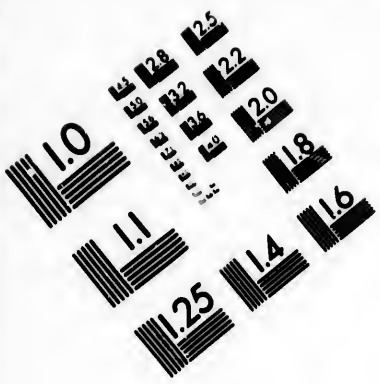


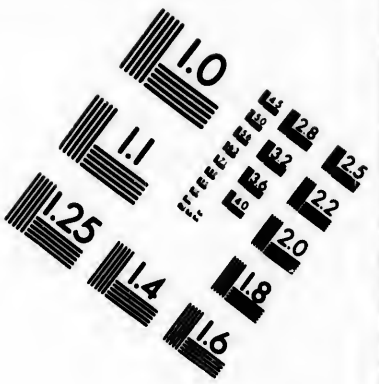
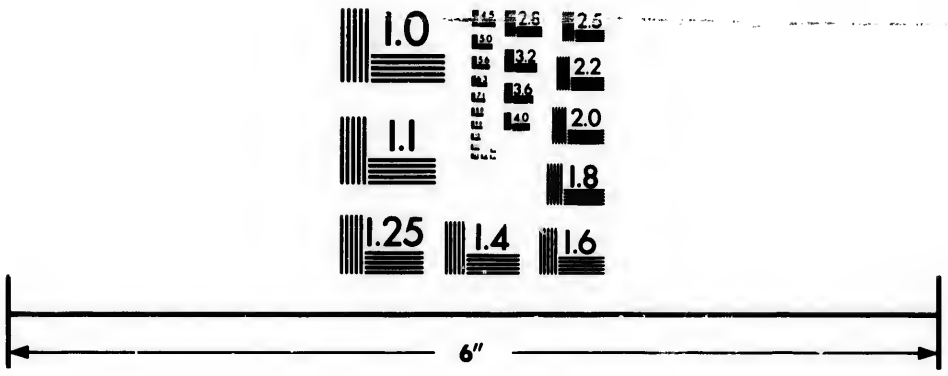
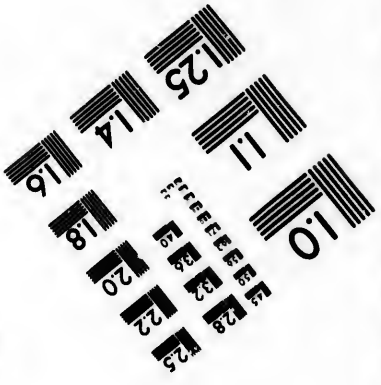


IMAGE EVALUATION
TEST TARGET (MT-3)





Photographic
Sciences
Corporation

23 WEST MAIN STREET
WEBSTER, N.Y. 14580
(716) 872-4503

Technical and Bibliographic Notes/Notes techniques et bibliographiques

The Institute has attempted to obtain the best original copy available for filming. Features of this copy which may be bibliographically unique, which may alter any of the images in the reproduction, or which may significantly change the usual method of filming, are checked below.

L'Institut a microfilmé le meilleur exemplaire qu'il lui a été possible de se procurer. Les détails de cet exemplaire qui sont peut-être uniques du point de vue bibliographique, qui peuvent modifier une image reproduite, ou qui peuvent exiger une modification dans la méthode normale de filmage sont indiqués ci-dessous.

- ☐ Coloured covers/ Couverture de couleur
- ☐ Covers damaged/ Couverture endommagée
- ☐ Covers restored and/or laminated/ Couverture restaurée et/ou pelliculée
- ☐ Cover title missing/ Le titre de couverture manque
- ☐ Coloured maps/ Cartes géographiques en couleur
- ☐ Coloured ink (i.e. other than blue or black)/ Encre de couleur (i.e. autre que bleue ou noire)
- ☐ Coloured plates and/or illustrations/ Planches et/ou illustrations en couleur
- ☐ Bound with other material/ Relié avec d'autres documents
- ☐ Tight binding may cause shadows or distortion along interior margin/ La reliure serrée peut causer de l'ombre ou de la distortion le long de la marge intérieure
- ☐ Blank leaves added during restoration may appear within the text. Whenever possible, these have been omitted from filming/ Il se peut que certaines pages blanches ajoutées lors d'une restauration apparaissent dans le texte, mais, lorsque cela était possible, ces pages n'ont pas été filmées.
- ☐ Additional comments:/ Commentaires supplémentaires:

- ☐ Coloured pages/ Pages de couleur
- ☐ Pages damaged/ Pages endommagées
- ☐ Pages restored and/or laminated/ Pages restaurées et/ou pelliculées
- ☒ Pages discoloured, stained or foxed/ Pages décolorées, tachetées ou piquées
- ☐ Pages detached/ Pages détachées
- ☒ Showthrough/ Transparence
- ☐ Quality of print varies/ Qualité inégale de l'impression
- ☐ Includes supplementary material/ Comprend du matériel supplémentaire
- ☐ Only edition available/ Seule édition disponible
- ☐ Pages wholly or partially obscured by errata slips, tissues, etc., have been refilmed to ensure the best possible image/ Les pages totalement ou partiellement obscurcies par un feuillet d'errata, une pelure, etc., ont été filmées à nouveau de façon à obtenir la meilleure image possible.

This item is filmed at the reduction ratio checked below/
Ce document est filmé au taux de réduction indiqué ci-dessous.

10X	12X	14X	16X	18X	20X	22X	24X	26X	28X	30X	32X
			✓								

The copy filmed here has been reproduced thanks to the generosity of:

National Library of Canada

The images appearing here are the best quality possible considering the condition and legibility of the original copy and in keeping with the filming contract specifications.

Original copies in printed paper covers are filmed beginning with the front cover and ending on the last page with a printed or illustrated impression, or the back cover when appropriate. All other original copies are filmed beginning on the first page with a printed or illustrated impression, and ending on the last page with a printed or illustrated impression.

The last recorded frame on each microfiche shall contain the symbol → (meaning "CONTINUED"), or the symbol ▽ (meaning "END"), whichever applies.

Maps, plates, charts, etc., may be filmed at different reduction ratios. Those too large to be entirely included in one exposure are filmed beginning in the upper left hand corner, left to right and top to bottom, as many frames as required. The following diagrams illustrate the method:

L'exemplaire filmé fut reproduit grâce à la générosité de:

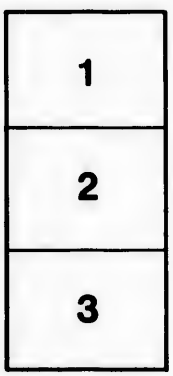
Bibliothèque nationale du Canada

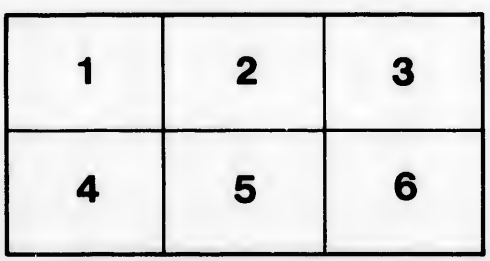
Les images suivantes ont été reproduites avec le plus grand soin, compte tenu de la condition et de la netteté de l'exemplaire filmé, et en conformité avec les conditions du contrat de filmage.

Les exemplaires originaux dont la couverture en papier est imprimée sont filmés en commençant par le premier plat et en terminant soit par la dernière page qui comporte une empreinte d'impression ou d'illustration, soit par le second plat, selon le cas. Tous les autres exemplaires originaux sont filmés en commençant par la première page qui comporte une empreinte d'impression ou d'illustration et en terminant par la dernière page qui comporte une telle empreinte.

Un des symboles suivants apparaîtra sur la dernière image de chaque microfiche, selon le cas: le symbole → signifie "A SUIVRE", le symbole ▽ signifie "FIN".

Les cartes, planches, tableaux, etc., peuvent être filmés à des taux de réduction différents. Lorsque le document est trop grand pour être reproduit en un seul cliché, il est filmé à partir de l'angle supérieur gauche, de gauche à droite, et de haut en bas, en prenant le nombre d'images nécessaire. Les diagrammes suivants illustrent la méthode.





TWICE TRIED.

All day she had been haunted by a vague restlessness."—*Page* 178.

TWICE TRIED

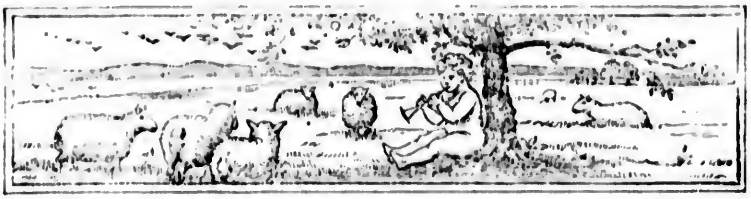
BY

ANNIE S SWAN

AUTHOR OF "ALDERSYDE," "GATES OF EDEN," "ACROSS HER PATH,"
"ST VEDA'S," ETC., ETC.

TORONTO, CANADA
WILLIAM BRIGGS
EDINBURGH AND LONDON
OLIPHANT, ANDERSON & FERRIER
1889

CONTENTS.



TWICE TRIED.

CHAPTER I.

FATHER AND SON.

ON a winter's evening, two gentlemen were sitting over their wine in a comfortable, well-lighted room, which presented a pleasant contrast to the dark and boisterous night without. The appointments of the table were plain, yet rich and good. There were no plated articles in the Bank House of Auchengray. The room was substantially furnished in oak and ruby leather, there were some really good pictures on the walls, and the few ornaments on the mantel and elsewhere were gems in their way. Evidently a refined taste had guided the furnishing and adorning of the house. Yet there seemed something lacking in that lofty room—a dearth of flowers and other dainty touches which only the hand of a woman can give. There were no ladies now in the Bank House at Auchengray, Mr Angus, banker and writer, having been a widower for nearly ten years. Father and son sat opposite each other, as they had done, with few exceptions, daily since the dear presence of the wife and mother had been

removed by the relentless hand of Death. Robert Angus the elder and Robert the younger were curiously alike—both handsome, and even striking-looking men.

They were tall of stature, broad of figure, and manly in appearance. The square massive head and somewhat strongly-marked features were characteristic of both; while the keen, penetrating, grey eye indicated that both were shrewd and far-seeing men of business. The elder was, if anything, the handsomer of the two. His habitual expression was more bland and kindly, his mouth less resolutely stern than that of his son. Then the silvering hair and beard gave a fine softening effect to his face, adding a mellowing touch, as it were, to its sterner outline.

"Young Douglas leaves next month, Robert," said Mr Angus the elder, looking across the table at his son.

"Does he?" inquired Robert, without any exhibition of interest, for his thoughts were elsewhere.

"Yes," responded his father. "We'll need to see about getting someone to fill his place in the bank."

"I suppose so," admitted Robert, carelessly. "But I daresay there will be plenty of lads in Auchengray eager for the job. Have you promised the place to anyone? There's Charlie Burnett, you know. I believe his father would be glad of the opening for him."

"He is too young—a mere schoolboy," said Mr Angus, quickly. "I want one older, if possible."

Robert Angus elevated his eyebrows.

"Douglas was just Charlie's age, father, and he did not give much trouble, so far as I can recollect. I am glad he has got promotion, so that he can wed the girl of his choice."

"If he marries just now he will be an ass," said Mr Angus, dryly.

"That's just what he intends doing. A hundred and fifty, no doubt, seems a great fortune to him," said Robert, cracking his walnuts philosophically. "And the chances

are he will be more comfortable than in lodgings, and ten times happier."

"You seem to know all about it," said Mr Angus, drily still. "Well, Douglas's marriage isn't the point. I don't suppose his domestic felicity is of absorbing moment to us. What I want to say is that there is a young lad in Strathblane to whom I am going to offer the place."

Robert Angus looked up in surprise.

"In Strathblane!" he exclaimed. "Who is he? It is surely unusual to go so far afield."

"You have heard me speak of Mrs Colquhoun of Mount Rosa?" inquired Mr Angus.

"I know who the lady is. You have done some business for her, I think."

"The same," nodded Mr Angus. "Well, it is her nephew, the son of her sister, who married Captain Ransome, of the Navy."

"Is this lad dependent on Mrs Colquhoun?" asked Robert.

"Yes. He and his sister have been left destitute by their father's sudden death. They are orphans, and Mrs Colquhoun is their only relative."

"How old is young Ransome?"

"He is not a lad. I should think he must be three or four-and-twenty."

"He has been in a bank before, of course?" said Robert.

"Well, no, he hasn't."

"What has he been doing?"

"Nothing, that I know of," returned Mr Angus, in a rather embarrassed tone. "In fact, they have been neglected. Their father, I suspect, was a ne'er-do-weel, and the lad has never had a chance."

"He is pretty old not to have sought some kind of chance for himself," said Robert, a trifle drily, for he felt slightly mystified.

"Suppose I offer Rolfe Ransome the place, Robert, and he accepts it, would you have any objections to him living in the house?" asked Mr Angus, presently.

Robert raised his head this time and looked with unmitigated astonishment into his father's face.

"Not I. But surely that would be a very extraordinary arrangement."

"Not so very extraordinary when you come to think of it. He has been brought up in a very different position, of course, from the like of Jamie Douglas, and his aunt is a thorough lady," said Mr Angus emphatically. "There is plenty of room here, and these two idle women will be all the better of having a little more to do."

Robert Angus was still further amazed. He observed an under-current of anxiety in his father's manner which seemed to denote that this was a matter of extreme interest to him. Yet why should he be so concerned in behalf of an utter stranger? Who was Mrs Colquhoun, of Mount Rosa, that the internal arrangements of the Bank House of Auchengray should be upset on her nephew's account? These questions presented themselves to the mind of Robert Angus, the younger, demanding satisfactory answers.

"The house is yours, father," he said, quietly. "Surely you don't need to consult me about its arrangements."

"I wouldn't say that, Bob," said the banker, drawing a very perceptible breath of relief. "So long as you are under my roof you have a right to be consulted."

"It is very good of you to say so," replied Robert, briefly. "What age is the young gentleman's sister?"

"I really cannot tell," said Mr Angus, rather quickly. "I believe she is three or four years older than Rolfe."

Once again was Robert Angus immeasurably surprised, and yet another question suggested itself rather disagreeably to his mind. Why had he never before heard the name of

Ransome, when his father seemed to be on such very familiar terms with the latest additions to the family circle at Mount Rosa? He thought he had found a new explanation of the very frequent pilgrimages to Strathblane his father had made of late. It was such a startling explanation that involuntarily he rose to his feet, and pushed back his chair.

"Are you going out?" his father asked.

"Yes; I promised James Burnett to look in at the Thorn for an hour; but I won't be late."

"All right! Don't hurry yourself. I shall be late myself over that deed of old Macdonald's. I'll make the executors pay me handsomely for the trouble I've had with it, I promise you."

Robert nodded again, sauntered out of the room, and put on his great-coat. When he opened the outer door a blast of the keen north wind met him in the teeth and made him shiver. It was not a very inviting night, and the cheery glow from the dining-room fire shone ruddily across the hall; but Robert Angus did not hesitate. There were good fires and cosy rooms at the Thorn likewise, and a pair of shy dark eyes which he knew very well would grow brighter at his coming. So, buttoning his coat closely over his muffler, he thrust his hands into his pockets, and stepped out into the rain. The bank stood at the very top of the High Street, and before him stretched the long narrow thoroughfare, with its straggling uncertain lights flickering in the wind, until they mingled at length in the black darkness of the high road to Strathblane. He began to walk briskly down the sloppy street, looking neither to the right nor to the left, until presently he knocked up against someone directly under a gas-lamp.

"I beg your pardon," he said, quickly, and raising his hat when he saw it was a woman. "Hallo! Miss Laurence, is it you? What are doing out on such a night?"

"Necessity knows no mercy, Mr Robert," responded a clear, musical voice, rather more deeply intoned than most feminine voices, but singularly sweet withal. "I give Rosie Balfour her music lesson to-night."

"And do you mean to say you will walk to the Manse in this downpour?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

"They will never expect you."

"Will they not?" Joan Laurence's voice took a harder tone as she asked the question. "I ventured to remain indoors one stormy night last winter, and Mrs Balfour elected to be mightily displeased. She will have her pound of flesh; and why not, when she pays for it?"

Robert Angus muttered something under his breath, not at all complimentary to the minister's good lady, then very deliberately took Joan Laurence's umbrella from her, put it down, and drew her hand within his arm.

"Where are you going? What do you mean to do?" she asked, lifting a pair of magnificent grey eyes to his face.

"I'm going to escort you to the Manse, and perhaps I may give Mrs Balfour a piece of my mind. Where are we to look for charity and loving-kindness if not in the bosom of our shepherd's family, Joan? We were too long accustomed to a different *regime* in the Manse of Auchengray to have much forbearance with the present one."

Joan Laurence's lip quivered, and she turned her head swiftly away. Robert Angus had unintentionally touched a very tender cord in her heart, for, until a few years ago, the Manse of Auchengray had been her happy home, where she had been sheltered and cherished by a father who worshipped the very ground on which she trod. Death had robbed her of that loving parent, and then troubles had crowded so thickly upon her that she felt as if she had lived a lifetime in a few years. Truly it was a great change for Joan Laurence to be dependent upon her own

exertions for her bread; and, like many others, she had found the world a barren sympathiser in the time of need.

"Let me have my umbrella," she said, presently. "I don't need your escort."

"Nevertheless you shall have it. Come, Joan, we are too old friends to fall out now; besides, I want to speak to you."

"But you are on your way to the Thorn."

"How do you know?"

She looked at him again, and a little humorous smile relieved the too stern, sad curves about her mouth.

"You are too fond of creature comforts, Robert Angus, to allow anything but a pair of brown eyes to come between you and them," she said, daringly. "What excuse will you make to Amy for your tardiness? It will hardly do to tell her you have been escorting another forlorn damsel, will it?"

"You are in a bantering mood to-night, Miss Laurence, but you will find me a match for you," said Robert Angus, with a quiet laugh. "How do you know that Amy Burnett has a right to question my actions, eh?"

"Rumour has it that you and she are to be made one shortly, and that the interest Mr Angus takes in the repairing of Fairgate is on your account," said Joan, quietly. "You need not trouble to deny it to me, Robert."

"Why not to you?"

"Because I am your true friend and hers, and you know it," she said, huskily. "I think I have earned your confidence."

"Yes, you have. Forgive me. I am a brute," he said huskily.

"Don't use such strong language, please. It is quite uncalled for. You are only a man like other men."

"You used to hold me in higher estimation in the old days, Joan, when we studied together at the Manse."

"Yes, but you were a boy then and——"

"And what?"

"Nicer than you are now. You have not improved du-

ing the last few years, Robert Angus. You have grown much more selfish, and——"

"Go on, please."

"I think you miss your mother," Joan said, involuntarily, and there was a moment's silence. She had set Robert Angus thinking, as she meant to do.

"Do you know Mrs Colquhoun, of Mount Rosa, Strathblane, Joan?" he asked, suddenly.

"I used to know her. She does not know me now," said Joan, with the slightest touch of scorn in her voice.

"Do you know anything of a nephew and niece who have lately come from the south to reside with her?"

"Why do you ask?" queried Joan, quickly.

"I have a reason, which, if you will be civil and communicative, I may tell you," said Robert.

"Well, I have seen Miss Ransome once at Strathblane," said Joan, slowly.

"She is not a mere girl, is she?" Robert asked.

"No. I should imagine her to be older than I. She is very beautiful, and very good, unless I have lost my old gift of reading physiognomy. Now, tell me why you are asking about them?"

"My father talks of having young Ransome to fill Jamie Douglas's place in the bank, and I wondered at it, that was all," responded Robert. "Don't you wonder too?"

"It is unlike Mr Angus," Joan admitted, but did not say she wondered at it, for in her inmost heart she was not at all surprised.

"I am not easy in my mind about this, Joan."

"What makes you uneasy?" asked Joan, in a low voice.

"I cannot tell, only the feeling is there. I don't relish the idea of a third party in the house," said Robert, shortly. "My father intends him to reside with us."

"That will be rather unpleasant until you get used to it," said Joan. "But you won't need to mind it if you are going

to set up in Fairgate shortly," she said. "Well, here we are," she added, pausing at the iron gateway of the Manse. "I am much obliged to you for your company. The way has never seemed shorter and less dreary. There is a compliment for you, sir!"

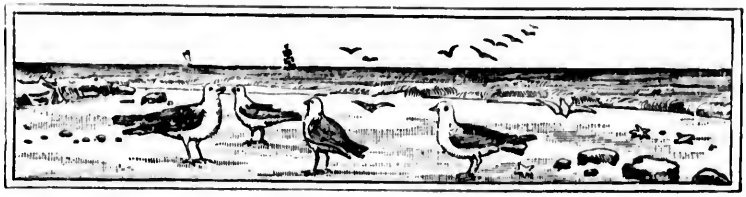
"For which I cannot be sufficiently grateful, seeing they come so seldom," Robert answered, raising his hat laughingly; then, as if a sudden thought struck him, he added gravely—"I say, Joan, it must be a trial to you to come here in the capacity of music teacher, is it not?"

Joan Laurence turned her head towards the old-fashioned grey house, with its lights shining brightly through its sheltering trees, and it seemed as if her eyes grew darker as she looked.

"Yes, it is a trial. But we get used to these things, thank God; and through much usage the knife grows blunt and cannot probe so deeply," she said, hurriedly. "Good-night. My kind regards to Amy and the rest at the Thorn."

"Good-night, Joan," said Robert Angus, looking into the sad, grave face with a tenderness which beautified his own. He felt moved with a deep compassion for the desolate woman before him, so changed from the bright, winsome girl who had been the sister and companion of his boyhood. Ay, all things were changed indeed since the happy days when the Bank House and the Manse of Auchengray had been as one, and when the two mothers, in their fond love and pride, had anticipated the union of their children, little dreaming what the future held for either.

Robert Angus turned towards the town again, a little saddened in heart, until the thought of the bright eyes watching for him at the Thorn restored his spirits. And Joan! Through long usage she had accustomed herself to hide her pain and show to the world a calm, unruffled front which should give no indication of the thronging emotions which surged beneath.



CHAPTER II.

LOVERS.

"HE won't come to-night, Amy, so you needn't have put on your best frock and frizzed up your hair. Just listen to the rain."

"I haven't on my best frock, and my hair is just as usual, James Burnett; and pray who do you mean by 'he'?" queried the small person addressed, trying to speak in a very dignified manner, and utterly failing, for there was no dignity whatever about Amy Burnett. She was very pretty, there could be no doubt of that, but it was with the beauty of a child—pleasing to the eye indeed, but not suggestive of the inner loveliness of mind and heart. She was just nineteen, and scarcely looked her years. The *petite* figure, so slim and graceful, the fair, delicately-tinted face, with the rosebud mouth and the big, childish brown eyes, the bright golden hair curling about the white neck, made a very pleasant picture, but one of which the eyes would soon tire. Then her dress was so pretty—pale blue, with trimmings of lace, short sleeves which showed the contour of the round, plump white arm to perfection, and dainty slippers, with high heels, which added a little to her stature. She was a very tiny person—"quite undersized," the feminine critics of Auchengray had it, for Miss Burnett of the Thorn was no favourite with her kind.

"What's the use of denying the thing to me, pussy cat?"

queried her brother, unmercifully. "Haven't I watched those eyes of yours wandering wistfully to the clock half-a-dozen times within the last half hour?"

"Jim, you're a—a——"

"Wretch," supplemented the young fellow, promptly. "Yes, I know all about it. Say, mother, is that not Amy's party frock she has on?"

"Do be quiet, Jamie, and don't tease your sister," said Mrs Burnett, good-naturedly, while Mr Burnett looked up presently from his paper, and inquired what all the noise was about.

It was a pleasant picture in that pleasant family round, suggestive alike of comfort and happiness and peace.

There was nothing fine nor grand about the drawing-room at the Thorn, for Mrs Burnett had no ambition for a fine house. She was a motherly woman who made her house a home indeed to her husband and her children, who were devoted to her heart and soul, and loved their own home better than any place on earth. The Burnetts were in comfortable circumstances, for Mr Burnett was factor on the Earl of Beauly's estates, and also for the neighbouring estate of Strathblane, whose owner was still a minor. The Thorn stood within the policies of Beauly Castle, and was a roomy, old-fashioned house, replete with every convenience and comfort for the use of a family.

There were nine Burnetts, of whom James, aged twenty-one, was the eldest. As fine a young fellow as ever stepped in shoe leather, the servants on the estate called him, and their verdict was correct. He assisted his father in his work, and was in every respect his right hand. He was his mother's boy, too, and the younger members of the family almost worshipped him; so it was little wonder that the sunny-hearted James Burnett found the world a very pleasant place to live in, for he had countless friends, and not an enemy that he was aware of. Is the world not, after all, much as we make it for ourselves? If we "carry our ain

sunshine wi' us," as the song has it, we will have neither time nor inclination to grumble or be sad at heart.

"Did I hear you say Robert Angus would be over to-night, James?" queried Mr Burnett, folding up his paper.

"I didn't say so; I only inferred it from Amy's frock," answered Jim with a comical smile.

Mr Burnett glanced at his daughter, and laughed in his dry fashion. He enjoyed hearing his children's nonsense, and believed that Jim's unmerciful teasing would do Amy good. She was as vain as a peacock over her pretty face, and inclined to be idle and selfish because she considered herself the beauty of the family.

The next daughter, Mary, a demure, plain featured girl of sixteen, was worth two of Amy where common-sense and usefulness were concerned. But, doubtless, Amy would improve by-and-by, and perhaps make a good wife and mother yet. With these assurances Mr Burnett was wont to comfort his wife when she complained sometimes of her eldest daughter's failings.

"Don't bend your brows that way, child," he said, for Amy's quick temper was up now, and she showed it in her face. "Let us have some music! See, mamma is half asleep."

"Come on, Amy; don't get in the dumps," said Jim, with a provoking smile. "If Angus saw you now, I'll bet he wouldn't come back."

Amy jumped up and flounced out of the room in anger. James whistled, and sitting down to the piano, began to play a rattling piece such as he loved. The noise of the instrument under his powerful manipulation prevented them hearing a knock at the front door which was familiar and welcome to more than one at the Thorn. James Burnett entertained for Robert Angus that species of reverential love which young lads often lavish on older men who make friends of them. Amy was on the way to her own room

when the knock came to the door, and she stood on the stair and listened till the maid answered the appeal. Then she peeped over the balustrade, and after one glimpse of the intruder turned and ran downstairs.

The housemaid, waiting to usher Mr Angus upstairs, discreetly withdrew at sight of Miss Burnett, and the two were left alone.

"Well, my darling, how are you to-night?" Robert Angus said, and putting his arm about the slender little figure, touched her brow with his lips.

"You are late, very late!" she said, pettishly; "you don't deserve to be admitted at all. What kept you?"

"Kept me? Oh, nothing!" said Robert, absently; for somehow his thoughts would revert with a strange persistence to the woman he had left. "Are they all upstairs? Couldn't we go into some other place for a little?"

"Yes, there's a fire in papa's room," replied Amy, rather ungraciously.

Then Robert Angus stepped across the hall, and held open the study door for her to enter. The only light in the cosy little room was that given by the fire, which cast a ruddy glow about the hearth, and made fantastic shadows dance upon the walls and floor.

Amy threw herself into the easy-chair, while Robert stood on the hearth, leaning his arm on the mantel, and looking into the fire. Certainly he was not the most demonstrative nor satisfying of lovers to-night.

There was a wide contrast—something of incongruity almost—between them. Robert Angus looked his thirty years to the full, and there were positively some grey hairs in the short pointed beard which was so becoming to his style of face. Beside him Amy Burnett looked a perfect child, and yet it was understood that some day they would be husband and wife. Surely both had made a mistake.

"Is James in?" he asked at length, recovering himself with a start.

"Yes. Shall I ring and ask Sarah to request him to come down?" asked Amy, sarcastically, and with her small hand on the bell-rope.

"Not yet. What is the matter with you, Amy?"

"Nothing. But what is the matter with you? Do you know you are perfectly horrid? I just hate you, Robert Angus!"

"No, you don't," responded he with a smile; "at least I don't hate you."

Then he stooped down and kissed her again, but still the puckers in her brow remained.

"Yes, I do; and if it's Jim you come to see, why do you pretend it's me? I'm sure I don't want you. There are plenty of other men in the world besides you—plenty nicer ones, too."

"Don't be so foolish, dear. I know I am a bear, but I feel troubled about something, so you must excuse me."

"Was that what kept you so late?"

"Oh, no. I left just after dinner, but I met Miss Laurence in the High Street, and, as it was so dark and stormy, I walked back with her to the Manse."

"Oh, indeed. You might just have waited and walked home with her again. Don't imagine I would have cared," said Amy, hotly. Her temper was up now, and she was as jealous as could be.

"What are you saying, Amy?" queried Robert Angus, in no little astonishment. Accustomed as he was to his sweetheart's whims and caprices, she surpassed herself to-night.

"Saying? Just that if you prefer Joan Laurence's company to mine, you needn't come any more to the Thorn," said Amy, jumping to her feet.

Robert Angus stepped to one side, put his arm about her, and drew her very close to him.

"You are a silly little thing, Amy. Somebody has been teasing you, and putting up your small temper. Well, my pet, am I the kind of man to come to see one woman and like another better? You ought to have more faith in me than that."

"So I have," sobbed Amy, remorsefully. "But Joan is so clever and grand, and knows so much more than me; and then I believe she cares for you, and——"

"Amy!"

Never in her life had Amy Burnett heard her lover speak in such a tone.

"Well, it's quite true, I'm——"

She got no further, for a stern hand was laid on her lips.

"For shame, Amy; Joan Laurence is your friend and mine, and she is a woman from whom both of us might take a lesson," he said, sharply. "You are not my sweet-tempered, bright-eyed darling to-night at all. I do not know what kind of a little Tartar I have got in her place."

Amy wept afresh, and Robert was obliged to soothe away her tears, though inwardly much annoyed. He felt rather irritable himself, and in his mind there was a strange prevision of coming trouble.

"I'm very sorry, Robert. I know I am perfectly horrid," sobbed Amy. "I'm sure I don't mean to say anything nasty about Joan."

"Let us leave Miss Laurence alone, dear," said Robert, with quiet authority. "If Jim is in, I think we had better go upstairs. I am afraid we will only be very disagreeable to each other if we remain here."

"You can go up yourself, then," Amy said, petulantly, and, somewhat to her astonishment, he took her at her word, and walked out of the room.

He hesitated a moment in the lobby, feeling much more inclined to go home than join the family circle. However,

reflecting on Jim's disappointment if he left without seeing him, he proceeded upstairs, and entered the drawing-room with the unceremonious ease of a privileged visitor.

James jumped from the piano at sight of him. Robert nodded to him, pulled the curly hair of a small urchin poring over his lesson-book, and went round to Mrs Burnett's chair.

"Good evening, Mrs Burnett. I hope I see you well to-night," he said pleasantly. "Well, sir, how are you?" he added, returning heartily Mr Burnett's hand-shake.

Then he took the chair Jim set for him, and the circle closed about him; and the talk began to flow pleasantly, as it always did when Robert came.

"Run up and tell Amy Mr Angus is here, dear," said Mrs Burnett, turning after a little to her second daughter.

"I saw her downstairs," Mrs Burnett, said Robert, quickly, whereat Jim elevated his eyebrows and grinned a comical grin.

Amy elected not to appear again that night, though she did not disdain to peep over the balustrade for the last glimpse of her lover when he was going away. There was a temporary lull in the storm outside, and Jim escorted his friend half-way home. The Thorn was quite two miles from the town, and it was a dreary walk, especially on a stormy winter's night.

"I say, Angus, what's up with you to-night? Are you not well?" Jim asked, after they had walked a hundred yards in silence. "You're awfully quiet."

"Yes; I'm well enough," responded Robert, briefly.

"I suppose you and Amy had a tiff," continued Jim, with his own charming candour. "You needn't mind; she'll be sorry enough to-morrow. Girls always go on in that way."

"Do they?" queried Robert, in no little amazement. "What do you know about it?"

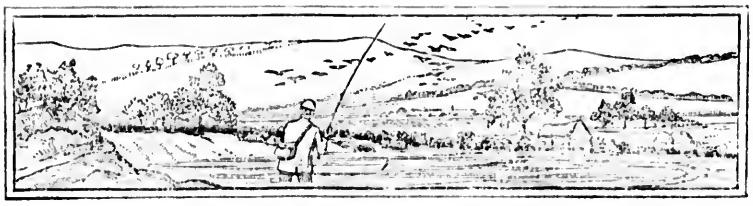
"Oh, well, I've heard and read a good deal about love,

you know," laughed Jim, "though I'm thankful to say I've never been in it."

"Time enough yet, my boy," said Robert, gravely. "I really think you shouldn't come any further, Jim, the roads are so bad."

"I see you don't want me; you are out of sorts," said Jim, candidly. "Well, good-night. Hope you'll be all right next time we meet."

James Burnett was wont to say often that from that night Robert Angus was a changed man.



CHAPTER III.

THE NEW MEMBER OF THE HOUSEHOLD.

IT had been an uncomfortable, unsociable meal. Mr Angus had done his best to keep up the conversation, and had been affable and talkative far beyond his wont. It was necessary, perhaps; for Robert did not appear to be in the most amiable of moods, and was certainly not conspicuously courteous to the guest at his father's table. That, however, did not at all discompose Mr Rolfe Ransome; quite the reverse; he seemed to enjoy it. He had arrived at Auchengray that afternoon, Mr Angus having driven him in from Strathblane, where he had been on business. Of late Mr Angus's business calls at Strathblane had been numerous and pressing. People were beginning to remark upon the frequent appearance of his horse and trap in the neighbouring town, and to "put two and two together," as the saying goes. And when the news got abroad that Rolfe Ransome was coming to fill Jamie Douglas's place in the bank, there were many wise head-shakings, many satisfied "I told you so's," and a great deal of excited waiting for the issue of events—all quite undreamed of by those most interested. The new bank clerk was a very different person from what Robert Angus had anticipated. He had expected to see a raw, youthful looking lad, such as Douglas and he himself had been when they

entered upon similar positions in the bank, but lo! the new importation was an exceedingly smart and very foppish young man, with the assurance and conceit of twice his years.

He was undeniably handsome; but his was an empty face, possessing the beauty of form and feature, but sadly lacking in that of expression. He made himself very much at home in the house of his employer,—so much so, that Robert Angus was infinitely disgusted, and took a dislike to him at once. That need scarcely be wondered at, for if ever two men contrasted widely, and were utterly antagonistic in nature and habit, these two were Robert Angus and Rolfe Ransome. He seemed to accept his place at his employer's table as if it were his perfect right, and instead of being shy or reticent, as might have been expected of him under the circumstances, he had a charming flow of talk, which, however, did not fall very agreeably on at least one of his listeners' ears.

"Have you, ah—much society here?" he inquired, with a slightly supercilious smile, which aggravated Robert Angus almost beyond endurance.

"Yes, we have some very nice families in Auchengray, small though it is," Mr Angus hastened to reply. "You have heard me speak of the Burnetts. Robert, you must take Mr Ransome to the Thorn, and introduce him. It is the very place for a young fellow to pass a happy evening. I have often heard you say so."

"Mr Ransome's predecessor was not on visiting terms at the Thorn, I think," Robert said in his quietest tones; and the expression on his face conveyed a finer sarcasm than his words.

Mr Angus looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"No, no, of course not," he said, hastily. "But I thought I explained to you, Robert, that Mr Ransome comes here on a very different footing. He is a gentleman's son. His father was a captain in the navy."

"If a man can't stand on his own legs, and make a position for himself, independent of his father, he does not deserve the name of a man," Robert said in the same quiet tones, and glancing very expressively at the handsome face opposite him. Mr Rolfe Ransome did not seem at all put out, however, but continued to eat his dinner with evident relish. But he heard and felt the scorn with which Robert Angus regarded him, and made a note of it for future consideration.

"I should imagine Auchengray to be rather a slow place," he said, presently. "Strathblane is bad enough; but I should say this would be a degree worse. I wonder you have stayed so long in it," he added to Robert.

"I have never thought it slow; possibly because I am slow myself," said Robert, with a slight smile. "You will have some difficulty in supporting existence here, Mr Ransome."

"Ah, I daresay it will do in the meantime. Isabel won't care for it, I doubt," said Rolfe, looking straight across the table to Mr Angus.

That gentleman coloured slightly, and there was an uncomfortable pause. Robert devoted himself to his pudding; if he wondered at the speech he made no sign.

Mr Angus hastened to change the subject by referring to some bank business, and the slight constraint passed off. Rolfe Ransome took advantage of his employer's invitation to help himself from the decanter, and took more spirits than that gentleman approved of.

"Have you any engagement for to-night, Robert?" Mr Angus asked, cutting the dessert short by rising and pushing back his chair.

"Nothing particular," Robert answered, carelessly.

"Are you going to the Thorn?" his father asked, pointedly.

"Yes," answered Robert, briefly.

"I shall be much obliged if you will take Mr Ransome

with you. Tell Mrs Burnett who he is. I think she knows Mrs Colquhoun."

"All right," said Robert, briefly as before. "Well, if you are ready, Mr Ransome, we will go."

Mr Ransome nodded, emptied his glass, and signified his readiness to go. So the two stepped out together into the bright starlight, and turned their faces down the street.

"Got a light, eh?" asked Ransome, producing his cigar case.

"No, I don't smoke."

"Eh, you don't? I wonder at that. Nice old cove, your governor!" said Ransome, affably.

"Sir!"

Nothing could exceed the hauteur with which Robert Angus uttered the monosyllable. Ransome saw that he had overstepped the mark, and that Robert Angus would not brook much familiarity on so short an acquaintance.

"No offence meant," he said, apologetically. "Any pretty girls in this place, eh?"

"I don't know. If there are any, doubtless you will soon discover them," said Robert, drily. "Have you had any experience of bank business, Mr Ransome?"

"No. Don't suppose it's hard work, though. A fellow must do something for a living, I suppose. It's a shame of a fellow's governor to bring up a fellow like a gentleman, and then shuffle off without leaving him a copper to bless himself with. Isn't it, now?"

"Yes, especially if a fellow has no desire to work for his own living," Robert answered, in his dry fashion.

"Don't believe much in work myself. Neither does Isabel. She's a degree worse than me," said Ransome, serenely. "It's in the blood, I believe; the governor was a lazy old chap, too. Holloa! is this the place? Is it swells we're going to see?"

"No; this is the Earl of Beauly's place. We are going to his factor's house," said Robert, and relapsed into silence. There was not another word spoken till they turned aside from the avenue, and crossed the park to the Thorn. The upper windows were lighted as usual, for the Burnetts always sat in the drawing-room in the evening.

The front door was open, and Jim was enjoying his cigarette on the step, and watching for his friend. When he heard the sound of approaching footsteps he stepped across the lawn to meet him.

"That you, Angus?" he called out, cheerily. "Holloa, who's with you?"

"The new member of our household. Mr Ransome—Mr James Burnett," said Robert. "Are you alone to-night?"

"Yes; very glad to meet you, Mr Ransome. Come away in both of you. We'd better go straight upstairs. They're all there as usual."

Robert nodded, and the trio proceeded to the drawing-room. At sight of the stranger with Robert, Mrs Burnett rose from her chair.

"This is Mr Ransome, our new clerk, Mrs Burnett. I have brought him at my father's express desire," Robert said, with a very curious expression, and then walked over to Amy's side. He would make no more introductions that night. Mrs Burnett was surprised; nevertheless, she received the young man kindly, and offering him a chair by her side, began to talk to him in her own frank, motherly manner.

"Can we go downstairs, Amy?" Robert whispered bending over her chair.

But Amy was too curious, and too interested in the handsome stranger, to retire from the drawing-room yet.

"Papa is in the study, and there are no lamps in the dining-room," she said. "Wait till papa comes up. Do

tell me something about Mr Ransome, Robert. Why didn't you introduce him specially to me?"

"Because I did not choose," said Robert, coolly. "If I had had my way, he shou'd never have been here at all."

"Oh, why not? I am sure if he is as nice as he looks, he will be quite an acquisition to society in Auchengray."

"I am afraid Mrs Burnett will not be quite of your opinion, Amy. She has not been accustomed to receive the bank clerk into her family circle hitherto."

"Dear me, how horrid you are!" exclaimed Amy. "I believe you are jealous of him, he is so much handsomer than you. I never saw such lovely eyes."

Amy looked up coquettishly into her lover's face, but her words had not quite the effect she had expected, for he only smiled his most aggravating smile, but did not seem at all chagrined.

"I am sorry for your sake that I am so much inferior in personal charms to Mr Rolfe Ransome."

"And what a pretty name he has!" pursued Amy. "It is quite musical. I always thought Robert an ugly name, and when it is joined on to Angus it is simply hideous."

Robert Angus turned from his sweetheart's chair, and went over to the sofa where Charlie was poring over his Euclid.

"Well, old chap," he said, pleasantly, "how are you getting on? Can I help you?"

The lad looked up gratefully, and in a few minutes both were absorbed in the problem.

More annoyed than she cared to show, Amy crossed the room to her mother's side, and was then duly introduced to the stranger. In three minutes she was chatting gaily and freely to him as if she had known him all her life, but her coquetting, if it was meant to annoy Robert, did

not appear to do so, for he never once glanced towards them.

Amy Burnett was a born coquette. She would flirt with her own brother if no more eligible person could be found, and here was a glorious opportunity to exercise her charms on a handsome young man—a stranger too!—and strangers were as welcome in Auchengray as the flowers in May. Then, how delightful to provoke Robert Angus, to make him jealous, and to punish him for his grumpiness! Verily, Amy Burnett was in the zenith of her delight to-night. Mrs Burnett listened to her daughter's chatter and Ransome's flattery in rather a nervous frame of mind, glancing sometimes at Robert Angus to see whether he was listening; but he seemed absorbed by Charley and his Euclid. She was relieved presently by the entrance of her husband, who received the stranger affably enough. Mr Burnett was always affable, and had the reputation of being the most good-natured man in Auchengray. As the evening wore on, and Robert still remained perfectly indifferent and neglectful of Amy, she began to feel a little uneasy. Of late her lover had displayed less inclination to bear with her coquetting and silly, selfish ways; and she feared her power over him was on the wane. Now, this idea was not at all pleasant to Amy Burnett. She had won Robert Angus away from all the ladies of Auchengray, any of whom would very gladly stand in her shoes; and it would not do to let him slip away from her; to give the disappointed ones the chance to say that though she won him she could not keep him. At half-past nine the supper tray was brought in. Robert Angus had a little claret and a biscuit, and again Rolfe Ransome took spirits.

"Tell me who Mr Ransome is, Robert," whispered Mrs Burnett, when she had a chance of a word away from the others. "His name is familiar, and his face too. Does he belong to this country-side?"

"You know Mrs Colquhoun, of Strathblane, Mrs Burnett?"

"Oh, yes, of course; I know now. He must be her nephew; the son of her only sister, who married the captain! How stupid I am! He is his mother's living image. I am not very favourably impressed with him."

"Nor I, Mrs Burnett; but possibly he may improve on acquaintance," said Robert. "Well, we must be going. You must set the example, and teach young Ransome to keep elders' hours. I fear he has not been accustomed to them hitherto."

"It's a queer idea of your father's to have him in the house; but no doubt it is for Mrs Colquhoun's sake. Well, must you go? I am very angry with Amy to-night, Robert."

"Don't be, Mrs Burnett. She seems to be enjoying herself," Robert said, quietly; but Mrs Burnett knew that he was not well pleased, and inwardly determined to talk seriously to her wayward child. When Amy saw her lov moving to go, she rose and purposely retired to the oriel window, and began to toy with the fern on the little table.

"Good-night," he said, courteously but coldly, coming last of all to her, and offering his hand as he had done to the others.

"Why are you so stiff and horrid to-night?" she asked, in a low, pettish voice. "We have never had a minute to ourselves, and I had ever so many things to say to you."

"They must wait now. It was not my fault, Amy," he said, in the same cold, quiet tones.

"Are you very vexed with me, Robert?" she asked then, lifting lovely, beseeching eyes to his face. It was just such a look which had swept aside his better judgment a year ago, and made him utter the irrevocable words which

bound him in honour to a woman who would never make him happy; but now they had lost their charm.

"You know best whether I have a right to be, Amy. I am growing tired of this nonsense. I endeavour to be kind and considerate to you, and I think it not too much to expect like treatment at your hands. If you think you have made a mistake, tell me so. It will be better for us both."

"Oh, Robert!" The wistful, childish eyes, filled with tears, touched him in spite of himself. She was wayward, indeed; but then she was so very, very young! He must be gentle with her yet.

"I don't mean to hurt you, dear. It is my love for you which makes the thing hurt. Well, we can't say any more with so many eyes on us. Will you meet me to-morrow night at the old bridge at seven, and we can have a long talk?"

"Yes, yes," she said, quickly, and the sun shone again in the sweet eyes, and the white fingers returned the pressure of the strong hand grasping them with loving earnestness. Rolfe Ransome had not been unobservant of this little scene, and he was not slow to draw his own inferences therefrom.

"Nice family that," he said, rather patronisingly, when they were walking across the park. "Nice little girl, too; regular flirt, though. There's some fun in her. Don't you think so, eh?"

Robert Angus bit his lip.

"Kindly reserve your comments upon my friends, Mr Ransome. They are neither agreeable to me nor creditable to yourself," he said, in his most cutting tones.

"What a mighty prig you are! Talk of good taste. Do you call your treatment of me gentlemanly? You couldn't behave worse to me though I were a cad—by Jove, you couldn't!"

Robert Angus held his peace, though certain uncomplimentary words were burning on his lips. But, after all, it was scarcely worth his while to bandy words with Mr Rolfe Ransome.

"I know how the land lies, Mr Robert Angus, and I'll be even with you, I bet I will," Mr Ransome whispered within himself; and he kept his word.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BEGINNING.

"I AM going to Edinburgh by the first train to-morrow, Robert," Mr Angus said to his son as they were parting for the night.

"That is unusual, sir," Robert said.

"Yes, it is an early start, but I have a good deal of business to transact."

"Well, have you any directions to leave with me?"

"None, except that you are to keep the key of my room in your pocket. If you need to enter, you know where to find it."

Robert looked so much astonished that the banker felt called upon to make some explanation.

"I don't care to have everybody prying into the place. There are so many valuable things in it, and too much money in the cash-box. There is no use putting temptation in the way."

Robert nodded. He knew as well as if he had been plainly told, that there was someone in the bank his father could not trust; ay, and he knew, too, who it was.

"I hope you have left your orders with Ransome, father. He declines to do anything I bid him."

"He has no right to decline. What does he suppose he is there for if he can't obey you?" fumed Mr Angus. "I'm afraid he isn't going to turn out so well as I expected and hoped. Perhaps I should hardly have taken him into the

bank, but under the circumstances I could hardly do less. Well, good-night," he said, hastily, as if in dread lest he should be questioned further.

"Good-night, sir. When will you be home?"

"Not in time for dinner. I will come to Strathblane by the 8.40 express. I have given M'Dowall his orders to be at the station."

"All right, sir."

Mr Angus took up his candle and retired. Robert went back to his arm-chair on the hearth and fell a-thinking. There were several things puzzling him very much, and troubling him not a little also. There was something about his father he could not understand—a nervousness and hesitation he had never seen in him before. It could not be that his powers were failing him yet, for he was only sixty-two, and up till within the last six months had been as even tempered and coolly practical as he had been all his life. But of late there had been a change. It seemed to Robert that his father lived like a man in perpetual fear of being found out in some great wrong. And yet how could such an idea be applicable to Mr Angus of Auchengray, whose name was synonymous in the country-side with integrity and honour, and whom all who knew him would trust with untold gold, and with what was much more precious—the family secrets, the skeletons on the hearth, the shadows in the home which have to be revealed sometimes to those in his profession. Robert dismissed the idea as absurd, and yet it would haunt him persistently, till he felt astonished and annoyed at his own imaginative folly.

It was now two months since Rolfe Ransome had come to Auchengray, and during that time Robert and he had not become more friendly; in fact they rarely spoke to each other, and between them Mr Angus was kept rather uncomfortable in his mind. Many wondered, both privately and publicly, what the banker meant by being so much

more indulgent and considerate to the junior clerk than he was to his only son. One or two had a strong suspicion of the truth. Mr Angus left Auchengray at seven o'clock the following morning, and Mr Rolfe Ransome elected to take a holiday likewise, and joined the skaters at noon on the loch in the Earl's grounds. Robert Angus made no comment thereon, but those in the office with him knew the meaning of that ominous darkening of the brows and the stern compression of the lips. There was a storm brewing in the Angus household, which would break ere many hours were over. Robert directed M'Dowall to have the trap ready at half-past seven, as he intended driving to Strathblane himself to meet the master. Then he dined alone (nobody knew what had become of Rolfe), and, muffling himself up well, jumped into the gig and drove away.

It was bright moonlight, the air clear and still, and frosty —as fine a winter night as one could wish to see. Objects could be seen at a great distance, and the snow-capped ridges of the hills beyond Strathblane were distinctly visible as he drove slowly up the long incline which gradually rose from Auchengray. When he reached the Earl's gates he pulled out his watch and saw that it was ten minutes past eight. Beauty had been taking it easy coming up the hill, but he would need to pull up now, for the train was due in twenty minutes, and he had still three miles to run. By driving straight through the policies, past the Thorn and out at the North Lodge, he would save a mile, so after a moment's hesitation Robert turned the animal's head down the avenue. He could see the lights of the Thorn twinkling through the trees, and picture, too, the pleasant family circle gathered in the drawing-room, such as he had seen it many, many a time. The avenue took a wide sweep past the Castle, which at that season of the year was dark and deserted, then it cut across the park, and, passing the factor's house, emerged into the high road to Strathblane. The

trees at the lower end grew thickly together; giant beeches, with the growth of centuries upon them, interlacing their huge arms overhead, which in the summer time made a dark, delicious shade, and now in their winter nakedness cast long, weird, dark shadows across the way.

Robert Angus looked with fond interest at the brightly-lighted windows of the house which held his darling, little dreaming how near she was to him in that moment, and what unexpected picture was about to be presented to his view. When he entered upon the other end of the avenue he saw two figures in the distance—a man and a woman, his keen vision presently assured him—and there was a strange familiarity about them both. They were walking closely together, and seemed so much absorbed that they apparently did not hear the whirr of the approaching gig. When he came nearer to them he saw distinctly the outline of the woman's graceful figure, the soft, white wrap about the head and shoulders, and his lips twitched under his brown moustache. Her companion might be Jim; but the figure was scarcely so tall or so well-built; then a brother and sister are not much given to moonlight strolls on a bitter winter night, unless, perhaps, under very exceptional circumstances. When the machine was close upon the pair they seemed to come to themselves with a start, and both turned round, and immediately sprang apart. But not before Robert Angus had seen the close-clinging of Amy's hand to Rolfe Ransome's arm—not before he had noted the air of confident proprietorship with which Rolfe Ransome held his handsome head down to the golden one. No, he saw all these, but he made no sign. He gave Beauty a sharp touch with the lash, and set her off in a sharp trot, and he kept his face looking straight before him, as a stranger might have done out of consideration for a pair of lovers whose courting he had unintentionally interrupted. Robert Angus made no outward sign; only Beauty seemed to be alive to

the fact that her master was not to be trifled with; she was kept so hard in curb, and driven with such unusual force. The train was signalled when they reached the station, and in two or three minutes it came puffing in with a mighty noise, the red lights on the engine gleaming like fierce eyes in the darkness. The omnibus from the country was in waiting as usual, and one or two cabs and a carriage and pair, pertaining to one of the Strathblane mill-spinners, were waiting in the enclosure. Robert Angus drew up as near to the station gate as possible, and watched—with little enough interest, it must be told—the passengers streaming from the platform. He saw two ladies and a gentleman get into the carriage, which at once drove away, and wondered a little what was keeping his father, who was generally to the front everywhere. He saw him presently coming along the platform, laden with packages, and carrying a lady's fur mantle over his arm; and he was not alone. Robert paid no attention, however, thinking he was helping some friend who happened to be travelling alone. She came out of the gate first, and then paused directly under the lamp, waiting, evidently, till her companion had delivered up the tickets. Robert Angus glanced carelessly and curiously at her, and his eyes were at once riveted by the exceeding beauty of her face. It was a beauty not common in the North country; a delicate and exquisite loveliness, such as he had never seen surpassed or equalled. The face was not attractive merely in its harmonious blending of feature and colour, but was peculiarly winning in expression. Robert Angus had not for a long time seen a face which interested him so deeply.

While he was looking and wondering who the fair stranger could be, he saw his father join her, and could not but be struck by the impressive courtesy of his demeanour towards her. It was far beyond his ordinary polite attention to the ladies of his acquaintance.

"Has your man not come?" he heard her ask, and

her voice was low and sweet—that excellent thing in woman.

"The trap is there," Mr Angus answered. "I see my son is with it himself."

Robert saw the fine eyes shadow as she glanced a little timidly towards him, little guessing how closely she was being watched.

The next minute Mr Angus crossed the enclosure to the side of the dogcart.

"Robert, can't you come down a minute, and see this lady?" he said, in a queer, abrupt way. "I want to introduce you."

"Beauty won't stand, as you know," Robert answered, with unpromising brevity, for the whole truth had come upon him with a shock. Mr Angus at once went back to the lady, and appeared to be urging something upon her; but she repeatedly shook her head, and at length he opened the door of the nearest cab and put her in. Robert watched how he lingered, as if loath to say good-night; but at last he turned away, gave the driver his orders and his fare, and, when it drove away, crossed over to the dogcart, which was now the only vehicle in the enclosure.

"What made you think of coming to-night. I never thought of it," he said, as they drove away.

"I don't know. I wanted the air about me," Robert answered. "Did you get all your business through in town?"

"Yes, very comfortably. What kind of a day have you had?"

"Busy. Ransome had a holiday, of course, and that gave the others more to do."

"A holiday! Bless me, who gave him a holiday?"

"I thought you did, sir, he went off so calmly."

"Not I. I'm not such an ass as to imagine two can be spared at once. The lad wants talking to."

"He wants something more," said Robert, with a kind of subdued savageness. "If I were the master, I'd kick him into the middle of next week."

Mr Angus, senior, discreetly held his peace, and there was a brief silence.

"That was Miss Ransome I wished to introduce you to at the station, Bob," he ventured to say at length.

"Was it? I fancied so," Robert made answer, and not another word passed between them all the way home.

M'Dowell was waiting to take Beauty to the stable, and the two gentlemen passed into the house at once.

The dining-room was snug and cosy, but it was empty.

"Has Mr Ransome been in to dinner?" Robert asked of the servant who came in to put up the lights.

"No, Mr Robert. It is very inconvenient when Mr Ransome has to have dinner kept for him," said the girl, in rather an aggrieved voice.

"Next time Mr Ransome is not in to dinner there is none for him, my girl; remember that," said the old master, in sharp, clear tones. "And if he makes any complaints, refer him to me."

"Very well, sir," said the girl, respectfully, and at once withdrew.

Robert threw himself into the easy-chair and took up the *Scotsman*. His father went to the sideboard and helped himself to a glass of sherry.

"Cold work driving six miles to-night. Wouldn't you like a nip?"

"No, thank you. Did you dine in town, father?"

"Yes. You would have your dinner alone, seeing Ransome wasn't in?"

"I didn't particularly miss him," said Robert, drily.

"You and he are not great friends."

"Do you wonder at that?" asked Robert, quietly.

"Well, no; you are very different. He is a senseless,

thoughtless lad, but I hope as he grows older he will improve."

"I don't think it likely. He will get us all into trouble if we don't watch ourseives," said Robert, significantly.

"The fact of the matter is, I believe I made a mistake bringing him here, Bob," said Mr Angus, repeating the conviction he had expressed the previous night.

"Why don't you send him about his business? If I were dissatisfied with a servant I wouldn't keep him a day longer than I was obliged to. It passes my comprehension how you can tolerate him in the house for a moment. I have been very near kicking him out myself more than once."

"Well, you see—well, you see——" said Mr Angus, in rather a helpless manner. "Say, Bob, didn't you wonder why I wanted to introduce you to Miss Ransome to-night?"

"If I did, what then?"

"Well, I suppose I had better tell you. But by-the-by, when are you going to set up house-keeping yourself?"

"I have not thought about it," Robert answered, keeping his eyes fixed on the newspaper before him.

"I think, if you are going to marry, it would be a pity to lose the chance of a house like Fairgate. It will be snapped up quickly enough."

"Are you anxious to get rid of me, father?" asked Robert, with a slightly bitter smile.

"No, no; what's the use of saying that?" asked Mr Angus, testily. "It will be dull enough for me when you are away."

"Then you may keep your mind easy, father, for the probability is that I may never marry."

"Oh, nonsense! What's the use of saying that to me? What of Amelia Burnett? I would be sorry to think you were speaking in earnest."

"But what was it you were to tell me?" said Robert, bringing his father back to the starting-point.

"Well, well, I thought you were a shrewd fellow, Bob, who could put two and two together. In fact, I never thought I'd need to tell you," said Mr Angus, nervously. "Well, you see, when you are married it will be rather a lonely job for me. So, in fact, I've made up my mind to marry again."

The paper fell from Robert's hand, and he looked at him in absolute surprise.

"Marry again!" he repeated, blankly. "At your time of life? Surely not."

"At my time of life! Bless me, boy, I'm only sixty-three, and as fresh as a man half my age," said Mr Angus, briskly.

There was a few minutes' painful silence.

"You cannot expect me to be greatly elated at first, sir; the thing has come so unexpectedly upon me," said Robert, at length. "But if the lady is suitable in age and circumstances, and will make you happy, I will be the last person to say one unsatisfactory word."

"Thank you. I knew you would take a sensible, considerate view of the matter. Let me assure you that, though there is some little disparity in years between us, the lady is all that even you could desire."

"Is it Miss Ransome?"

"It is Miss Ransome," responded Mr Angus at once; then to his no little astonishment, Robert rose up and walked out of the room. A minute later he heard the closing of the hall door, and his firm, quick step going down the street.

CHAPTER V.

FRIENDS.

IT was a very pleasant room, especially on a winter evening, when the curtains were closely drawn and the old-fashioned chintz-covered couch placed in front of the cheery fire, and the little work-table beside it, with the open work-basket, and a piece of knitting, or perhaps just a thimble, to indicate that it was a woman's favourite corner. There was a piano opposite the fire-place—an old-fashioned square, with a sweet, tinkling voice, and a very brilliantly-polished case, which told that it had been well and tenderly dealt with. The old piano and one or two choice engravings on the wall were the only valuable articles which had been saved from the Manse sale, and which helped to make the little parlour at Sunset Cottage something like home to Joan Laurence. People had wondered and condemned when, without consulting anybody, Miss Laurence had rented the little empty cottage at the foot of the High Street, and, after having removed the few goods and chattels she possessed, had settled down alone to earn her bread in the place where she had been born. The busybodies agreed in thinking that it would have been a much better plan for Miss Laurence to have gone out as a governess, for which she was perfectly qualified, and which would have been a much more respectable and proper position

for the daughter of their former minister than living alone, without even a solitary domestic to give a tinge of genteel propriety to the small domicile. But Miss Laurence evidently knew her own mind best, and none of those so deeply interested in her affairs dared to make a suggestion, or to hint at their disapproval to her, for she was a thousand times more distant and haughty and unapproachable in her reduced circumstances than she had ever been in the days when she was mistress of the Manse. Joan Laurence had not many friends now among the upper classes of Auchengray. She was one of the women who would be known and loved by the few, never by the many. Those who had known her longest loved her best, for she did not reveal herself to everyone. In her nature there were depths undreamed of by the shallow minds who sat in pitying judgment upon her, and who would say, with a shrug of their shoulders, "Poor Joan Laurence! She was always peculiar, and she gets worse as she grows older."

But there were people in Auchengray, hard-working, struggling, ignorant men and women, whom the "select circle" would pass by loftily on the other side, but who worshipped the very ground upon which Joan Laurence trod. To them she showed herself; to them she was the tender, sympathetic, warm-hearted friend, strong to comfort and to help, humble and unmindful of herself in her endeavours to make life a little less hard for them. Such had Joan Laurence been to the poor in her father's parish, and as their firm, warm friend they loved and honoured her even after the advent of the new minister's very officious wife, who intruded into their dwellings at all hours, lifted the lid from their broth-pot, and gave patronising advice about the making of economical dinners out of cheap bones and inferior meat. Mrs Balfour pronounced the parishioners of Auchengray to be an ungrateful lot, wanting in every element of respect and proper understanding of their position, and

she did not scruple to say that the former minister's wife and daughter had spoiled them, and given them ideas far above their station. It had been a hard trial for Joan Laurence to undertake the musical tuition of Mrs Balfour's two girls. But knowing that she could not afford, and had, moreover, no right to refuse to give her services to the minister's wife more than to any other, she swallowed her pride and went. Mrs Balfour was jealous of her influence in the parish; she could scarcely take a step without being met by warm and loving praise of Miss Laurence, and, not being a lady either by birth or education, nor even a feeling-hearted woman, she did not scruple to humiliate the "music-mistress," as she termed her, on every possible occasion. But Joan was equal to her. Whatever rudeness or discourtesy Mrs Balfour might choose to exhibit to her, she never for a moment forgot that she was a lady, never for a moment allowed her calm, proud serenity to be ruffled; she did her work faithfully and well, and, while teaching the minister's girls the mysteries of music, she also gave them lessons in love.

The minister himself was a kindly, well-intentioned man, much subdued by his wife. "A feckless crater," the working-folk called him, and his influence for good in the parish was not very strong. He was a good preacher, however, and was seen and heard at his best in the pulpit; out of it he was little more than a cypher.

Joan had just returned from the Manse, and was in the kitchen setting on the kettle for the cup of cocoa with which she was accustomed to refresh herself after her walk when there came a loud and imperative knock to her door. Thinking it would be a messenger from some poor body who had been taken suddenly ill, she ran to answer the summons, forgetting in her haste that she carried the little tin kettle in her hand. It was pitch dark outside, and, as there was no light in the lobby, she could only discern the dim outline of a man standing on the step.

"Well, what is it?" she asked, kindly, and was a little alarmed when the man, without speaking, stepped across the threshold.

"Who is it?" she asked more sharply.

"It's only me, Joan," said Robert Angus, in a stifled voice. "I can come in, I suppose?"

"Of course," she said, quickly; "step into the sitting-room, please, and I'll be with you presently."

So saying, she sped back to the kitchen, set down the kettle with a little laugh at herself, then took off bonnet, cloak, and over-shoes, and took down her dress, which she had carefully fastened about her to save it from the wind—for in these changed days Joan had to be very careful of her clothes, not knowing where the next suit was to come from, but sure that it could not be procured until it had been hardly earned. When she was quite ready she went back to the sitting-room, to find her visitor leaning back in the comfortable easy chair with his eyes fixed moodily on the fire. He did not even look up at her entrance, and, divining at once that there was something wrong, she never spoke a word, but sat down in her own corner of the couch, and took up her knitting. She was one of those rare women who know when and how to hold their tongues.

"What are you making, Joan?" Robert Angus asked presently.

"A woollen vest for that poor Willie Wilson. He has such a frightful cough; and he is thinly enough clad. There are frightful draughts in that station-house, and when he goes out to collect the tickets the east winds get a beautiful clutch at him; so I thought this would be the very thing for him."

"How on earth do you find ways and means to do so much for people, Joan? It is a perfect miracle."

Joan laughed slightly; but there was a little catch in her voice more suggestive of tears than laughter.

"Oh, I like to do it, and the will finds the way, you know. It is good for me, too, to see that others are worse off than me, and so try to help them if I can."

"It's a pity there are not more like you," was Robert Angus's sole comment; and another silence ensued.

"It's a long time since I was here, Joan," he said, presently.

Joan nodded.

"Not since I told you not to come," she said, with a little odd smile. "You remember, when I became rather unpleasantly aware that it was not proper for me to allow you to spend an hour here. Yet they knew our relationship, and how we had been like brother and sister all our days. Truly, the tender mercies of our friends are very cruel."

"But for you, Joan, I would have disregarded their silly and malicious gossip."

"So should I if I had not been dependent on them for my bread," said Joan. "Poor things, their hearts are not much wider than their purses, and that is narrow enough, as I have bitterly proved."

"Why don't you ask me why I am here to-night?" asked Robert Angus, abruptly.

"Because I expect you to tell me. I am not of a prying nature."

"I wish you were a little more like your neighbours—no, I don't, though. Well, I'm rather put out to-night; in fact, I'm thoroughly disgusted with myself and everybody else."

"Charming frame of mind! Go on! Confession is good for the soul."

Robert Angus rose from his chair, and began to walk up and down the little narrow room.

"Joan, my father is going to marry again," he said, suddenly.

Joan laid down her work, and turned her face round to him.

"I am not surprised. I was afraid of it; but I am very sorry."

"What do you think of it?"

"Not very much; but Mr Angus is not an old man."

"He is sixty-three."

"Look at my Uncle Joseph. He was eighty."

"But he married a suitable wife. Do you think Miss Ransome a suitable wife for my father?"

"Not in age, certainly; but you must not be too hard on her."

"How can I respect her? Would any young girl marry an old man for anything except to gain position and wealth?"

"Now I do not quite agree with you. I grant that what you say is the rule, but there are exceptions. Your father is very handsome, and carries his years well. Then he is young in spirit, and very lovable."

"Oh, bosh?"

"Thank you, Mr Angus."

"Well, what's the use of going on like that? Are you trying to make me believe there is any love in the matter?"

"I cannot say, but I think it not unlikely. You must make the best of this, Robert. As far as I can hear and judge, Miss Ransome is as good as she is beautiful."

"Then she must be very different from her precious brother," said Robert, savagely.

"She is very different. I am sure you will like her, and I believe she will make your father very happy. As you are a man, and have a home of your own in prospect, the change really cannot affect you very much. If you were Mr Angus's daughter instead of his son, it would be different."

"You are right, it would. You are very positive that I have a home in prospect, Joan."

"Whether is it Amy or you who have changed, then?"

Robert Angus made no answer, but Joan saw his face grow darker as if some unpleasant thoughts were in his mind.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked, presently. "Fairgate is ready, isn't it? I think you should marry soon, Robert."

"Why?"

"I am not compelled to give my reasons. I think both Amy and you would be happier. Certainly she would be more settled; and what is the use of waiting?"

"Not much, certainly. It will have to be off or on soon, any way," said Robert Angus, and there stopped. He felt tempted to tell Joan Laurence what he had seen in the policies that night, but it would hurt his pride. He could not confess that a being so contemptible in his eyes as Rolfe Ransome should have caused Amy to swerve, even for a moment, in her allegiance to him. He need not have been so reticent, however, for Joan had her suspicions already; and, what was more, she was reading his thoughts in that very moment like an open book.

"Is your father's marriage likely to take place soon?" she asked, wisely changing the subject.

"I don't know. I was so disgusted when he told me of it that I walked out of the house. I haven't much patience, Joan."

"You're a man," said Joan, philosophically; "so nobody expects it of you. You will be more civil to him the next time he speaks of it."

"If I am, he has you to thank."

"Oh, no; you would have come to reason sooner or later," said Joan, serenely. "Will you take a cup of cocoa with me? If you won't you must go away and let me have mine. I am very hungry."

"No, thanks, I could not eat or drink anything, so I'll go away. You are a good sort of woman, Joan. I couldn't get on at all without you," said Robert, suddenly, as if the thought had but newly struck him. "I believe I'm a selfish, ungrateful wretch, but I do value your friendship, Joan Laurence; I assure you I do."

Joan's fine eyes filled with sudden tears, and she rose hastily, brushing them aside as she did so, as if ashamed of her emotion.

"Of course I know you do, else I wouldn't have taken the trouble to talk so much to you. When you fall short of what I expect and think you should do and be, I just comfort myself by thinking that as you are a man you must be excused."

Robert laughed a little, and looked contemplatively for a moment at the woman before him.

She was not beautiful by any means, but there was a something about her he had never seen in any other woman. The wide sympathies, the strong yet tender soul, the boundless kindliness of her heart shone in her eyes, and showed themselves in every play of her somewhat strongly-marked features. Her attire might be shabby and lowly enough, but she was a lady, and looked it every inch; nay, she was more—a woman whom any man might be proud and glad to call friend.

"You always do me good, Joan; what a brick you are! Do you know I sometimes wish those jolly old days, when we used to throw stones at and otherwise abuse each other, were back again? We were very happy then."

"Very; but there's no use growing sentimental," said Joan, with a queer twitch about her grave, sweet lips. "Good-night, and do you take my advice and be kind to your father, and to the young wife when she comes home. You'll never regret it. I think we'll find when we grow old

that it's not the kind deeds that will cause us sorrow, but the other ones. Off you go!"

"I'll remember your sermon, Joan. Good-night, and God bless you! I don't often use phrases like that, but I really mean it to-night."

Joan nodded. She really could not trust herself to say any more. When the door closed upon Robert Angus, she gulped down a great sob, and went away to prepare her solitary meal.

CHAPTER VI.

BEYOND THE BOUNDS.

INSTEAD of going straight home, Robert Angus walked out the Strathblane road as far as the Earl's gates. He had no intention, however, of going to the Thorn; Amy Burnett would see no more of him for a few days to come. He simply wanted a quiet hour to himself to ponder over certain things, and to shape the course he intended to pursue. His talk with Joan Laurence had done him good. There was no nonsense about her, no beating about the bush; she said what she had to say in plain, pointed language which could not be misunderstood. Then she never flattered nor spared when she thought blame was due; when she did praise, however, it was in no stinted measure—she did nothing by halves. Curiously enough, Robert Angus thought, she had never given him a word of approbation; on the rare occasions when they met now she was invariably taking him to task honestly and fearlessly about something. The strangest thing of all was that he enjoyed it, perhaps because it was different food from that to which he was accustomed. The women folk of Auchengray had done their best to spoil Robert Angus, and they had very nearly succeeded.

From Joan Laurence his thoughts wandered presently to Amy Burnett, with whom he felt justly indignant. The

very soul of honour himself, true not only in word and deed, but in thought, to his promised wife, it hurt him bitterly to find that she had swerved in her faith to him. There might be nothing in taking a stroll with Rolfe Ransome; still, as the betrothed of another, she had no right to do it. Therefore she deserved to be punished, and he would go no more to the Thorn till she penitently sent for him and begged to be forgiven. Grimly satisfied with this resolution, he bethought himself that he had better be going home, as it was past nine o'clock. Just as he turned to go, someone came striding through the Earl's gates, and presently the mingled odour of perfume and tobacco convinced him that Rolfe Ransome was coming up behind. Not at all desirous of having his company home, Robert quickened his steps; so did Rolfe, and in a few minutes was alongside.

"Holloa, Angus, it's you! Out for a stroll, eh?" he asked, in his cool, impertinent manner.

No answer.

"It's rather late to go to the Thorn; besides, Mrs Burnett had a headache, and had gone to bed. That's why I left so early. Going home, eh?"

"Yes; but be good enough to go on in front, or else keep behind," said Robert, quietly. "I prefer my own company to yours."

"Dear me, how grumpy you are! Governor home, eh? Was he waxed at me for taking a holiday?"

"I expect you will hear about it. Mr Angus is much displeased. It is probable you will receive your dismissal."

"Not a bit of it," said Rolfe, serenely. "He won't for Isabel's sake. You bet he won't; but there, I'm letting the cat out. You wonder I am——"

"The fact that Mr Angus is about to marry your sister will not make him overlook all your offences," said Robert, significantly. "Several of your doings of late will require an explanation shortly."

Rolfe gave vent to a long, low whistle, indicative of his extreme surprise.

"So you know all about it, do you? Well, you know, you may as well keep civil, for you won't have much say when there's two of us in the house."

Robert Angus bit his lip till it bled. Only himself knew what a mighty effort it cost him to keep his hands off Ransome.

"You've treated me worse than a dog since I came to this vile place," said Ransome, presently, carefully knocking the ashes from his pipe. "But I'll be revenged on you. Say, how did you feel when you saw the divine Amy and your humble servant in the avenue to-night? Very small, eh? I thought you would. Here, I say, keep off. Do you mean to kill me?"

Robert Angus threw his prudence to the winds. Catching his tormentor by the collar of the coat, he shook him as a dog would shake a rat—shook him till his teeth chattered in his head, and he howled for mercy. Then taking up the dainty cane which had fallen from Ransome's nerveless fingers, he snapped it across his back, and tossed it and its owner in the gutter. Then he strode on in front, leaving Rolfe to pick himself up gingerly, swearing and vowing vengeance in no measured terms. When it came to a trial of strength, he had not the ghost of a chance against Robert Angus; so his revenge would need to take some other form than that of personal chastisement. After the heat of his passion wore off, Robert felt annoyed at and ashamed o himself. It would have been much more dignified, certainly, to have passed by Ransome's impudence with silent contempt, only there were men upon whom contempt was utterly lost, and whom nothing short of corporal punishment would touch; and Rolfe Ransome was certainly one of these. He seemed utterly devoid of any of the finer feelings; as for honour, the word was to him only an unknown sound.

As he neared home Robert's thoughts reverted again to

his father. He felt sorry now that he had been so short with him. After all, he had a right to please himself without consulting anybody. When he remembered the anxious nervousness with which he had approached the subject, and the evident dread he had of the reception he (Robert) would give his news, he smiled a compassionate smile, and again regretted that he had not been kinder. As Joan had said, kind deeds would be the pleasantest to reflect upon at that period of life when memory is all we have to live upon—that time which comes upon us silently and swiftly, convincing us that the highest ambitions and proudest aims of humanity are as nothing when weighed with love.

It was exactly half-past nine on the Town Hall clock when he passed up the High Street, which was now quite deserted. The only creature he saw was the doctor's housemaid, running to the Post Office with her master's letters. He bade her good evening as he passed, for she had been two years in the Bank House, and it never occurred to Robert to pass even a servant-girl without recognition. It was that perfect frank courtesy which made him so much beloved in Auchengray.

"Is the master in, Christina?" he asked the girl who opened the door to him, for he had forgotten his key.

"Yes, sir. He is in the study. Is Mr Ransome not with you, Mr Robert? The master has been asking for him. He seems anxious about him."

"Oh, he is all right. He will be here shortly," Robert answered carelessly, and, hanging up his hat and coat, went straight to the library.

His father was writing at the table, and merely glanced up at his entrance, but made no remark. Robert stood against the mantel with his hands in his pockets, listening to the scratching of the pen across the paper.

"You did not see Ransome, I suppose?" his father said presently, as he addressed and sealed his letter.

Robert could read the address from where he stood—"Miss Ransome, care of Mrs Colquhoun, Mount Rosa, Strathblane."

"Yes, I saw him. He will be in shortly."

"Where has he been; do you know?"

"Spending the evening at the Thorn," responded Robert, briefly.

"Ah, I'm glad to hear he was in so safe a place. You surely don't go so much to the Thorn as you did, Bob?"

"One wooer at a time is sufficient, I fancy, even for Miss Burnett," Robert answered, with a bitterness which surprised both his father and himself.

But the old man wisely made no comment.

"Father, I'm sorry I was so rude to you this evening," said Robert, presently, turning his fine eyes fully and frankly on his father's face. "I was taken by surprise and forgot myself. Believe me, I wish you every happiness, and I shall not lack in courtesy, I assure you, to your wife, whenever you please to bring her home."

It was half-comical, half-pathetic, to see the change which came upon the banker's face as he listened to these words.

"Thank you, Bob. I hoped this wouldn't make any difference between us," he said, somewhat huskily, and extending his hand to his son as he spoke. "I won't forget this, I promise you; and I am sure Isabel will appreciate your good-will even more deeply than I do. She has been very anxious about you, and I have just been writing to her to-night with a heavy heart."

Robert nodded.

"You might re-open the letter, and convey my good wishes to her in a postscript," he suggested, with a slight twinkle in his eye, which brought a smile to his father's lips. So Joan's sermon was already bearing fruit.

"I say, father, do you know what I've been about to-night?"

"No. Haven't you been at the Thorn?"

"No, I looked in to see Joan Laurence for an hour; then I went out the Strathblane Road, and gave Ransome a thrashing."

"Bless me, boy!"

Mr Angus started, not being able to discern the analogy between paying a visit to Miss Laurence and chastising Ransome.

"He was impertinent to me, and that was the only way I could punish him; so I did it," said Robert, coolly.

"I hope you didn't hurt him."

"Not I; only spoiled a cane and a pair of kid gloves for him; that's all. He'll weigh his words next time he speaks to me, I'll warrant you."

"Dear me, it is most extraordinary! I had no idea there was so much fire in you, Rob. But if you didn't hurt him, I daresay it won't do him any harm."

"It'll do him good. There he is, coming in. He won't show face here, I promise you."

Mr Ransome admitted himself with his own key, and went straight up to his room. As may be imagined, he was not in a particularly amiable mood. Nor were the remarks he made in a savage undertone while he brushed the mud from his new tweed suit of a very elegant or complimentary kind. Robert was right. The thrashing, richly merited as it was, did Ransome good, in so far as it put an end to all impertinence directed against the individual who had inflicted it. He now kept a respectable distance from Robert, and, though living under the same rooftree, they seldom exchanged words. Mr Angus, senior, began to keep a more strict and vigilant surveillance over his junior clerk, and did not mince matters when he chanced to offend; so that the young gentleman had but an indifferent time of it in the house of Angus.

But he found consolation ever awaiting him at the Thorn.

Robert Angus absented himself from the factor's house for a week, and intended still further to absent himself until Amy should send for him and make some explanation of the scene which she knew very well he had witnessed. He was somewhat astonished at his own coolness in the matter; in fact, he felt no extreme distress at the separation from his lady love, and as the days went by he felt less and less inclination to return to his old allegiance.

He was standing at the bank door one afternoon just at closing time, waiting on the office boy bringing up the mail-bag from the post-office, when Mr Burnett came up.

"Holloa, Robert; how are you?" he said, cheerily. "I was in the town, and came up specially to see you. What's come over you this age, eh?"

"Nothing particular. Won't you come in? It is just three, and my father will be going into the house presently."

"No, thank you. Come, tell me why you have stayed away so long. Amy not been behaving, eh?"

"Amy knows what has kept me, Mr Burnett," Robert said.

"She pretends not to—the monkey—for I asked her this very day, and she tossed her head, and said you must have got a sweetheart. Is that so?"

"It is Amy who is fickle. She does not miss me, evidently; she has got so good a substitute," said Robert, drily.

"Tell you what; that young Ransome's not worth his salt, and he comes a deal too much to the Thorn. If I thought he was making love to my girl I'd show him the door precious quickly, I assure you," said Mr Burnett, with asperity.

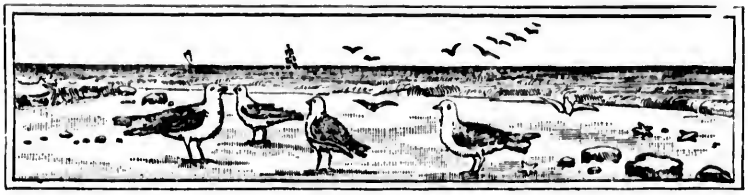
"That's just what he is doing, Mr Burnett; and it is scarcely to be expected that I should brook his rivalry."

"Bless me! I wish my family had been all boys; they are so much less trouble. That Amy beginning to annoy me with her lovers already, and four young ones coming up

to follow her example. It'll make me an old man before my time," said Mr Burnett, comically. "Well, Robert, Amy or no Amy, don't desert us. Mamma misses you of an evening—so do we all."

"Thank you. Tell Mrs Burnett I'll be up some evening soon. You've heard of my father's approaching marriage with Miss Ransome?"

"Yes, and I didn't know what to think of it. I thought your father too sensible a man to have done it," said Mr Burnett, shaking his head. "But she's a very sweet girl, I hear, and you may be very comfortable together; I am sure I hope so. Well, I'm off. There's Miss Laurence coming up the street. Fine woman that; I wish my Amy were more like her. Don't forget your promise to come up. Good day!"



CHAPTER VII.

AYE OR NO?

MR BURNETT was an exceedingly amiable man and an indulgent father, but he could be sternly angry at times, and then his children quaked before him. Now, if he had one special desire in this world, it was to see his eldest daughter the wife of Robert Angus, and there had been no prouder or better pleased man in Auchengray than he that day when Robert asked his permission to pay his addresses to Amy. It was not only that it was a good settlement in life for her (for, in addition to his expectations from his father, Robert Angus had inherited a considerable fortune from his mother), he was a son-in-law of whom any man might be proud. He had never been mixed up in any of the follies of which so many young men are guilty; his life from his very boyhood had been a pure and spotless page, in which even the most censorious could not find a flaw or a blemish. Such being the case, it was no wonder that Amy Burnett's father and mother had both gladly and thankfully promised her to Robert Angus. Knowing him so well, Mr Burnett guessed that it was not from a mere punctilio he had absented himself from the Thorn so long. No. Amy must have given him some real ground for offence; and it was his nature to stand aloof until that offence was

acknowledged, for he was as proud as a prince where his own honour was concerned, and would not swerve an inch, even for the woman he loved. As Mr Burnett walked home that afternoon, thinking over the thing all the way, he grew gradually more irritated and annoyed, until, by the time he reached his own house, he had made himself seriously angry. He let himself in, and went into the study, where Mary was lying full length on the rug devouring "The Fortunes of Nigel." She jumped up at her father's entrance, and, gathering from his face that he was displeased about something, began to move quickly out of the room.

"Where's your sister? Is she in the house?" he asked, abruptly.

"Which one, papa?" queried Mary, rather timidly.

"Amy, of course. What should I want with the children?" he asked, sharply. "Go and find her, and tell her I want her down here at once."

Mary gladly made her escape, feeling inwardly thankful that she was not Amy, though very sorry that she had so evidently fallen under the ban of her father's rare displeasure. Mary was a shrewd girl, and like these very quiet people, saw more than anybody imagined. She quickly surmised that it was about Robert Angus her father was going to take her sister to task. Amy was in the drawing-room, trying her eyes in the already fading light over an exquisite piece of crewel work, for she was an adept in making these pretty trifles which cost both time and money, and which are in constant requisition for bazaars and fancy fairs.

"Father wants you in the study, Amy," said Mary, breaking in upon her reverie. "You had better make haste. He said you were to come at once."

Amy jumped up at once.

"Dear me, papa wants me in the study! What can it be for?" she wondered, as she folded up her work. "Do you think he is angry, Polly?"

"I am afraid he is, Amy," Mary admitted, whereat Amy compressed her lips, and marched boldly downstairs. She, too, had a pretty good guess what her father wanted her for; but she felt herself equal to the occasion. She found her father standing on the hearth-rug, solemnly waiting for her, and wearing a very stern expression, which rather diminished her courage.

"Well, papa, what is it?"

"Shut that door, please. Now, then, tell me what you mean by making a fool of yourself, and trying to make one of Robert Angus too—eh?"

"What do you mean, papa?" queried Amy, faintly, beginning to fear that he knew far more than she had the faintest idea of.

Visions of innumerable moonlight and starlight walks, innumerable sweet words and flattering vows, to which she had no right to listen, and which, no doubt, some spy had reported to her father or her lover, or both, rose up before her mind and made her quake.

"Mean! Bless me, girl! can't you be content with one sweetheart at a time? You are engaged to Robert Angus, and mean to be his wife; why on earth do you encourage the silly attentions of a jackanapes like Rolfe Ransome?"

Amy's fair face flushed crimson at this contemptuous allusion to the young man whom she had invested with a halo of romance such as surrounds the heroes of poetry and story, but which the reality of work-a-day life speedily dispels.

"If Robert Angus has been complaining to you, father, it shows his mean, ungentlemanly spirit," she said, hotly. "He seems to think that because he did me the infinite honour to ask me to be his wife I should be for ever grateful and expect nothing more. No woman with any sense of what is due to her would be content with the meagre

attention he thinks fit to bestow on me. It is time his eyes were opened; better now than when it is too late."

Mr Burnett listened to his daughter's words in extreme surprise.

"Bless me, girl! He came to see you every night. He was always planning things for your enjoyment, and I am sure he has spent plenty of money on trinkets and such like," he said, pointing to the exquisite diamond brooch and ear-drops, his gifts, with which she was then adorned. "What more do you want? Perhaps he didn't flatter you, and talk a lot of rubbish to you; but didn't that show he respected you more than those who do? Be careful what you are about, my girl; a man like Robert Angus isn't to be picked up every day—remember that."

"I'm sick of having that dinned into my ears morning, noon, and night. In my opinion, Robert Angus is a very ordinary man," said Amy, still hotly. "It shows how much he cares for me, anyway, that he has stayed away so long."

"There is a reason for that, you know very well," said Mr Burnett, significantly. "Robert Angus loves you, but he will not lose his self-respect for the best woman alive. I know him too well. Well, then, the question is this. Are you going to be off with him altogether?"

The girl's fair face paled a little. She was not prepared to go so far yet. Some lingering tenderness for the absent one remained, for he had been good to her, he had loved her well—none knew it better than she.

"How am I to know, papa?" she said, pettishly, her lovely eyes filling with tears of vexation. "Do you want me to walk into Auchengray and go down on my knees to him?"

"Don't be absurd. No, I don't want that; but I'll tell you what I do want, and what I mean to have—no more of young Ransome hanging about the house. If you don't

give him his leave I'll do it, and perhaps not quite so politely. Apart from you altogether, he is not a good companion for the boys. One thing more; take a bit of fatherly advice, my dear, given to you in love. Be faithful and kind to Robert Angus, for he is a good man, and will make you the best of husbands. Don't estimate that lightly, for, let me tell you, good husbands are growing scarcer and scarcer every day. Robert Angus may not have so much polish about him as some, but he is the true sort. It's the old story of the gold and the glitter: take care not to be deceived. And mind that he won't stand very much more. No manly man will allow a woman to play with him. If he does, he loses both her respect and his own, and the love soon follows suit. Now, off you go, and mind what I have said."

Amy had no more to say, and leaving the room, she went upstairs to her own, with her hands clasped before her, and an unusually thoughtful expression on her pretty face. She sat down in her quiet chamber and followed out the train of thought her father's plain speaking had started. Now, though Amy had been pleased and flattered by Rolfe Ransome's admiration, and though she had found his passionate protestations and vows of eternal devotion very sweet in comparison with her own lover's cooler wooing, she was not at all prepared to give Robert Angus up. She was not blind to the advantages of the position he could offer her. Mrs Robert Angus of Fairgate would be a person of no mean importance in Auchengray, whereas Mrs Rolfe Ransome would be nobody at all—a creature to be pitied, perhaps, that would be all.

Amy Burnett weighed the thing carefully in her own mind in a worldly-wise manner, which was surprising, seeing she had been reared in such an unworldly home, and surrounded with the most affectionate influences all her life. Finally she came to the conclusion that her father was r ght,

and that she would need to woo Robert back to his allegiance. That, of course, would involve the sacrifice of Rolfe's sweet adulation—a certainty which caused a faint sigh to escape the coquette's lips. Acting upon the impulse of the moment, she opened her desk to pen a little pleading note to Robert; but she was not a ready writer, and got no further than "Dear Robert,—Why do you stay away so long?"

Then she shut up the desk, resolved to leave the thing till a more convenient season; and hearing Jim's cheery whistle in the hall, went off downstairs.

"Holloa, Amy! You'd better get on that fine, fancy frock to-night, and give your hair an extra frizz," he said, teasingly. "Angus is coming up to-night."

"Is he? What time?"

"Oh, about seven, I suppose. You don't deserve that he should come," said Jim, grimly. "See if you can't behave yourself. I don't know why girls can't appreciate a thorough good fellow like Angus when they get him."

"What do you know about anything?" queried Amy, loftily, and passed on, outwardly indifferent, but inwardly relieved and glad. A little before seven that evening a slight figure, warmly wrapped up, stole out of the house, and ran lightly across the park towards the avenue. It was a fine moonlight night, and a figure coming up from the lodge gates could easily be recognised from where Amy stood. She had not long to wait, for in a few minutes the long swinging tread, so familiar, came sounding through the stillness, and she saw the tall figure of Robert Angus coming towards her. When he was within a hundred yards of her, she stepped out from behind the trees which sheltered her, and went to meet him.

"Is it you, Amy?" he asked, in surprised tones, but not offering to kiss her, or even to touch her hand.

"Yes, it's me," she said, rather pathetically. "Jim told

me you were coming, and I came to meet you. But you don't seem glad to see me."

"You are sure I was me you came to meet?" he said, quietly.

"Of course, who else could it be?"

"You might have expected Ransome," Robert answered quickly; and they turned and began to cross the park together without saying another word.

Amy was nearly crying with vexation. Her power over Robert Angus was too evidently gone, for he took not the smallest notice of her woe-begone expression and beseeching eyes. When they reached the edge of the park, and were within sight of the house, he suddenly stood still and faced her.

"I have something to say to you, Amy, before we go in. We had better come to an understanding at once and for all."

Amy shivered a little, for she felt a little afraid of her lover when he spoke like that.

"It is nearly a fortnight since I was at the Thorn before, Amy—a fortnight to-night since I passed you and Ransome down there," he said, pointing in the direction of the North Lodge. "I have waited patiently for an explanation of that scene. Why has none come?"

"What could I say, except that I was sorry if you were vexed? Was it so very unpardonable to walk a little way with him without meaning anything?" she asked, innocently.

Robert Angus impatiently shook his head.

"Well, Amy, leaving that altogether out of the question, please to answer me one thing truly. It is the first and last time I shall ask it. Whether do you care for him or for me?"

"I promised to be your wife, Robert Angus; yet you ask me that!" she said in an aggrieved voice.

"I do, and I require a truthful and earnest answer, Amy,

if you please. I am tired of this nonsense, and must have it ended either way."

She moved near to him, so near that her dress touched him, and her head was very near his shoulder. But he never stirred.

"I am waiting for my answer," he said, quite calmly.

"If you are tired of me, of course, and don't want me for your wife, of course I can't help it; only it's very hard, after making me love you," she said, beginning to sob.

"Do you mean those words, Amy? Answer me truly. If I seem cold and hard, I am to be forgiven. It is the happiness of both our lives we are about to decide. Be womanly and true for once, Amy," Robert Angus said, with a husky tremor in his voice. The next moment the white arms were clasped about his neck, her golden head pillowed on his breast; and he held her very close to him. "You will let me speak to your father to-night, Amy, and you will be my wife very soon? The house is almost ready, and there is no need to wait. I will be happier and more at rest when you belong to me."

"Yes, yes, Robert, whenever you like, and I will try and not vex you any more," cried Amy, really penitent now.

"I have given my honour and happiness into your keeping, Amy, as you have given me yours. God help us to be faithful and true to each other to the end," he said hoarsely. Then he lifted the fair face to his, and kissed it once—not with a lover's passionate fondness, but with a grave tenderness, which seemed to Amy Burnett like the confirmation of some solemn vow.

CHAPTER VIII.

HIS FATHER'S WIFE.

SEVEN rang, first on the clock in the hall, and then from the dainty little timepiece on the drawing-room mantelpiece, and in a few seconds the deep-toned bell in the Town Hall steeple followed suit. The sound seemed to rouse Robert Angus from some reverie, for he started up, stirred the fire into a brighter blaze, and finally walked over to the oriel window and looked out. It was a fine, hard March evening, clear, and bright and bracing, but bitterly cold, and that keen frosty wind would nip the young buds and tender leaves which had begun to brighten the wintry earth. Twilight was darkening down, but he could see right down to the end of High Street, but the carriage for which he was watching was not in sight. Surely guests were expected at the Bank House, for Robert Angus was in evening attire, which became him rarely well. He stepped back to the fireplace, and looked about him with a scarcely perceptible sigh. The room was not as he remembered it in his younger days, when it had been his mother's favourite resort, and had the appearance of a place where you could be comfortable and at home at once. That homely look was gone now, for the upholsterers had done their best to make it beautiful for its new mistress.

It had been entirely refurnished in ebony and rich

crimson plush; a new Erard piano had taken the place of the homely square piano which had sufficed for the musical needs of the banker's former wife, and there were countless costly articles, gems of art and vertu, which helped to make up the beautiful whole. But it required that nameless and indescribable something to crown its beauty—those tender, graceful, inimitable touches which only a woman can bestow, and which it remained to be seen whether the young wife could impart to her new home.

The drawing-room alone had been refitted for her; the rest of the house remained untouched. If Robert Angus was in rather a nervous frame of mind he may be excused, for in a few minutes he would be called upon to utter his word of welcome to his father's wife. He had not yet met her; he had not been at the quiet wedding which had taken place in Edinburgh a fortnight ago, and which had been the absorbing topic with Strathblane and Auchengray busybodies both before and since.

Rolfe Ransome was in the house, too, lounging on the couch in the library. By tacit agreement these two men kept apart; they had nothing to say to each other, and only exchanged the barest civilities when occasion demanded. Punctually at a quarter past seven the rattle of wheels broke the stillness, and immediately head after head peered over window blind and round half-open doors, straining to catch a glimpse of the bride and bridegroom. The carriage, of course, was closed, and was driven so rapidly that there was no chance of even a glimpse for the eager on-lookers. When it drew up at the bank door Robert Angus left the drawing-room and went downstairs, meeting his father in the hall as he led his wife in. She was closely muffled in furs, and her veil was down, but when Mr Angus briefly and rather nervously introduced her to his son she raised it and looked full in Robert's face. That look, its indescribable pathetic wistfulness, which almost seemed to crave his

forgiveness, went to his heart at once. Strange to say, their greeting was one of absolute silence, but their hands met in a firm, warm clasp, and that one glance from Robert's true eyes rolled away a great burden from the heart of Isabel Angus.

"Is Rolfe not here?" she asked, presently, and Robert was quick to note the rich, yet exquisite sweetness of her voice.

"Yes, he's here," came Rolfe's drawling tones through the library door, and presently he sauntered out, in a very leisurely fashion, and, after carelessly kissing his sister's cheek and shaking hands with Mr Angus, he surveyed the party with a grin.

"I think dinner is almost ready, father," said Robert, with his quick tact. "Here comes Christina to show Mrs Angus to her rooms."

So saying, he stepped aside while his father briefly introduced the housemaid to her new mistress, and when they retired upstairs he returned to the drawing-room, not caring to be left in Ransome's company. He had been about ten minutes alone there when the drawing-room door opened, and, to his astonishment, Mrs Angus entered. Though her toilet had been hastily made, it had not that appearance. Looking at her, Robert Angus could not but wonder at her beauty. The rich black satin robe fitted her to perfection, and hung in shiny folds about a figure that was all grace. Although her attire was of rich material, it was not enhanced by jewellery, the only ornaments she wore being a small diamond brooch fastening the lace at her throat. There was no ring upon the shapely white hand but the plain circlet which was the badge of her new estate.

Robert took a step forward, and placed a chair for her, but she did not take it. She paused beside a little table near to him, and looked him straight in the face with a little tremulous smile.

"I hoped to find you alone, Mr Robert," she said. "I

wanted to say something to you at once, before I had been long in the house."

"I am at your service, Mrs Angus," said Robert, courteously. "Will you allow me first to say what I ought to have said downstairs?—that I sincerely bid you welcome to your new home, and wish you every happiness in it."

"I thank you," she said, simply. "What I wish to say is that I do not wish to be an intruder here. I know very well that my coming must be more or less of a trial to you. It has been something of a trial to me also. I do not want to make any changes here. I pleaded with Mr Angus not to touch this room," she added, glancing round her, "lest the difference should be a pain to you. My aim will be to make the house a home, indeed, to your father, and, if you will allow me, to you."

She spoke with something of timidity and a little hesitation, as if not very sure how her words would be received. She need not have been afraid. Robert Angus, true to the core himself, was quick to note and appreciate a true and generous purpose in any man or woman. And swiftly the last grain of prejudice against his father's wife died out of his heart. He held out his hand—

"Then we are friends for life, Mrs Angus," he said, a sunny smile relieving the gravity of his face. She smiled also, but the beautiful eyes were wet with tears.

But for the presence of Rolfe at dinner, it would have been a very pleasant meal. He was in the mood which always had a peculiarly irritating effect upon Robert. He seemed in good spirits, and was pleased to direct his rather tame witticisms towards his sister and her husband. His frequent allusions to their new relationship were neither acceptable nor in the best of taste. Isabel flushed painfully more than once, and Robert saw his father bite his lip, and knew that it was only for his wife's sake that he endured in silence. It was something of a relief to all when the wine

was brought in, and Mrs Angus rose. Robert was very temperate always, and as he had already been too long in Ransome's company, he very gladly joined Mrs Angus upstairs. His father did not stay long behind, and as Rolfe had no desire to spend the evening *en famille*, he immediately left the house. He had an engagement in the Earl's grounds at half-past eight, and it would take him all his time to be punctual. He walked briskly, puffing at his cigar the while, but in spite of his haste he found Amy Burnett waiting for him at the old bridge over the burn at the back of the castle. Yes; Amy Burnett! An hour ago she had been busy stitching at a part of the wedding garments she was to wear as Robert Angus's wife, and here she was keeping an appointment with Rolfe. Oh, woman, verily thy vows are writ on sand! How Robert Angus would have gnashed his teeth had he seen the calmness with which Ransome put his arm around Amy, and lightly touched her cheek with his lips, scarcely troubling to remove his cigar.

"Not a word, my pet. I know I am late, but the happy couple were nearly half an hour behind the time, and I was obliged to sit the dinner out," he said coolly.

"I thought so, but it was very cold here, Rolfe, and I was so afraid anyone would see me," she said, drawing closer to him, as if to hide from some reproachful and condemning eyes. "Tell me about them, and about the home-coming."

"Oh, it went off beautifully. The governor looks years younger, and was particularly jolly, seeing his good boy so obediently playing the part of a dutiful son. The meeting was pathetic—'pon honour it was—and Isabel, you know, is A1 at that kind of thing. At home she was always executing a weep over her scapegrace brother, and appealing to him in a heroic vein to behave his little self better; but the colt must have his fling."

Amy was silent. Truth to tell, she felt slightly disgusted with her admirer's vulgar talk, and could not but contrast him with Robert Angus, who never adorned his conversation with any slang or objectionable phrases.

"It's going to be a regular nest of turtle-doves, I tell you —till there's a row, of course," continued Rolfe. "I feel rather out in the cold. Never got on very well with Isabel, you see. She's too goody-goody for me. The governor isn't a bad old sort, if he was let alone. As for Bob, I like him about as well as he likes me, and that's very well indeed. What are you so quiet about, eh?"

"I want to say to you, Rolfe, that I can't meet you any more like this," said Amy, striving to speak firmly. "It isn't right. I feel quite miserable about it sometimes. Besides, what's the use, when I'm to be married in June."

"June is it? Why, that's an age yet! And, let me tell you, you may as well take your fun when you can, for when Angus once gets you shut up in Fairgate you won't get any more. As well go to Newgate at once, you take my word for it."

"No fear. Do you think I'll be a poor downtrodden creature, like Dr Torbain's wife, for instance?"

"That's just what you will be unless you begin right. Angus is an out-and-out tyrant. I know him better than you, for you only see the sweet side, if he has one."

Amy stood silent, her heart misgiving her a little over her treachery to her absent lover.

"It was an awful shame of you to throw me over after making me care about you," said Ransome, in an aggrieved voice. "I suppose that's the way of all women."

"No, it isn't; but what was the use of going on with you? Suppose I had sent Robert Angus away, would you have married me?"

"Of course I should," said Rolfe, loftily. "And after I had made my fortune we'd have had a place in the country, and a house in London, and had jolly times with the swells—much jollier than you'll ever have at Fairgate, for

I'm quite an easy fellow to live with if I'm not crossed, and we would have got on splendidly."

Amy sighed a little The picture presented to her silly little mind was very bright, and beside it the roomy house at Fairgate, and the position she would have there in a few months' time, paled into meanest insignificance.

"But seeing you did throw me over," said Rolfe, condescendingly, quite oblivious of the fact that he had never uttered one serious or compromising word to the girl in his life, "there's no use grumbling over it. You must just marry Angus, I suppose, and we can be good enough friends after it. Of course, we'll need to stop all this sort of thing, but in the meantime we may as well have our fun off Angus. I chuckle when I look at him sometimes, and think how I could make him swear if I let the cat out of the bag."

"Oh, you mustn't tell," said Amy, apprehensively. "I don't know what papa would say. He'd nearly kill me, I believe."

"Not he; he'd get over it. No, no; I won't tell. Are you going away already? Why, I have ever so many things to say to you yet."

"I can't stay any longer. They'll miss me, and come out to look for me. Good night. No, I'm not coming to meet you again. I've made up my mind."

"Oh, yes, you are. You must just make your mind down again. I couldn't live without seeing you, my darling; you have made yourself necessary to a fellow's existence, and it isn't much pleasure he has in this vile place. Don't grudge me a few minutes. It'll come to an end all soon enough."

The honeyed words, the strange fascination which Rolfe Ransome had over the girl, speedily weakened and dispersed her feeble resolutions. And they parted in a little, after appointing time and place to meet again. And all unconscious, Robert Angus was enjoying himself in the drawing-room at home, with a heart unsuspicious of treachery or wrong.

CHAPTER IX.

JOAN.

"I HAD one caller to-day in spite of wind and weather," said Mrs Angus to Robert one evening when he joined her in the drawing-room before dinner.

"Yes, who was it?" Robert asked, cheerily. "It certainly has not been a very tempting day."

"Miss Laurence."

"Joan!" exclaimed Robert, eagerly. "And what did you think of her, Mrs Angus?"

"Will you excuse me if I say I like her the best of all the ladies who have yet called?" Isabel said, a little hesitatingly, for the ladies from the Thorn had been among her earliest visitors.

"I hoped and expected you would like her, Mrs Angus. I was afraid she would not call. Joan is very proud in her own way."

"I could see that. She apologised for coming in the storm, and frankly told me her reason for doing so was that she guessed she would find me alone. We both laughed at that, and then we got on splendidly. She invited me to come and see her, and I am going soon."

"Then she must have thoroughly approved of you, Mrs Angus," laughed Robert. "Miss Laurence has not sustained her old reputation for hospitality since she went to Sunset Cottage."

"I felt very sorry for her, yet she is not a woman, either, who looks as if she expected or desired pity. Yet her life must be terribly lonely."

"Then you know her circumstances?" Robert said, inquiringly.

"Oh, yes. Your father used to tell me about Auchengray folks before I came; and I was specially interested in Miss Laurence, probably because she is an orphan like myself."

"She will be your true friend, Mrs Angus. She has been mine all my days, and has kept me in the right way often when I might have gone wrong," Robert said, and Isabel Angus marvelled a little at the evident emotion with which he spoke.

Very pleasant indeed was the friendship between Robert Angus and his father's wife, and, save for Rolfe, it had been a happy household. It was wonderful the difference a woman's gentle presence made in the house, and day by day she fulfilled more completely her resolution to make it indeed a home. She was a woman whom it was impossible to be constantly with and not learn to love. She was unselfish, considerate, thoughtful for others, gentle and yet bright in her whole bearing; her very presence was like sunshine wherever she was. Spite of the disparity in years between her husband and herself, they were deeply attached to each other, and happier than many who enter the bonds with brighter and more equal prospects. Rolfe Ransome was the only shadow, and a dark one indeed, upon his sister's happiness. She was never a moment at ease concerning him. Too surely he had inherited all his father's vices, and very few of his virtues, and Isabel lived in daily dread lest he should commit some graver offence, which her husband, even out of his love for her, could not overlook. She pleaded with him, appealed to his sense of gratitude, placed before him the benefits Mr Angus had heaped upon them both, and tried to make him acknowledge his obligations, but in vain. He laughed her off, and went upon his careless way, enjoying himself as best he could in the quiet

country town, where he was regarded as a hopeless ne'er-do-weel; indeed, Mr Angus had to listen to many a bitter comp[illegible]int against his junior clerk. He had more than once seriously warned him, and threatened him with dismissal, but the grave, rebuking words went in at one ear and out at the other, without making the slightest impression on the scapegrace.

Meanwhile the year was wearing on, spring blossomed into early summer, and Robert Angus's own wedding day approached. The house at Fairgate was complete without and within, the grounds laid out, and the rooms furnished in accordance with the bride-elect's desire and taste, which no expense had been spared to gratify.

Robert Angus had means, and did not grudge to spend now, though he had hitherto been of rather a saving nature. Fairgate was indeed a home of which any woman might have been proud, and Amy Burnett was proud of it in her own way. When she surveyed the lofty drawing-room, with its costly nick-nacks and substantial furnishings, her vain heart swelled at the thought that it was the finest drawing-room in Auchengray, that at the Bank House not excepted, though it was much admired. Robert Angus superintended all the preparations for the approaching change in his life in a quiet, methodical, undisturbed manner, which might be characteristic of him, but was not like the happy elation of a man about to marry the woman of his choice. He never attempted to analyse his own feelings; he only felt at times a vague apprehension lest the new life should be disappointing, and less happy than the present. For just then he was very happy at home, happier than he had ever been since his mother died—thanks to Isabel. In the middle of all these busy preparations Robert had no time to see or speak to Joan Lawrence. She stepped aside, as it were, knowing that at this time she was not necessary to him, and never would be again, indeed, unless some undreamed of trouble came.

Joan accepted this as her portion, and if there was a little bitterness in her heart over it nobody dreamed of it. She was not a selfish woman, as you are aware, yet at times it did seem hard to her that a vain, empty, shallow-hearted creature like Amy Burnett should have won, and account so little, the treasure which she would have thought the most precious on earth. She never for a moment doubted, observe, that Robert's love was fully and completely won, yet the matter was open to question.

Society in Auchengray was much exercised and sore displeased that, passing by many more eligible ladies, Mrs Angus elected to make Joan Laurence her chief friend. That friendship, sincerely offered, and as sincerely accepted, was an unutterably precious thing just then to Joan; and she clung to Isabel Angus with a strange, rugged love which had in it the very power to attract and draw Isabel's heart towards her.

They were sitting together one sunny evening in the window of Joan's sitting-room at Sunset Cottage, and from one topic to another the talk turned upon Robert's marriage, which was to take place that day week at the Thorn.

"Robert is a very cool lover," Mrs Angus said. "I sometimes think he does not care for Miss Burnett as he ought."

"That is his way," Joan replied, quietly. "He does not wear his heart on his sleeve."

"I am rebuked," laughed Isabel. "But, seriously, Joan, I am not altogether satisfied with this marriage. Do you think Amy good enough for Robert Angus?"

"Why do you ask me that, Mrs Angus?" Joan asked, a little harshly. "How should I know? I daresay he is the best judge. He has chosen her, and is evidently satisfied that she is the wife for him."

"Dear me, don't get so cross," said Isabel, good-naturedly. "Do you know, you are sometimes very irritable, Joan?"

"Oh, I know. Don't I feel myself a perfect bear some-

times? I am a kind of Ishmael," said Joan, a little wearily, and her eyes turned yearningly towards the glowing west, as if longing for the rest which lay beyond those golden bars. She was pale to-night—paler than her wont, and her fine eyes were mournfully shadowed, telling of some inward care. Looking at her, Isabel Angus felt her heart moved in no ordinary degree, and she laid her soft hand, with tender compassion, on the girl's arm.

"Dear Joan"——

"Oh, don't," said Joan, quickly. "Don't pity me, or anything. I don't need it. I am not unhappy; why should I be?"

She spoke vehemently, and her eyes flashed restlessly back to Isabel Angus's sweet face, and, resting there, filled with sudden tears.

"How weak we women are at times!" she said, with the glimmer of a dry smile. "I suppose all this marrying and giving in marriage among my friends makes me feel my loneliness more than I do at other times. Let us talk of something else."

"I want to talk to you about my brother, Joan," said Mrs Angus, growing graver. "He is a constant care to me; the only shadow on my happiness. I wish Mr Angus had never brought him here, and yet it may be for his good."

"He is very different from you, Mrs Angus," said Joan, as gravely. "One could scarcely believe you to be brother and sister."

"He is very like poor papa, both in appearance, and, I fear, in other things. When I think of the martyrdom my mother endured for many years, Joan, I can only thank God for my husband. He is so good," Isabel said, passionately.

"Yes he is. I knew you would be happy. We used to account Robert's mother the happiest woman in Auchengray," Joan said, gently. "But there are few men really fit to have the shaping of a woman's life in their hands; so many of them are unworthy."

"You speak bitterly; almost as if you had proved them unworthy by experience, Joan," said Isabel, with a slight smile.

"I? Oh, no. I had the best of fathers, and I have known, and do know, many good men. But I never had a sweetheart in my life," said Joan, with a short laugh. "Yonder comes Robert, swinging down the hill. His walk will soon be in a different direction."

"Yes. Well, I will just wait and go up with him," said Isabel. "Mr Angus will be wondering where I have gone. I did not say to him I was coming here."

She rose as she spoke, and the two went out into the little garden and waited till Robert came down to the gate. He raised his hat, and greeted them in a gay fashion, which indicated that he was in the best of spirits.

"Holloa, Joan! How pale you look; working too hard. Don't you think so, Mrs Angus? Do you ever take a holiday?"

"No; where should I go, or what should I make of myself? I am best grinding on day after day without a break or a pause. Leisure would only bring me discontent, I fear," Joan said, quietly.

"But you will wear yourself out in time," Robert said. "Mrs Burnett is not very well pleased at your refusal to come to the wedding."

"I should be out of place there. Mrs Burnett knows, as do you and Amy, that I wish you every happiness; not many are more sincere in that wish than I."

"I believe you. Thank you, Joan," said Robert, very gently. "Well, Mrs Angus, are you going home?"

"Yes. Good evening, Joan, do come up, soon. You stay indoors too much; indeed you do. Will you take a drive with me to-morrow?"

"No, thanks; I am as anxious to keep myself in my own place as certain folks are to put me there," said Joan, with a little wilful pride. "But I am sincerely obliged all the same. You are very good."

"I want to be, but you won't let me. Wait till all this excitement is over, and I'll talk to you," Isabel said, merrily, and they parted.

"Had Joan Laurence a disappointment in her younger days, dear?" Isabel asked her husband that night.

"A love disappointment, do you mean?" Mr Angus asked.

"Of course, what else could I mean?"

"No, I don't think she had; at least, I never heard of it. But she has had a hard life of it since her father died."

"Do you know what I have often thought, Robert?"

"No. Tell me."

"That she would have made a better wife for Robert than the one he has chosen."

"I hardly think so, Isabel. They were always quarrelling when they used to be together long ago. She is an assertive, self-reliant sort of woman; and Robert's disposition is too similar to permit them to agree."

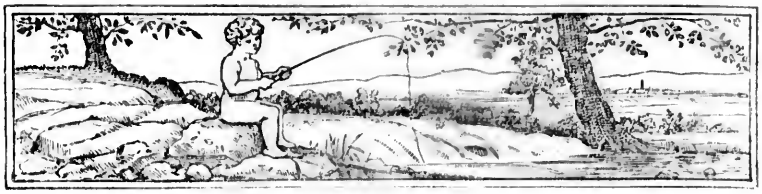
"Don't you like Joan, Robert?"

"Like her? Oh, yes. I have a great respect for her, and she has battled nobly for herself, but she isn't exactly the sort of woman I would care to marry, you know."

"Now I think she would make a perfectly splendid wife, Robert," said Isabel, warmly. "Between ourselves, I don't much admire Amy Burnett. She is so empty and shallow-hearted. A man like Robert will soon weary of her."

"I myself was astonished at his choice," Mr Angus conceded. "But 'what's one man's meat is another man's poison,' you know; and it's a mercy we don't all fall in love with the same woman, or I wouldn't have had a chance with you. We will hope they will be happy, however. Bob's a good sort of a chap, and deserves the best of wives."

"I am sure he does, for he will make the best of husbands. I only hope Amy will have the sense to appreciate him and try to make him happy," Isabel said, with a sigh, and the subject dropped.



CHAPTER X.

THE NIGHT BEFORE.

IT was a lovely June evening; scarcely a breath of wind stirred the bright summer leaves, yet there was nothing oppressive in the warm and balmy air, which had not yet lost the freshness of the spring. Every hedgerow and hawthorn tree was white with bloom, the sloping banks on the broad highway to Strathblane were dotted with pink-lipped daisy, blue speedwell, shy primrose, and all the other wild flowers for which these banks were justly famed. The road itself was pleasant footing, for a refreshing shower had but newly laid the dust, and was drawing forth the inner and most exquisite perfumes of the hawthorn and sweetbriar. Along this pleasant highway, towards sundown, walked Joan Laurence on her way to the Thorn. She carried in her hand a little basket in which, wrapped in pink paper, lay her wedding present to Amy Burnett. She was late in coming with her gift, but Joan liked her own time and her own way of doing things, and it was her desire to see Amy Burnett the night before her wedding-day, and this was it. Yes, to-morrow, all going well, would see Robert Angus and Amy Burnett husband and wife.

Joan walked slowly, and with rather a listless step. It might be that she found her walk through the sweet summer air so pleasant that she was anxious to prolong it; and yet,

if she were conscious of all the beauty around her, she scarcely looked at it, for as she walked she kept her eyes on the ground. The lodge gates were wide open, for the family were at home. The season in London had been cut short owing to the illness of the Countess, and they had come to the Castle in the end of May. Directly she was within the gates, Joan stepped on the soft turf, and walked in a slanting direction across to the Thorn. Some of the younger ones were playing croquet on the lawn, but at sight of her they threw down their mallets and ran to meet her. She was a great favourite with old and young at the Thorn, and her rare visits were highly prized. She had a kind smile and a word for them all; then she turned to Mary, and asked if Amy was in the house.

"Yes, I think she is; at least, she was a little while ago, and I have never seen her come out. See, there is mamma at the drawing-room window. She will be so pleased to see you!"

Joan looked towards the window, waved her hand to Mrs Burnett, and followed Mary into the house. It was in somewhat of a confusion, as was to be expected, for the waiters from the hotel at Strathblane had taken possession of the dining-room already, and were erecting tables long enough to seat the large company invited to the wedding. Poor Mrs Burnett, as was to be expected, also looked tired and harassed, for the burden of the preparations had fallen on her, the bride-elect evincing singularly little interest and very little helpfulness indeed.

"How are you, Joan? I had a mind to scold you, but I can't now I see you," said the kind, motherly woman, as she affectionately kissed Joan. "This is a turn up! I've just been telling Polly and all the rest they must either all marry on the same day, or give me five years' respite between each. What a business it is! I shall be thankful when it is over."

"As it will be soon now," said Joan, with a smile. "And it is pleasant labour after all. I hope I can see Amy to-night?"

"If you wait long enough I dare say you will. Robert will be here by-and-by. I expect she has gone out to meet him. Come in and see what remain of the presents. So many have been sent to Fairgate already."

There were many costly and beautiful articles, chiefly silver plate and pretty ornaments, set out on the drawing-room tables, and these Joan duly admired. Then she produced her own gift. It was a necklet and pendant of gold set with fine rubies; a lovely thing, both costly and rare in workmanship and design.

"Bless me, Joan, this is far too valuable a gift from you!" exclaimed Mrs Burnett, in astonishment.

"Only part of it is new. The pendant was my mother's, but you will understand how I value it."

"Yes, yes, I know; but, my dear, it is too much."

"Not for Amy to wear," Joan said; adding in her heart, "when she is Robert Angus's wife."

Glad of a sympathetic listener, Mrs Burnett sat down and began to talk freely about the marriage and all its connecting circumstances, frequently expressing her admiration for Robert Angus, and her hope that Amy would make him a good wife. Joan was quick to note that the mother's love could not blind her to her child's imperfections; and that no little anxiety and fear mingled with her thankful happiness. The sun went down, and slowly the long shadows of twilight began to fall aslant the lawn, and at last Joan rose and said she would need to be moving homewards.

"Oh, do wait a little," pleaded Mrs Burnett. "Robert and Amy should be in soon, and papa and Jim will be home from Strathblane, and you will get company home."

But Joan would not stay. She neither wanted nor re-

quired company home to-night. She left a kind message for Amy, promised to come up again very soon, and not unthankfully went her way. She had no part in the delightful stir and excitement; she was best at home by her own quiet fireside. She crossed the park at a different part, and going round by the eastern wing of the Castle, followed a little winding footpath which ran parallel with the burn, and, leading through a deep and bosky glade, conveyed her into the high road almost at her own door. It was a quicker and quieter way; and for both these reasons it commended itself to her to-night. She was walking quickly, and without paying much heed to her surroundings, when the sound of voices startled her. She was nearing the old bridge, which was in the darkest and most secluded part of the glen, and from which the voices evidently proceeded. She hesitated a moment; her first thought was that she had come upon Robert and Amy; her second, that it might be some of the Castle guests enjoying an after-dinner stroll. In either case she must go on now, for she was too near home to turn back. Presently, through the dim light which struggled through the leafy arches overhead, she discerned two figures standing near the bridge—lovers evidently from their position, and she smiled a little as she walked on, determined to pass them quickly, with her face averted, so that they might not recognise her. One step more, and her limbs began to tremble, for both these figures were familiar to her, and their presence there together was a thing she could not, dared not understand. She held to her resolution, and went bravely on, until she came so near that they became aware of her approach, then both started and sprang apart. Joan stood still a moment, looked from the blanched face of Amy Burnett to the defiant, mocking one of Rolfe Ransome, and without a word passed on. She walked now as if pursued by some evil thing, and just as she came up to the wicket, which opened out to the road, a

man's tall figure approached it, and held it open for her to pass through.

"Holloa! Joan, is it you?" he asked cheerily. "Have you been at the Thorn?"

She stood still a moment, lifted her eyes to his face, and put her hand to her heart. For a brief space her voice failed her.

"Yes," she managed to articulate in a voiceless whisper. "If you are going, I think you should keep the highway, it is so—so dark down there."

"Has somebody been frightening you, Joan? you are trembling from head to foot," laying his strong hand on hers, with a curious tenderness. "This weakness is not like you; tell me what it is."

"Yes, I was frightened. Do go round the road," she said, eagerly. And yet her heart misgave her. Was it her duty to tell or keep silence? That was a question not to be answered in a moment.

"If I was not obliged to go to the Thorn I'd see you home, Joan," said Robert, gravely. "I'm too late as it is, but I don't like to let you go like this—near home though you are."

"Yes, yes—never mind me," she said, hurriedly. "Good-night."

"Give me a word of comfort for to-morrow, Joan," said Robert, as he held her hand a moment in his own. "You have never said a special word yet."

"Have I not? It was not forgetfulness or lack of sincerity. May God bless and keep you, and your wife, Robert Angus, for ever and ever," she said, solemnly, and the next moment she was gone.

Robert Angus thought much of Joan as he strode onwards to the Thorn. She was certainly not like other women, and had a way of surprising you, and making you think when you least expected it.

As he passed the old bridge he looked at it, not without tenderness, for it had been a favourite trysting-place for him and Amy, and many sweet though some half-bitter,

memories clung about its mossy parapet, and the tinkling burnie underneath had borne upon its breast many a sweet word and earnest vow. It was quite deserted now. The pair whom Joan had disturbed had made good their escape, and Amy Burnett was nearly home. Robert could scarcely realise the fact that ere to-morrow closed he should call Amy Burnett wife, and that henceforth he should have a home of his own, whether for weal or woe he could not tell. It seemed to him almost as if he were only an onlooker; not the principal person to take part in the event of to-morrow, and upon whom its after-consequences, whether happy or the reverse, would fall. These somewhat strange musings were ended by his arrival at the house, and, pulling out his watch before he knocked, he saw it was twenty minutes to ten. But they would be indulgent to him to-night.

Mary opened the door to him, and looked surprised to see him.

"How did you come?" she asked. "Amy went down to the bridge to meet you, she said; she has just come in. She got nervous waiting; it was growing dark and late."

"I am sorry for that. She might have waited long enough," Robert answered. "I did not say I would come that way. Amy knows I prefer the highway. Where is she, Polly?"

"Upstairs. There is no one in the drawing-room. If you will go there, I'll tell Amy," Polly said, with her usual quiet consideration.

Robert nodded, and ran up to the drawing-room two steps at a time. It was not lighted, but he made his way through the confusion, which Mrs Burnett, in despair, had abandoned till morning, and was already in bed, for she was completely worn out. He waited a few minutes, and was beginning to grow impatient, when Amy came in. She entered the room hesitatingly, but Robert met her half-way, and gathered her to his heart. She shivered a little, and then lay still: and for a brief space there was nothing said.

"My darling, I am so sorry you had to wait You should scarcely have gone out to meet me. You know I could not tell you when I should come," he said, gently. "Did you walk down with Joan Laurence? I met her at the wicket."

The slight figure in his arms gave a violent start.

"Oh, did you meet Joan? No, I did not see her," she whispered at length. "She must have gone round by the stables. It is quicker, you know."

"Amy, did anyone try to frighten you in the glen? Joan seemed in a nervous terror, and Polly said you were afraid."

"No, not very. Did Joan say she got a fright?"

"Yes, but she would not tell me how or where. But enough of this. Come, tell me, my pet, are you to be a brave little woman to-morrow, eh?"

"I—I don't know. Light the gas, will you, till I let you see what Joan brought me," Amy said, hurriedly, and drew herself away from him.

When the bright light shone full on Amy's face, he was struck by its exceeding paleness. There were purple rims about the big brown eyes and some lines about the childish drooping mouth he did not not like to see.

"My darling," he said, almost passionately, "you look very ill. It is quite time I had you in my care. We will have a delightful time of rest at Penzance when we get there. We will not come back in a hurry, I promise you."

Amy smiled faintly, and, opening the clasp of the morocco case, held it up for inspection.

"Is this Joan's present, Amy?"

"Yes, isn't it lovely? It is very good of her; far, far more than I deserve from her, for I have not been kind to her," she said, a little brokenly. "I want you to take this home, and keep it for me, Robert."

"To-night, do you mean!"

"Yes, now, take it," she said, shutting the case with a sharp click, and offering it to him.

"Won't you wear it to-morrow?"

"No, I shall not wear it to-morrow; do take it; it will be safer with you. I have no right to it. If Joan knew all my waywardness she would not have given it. It was for your sake, I know."

Robert Angus put the case in his pocket without a word, and looked searchingly and gravely into the white face of the girl before him, but she had never been dearer to him than now. He took her to his heart again, calling her by every endearing name, but no word of response fell from her pale lips.

"Will you forgive me, Robert, for all the way I have done to you? I never was worthy of your love. I have tried lately to be better, but I was not strong enough. Say you forgive me; yes, yes, say it."

"My dearest, if there is anything to forgive, I do forgive it with my whole heart," he said, fondly. "And now I am going away. I am afraid when I see you, you look so white and ill. Get to bed at once, my darling, so that you may not look so haggard to-morrow, when so many eyes will be upon you. I wish the ordeal was over, and I do wish it had been quieter."

"What if all the people came and there was no marriage —wouldn't that be funny?" she asked, with a strange smile.

"How no marriage?"

"Oh, bridegrooms sometimes don't turn up, you know; but I daresay it will be all right. Well, good-night and good-bye, Robert."

"Not good-bye, Amy; only good-night for a few hours, and then we never part," he said.

Then she drew herself away from him, and ran sobbing from the room.

CHAPTER XI.

CAUGHT.

IT was after eleven o'clock when Robert Angus reached home that night, to find the household in bed. Even Rolfe, who was generally the night bird, had retired to rest.

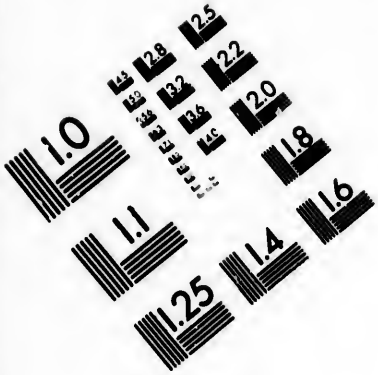
Robert was not sorry. He had many things to think of, and the perfect stillness in the house was grateful to him. He went into the dining-room, where the thoughtful Christina had left the supper tray; but he did not touch either food or drink. He threw himself into an easy-chair, and sat in the dim light looking straight before him, his face wearing a look of deep thoughtfulness, which was almost pain.

To-morrow he was to take a woman's life and happiness into his keeping. It was a solemn thought; he had a vague feeling in his heart, too, that all was not right. He could not divine whether it was with himself or with Amy that the discording element lay, but there it was, a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, but which might ere long overshadow the horizon of his life. It was nearly one o'clock when he raised himself somewhat heavily from his chair, put out the gas, and mounted the stairs to his own room; little guessing with what strained anxiety a pair of ears were listening for his step.

There was only one bedroom on the first floor, next to the drawing-room, and which was occupied by Mr and Mrs

Angus. On the second floor there were four bedrooms—that occupied by the servants, one by Rolfe, the guest-chamber, and Robert's own. The last mentioned was the first room on the landing, while Rolfe's was quite at the other end of the corridor; had they been good friends, one room would probably have served them. As it was, the further apart they were the better, both by day and night. The moonlight was streaming so brilliantly in at Robert's chamber window that he did not trouble to light the gas. He stood a few minutes looking somewhat absently across the wide stretch of fertile landscape, on which the waving corn gleamed white in the deceptive moonlight, though it had not yet a harvest tinge upon it. After a little he leisurely undressed and got into bed, but sleep was very far indeed from his eyes. He had never felt so wakeful in his life. Very slowly the dawn of day began to creep over the earth, causing the brightness of the moon to wane. So still was the house that Robert could hear quite distinctly the ticking of three clocks, which presently struck two—the hall clock and the dining-room one simultaneously, and in a few minutes the sweet tinkling chime of the timepiece in the drawing-room.

Not many seconds after that he heard another noise—that made by someone moving in one of the bedrooms. That noise ceased, however, and he was beginning to feel a little drowsy, when he heard the creaking of a door. He turned his head and listened, and, as his own door was a few inches ajar, he heard quite distinctly a stealthy footfall pass it and steal downstairs. Curious, though not very suspicious, for it might be one of the maids, he crept noiselessly out of bed, threw on dressing-gown and slippers, and with a swing which prevented his door from creaking, he opened it and stepped out on the landing. The light had now grown a little broader, but the hall was still in semi-darkness. Glancing over the balustrade, he saw quite dis-



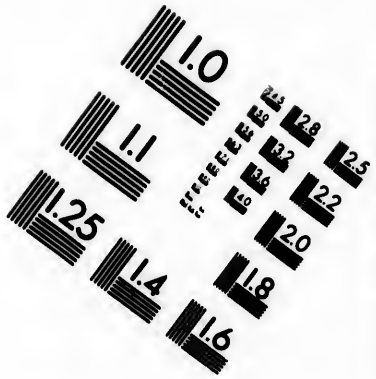
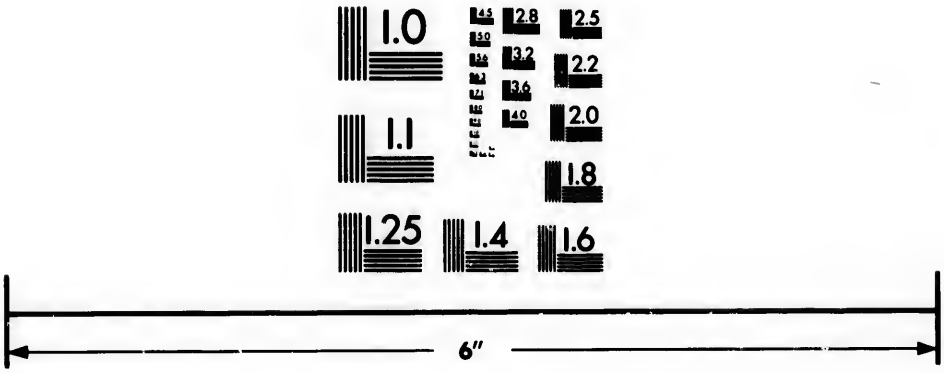
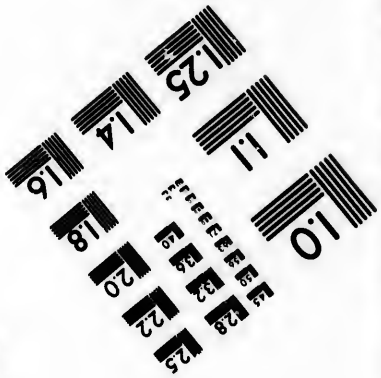


IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (MT-3)





Photographic Sciences Corporation

23 WEST MAIN STREET
WEBSTER, N.Y. 14580
(716) 872-4503

tinctly a portmanteau standing on one of the chairs, and, though he could not see the front door from where he stood, he knew it was open by the current of cold air which came sweeping upstairs. There was a door on the left side of the hall which led into the bank, and which Mr Angus himself locked every night, taking the key with him to his dressing-room. With suspicions now thoroughly aroused, Robert stood almost breathless till he heard a key turn in the lock with that subdued and easy click which indicated that it had been very recently oiled. Owing to the way in which the door was hung on its hinges it opened without a creak, and immediately closed noiselessly. Without hesitating a moment, Robert ran downstairs, pushed open the baize-covered door and entered the bank. What was his astonishment to see the door of his father's private room open also, though he was most particular about locking it every day when he left it. Robert stepped round the end of the counter and placed himself directly across the threshold of the inner room. And he saw Rolfe Ransome standing by the safe, which was open, and with his hand busy among the contents.

"You thief!" he said, in a low, stifled voice, and, springing forward, gripped Ransome by the collar.

It would be impossible to describe the expression on Rolfe's face. Amazement, chagrin, bitter anger were commingled, but gave way at length to a look of black, utter hatred, and a terrible oath fell from his lips. He raised his clenched fist, but in Robert Angus's giant grasp his puny strength was as nothing.

"So this is your gratitude for the countless benefits your employer has heaped upon you," Robert said, slowly, and with measureless contempt. "I thought you weak, foolish, contemptible, but I did not deem you so utterly vile."

"Let me go!" muttered Ransome. "Let me get clear away out of this cursed place, and I'll never darken it again.

I have taken nothing, see ; search me if you will," he added, doggedly. "The few shillings I possess are the remains of my salary. Let me go !"

Robert hesitated a moment, keeping the culprit firm in his grasp. What would be best ?

"Let me go, I tell you !" hissed Ransome. "If you'd only been five minutes later, you sneak, I'd have richly paid you out, I would. Let me go."

"No, I shall not," Robert said, firmly.

"You must ! I must get away, I tell you. Let me go !" he repeated, raising his voice in his excitement.

"If you want to rouse the whole household, and to be given into the hands of the police, just make a little more noise," said Robert, significantly. "If my father should catch you here he would have no mercy on you, but I would spare you for your sister's sake."

Rolfe preserved a dogged silence, but his eyes were glaring, telling of a baffled and terrible rage. But that Robert was so completely master, there would have been blood shed in the bank that night.

"Tell me before I take you up to bed where you got the keys. Did you steal them first ?" Robert asked.

"No, I didn't steal them. How do you suppose I could get them ? Go into the governor's room for them, I suppose ; eh ?" he asked, mockingly.

"I see," said Robert, quietly. "Give them to me, if you please."

Slowly Rolfe produced the duplicates from his pocket, and in a moment they were transferred to Robert's own.

"Now, what do you suppose I'm to do with you ?" he asked, looking him full in the face.

"Let me go, I tell you," said Rolfe, struggling anew, as the town clock rang three, and the first glory of the sunrise began to suffuse the sky with a wondrous and tender glow of loveliness. "Let me get away, and I'll never trouble

you again. You'll never hear of me again, I promise you."

Again Robert hesitated. It might be the better way, and yet Rolfe's flight would cause Isabel anxiety and pain, and cast a shadow on his wedding-day.

"No, I will not," he said at length; "I'm going to give you another chance. Swear to me here that you will never attempt such a thing again, and I'll promise to keep your secret."

Ransome's eyes brightened; he had scarcely expected such mercy at the hands of Robert Angus—nay, when he had felt his heavy hand fall accusingly on his shoulder he had inwardly decided that the game was wholly up.

"Will you really not peach?" he asked, with a curious, sly, upward glance of his shifting eyes.

"When I say a thing I mean it," said Robert, briefly. "Give me the promise I require, and I'll let you go back to bed."

"All right; I promise."

"On your honour, if you have any," Robert said, with a faint smile.

"On my honour, if I have any," repeated Rolfe. "You won't catch me at this again, I promise you; now let me go."

Robert at once relaxed his hold, followed Ransome out into the hall, pointed to the portmanteau and then significantly upstairs. Rolfe sullenly lifted it, and obeyed the second gesture also. Then Robert locked the doors, and followed the culprit upstairs right into his own room, and deliberately stood till he had undressed and got into bed. Then he took the key and fitted it into the outside of the door, saying, as he did so:—

"This is in case you should change your mind, you know. I'll let you out in good time for breakfast. Good night—or rather, good morning."

Then he locked the door and went back to his own room, quite unconscious of the muttered imprecations which followed him.

Ransome leaped out of bed directly he was left alone, and, striding over to the window, appeared to be calculating the distance from the ground. It was fully thirty feet—too serious a risk, thought Mr Rolfe Ransome, and crept back to bed. It will not be wondered at that he did not sleep.

Whilst this strange scene was being enacted at the Bank House, there was something curiously like it going on at the Thorn. The tired household were all sound asleep, except the bride-elect, who was up and dressed at two o'clock in the morning. By the faint light of the dawning day she noiselessly packed a few necessary things into a new and handsome bag, which had been one of her wedding presents, and which was supposed to be going to Penzance with her. When that was done she sat down, pale, and trembling violently, with her watch in her hand, to wait till the appointed time. At half-past two, unable to bear the suppressed excitement and the painful nervous tension any longer, she took her bag in one hand, her boots in the other, and stole noiselessly downstairs. Once on the ground floor she was comparatively safe, for there were no sleeping apartments there, and no one whom she could disturb. She went into the dining-room, and glanced at the time-piece; it was only the half-hour yet, and three o'clock was the appointed hour, yet she dared not tarry longer, lest she should be discovered. She had taken the precaution to run downstairs after they had all left the dining-room for the night, and set one of the long windows a little ajar. So she had only to step out to the terrace and she was free! Once out into the chill morning air she fled away from the house like a hunted thing, and only relaxed her speed when the leafy trees safely hid her from view. She had never been out so early on a summer morning before, and as she sped across

the dewy park she wondered at the strange still beauty of the dawning. In the blushing East the sun was ready to burst his golden chains, and to shed his effulgent radiance on the awakening earth; the sky was a ripple of tender silver grey, against which the opening glory of the sunrise showed in a contrast which was exquisite. The daisies were opening their wet and sleepy eyes to meet the sun's kiss, and a low, brooding twitter in the leafy boughs told that the drowsy birds were tuning their morning hymn.

Across the park, round the end of the Castle, and down into the glen sped Amy Burnett, and only halted when she reached the trysting-bridge. A quick sigh of disappointment escaped her when she saw there was no one there, and yet she was ten minutes before the appointed hour; doubtless Rolfe would appear in ample time. When three came pealing through the silent air, she ventured in her impatience as far as the wicket to see if there was any sign of the laggard, little dreaming who had him in firm grip at that very moment. Quickly, very quickly, the minutes sped, and Amy Burnett began to be sick with apprehension. If he were many minutes late it would be impossible for them to walk across the fields, as they had arranged, to the little wayside station at the hamlet of Craigieburn, where the early train stopped on its way to Glasgow, and where they would not be recognised.

Half-past three! And still no sign. Amy Burnett's limbs were trembling beneath her, and could scarcely sustain her tottering weight. Her teeth were chattering with cold and dread. What was she to do? What did it mean? Had Rolfe repented at the last moment? Then he might have at least come and told her so; it was cruel, cruel to subject her to this, and yet it was not unlike him. She hated herself; she was brought face to face with her treachery to the good, true man who expected to make her his wife that very day. In these moments of sickening sus-

pense and desperate dread, all that was best, and sweetest, and most lovable in Robert Angus rose up before her mind, and she almost loved him. Oh, how foolish, how mad, how wicked she had been, and this was her punishment for her sin! When the town clock rang four she caught up her bag and ran away home; ran with a fleetness of step which amazed herself. Her thoughts and fears centred in one idea, that the servants might be astir at the Thorn, for she had heard her mother tell them not on any account to be later than five, but to rise before it, if possible, assuring them that there would be rest after the wedding was over. She had smiled drearily to herself when she heard the order given, thinking what desolation and dismay would reign at the Thorn on the morrow, when there would be no wedding, because the bride was gone.

The dining-room window was still open as she had left it; she listened a moment; oh, joy! there was not a movement stirring in the house! She sped into the room, pulled off her boots, and slipped noiselessly upstairs. When she was in her own room, with the door shut safely upon her, she sank on the floor, and burst into tears. The relief was too great. When she was calmer she tossed the things out of the bag, hastily undressed, pulled down the blind, and got into bed. Her brief dream of romance was over, rudely dispelled for ever, and the sober reality of life would commence in a few hours, when she should utter the words which would bind her for life to Robert Angus. There was rest, rest unspeakable in the thought. She felt as if she had been saved from a terrible leap in the dark, and that she owed her deliverance to him. Therefore, she thought of him with a gratitude that was almost love. Oh, but she would make up to him for thus swerving from her path; she would be a dutiful wife to him, and make him happy if she could. Of Rolfe Ransome she dared not trust herself to think. His treatment of her was too base, too humili-

ating to be borne. But she would reward him with her scorn, with a contempt so immeasurable that he should sink beneath it. The best plan of all would be to pretend that she, too, had rued her promise to elope with him. You will observe that a petty falsehood did not alarm Amy Burnett, or cause her any serious thought. She thought it justifiable in certain circumstances.

She had not been many minutes in bed when she heard the servants go downstairs. When the housemaid entered the dining-room and saw the open window she stood aghast, and finally called to her companion.

"Anne, what d'ye suppose is the meaning of this?" she asked, pointing to it with trembling finger.

"Meanin'?—that the house's been broken into!" said the cook, vigorously. "See there," she said, pointing to wet footmarks on the carpet. "Mercy me! let's look in the sideboard and see what's been took."

There was nothing "took," greatly to their astonishment, and, on investigating the drawing-room, the valuable gifts belonging to Miss Burnett were all intact.

As there was without doubt nothing missing, the two discreetly agreed to say nothing about the open window, as it was Jane's duty to see that the windows were closed, an item she had neglected on the previous night.

Meanwhile, Miss Burnett was lying wide awake, listening to their movements and their whispers, divining them all as plainly as if she had been beside them.

But, fortunately, they had no suspicion of the truth.

CHAPTER XII.

THE WEDDING-DAY.

VERY brightly dawned Amy Burnett's wedding-day. When her mother, flurried and anxious, came downstairs shortly after seven, the sun was streaming in through the open door, shedding a flood of golden glory into the hall.

Mrs Burnett stepped out to the door, and looked for a minute at the smiling sky, at the sunbeams kissing the wet-eyed daisies on the lawn, and then turned away to begin her many duties with a smile on her kind face. She was glad that the day was bright, for "blessed is the bride that the sun shines on." While the drawing-room was being put in order, and the other members of the family were partaking of a rather hastily-prepared breakfast in the schoolroom, Amy was allowed to slumber on. Polly had crept softly out of her room directly she heard her mother's foot on the stair, for she was by nature helpful, and though her work was always quietly and unostentatiously done, she managed to get through a considerable amount when other people were talking about it. Shortly after nine Mrs Burnett, bearing a small tray, on which was a cup of delicious tea and a slice of crisp brown toast, entered Amy's room.

"Are you not awake yet, dear?" she asked, pleasantly. "Do you know it is nearly half-past nine?"

"Is it really, mamma? How soundly I must have slept. I have heard nothing," answered Amy, starting up.

"Don't hurry, Amy. Here, put that about your shoulders," she said, handing her a dressing-jacket, and then bringing the tray to the bedside. "Drink this, and then rise leisurely. You have nothing to do, you know, but dress to-day, and that will not take you all forenoon."

"How good you are to me, mamma!" said Amy, lifting grateful eyes to the kind face bent upon her in love.

"I may be to-day, my daughter, seeing that in a few hours you will not belong to me any more," answered her mother, lightly, though a tear trembled in her eye. Amy was silent, and lifted the teacup to her lips to still their trembling. Looking keenly into her daughter's face, Mrs Burnett was grieved at its exceeding paleness, and marvelled why the sweet eyes should be encircled by such mournful shadows on the morning of her happy wedding-day.

"My love, you do not look quite like yourself. I hope your colour will come again, and your eyes grow a little brighter before noon, or we shall have too delicate a bride," she said, with gentleness. "I am afraid you did not sleep well."

"Not in the early part of the night," said Amy, almost in a whisper; and then a wild desire to confess all to her mother came upon her. Oh! it would be such an unutterable relief to sob out all her humiliation and pain, all her unspeakable gratitude, too, upon that faithful breast!

"Everything is ready, and there will be no bustle or confusion at the last," said Mrs Burnett, presently. "The girls have really worked well, and Polly is very helpful. But I shall be glad when it is all over."

"So shall I," said Amy, faintly; then suddenly she lifted her wistful eyes to her mother's face, and added almost humbly, "Mother, do you think I shall make a good wife? Do you think I shall make Robert as happy as he deserves."

"My darling, I hope and believe it," said the mother,

quickly. "I think you know the value of the love you have won. Oh! it is a great and inestimable blessing, Amy, the love of a good man, and one which a woman cannot too highly prize, or too sacredly strive to keep!"

Amy winced a little, for every word pierced like a two-edged sword.

"I have no fear for your happiness, dear, for I love Robert as if he were my own son, and he is one who will make his wife's happiness his first earthly care," continued Mrs Burnett, warmly, for the merits of her future son-in-law, to whom she was indeed deeply attached, was a very favourite theme. "But there, I must go now, and you must get up. I wish the next fortnight were over and I saw you fairly installed as Mistress of Fairgate. My dear, you may live to know that children are really little of a care until their wings are grown, and they begin to plume for flight to other nests. There! is not that a sentimental thought for your practical mother to utter? I will leave you to digest it, and see what the boys are after. It will be a wonder if there is not some trick perpetrated somewhere this morning."

So with a nod and a smile Mrs Burnett left the room, and Amy rose, but paused often in her dressing to look across the fields to Auchengray, especially to the little patch of woodland, above which she could see peeping out the roof-tree of her future home. She felt like one in a dream, or rather like one about to witness some important and thrilling drama, in which she had no part. When she had thrown on her morning-gown at last, she looked into the little dressing-room, where lay the shimmering robe of white silk she would wear ere another hour went by. It had only come home the previous day, and Mrs Burnett and the girls had wondered at Amy's utter indifference regarding it. The anxious mother had even noted the little shiver which shook the slight figure when Polly shook out its shining folds, exclaiming at its loveliness. Then Amy Burnett had wondered a little bitterly at what they would

do with the bridal robe when the bride should be gone. But it was different now. She took it in her hand, examining critically the trimmings of flowers and lace, noting the elegance and grace of the draperies, and thinking, with a little vain satisfaction, how fair she would look when she put it on. What a pity she had given up Joan Laurence's gift, for now she had no ornaments to wear, except the diamond brooch Robert had given her some time ago. Well, it would need to do; so, having arranged all the details of her toilet in her mind, she went away downstairs to see what the other members of the family were about. Everybody was very tender and deferential to Amy that morning; even the servants, with whom she was no great favourite, on account of her capricious and domineering disposition, seemed anxious to perform any little service for her, to show their hearty goodwill. All this was very soothing and gratifying to Amy; and when she retired upstairs again to begin the momentous dressing, she was in the best of humour with herself and everyone else. After all, it would have been a pity to have missed such a gay wedding, at which she would be the heroine of the hour. As the toilet approached completion Amy's heart began to beat a little faster—not, however, with the nervous agitation of the approaching ordeal, but with the feeling that Rolfe Ransome might actually present himself at the wedding. His invitation had been sent with the others to the Bank, and with them had been duly accepted. Yet surely he would never be so presumptuous.

Shortly after noon the guests began to arrive. Polly remained with Amy in her room, and from behind the curtain watched the various equipages drive up the avenue, and making correct guesses at their occupants, though she could not see them alight at the door.

"A quarter to one, Amy. And here is the Bank carriage at last. Don't you feel funny?" she exclaimed. "I

declare I'm beginning to tremble myself, though I'm only a bridesmaid."

"Can you see who are in it, Polly?" asked Amy, faintly.

"No; but what a funny question to ask. Won't they be all there? I wish that Rolfe Ransome hadn't been coming, Amy. But I suppose he had to be asked."

"I wish you'd go out and peep over the balustrade, and tell me if they are all there," said Amy, hurriedly.

"In a minute. There's the minister, and that horrid woman his wife. How gay she is. I——"

"Do go, Polly, or they'll be in the drawing-room," interrupted Amy, feverishly.

"Dear me! are you afraid Robert won't be there? There's no fear of him, I'm sure," said Polly, in good humoured banter, and went away at once to watch the guests entering the drawing-room.

"Yes, they're all there," she announced, coming back presently. "How perfectly lovely Mrs Angus looks! Do you know, Robert is quite pale? I shall tease him about it when I get a chance."

Amy rose, and, under pretence of shaking out her train, turned her face away from her sister. Her lips twitched, as if she were crushing back some wave of pain, but it passed in a moment, and she stood up, calm, erect, self-possessed, for she had a part to play, and she would play it well.

At that moment there was a knock at the door, and the smiling face of Mr Burnett looked in.

"The folks are all here. Are you ready, Amy?"

"Yes, papa, quite ready," fell clear and distinct as a bell from Amy's lips.

"Then I had better take you down; the other girls are waiting on the stairs," said Mr Burnett, stepping into the room, and looking admiringly at his daughter. "My dear, you look very well. I am very proud of you, and God bless you—but come away," he said, a trifle impatiently, for his

fatherly feeling was making his voice husky, and he had no wish to break down at all if he could help it.

Amy laid her hand on her father's arm, and they swept out to the landing, where the other two bridesmaids joined Polly, and they marched in order to the drawing-room. A mist swam before Amy Burnett's eyes, and she seemed to know and feel nothing until she felt the touch of Robert Angus's hand on hers. Then she uplifted her white face and smiled upon him, for there was that in his manly honest face which gave her courage and strength.

After that brief, upward glance, she kept her eyes upon the ground until the ceremony was over, until the golden circlet was glittering on her finger, and she was made a wife. Then she felt her mother's kiss on her brow, her father's husky word of blessing fell upon her ears, followed by a perfect babel of congratulation from the assembled guests. As yet her eyes had not lighted upon the face of Rolfe Ransome.

"Allow me to wish you every happiness, Mrs Angus," said a smooth, musical voice at last. Then she raised her head. Her eyes looked clear and straight forward into Rolfe Ransome's blue orbs, which were full of meaning. Without so much as an inclination of the head, or a gesture of acknowledgment, she turned her back upon him and touched, with something of pleading appeal, her husband's arm.

"My darling, what is it?" whispered Robert Angus, at once.

"Nothing; only keep close beside me. Don't leave me," she said, with an exquisite gleam of wistful tenderness in her sweet eyes. "I feel so safe when you are just here."

For an instant Robert Angus wished that the company would vanish away that he might clasp his new-made wife to his heart, and tell her all that was in his heart. But the laughing voice of Jim, bidding him come and sign the deed of his execution—as he irreverently termed the register—recalled him to himself, and he passed over to the table.

And now, weary with the strain of the double ordeal which she had just passed through, the bride was glad to escape to her own room to change her white robes for the more sober attire in which she was to travel. She was trembling so violently that her mother was alarmed; but by the time the toilet was completed she had somewhat recovered herself; and when Polly knocked gently, saying the carriage waited, and that there was no time to lose, she declared herself quite calm, and ready to go. The guests, armed with rice and old slippers, lined the hall, and pelted her unmercifully as she ran out of the house. Robert was hunting vainly for his portmanteau, which some unmerciful tormentor had pilfered from the box. As Amy was about to step across to the carriage, Rolfe Ransome stepped to her side.

"I must have a word with you, Amy," he whispered. "It wasn't my blame I couldn't get. I'll tell you about it when you come back."

"Have you got it, dear?" she said, turning smilingly to her husband, as, amid a shower of rice, he came running out to the carriage.

He nodded, gave his hand to help her in, followed her at once, and in an instant they were gone. Nothing could have been more perfect, more crushing, than her utter ignoring of Rolfe Ransome. She had appeared as utterly unconscious of his presence and speech as if he had not existed. It was inimitable acting, but it made Rolfe Ransome grind his teeth in rage.

In the carriage that matchless composure of demeanour, however, suddenly gave way, and she burst into tears.

"Hold me closer, Robert! Keep me always by your side!" she cried, laying her head upon his arm. "I am not worthy to be your wife, not worthy of your love; but oh, I will be! I will be!"

So their married life began.

CHAPTER XIII.

EDGED TOOLS.

IN the oriel window of the drawing-room at Fairgate sat Mrs Angus, the younger, on the afternoon of a dull November day. Of what was the young wife thinking? What could bring such an ominous cloud to her fair brow? What inner impatience caused her to tap so restlessly with her finger tips on the broad sill? There was not much of beauty in the prospect to be seen from the window, for winter had laid grim, relentless fingers on flower and leaf, on green meadow and woody uplands, and robbed them all of autumn's brighter hues. A dull, heavy mist hung low over the earth, quite obscuring the low range of hills in the distance, and even making the little town itself look indistinct and shadowy. But for the disagreeable nature of the weather, Mrs Angus would not have remained indoors, but she liked her creature comforts, and the ruddy gleam of the tiled hearth was more tempting than the cold caress of the biting northerly wind. About three o'clock she perceived a figure coming briskly up the hilly road from Auchengray, and as it grew nearer she recognised Polly. Glad even of a sister to relieve the monotony of the afternoon, she went down to the hall door, and received her on the step.

"I am glad to see you," she said very heartily for her. "Did some little bird whisper to you that I was wearying my life out here."

"No," answered practical Polly. "Jessie Forbes, the forester's daughter, has come home from service, and mamma thinks she would be the very thing for you; that is, if your housemaid is really going."

"Yes; she leaves next Thursday, and I have not heard of another. Jessie Forbes will do very well. Tell mamma just to engage her," said Amy, indifferently. "You will stay and have tea with me?"

"Tea! Won't Robert be in to dinner immediately?"

"No; he has gone to Edinburgh on business, and won't be home till late. Won't you stay?"

"Well, I will, though I didn't mean to," said Polly. "Why didn't you come over to spend the day at the Thorn? You hardly ever come to see us now."

"I have my house to look after," replied the young wife, with an assumption of dignity which highly amused Polly. "And you have no idea of servants when they are left alone."

"What a peck of housewifely troubles you are in, Amy," laughed Polly. "Is that what puckers up your face, and makes you look so old, and anxious, and worried sometimes?"

"Do I look like that, Polly?"

"Sometimes. You look as though you had all the cares of the State upon your shoulders. Yet I am sure you cannot have a care or a trouble in the world."

"That is all you know, Polly," said Amy, involuntarily. "But we needn't stand here all day. Take off your hat and cloak, and come up to the drawing-room."

In a few minutes the sisters were sitting by the dainty little table with the tea equipage between them, chatting quietly together, chiefly of household and family matters at the Thorn. Polly was right. Amy did look anxious and worried, even haggard, at times, and the bright eyes had a furtive gleam in their depths which seemed to whisper of a mind ill at ease.

"When did you see Mrs Angus at the Bank?" asked Polly, presently, desirous of changing the theme of talk.

"Not for a month. I don't trouble her, and she doesn't trouble me," said Amy, with strange sharpness. "I don't care about her, Polly."

"Don't you? Why, I think she is the nicest woman in Auchengray, except Joan Laurence. I'm sure Robert will be sorry you are not intimate."

"I daresay he is; but though I'm Robert's wife, Polly, I don't allow him to choose my intimate friends for me," said Amy, throwing a piece of sugar to the spaniel on the hearth.

Polly opened her eyes very wide. These words seemed to reveal something of which she had never hitherto dreamed —that it was possible for a husband and wife of six months' standing to disagree. But she had tact and discretion enough to let it pass without remark.

"Did you say Robert wouldn't be home till the late train?" said Polly, presently.

"It will be half-past eleven before he will be here. As Mrs Angus doesn't happen to require the carriage, M'Dowall will be permitted to drive to Strathblane for my husband. It is a shame and disgrace, Polly, that Robert will not give me a trap of my own, to save me the humiliation of being indebted to his father's wife for the loan of hers."

"Bless me, Amy, what is the matter with you? What do you want with a carriage?" exclaimed Polly, in honest indignation. "I think you have no reason to complain. It is a mean thing to say, but can the Bank House compare with Fairgate? Mrs Angus has as much right to grumble over that as you have to be displeased because you haven't a carriage."

Amy was silent, and Polly feared her plain speaking had given offence.

"What are you going to do all the evening? I'll stay over night, if you send Sarah to the Thorn to tell them," she ventured to say at last.

"Oh, no, never mind. I won't weary. I have some

letters to write, and some new music to practise, if I am not too lazy," answered Amy, more affably. "Don't be in a hurry to marry, Polly—especially a man so much older than yourself. He expects you to live like a hermit, and to be for ever grateful that he has made you his wife."

Polly bit her lip to keep back some indignant words which burned for utterance. She was annoyed at Amy, whose exacting selfishness she knew of yore, and her sympathies were all with the absent husband. Young though she was, she felt how unbecoming it was in a wife to speak, even to her sister, in such terms.

"You've got one of your old tantrum fits, Amy," she said, quickly, as she buttoned on her gloves. "Shall I tell you what I think—that you are one of the best cared for women in the world, and that if you could appreciate your blessings you would be the happiest, only you can't see it."

And, having thus relieved her mind, Polly took her leave. But it was a very long time before the haunting feelings of discomfort left by Amy's words faded out of her mind.

Young Mrs Angus sat idly dreaming in the firelight till the maid came in to remove the tea tray and light the lamps. Then she bestirred herself and seated herself at the davenport, to attend to a mass of neglected correspondence. But she only read over one or two of the accusing epistles, idled a little, pen in hand, over a sheet of notepaper, with her dainty monogram at the top, then shut up the desk, and betook herself to the piano.

While she was listlessly looking over the sheets of music, a peal at the hall bell sent its echoes reverberating through the house. She held her breath, her colour came quick and fast, her heart beat as she heard the footsteps on the stairs, and guessed the maid was showing up a visitor. She had no reason to expect that the intruder would be Rolfe Ransome, and yet, when the servant announced his name, she was not at all surprised. A something—a vague, but

unerring prevision—had whispered all day that evening would bring him to Fairgate. It was not the first time he had been in the house. He had received and accepted the invitation to young Mrs Angus's first dinner party, and he had occasionally spent an evening with the inmates of Bank House. But he had never been encouraged to drop in without ceremony, and this was the first time he had presented himself alone—the first time, also, that he had had the opportunity of a private word with Amy Angus. Hitherto her avoidance of him had been most pointed. To-night she was equal to the occasion. She turned away from the piano, and, standing directly under the gasalier, with her fair, calm face unruffled by tremor or faintest blush, bowed stiffly to Rolfe Ransome. He was not less handsome than of yore—nay, both face and figure had gained in manliness, which added to their grace. He did not appear quite so much at ease as Mrs Angus, for the colour came and went in his smooth, pale cheeks, and there was an unwonted fire glaring in his eyes.

"Good evening, Mr Ransome," said Amy's clear, sweet voice, which in her inner excitement was raised a little louder than usual. "I am sorry my husband is not at home to see you. You cannot have known it, I suppose, or you would have spared yourself the walk to Fairgate."

"Yes, I knew it. It was because I knew I should find you alone that I came," said Rolfe, quickly. "Won't you ask me to sit down, Mrs Angus?"

"No. You must know you are not welcome here," she said, and now the rich colour rushed to neck, and cheek, and brow, and her voice perceptibly faltered.

She turned away, walked over to the hearth, and stood there looking down into the fire. She was trembling in every limb, and her heart was beating almost to suffocation.

"It is not pleasant for a fellow to be told plainly that he isn't wanted," said Rolfe, following her, and standing where

he could look upon her face. "If I were as mean and contemptible as you believe me to be, I should deserve it. It is to clear myself in your eyes that I have come here to-night, Mrs Angus."

Amy did not speak, but he saw the start of surprise with which she heard the words.

"If you had not avoided me so pointedly since you became Angus's wife," he went on—"if you had even given me a chance to explain certain circumstances, we might have been good friends these past five months, and it would have been much more jolly and pleasant all round. As sure as I stand here, Amy, I would have kept my appointment that morning if——"

"Be quiet! Say no more! Don't dare to refer to such a thing in my presence!" fell thick and fast from Amy Angus's indignant lips. "It shows what you are, Rolfe Ransome, better than anything else could have done, that you come here in my husband's absence to insult me, but I shall tell him. You shall not go unpunished."

"I don't think you will, Amy," said Rolfe Ransome, quietly, and a slight smile came upon his lips. "You may as well listen quietly, for I intend that you shall hear my explanation. I was ready to come—waiting in the hall, in fact, with my portmanteau in my hand, when Angus came and caught me. He ought to have been asleep; I don't know why he wasn't, I'm sure, but whether he suspected anything or not I can't tell, only he wouldn't let me out. He's a stronger man than I am, Amy, and he made me go upstairs and locked me into my room. I'm telling you the solemn truth, so you needn't stare so incredulously."

Amy Angus fixed her startled eyes full upon the speaker's face. Dared she believe him? Could it be possible that her husband had suspected the plotting of that night? Oh, no—never; else how could he have been so gentle, so tender, so loving with her all these months?

"I tell you it's true, and I felt precious queer that day, I assure you. It wasn't pleasant for me to know you thought me such a treacherous, mean scoundrel. If it had been as you thought, and I had purposely stayed away, I don't know what I deserved. Won't you forgive me, Amy? It wasn't my blame."

Amy Angus spoke no words, but only kept her eyes fixed fast on the dancing flames.

"Perhaps it was better that it happened so. If you really don't believe me, you know, you can ask Angus," continued Rolfe, knowing very well how small was the chance of such a thing happening. "I believe it was better, I say; for, of course, though I loved you, and all that, I couldn't have kept you in style like this," he said, glancing round the luxurious room and assuming an air of injured self-sacrifice. "And, of course, you are ridiculously happy—everybody says so—and so I daren't complain, though I must say it was pretty hard upon me, and I can't think very calmly about it yet."

Still Amy Angus never spoke. What were the thoughts which brought that dark, dark shadow into her eyes, and which blinded them by a mist of tears.

"Well, I'm off now. I've said what I came to say," said Rolfe Ransome, making a motion to go. "I feel better now that you know it wasn't my blame. So, good-bye, Amy. You won't often see me again, for I'll get away from this place as quickly as I can. I'd have been away before now, only I was waiting to tell you about it. I knew my time would come. It's not easy for a fellow to stand seeing the only woman he has ever loved married to another man, you must know. It's about more than he can stand. Won't you say one kind word to me, Amy? Well, good-bye."

He waited a moment, expecting the drooping figure to turn, and the down-bent face to be raised to look into his. He was not mistaken.

"Don't hurry away. There is no need," she said, with

difficulty. "Sit down for a little. I am glad you have told me this, for I did feel very bitter against you. I shall be happier now, knowing you did not wilfully deceive me."

"I thought you were too much bound up in your own happiness to give a thought to a miserable wretch like me," said Rolfe, his eloquent eyes bent full upon her changing face.

She looked at him again, and the glimmer of a strange smile touched her lips. It was her only answer, but he understood it. It seemed to imply a little scornful wonder that he should be so blind. Ah, poor Amy! the old fascination was creeping over her again, and for the time everything was forgotten but the charm of the presence with her.

"When and where do you think of going?" she asked presently. "I thought you were very happy at the Bank."

"Oh, so I am, as happy as a third party can be in such a nest of turtle doves," he said lightly. "I have not quite decided, but I intend to leave this country."

"Why?"

"Because of the reasons I gave you before. Had you been still at the Thorn, things would have been different. Oh, what fools we were, Amy, not to grasp happiness when it was within our reach."

"Oh, hush, you mustn't say such things to me!" said Amy, faintly. "You forget my position."

"No, I don't. I know very well I am speaking to Mrs Angus of Fairgate," said Rolfe, in a savage undertone. "It might be better if I could forget it."

At that moment the hall bell again sent a hundred echoes sounding through the house. Amy started up. What if it should be Robert, home by the earlier train; would he not wonder at Rolfe Ransome's presence in the house? Ay, verily he would. Even Ransome himself looked slightly uncomfortable; and it was a source of unutterable relief to both when the servant opened the drawing-room door and announced—

"Miss Laurence."

CHAPTER XIV.

GATHERING CLOUDS.

THAT relief, however, was only momentary, for when Joan Laurence stepped into the room, and saw its occupants, she looked immeasurably surprised. Ransome turned upon his heel, muttering that he would need to go, and then Mrs Angus recovered herself, and approached her visitor with outstretched hands.

"How are you, Joan? I am so glad to see you. What happy inspiration moved you to come up to-night? Did you know I was alone?"

"Yes, of course. I thought you would expect me," said Joan, and, seeing Rolfe Ransome looking at her, she acknowledged him by a distant bow. "Mr Angus looked in as he was passing up to the station, and asked me to come up and sit an hour with you, as he would not be home till late."

"That was very good of him," said Amy, quickly, and her colour rose, for she saw Rolfe's lip curl in scornful amusement. "Well, you had better take off your bonnet, I suppose, for he won't be home for three hours."

And, without waiting for Joan's assent, she rang the bell for the housemaid.

"Take Miss Laurence up to my dressing-room to remove her bonnet, Sarah," she said, imperiously. "And let us have a cup of coffee here in half-an-hour. You will stay and join us, Mr Ransome,' she added to Rolfe, as Joan turned to leave the room.

"No, thank you. I must positively go now. Good-night, Miss Laurence."

"Good-night," answered Joan, coldly, affecting not to see the hand half-extended towards her; then she followed the maid out of the room.

"Angus evidently thinks you need a duenna, Amy," said Ransome, with calm impertinence. "I shouldn't relish being watched by such a gorgon."

"Don't say such things. Joan Laurence is my friend. I have known her all my life, so has Robert; it is quite natural he should ask her to come up to stay with me," said Amy, bravely. "I dare say he forgot to mention it to me."

"You are the soul of charity and wifely trust," laughed Rolfe. "Not many women would accept so good-naturedly a husband's attention to an old sweetheart. Miss Laurence would have been better suited to Angus. You are too young and bright and charming to be buried in this great house with such a tyrant."

The shaft went home. Amy Angus was not unconscious of the mistake she made in allowing this man to speak to her in such a manner, and to refer to her husband in such impertinent and disrespectful terms; but she was weak where she ought to have been strong, and she felt at the moment like a spoiled child deceived and thwarted for the first time. She was weak, foolish, wayward; but, to do her justice, she had no idea of the danger in which her weakness placed her.

"Well, good-night, Amy," said Rolfe, offering his hand, and assuming an expression of pathetic regret. "I am afraid you are not quite so happy as people say. I understand you best, after all, only you wouldn't give me the chance to make you my wife. So it can't be helped now. Good-night and good-bye."

"Not good-bye," she said, hurriedly. "Why not come up sometimes? Now I shall be glad to see you, when I know you are not so much to blame as I thought."

"I won't promise. It wouldn't be good for either of us, Amy. But there's Miss Laurence coming down again, so good-night."

A hasty hand-clasp, an eloquent and speaking glance, and he was gone. Amy Angus walked back to the hearth again, her heart as heavy as lead, and when Joan presently entered the room she had not even the courtesy to turn her head.

"Shall I go away again, Amy?" she said, pleasantly. "I fear you are not very glad to see me."

"Why shouldn't I be glad?" asked Amy, ungraciously. "Sit down. I am not in the humour for speaking much, but you have known me long enough not to mind that."

Joan did not answer. She stood straight up by the little table, and looked with grave, mournful eyes on the slim, graceful figure in its rich velvet robe—at the fair head with its crown of gold—at the sweet childish face, whose beauty was marred by its expression of miserable discontent. At that moment her heart yearned with unspeakable yearning over Robert Angus's wife.

"Why do you look at me so solemnly?" said Amy, pettishly, at last, quite conscious of Joan's scrutiny, though her own eyes were resolutely down-bent. "I know I'm horrid and inhospitable, and all that, but I'm out of sorts. I dare say you are often like that yourself."

"Sometimes," was Joan's answer. "Shall I sing or play to you, or just keep quiet?"

"Just sit down. I'll speak presently," said Amy; so Joan dropped into a chair, and folding her beautiful hands lightly on her lap, watched the fire-beams dancing on the bright tints of the tiles on the hearth. After a little, Amy too threw herself into a low basket chair, and fixed her eyes on the grave sweet face opposite her.

"Of course you wondered what Rolfe Ransome was doing here to-night, Joan," she said, presently, in rather a defiant tone.

"I would rather not speak about him, if you please," said Joan, quietly.

"But if I don't tell you, you'll go away thinking all sorts of horrid things," said Amy in pettish tones. "He just came to explain something to me. I misjudged him very seriously once, Joan, and he came to clear himself in my eyes. He had not been here many minutes when you came."

"Amy, dear, why should you say all this to me?" said Joan. "What right have I to hear it? Suppose you did not say a word in explanation of his presence here, I should not dare to try to understand it."

"Why?"

"Because you are Robert Angus's wife, Amy, and she is above all suspicion in my eyes," was Joan's quiet answer. It brought the rising flush slowly to Amy's cheek.

"When did you see Mrs Angus at the Bank?" she asked, by way of changing the subject.

"To-day," was Joan's brief reply.

"You see her often, don't you?"

"Yes, very often. She is the truest friend I have in Auchengray," answered Joan, and her eyes filled with sudden tears.

"That's not fair, Joan. We are older friends," said Amy, reproachfully.

"Yes, but you have not always been constant, Amy," replied Joan, candidly, and a smile drove away the mist of tears.

"Well, you haven't known Mrs Angus long, Joan. You have to prove her constancy. I can't get on with her. Don't you think her very straitlaced?"

"Not at all."

"She always makes me feel very ignorant, and stupid and silly."

"I am sure she does not try to make you feel so, Amy. She is the soul of kindness, and it is a real grief to her that there are so few comings and goings between Fairgate and the Bank."

"Robert is always lecturing me about not going, and holding up Mrs Angus before me as a paragon of perfection.

That doesn't do any good, Joan," said Amy, significantly. "A woman always resents that."

"You must remember how comparatively little your husband knows of the ways of women. He never had any sister, and did not seek ladies' society much."

"Except yours," said Amy, with a little jerk. "Does he never tell you what a useless, stupid, ignorant wife he has, Joan?"

"Amy!"

"Well, I know he thinks you are a paragon, too, and—and—I am very wretched!" cried Amy, and she burst into tears, although she could not, for the life of her, have told what she was crying for.

In a moment Joan was kneeling by her side, with her strong, tender arm round her, soothing her with a gentleness peculiarly her own. She saw that the girl's nerves were quite unstrung—the result, probably, of her talk with Rolfe Ransome.

"I am not happy, Joan. I should never have married Robert Angus," she sobbed, wildly. "He doesn't understand me, nor love me well enough to try to understand me. My life is monotonous—so miserable—I sometimes think I shall die. What shall I do? What shall I do?"

"Hush, hush, my darling! You will remember with pain these wild words. You are out of sorts. You have been left too much alone, but you will be better soon," said Joan, with infinite tenderness, speaking in low, sweet, soothing tones, though she was herself trembling in every limb.

"I am too young to be shut up here with nothing to do but look after my house and my servants, and none of my own age to speak to," continued Amy, still sobbing, though less vehemently. "If Robert had any real love or consideration for me he would see how dull I am. He would try to make life brighter and happier for me. I——"

"Hush, oh, hush," fell in low pleading tones from Joan's

lips. "You are talking of your husband, who loves you above any earthly thing."

"If he does, I do not know it. He never lets me see it!" said Amy, rebelliously. "He comes in and out, sits down to his books and his papers, and leaves me to amuse myself. It is not right. If my love gets starved out by slow degrees he has himself to blame."

Joan was silent, because she felt utterly helpless and perplexed. How could she guide and soothe this wayward heart, how lead it to estimate more dearly its own precious blessings?

"Amy, listen to me," she said, at length, in low, grave, almost solemn tones. "I must speak plainly to you, my dear, because you have spoken with such sad unreserve to me. Your words are not only wild, but wicked; they wrong the good, true man who loves you, and whose wife you are. If there has been any apparent neglect on his part, it only arises from his nature and habits; and, instead of railing at them, Amy, you must try to change them in so far as they affect your own happiness. I am quite sure of this, Amy, that Robert Angus would never grudge you anything you thought necessary for your happiness or welfare. And is it not largely your own fault that you live so quiet a life here? When do you go out, or ask anybody to Fairgate? You might have the largest, and yet the most select, circle of society in Auchengray if you chose."

"Robert doesn't like company. I have often heard him say it."

"My dear, he must and will learn to like it for your sake. I fear you shut yourself up too much from your husband too, Amy. Go to him, tell him frankly and kindly that you feel your life quiet and dull. If he does not at once bestir himself to make it livelier for you, he is not the man I take him for."

"I hate to beg and sue to any man. He ought to see for himself. He must know well enough it is a great change to me to live here after the Thorn. Why, it used to be like a party there every night!"

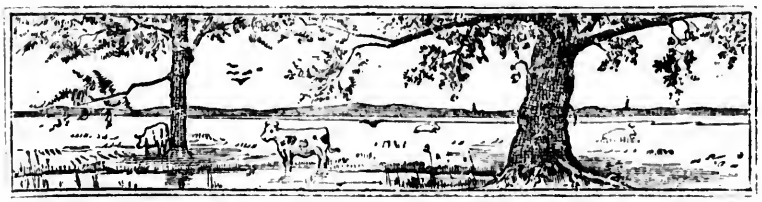
Joan sighed, and almost helplessly dropped her hand from Amy's shoulder. What could she say—how advise in a case like this? It was too evident that Amy Angus was the wrong woman in the wrong place, and her heart filled with sorrow and with compassion for the husband and wife, for she loved them both.

"Amy, dear, did you not weigh those things in your mind before you married? You can hardly expect to live such a gay, butterfly life as you did when you were a girl at home. Would it not be better to try and sympathise a little with your husband's love of quiet? Don't be too hard upon him, though he seems unsympathetic with you. Take him into your confidence; believe me, that will be the first step towards setting matters right. How can any third person advise or help? No one, you know, has any right to come between husband and wife. Interference is often productive of evil, seldom of good."

"It is so easy for you, who have every liberty, to give good advice to one who is bound," said Amy, with a smile, which made Joan rise quickly from her knees, and turn a little coldly away, wondering whether the pretty creature before her had any heart at all.

"Here comes Sarah with the coffee," said Amy, presently, having apparently quite recovered herself. "I have quite made a fool of myself, Joan. Please forget what I said. As you said, my words were wild enough, but I felt thoroughly out of sorts. I think it is the weather. Do sit down now and let us have a cosy chat until Robert comes home. Mrs Balfour was telling me the other day that you were writing a book; too bad of you, Joan, not to tell us the secret. Do tell me all about it now. I am sure it will be splendid, you are so clever."

"When I do write a book, Amy, I will be quite sure to tell you about it," said Joan, very drily indeed for her. "I think after we have had some coffee, we had better try the effect of music, for we are both out of sorts."



CHAPTER XV.

VERY OMINOUS.

"VERY well, sir. Of course, if you insist on turning a fellow out of the house, there's nothing for him but to go; but I must say it is very hard."

So said Rolfe Ransome, in very sullen, aggrieved tones, his handsome face wearing an expression of injured innocence. He was alone with Mr Angus, the elder, in that gentleman's private room in the bank, and, as business hours were over, the outer office was deserted. The banker bit his lip, but made no reply, for he was determined not to bandy words with his wife's brother.

"Why did you bring me here at all, hang it? Did I ask you to let me come?" asked Rolfe, kicking the bar of the fender with his foot. "It's not fair, I say, to kick me out like this after I've got accustomed to the place."

Mr Angus took no notice of these disrespectful remarks, but went on serenely adding up the figures in the ledger before him.

"On the 15th of this month you will receive your quarter's salary in full," said he, at length, leaning back in his chair and sticking his pen behind his ear. "I advised you before, and I advise you again, to emigrate. Isabel tells me you have a distant relative in Sydney. I think the best step you could take would be to go out there."

"Oh, I see! Isabel and you have been laying your heads together to get rid of me," he said, with a slight

sneer. "Very good. But how am I to get there? Do you think the Government will give me an assisted passage, eh?"

Again Mr Angus bit his lip. He was a quick-tempered man, and scarcely for his wife's sake could he calmly endure such gross impertinence.

"If you decide to emigrate to New South Wales, I will give you a hundred guineas," he said quietly. "It is infinitely more than you deserve. And I beg of you to consider that it is solely for your sister's sake that I am so generous with you."

"And if I decline to accept your munificent offer, what then?"

"Nothing, except that on the 15th of the month you quit your situation and my house," said Mr Angus, quietly. "Had I done my duty to myself and others I would have sent you about your business long ago. You have not been a credit to the Bank of Auchengray, nor to me, sir."

"I'm sure I wrought for the beggarly pittance I got," said Rolfe, savagely.

"Hush!" said Mr Angus, sternly. "You know as well as I do that you have supplemented the 'beggarly pittance,' as you are pleased to call it, in certain very questionable ways. My pocket has materially suffered since you came—a fact of which my son is quite aware, and which, I fear, the others more than suspect. Be very thankful, sir, that you are getting off so easily. I have it in my power to place your departure from this country out of your power, so you had better keep a civil and quiet tongue in your head, lest I rue my indulgence."

Rolfe Ransome grew pale with rage and apprehension.

"It's Robert who has done this. He hates me. He would do me a bad turn if he could. He has been jealous of me since the first night he took me to Burnett's," he fumed, angrily. "I might have known he was at the bottom of it, but I'll be even with him!"

Mr Angus turned upon him, his eyes blazing with fury. Ransome, an arrant coward at heart, quailed beneath that look.

"Don't insult my son by taking his name upon your lips!" he thundered. "You are not fit to even mention his name. Robert regards you with a contempt so immeasurable that he would scorn to speak of you in any terms whatsoever. You nave need to go to him, ay, on bended knees, and thank him for keeping you out of a felon's cell. There is not another man in Auchengray who would have done so much for you."

Paler still grew Rolfe Ransome's face, and he shifted uneasily from his position. He was utterly cowed now, for he saw that all his misdemeanours were fully known. He need not have been surprised. Did he suppose that, in an office like the Bank of Auchengray, the heads of which were men of more than ordinary shrewdness and perception, sum after sum of money could disappear and not be accounted for? For his wife's sake hitherto Mr Angus had refrained from taking any step in the matter, until he saw it was impossible to stop Ransome in his course of dishonesty, and that it would speedily become almost impossible to keep it from the public ear. Isabel more than suspected the true reason of her husband's increased anxiety to get her brother away from Auchengray, only she had never put that unhappy suspicion into words. Yet she was not less anxious to have him removed from all connection with the Bank and from residence in the house, for he had been the one shadow on her own happiness, and she lived in a perpetual nervous dread of something happening through him, some trouble which she could not specify or describe. Therefore she had eagerly and gladly acquiesced in her husband's desire to dismiss him—nay, she urged upon him to do so without delay. She feared, indeed, that Rolfe was a hopeless reprobate, for she had never been able to reach or touch any finer feelings in him, nor to arouse him to any interest apart from self and selfish ends. She had pleaded with him, wept over him, and now only prayer for him was left. Her

influence was utterly impotent to awaken in him any sense of honour or gratitude, and his presence was like a dark shadow coming between her and peace.

"Well, then, I'll go; I won't wait till the 15th," he said, between his teeth. "I wish I had never seen this place. I've wasted too much time in it already. I wish you'd left me alone, I say. Did I beg you to take me into your employment?"

"It was to give you a chance to redeem your character, and to enable you, if you chose, to follow out an honourable and respectable path in life. If was for that reason, and for the sake of the sister whose heart you have nearly broken, that I took you against my better judgment. Perhaps the day may come when you will look back with regret upon the time you have truly enough wasted here," said Mr Angus, gravely; then, holding open the door, he signified that the interview was at an end, and that he had better go.

In no amiable frame of mind, Mr Rolfe Ransome quitted the banker's private room. He sauntered into the hall, took his hat from the stand, and went out of doors, with no particular object in view. Mr Angus was not surprised that he did not appear at the dinner table.

"Well, my dear, I have given Rolfe his *conge*," he said to his wife, when at the sound of the bell he quitted his desk and hastened into the dining-room.

"How did he take it?" Isabel asked, paling a little in her anxiety.

"Much as I expected. It will be an immense relief to us all when he is safely out of the way, Isabel. You, at least, will be infinitely happier."

"You are right," Isabel answered, and yet an involuntary sigh escaped her lips. Her heart reproached her a little, for when the ne'er-do-well was cut adrift from all better influences and left wholly to himself, what might not be the result?

"What troubles you, dear?" said the banker, quick to note the shadow on his wife's fair face. "Don't keep it

from me, Isabel. You know my chief earthly aim is to make you happy. There is nothing I will not do to accomplish that end. If you have any plan or thought in your head about Rolfe, tell it to me, and I will do my utmost to aid you in it. Although our past endeavours to help him have failed, we may be successful in the future."

Isabel Angus did not speak, but her beautiful eyes filled with tears, and stooping, she touched with grateful lips the kind hand resting on her arm.

"I have no more to ask, Robert," said she at length. "You have done too much for me and mine already. Did Rolfe seem willing to emigrate."

"He did not say, but I fancy he will see that it will be to his own best advantage. He is not the fellow to refuse the chance of a hundred guineas, and I told him plainly that unless he left the country he should receive nothing but his salary."

"You are quite right. Unless there is an ocean between him and Auchengray, he will be a ceaseless trouble and annoyance to you," said Isabel, sadly. "I will write this very day to my mother's cousin in Sydney, and tell him the whole circumstances. For her sake I believe he will try and lend Rolfe a helping hand. They were deeply attached to each other in their youth."

"That is satisfactorily settled then. Now let me see you smile, wife; I like not that doleful countenance," said the banker; "you at least can have nothing to reflect upon. You have borne his waywardness with an angel patience and loving kindness which would have touched any heart but his."

"Robert, do you think there is any human being wholly bad?" asked Isabel, almost wistfully. "I sometimes fear there is no portion of good in Rolfe."

"There must be good, though we have not discovered it, my dear," said Mr Angus, gravely. "We must just hope that he may speedily be surrounded by influences which will

call it forth; and yet, where could he meet with more kind and helpful consideration, more patient and long-suffering tenderness, than you, my darling, have lavished upon him here?"

Isabel shook her head.

"He is so like poor papa. He has inherited all that terrible weakness—I dare not call it by a harsher name—which broke my mother's heart, and made our home the most miserable place on earth. Life is a great mystery, Robert. I am overwhelmed at times by the unutterable sense of thankfulness I feel when I think of all the secure and happy privileges you have bestowed on me. My own deep happiness makes me very tender, very sorrowful, for my brother, who seems bent on making an utter shipwreck of his life."

"We will leave him in a higher Hand, my wife," said the banker, quietly. "Sometimes, when human beings lay down the work in despair, God takes it up and finishes it."

"I will try to be hopeful, but it is not easy," said Isabel; for she was haunted by a perpetual brooding sense of coming trouble, a feeling that the worst had not yet come.

Mr Angus was obliged to ride out to Strathblane on business that evening, and after he was gone his wife put on her bonnet and walked down to Sunset Cottage, where she found Joan among her flowers. The weather was exceptionally warm and pleasant, even for genial April, and flower and leaf were rapidly approaching perfection. Joan's little plot was gay with hyacinth, polyanthus, and crocus, and the air about her was laden with the perfume of the sweet narcissus. She looked up with a ready smile, to greet her friend—for these two women were friends in the truest sense of the word. They had an absolute faith in each other.

"You look troubled, Isabel. What is it?" Joan asked, leaning upon her garden rake, and looking inquiringly at her friend as she came up the path.

"Yes, I am troubled, Joan. It is the old story. I want

to speak to you about my brother, if you are not too busy to listen."

"No, I am never too busy to listen to you; but why should we sit in the house on such a glorious evening? Just look at yon purple light upon the moor beyond Fairgate. I have been looking at it longingly for the last half-hour. Do you feel equal to the climb? You look as if the fresh moorland air would do you good, and we shall see a glorious sunset over the Ben to-night."

"How eloquent you have become since you began to exercise your literary tastes," said Isabel, with a glimmering smile. "I fear I do not see with your enchanted eyes, but I shall be grateful for the walk up to the moor, and we can talk as we go. I shall just wait here till you are ready. How lovely your flowers are! Mr Angus says you are the most capable gardener and the cleverest woman in Auchingray; there now!"

"Tell Mr Angus from me that he talks treason against his own accomplished wife," Joan laughed back, as she disappeared within the doorway. She did not spend a long time over her toilet, and ere half-an-hour was passed they had left the quiet town behind, and were slowly mounting the winding hill-path to the moor. It was a wide stretch of waste ground, covered with heather and bracken, and dotted here and there by clumps of sturdy firs—a pleasant place for a walk on a fine summer evening, the sense of freedom and breezy freshness being enough to sweep the cobwebs away from mind and heart.

As they walked, Isabel told Joan the wholy story of her brother's waywardness and sin, the greater part of which was known to her already. She was sympathetic and kind, but she could not be very hopeful or comforting, for her antipathy to Rolfe Ransome was so strong as to surprise herself, and she feared he would be little else than a heart-break and trouble to those connected with him all his days. We do meet with such weak, faulty, erring human beings

sometimes, who seem either to be devoid of any higher, better impulses, or who have allowed the baser part of their natures to gain the mastery, to the annihilation of the good. They are a heartbreak, truly enough ; a constant martyrdom to those bound to them by the ties of kinship.

"I feel better after a talk with you, and this air is delicious," said Isabel, when they had reached the wide pleasant tableland, and could look down at the little town clustering at their feet. Joan took in a full, deep breath, enjoying the whole prospect and surroundings to the full. Away over the lofty peak of the Ben the sky was rosy red, fringed by a rim of burnished gold where the sun was dropping to his royal rest. There was a feeling of life and promise in the air, flower and bud were springing everywhere, and the green fulness of the heather tops gave promise of a glorious autumn bloom. The cuckoo was calling sweetly and clearly in her haunt in the fir trees, and somewhere down in the vale a thrush was pouring out all its heart in a glorious burst of song.

"We are not quite alone," said Joan, presently, with a little smile. "I see a white gown gleaming through the trees. A pair of lovers, probably seeking the kindly shelter of yon copse. We had better be merciful and retire."

Isabel looked in the direction indicated, and her face began to flush. Her vision was clearer than Joan's, and she could see more than the gleam of a woman's white gown.

"Joan, look again!" she said, grasping her friend's arm. "Can't you see them now? Don't you know them? Perhaps I am mistaken."

Joan looked again, this time aided by her eye-glass. Then her arm fell helplessly by her side, and she looked speechless into her companion's face. The pair, standing in the attitude of lovers, absorbed in very earnest conversation, were no other than Rolfe Ransome and Robert Angus's wife.

CHAPTER XVI.

HUSBAND AND WIFE.

"WHEN are you going to take your wife away for a holiday, Robert?"

It was Isabel who asked the question, next afternoon, when he dropped into the house for a few minutes, as he often did, before going home to dinner. She smiled as she spoke, but it was a tremulous, uncertain smile, which, had Robert Angus been particularly observant at the moment, might have suggested to him a little uneasiness of mind.

"My wife! Do you think she needs a holiday, Mrs Angus?" he asked gaily, for that day he happened to be in the best of spirits. "Why, I was telling her this very morning she was looking as fresh and sweet as the spring flowers! Rather a pretty speech for me, wasn't it? Seriously, though, what makes you ask such a question?"

"I was only thinking a change might be good for Amy just now," said Isabel, and her eyes drooped a little, for she felt uncomfortable in the extreme. "She leads a quiet, uneventful life at Fairgate."

"I assure you she is perfectly contented, Mrs Angus," said Robert, blithely. "She told me so this very morning. Shall I tell you a secret? I never hoped that Amy would turn out such a pattern wife. We suit each other admirably, and we are very happy."

Isabel turned her shadowed eyes towards the window;

and for the moment she could think of nothing to say. Were they mistaken, after all, in thinking Amy Angus was swerving from her wifely faith, and might not that evening stroll on the moor be capable of a very simple explanation? She felt in a maze of bewilderment and perplexity, not unmixed with an indefinable dread. She had resolved to do the only thing she could do—counsel Robert to take his wife away from Auchengray for a week or two—but in the face of his remark she could say no more.

"So your brother is going off?" said Robert, more gravely. "I sympathise with you very much about him."

"I know you do. You have acted a brother's part towards me and mine, Robert," Isabel said, in tones of emotion. "I only wish I could repay you with aught besides my deep gratitude."

"That and your sisterly love have repaid me over and above, if I need payment," answered Robert, with a sunny smile. "Has Rolfe decided where to go?"

"Yes; he gave your father his decision to-day. It seems that one of the Royal Mail lines sails from London on the 16th, and he seems inclined to go with it instead of waiting another month."

"Sydney is his destination, then?"

"Yes. I wrote to our relative last night, and the letter will arrive in time to prepare him for Rolfe's coming."

"He may do better there," said Robert. "You must keep up your heart about him."

"I will try to do so; but I must confess I do not feel very hopeful," answered Isabel. "Are you going already? There was something I was going to speak to you about. Oh, yes; it was Joan Laurence. Did you know she had turned *littérateur?*"

"Amy was telling me something to that effect the other day. Mrs Balfour had hinted it to her, but I did not pay much attention to what she said. Is it really true?"

"Yes. She has got her book disposed of, too, very

advantageously, considering that she is quite an amateur. I am afraid Auchengray will not long hold Joan Laurence."

"I should say not. Well, I am not surprised. I have always known Joan to be a woman by herself. I wish we saw more of her at Fairgate, but Amy and she do not seem to pull well together. Tell Joan I congratulate her, and wish her continued success with my whole heart, will you?"

"If you wish me to do so, but good wishes lose half their value when uttered by proxy," said Isabel, with a slight smile. "Well, good afternoon. Give Amy my love, and tell her I will be up one of these fine days."

"We shall be charmed to see you. Good afternoon," said Robert, and went his way.

Not many yards past the Bank he met his father-in-law hurrying to see Mr Angus on some business of the Earl's.

"Holloa! Robert. How are you? Amy well, eh?" he said, in his cheery fashion. "Is your father in? I have a telegram from Lord Beauly to-day which will require his attention."

"I think he is still in his private room," answered Robert. "All well at the Thorn?"

"Yes, thanks, although we might be anything for aught you and Amy care," laughed the factor. "James was amusing us at breakfast this morning by counting on his left hand the times you had been together at the Thorn since your marriage."

"Well, I own we have been rather remiss," said Robert. "But we seem to like our own fireside best."

"All very good and commendable," said Mr Burnett, drily, "only don't grow selfish over your own fireside. I must say I am agreeably disappointed in Amy. I thought you would have some trouble with her."

"No man need have any trouble with his wife, if only he take the right way with her," said Robert, rather loftily. "Amy has accommodated herself very readily to my quiet habits."

"I suppose she must; but don't live like hermits up at Fairgate. It is not good for either of you," said Mr Burnett. "Tell Amy to walk over soon, and I'll drive her home. Mary is going north to Dingwall on Friday to spend a week with her cousins. But there, I must be off. Good-bye."

And with a nod and a smile the factor hurried off, having opened up a new vein of thought in his son-in-law's mind. Might it be possible, after all, that he was not quite doing his duty to his young wife? Was it a right or a fitting thing that one so young should so quickly have settled down into a staid, sober wife, like Martha, careful and troubled over many things; especially when her girlhood had been such a bright, happy, sunshiny time, in which each day brought its attendant pleasures, and in which the word care had had no place.

For the first time since his marriage a vague feeling of dissatisfaction with himself crept over Robert Angus. Amy had never complained. She had not seemed to desire anything beyond their quiet life at Fairgate, and yet, now that he began to ponder over things, he remembered how very seldom he heard her laugh or sing. True, he did not greatly care for music. Nevertheless, he had been particular that the piano should be one of Erard's best instruments, yet how very seldom its rich, sweet tones were heard in the house. He was startled when he thought of these things, remembering that Amy had been the very life and sunshine of the Thorn. The piano had been her idol in those days, and she could play and sing almost every new piece that was published; then she was in the midst of every bustle and gay frolic of the younger members of the family. What, then, had wrought this great change? He felt that it should not be—the cares of wifehood should not so soon have changed the light-hearted girl into the sober, quiet, practical woman who now presided over his home. Robert Angus was glad when he reached Fairgate that day, and he hurried

into the house possessed with a strange yearning to look into his wife's face, and, holding her in his arms, to ask what had wrought the change. She was watching in the oriel window of the dining-room, ready to touch the bell at once, and give the maids the signal to bring dinner in. While her hand was on the bell-rope her husband entered the room, and, ere the summons was given, took her to his heart.

"Don't ring yet, Amy. Dinner must wait. I have something to say to you."

He saw her face flush deepest crimson first, and then pale to the whiteness of the lace at her throat. He wondered at it, little guessing the wild dread beating at her heart.

"What is it?" she asked, faintly. "You frighten me, Robert."

"Don't start so, my darling; you are too easily frightened," he said, with the utmost tenderness. "Come over here to the window, where I can see your face. Now, tell me truly, Amy—are you happy here with me?"

"Why do you ask me such a strange question?" she asked, falteringly, scarcely daring to lift her eyes to his face.

"Because, if you are happy, it is little short of a miracle," he said grimly. "My eyes have been opened to-day, Amy, never mind how, and I know that I have treated you shamefully, and why you have borne it all so meekly passes my comprehension."

"What are you saying? I don't know what you are talking about, Robert."

"I know, though, and that is enough at present," said Robert, more grimly still. "Eight months ago, Amy, I married you—took you away from a happy home, where you had everything in the shape of pleasure that you could desire. Well, I married you and brought you home to this dismal house, and shut you up like a prisoner. I forgot that you were only a girl, my poor love, and that you had all a girl's natural cravings after gaiety and pleasure. I was happy

enough in my quietude among my books, it was a bore to me to entertain visitors, and I dare say I let you see it plain enough. In my utter selfishness and thoughtlessness, my darling, I have been very cruel to you. Oh, Amy, why did you not complain? Why did you not tell me of it long ago?"

But Amy never spoke. Her flushed face was hidden on his arm, but he could not feel her trembling.

"Look up, my darling, and say you forgive me," he said, fondly. "I have been blind and selfish too long; but I will try to make amends now. We will begin a new life at Fairgate, which I promise you will be as merry and happy a house as the Thorn, if only you will help me to make it so."

"Oh, Robert, hush," fell low and brokenly from Amy's lips. He did not know the keen agony which prompted that cry.

"Mrs Angus was asking me to-day if I were not thinking of taking you away for a holiday," said Robert after a while. "We are so busy just now that I could not possibly get away longer than a day or two. We will have a glorious holiday in August though, but I intend you shall have a change soon. I saw your father to-day, and he tells me Polly is going up to Dingwall for a week. What would you say to going with her, and I would come up next Friday and bring you home?"

"To Dingwall, Robert!" repeated Amy, and she spoke like one in a dream. "Couldn't you take me away just now—to-day or to-morrow?" she added, wistfully, and her eyes, full of dumb entreaty, looked into his. He wondered a little at the request, at the intensity of the look which accompanied it, but he shook his head.

"It is utterly impossible just now, dearest, but you will go North with your sister. I have quite decided it. Now that I look at you, I do not wonder that Mrs Angus thought you required a change. Amy, I feel as if I could never forgive myself for my neglect of you."

"Don't speak in that way. You have not neglected me

You have been all that is kind and good," she said with difficulty, and she turned a little away from him. "It is I who am unworthy. You should never have married me, Robert."

"Or you should never have married me, rather," he corrected, laughingly. "In six months' time we will not cast such reflections at each other. The more I think of it the more I am amazed that you have borne my stupid selfishness so patiently. I have never heard you once complain."

"I had no need," she whispered; "I had no need. But we must have some dinner now," she added, with a wan smile, which somehow struck Robert Angus to the heart.

"Are you well enough, Amy?" he asked, anxiously.

"Quite well. I know I look pale. I do not go out enough. But if you insist upon me going to Dingwall, I shall surely gather some roses there."

"Would you like to go, Amy? You used to enjoy a visit to the North. I remember I used to despair of ever seeing you again, you stayed away so long."

"I will go if you wish me to."

"Don't put it in that way, Amy," he said, quickly. "It reminds my of my tyranny. I think it would do you good, and when you come back we must have some young people to stay here. Couldn't you get up a garden party or something?"

"I daresay we could. Well, I will go, Robert," said Amy, listlessly. "Here comes Sarah with the soup."

Robert Angus was uneasy about his wife. There was something in her look and manner he could not understand, and again and again he blamed himself for his lack of interest, his inattention to her in the past. He was by nature reserved and undemonstrative, and forgot that the young life he had linked with his own might require a different atmosphere from that which satisfied him. He had imagined that in making Amy Burnett his wife he had

given her the highest, most indisputable proof of his love, forgetting that to certain natures the outward evidences of love—caresses and endearing words—are almost indispensable if their own affection is to be kept bright and living. It is not a mark of the highest nature, perhaps, nor of the most unselfish; but it is nevertheless true, and it was true, sadly true, of Robert Angus's wife. She went over to the Thorn one day to tell them of her intention to accompany Mary to the North—an announcement which her mother was pleased to hear, for she fancied her looking worn and in need of change. In answer to her anxious questioning, Amy said she was perfectly well, and Mrs Burnett wondered whether she had not found happiness at Fairgate, only she was too prudent to hint at such a thing.

On the Friday afternoon the sisters left Auchengray, Mrs Burnett and Robert Angus seeing them safely into the train.

"You will write every day, Amy?" he said to his wife, his eyes bent upon her in tenderness, for somehow he had never felt his heart go out to her as it did that day.

"Yes, I will write if I have anything to say," she added, with a slight smile, but she did not ask him to send a daily letter, at which he felt a little pang of disappointment.

"Here comes the train. Good-bye, my darling," he said. "Take care of yourself, Amy. I will be up without fail next Friday."

"Very well. Good-bye," she said, and suffered him to kiss her without returning the caress.

Just as the train was moving she leaned out of the carriage window and touched her mother's shoulder.

"Kiss me again, mamma," she said hurriedly. "*You* will always love me."

Mrs Burnett was surprised, but could say nothing, for the train steamed away. When it was fairly out of the station, Amy leaned back in her corner, and, to Mary's amazement, burst into tears.

CHAPTER XVII.

A CRUEL BLOW.

"WHAT is the meaning of this, I should like to know? When did I make such a stupid blunder in an account before?" muttered Robert Angus to himself, pushing his hair back from his forehead in real annoyance, for he had undone a good hour's work; a most unusual thing for him, for he was a quick and accurate accountant. He could not tell why, but he was unusually abstracted, or, perhaps, out of sorts would be the better term. He had had a bad dream the previous night, and had risen depressed and unrefreshed. Then the morning mail had brought no letter from Amy, the second day she had missed, and, though it was only Thursday, he had half resolved to run up to Dingwall that afternoon, just to see if all were right. He tried to banish the vague feelings of uneasiness which possessed him, and set himself laboriously to rectify his mistake, when the young lad who had replaced Ransome in the Bank tapped at the door, and said a lady wished to see him.

"Who is it, do you know, Graham? Is it not Mrs Angus she wishes to see?" he asked, without much interest.

"No, sir, she asked for Mr Robert. I think it is Mrs Burnett, of the Thorn," said the lad, who was a stranger in Auchengray, and did not know many of its folks.

"Ah, show her in," said Robert, springing to his feet, all

his listlessness gone. Mrs Burnett entered presently, shut the door, and turned a white, anxious face to him.

"Robert, where is Amy?" she asked almost in a whisper, and sank into the chair he had placed for her, for she was trembling in every limb.

"Amy! Where should she be but at Dingwall?" he repeated, blankly.

"She is not there! I had a letter from Polly this morning; see, read what she says," said Mrs Burnett, taking a letter from her bag, and offering it to him with trembling fingers. He took it, mechanically, and fixed his eyes on the paragraph she indicated. Thus it ran:

"Robert would be surprised to see Amy home on Tuesday afternoon. She positively wouldn't stay another day. Auntie and the boys made such fun of her, and offered to telegraph for Robert, if only she would stay. It is very funny to be newly married, I think; you don't feel much interest in anything but your own husband and your own home. I suppose that is quite right, mother, only it seems funny in Amy. She used to be so different. I don't think she is very well. Auntie seemed anxious about her. Do write and tell if you were not all astonished to see her so soon."

"I felt so anxious and so astonished when I got that letter that I just put on my bonnet and walked over to Fairgate," said Mrs Burnett. "I did not know what to think when Jessie assured me her mistress had not come home."

"No," repeated Robert Angus, with bloodless lips, "she has not come home."

There was a dead silence for a few seconds, then Robert Angus pulled out his watch.

"I have time to catch the noon train for the North," he said in a voice of curious calm. "Mother, pray God it may not be as I fear. Good-bye."

"What is it you fear? Do you think anything can have befallen Amy? Do you think she can be dead?"

"No, or we should have known it ere this," he said, taking his hat down from the peg behind the door, and striding out of the room.

Mrs Burnett sat still for a few minutes, and then, rising heavily from her chair, for a great burden and terror seemed to encompass her, she went away into the Bank House to speak to Mrs Angus. But the banker and his wife had gone to spend the day with some friends among the hills, and were not expected home till late. Craving for some sympathy or help, Mrs Burnett walked down the High Street, and turned in at the gate of Sunset Cottage. Joan, sitting at her desk in the parlour window, hastened to open the door for her, marvelling a little at her early visit. She saw at once, from the expression of her visitor's face, that there was something wrong.

"I want to come in and sit down for a few minutes, Joan," said Mrs Burnett, without smile or greeting of any kind. "I fear a great trouble has come upon us."

Joan did not speak, but held open the door for her old friend to enter, and when she had followed her into the sitting-room, she placed her in the most comfortable chair, untied her bonnet strings, and hovered about her with gentle kindly touches, infinitely soothing to the nervous, excited woman.

"It is about Amy, Joan," she said at length. "She went to Dingwall, you know, with Mary. I had a letter this morning saying she left to come home to Auchengray on Tuesday, and she has never come. Robert has never seen her."

An involuntary exclamation fell from Joan's lips, and she, too, visibly paled.

"May she not have stopped on the way? Have you no friends between this and Dingwall, Mrs Burnett?"

"None on the route by which Amy would travel; besides, she had no such intention when she left her aunt's," said Mrs Burnett, drearily. "Oh, Joan, I dare not put in words the terrible suspicion which has whispered itself to me, and which I fear Robert feels also."

"You have seen Robert, then?"

"Yes; I have just come from the Bank. He is away like a man possessed to catch the noon train to the North."

Joan was silent, but her heart was heavy as lead.

"Joan, when did young Ransome leave Auchengray?" asked Mrs Burnett at length. "Was it not on Tuesday?"

"Yes," answered Joan, almost in a whisper.

Mrs Burnett rose, and, tottering to Joan's side, laid her shaking hand on her arm.

"Joan," she said, in a shuddering whisper, "may God forgive me if my words cruelly wrong my own child; but do you think it possible that her disappearance can have anything to do with his departure?"

"God forbid!" fell fervently from Joan's white lips; and yet she could not try to dispel the mother's terrible fears, which she doubted were only too well grounded.

"Surely a child of mine would never be so base," continued the unhappy woman in low, wailing tones. "She was so well off in every respect; she had a good and loving husband, a beautiful and happy home, she could have no cares, unless those of her own making. Surely, in her own interests, if for the sake of nothing else, she would never take so wild and wicked a step."

Joan was silent, because she dare not utter the thoughts of her heart. She could not tell the poor mother that this tragedy was scarcely a surprise to her—nay, that she had seemed to live in daily dread and expectation of it for long.

"Dear Mrs Burnett, let us wait, and hope, and pray," she said, in a low voice. "If Amy has really yielded to such a rash impulse it is possible she may rue it ere it be too late. She may yet come back. Oh, I cannot think she would so lightly throw away all a woman has worth living for upon the earth," she added, with unwonted passion.

"I cannot hope. A kind of despair has laid hold of me, Joan. I must go away home now; but how am I to tell

her father? For the first time since we were married, Joan, I am afraid to look upon his face."

What could Joan say? With what words could she comfort or strengthen the stricken woman? She tried to speak, but her lips refused to utter the thronging, yearning sympathies of her soul.

We will not follow Mrs Burnett to the Thorn, nor linger over the terrible agonising suspense of that interminable day. At noon next day Robert Angus returned to Auchengray, a worn and haggard man, with an expression of restless misery on his face. He walked up to the Bank, briefly informed his father that he had heard no word of his wife in the North, beyond the fact that she had left Dingwall on Tuesday, ostensibly to return home. Each knew well the thought of the other's heart, but neither dared utter it yet.

"I will go home. It is possible there may be a letter for me there," Robert said, and his father saw him depart, and watched with an aching heart the tall figure, with the fine head drooping dejectedly upon the breast, walk with slow and hopeless step up the hill to Fairgate. Not yet had anything about these events transpired in Auchengray, although the eager busybodies were puzzled to understand the proceedings of Robert Angus the younger. The maids at Fairgate were relieved to see their master return, and Jessie Forbes met him at the door with a letter in her hand.

"It came this morning, sir," she said, glad in her kindly way to administer some relief to the anxiety which she saw still possessed him. He took the letter, hung up his hat mechanically, and opened the dining-room door. But the large, lofty room, brilliant with the noon sunshine, seemed to chill him to the heart, and, stepping across the hall, he entered his own little sanctum, which he used as a study as well as a business room, and locked himself in. There was no sunshine here, except one stray gleam which stole through the thick foliage of the chestnut tree overshadowing the

window, and cast a long line of light across the floor. He sat down there and looked curiously at the address, his own name written in the sharp, fashionable handwriting he knew so well. Then he looked at the post-mark, which was Queenstown, and the date that of the previous day. He was in no hurry to open it, knowing full well what it contained. Nevertheless, he did at length carefully cut it open with his paper-knife, and quietly unfolded the closely-written sheet within. As he did so, his face wore a very curious expression, but he neither looked agitated nor excited. That was past, the calm of conviction had succeeded:—

"S.S. *Sidonia*,
"In the Clyde, April 19th.

"DEAR ROBERT,—Something impels me to write to you, though, if you know of my unworthiness when this letter reaches you, you will never read it. I would not write at all, but, remembering how you blamed yourself for your treatment of me, I want to say that to my dying day I shall only think of it with gratitude and love. You were good, too good, to me, Robert. I did not deserve it. I never deserved your love, because I could not love you in return. When you know how and with whom I have gone away, you will go back in thought, I know, to the times before our marriage when Rolfe Ransome seemed to come between us. He taught me to care for him then, and but for my father and mother I should have listened to him, and sent you away. Only I do not blame them. It was out of their love for me, I know, but it is not a right thing to force any girl to marry against her will. That is my excuse for what I have done. When you are all blaming me, and thinking hardly of me, remember that it was not quite of my own free will that I married you. And now I have one thing to confess before I say good-bye to you for ever. You will remember the night before our marriage you inter-

cepted Rolfe as he was leaving the Bank, and kept him from going away: why, I do not know. If you had not done that, I should not be writing these words now, because I should never have been your wife. We had planned to go away together that night, and be married in Glasgow, and I was waiting for him at the old bridge at the very time when you were keeping him in the house. Then, when he did not come, I just went home, and went through the dreary ceremony which made me your wife. I was nearer truly loving you then than I ever felt before or since, and I believed I should be happy enough at Fairgate. About five months after we came home, Rolfe explained to me how he had failed to keep his appointment, and it made me feel very bitter against you, for I did not know why you should have interfered, and thus spoiled three lives. I need not say much more. I always felt, somehow, that though you were good and kind—too good and kind to me—you had not so much respect for me as you had, for instance, for Mrs Angus and Joan Laurence. Of course, I was not clever, nor intellectual, nor anything; only a poor ignorant little girl, who loved to be surrounded by all brightness and sunshine. It made me very miserable, and I saw what a mistake we had made in marrying each other. You would have been so much happier with someone more like yourself, and I with someone who understood me, and did not despise me for my lack of cleverness. And so I thought and thought until it seemed to me no great sin to rid you of the wife who was so little of a companion to you. And so I went away. I hated to deceive you, and to tell the falsehoods I had to tell at Dingwall, but there was no use, after my mind was made up, letting people prevent me from going. I have given up a great deal, but I believe I shall be happier. I have only one thing to ask as a last favour—that you will not delay taking the necessary steps to sever the tie between us, so that we may be married as soon as

possible. I feel very heartless and cruel when I am writing all this, and my tears are blotting out the words. You will be so lonely and desolate at Fairgate, and they will make such a talk in the town. Try to forgive me. I have done a very wicked thing, and I know papa and mamma will never, never forgive me; but I could not help myself. Circumstances have been against me for a long time. So don't be very hard upon me; and be kind to my little dog for my sake. Poor Flossie always loved me, and was a great comfort to me often when I was dull. We are bound for Halifax now, for, of course, we could not go to Sydney just yet. Good-bye. Try to think of me as you used to do when I pleased you best. Thank you, thank you for all your goodness.

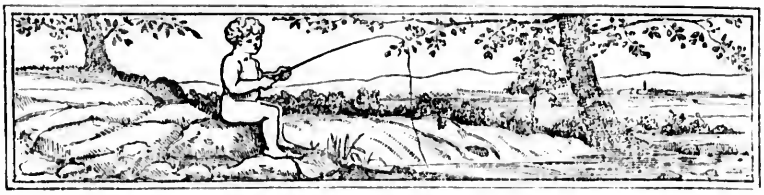
"AMY BURNETT."

With the same curiously calm expression of face, Robert Angus refolded the letter and laid it on the desk. Then he folded his arms across his chest, and, dropping his head on his breast, fixed his eyes on the shifting line of sunshine across the floor. In absolute silence, without a muscle moving or a change of expression, the man bore the first agony of his pain. The letter itself was more cruel in its sting than the blow. It seemed to him to be one long reproach, and yet, God knew, he had no need of it; for every trifling thing, every slight instance in which he had lacked in love or consideration for his erring wife, returned to him magnified a thousand-fold. Yet they were such trifling things after all—too trifling for any but a trifling, shallow nature to deign to notice.

The day wore on, the line of light shifted yet further across the floor, until it changed to a deep red glow, the reflection of the setting sun. In the kitchen the two maids held whispered, awe-struck conferences, longing, yet afraid, to disturb their master. They knew that something strange

and serious must be amiss with him. The spaniel wearying for the voice and touch of its mistress, wandered disconsolately about the house, and finally settled itself on the mat at the study door. After a time the maids heard it scratching and whining for admittance, and then the opening of the door. At sight of its master the animal leapt upon his knee, barking for very joy. But there was something in that rigid, white face which settled at last its noisy demonstration, and it put its paws on his shoulders and licked his face, its eyes almost human in their expression of dumb sympathy.

"Be kind to my little dog." It was her last request. Robert Angus did not know what it was, only the creature's sympathy seemed to shake the stony calm which bound him heart and soul. A great trembling shook him, and, leaning his folded arms on the table, he bowed down his head and wept.



CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FINAL TOUCH.

"WILL you walk up to Fairgate with me, Isabel? I cannot rest until I know the worst. There must have been a letter, I think, or Robert would have been back by this time."

"Yes, I will go. Oh, Robert, if our worst fears should be realised, how am I to look into your son's face?" she wailed. "If I had never come to Auchengray this terrible thing would not have happened."

"Hush, my dearest! You are blameless," said the banker, tenderly, and yet his own heart was very sore. He felt, somehow, as if he had been the indirect means of inflicting this cruel blow upon his only son. But for him, Rolfe Ransome and Amy Burnett could not have met.

"You do not look very fit to walk," he said, looking anxiously at his wife's white face, worn with the agonising suspense of the last four-and-twenty hours.

"We may as well have the carriage. M'Dowall will be about the stable at any rate."

So saying Mr Angus went to give his orders, and Isabel slowly dragged herself up to her dressing-room for her bonnet. She was longing, yet afraid, to see Robert, and to know the worst.

It was about half-past seven when the Bank carriage drove

up the approach to Fairgate. The maids heard it come with a sense of relief, for their master was still locked in the study, and they were begining to fear they knew not what. He, too, heard its arrival, and when Jessie knocked at the door, saying Mr and Mrs Angus had arrived, he unlocked the door and went out, meeting them in the hall. Isabel hung a little behind her husband, afraid to look upon Robert's face.

"Well!" said Mr Angus, in a brief, intense monosyllable.

"Come into the dining-room," Robert said, quietly; then he turned to Mrs Angus and took her hand. "I am glad you have come," he added, in the same quiet voice. "I have had a letter from my wife," he said, when he had followed them into the room and closed the door. "It was written on board an Atlantic steamer, and posted at Queenstown. You can guess the rest."

"Then they have actually gone away together!" said the banker, huskily.

Robert briefly nodded, and, walking over to the oriel window, stood there with his back to him. His hand touched the leaves of a white hyacinth which had been Amy's pride, and its odour rose up and seemed to sicken him. It recalled so many bitter memories.

"Robert." A woman's trembling hand touched his arm, a sweet voice fell in broken accents of pleading on his ear. "What can I say? My heart is breaking for you. I dare not speak to you, and yet I must. Will you forgive me for my part in this? If I had never come to Auchengray you would not have had this to bear."

"Hush," he said, and looked almost wonderingly into her pain-lined face. "Why should you needlessly pain yourself? Did you think I could ever attach any blame to you? No, no. I know I have your sympathy. Poor, poor Amy!"

He seemed quite overcome then, and sat down, covering his face with his hands. It came upon him all at once that though his suffering was keen, it was as nothing to what

must be in store for the poor misguided girl who had so rashly thrown away her all. She had sown the wind indeed, and verily only the whirlwind could be the reaping in store. The unselfishness, the true manhood within, was moved with so vast a compassion towards his faithless wife that for the moment his own wrongs were forgotten.

"I cannot ask you to stay," he said at length. "I am going over now to the Thorn to show the letter to her father and mother. It must be all done with to-night. All that is to be said must be said now. After to-day no man or woman shall ever hear me mention the subject again."

He spoke with quiet yet unmistakable resolution, as if the course were one he had carefully mapped out for himself. So, with a further expression of deep and heartfelt sympathy, the husband and wife left Fairgate. Then Robert Angus rang the bell, and when Jessie came, briefiy informed her that her mistress would not return again to Fairgate, and that in the meantime she and her neighbour must do the best they could until some other arrangements concerning the housekeeping could be made. He delivered his communication so calmly and indifferently, as if it were the merest matter of course, that the girl retired in a perfect wonder of amaze. She more than suspected the true state of affairs, but was puzzled to understand how the master could take it so calmly. Poor Jessie, like many another, was deceived by the outward cloak, which so often hides a breaking heart.

The sweet spring twilight was slowly and lingeringly giving place to darkness when Robert Angus crossed the park to the Thorn. He wondered a little that none of them had sought him at Fairgate; yet it was little marvel either; sometimes uncertainty is to be preferred before knowledge which is only cruel.

Polly, who had returned home in the afternoon, opened

the door to him, and lifted wide, pathetic, almost pitying eyes to his face.

"Are your father and mother in, Polly? I can see them, I suppose?" he said, quietly.

"Yes; they are shut up together in mamma's room. Oh, Robert, what dreadful thing has happened? Is it true what Jim says, that Amy has gone away?" she said, and her eyes dropped, for she could not be more explicit.

"It is quite true, Polly. I had a letter from her to-day. She is on her way to America with Ransome," he said, quite quietly still. "I am telling you the whole truth, as it is the last time I wish to hear your sister's name mentioned to me. Do you understand?"

She nodded, unable to speak. It seemed to Polly that this was too terrible a trouble to be referred to in words.

"I will tell papa and mamma you are here. Will you just go into the study?"

"Yes. Is Jim in the house, Polly? I would rather not see him to-night."

"No, he went out, dreading you would come," said Polly, bursting into tears. "He said if it were true he would go away from Auchengray, and never look you in the face again."

"There will be no need for such a step, Polly," said Robert, with a somewhat mournful smile. "Tell him after I am gone to-night that I shall look for him at Fairgate to-morrow. My friends must not turn their backs upon me now."

Polly fled from the room, her sympathetic tears flowing afresh. After what seemed a very long time to Robert, in his impatience to be done with the whole painful business, and to bury it away out of outward sight at least, the door was slowly re-opened, and Mr Burnett entered.

Robert could not help being glad that Polly had for-

gotten to light lamp or candle, and that the room was in semi-darkness.

"I could not come down, Robert," said the factor, huskily. "What can I say? I feel like to sink into the very earth with shame that a child of mine should have done as Amy has done. It is true, I suppose?"

"Quite true," Robert answered, so quietly that his father-in-law was amazed, but not deceived. He knew the inner depths of Robert Angus's nature, and guessed what surged beneath that calm exterior. "I have brought the letter I received to-day," continued Robert, "thinking it right that you and Mrs Burnett should read it before we bury this unhappy business out of sight for ever."

"Robert, can you ever forgive? I was in such a passion when Elizabeth hinted at the thing that I could have killed somebody. But that has passed away, and only shame and humiliation remain. How can I express a tithe of what I feel for you, who have to bear the brunt of the blow."

"I know. I understand," said Robert, quickly. "Mr Burnett, do you think I can attach any blame to myself? I fear I didn't study my poor wife enough. If she had been happier with me she would never have left me."

"Hush, hush! Don't make it worse for us to bear," interrupted the factor. "If it is any consolation to you, Robert, you may rest assured that both my wife and I think you were all that is kind and good to her. She could not appreciate her blessings. Poor thing! poor thing! she will learn their value by-and-by. She is making us all suffer now, but her turn will come—ay, too soon. My anger against her has been quenched in pity for her, Robert; and yet, when I think of the dishonour she has brought upon you, I feel glad that she will not go unpunished. How is it that you can be so charitable towards her?"

"I don't know," said Robert, passing his hand wearily across his brow. "I think it must be because I have failed

somewhat in consideration or care for her that I feel nothing but sorrow or compassion for her now. And yet, God knows, it was unwittingly I erred. I thought she was happy. She made me believe it"

"Hush, hush! It unmans me to hear you reproach yourself," said the factor, more huskily. "Don't let such a thought rest for a moment in your mind. It has no foundation in truth. You were always too good for her. Her mother and I feared from the first that she would not make you so happy as you deserved. Will you come up and see Elizabeth now?"

"Not to-night. I feel as if I had gone through too much already," he answered, with a dreary smile. "Say to Mrs Burnett I will come and see her when we are both able to bear it better. There is Amy's letter. I will leave it with you. You can return it to me at any time. Good-night."

"Good-night. You will not let this make any difference in our relations, Robert?" said the factor, with all the wistfulness of a child. "Though Amy has brought disgrace upon you, you will not turn against us? We could not do without you at the Thorn."

"God forbid that I should visit the sins of others upon innocent heads," said Robert, fervently.

"This will be a great blow to poor Mrs Angus," said the factor, as they left the room together.

Robert nodded.

"Greater than any of us can imagine," he said, significantly. "I am sorry for her, and for my poor father. I can see he blames himself."

"I thought he would. Good-night," said Mr Burnett, and he wrung his son-in-law's hand, as if to express more eloquently than in words the yearning sympathy of his soul.

A few yards from the door Robert knocked up against poor Jim hurrying into the house. He put out his hand to detain him, but the lad was too quick for him.

"Oh, hang it! Bob, I can't speak to you, you know. Let me go. I'll never lift up my head again," he muttered, and dashed past him into the house.

Poor Jim! His impulsive, generous, honest heart was wounded in its very tenderest part. I am not sure but that the blow fell as heavily upon him as upon any inmate of the Thorn.

Robert Angus seemed fated to encounter all his friends that night, for when he came to Sunset Cottage he saw Joan entering the gate. She had just returned from the Bank, a message having summoned her there after Isabel's return from Fairgate. Recognising the stalwart figure, she hurried up the path, feeling as if she dared not meet him face to face.

But Robert followed her, and she turned to him at the door.

"You have heard, I suppose, Joan?" he said.

"Yes, I have heard! May God comfort you and help her!" fell in a bursting sob from Joan's lips; and, turning from him, she ran into the house and shut the door.

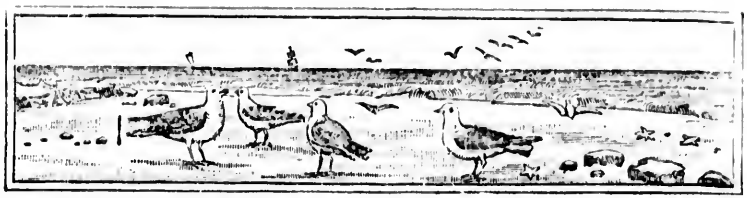
Not for many a long year had the busybodies of Auchengray had such a rich tit-bit to discuss, and Robert Angus the younger had to run the gauntlet of the usual nine days' wonder over his domestic calamity. He bore it well. After that terrible, trying day, he was not absent an hour from business, nor did he shut himself up in solitude. In him the outer world could detect no change. But those who knew and loved him best were not deceived. The blow had told, the shaft gone home—ay, to its uttermost length. Within a week the servants were dismissed, Fairgate shut up, and Robert Angus became once more an inmate of his father's house. It was his own request made to Isabel, that she would allow him to take his old place, for the solitude and the thronging memories of Fairgate were more than he could bear. Only a few more days, and the

crowning touch was put to the domestic tragedies crowding so thick and fast upon the house of Angus.

One morning, within a fortnight after Amy's flight, Robert was the first to enter the dining-room, and, as was his wont, unfolded the newspaper which had just been brought in. The first thing which met his view was a paragraph with a sensation heading, which ran as follows :—

" Terrible Catastrophe at Sea—A City Liner in Collision with an Iceberg off the Coast of Newfoundland—Loss of all on Board."

The name of the steamer was the *Sidonia*, and in the list of passengers, given lower down the page, were the names —Mr and Mrs Rolfe Ransome.



CHAPTER XIX.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

IN the pleasant drawing-room of a luxurious mansion in the West End of London a company was gathered on the evening of a foggy December day. Closed shutters, drawn blinds, and heavy velvet curtains could scarcely keep the thick Thames vapour from penetrating into the room, and there were hazy circles round the lights of the chandelier, which obscured their usual brilliance. The room was large, lofty, and handsome, its furnishings and adornments indicating that its owners were persons of wealth and taste. It could comfortably accommodate about fifty people, but there were not more than a dozen present. Mrs Harrington, the wife of the principal of the well-known publishing house, Harringtons & Co., was noted for her select and enjoyable social gatherings, and her Wednesday evenings were eagerly anticipated by those to whom she was "at home."

A clever and intellectual woman was Mrs Christopher Harrington; and yet, to look at the very slight, girlish figure, the fair, sweet, winsome face, with the laughing eyes and coronet of short brown curls, one would have scarcely associated her with the idea of a clever woman, nor did she look a very fitting helpmeet and companion to the grave, silent, elderly man whom she called husband. Christopher

Harrington had married late in life, but the union had been one of pure affection on both sides, consequently they were very happy. Two children had been born to them—twin boys—in whom both were bound up.

Although it was one of Mrs Harrington's usual reception nights, there was a special interest attached to this gathering, and it was very select, only a privileged few having been asked to meet the guest of the evening, the lady whose name was beginning to be mentioned with honour in the world of letters.

The initials "J. L." were not yet familiar to the insatiable devourers of the library three volumes, and probably would never be. The new writer was eminently one whose words would be read by the few, never by the many. Those who had heard Mrs Harrington speak in flattering terms of Miss Laurence's appearance were not disappointed—they found her a handsome, distinguished-looking woman. But her manner was not winning, nor attractive. It was brusque, short, and even repellant. It had been only after repeated solicitations that Miss Laurence had consented to be introduced to some of those most anxious to meet her, and she had laughingly warned her hostess, who was also her friend, that she would be certain to regret it.

"I have an inborn aversion to strangers," she had said. "I am just like a snail; I could creep into my shell at the merest hint of any denizen of the world of which I know so little. I am only a country girl. Have pity on me, and don't force me to face such an ordeal."

But Mrs Harrington had laughed away her entreaties, and, as usual, had her wilful way. But though Miss Laurence did not take a prominent part in the conversation, she listened and enjoyed it to the full. And one or two who, out of their deep interest, watched her closely, said the fine eyes kindled at times, telling that the soul was awake though the lips were so provokingly silent.

"You are interested in the subject Professor Truefitt has just referred to," said a voice at her elbow. "I believe you know more about it than all of us put together."

It was such a pleasant voice, and the blue eyes bent upon her were so winning in their expression that Joan smiled, and finally laughed outright.

"I am so glad you have come to talk to me at last, Mr Giles," she said, with that frankness which only those who knew her best were permitted to see; and she leaned back in her chair with a very satisfied expression in her face, which sent a strange, swift thrill to Giles Harrington's heart.

He was the younger brother of Mr Christopher Harrington, and a junior partner in the firm. He was six-and-thirty, but carried his age so well that he might have passed for ten years younger. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, fine-looking man, with a face which at once inspired trust. Many wondered why Giles Harrington, popular and beloved as he was, had never married, but, if there were any reason apart from the fact that he had never seen the woman he could love, he kept his secret well. Joan Laurence had always liked him since that day she had presented herself, in some fear and trembling, in the dingy office off Paternoster Row, bearing in her hand the manuscript which had already been rejected by three inexorable publishers. He had been so gracious and courteous, so different from the grim individuals who had so persistently shaken their heads, and uttered so mercilessly the verdict which had been such a blow to her hopes. For the manuscript in question had been the outcome of a year's toil and study, and she knew that it was good. The Harringtons, without holding out any hope of accepting it, had agreed to read it, and when she called again at the specified time she was agreeably surprised to find them willing and eager to publish. The story, a deep and intricate study of motive and character, without any great plot to recommend it to the commonplace

reader of fiction, had not, at first, promised to be successful. But it made its way slowly, yet with sure, unmistakable strength. One of the best critical papers spoke a word of hearty praise, which was re-echoed by one after another, until its success was assured. It made no great stir, nor did it excite a popular craze, but it was spoken about by competent judges as a remarkable book, and its author as an exceptionally clever and thinking woman. So Joan Laurence, having found her sphere, saw stretching out before her a career of usefulness and honourable independence, with which she told herself she would be amply satisfied.

"How glorious it must be to be gifted with an eloquent tongue," said Joan, presently. "I have read several of the Professor's philosophical articles in the *Contemporary* without being at all convinced that he is right. But, if I heard him vindicate his theory in such a masterly manner two or three times, I would not answer for the consequences. The voice carries so much more power with it than the pen."

"Possibly; yet the influence of the voice in comparison with that of the pen is almost *nil*," answered Giles Harrington; "only a limited number hear, thousands upon thousands read, the words penned by our master minds."

"It is true. Then the responsibility of those who wield the pen is greater," said Joan, dreamily. "Will you excuse me telling you how very much I admire your sister-in-law? She is my ideal of perfect womanhood."

Giles Harrington smiled, and followed Joan's glance in the direction of his brother's wife, who was listening with sweet patience to the grumblings of a discontented old lady, a distant kinswoman of her own, who intruded herself in season and out of season upon the household in Cadogan Place.

"Yes; I might well envy Christopher his happy home," he said, quietly. "It was a blow to me when he married, Miss Laurence. Before it we were all-in-all to each other, and there were only the two of us."

"You do not regret it now, though," said Joan, quickly.

"No. Instead of losing my brother, as I feared, I have only found a sister," answered Giles, with a sweet, sunny smile. "Only it has made me a little discontented with my own solitary existence."

"That can be easily remedied," said Joan, with a smile.

"Not so easily, perhaps, as you imagine," Giles said, with something of significance. "Another arrival! Who can it be so late? Oh, excuse me! It is a friend of mine. Mrs Harrington has often asked him to drop in on Wednesdays. I am glad he has come to-night. May I bring him to you, Miss Laurence? He is a Scotchman."

Without waiting her reply, Giles Harrington crossed the room to greet the tall stranger newly announced. Miss Laurence did not hear the name; and for a moment she really felt oblivious of everything around her. That manly figure, that noble head, that open, honest face, with the fearless eye and the grave, firm, sorrowful mouth—all, all were too familiar to be mistaken. And when she looked upon the face of Robert Angus she knew how false was the peace with which she had deceived herself. Ah! a woman does not so easily, so soon forget! Joan Laurence's heart beat, her pulse quickened, the blood seemed to rush impetuously through her veins. A new light stole into the deep, serious eyes, and a colour like the loveliest blush of a pink-lipped shell leaped into the pale cheeks.

Her eyes were down-dropped, but she knew the instant Robert Angus saw and recognised her. She heard him say something to Mrs Harrington, and the next moment he was at her side.

"Joan," was all he said, and she gave him her hand, and when her eyes met his they were full of tears.

"It is the thought of long ago, Robert," she said, quickly. "I feel just as I imagine a Scotch exile might feel at sight of a bunch of heather from his native hills. How little I expected to see you here!"

"Or I you," he returned. "I did not know you were in London."

"I live in London now, you know. I came up in the autumn," she answered. "And you? What brings you here?"

"I, too, must live now in London. You know I have been abroad for six months?"

Joan nodded.

"I knew from Mrs Angus. When were you at Auchengray?"

"Before I came up to London, two months ago. I have got a partnership in a banking firm in Lombard Street. I could not settle down to the old life again, Joan."

Joan nodded, and there was no time to say more then, for Giles Harrington came up to them, with rather an aggrieved look on his face.

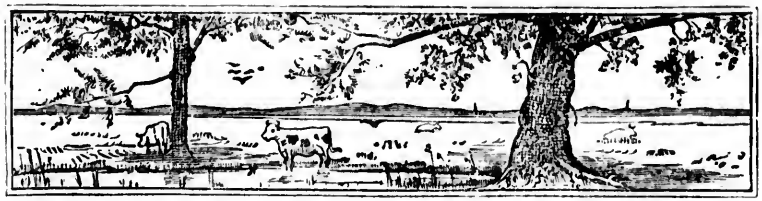
"This is not fair," he said, laughingly. "I thought I was to have the pleasure of introducing you two Scotch people to each other, and here you have stolen a march upon me. Why didn't you tell me you knew Miss Laurence, Angus?"

"My dear fellow, I might ask you the same question. How was I to know you had any acquaintance with Miss Laurence? You have never mentioned her name in my hearing."

"So you are old friends?" said Giles, with something like regret in his pleasant voice. "You have known each other for a long time, I suppose?"

"Since we quarrelled together in pinafores," laughed Robert Angus. "I must go and speak to Mrs Harrington now. Tell me, Joan, when and where I can see you again."

"My address is Sunset Cottage, Kew, and I shall always be at home to you," said Joan, with a readiness which sent something of a pang to Giles Harrington's heart. And yet, he told himself that the perfect unrestraint between these two was in his favour, for since they had been merely friends so long, might they not so continue still? So he resumed his seat by Miss Laurence's side, but found her abstracted and inattentive to his remarks. It was with difficulty Joan could bring herself to answer him even in monosyllables, for her heart and thoughts had fled with strange persistence back to quiet Auchengray.



CHAPTER XX.

GILES HARRINGTON'S WOOING.

"GILES, I am quite out of patience with you. Do you know what I said to Christopher this morning?"

So said Mabel Harrington to her brother-in-law one evening, when they happened to be alone together for a few minutes after dinner.

"Why are you out of patience with me, Mabel?" asked Giles, with indolent indifference, which rather piqued the little woman.

"Oh, for a thousand things!" she answered, with pretty impatience. "You are moody and unsociable, cross and unreasonable, and——"

"Have mercy, Mabel! I shall sink beneath the weight of your accusing adjectives," said Giles, lifting a deprecating hand. "I am sure I have never exhibited any of these undesirable characteristics to you."

"Haven't you, indeed, sir? Do you know how long it is since you dined here, how long it is since you deigned to honour my Wednesday evenings? Nearly a month. And I believe people are beginning to think we have quarrelled, or done some other equally dreadful thing."

"Is it really so long?" asked Giles, in astonishment. "Well, to tell the truth, Mabel, I have felt rather out of sorts lately—not in the mood for mixing in society, you know. But I didn't think you'd mind, or that you missed me."

"Now that is neither fair nor kind, Giles," said the young wife, quickly. "You know that Christopher and I miss you very much."

"And what was it you said to him this morning? You have not told me that yet."

"Well, I said, Giles, that I thought you must be in love," said Mabel, with a little twinkle in her bright eyes. "I could think of nothing else which could account for the extremely unpleasant change in you."

Giles Harrington turned his head away, and began to walk slowly down the long room, and Mabel knew that her little arrow had gone home. When he came back to the window again all the laughter was gone from his eyes, and his pleasant face was troubled and grave.

"Mabel, you are right, as you always are. Will you tell me the truth? Do you think I have any chance?"

"Why not, Giles?"

"Oh, you know. Don't you think she cares for that Angus?" he asked, almost bitterly. "If I hadn't brought him here, and got you to invite him back, they might never have met again until it couldn't matter whether they did or not."

"How long is it since then, Giles?"

"It must be about six months. It was before last Christmas."

"Did you know your own mind then?"

"Of course I did. I've always known it, I think, since the first time I saw her that day she came to the office," said Giles, gloomily.

"And what are you waiting for? What have you been doing all this time?" said Mabel, almost impatiently. "It seems to me that you are anxious Mr Angus should step in before you. Why, if you were in the least like Christopher," she added, with a little tremulous smile, "you would have been engaged, perhaps married, to Miss Laurence by this time."

"Don't laugh at me, Mabel. Tell me what to do. Do you think I have any chance?"

"Suppose I thought you had all the chances I wouldn't tell you," said Mabel. "All I have to say to you is, go and find out for yourself."

"It is easy for you to speak, Mabel. Women have the best of it; and she is so far above me."

"Nay, I will not allow you to say that. Joan Laurence is a clever woman, but you are a clever man; and what is infinitely better, a good one," said Mabel, with a smile and a tear. "If you will take the advice of a woman who knows her sex pretty well, don't go humbly to Joan suing for her love as a priceless favour. I know her well; and your best chance lies in your being just what you are—honest, manly, and fearless—the best man in the world next to Christopher," she added, and now the bright eyes filled with unmistakeable tears.

"Thank you, Mabel; you are too good to me," said Giles, taking the slender hand a moment in his own. "Then you think I should venture now or never?"

"Of course. 'Faint heart,' you know," laughed Mabel. "Oh, Giles, Giles! to think that you should be conquered at last; and so completely conquered, too. But there—I must not tease you. I hope you will be successful. You would make a splendid pair, and, I am sure, would be nearly as happy as Christopher and I."

Giles Harrington's face brightened, for her words seemed to carry hope with them.

"Well, I will lose no time," he said, with a new energy. "I am afraid I have been dilatory too long. Good evening just now."

"Are you going up to Kew to-night?" queried Mabel, in some little surprise.

"Yes, now. Miss Laurence goes down to Scotland soon. I may not have another chance."

So Giles Harrington set out upon his wooing, and Mabel watched him striding down the street with the air of a man who had an object in view, and then danced off to the library to acquaint her husband with the conversation and its results. Giles Harrington went up to Kew by train, and, though he was little more than half-an-hour upon the way, he found it infinitely too long. There were a goodly number of passengers, and the pleasant, shady road leading away from the station was thronged with strollers going to and from the gardens. It was one of the loveliest evenings in the summer's prime, the sky one unbroken canopy of blue, save on the western horizon, where the sun was sinking to his rest in a blaze of red gold light. The placid, lazily-flowing river reflected the golden radiance, and the song of the rowers came floating across the meadows, with that enchanting, peculiar sweetness lent by the distance. Giles Harrington, not insensible at other times to the sights and sounds of Nature, paid no heed to them to-night. He saw only the tiny turrets of the quaint little villa where Joan Laurence had her home; heard only the deep, sweet tones of the voice he had learned to love as the sweetest music in the world.

When he swung back the fantastic little gate his heart leaped within him at sight of the graceful, womanly figure at work among the flowers, fastening up the refractory branches of a splendid Gloire de Dijon which had escaped the fastening which bound them to the gable of the house.

Hearing the step on the gravel, Joan turned her head. Was that a slight shade of disappointment which followed upon her ready smile, wondered Giles Harrington? Had she expected someone else?

"Good evening, Mr Harrington. This is a pleasant surprise," she said, tossing aside her garden gloves and advancing to meet him. "All well at Cadogan Place, I hope! I have not seen Mrs Harrington for a fortnight."

"Yes, thanks, all well," said Giles, rather abstractedly, for he was wondering in what words he should tell his errand. "What a lovely place you have here!"

"Yes, it is lovely, but too sweet, I think, sometimes," she said, with just a touch of wistfulness in her voice. "I was accustomed to greyer skies and wilder scenes, and I find this perpetual sunshine and balmy air just a trifle enervating. Am I not a malcontent, Mr Giles? But, there, I am most inhospitable, and this your first visit to Sunset Cottage. Do come in."

"Why did you call it Sunset Cottage, Miss Laurence?" asked Giles Harrington, as he followed her across the flower-framed verandah, and into the little hall.

"It was a bit of sentiment on my part," said Joan, with a little laugh. "The house in which I lived in Scotland was so named, but it was very different. You do not know what a but and ben is, I suppose?"

"I must plead ignorance, I confess," answered Giles. "Pray enlighten me."

"Not I. You must find out the meaning of those obscure words for yourself. You do not feel the room chilly, I hope. I cannot shut my windows here day or night, or I could scarcely breathe. I do not think I am so well since I came to the South, Mr Giles," as she drew up the Venetians, and pulled back the lace curtains with a somewhat impatient hand. All day she had been home-sick, possessed body and soul by a wild yearning for the grey skies and purpling moors of her native strath.

"You are changed, much changed," admitted Giles Harrington, and he was right. She had gained in grace and elegance, but her face was paler and more worn than it had been a year ago, and the deep eyes seemed to shine with a brilliance not quite their own.

"Do you think so? I hope not. I do not want to be so changed that my friends will remark upon it," said Joan,

quickly. "I am going home next week, and I feel just like a child about to be let loose from school."

"Then you do not look upon this as your home?" said Giles Harrington, glancing round the pretty drawing-room, in which any woman might have found rest and pleasure.

"Oh, no. This is only a habitation. I begin to fear I made a mistake in leaving Scotland. Some plants will not thrive, you know, in foreign soil," said Joan. "But I thought it would be better. I felt I must see more of the world, I knew so little."

"Pardon the question, Miss Laurence; but have you any near relatives living?"

"None. I am an orphan, and—friendless, I was about to add, but that would be treason against those who love me more than I deserve," said Joan. "I am going on a visit to Mr Angus's father and his wife. Of course, you know they are my old friends?"

"Yes; at least I imagine so," said Giles, with a sudden restraint of manner, which, however, Joan, wrapped up in her own thoughts, did not observe.

"You would not like to make your permanent home in England, then?" he said, presently.

"I can hardly tell. It would depend on circumstances," said Joan, somewhat dreamily. "But, Mr Giles, I have never asked your errand. I hope it is a friendly visit, but I can hardly expect it. Are you growing impatient for that promised manuscript? Well, must I confess I have really and truly stuck with it? My mind is as barren of ideas as my new skeps are of bees at this moment. I am going away home to see whether the heather scents and the muirland breezes will blow to me some new thoughts."

There was a restlessness, a strange waywardness of look and tone, which seemed to indicate a heart ill at ease. Joan Laurence was not quite herself to-night.

Giles Harrington rose to his feet, and when Joan turned

questioning eyes upon his pleasant face, she, too, rose, and a sudden terror sprang into her eyes.

His meaning, the very words he was about to utter, were written plainly there.

"Joan, you must know what has brought me here," he said, in that honest, manly way, which must have won her heart had it not been taken by another long ago. "I love you with a love of which I cannot speak. What hope is there for me?"

She shook her head, and it dropped upon her clasped hands, as if her sorrowful eyes could not meet his

"I know how unworthy I am, how immeasurably you are my superior in all things," he went on, gaining new courage in his earnest pleading; "but if you will only give me the chance to be worthier, if you will only give me hope that in time I may win you, I will do all man can to make you happy."

Still no answer; still the downbent head remained hidden in the hands which were trembling now.

"You know a little of me. I think you believe me to be honest and sincere, Joan. This is no light thing to me. I am not a boy now, but a man to whom love has come a little late, and which will make or mar his life."

"Oh, do not say that; I cannot bear it! I did value your friendship, and it is broken," came thick and fast at last from Joan's lips. "Oh, Mr Giles, I do not know what to say. You have made me very wretched."

"I did not mean to give you pain," he said, with just a touch of pride. "Then there is no hope, neither now nor at any future time? If you say so I shall go away and trouble you no more; for I know that you will be as true with me as I am with you."

"I wish I knew what to say. I feel as if I had done a great wrong," said Joan Laurence, in tones of keen distress. "Mr Giles, I did not give you reason to suppose my answer would be different. I liked you so much as a friend, I felt

no restraint in your presence. Perhaps I ought to have been different with you, but I never thought it could or would come to this."

"Don't distress yourself. I had no right to suppose anything about your answer," said Giles Harrington, with prompt frankness, unselfishly crushing down his own bitter disappointment so that she might not be hurt. "If it is possible, will you still let me be your friend? I will make no difference, except, perhaps, that in my heart I may honour you more."

"You make me more ashamed, you are so noble, so generous, so good! Oh, I will never forget it!" said Joan, with eyes full of tears, for her whole being was stirred.

"I will go now. When we meet again there will be no trace of my folly left to give you pain," he said, with a slight smile. "May I be permitted to wish you truest, deepest happiness whatever your future life may be, or with whomsoever it may be spent?"

Joan could not speak. She mechanically extended her hand, which he raised respectfully to his lips, and the next moment she was alone. The brightness was gone from earth and sky for Giles Harrington, and a grey pall seemed to have fallen upon his heart and life. It was indeed, as he had said, no light thing for him, and if he felt the very bitterness of death in his soul, he may be forgiven.

And Joan? Very keen also was her distress. But for that strange, deep, unutterable love which had grown with the years, she would so gladly, so willingly have given to Giles Harrington a different answer. It would have been a good and fitting match for her, one of which the world would have approved. She knew it; knew, too, that it would have put an end to all care, and placed her at once in a secure and honourable position, in which even she might do great good. But she would not so wrong him. The woman remained true to herself.

CHAPTER XXI.

OLD FRIENDS.

"MAMMA, Joan Laurence came to Mrs Angus's yesterday," said Mary Burnett, coming in from a walk to Auchengray.

A gleam of interest lighted up the pale worn face of Mrs Burnett, and she raised her languid head from the couch on which she had been taking her afternoon rest. There was a great and sad change in Mrs Burnett of the Thorn, dating from that time two years before, when the double blow of her daughter's flight, and her subsequent fate, had fallen upon her in such cruel succession. She was not now the bustling, active, happy-hearted woman who had been such a favourite with everybody, young and old. No; she was now a frail, ailing woman, aged before her time—striving ever, it is true, to forget the past, and to enter cheerfully into the work and interests of her children and her home. But it was easy to see how great was the effort, and when there was no one by, many a salt tear forced itself from under her burning eyelids. Ah, what mother can ever forget? Amy's name was never mentioned in the house, but the shadow cast by her memory remained, and the Thorn was no longer the mirthful, happy home it had been in the past.

"Has she really come?" asked Mrs Burnett, with more display of interest than Mary had seen for long. "Mrs

Angus was not sure last time I saw her whether she would. Did you see her?"

"No. They had gone out for a walk when I called, and I did not want to wait for them," answered Polly. "Joan will be sure to come up soon."

"I hope she will. I do not think fame and flattery will spoil her. She was always a superior girl. Is that someone at the door, Polly? Why, it is Joan herself!"

It was Joan. There was the faint odour of violets, the rustle of a gown, and then a swift, light step across the floor, and Joan was kneeling by the couch, tears raining down her cheeks.

"Dear Mrs Burnett, forgive me; I could not wait! I know I am very foolish, but it is so sweet to see you all again," she said, half laughing through her tears. "Come and kiss me, Polly. Oh, it is glorious to be at home again among old friends!"

Polly advanced somewhat shyly, for this handsome, distinguished-looking lady with the indescribable air of grace and elegance about her, was a very different being from the plain Joan Laurence she had known and loved in her childhood.

"Why do you stand back, Polly? Am I so changed that you do not know me?—and yet it is little more than a year since I went away," she said, taking the sober face in both her hands, and kissing it affectionately. "You have changed, too, child. You seem to have grown a woman all at once. Ay, ay, time plays tricks upon us all."

So she rattled on, to hide the deep emotion which possessed her, and to hide, too, the deep grief at the sight of the greater change in Mrs Burnett. It seemed that time, instead of healing her bitter sorrow, was only adding to its hopeless keenness.

"We were just talking of you, Joan. How glad I am to see you!" said Mrs Burnett. "It seems so long since you left us, but I dare say the time has flown for you."

"Indeed it has not. I am as glad to come back as you can be to see me," said Joan, laying off her hat and gloves, which Polly at once volunteered to take upstairs, guessing, perhaps, that the two would like to be alone for a little. "I expected to overtake you on the road, Polly, but your walking powers excel mine, for I never even caught sight of you. Yes, I will gladly stay tea. Mrs Angus knows not to look for me before dusk."

When Polly left the room, Joan crossed to the sofa once more, and, kneeling down, took Mrs Burnett's thin hands in both her own, and looked with loving eyes into her face.

"You find me changed, Joan," said Mrs Burnett, with a sad smile. "And not for the better, like you. Oh, my dear, it is not easy to bear, not easy to think everything must be for good! Not a chance given for repentance! It haunts me day and night! My poor, lost child!'

Joan was silent, wisely letting the pent-up, struggling feelings have their way. She guessed they had few opportunities of finding vent, and knew it would do good.

"The more I think of it the more terrible it seems," went on the unhappy mother. "I cannot understand how she could ever be so madly tempted. To give up so much for so little!—to throw away everything. Was it not a fatal madness? And then that awful death? I lie awake at nights, Joan, conjuring up pictures of the collision, of the terrible panic, and then the final catastrophe, until my brain begins to reel. Cut off in the midst of her sin, what hope could there be for my poor, unhappy girl?"

"Dear Mrs Burnett, we do not know. Death might not be instantaneous. There would be some hours between the collision and the sinking of the ship," said Joan, very, very tenderly. "It's never too late, you know. 'Even at the eleventh hour' are the words of Holy Writ."

"I try to dwell on the faint hope that there might be opportunity given. Your words comfort me a little; I wish I had you oftener to talk to, Joan. You see I dare not mention Amy's name to John. He has been very stern over it. He does not seem to be able to forgive the disgrace—both to ourselves and to the Anguses. Isabel Angus is a good woman, Joan. She has been a true friend to me in this trouble. But you will understand that *that* is never mentioned between us. I know she blames herself, of course; she feels it even more keenly than we do."

"Time will heal," whispered Joan, "and if we can only leave it all with the Almighty's all-pitiful heart, it will be easier to bear."

Mrs Burnett smiled a little through her tears.

"I have longed for you, Joan. I knew you would do me good. You see you knew her so well and loved her. And you are not like these over-righteous folk, who think that the very mention of Amy's name would contaminate. There is not much Christian charity in this world. But, there! I am selfish in my sorrow. Let us talk of something else. How well you are looking! Your London life has given you something you did not possess before."

"Yes; what is that?" asked Joan, with a smile.

"An indescribable something I cannot put into words. I always thought you nice-looking, Joan, but you are beautiful now. But, tell me, are you happy?"

"As happy as a solitary woman can be," said Joan, lightly. "At least, my life is not so aimless as it was when I lived in Auchengray."

"And of course you have made many friends? When we read what they say of your books, Joan, we feel so proud, and yet a little afraid of you. But I knew nothing could really change you," said Mrs Burnett, fondly.

"Tell me, Joan, do you ever see Robert Angus in London?"

"Yes, I see him often," said Joan, and the dusky colour began to steal unbidden to her cheek.

"Tell me about him, Joan. How my heart yearns over him! I cannot tell you! Is he very unhappy? Do you think he is recovering from the shock?" asked Mrs Burnett, eagerly. "I think I could be happier if I thought time was healing it for him."

"I do not think he is very unhappy, Mrs Burnett," said Joan, her eyes down-dropped on the petals of a rosebud she had taken from her breast. "He seems to be making new interests for himself in London. He has many friends."

"I am glad of it," said Mrs Burnett, and then there was a little silence. Presently Joan laid her head down on her old friend's clasped hands, and began to speak in a low, trembling, troubled voice.

"I must tell you something, Mrs Burnett, though only this morning you would have been the last person I should have thought of telling it to. I came down here because I needed rest and change; but there was another reason. I was afraid Robert was beginning to care too much for me, and so I came away."

"Joan!"

"You are not angry, dear Mrs Burnett?" asked Joan, with strange, wistful humility.

"Angry! My dear, my dear, it is the best news I have heard for many a day. If it is true, Joan, I believe it will make me well. Not the lightest part of my burden has been the thought of Robert Angus's spoiled and blighted life."

Another silence ensued, and Joan's face was hidden away from the searching eyes bent upon it in love.

"Joan, you did not come away because you could not care for him in return?" said Mrs Burnett eagerly; but for a long time Joan made no answer. "He would make you

happy, and you would recompense him for the bitter past. Oh, Joan, if you only would!"

"You must know," said Joan, at length, in a very low voice, "I came away because I found it so hard not to care. It was the thought of you all here. I thought it would make you feel sad and angry."

"How could you misjudge us so? We would have little need to grudge you or him any measure of happiness. When the time comes for you to give an answer, Joan, you will remember that none will wish you deeper happiness, nor feel a deeper joy over your betrothal than ourselves."

"Thank you. I shall not forget," said Joan, dreamily; and silence fell upon them again. The face of Mrs Burnett wore a more serene and peaceful expression than it had done for many a day, while upon Joan's there was the dawning of a shy, exquisite happiness with which as yet she scarcely dared come face to face. In her inmost heart she knew that the crown of her womanhood was coming very, very near, and as yet no prevision of the bitter cross of pain it was to bring with it cast its shadow before.

When Mary slipped into the room by-and-by she wondered what Joan had been saying to her mother, there was such an expression of peace upon her worn face. Mr Burnett joined them at tea, and he had a hearty welcome for Joan, for whom he ever entertained a warm affection and respect. There was a good deal of joking about the change in her position and prospects, and altogether Joan's visit made quite a little happy stir in the house, which was much appreciated by them all. About eight o'clock Mr Burnett offered to drive her back to Auchengray, when Mr Angus arrived to escort her home. It was a surprise, for Mr Angus had not been at the Thorn since the visit he had paid at the time of the trouble which had fallen upon both houses. There was a little restraint at first, but it soon passed away, and the talk grew so neighbourly

and pleasant that it was getting dark when Joan sprang up, saying it was a shame to leave Mrs Angus so long alone. So promising to come up soon and often during the remainder of her stay, she went away, leaving the Thorn a brighter place than she had found it.

"I suppose we can go round by the Castle, and see the old bridge," said Mr Angus, drawing her hand within his arm. "It is growing very dusk, but I fancy you could walk that way blindfold, eh?"

"Indeed I could," laughed Joan, and then face and voice grew grave again as the banker began to talk of the family they had just left. And somehow after a little the conversation turned solely upon Robert and his affairs, Joan never guessing that the old gentleman had an aim in introducing his son's name.

"It is likely we shall see him in Auchengray while you are here, Joan," he said, and Joan shook her head.

"Don't build yourself up in that hope, Mr Angus. I am afraid he will not come to Auchengray for a long time."

"I am not so sure of that. I don't know whether it is that I am getting old, Joan, but I seem to feel the want of my boy more than I did. I would like to see him happy before I die."

"Don't talk in that strain, Mr Angus. I was telling your dear wife only to-day that you look twenty years younger than you are," said Joan. "It would vex her, I am sure, to hear you say that you are getting old."

"Maybe, but she knows it as well as I. Shall I tell you, Joan, what would make us both happier than anything else could do?"

Joan did not answer, but in the darkness her face flushed deepest crimson.

"Robert has been writing to me oftener of late, and there has been a something in his letters which puzzled me a little until Isabel read them again for me," continued Mr Angus,

with a haste of manner and tone which betokened a little nervousness. "The very day you came I had a letter, Joan, in which he told me plainly—can't you guess what? He will be here, I am sure, soon. I don't know whether I am doing right or wrong, but I cannot help it. Joan, if my boy comes to you, you will not send him away. He has had a hard life of it, and deserves a little happiness now. And somehow I think, and Isabel thinks too, that this is a very different love from the other. Oh, my dear, if you think you could be happy with him, don't let any little punctilio stand in the way. If I am meddlesome or impertinent, you will forgive it in me, Joan. I was your father's friend, and many a time have I dandled you on my knee."

"I am not angry," said Joan, in a quiet, still voice, which did not convey much hope to the father's heart. And there was no more said until they had reached home, when Mr Angus paused on the steps, and looked a trifle anxiously into the grave, beautiful face by his side.

"Well, Joan," he said, "have you nothing to say to me?"

"Surely it must be a weak case which requires so many advocates," said Joan, at last, with a low, rippling laugh. "How can I tell what my answer will be? It will depend upon the mood I am in when I am asked."

And then she ran into the house, and Mr Angus hung up his hat with a smile on his face, knowing that the case was won.

CHAPTER XXII.

ACROSS THE MOOR.

IT was a glorious July day. There was not a ripple nor even a passing summer cloud to mar the perfect brightness of the sky; scarce a breath of air stirred the sweet flower-laden air; a brooding stillness hushed every discordant sound; surely it was the most perfect day of the summer's prime. In the town the heat, perhaps, was a trifle oppressive, the roads were dusty and trying to the eyes, but away up the wide muirland, where already the purple glow was creeping over the heather, the air was delicious, soft, and sweet, and yet fresh and cooling like a draught from some mountain spring. After lunch, when Isabel had gone to rest for a little, Joan had wandered away up by Fairgate, which was still a deserted, desolate, unoccupied house, and, after lazily climbing the dusty hill-path, she was now resting among the heather. She was leaning against a sloping bank, with her hat half-drawn over her brows to shut out the powerful glare of the sun, for once oblivious of the fair picture the smiling stretch of landscape made under the summer sky. The fields were whitening to harvest, and showed in fair relief against the Castl beeches and the clumps of darker pine which dotted the rising upland.

It was not that life in the city had in any way blunted Joan's keen perception and enjoyment of nature's charms,

but that day her heart was overcharged with thoughts of other things. All day she had been haunted by a vague restlessness—a feeling that she was approaching a crisis in her life. What that crisis was she dared not ask herself. So absorbed was she in these brooding thoughts, and so oblivious of anything about her, even of the bees, sipping the honey from the blossoms under her very hand, that it was little wonder she did not see the tall broad figure of a man coming up the hill with a quick, swinging tread, which showed he had an aim in view. He paused once or twice, and, shading his eyes from the sun, took long, sweeping glances across the moor, as if in search of something, and then, as if catching a gleam of Joan's light dress against the darker heather, made directly for the spot where she sat.

She saw him at last, when he was within a few hundred yards of her, and she sprang up, and held her hand to her heart as if to still its throbbing. She was not conscious of any feeling of surprise, the only thought in her mind being a desire to flee away from the presence of the approaching stranger, and yet when he did come up, and lifted his tweed cap as he held out his hand, she raised a calm, unruffled face, and, laying her hand in his, said, quite quietly—

"So you have come back."

"Yes, I have come back," said Robert Angus, his eyes dwelling hungrily on the face he loved with a great love. "They told me I should find you here. Will you walk a little way over the hill with me, to a place where every passer on the road will not see and recognise us? I want to speak to you."

"Yes. I have a book; oh, here it is!" she said, quite quietly still, and, lifting the copy of Browning, which had been companion of many a ramble, she turned and walked by his side.

"Did you see Isabel? She had gone to lie down when I came out."

"Yes, I saw her."

"How do you think she is looking? I have been a little anxious about her these few days."

"I don't know. I did not pay any attention to her looks," said Robert, so carelessly that Joan might have thought him heartless had she not known—oh, so well—that she had been his all-absorbing thought. "You look better than you did. I never saw you look so well."

A stronger adjective had been on his lips, but he repressed it.

"Your father would be glad to see you. He seems to be missing you very much," said Joan, softly.

"I did not see him. The bank was not closed, you know. Are you glad to see me? That is the question I am more deeply interested in at present."

"Yes, of course, I am glad; but I have seen you so recently, that—that——"

"That you don't care, I suppose," said Robert, finishing his sentence in rather a bitter undertone.

"You seem to be very cross. Have you travelled all night?" asked Joan, with a provoking smile. But she received no answer.

"When did you see any of the Harringtons?" she asked, changing the subject. "Have you been at Cadogan Place since I came down?"

"No. I saw Giles one day. Joan, I was told in the city yesterday that you are engaged to Giles Harrington. Is it true?"

"No, it is not true," she answered, and turned her face away, for the memory of Giles Harrington cast a blurring shadow over all the sunshine of the summer day. It was a true, manly heart he had given her, and she knew a little of the pain her answer must have given.

"Are you likely to be?"

"No, I am not likely to be," she answered, very sharply.

"Did you come down from London expressly to ask me these questions?"

"Yes, and one other; only I am afraid."

They were completely alone now in a little isolated dell, with sloping banks on either side, crowned by fir trees which effectually hid it from view. There was a cairn in the middle of it, to which many a wayfarer had added, until it had grown to quite a formidable height. Joan stood still, and leaned up against it, playing with a little tuft of yellow stonecup peeping out of a crevice by her side.

"Joan, how can you look so calmly, so indifferently?" said Robert Angus, hoarsely. "Can't you see what a terrible thing this is to me? I love you with a love which will be my bane or blessing. What have you to say to me?

"I know very well my presumption. I know very well that in the eyes of many my unhappy past is an insuperable barrier in the way," he continued, when no answer came to his pleading. "But I expect more mercy from you. You are not one to visit the sins of others on an innocent head. And I have never forgotten how you told me at the time that you thought me blameless; that I had done my duty by my poor unhappy wife."

"Hush, oh, hush! Do not recall that! It is buried for ever," fell pleadingly from Joan's lips, which were trembling now.

"I know how far above me you are," continued Robert Angus, using unconsciously the very words with which Giles Harrington had pleaded his cause. "But if you will take me as I am, Joan, you can make of me what you will. But I am not come to appeal to your pity. Unless you can care for me as a wife should, let me go. There must be no mistake this time, Joan. A bitter experience has taught me that."

"You are sure you do not mistake your own feelings?"

said Joan, with a strange, pathetic wistfulness. "You know my solitary position, my need of love. You know how my heart craves for the things other women have in abundance. You are sure you are not mistaking pity for love?"

"My darling, is it pity which makes me think of you by day and dream of you by night? Is it pity which makes every pulse thrill at your step, at the sound of your voice? No, Joan. It is love—a love such as I did not believe could exist in the world."

"Then I will be your wife," said Joan, simply and quietly, and she laid her clapsed hands very lightly on his.

"But you love me, Joan; it is not pity, but love?" said Robert Angus, with an eagerness which told something of his deep yearning to be cared for, for himself alone.

"I am not likely to make that mistake," said Joan, in a whisper. "Did you never guess that I have loved you all my life?"

. . . . .

It was long past the dinner hour at the Bank when the truants returned home. Their secret would not hide, and indeed they had no wish to hide it, knowing what happiness it would give to the two who loved them both so well.

The evening was spent in discussion of plans for the future—the happy future, which seemed so bright with promise. Then there were a few days of quiet idling and dreaming, ere Robert Angus went back to London to prepare, for the second time, a home for a wife. But, oh! how different the feelings which prompted him now!—how deep and unshadowed the happiness which Joan's true heart had given him! There was no mistake this time, no qualms of doubt, no jealous fears, no tormenting misgiving; all was peace and trust, born of that richest blessing—a woman's fixed unalterable love.

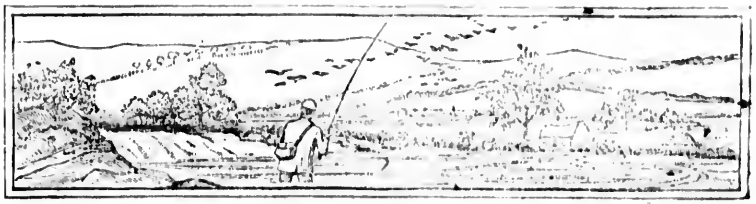
In the long, golden, August days, after Robert left her, Joan's new book was finished, and placed in the publisher's

hands. And when Giles Harrington read its latter pages, he was swift to read between the lines, and to know what had given the brilliant pen such a deep and matchless grace. Joan was in no hurry to leave quiet Auchengray. She was willing to stay as long as they would keep her, she would say, laughingly; and so it came to pass that sere October had crept over the sunny landscapes before she began to talk of going. The marriage was not to be delayed. There was no reason why these solitary beings, loving each other as they did, should live apart in the great wilderness of London. A house in Cadogan Place, a few doors removed from Mr Christopher Harrington's residence, was secured, and with what pride and interest did Robert Angus himself superintend its furnishings! Joan refused to come up and choose for herself. She could leave it with him, she wrote, and she was too idle and happy to take the trouble. Early in November Miss Laurence, under the escort of the banker and his wife, left Auchengray. It had leaked out in the prying little town what was the meaning of this journey, and, as may be imagined, many comments were passed, the generally expressed opinion being that Miss Laurence might have done better.

Very precious to Joan Laurence were the words of earnest blessing with which her friends at the Thorn sent her on her way. If their fervent wishes were all fulfilled, then she would be happy indeed.

So, upon a still, grey December morning, a quiet unostentatious marriage took place at the church of St Peter's, Eaton Square. The Harringtons were the only strangers present, and Giles, unselfish to the last, acted as Robert's groomsman.

Then there was a week spent on the sunny Isle of Wight, after which husband and wife entered their own home, taking up the thread of life once more, and looking forward to a length of useful, happy days.



CHAPTER XXIII.

A SPECTRE OF THE PAST.

"IF you please, ma'am, Mrs Harrington is in the drawing-room," said Mrs Angus's housemaid, entering the nursery one raw, chilly, January afternoon.

Mrs Angus raised her head from the cot over which she was somewhat anxiously bending, but her hand did not unclasp itself from the little pink fingers closed so lovingly over it.

"Yes, Kitty. Is Ellen having tea downstairs?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Stay you here beside baby while I see Mrs Harrington. Move about as little as you can. His sleep is so troubled. I am afraid he is going to be very ill."

"Very well, ma'am," said the girl, in willing tones, for the service of the maids in Robert Angus's household was one of love.

Mrs Angus left the nursery at once, and ran lightly down to the drawing-room to see her friend, who had run in, as she often did in the afternoon, to have a few minutes' talk.

"Good afternoon, dear. How well you look," said Mabel Harrington. "Have I interrupted you at your study?"

"Oh, no. I have been sitting over the nursery fire with Eric. I am a little anxious about him," returned Joan, and the colour was already slowly receding from her cheeks.

"I am sorry to hear that. Do you think him not so well?"

"There is a difficulty, a hurriedness about his breathing I do not like," said Joan. "But he has never been a strong child. He may not be any worse than usual. Perhaps I am too fearful about him."

She tried to smile, but her lips quivered and her eyes filled. The delicate state of her only child was Joan Angus's cross, the only shadow which ever fell darkly across the happiness of her married life. And it *was* happiness. She was wont to say she had only realised what life really held during the past two years.

"We were talking this morning of leaving London for the spring months," she continued. "Robert thinks a sojourn in the Riviera would do both Eric and me good. But it is so hard to leave him behind."

"It would be worth if it restored baby to complete health," said Mrs Harrington. "And you need both rest and change. I see now how pale and worn you look."

"I seem to have collapsed all at once. I suppose it is the spring," said Joan, gravely. "I feel such an oppression of spirits, too; quite unlike anything I have ever experienced before. I feel as if some trouble were hanging over me. I cannot shake it off."

"That is just the result of overwork. Your system is down," said Mabel. "I really think you should get away without delay."

"We will see if Dr Roberts thinks it would be safe to travel with Eric just now," said Joan. "How are you all? I seem to have seen so little of you since Christmas."

"All well, thanks. I have heard some good news to-day, Joan, and I am just like a child—I could not rest till I shared it with you."

Joan smiled.

"I am glad of it. You know I am always interested in what interests you. I feel quite curious"

"It came with such a surprise, too. You have heard me speak of my sister Lucy, who went out just a girl with her husband to Newfoundland?"

"Lady Finch, you mean?" said Joan inquiringly.

"The same. Poor John was only knighted six months before his death—a recognition of his services to the Government which ought to have been given him long ere it was. But he was not one who set great store by such honours."

"I have often been going to ask you about her. It must be so sad for her to be left a widow in that strange land," said Joan.

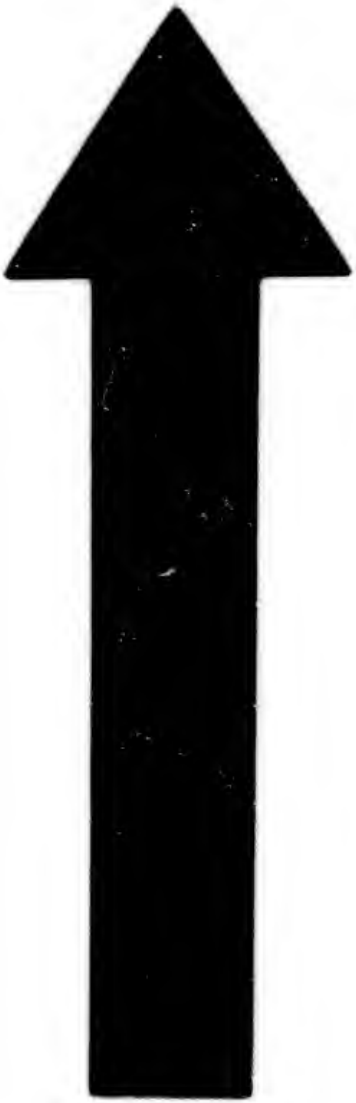
"It is not exactly a strange land to her now, you know," answered Mabel. "It is twelve years in May since she went out to St. John's, and John had been there five years before that. I know she has many friends; and then her three children have been a great comfort to her."

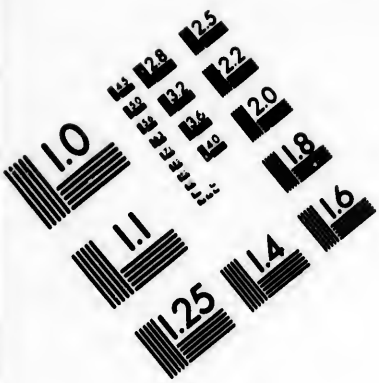
"No doubt," said Joan, quickly. "They must have helped to soften the blow. But it seems to me so terrible a thing to be left a widow that I cannot face it even in thought."

"Lucy has never said much about it in her letters. She is more reticent by nature than I am. But I must tell you my surprise. She is coming home—is actually on her way, indeed, to settle in London. She seems to have acted on some sudden impulse, she has given us so little notice, and she actually expects me to have a house taken and furnished for her before she comes next week."

"No impossible task, if you bestir yourself," said Joan, laughing. "It will be a delightful excitement for you; and what a joy to think you will see your sister so soon. I heartily sympathise with you; I am not sure but that I envy you a little, too."

"I hardly know how or when to begin. If she and the children had been coming alone, of course there could have been no difficulty, for they would just have come to us for a time. But she is bringing two servants and her governess with her; so that is out of the question."





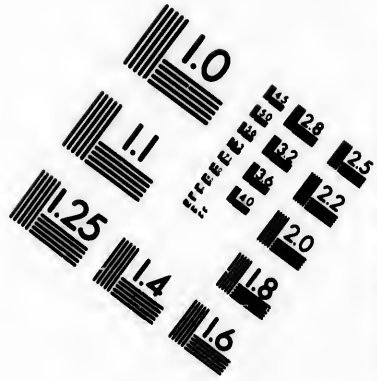
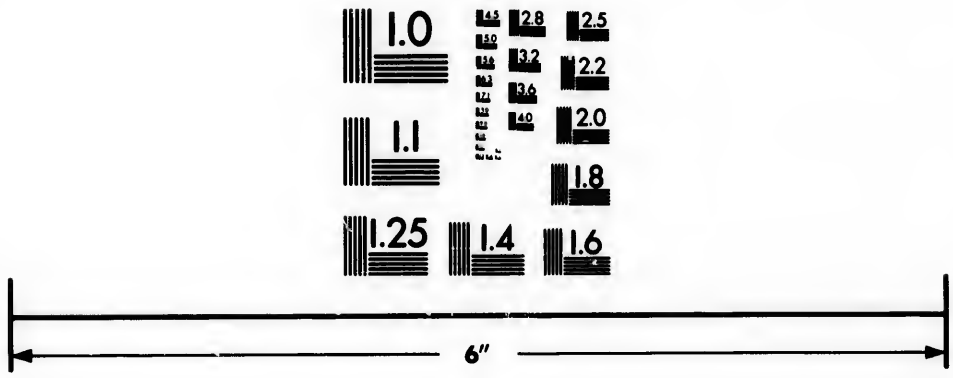
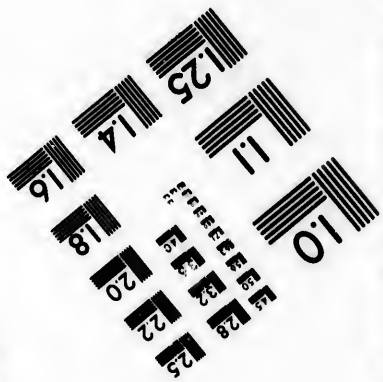


IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (MT-3)





Photographic Sciences Corporation

23 WEST MAIN STREET
WEBSTER, N.Y. 14580
(716) 872-4503

"Have they sailed from St. John's yet?"

"They embark in the *Sidonia* this morning. Such weather for an Atlantic voyage! I really do not understand this proceeding of Lucy's; it is most extraordinary!"

"Possibly Lady Finch may have been overpowered by a yearning for England and you. We do feel these strange impulses at times, and they sweep everything before them," said Joan, musingly. "She will have given you some instructions about the kind of house she wants."

"No; but she has given me *carte blanche*. She is well left, you know. Christopher thinks it will be for her boy's sake she is coming home. He is nearly as excited as I am, Joan. He had a great admiration and respect both for Lucy and John."

"Ah, well, you have much to look forward to. I do not know how it is, Mabel, but of late I have felt a strange yearning for a mother or sister. It is not that I am less happy, or that my husband—God bless him!—is less dear and kind; but there is a kind of helplessness comes over me at times, a feeling as if I were utterly alone."

"Joan, I cannot understand it. I am afraid for you. You are not yourself. You must go away for a time," said Mabel, with tenderest solicitude.

"There! I am selfish with my gloomy fancies, born of a disordered system, as you say," said Joan, speaking more cheerfully. "If Eric is better to-morrow, I shall be glad to go house-hunting with you."

"Did you guess that was what I was after? Oh, you most penetrating of womankind," laughed Mabel. "Well, good-bye. I will run in after breakfast to-morrow morning, and see how you all are. Do be careful of yourself, Joan. You are a precious person to very many besides ourselves."

It was a great relief to Joan that day when her husband came home. By that time the child seemed to be easier, and Robert assured her she need have no ground for her

fears; it was but a touch of cold, he felt sure, which would speedily pass away. So dearly did Robert Angus love his wife that he could not bear to see a cloud upon her brow. He had studied that dear face so closely and so often during the happy years they had been together that he could divine any thought that found expression on it. His child was dear to him, but the mother was infinitely more precious in his sight. If he could have helped it, no shadow of anxiety or pain should ever touch her heart. And yet, how powerless he was to turn aside the dark and terrible cloud rising slowly, but surely, above their home! While they were at dinner Joan told him of Mrs Harrington's call, and the approaching arrival of her sister, Lady Finch.

"I feel sorry for her; more especially as Mabel tells me she is one of those still, reserved natures. They always suffer most, because they so seldom find vent," said Joan, musingly. "Robert, I sometimes wonder whether it is a sin to love as we do. Can it be right for us to depend so utterly on human love? I often fear not."

"How can it be wrong? The faculties for loving are God-implanted, Joan. We cannot help them being called into life."

"No, but when it comes to this, that the very thought of being parted brings a sort of horror with it, I fear it is carried beyond the limits, and yet I cannot help it. How could I estrange my heart from you now?"

"My dearest, you are morbidly fanciful to-day!" said Robert Angus, anxiously. "You are too much indoors. Promise me you will not confine yourself so much."

"There! see how the very fancy that I am out of sorts upsets you!" said Joan, smiling faintly. "You should not be so sensitive where I am concerned, though I find your solicitude very sweet. I hope—I hope we are not making idols of each other."

Joan spoke very gravely now, as if weighed down, as

indeed she was, with some inner misgiving and doubt. As the days went by this strange feeling of depression did not quit Joan Angus, but the increasing weakness and debility of her little son occupied all her thoughts.

Dr Roberts shook his head when the idea of travelling was mentioned, but did not say what he thought—that the child would never be well again. For a week or two Joan was never out of doors. She heard that Lady Finch and her family had arrived safely, and that they had taken up their abode in one of the quiet squares near Hyde Park, but she was too much absorbed in her own anxiety to feel her usual kindly interest in the affairs of others. Early in February the east winds fled at the approach of spring. The air grew mild and balmy, tender buds began to glisten on hedge and tree, and in the borders the spring flowers burst suddenly into bloom. With the advent of more genial weather Joan fancied there was a change for the better in her darling, but when she hinted it anxiously to her husband, he could not truly say he observed it. It seemed to him that those exquisite waxen features bore too plainly the impress of an early death. One sharp pang was spared the father and mother—their little one seemed to suffer no pain. It was only a great weakness which possessed the fragile frame, and the time came when the golden head could scarcely turn languidly on the pillow to smile into the face bent upon it in love. All but Joan herself saw the gradual sinking, and she refused to believe that one day soon she would be childless. It was her nature thus to cling with terrible intensity to what she loved; the very strength of her affections was oftentimes a source of pain.

"I am not quite satisfied with Dr Roberts," she said one morning, as her husband was leaving the house. "Don't you think it would satisfy us to get some other advice?"

"My dearest, if it will ease you of a moment's anxiety, I will call Sir William Jenner in this very day," answered

Robert, with infinite tenderness. She felt at once the hopelessness of his tone.

"Robert," she said, lifting worn, pathetic eyes to his face, "do you think it is useless? Do you think we must give him up?"

"My wife, would it be more than you could bear?" he asked, almost compassionately.

"I am afraid of it," she whispered. "But I will try not to be selfish. I believe it is selfish to wish his life prolonged. But you will see Dr Jenner to-day? Everything must be tried. It is possible there may be something we have left undone."

"I will call at his house after business hours, and if he is at home I will bring him with me," said Robert. "Try and be brave, my darling. It unmans me to see you so utterly prostrated."

"It is what I told you, Robert. I have made idols for myself to worship, and my heart fails me when they are about to be taken from me," she said, with an indescribable pathos of look and tone. "I will pray for forgiveness and strength."

"You wrong yourself, Joan! You have never placed earthly treasures before heavenly. You cannot help the intensity of your nature, my poor wife!"

She smiled wanly, and shook her head.

"I know better than you; but there, I am keeping you too long. It is nearly ten. Good-bye."

She put her hands upon his shoulders and kissed him as was her wont, then went somewhat wearily upstairs, not once looking back. It was not to be marvelled at that Robert Angus could not fix his attention on business matters that day; and in his yearning impatience to be home he left the office earlier than usual. He had some business to transact in the Strand, and then took the 'bus to the end of Oxford Street, where he alighted, intending to cross the

park to the great doctor's residence in Prince's Gate. It was a lovely day, and the air was filled with a balmy sweetness more suggestive of summer weather than of the early spring. The daisies dotted the smooth green turf, and the buds on the trees were expanding into leaf. Birds twittered and sung on every bough, and the whole earth seemed full of happiness and promise. It is often thus, I think, when the greatest sorrows are about to fall. It was too early yet for the votaries of fashion to be about, but the promenade had its complement of nursemaids and children, the latter enjoying the sunshine to the full. As Robert Angus neared Albert Gate, a young lady, who looked like a governess, in company with three lovely children, dressed in deep mourning, entered the park by the passenger's gate. Robert Angus was on the carriage-way, and as he was about to pass out glanced carelessly at the little party. His eye rested first on the boy's fair face, thinking with a sigh that in a year or two Eric might have been just such another. Then suddenly he saw the face of their guardian, and he stood absolutely still.

She was a slight young thing—only a girl in appearance—dressed in mourning, too, which was exquisitely becoming to her fair face and golden hair. Utterly unconscious of the stranger looking at her so intently, she went on talking gaily to her charges, who seemed to regard her with confidence and love. In a little they were lost among the throng, but Robert Angus still stood looking in the direction whither they had gone, with such a stony horror on his face that some of the passengers stood still to look at him, wondering whether he had sustained a shock. Little cared Robert Angus for the curious scrutiny of the passing throng.

An awful shock had come to him, indeed. For unless there existed one who so closely resembled her that even he might be deceived, he had looked upon the face of his former wife, Amy Burnett.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A TERRIBLE CONFLICT.

THE great physician's opinion coincided with that of his less famous brother. There was no hope for the child. Organic weakness could not be overcome, and the issue was only a question of days. Joan heard the verdict calmly—she had schooled herself to hear and bear the worst, at what cost she alone knew. It was as if her very heart-strings were rent asunder when she thought of the empty cot, the silent nursery, when only a memory of its dear occupant should remain. While the physician talked, Mrs Angus noted her husband's ghastly paleness, but attributed it to the pain caused by the final extinction of hope. He had been so fond and proud of the child, loving to trace in the sweet face a resemblance to the still dearer mother, loving, too, to speak of the future of his first-born son; and now it was all at an end, so far as an earthly career was concerned. When the two gentlemen left the nursery Joan Angus knelt down by her baby's cot and hid her aching head on the pillow beside the golden one, which was now too utterly prostrated even to stir. In these brief, sharp moments of agony she gave him up; and when she rose her face was more serene than it had been, and there was less of anguish in the depth of the sweet, serious eyes.

She wondered a little why Robert had left her so long

alone, but perhaps he, too, would be solitary awhile until the first pang was past. She would not seek him yet. At last, however, yearning for his sympathy, she stole down to the lower rooms, seeking him in the dining-room, library, and study, but he was not to be found.

"The master has gone out, ma'am," said Kitty, meeting her mistress in the hall, now guessing whom she sought.

"Did he say when he would be back, Kitty?"

"No, ma'am," said the girl, and lingered a little, as if she would fain ask a question. At last it came in a sudden burst of tears. "Oh, ma'am, would you please tell me what the doctor said? We are all so anxious in the kitchen. We love baby so."

"We will have to part with him very soon, Kitty," said Mrs Angus, and extended her hand, which the girl clasped in both her own and kissed it. That little action, so expressive of sympathy and love, did the tried heart good.

Meanwhile where was Robert Angus? Why was he absent from his wife's side at such a time? He walked down to the corner of the street with Sir William, and, after parting from him, returned past his own door to the residence of Mr Christopher Harrington. He was admitted at once when he knocked, and shown into a small sitting-room, which Mr and Mrs Harrington often occupied when alone. Mabel was writing letters, and rose to greet him, exclaiming at the change in him—

"What is it, Mr Angus? Is baby worse? or Joan ill? You look terribly upset."

"I feel it. We have had Jenner to-day, and he says there is no hope for the child," he said, vaguely, and, sitting down, looked in a mechanical, dazed way round the room.

He had had an object in coming here, but he forgot for a moment what it was.

"And your poor wife. How does she bear it?"

"Better than I hoped. She was wonderfully calm," he answered, in the same mechanical, listless way.

"Would you like me to go in and see her? I am afraid I could not be of much use. But I am ready if you think she would care to see me."

"I think it might be better to wait till to-morrow," he obliged himself to answer. "I thought I would come in and tell you. You have always been most kind."

"But is Mrs Angus alone?" queried Mabel.

She could not understand Robert Angus to-night. Apparently the physician's verdict had upset him mentally as well as physically. She had never seen a man look more unlike himself.

"Yes, but I am going in presently," he said, rising heavily to his feet. "So you have got your sister safely settled beside you, Mrs Harrington?"

"Only the breadth of the park between us," said Mabel, with a slight smile, wondering at the question.

"She is quite well, I hope, and her children?—there are three, I think?"

"Yes, three—dear children," answered Mabel, warmly.

"Do they go to school with your boys, Mrs Harrington?"

"No. Lucy brought a governess home with her from St John's, you know," said Mabel, still further mystified.

"I fancied I saw them to-day in Hyde Park; that is why I mentioned them at all," said Robert, recovering himself, and speaking with an admirable assumption of indifference. "There was a young lady with them whom I fancied might be Lady Finch.

"Was she tall and dark?"

"No, quite the opposite," said Robert Angus, hating himself for the part he was acting, but it was a matter of life or death to him. He must learn something about this governess who had come from Newfoundland with Lady Finch.

"It must have been Mrs Burnett, their governess. You

seem surprised to hear she has been married. She is only a girl!' said Mabel Harrington. "Hers is quite a romantic story. She was the sole survivor of that terrible catastrophe which overtook the *Sidonia* some years ago. Perhaps you may remember it."

"Yes, I remember it," said Robert Angus, marvelling at his own calm.

"Her husband, poor thing, was drowned, and it seems she has no friends in the world! But, there, I must not keep you any longer. I daresay my sister will tell you the story herself. Both she and the children are deeply attached to Mrs Burnett."

"Yes, it is very interesting," said Robert Angus. "Good morning, and thank you."

"I have done nothing to deserve thanks; I wish I could be of any use," said Mabel, sympathetically. "Tell Joan she is in all our thoughts, and that I will come in to-morrow morning."

"Yes, I will tell her," said Robert Angus, vaguely as before, and he walked away out of the house like a man in a dream. When he reached the street he paused irresolutely for a few minutes, as if not knowing where to turn. He thought of his wife sitting alone by the bedside of the dying child, wondering, perhaps, why he was absent from her, but, God help him, he could not go to her! No, not yet.

He turned his face westwards, and with his head drooping on his breast, mechanically threaded the quiet, unfrequented streets and squares which intervened between Cadogan Place and Hyde Park. When he reached the solitudes of the park he pushed his hat back from his brow, and let the cool night wind play back upon his aching head. It was growing dark now, but the young February moon was peeping shyly up above the green tree tops, and in the soft spring sky many stars were shining. Peace, unutterable peace, seemed to be in the air, and the din and roar of the city,

softened by the distance into a pleasant hum, only made the quiet seem doubly sweet. And yet, was it not a very mocking of his pain? He dropped at length into one of the seats under the spreading beeches, and, folding his arms across his chest, faced this terrible thing and tried to think it out. His former wife, beyond a doubt, still lived, was even then not a mile distant from him, and the woman whom he loved, and who had made happiness and home for him, was what? Nothing! No more in the eyes of the law to him than one of the night wanderers flitting about the streets of that great and evil city. He cursed the carelessness that had prevented him seeking a divorce from his faithless wife, and yet he smiled bitterly to himself, for what need had there been to file a petition for dissolution of the tie which death had already broken? A doubt, a fear that she might have survived the catastrophe, had never, in his wildest dreams of imagination, occurred to him. The newspaper had so emphatically and repeatedly referred to the loss of all on board. Then there came into his heart a wild bitterness against her who, unwittingly perhaps, had wrought him this cruel wrong. He remembered her of yore—thoughtless, careless, giving no heed to the consequences of any action. Doubtless, she had acted upon the impulse of the moment to conceal her rescue, knowing she had forfeited all claim upon kindred and friends.

Even in his agony he was just. He believed that any idea of what the fatal consequences of her mistaken concealment might bring to her former husband never occurred to her. But the mischief, nevertheless, was done—aye, the irrevocable evil, which God alone knew how to cancel or mitigate, was wrought—and what remained? He groaned aloud when he thought of his wife, dearer to him than aught else on earth. What had his love brought her? She was wont to say, lovingly, that it was the very sunshine of her heart, the greatest blessing of her life, and he had

been glad to believe it. And now? How could he go to her and tell her that she was not, and never had been, his wife? How could he look into those wistful, startled eyes, and say that they must part; each to live henceforth a solitary blighted existence, bereft of all earthly happiness? And they had been so happy! They had loved each other so well!

As he sat there in the deepening night his awful agony did its work upon him, rending his heart and soul, and setting its cruel stamp upon his face. He heard the clang of the city bells; the solemn booming of St. Paul's seemed to him like the knell of death. He started when he counted the strokes at length to hear that it was nine o'clock. Nine o'clock, and it was four hours since he left home. Home, did he say? Nay, it was home no more. Henceforth he must be a wanderer upon the face of the earth, without tie of love or kinship to sweeten the husks of life. What had he done, and, more, what evil had his angel wife wrought that such a blow should fall on her in the very summer of her days? As he dragged himself heavily to his feet the tempter slipped behind and whispered that there was a way out of the maze of horror and difficulty with which he was encompassed. One chance remained. He would see Amy Burnett, tell her of the desolation she had created, and appeal to her to save Joan. He would provide her with sufficient means to leave the country or bury herself in the oblivion her sin deserved, and leave those she had wronged to such peace as they could enjoy. If she would consent, and he did not doubt that she would, Joan need never know. But, again, there was the nobler, more honourable course—to tell all to his wife, to part for a time, until he could be divorced from Amy Burnett, when they could be married again. But, then, what an opening of old wounds, what a revival of painful, darkest memories! How could he subject his sensitive, proud-souled wife to the ordeal of

publicity? How could he bear to see her name mentioned and freely commented upon in the pages of the scandal-loving press? It would kill Joan, whispered the tempter. The other was the better way. It was a terrible struggle. It seemed as if the air was hushed in painful stillness, waiting for the victory. It is in such moments, when good and evil are trembling in the balance, that the angels hover near us, waiting to rejoice, or to hide their saddened heads when the tempter conquers. The bells were chiming once more when Robert Angus turned away from the spot which had witnessed the keenest conflict in his life. Had he gained the victory? Ah, no; for the victor walks with head erect and buoyant step, conscious of the approval of his God.

His step was hurried and fearful; his heart beat still, as if in shame, upon his breast, and the angels hid their faces over the fall of a righteous man.

When he reached his own door again it was nearly eleven o'clock. He was obliged to ring, for in his haste that afternoon he had left his keys lying on his office desk. Kitty opened the door, and looked unspeakably relieved to see him.

"Oh, Mr Angus, sir, where have you been?" she exclaimed, forgetful for once of her place. "My mistress has been nearly distracted. And—and——" a burst of tears choked her utterance.

"I could not help it, girl," returned Mr Angus, in tones which Kitty had never heard before. "Where is your mistress?"

"In the nursery, sir, but—but——"

"What?"

"Oh, sir, after you left baby grew suddenly worse, and though we sent for Dr Roberts, he could do nothing."

"And is the child no easier yet?"

"No, sir; at least, yes!" cried Kitty, in a burst of sobbing. "He is dead."

CHAPTER XXV.

AMY.

ROBERT ANGUS uttered a low cry, and staggered on the stairs like a drunken man. Kitty silently withdrew, leaving him standing with his arms folded on the balustrades, and his head bowed low upon them. But in a few minutes she heard him slowly and heavily ascending the stairs. He passed the drawing-room, where the fire was crackling, sending a ruddy glow across the floor and right out to the landing. Robert Angus paused and looked into the room with a strange feeling, as if he were about to bid farewell to it and its many associations; for there many of the happiest hours of his married life had been spent. Then he turned away and ascended the stairs to the nursery flat. He heard them moving in the room, and the door being wide open, he could see the interior and the occupants. Evidently the last offices for the dead child had been performed, for he could see the white cot and its occupant; he could even discern the sweet child-face lying upon the snowy pillow. Joan was standing at the head, and her hands were full of white chrysanthemums, which he had brought in from the city only yesterday. Over at the fire, Ellen, the nurse girl, was crying quietly to herself. Not quite so deeply absorbed as her mistress, she had heard the step on the corridor and the movement at the door. When

she turned her head her master signed to her to leave the room, which she did; then he entered it and shut the door. Then, and not till then, did Joan look round. When she saw her husband the flowers fell from her hands in a white shower upon the bed, and uttering a strange sobbing moan, she tottered across the floor, and was clasped to his heart.

"Oh, Robert, where have you been? What happened to keep you away? I had to go through it alone. I thought I should have died," she whispered through her trembling lips, and her arms clung about his neck as if they would never unloose again. How could he take them away, how could he tell the stricken, trembling woman, seeking comfort on his breast, that he had no right to comfort or care for her any more?

"My darling, my darling, I could not help it," he said, hoarsely. "Oh, my poor wife!"

The intensity with which he spoke struck her strangely, and she raised her head to look at him. Her eyes dilated with fear as they dwelt upon the face which was the dearest in all the world to her. It was so changed, so wan, so haggard, the eyes dim and weary-looking; and, strangest, saddest of all, the rich waves of dark brown hair had grown grey in a single hour.

"My dearest! my husband! I did not know you could feel it so terribly, and you bore it all away from me!" she said, forgetting her own pain in her infinite pity for him. "We would have been braver together. Come and see him, Robert," she added, in a voiceless whisper. "Although the end came so suddenly, it was perfect peace. It is well with the child."

She led him with loving hand to the side of the cot, where the child lay among the flowers, himself the purest bud of all. Upon the sweet face, from which kind death had smoothed away any line of pain, was a lovely smile, like a reflection of glory from that Heaven to which the spirit had returned.

"'Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven,'" whispered Joan, beginning dreamily to arrange the fallen flowers. A great peace had stolen into her soul, calming the tumult with which she had been struggling for many weary days. How different her quiet heart from the tempest-tossed spirit of the man by her side! How little dreamed Joan Angus at that moment of the battle which had been fought and lost in the solitude of the night! Ah! poor Joan! her cup was not yet full.

"It is wonderful what strength is given for such heavy trials," said Joan, hiding her tearful eyes on his arm at length, her work of love ended for the present. "We have not lost our little one, Robert. It is only separation for a little, and he is safe."

"Yes. There are things worse than death," said Robert, in a loud, thick whisper, which had in it a ring of despair.

"Yes, we might have lived to see him go far astray. That would have been worse than death," said Joan. "Shall we go down now? I am concerned about you, dear. I cannot understand this terrible change in you. You are all I have to care for now."

He turned his head away, averted his ashen face from those tender love-lit eyes. Every word she uttered stabbed him to the heart. Every moment seemed to make it more impossible that he could ever tell her the truth.

When all was over, when nursery and cot alike were empty, and a green grave in a suburban cemetery was all that remained of Eric Angus, then Joan broke down. Isabel came up from Auchengray and nursed her through her illness with a sister's solicitude and care. She was grieved, indeed, to see that the loss of their child had told so terribly on both. Perhaps the change in Robert was the more marked; he was as different from the Robert of old as could well be. It seemed to Isabel that he was like a man weighed down by a secret care which nothing could lessen

or remove. In these dreary days they saw little of the Harringtons; but when Robert Angus heard by accident that Lady Finch and her household had gone to Bournemouth, he felt an unspeakable sense of relief. When Mrs Harrington mentioned casually that it was more on the governess's account than her own that Lady Finch had sought the health resort, he hated himself for the thrill of passionate hope which filled his heart. Oh, if kind death would but step in, he said to himself, what an easy and satisfactory ending to the terrible chain which bound him.

When Joan began to gather strength once more, and was able to come down stairs, Dr Roberts ordered an immediate change of air and scene. After much consultation it was agreed that she and Isabel should proceed to Cannes for the months of April and May—Mr Angus, the elder, being glad enough of the proposed holiday for his wife. So Robert Angus was left alone in his empty house to brood over his secret care. Joan left him with a somewhat heavy heart. She had tried in vain to lessen or lighten his deep gloom, the only result of her tender questioning having been a forced cheerfulness, which was even more painful to her than his depression. He had grown irritable and uncertain-tempered, too, apt to break out in little bursts of passion, such as none had ever witnessed in him before. But in his love and devotion to his wife there was no faltering or change. Nay, it seemed to Joan that in these times of sadness and depression he became knit to her in the bonds of a deeper love; but there was a strange yearning passion, a visible intensity in it she had not seen before. It troubled her, and, as I said, she left him with a heavy heart. Little did she guess with what thankfulness he saw her go, for he had much to accomplish ere she should return again to their home.

At the end of April Lady Finch returned to town—an item of intelligence which Robert Angus received with

gratitude from the lips of Mrs Harrington. He was beginning to despair of seeing Amy Burnett, and he lived in dread of his wife's return, for her letters already breathed a yearning for his presence and for home.

By a little adroit and careless questioning he learned Lady Finch's exact address, and, schooling himself for the painful ordeal he was about to meet, he proceeded directly after business hours one afternoon to the quiet square where the Governor's widow had her home.

"Lady Finch is not at home, sir," said the maid, who opened the door to him. "She has gone up to Walton-on-Thames. Can I take any message for her? Or will you see Mrs Burnett?"

"Yes, I will see Mrs Burnett," he answered, quietly, and followed the girl into the morning-room. He had not been long left alone when he heard a light footfall in the hall, and then the door opened. Slowly he turned from the window to meet with stern, accusing mien the woman who had tried him so bitterly and long. She had entered the room with a pleasant smile, expecting some mutual friend, but when she saw who awaited her, her pale face grew white as death, and she staggered like one who had received a terrible shock. Then she sank shivering on the couch, while Robert Angus quietly walked to the door and turned the key in the lock.

"You are surprised to see me," he said, in tones which his pain made intensely bitter and scornful.

"Yes; how did you find me out?" she faltered, not caring to raise her shame-stricken face. "I thought I was safe here; London is so big. How did you ever find me out?"

"Are you not aware that I have my home in London now?" he said, quietly. "Do you not know that Mrs Harrington, the sister of your benefactress, is my wife's dearest friend?"

"Your wife!" she repeated, vaguely, and lifting her head, fixed her eyes, slowly filling with horror, on his rigid face.

"Yes, my wife—Joan Laurence. You know now, if you did not before, Amy Burnett, what you have done," he said, in the same strange, passionless voice. "I hope you are satisfied with your work."

"Joan Laurence your wife!" she repeated, and then, as the full import of his words dawned upon her, she uttered a low cry, and once more hid her face.

"Yes, Joan Laurence is my wife, or rather was. God help her and me, she is not so now."

"Does she know? Has she gone away from you?" fell thick and fast from Amy Burnett's ashen lips. "I never thought that anything so awful could happen. How was I to know you would marry Joan Laurence whenever I was away? If I had thought that I would have refused to be rescued—I would have drowned myself rather in that awful frozen sea. Don't you believe that?"

"I believe it was your usual thoughtlessness which wrought the mischief," he said, more kindly, for her distress was apparently very keen. "If you had had a moment's consideration for anybody but yourself, Amy, you would have let me know you were safe."

"I was filled with shame and repentance for what I had done. I knew before the catastrophe that I had made a bitter mistake," she said, hurriedly. "And when I thought of the disgrace and humiliation I had brought upon you all it seemed to me the only reparation and kindness I could make, to sink into oblivion, to let you believe me dead."

"Why did you come back to England, then?" he asked, almost sharply.

"Oh, I know I did wrong, but how could I leave the kind friends who gave me shelter and home? Because I was English Sir John Finch came to see me when I was lying ill in the hospital, and then his wife came, and, when I was able, they took me to their own home. I had to deceive them. I had to tell them I was an orphan, and

that my husband was drowned in the wreck. My life since has been one long course of deception and misery. I have borne my punishment for my sin. And I thought that in London I would be quite safe—as safe as in Newfoundland. How was I to know that you would be living in London, and that you should know Lady Finch's sister, or that you had married at all?"

She looked at him with something of the petulant querulousness he remembered so well. The old impulse to excuse and pity herself, even when she was in fault, was cropping up again—ay, even now, when she ought to have been humbled and crushed to the very dust. Ay, verily, she was a strange mixture, a very enigma to read. Robert Angus bit his lips to keep back the words of bitter recrimination he could, oh, so willingly, have poured upon her selfish head, and schooled himself once more, by a desperate effort, to keep calm.

"You have not answered my question," she said, presently. "Where is Joan? Has she left you?"

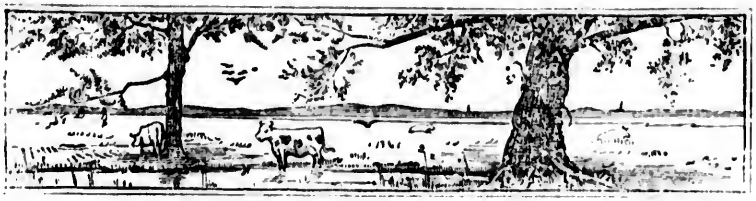
"She is in France at present," he said, briefly.

"But I cannot understand why you did not seek a divorce from me," she said. "I thought that would be the very first step you would take."

"You forget. Your death was reported not ten days after you left me, otherwise it would have been my first step," he said, bitterly. "It is well you can think and speak so calmly of such things, Amy. Brooding over care or wrong will not send you to an early grave."

"I daresay you would not be sorry," she said, with a strange fleeting smile. "I think I would be glad myself. I have been nothing but a misery to myself and others all my days, and I have nothing to live for now. Why will you not answer me about Joan? Does she know I am alive?"

"No," said Robert Angus, slowly. "She does not know."



CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BLOW FALLS.

"SHE does not know? That means you have not told her, of course. How long have you known it?"

"Since one day in February when I met you with Lady Finch's children in the Park. You did not see me."

"No, I did not see you. Well, what are you going to do?"

Her indifference and cainmess nearly maddened him, but he still kept his p ssion held in curb. Not many men could in like circumstances have been absolutely masters of themselves.

"I came here in the expectation that you might be not only willing, but eager to do what you could to repair the almost irreparable injury you have done to those who never hurt a hair of your head," he said, quietly. "I find I have been mistaken. There is nothing for me now but to go to my wife and tell her the whole truth."

"And then?"

"What right have you to question me?" he demanded fiercely. "I daresay you know very well what this means to her and to me. I suppose you know that one hair of her head is dearer to me than you ever were, body and soul."

He was sorely driven, or he would not have given her such a stab. It was a stab, for Amy Burnett's heart had

awakened too late in response to the love she had so lightly thrown away, and it had been like the very sting of death to her to hear that he had so soon forgotten her. Her chequered life had not killed the innate selfishness of her soul.

"How could I make any reparation? What could I do?" she asked, more humbly and anxiously. "I am quite willing to do anything; to go away back to Newfoundland if you like, if only you will not be so hard upon me, Robert."

"Don't take my name on your lips," he said, fiercely. "No, I want you to do nothing but pray for a human heart to feel for the agonies of others, and for a penitent soul to plead forgiveness for your sins." So saying, he turned upon his heel, and unlocking the door with an angry hand, was about to leave the room, when she intercepted him.

"You will not betray me," she said, wildly. "If I am cast out from this house my fate will lie at your door. I have nowhere else to go."

"You need not fear," he said, laconically; "so long as you can deceive the kind and generous lady you have deceived so long you will be safe, so far as my wife and I are concerned. In the midst of our own agonies be very sure your welfare will not be forgotten, only for the sake of the mother whom your wrong-doing has brought to the edge of the grave."

So he left her; and though the very bitterness of death was in his soul, there was something else—a strange, unutterable sense of relief, whispering to him that it was better so. Amy Burnett had brought him face to face with that baser self which for a time had been his master and he the slave, and had made him ashamed. Now that he had firmly and finally resolved to tell his darling all, that peace, born only of well-doing and noblest thoughts, had once more

whispered itself to his riven and weary soul. Verily "the way of transgressors is hard;" it is the narrower path which becomes at length the easier for pilgrim feet.

An uncontrollable yearning for some human sympathy and comfort in his hour of bitter need came upon Robert Angus, and his thoughts turned so longingly to his father that he made arrangements for his absence for a few days, and went down to Scotland by the night mail next day. He sent no announcement of his coming, knowing the old man would be glad to see him; doubly so in his solitude, which, doubtless, he would be finding dreary enough. Robert felt that after having unburdened his mind to his father he would be stronger to face the hardest trial of all—breaking the news to his wife. Little did he dream that in his absence Joan was to learn the bitter truth for herself. Kitty, the housemaid, was the only person left in charge during the master's absence, the other two having been given permission to take a few days' holiday. So it may be imagined that it was a pleasurable surprise to the faithful girl when a cab drove up to the door, the day after the master's departure, and her mistress, accompanied by Mrs Angus, alighted from it.

"Well, Kitty, surprised to see me back?" said Joan, radiant with restored health and pleasant expectancy. "Haven't we stolen a march upon you all?"

"On me, ma'am, you have," answered Kitty, smiling in return, glad, in love of her heart, to see her dear mistress restored to her old home, health, and beauty. "I am all alone in the house."

"All alone! Have the girls run off, or have they been guilty of some misdemeanours which your master thought worthy of dismissal, eh?" said Mrs Angus, gaily.

"No, ma'am; but Mr Angus has gone to Scotland, and he allowed Ellen and Sarah to go home. It was my turn to keep house."

"Gone to Scotland!" repeated Joan, blankly. "You hear that, Isabel? What can have taken him to Auchengray just now?"

"Oh, he may have taken a fancy to surprise his father, just as you took the fancy to surprise your husband and would give me no peace till I packed up," answered Isabel, with a twinkle in her eye. "Don't, in the depth of your disappointment, grudge him a holiday; I am sure he needs it."

"I don't grudge him it. I am glad he has gone. Only, of course, I am disappointed at not seeing him," admitted Joan, and there was a suspicious tear-drop trembling on her eye-lash. "Will you still persist in going to Scotland to-night?"

"I think so," said Isabel. "You won't mind being left for a day or two. I am sure Robert will hurry home directly he sees me."

"Oh, I shall not mind it in the least. I dare say you are as anxious to see your husband as I was to see mine," said Joan, laughingly. "What a prosaic ending to my romantic surprise, isn't it? But I have the joy of meeting still in store."

"How has your master been during my absence, Kitty?" asked Mrs Angus, when the girl followed her to her dressing-room to offer her assistance in unpacking.

"I do not think he has been very well, ma'am," Kitty admitted, reluctantly. "I am glad you have come back. We were all anxious about him."

"That is what brought me home so suddenly. I had an intuitive feeling that all was not right," said Joan, with a cloud on her brow. "I am greatly better, Kitty, so I must nurse your master now."

"You look quite different, ma'am," said Kitty. "I am so very, very glad you are better."

"You have all done your duty faithfully in my absence,

Mr Angus told me in his letters," continued Mrs Angus, kindly. "I shall have something more than thanks for you when the others come back. My girl, I shall never forget your kindness and sympathy with us."

"Hush! hush! ma'am. How could we be anything else to such a kind, good master and mistress?" said Kitty, warmly. "I never was so happy in any place, and Ellen and Sarah say the same. Ellen is so afraid, ma'am, that you will dismiss her now, her work being so much in the nursery."

"I shall never dismiss Ellen while I am able to keep her, and while she will stay, Kitty," said Mrs Angus, quickly. "She might have known that. I intend to ask her to stay as my own maid. I will do so when she comes back."

So Joan settled anew the arrangements of the household, little dreaming that the breaking up was so near at hand.

Isabel left for Scotland that night, and next day Joan went to have a chat with Mrs Harrington, who was delighted to see her again looking so much like her old self.

"I think I must try and make out my call for Lady Finch now," said Joan, when they had talked of their more immediate interests. "I am quite ashamed having been so long of returning her kind visit of sympathy. Could you go with me this afternoon?"

"I shall be delighted, and Lucy will be charmed to see you. She has often wished to see more of you."

"Perhaps we may have opportunities of meeting more frequently now. I shall have so little to occupy me," said Joan, with a sigh. "O Mabel, the house seemed very empty when I entered it yesterday."

"It was hardly wise, I thought, to come home so suddenly," said Mabel. "However, Mr Angus will be here to-day or to-morrow, and then all will be right."

"I am anxious about him. Kitty tells me he has not been so well. Did you notice anything amiss?"

"We have seen almost nothing of him. He has lived like a recluse during your absence. But I do think he would be the better for a change. You must have a trip together soon."

"We will see," answered Joan, with a slight smile. "Well, I shall go and get on my bonnet. Shall we walk across the Park? The day is so lovely."

"By all means," returned Mabel. So within an hour they set out in the pleasant sunshine of that sweet May day to walk the distance to Lady Finch's residence in Boardman Square.

Lady Finch was at home, and very warm was the welcome she accorded her sister and her friend. Mrs Angus was much struck by the contrast the two sisters presented. There was not even one point of resemblance between them. Lady Finch was a tall, aristocratic-looking woman, with a pale, clear-cut face, and large, lustrous, rather melancholy dark eyes. Her manner was the perfection of ease and grace, and there was a repose about her which seemed to indicate that she had occupied a more dignified position than her sister. Although so different in every way, Joan could see that they were very warmly attached to each other.

"I am so sorry you will not see the children, unless, indeed, you can stay and have tea with me," said Lady Finch, after a few sympathetic remarks to her visitor. "They have gone to spend the day at Hampton Court with their governess. It has been a promise that they should go whenever we returned to town. Alice had heard some of her Bournemouth girl-friends talking of it. They went up the river, and will probably return by train, unless they tire quickly and leave early."

"Your children have been well since they came to England, Lady Finch?" said Joan, inquiringly.

"Very well, indeed. Their governess and I have not

acclimatised so well. I have been rather anxious about her, and I have been only in indifferent health myself," returned Lady Finch. "I have had some new photographs of the children taken at Elliott and Fry's, Mabel," she added, to her sister. "I must let you see the proofs. They are very good."

She opened the davenport and took out the photographs, passing them in order to Mrs Angus, whose eyes filled at the sight of the sweet, chubby faces, remembering her own empty, childless home. Before the day was done she would have reason to bless God that it was childless now.

"And this is Amy, Mabel," said Lady Finch, handing a fourth portrait to her sister. "Isn't she a pretty creature? It was with the utmost difficulty I persuaded her to sit the day we went with the children."

"She is, indeed," said Mabel, warmly. "Poor thing, she looks little more than a child."

"She is little more," said Lady Finch. "Her health is failing. I think she feels the effects of her terrible sufferings more now even than she did at first. If we should lose her I know not what we shall do. This is my children's governess, Mrs Angus, and my very dear friend."

Joan laid down the photographs of the children, and took the other in her hand. At the first glance she gave a sudden start, and then fixed her eyes upon that sweet, innocent baby face with a stony stare. It was the same, yet not the same; but it was beyond a doubt the face of Amy Burnett. Fortunately, the ladies were not particularly observant of her at the time, or they must have seen something amiss.

"She was made a widow under very distressing circumstances," said Lady Finch. "Possibly you may remember the loss of the *Sidonia* in the spring of '76."

"Yes, I remember," said Joan, quietly, still looking fixedly at the photograph in her hand, but seeing none of it.

"She was the sole survivor. After the ship went down she was cast on some rocks near the shore, and, after fearful sufferings, was observed by some French fishermen, who succeeded in rescuing her. She was taken to the hospital, and my husband, hearing the story, interested himself about her, and took me to see her. She told us her story, and sad enough it was, too. She was an orphan, without kindred or friends, and had only been married a few weeks to her husband, who was, of course, among the victims of the collision."

"Why were the circumstances of her rescue not reported at the time?" asked Joan, a little coldly, but quietly as before.

"She was so long unable to give the slightest account of herself that I suppose public interest in the loss of the *Sidonia* had expired or been absorbed in some new calamity, and as the poor lady had no friends it could not matter," answered Lady Finch. "When she was able we had her removed to our house, and she remained with us ever since. She is highly accomplished, and has been invaluable to me in many ways. I could not part with her now."

"You did not mention her name, I think," said Joan Angus, in a low, strange voice.

"Amy—Amy Burnett. Mrs Burnett, of course, we call her now. Pardon, me, are you quite well, Mrs Angus?"

"Yes, thank you, but this face reminds me of one I knew long ago," said Joan, with difficulty.

"Some dear friend?" asked Lady Finch, sympathetically.

"Yes; at least she was lost to us," said Joan, recovering herself by a superhuman effort, and speaking more naturally. "Mrs Burnett has been fortunate in meeting with such a generous benefactress as yourself, Lady Finch."

"The good fortune has been mutual," laughed Lady Finch. "I have never regretted the step we took. Are you going already? Dear me! do stay a little longer.

You look very pale, Mrs Angus. Let me order a glass of wine."

"No, thank you; I do not drink wine," said Joan, smiling bravely, for she must not betray herself yet—not at least until she had faced this terrible possibility—or rather certainty—alone.

Although her limbs were trembling, she dared not suggest to Mrs Harrington that they should drive home, lest she should suspect something amiss. So they recrossed the Park together, Joan trying her best to respond to her friend's comments on the fashionable crowd now thronging the Row and the Promenade. When they reached Oxford Street Joan paused, and said abruptly—

"I have a little business to do in Fleet Street, so I may as well go when I am out. You won't mind going home alone?"

"Not at all; but be sure and drive home. Remember you cannot stand much fatigue yet. You look quite pale and fagged already."

"Oh, I am all right. I shall see you soon," said Joan, hurriedly, and, nodding to her friend, she turned away in the opposite direction. At the first cab stand she hired a conveyance, and gave the order to drive to the Inner Temple. She felt that she must know the worst—ay, the very worst—without delay. She had had some business transactions with the barrister whose chambers she now sought, and he greeted her with cordial deference, for her name was one held in honour now, even in the high places of the earth.

"Mrs Angus, good afternoon!" he said courteously. "What can I do for you?"

"Only answer me a few questions, Mr Woodhouse," responded his client, with a wan, fleeting smile. "I am interested in a case. Will you permit me to state it briefly to you, and ask your opinion upon it?"

The lawyer bowed. He would only be too pleased to listen and advise.

"A friend of mine married a gentleman who was a widower, his first wife having been drowned at sea," she said, hurriedly. "Suppose that, after a lapse of a year or two, it should transpire that the first wife was still alive, having been saved from the wreck, what would be the position of the second wife?"

"She would have no position whatsoever, Mrs Angus," responded the barrister, promptly; "nor any legal claim upon the gentleman so long as his first wife survives."

"Then the marriage would be null and void?"

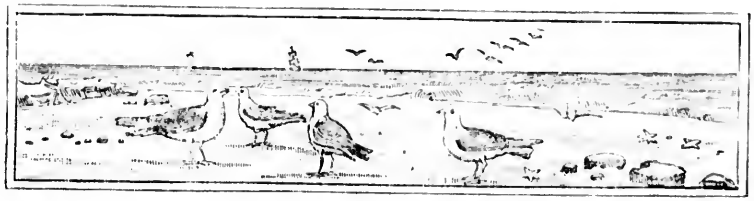
"Completely so. It would be a most unfortunate position for any lady, but the law would be quite powerless to render her any help, or even to give redress."

Mrs Angus rose to her feet and drew down her veil. The lawyer perceived that she was much agitated, but had not the remotest suspicion of the truth.

"May I express the hope that the case to which you have referred does not apply to any near relative or friend, or affect you nearly," said Mr Woodhouse, with courteous solicitude.

"Thank you. It does affect me very nearly. I may have to see you again about it," she said, quietly. "Good afternoon."

She returned his bow, walked with steady, unfaltering step down the long, wide stair, across the dim silent Temple courts, and out into the noisy street. With clear distinctness she gave her address in Cadogan Place, and was rapidly driven home. Home, did I say? What home, what interests, what ties of love or kinship upon the face of the earth had Joan Angus now?



CHAPTER XXVII.

DARK HOURS.

KITTY was unable to understand what was the matter with her mistress. She had watched her walk up the street with Mrs Harrington that afternoon, and thought she had never seen her look so well. After an absence of little more than two hours she returned in a cab, looking like a person who had been seized by a fatal illness. The face, to which something of a girlish bloom had been restored in the sunny South, was once more pallid and worn, but the anguish written so plainly upon it was what caused Kitty the keenest distress.

"Oh, ma'am, my dear lady, what has happened to you?" she exclaimed, when she opened the door. "You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"So I have, Kitty; so I have," returned Mrs Angus, almost in a whisper. "Put a fire in my dressing-room, my girl, and let me lie down there. When did you say the girls were to come home?"

"To-morrow, ma'am," replied Kitty, taking her mistress's *portmonnaie* and sunshade from her trembling hands, and offering her strong, willing arm to assist her upstairs.

"I am glad it is not to-night. We will be alone and quiet together in the house," responded Mrs Angus, wearily.

"Get me something warm to drink. I feel as if it were winter instead of May."

"Will the master be home to-day, do you think?" asked Kitty, when they reached the dressing-room, and her deft fingers were busy unfastening bonnet-strings and mantle.

"I cannot tell," said Mrs Angus, with a low moan. "Oh, Kitty, my girl, pray for your poor master and mistress. They have need of it."

Kitty, more distressed and mystified than ever, made no reply, but made haste to put a match to the fire, and to arrange the pillows of the couch for her mistress's aching head. Mrs Angus took off her walking dress, threw on a loose morning robe, unfastened the coils of her magnificent hair, and wearily sank on the couch. Every atom of physical strength seemed to have deserted her; she felt weak as the veriest infant. Kitty ran for a cup of tea, which she feverishly drank, and, refusing anything more substantial, asked that she might not be disturbed.

"If anyone calls, Kitty, say I am too indisposed to appear. I cannot see even Mrs Harrington should she come in"

"Very well, ma'am, I will attend to it," responded Kitty, and she stole away rather disconsolately downstairs, wondering what new and terrible trouble had fallen upon the house.

Unable to move, Joan Angus lay with her dazed head buried among the cushions, trying, even as her husband had done before her, to think out this thing which had been revealed to her. I dare not try to describe, or attempt to analyse, her state of mind. The terrible truth involved many painful complications for her, but for a time only one fact was present to her mind—that she and her husband must part at once, and for ever. Remember how long and how truly she had loved him, reflect on the years of her happy wifehood, on the undying and sacred memories which bound her to him in a tie which she had hoped only death would break, and imagine something of the agony

which rent her soul. She lay perfectly still while the first waves of the tempest broke over her, but the clenched hand, the pain-drawn brows, the ashen lips told their pitiful tale. After a time the other aspects of the matter began to crowd in upon her, and she realised in a flash that her life was ruined. Henceforth she must be a homeless, nameless waif, drifting alone and uncared for on the sea of life. And she had been so happy, so favoured among women, so honoured among her fellow-beings. Had she grown proud and hard of heart, she wondered, that so awful a punishment should be meted out to her? Then she thought of her little child, and a wave of healing swept across her. For the first time, I believe, Joan Angus really thanked God in her heart that He had taken the child to Himself. The mystery of that hard dealing was in a moment made plain, for had the child lived what name or place could he have had among his fellow-men?

At length the over-driven brain, weighted by its heavy burden of thought, pressed upon the eyelids until merciful slumber came. It was the sleep of utter exhaustion, mental and physical; so heavy and dreamless that when Kitty stole into the room late at night the tired head did not even stir upon the pillow. The faithful girl, with tears in her eyes, softly drew a rug over the prostrate figure and stole away again, to wonder anew what the trouble could be which in a few hours' time had wrought so dire a change.

She waited until she thought her master had ample time to come from the station, should he have arrived by the evening train from the North, and then, after another look at her still slumbering mistress, she retired to rest. About four o'clock she heard her mistress stirring, and at once sprang up and ran down to light the kitchen fire, so that she might have soon her much-needed breakfast.

The early sunshine was streaming in at the window when Mrs Angus awoke, and, rising slowly, she dragged her feeble

limbs across the room, and drew up the blind. Oh, how fair the sweet summer morning, how bright the sunshine, how green the leafy trees in the gardens, how loud and glad the singing of the happy birds! What a mockery it all seemed! For the first time in her life Joan Angus closed her eyes to shut out what had ever given her keenest delight. She walked back to the couch, sat down, and, folding her arms across her breast, stared in a vague, dazed way before her. A new day had begun—the day on which, probably, Robert would come back. With what words would she greet him—in what words tell him of the blight which had fallen upon them? Would it not be better far, she asked herself, to go away before he came, leaving an explanation behind? Would they not thus be spared needless agony? Prudence said it would be the wiser way, but the heart whispered no. She must see him once more. She must creep into his arms, and lay her head a moment on his breast; she must hear a word of love to carry with her into the desolation of the future. They must look into each other's eyes once more, reading there true, abiding love—ay, for the last time. Not one gleam of hope was cast upon the darkness—it was a vast, intolerable, rayless despair, encompassing her like the blackness of eternal night.

The weary day wore on. Only once did Joan Angus quit her dressing-room, and it was to wander vaguely and aimlessly through the house, perhaps to take farewell of all that had been associated with her lost happiness. It tried her strength, for when she again returned to her own room she was glad to lie down again to rest her trembling limbs, though there was no rest for the throbbing brain. In the afternoon the other two maids returned to their duties—looking forward to brighter days, only to find that some new and heartbreaking cloud had fallen on the house. Towards evening a strange deep peace seemed to come upon Joan Angus, a preparation, as it were, for the keener

ordeal she had yet to endure. She was resolved to be calm, to spare Robert the sight of the anguish which she could carry with her into the dim shades of the desolate future; she would do her utmost to soften the blow for him. The day wore on, the sun sunk slowly to his rest 'mid a blaze of golden light, and the sweet summer dusk stole softly, tenderly, over the mighty city. The stars were trembling in the cloudless sky when Robert Angus, with slow and heavy step, came up the quiet street to his own door. He had thought himself strong to tell Joan the truth, but now, when the ordeal was so near, he shrank from it with a great shrinking. He pictured the radiant face paling at the cruel words; he pictured the light slowly fading out of the sweet, serious eyes; he saw the beautiful, sensitive mouth quiver with pain; ay, he saw it all. There were no lights in the front windows. Dining-room, drawing-room, and study, alike seemed to be in darkness. What did it mean? Kitty answered his knock, and he wondered why the girl looked so anxious and pale.

"Oh, sir, I am so glad you have come back," she said, quickly, "I thought you never would come. This has been such a long, terrible day."

"Why? Your mistress is well, I hope. Why is the house in darkness? What has happened?" he asked, quickly.

"Mrs Angus is not well, sir. She has been very ill since yesterday. I think she has had some bad news or something. It is a terrible trouble, any way," said Kitty, anxious to prepare her master for the change in his wife.

"Where is she?" he asked, briefly.

"In her dressing-room, sir. I think she expected you about nine to-night.

Robert Angus did not hear the latter part of the girl's sentence, being already half way upstairs. The door of the dressing-room was a little ajar, and a broad line of light shed by the glowing fire was cast upon the crimson carpet on the

landing. Its velvet pile deadened his footfall, and he reached the door without disturbing the inmate of the room. He saw the recumbent figure, the dark hair lying loosely over the white dressing-gown, but he could not see the face! He entered the room, closed the door, and his wife sprang up.

"My darling! my darling! Has the blow fallen already? Am I spared the pain from which, God help me, I have shrunk too long?" he cried, hoarsely, and gathered her in his arms as if he would never let her go again. For a minute or so she lay still in his arms with her white face drooped upon his breast, so still that he was afraid. "Speak to me, Joan. My wife, my darling!" he said, almost wildly. "Let me see your face. What is it has happened to you? Have you found out what has made the past few weeks one prolonged agony to me?"

"Kiss me, Robert, only once," she said in a low, still voice, and raised her colourless lips to his. He kissed her not once, but again and yet again, calling her by every endearing name, until at length she drew herself very gently away.

"Let me go now," she said, very quietly. "Tell me what you were talking about? What blow do you refer to? Do you know that Amy Burnett, your former wife, is still alive?"

"Yes, I know. How and when, my poor darling, did you discover it?" he asked, controlling himself by a mighty effort.

"Yesterday, at Lady Finch's. You knew she was there? How long have you known it?" she asked, in low, clear, passionless tones.

"Since the day Eric died," he answered, almost as one might have answered to a judge.

"That is three months ago. Why was I kept in ignorance so long?"

"Joan!—wife! Don't look at me with those eyes!" he exclaimed, hoarsely. "Oh, my darling, if you only knew

how I had been tempted and tried. I could not have told you then. It would have killed you."

"I—I thought you loved me," she said, unsteadily, but swayed a little where she stood, but when he would have put an arm about her she waved him back. "You have allowed me for three months to occupy a false position," she continued, and her clear eyes looked bright and fearless into his. "What have I done to be so treated? Did you not know me well enough to feel sure that any certainty, however terrible, would be preferable to that?"

"Do not be so hard upon me, Joan. Let me plead my case with you. I have been weak, erring, unjust to you if you will, but it was because I loved you. Look at me, and tell me if you think I have not suffered——"

"How long would you have continued to deceive me had I not discovered the truth for myself?" she interrupted.

"Be more merciful, Joan!" fell hoarsely from Robert Angus's lips. "Believe me when I swear to you that I was on my way to tell you the whole truth. My father knows, so will his wife by this time. Do not let me plead in vain for forgiveness. Oh, my wife! my wife!"

"Go—away—for a little, please, if you love me, Robert," she said, with great difficulty; "just a little while, please. I must be alone. I cannot bear it."

Her look was so imploring, so intense, that he dared not demur or disobey. When she was once more alone, a great dimness came before Joan Angus' eyes, and she sank on her knees before the couch. The final blow had come, the idol she had set up for herself to worship was shattered to atoms at her feet. The husband she had adored and reverenced, as a king among his fellows, a man upright and honourable above any she had ever met, was only common clay.

She bowed her head upon her clasped hands, and one voiceless prayer ascended from her breaking heart—"Let me die!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FAREWELL.

ROBERT ANGUS went downstairs, entered his wife's study, and shut the door. It is well there are not many such moments in life; they could not be compensated on earth. He walked up and down the floor of the darkened room, sometimes pausing to look curiously at the moonbeams, which, stealing through the half-closed venetians, made pale uncertain lines across the carpet. After a time he sat down in his wife's chair, at the writing-table in the window, and buried his face in his arms. He sat thus in absolute silence for a long time.

In the kitchen the three maids were grouped about the hearth, wondering what could be the matter, and afraid, though it was near midnight, to go to bed, lest their services should be required. The master had had nothing when he came off his journey, and they dared not intrude to ask for any orders. This terrible, unknown, but crushing sorrow seemed to be more dire in its consequences than little Eric's death.

"I'll go up and knock at the mistress's door," said Kitty, bravely rising when the eight-day clock on the kitchen stairs rang twelve. "I'm not fit to bear this quietness no longer."

She stole lightly up the stair to the dining-room flat, but

just as she pulled the baize-covered door back she paused, for there was a footfall coming down from the upper landing, and in a moment she saw the white-robed figure of her mistress, with her long dark hair fastened by a silver pin and hanging about her shoulders, glide across the hall and into the study. So there was nothing for her but to go back to her neighbours again, which she did, shivering as if she had seen a ghost.

Robert Angus was not conscious of the opening of the door, not conscious of the light footstep crossing the floor, and he started violently when he felt a presence near him, and when his wife's hands entwined themselves about his arms. But he did not look up, nor yet utter any word.

"Robert," she said, at length, in an almost voiceless whisper, but he heard it. "I have come back. I was very hard upon you. It was my pride that was hurt. Forgive me! Let us bear this together while we may——"

He turned about, folded his arms about the kneeling figure, and drew it to his breast. He bent down his head, and rested his cheek upon the shining brown tresses with which he had so often played. After a time she felt his tears falling on her hands; and with a quick sob she wound her arms about his neck, and prayed him to be calm. It was more than she could bear.

"You have forgiven me, Joan?" he said, at length. "You believe it was through my love for you I erred. It was a terrible temptation. Had I loved you less I need not have succumbed to it so easily."

"I know, I know!" she answered, quickly. "It is I who must ask to be forgiven for my hardness of heart. I ought not to be here," she continued, her voice falling to a whisper again. "It can be no sin, can it, seeing it must be the last time, and that we part to-morrow?"

"For ever, Joan?"

"Don't ask me, Robert?" she moaned. "It is sufficient for me to bear as it is."

"When I think of your ruined life, my darling, I am unmanned," he said, hoarsely. "You of all women to have such a fate. Was it for this you bestowed upon me the unspeakable blessing of your love?"

"Hush! hush! We must not, dare not, question; only accept, as unmurmuringly as we can, what cannot be helped," she whispered. "After all, we have been happy. We have memory to live upon. I am not sure that if I could I would undo the past. I have really tasted life's sweets these past two years."

"Joan," said Robert Angus, so suddenly and earnestly that involuntarily she started, "you know there is one way in which we can—partially, at least—remedy the evil my unhappy wife has wrought. Can you guess?"

"Yes, you can ask the law to make your former marriage null and void," she answered. "But——"

"But what, my darling?"

"You remember what the Bible says of the man who shall marry again after he is divorced," she said, shrinkingly. "Though you should divorce yourself from Amy Burnett, and we should be married, I could never feel as if I had any right to be your wife."

"Then we must part indefinitely, perhaps for ever, Joan?"

"I—I think it would be better so," she faltered. "We will get strength. It may not be so hard as you think."

"But you, Joan? Do you know what it will involve for you? Exclusion from the world; from the society of which you have been so bright an ornament."

"If that be the world's verdict, I am content to accept it," she said, with a strange, sad smile. "And what will society be to me without you?"

They were silent again, each weighed down by the burden

of the dark future, which seemed like some tossing, shoreless sea, without haven or destination.

"You have seen Amy?" said Joan, inquiringly, after a time.

"Yes, I saw her. I met her by accident one day in the Park walking with Lady Finch's children. Knowing Lady Finch had brought a governess with her from Newfoundland, I had no difficulty in understanding the whole matter."

"Then you went to see her?"

"I did."

"What did she say?"

"Don't ask me, Joan? If there be a woman on earth utterly devoid of feeling or heart except in her own interests, that woman is Amy Burnett," he said, passionately. "Her chief and only fear was that we should reveal her long deception to her benefactress."

"It is terrible to think what a living lie her life has been these past four years," said Joan, shuddering. "Poor erring Amy! One wrong step has led to too many more."

"Joan, is it possible you can have an atom of—of sympathy or compassion for her?" exclaimed Robert, in astonishment.

"When I think of her poor mother, when I remember what she was, Robert, there is nothing but pity in my heart for her," said Joan, her face shining with divine unselfishness. "Whatever my lot may be, hers is the harder, for my conscience has no burden upon it?"

"I never knew till now how utterly unworthy I was of you, Joan," said Robert Angus, humbly. "When I hear you speak, I feel as if I could almost be strong to part with you. And yet, God knows, without you my life will be empty indeed."

"On this side, but over yonder all will be well," whispered Joan, dreamily, and her face shone with something of the peace which, in answer to her agonised prayer, had

come as a benison from Heaven. "See, the dawn is breaking," she said, rising to her feet, and pointing to the faint glimmering of light in the room. "You are in need of rest, and so am I. Later in the day—for it is a new day now—we can talk more, and make our arrangements."

A smile flickered for a moment on the grave, beautiful mouth, but the quivering of the lips speedily dispelled it. She was brave, indeed, but it would not in a moment be crushed down. She bent over him, laid her white hand caressingly on the dark head, lightly touched his brow with her lips, and glided from the room. In her heart of hearts she said it was her last farewell.

. . . . . .

Before the day was very old, Mr and Mrs Angus from Auchengray arrived at the house in Cadogan Place, having travelled all night. Isabel could not rest until she had seen and spoken with Joan. Poor Isabel! it seemed as if her dead brother's sins were being visited indeed upon her head, and this was the bitterest fruit of all. Robert received them. He had only thrown himself upon the study-couch, sleep being out of the question. Kitty told him her mistress had fallen asleep in her dressing-room.

"Where is Joan?" said Isabel, hurriedly, putting back her veil from her haggard face. "Will she see me? Does she feel bitter against me? I should not wonder, only it would break my heart."

"None of us know Joan yet, Mrs Angus," replied Robert, with a mournful smile. "And I, who have been blessed with her close companionship so long, know her least of all. There is no bitterness in her heart. The way in which she has borne this awful shock is quite unlike anything I have ever seen. She is more an angel than a woman. She would even pity and pardon the woman who has done her so bitter a wrong."

"Then she is too good for this world. She won't live,"

replied Mr Angus, almost hotly. "Is there no law to punish a person who has done what that person has done? I daren't trust myself to name her. Can't she be hanged, or something?"

"Hush! hush!" said Isabel, gently.

"No, I won't hush! I must speak to somebody or I'll explode. The hussey! I only wish I had her here. John Burnett can't have brought up his children properly, or they wouldn't turn out such reprobates."

Isabel turned about and quitted the room, and Robert listened patiently to his father's ravings, guessing they would relieve his mind. He had been so stunned at first at the story his son told him at Auchengray, that he had been unable to utter a word.

"Well, what are you going to do?" inquired the old gentleman, when he had spent his wrath in plain speaking about Amy Burnett. "Of course, there will be no difficulty in getting a divorce, and then you can be married again."

"There would be no difficulty, but Joan will not agree to it," replied Robert, quietly.

"Not agree to it? In the name of wonder, why not?"

"She has peculiar and strong ideas on certain subjects, father," said Robert, with difficulty. "Her decision in this matter I believe to be firm and unalterable. I would rather not discuss it just now, if you please."

"Then what is she going to do?" queried Mr Angus, in open-mouth amazement.

Robert shook his head.

"Does she know what the thing involves? Has she faced it in all its bearings? Does she know how the world treats people in such a position?"

"She knows that she will have to retire into solitude, that she can have no position anywhere!" groaned Robert Angus, in the anguish of his soul.

"Is the woman mad?"

"For heaven's sake, father, be quiet, if you cannot say aught to help or comfort," said Robert, passionately, unable to bear any more.

"I never heard the like of it," said the banker, more quietly. "And you were so happy together; and Isabel and I were so proud and happy in you both. Poor Joan! poor, poor girl!"

His warm, impulsive feelings would no longer be hid under the semblance of blustering anger. His firm underlip quivered, tears chased each other down his cheeks, and he cried like a child. To Robert Angus the sight of his father's grief was even more painful than his assumed irritability, and he began to walk restlessly to and fro to master his own feelings.

"Isabel and I have talked it over, Robert," said the old man, at length, "and we've arrived at a conclusion. I am getting to be an old man now; time I was getting aside from active life. I'll give up the whole concern, and we'll go abroad, and make a home for that poor stricken creature, who has scarcely known a day's happiness since her father died. I think she will be happy with us. We'll do what we can to make up for all she has lost—at least she'll feel that she isn't alone in this cold, cruel world."

"God bless you, father!" fell hoarsely from Robert Angus's lips, and he took his father's hand in a grip of iron, which told a little of the relief, the unspeakable gratitude which filled his soul. Just then the door opened, and Isabel looked in. Her face was wet with tears, and her voice tremulous with emotion.

"Joan would like to see you," she said to her husband. "You need not be afraid; she is very calm and composed. Her fortitude is simply marvellous."

Robert Angus, the younger, remained below while the two went upstairs. He had no right any more to seek his wife's presence; she was his no more. They were as com-

pletely parted as if death had taken the one and left the other. Perhaps in time that thought might be less fraught with agony; and yet it was greater than he could bear.

It was rapidly arranged that day that Mr Angus the elder should escort his own wife and Joan back to Cannes, where they would remain until his affairs were wound up, and he could join them there. That was all that was settled in the meantime, the discussion of the future being left till Joan was more able to bear it. She was very calm, very sweet, very passive in their hands, like one, Isabel thought, whose interest in life was dead.

On the evening of the second day the trio started for the sunny South, once more leaving Robert Angus alone in the desolate house. It had been agreed that nothing need be said yet about the extraordinary change in their domestic affairs. Soon—ay, too soon—the world's tongue would wag freely, making light of what was of such terrible moment to them.

Joan would not seek a private parting from her husband. Isabel guessed the reason why. Her heart was already too sorely riven. He was in the hall to see them off, and when the others stepped out Joan turned to him and held out her hand. Neither spoke; but the language of the eyes, those mirrors of the soul, could not be mistaken. In both shone the deep unquenchable yearning of unalterable love. It was over in a moment. Mr Angus came back, took Joan on his arm, and drew the hall door close after them. A moment more, and the carriage wheels rattled over the stony street, and Robert Angus was alone indeed, among the ruins of his happiness and his home.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A WASTED LIFE.

THE summer wore on, flying with golden wings for the happy and light-hearted, but dragging slowly and heavily for those who had little in their lives sympathetic with sunshine and summer weather. August—hot, sultry, oppressive August—found Robert Angus still in town, toiling in his office at Lombard Street like a galley slave. His partners urged upon him to take a rest—to join his wife on the Continent for a week or two, or at least to relax his unceasing attention to business—but he assured them he was in no need of change. They were astonished, and discussed between themselves the probability that Angus and his clever wife were not on good terms with each other. In times gone by he had not needed urging to turn his back upon business, but had been the one most frequently away. Whatever the explanation, Robert Angus himself gave them no hint, or any satisfaction whatsoever, so they had just to cease speculating about the matter.

He was sitting at his desk one afternoon about closing time when the office boy brought him a letter in an envelope with a broad black border, and sealed with a crest he did not recognise. The writing was a lady's—a clear, delicate, refined hand. With some curiosity he broke the seal, and

when he saw the address he started, and ran his eyes rapidly over it. Thus it read :—

"32 Boardman Square, S.W.,
"*August 24th.*

"Dear Mr Angus,—My children's governess, Mrs Amy Burnett, who, as perhaps you are aware, came with me from St John's, is lying dangerously ill. The doctors say recovery is out of the question, decline being the malady. She implored me to-day with great earnestness to send for you. I was greatly surprised, not knowing she had any acquaintances in London outside our own circle. I may say she appears to be in great distress of mind, and if you could ease that distress in any way, you would greatly oblige me by calling immediately, if possible.

"Hoping you are well, and that Mrs Angus is recruiting abroad,—I am, yours sincerely,

"Lucy Anne Finch."

Within the hour Robert Angus was ringing the bell at Lady Finch's door. He was shown into the same room where he had met Amy face to face, and almost immediately Lady Finch entered. They had never met, although each was well known to the other by repute. She bowed, and quietly thanked him for his prompt attention to her message.

"I am greatly surprised, and a little distressed as well, Mr Angus," she said, looking keenly at him. "Mrs Burnett led me to understand that she had no friends, and yet in her wanderings she has mentioned many names, your own and your wife's with the greatest frequency. There is, I fear, some mystery about her."

"There is, indeed. Lady Finch, may I ask you to trust me until I have seen her? I assure you you will not be kept in the dark one moment longer than I can help," said Robert Angus, quietly, and with that winning entreaty which seldom could be denied.

She bowed.

"Most certainly," she said, kindly. "Will you please step upstairs now? Mrs Burnett is awake, and quite conscious. She is growing very impatient for you to come."

Robert Angus nodded, and turned to follow Lady Finch upstairs.

"I will not come in. Do not agitate her more than you can help," she said, anxiously. "Ring if you think she requires my assistance; I shall not be far away."

Robert silently nodded, and entering the room, shut the door. He started violently at sight of the woman who had tried him so cruelly, and if any bitterness remained in his heart it fled forever before the fast approaching majesty of death. She was sitting up in bed, propped by pillows, her short, bright curls clustering about her head like a halo, her eyes unnaturally hollow and brilliant, her wasted cheeks bearing that vivid red flush so unmistakably indicative of decline. Robert Angus was inexpressibly shocked. Was it possible that three months could have wrought this swift and terrible change?

She turned her head, and a wan smile flickered for a moment about her wasted lips, and the feeble head beckoned him to come nearer. "I am so weak I cannot speak loud. I can only whisper, and I have a great deal to say," she said with difficulty, and Robert Angus silently obeyed. He really felt at that moment that he had not a word to say.

"You see I am nearly done with life," she whispered. "It has weighed upon me all the summer, till it has brought me to this."

"What?" he asked, with strange abruptness.

"The weight of my secret. The thought of Joan and of you, the yearning for my mother—all, all have killed me," she said, wearily. "They tell me I have not many days to live, so I sent for you to ask you to forgive me. Where is Joan? Are you living together still?"

"No; my wife left me three months ago. She is now living abroad with my father and his wife," was Robert Angus's brief reply.

"How did she bear it? You thought it would kill her. But hearts are not so easily broken. Oh, Robert, Robert!"

The golden head drooped upon the breast, and burning tears forced themselves from her eyes.

"Hush! hush! you will exhaust yourself," Robert Angus said gently, and, impelled by a vast compassion, he laid his hand soothingly on the down-bent head. She caught it in both her own and passionately kissed it.

"I will try to be calm. I will do everything you wish, if only you will speak so kindly to me," she said, brokenly. "Tell me something about poor Joan. Do you think she would forgive me if she knew I was on my dying bed?"

"She forgave you from the first, Amy," Robert Angus answered, with difficulty. "What can I tell you of her? I have not seen nor heard from her since the beginning of May. She is but in indifferent health, my father tells me."

"Was it a great blow to her?" whispered Amy. "I used to lie awake at nights picturing how she would look when you told her. I knew not how very wrong I was in keeping the knowledge of my being alive from you. It was done thoughtlessly, heedlessly, but I have suffered for it. I have indeed."

"We have all suffered, Amy," said Robert Angus, sadly. "Why did you ever leave me at all? I have often wondered that."

"I don't know myself. I seem to have been pursued by some evil thing hunting me to my fate. Oh, what would I not have given to be back in safety with you when we were tossing on the sea! I knew too soon how great my sin and my mistake had been."

"We will not speak of it any more," he said, in a low

voice. "Nor need we prolong this interview, which is painful for us both. What can I do for you? Would you like to see any of your friends?"

A strange, bright, eager light sprang into her eyes, and she said, in tones of pitiful yearning—

"Do you think any of them would come? My mother—is she still alive? What you said about her being on the brink of the grave has haunted me day and night. I was very often nearly going home, only I was afraid."

"Your mother will come, Amy. I will bring her, if you wish."

"Will you? How can you be so kind, so ready to help me, after all the cruel suffering I have caused you?" she asked, wonderingly. "Had anyone so injured me I should live but to be revenged."

"Joan taught me, Amy," he said, and she saw the quick light of passionate love for the absent one leap into his eyes, and knew that his heart was wholly estranged from her.

"Do you love her very dearly, Robert?" she asked, wistfully.

"She was my wife, and she loved me," said Robert, quietly.

"I was your wife, too," she said; then, as if the words were forced from her against her will—"But you love her more than you ever loved me. Am I not right?"

"For Heaven's sake, Amy, do not torture yourself and me by such questions," he said, passionately. "What can it matter to you now? I think I had better leave you. I will go down to Scotland to-night, and by Thursday at the latest your mother will be by your bedside."

"You are sure she will come? Tell me how they all bore it. It must have been a terrible blow. I have never dared to think of my father. We feared his anger, perhaps because we saw it so seldom."

"It can do no good to recall the unhappy past," he said, gently, but firmly, feeling inwardly a little impatient of her persistence in referring to such painful matters. "Only one thing more before I go. It is my intention to tell Lady Finch the whole story before I leave the house."

"Do you think it must be told? How she will despise me; perhaps turn me out of the house," she said, with a burst of childish tears. "Would it not be better to wait until I am dead."

"No, I will tell her to-day. She has a right to know. How otherwise could this interview and the arrival of Mrs Burnett be explained? Be reasonable, Amy. Lady Finch is too kind-hearted a woman to turn you away now."

"Very well; if it must be, it must be. I want to do right, but it is so hard. I hate unpleasant things. Robert, do you think Joan would not come and tell me she forgives me, if you ask her? I should like to see her once more."

"I could not bring her home in her present state of health and subject her to such an ordeal," he said, quietly. "You may accept my assurance that she does forgive you. I know she does in her inmost heart."

"Very well. Of course you must be very careful of her, when you love her so, and when you will claim her again so soon," she said, plaintively. "Are you going? But I shall see you again. I must see you again! Do you know I love you ten thousand times better than Joan could ever do? And——"

"Hush! hush!" he said, sternly, and turning upon his heel, quitted the room, for he could make nothing of her, self seemed to be so predominant still.

"Will you ask Lady Finch to grant me a few minutes' conversation, please?" he asked a servant he met on the landing.

"Yes, sir. She is in the drawing-room; will you please to step this way?" the girl answered; and he followed her

into the presence of her mistress. It was with some curiosity that Lady Finch turned to greet him again, for her mind was a maze of bewilderment and doubt.

"You found her much changed and very weak, no doubt," she said, inquiringly. "I hope the interview did not exhaust her."

"I do not think so. Yes, she is greatly changed," said Robert Angus, leaning his arm on the mantel, and fixing his eyes on the wealth of green boughs entertwined about the fire-place. There was a moment's silence.

"Lady Finch, you are surprised at my acquaintance with Amy Burnett," he said, presently, without looking up.

"Yes. Have you known her long? Did you know her in that mysterious past, to which she has never even casually referred till now?"

"Yes. I knew her well. She was once my wife."

An exclamation of surprise and dismay fell from Lady Finch's lips, and she rose up. What manner of adventuress had she sheltered so long? What manner of woman had she permitted to be the guide and close companion of her children?

"It is a painful story, Lady Finch; may I ask you to resume your seat while I relate it to you as briefly as possible?" he asked; and she sank helplessly into her chair again, and folded her hands on her knee.

Then, as concisely and briefly as possible, Robert Angus laid bare to a stranger the story of his life. It was painful for him to tell, painful for her to listen, and both were relieved when it was over. Lady Finch was deeply shocked, deeply hurt likewise, that her generous kindness had been so undeservedly bestowed.

"What a mistake it has all been, and I have made her my bosom companion—have loved her almost as a sister," she said, with a slight flush of indignation in her gentle eyes. "What a course of deceit her life has been! Oh, I do

hope she has not contaminated my children ; and yet I do not think she has. I have frequently heard her urge upon them the fearful consequences of wrong-doing, and the necessity of standing ever by the truth."

"Out of her own bitter experience she could speak with added weight," said Robert. "Lady Finch, you have done already for the poor creature upstairs what can never be acknowledged or repaid. May I ask you, as a personal favour to my wife and myself, that you will extend your mercy a little further, and allow her to die here? We are comparative strangers to you, and it is a great deal to ask, but will you grant my prayer?"

"For your wife's sake, because of the strength and stimulus she has so often given us in her books, I will gladly grant your request," she said, smiling a little. "It would ill become me to turn a dying woman to the door, even though she had in a manner injured me. That is not the lesson the Master taught."

"God bless you!" fell fervently from Robert Angus's lips, and he looked with admiration and reverence upon the sweet face shining in its compassion and kindly feeling.

"What of her friends? Her poor father and mother—any of her relatives will be welcome to see her here," said Lady Finch, presently. "It might make the last days easier for her, and her mother's heart would be set at rest."

"If you will allow me, Lady Finch, I will convey your kind message to Mrs Burnett. I intend going to Scotland to-night."

"What trouble you are willing to take on her behalf!" exclaimed Lady Finch, involuntarily. "Not many could be so magnanimous."

"I cannot forget what she was, and I love her mother very dearly, Lady Finch," said Robert, quickly. "Besides, it is what Joan would have me do."

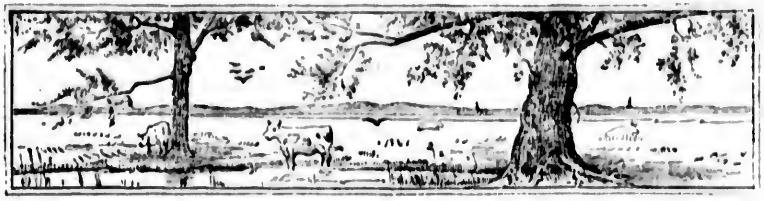
"This, then, is the explanation of Mrs Angus's protracted residence on the Continent? Need I say you both have my heartfelt sympathy?" said Lady Finch, with glistening eyes.

He nodded, and there was a moment's silence.

"Please God, there will be happier days in store for you both," she said presently. "Are you going now? Good-bye, and thank you for your confidence in me."

"I need not ask you to regard it as sacred, Lady Finch. Perhaps the world need never know that our marriage tie was dissolved for a time," he said, as he held her hand at parting.

"You are right. We cannot too jealously guard our family histories, for the world has a prying, uncharitable eye," she said, warmly returning his clasp. "Not even to my own sister shall I tell this story, Mr Angus. You may rest assured that it will never pass my lips again."



CHAPTER XXX.

THE ERRING CHILD.

"WHAT is it, mamma? Are you feeling worse?"

"No, dear, not worse, only restless and uneasy. How hot it is! I think there is thunder in the air."

Mary Burnett looked anxiously at her mother's careworn face, which was flushed beyond its wont, and her eyes restless and troubled in their expression.

"The room is hot, mother. I shall open the window a little," said Mary, pushing aside the curtains and throwing it open as she spoke.

"No word of the boys yet, Polly?" said Mrs Burnett. "Isn't it almost nine?"

"Yes, but they have scarcely time to be back from Strathblane, mother," answered Mary. "I wonder how the match went to-day. Willie is so jealous for the honour of the Auchengray Thistle. He was so excited he couldn't take a bite of dinner. James will come with them, likely. He went out, you know, by the five train. He is as much of a cricketer as ever."

"Jamie will be a boy all his days," said the mother, fondly. "Is that your father coming across the park?"

"I am just wondering," answered Mary, musingly. "Isn't it rather tall for papa? and he is carrying a bag, too. It isn't a Castle visitor. He is coming here."

Mrs Burnett leaned her arm on Polly's shoulder, and the two stood silently watching the approaching stranger. As he drew nearer a quick flush sprang into Polly's face, and she uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, mamma, it is Robert Angus!"

"Impossible!"

"It is. Don't you recognise him now? I can see his face quite plainly. Dear me, he looks different from what he used to; quite old and grey."

"That is the explanation of my restlessness, Polly. I felt as if something unusual were going to happen," said Mrs Angus, sinking into a chair. "I wonder what brings Robert here to-night. I hope his wife is quite well."

"I will run and see what Susan has in the larder," said thoughtful Mary. "He looks as if he had just come off a long journey, and he will need something substantial."

Mrs Burnett nodded rather listlessly and sat still. It was well for the Burnett household that Mary was such a capable housekeeper, and such a practical, thoughtful, unselfish person, for Mrs Burnett was no longer able to fulfil her part. The bodily weakness, so long protracted, had begun to weaken the mental faculties; memory had failed, and the poor mother could not follow out any train of thought. Mary investigated the larder, gave her orders to Susan, told the housemaid to prepare a room for the unexpected guest, and then ran out to meet him herself. She was anxious to learn first whether he brought any bad tidings with him, for things had to be broken very gently and gradually to Mrs Burnett now.

"Well, Mary, how are you?" said Robert Angus, cordially, for there was something very attractive and pleasant about the neat girlish figure, and the kind, open, pleasant face. Mary Burnett was a woman now—a cheerful, helpful, reliable woman, of whom everyone spoke well.

"Quite well, thank you, Robert. How surprised we are to see you, but how glad. Is Mrs Angus quite well?"

"I have not seen her since she went abroad," he answered, a little reservedly.

"You will be grieved to see the difference in mother. The doctor cannot give us any hope that she will ever be much better."

Robert Angus's grave face took a yet graver shade. Truly Amy Burnett had a great deal to answer for; the painful consequence of her sin had not been confined to herself—nay, she had escaped with the least hurt.

Mrs Burnett was effusively glad to see Robert Angus, but the wonder at his coming had already faded from her mind, and she greeted him as she might have done had he dropped in after an evening stroll from the town. During the few minutes he remained alone with her, her rambling uncertain talk and restless, uneasy manner struck him most painfully. He could scarcely believe that the wasted, fragile being before him could be the bright, cheerful, self-reliant wife and mother who had once been the centre and guiding light of her happy home.

"So you have been travelling, Robert?" she said, kindly. "Has the girl taken your portmanteau upstairs, and are they getting you something to eat? You see I am not able to do much now. I have been so poorly since Amy went away."

He was relieved when Mary re-entered the room to tell him his supper was laid. She accompanied him to the dining-room, and hovered about him, attending to his comfort in a gentle, unobtrusive way which reminded him of Joan.

"Mary, does your mother talk much about Amy?" he asked, when he had laid down his knife and fork.

"Talk! Amy's name is scarcely ever from her lips, Robert," said Mary, with filling eyes. "She has brooded

so long and painfully on the idea that her thinking powers have become weakened—so the doctor says."

"What effect do you think it would have upon her to be told that she is still alive?"

Mary started violently, and her eyes dilated with terror.

"Why do you ask such a question, Robert?"

"Because it is true, Mary,' said Robert Angus, rising to his feet. "Your sister is still alive."

Mary Burnett stood absolutely still, spell-bound in her astonishment.

"Alive! How? Where? Were they not all drowned in the wreck?"

"No, she alone survived," he answered, and then in a few brief words told her all that was necessary for her to know.

"She is very ill now—dying, in fact," he continued, "and it would ease her to ask forgiveness from your father and mother. What do you think? Could she bear the shock and the journey immediately? For we must go to-morrow, if at all. There is no time to lose."

Still Mary Burnett never spoke. Her quiet eyes were averted, for she was overwhelmed with the old shame which any mention of her sister always caused.

"I cannot take it in, Robert," she said, with difficulty. "Amy alive and in London!—but it will make no difference for you and Joan."

"It has made a difference," answered Robert, wincing a little. "That is the explanation of my father's hurried retirement from business, and of his sudden resolution to reside abroad. Joan is with them. I have not seen her since the month of May."

Mary Burnett uttered a low cry, and covered her face with her hands. Oh! was there to be no end at all to the misery arising from her sister's wrong-doing? At that moment life seemed a very sad and tangled web to the

young girl, whose early womanhood had been shadowed by the sin of others. Mary Burnett had not been the same girl since her sister's flight.

"Do not be distressed, Mary, and do not turn away from me. Blame you! No, how could I?" Robert said, kindly. "You have been a true sister to me, Polly, and always will be, I hope. Try to calm yourself, and let us see what can be done. You are so sensible and helpful, I rely upon you to make this all right."

"Well, I will go and try to break it to mamma," said Mary, more quietly, though her voice was still unsteady. "There is papa coming in. I can leave you to tell him."

Robert nodded, and Mary left the room. When she entered her mother's sitting-room she found that she had lain down on the couch, and seemed to be asleep.

"Is that you, Polly? Have you made Robert all right?" she asked, turning at her daughter's entrance. "What had you to give him to eat?"

"He had a bit of chicken and a cup of coffee, which I think he enjoyed, mamma," answered Mary, readily. "Are you more tired than usual, that you are lying down?"

"Oh, no, I am well enough. Robert is not going away to-night, is he? I should like to see him again, and ask for Joan. I am growing very stupid, child. Fancy forgetting to ask for his wife! What must he have thought?"

"Nothing at all, I assure you. What do you suppose Robert has come for, mother?"

"Is it anything particular?"

"Yes. He wants papa and you to go back with him to London to-morrow."

"Dear me! that's something like Jamie. He thinks you can be ready to fly at a moment's notice," answered Mrs Burnett, with her old smile. "It is very kind of him and Joan to invite us, but I couldn't travel so far."

"Not even to see some one very dear to you, if it was

the last chance you would ever have of seeing her?" said Polly, nervously.

"There is nothing wrong with Joan, is there?" asked Mrs Burnett, sitting up. "If she is ill and wants me, I must go. She has no mother, and I love her as if she were my own. I thought she would fret for her baby; that's her nature."

"It is not Joan, mother, but somebody dearer even; somebody you never thought to see again."

"Who can that be? Don't torment me, Mary. There is only one I can think of, and she was drowned, you know —swallowed up in a moment in that stormy sea. What are you speaking about, girl?"

"Mother, mother, Amy isn't dead. She was saved, and has been well cared for in a happy home all these years," said Mary, trying to speak soothingly and calmly, though she was much agitated. "She is very ill, not expected to recover, and Robert has come to take you to see her."

Mrs Burnett sprang from the couch, and a change spread so rapidly over her face that Mary was amazed. The eye was lighted by hope and joy, the mouth quivering with excitement, the whole being stirred.

"Is it true? Has God indeed been so good? Oh, Mary, bring Robert Angus here, that I may thank him, as only a mother can, for the tidings he has brought!"

Mary had feared the shock for her mother, but she saw now with grateful heart that it was a shock in the right direction. All her restlessness was gone; in a moment of time she was again the brisk, active woman, bustling to plan and prepare everything, discussing ways and means— in fact, she was a new being. The load of despair was lifted from her heart at length, and the wheels of her being sprang into their proper places, and did their work as of yore. She sat far into the night alone with her husband and Robert talking the matter over, discussing it in all its

bearings. Mr Burnett did not say much, but it was easy to see that his former bitterness against his erring child had died away, and only fatherly feeling now remained. To these two Robert Angus made light of his own pain, and told them Joan had borne it bravely. Not yet could Mrs Burnett quite realise anything except the fact that Amy still lived, that there was a chance still to repent, opportunity given to turn her thoughts to a merciful God.

Next morning the officials at Auchengray Railway Station were amazed, when, at twenty minutes past six, the waggonette from the Thorn was driven rapidly into the enclosure, and there alighted Robert Angus, with Mr and Mrs Burnett and their daughter. All took tickets for Edinburgh, and surmises regarding their destination and the object of their journey would suffice these gossiping individuals until the return.

They were in time to catch the ten o'clock Midland train, which arrived in London at dusk. They urged upon Mrs Burnett to delay her visit to Boardman Square till next day, thinking the journey itself trying enough without any further excitement. But she was feverishly eager to see Amy, and assured them she would not sleep until it was over. So they were obliged to humour her. Robert Angus accompanied them in the cab to Lady Finch's residence, and they were shown into the morning-room, where she joined them at once. Very keenly did the father and mother look at the noble woman who had so generously befriended their poor lost child.

"I would thank you as only a mother can," said Mrs Burnett, as she clasped the proffered hand. "My child has been unworthy of your kindness, but it has saved her at least from further sin."

"Pray say no more," said Lady Finch, gently. "I am so glad you have come. I hope you are prepared for the change. Poor Amy is very low to-day, but she has never ceased

to cry for you. You will not all go in at once. It would be too much."

Mary Burnett turned aside and burst into tears.

"Hush! dear, do not so distress yourself, for I know it is trying, but try and be brave," said Lady Finch, laying a very gentle hand on the girl's shoulder. She felt drawn to her; there was something in the frank, open face which won her heart.

"I need not stay," said Robert; "when you are ready drive to my house, 13 Cadogan Place. I shall be waiting for you there."

Mr Burnett nodded, and Robert Angus, bidding good-night to Lady Finch, went his way. He could do no more for Amy Burnett now. Mrs Burnett laid off her bonnet and cloak, at Lady Finch's request, and then the father and mother went upstairs—Mary remaining below. Lady Finch only accompanied them to the door, and then stole away. She would not seek to intrude upon that meeting; they were better alone. With tears from her own sympathetic eyes she returned to Mary, who was still crying as if her heart would break.

"Hush! hush! my dear, you will hurt yourself. You need not weep for your sister. It will soon be well with her. She is not sorry to quit this world, having made peace with that to which she is going," she said, soothingly. Under the influence of the gentle touch and comforting words, Mary Burnett gradually grew more calm. So they waited together in the gathering darkness, talking a little at times more like old friends than new acquaintances, forging the first links of a precious friendship which only death would sever. At last, when it was growing a little late, they heard the door of the upper chamber open, and a foot-step on the stair. Presently Mr Burnett entered the room.

"Will you go up now, Mary?" he said, unsteadily. "Amy knows you have come, and wants you."

Mary, trying to be calm, rose to obey the summons, and when she had left the room, her father turned to Lady Finch.

"I am a man of few words and blunt actions, madam," he said, huskily. "But if ever I was grateful—humbly, thankfully grateful—in my life, I am to you this day. But for you I tremble to think where or what my unhappy child might have been. How can I ever acknowledge what you have done?"

"Pray say no more. Your daughter has been of value to me. She comforted me in the loneliness of my widowhood; that in itself is sufficient reward for anything I may have done," said Lady Finch, quickly. "Since the day Mr Angus told me, I have thought very little about the more painful part of her history. It was better for us all that I should dwell rather on the Amy I knew and loved. You see she is very near the end. We cannot grieve for her. She does not grieve for herself. She looks forward now with hope—a change which has only come these last two days."

"And which she also owes to you, Lady Finch," said Mr Burnett, with emotion. "They talk of Christianity, but if there were more such acts as yours, it would be a better world. There would be less misery and heartbreak in it, and we would not feel so very far away as we do from the Kingdom of Heaven."

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN BRETON WOODS.

IT was a pleasant old garden, sloping towards a brawling, noisy, sparkling little river, and sheltered from every wind that blew by the tall and spreading chestnuts which made the beauty of that peaceful Breton landscape. In the far distance there was a blue line, so hazy and indistinct that it looked like a part of the sky; but the healthful breeze, blowing up strong and free from the coast, was laden with the salt flavour of the sea. There was nothing grand or striking in the stretch of country to be seen from the sunny slope of the old garden, yet it had a quiet charm all its own. There were patches of golden corn land and belts of leafy trees, then again a breadth of pasture on which the kine browsed all day long, lying down to sleep at night in the shelter of the little hillocks or the clumps of low trees which dotted the plains. A little way from the old chateau there was a sleepy little village, where the simple Breton peasant folk lived their quiet lives, and died when the time came, at peace with God and man. There was little stir or active life in that quiet retreat—it was a sweet old-world spot, whose chief characteristic and charm was its rest. It was frequented by tourists; now and then, however, an artist, charmed with the quaintness of the place, would unpack portmanteau and sketching materials at the chateau, which was the inn of the village, and linger a day or two to sketch the sunny, quiet landscape, or make a

study of the quaint old houses, and their still more quaint inhabitants. These stray sojourners were objects of great and unbounded curiosity to these simple folk; and it was a real excitement to them when any new arrival sought the hospitality of blithe Madame Pierrot's roof-tree. Towards the close of July, which had been a close and sultry month on the Continent, there arrived at the chateau a little party of English folk, consisting of an elderly gentleman and two ladies, one of whom seemed to be in poor health. Madame Pierrot, a gossiping, kind-hearted dame, with a strong sense of her own importance as mistress of the chateau, made a great fuss over her visitors, and made them so welcome and so much at home, that the week of their stay had lengthened out into a month, and still they were loth to go. The delicate lady, the object of Madame's especial devotion and care, mended so rapidly in the sweet, pure air, and seemed to be so charmed with the place, that for her sake they decided to remain until the colder weather should warn them away to milder scenes. It was a quiet life they led, walking and riding and driving when the days were fine, and seemingly bound up in each other. They attended regularly the service in the picturesque church on the Sabbath Day; and the village curé, a kindly, pious, old man—father as well as priest among his people—came to pay a friendly visit to the strangers, and was thereafter ever welcome at the chateau. The English gentleman and he became inseparable friends, and took long excursions together, apparently very well satisfied with each other's company. Then the two ladies enjoyed themselves nearer home, spending most of their time in the trellised arbour in the garden, busy with books, and papers, and work. Madame was perfectly astonished at the multitude of books and papers which came by post to her guests, and decided that they must be persons of great distinction in their own land.

One delicious August morning the two ladies, after watching their guardian and his friend, the curé, ride away

over the uplands on their sturdy ponies, bound for a day's exploration of some famous ruins at some distance away, retired as usual to the arbour in the garden. Ere they were well seated they saw the post messenger coming towards the chateau, and in a little while madame herself, with her rosy face all aglow, came out to them with her hands full of letters and papers.

"There!" she said, tumbling them in a heap on the little rustic table, and surveying them with wonder—for the good soul could do no more than spell a little in her old Bible, and follow the curé in his simple discourses on the Sabbath-day. To her there seemed something rather awe-inspiring in the ease and rapidity with which her guests disposed of their communications, and the speed with which the delicate lady used her pen made Madame cross herself and wonder if she did not possess some supernatural power.

"I have two letters from Auchengray, Joan," said Isabel Angus, when Madame had once more left them. "Long, gossipy epistles—just the thing for an idle, sunny morning like this. They will delight Mr Angus's soul when he comes back. I tell him sometimes that, though he is here in the flesh, his spirit is in Auchengray."

"It was selfish of me, Isabel," said Joan, a little sadly, "to allow him to sacrifice himself for me. To a man of his active temperament this idle life must be very irksome. But I was incapable of understanding anything at the time. I have often regretted it since."

"Hush! hush! what nonsense! Don't you see how young and strong Mr Angus has grown since we began our wanderings? He is delighted with this place; and Father Lacoste is an endless source of diversion to him, with his fund of queer stories and his deep insight into human nature," said Isabel, very tenderly. "And it is a great joy to us to see how this refreshing air and quiet are restoring you. You look almost well."

"I am better; and I find this solitude very sweet," an-

swered Joan, looking with grateful eyes out upon the pleasant garden, and after a moment bringing them back almost wistfully to her friend's face. "Are these all your letters, Isabel?"

"All to-day, dear," Isabel answered, knowing—oh! so well—what her heart was hungering for—news of that absent one whom she had no hope of meeting again. "But why are you so unmindful of your own letter? I see Mrs Harrington's writing on the envelope."

Joan took the letter from her lap, and read the address.

"I wish I had courage to tell Mabel, Isabel. It must be done sometime. I have no right to this name now. I am no longer a wife."

"Time enough by-and-by," said Isabel, quickly. "Open your letter, dear. It will at least divert your thoughts for a little.

Somewhat listlessly Joan broke the seal, and slowly read the somewhat brief letter to the end.

"She has not much news, but she says Lady Finch's governess has been very poorly," said Joan, handing the open sheet to her friend.

"Here is a *Times*, I perceive, addressed to Mr Angus in Robert's writing," said Isabel, cutting off the wrapper before she read Mrs Harrington's letter.

Folding out the bulky newspaper, she ran her eye rapidly over it, almost expecting to see some passage marked for perusal. Failing in finding what she sought, she turned, woman-like, to the record of births, marriages, and deaths. Presently she gave a violent start, and, springing up, laid the paper on Joan's knee, and, gathering up her letters, went away into the house. Joan, in no little amazement, lifted the paper, and glanced over it. In the obituary this met her eye—

"At 32 Boardman Square, S.W., on the 19th inst., Amelia Burnett, aged 24."

. . . . . .

It was the middle of September, and still the English folk remained inmates of Madame Pierrot's household. The villagers regarded them no longer with curious interest,

but rather with loving pride and satisfaction, feeling complimented that the strangers were pleased to dwell so long among them. There was no child in the village who did not know and love the kind ladies, who possessed an unlimited supply of *bonbons*, and did not scruple to distribute them with lavish hands. As for good Father Lacoste, he dreaded the time of their departure, having found in the English gentleman a kindred soul. Poor little Father Lacoste —a scholar and a gentleman of the truest stamp—had very little scope in his rural parish, and his life was a monotonous round to which at times his people's love could scarcely reconcile him. If Madame had a favourite among her guests it was Joan, and she would have gone down on her knees to serve her. It was a real joy to the kind soul to watch the gradual improvement in the fragile lady, and to see the return of the bloom to the cheek, the lustre to the eye, and the buoyancy of health to the step which had been so feeble and slow the first time it had trodden Breton soil. But it was not Breton milk and eggs, nor yet Breton sea breezes, which had wrought all the cure; nay, there was something more, which Madame did not know. It was September, as I said; the cornlands had yielded their golden harvest, and the magnificent tints of autumn were tinging upland and lowland, but not yet had the leaves begun to fall. It was a kind of Indian summer—a calm, delicious, sunny time, before the first snows should touch the distant hills, and charge the air with the winter's cold. Often now the ladies would join Mr Angus and Father Lacoste in their excursions, and Joan laid up a store of rich material for future use, as well as a store of health, that autumn time among the hills and dales of Brittany.

One morning an excursion had been planned, which, to Joan's astonishment, did not include her. It was too far, Mr Angus said, with a twinkle in his eye; she would be better at home. She laughed, and said she could enjoy herself very well independent of them, and she did not

trouble herself to wonder why they should be so anxious to leave her behind. But she did wonder why Isabel should come back to kiss her again, and why there were tears in her eyes, though her lips wore a very tender, tremulous smile. But before an hour was over she had forgotten her wonder, and wandered away through the pleasant garden down to the brawling river, feeling a strange thrilling of her pulses, a new gladness flowing through her being, as if some new and happy life had begun. So it had, indeed, for she knew that the future held some brightness, as of the past, and that her life was not ended yet. She had never thought very much about it, nor allowed herself to dwell very long upon the fact that death had swept away the barriers; only in her heart, deep down, hidden almost from herself, was a little well of sweetness, born of the thought that in time she would be reunited to her husband. It might be long or it might be short, only it would come; she did not care when; the conscious certainty was enough. She was thinking of him that day, recalling some very precious memories, filling her heart with recollections of the love and care with which, as a wife, she had been so richly blessed. Little did she dream how very near to her he was, that every moment was bringing him nearer to her side; nor did it occur to her that the excursion which excluded her was a little kindly stratagem to ensure a quiet, undisturbed reunion. She wandered along the river banks, dropping into the stream some red and russet leaves she had carelessly plucked in passing, and watched them dance upon the tiny wavelets out of sight. She was so glad of heart, she could have sung aloud for joy. She raised her happy face to the softened autumn sky, and thanked God for His goodness to her. She did not know why, but she felt overwhelmed by a sense of past and present mercy, vouchsafed from Heaven, and her heart seemed a perpetual well of praise. She came to a little patch of woodland by-and-by, and, turning aside, she entered the bosky glade,

startling a squirrel here, and a little brown rabbit there, and watching them with a smile flying from her, as if she would hurt th little creatures, whom she had loved from her childish days, when she had watched for them in the fields and woods of Auchengray. Presently the trunk of a fallen tree, obstructed her path, and she sat down upon it, and began to examine the curious, delicate mosses which had crept all over the unsightly roots, clothing them in living, loveliest green. She was so absorbed, humming a little tune to herself, that she heard no footfall behind her, until a sudden creaking of the fallen branches caused her to start to her feet, and the next moment she was clasped close to her husband's heart, her head lying on his breast, his voice calling her once more by the dear name of wife. What human pen could describe such a meeting? Better far to leave it untouched. They had parted as those part who have no hope of meeting again this side the grave, and now, by the strange hastening of events, they were together, never to part any more, please God, until He should call one or other to Himself.

"Let me see your face, my darling, my wife!" Robert Angus said at length, and taking the dear face in both his hands, he looked at it hungrily, passionately, as one might look at a face restored from the dead. It was a radiant, smiling face, thinner and more worn, perhaps, than it was wont to be, but it was the face of his wife—the dear woman he loved ten thousand times better than himself.

"You are glad to see me, Joan. I can read it in your eyes. Oh! my darling, my darling, it were worth the pain of parting to meet like this," he said, passionately. "Tell me, wife, that your heart is not estranged. You are glad to see me back?"

"Glad!" she said, dreamily. "They tell us it will be winter soon, but it will be perpetual summer in my heart. Oh! my husband, let us both thank God for this hour!"

Her hand stole up to his shoulder, and rested there

content; her head lay still on his breast, while the light of perfect gladness shone with a new and wondrous beauty on her face, and for a long time there was no more said.

"Well, miss;" said old Mr Angus, with a yet more mischievous twinkle in his eye, "have you got over your tantrum at being left behind, eh? A pretty thing, wouldn't it, if this gentleman had arrived to find us all gone! Nice sort of welcome for an exile, eh? Haven't you a word to say for yourself, either of you? We would better make ourselves scarce, Isabel, and leave these young people to themselves. 'A fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind!'"

. . . . .

Next day the simple village lost its English residents, and even the faithful promise to return again some day could not reconcile Madame Pierrot. But the pile of English gold they left upon the table of the *salon* made her smile very broadly through her tears. It was something of a solace that they had left her so much richer than they found her. The party travelled straight to London, and there Robert and Joan were remarried by a clergyman who was a stranger to them both. Then they went quietly home to the house in Cadogan Place, just as if nothing had happened.

The world never knew of the tragical episode in Joan Angus's life, and there was no need. In these days, when no man or woman's private life is secret in the eyes of the press and the press-reading public, the more rigidly family life can be guarded the better.

Auchengray has in a manner lost sight of the Anguses, who used to be of such importance in the quiet little town. There is one link, however, which binds some Auchengray folk to London. While on a visit to Lady Finch, Mary Burnett was wooed and won by one worthy of her, and who has made her a happy wife. The gentle, unobtrusive girl is now Mrs Giles Harrington, of 8 Bryanston Square, and Harrington Manor, Sussex, a great position for our quiet little Mary. There is a close and dear intimacy betwixt the

Harringtons and the Anguses, and something far beyond any tie which can unite author and publisher. They are friends—friends for life.

Lady Finch nobly kept her word, and to this day Mrs Christopher Harrington is unaware who her sister's governess really was. Giles Harrington heard the story from his wife's lips, but with him it is buried as in the grave. The younger members of the Burnett household were not told; to them their sister Amy is almost a shadowy myth, which as they grow older will probably fade from their memory altogether. In her latter years Mrs Burnett has regained something of her old-time cheerfulness; she is at peace concerning Amy now, and Mary's happiness is a great comfort; and so are Mary's children, who in the summer time make sunshine and happy stir at the Thorn.

What of Joan? There is now no shadow on her face. Another child fills the empty cot, and makes music in heart and home. She is a happy woman, but she is quiet and rather reserved in her happiness, giving it expression in deeds rather than in words. The past is like a shadow or a dream, which vanishes in happy, waking hours. She is a woman loved and reverenced by many, honoured by all who knew her through her pen. Husband and wife walk together the narrow way, laying up for themselves treasures in Heaven, and when they are called hence they will leave the world a little better than they found it.

. . . . .

In Kensal Green Cemetery Amy Burnett sleeps her last sleep. A white cross marks her resting place, and these few words can be read by any who care to linger a moment by the grave:—

In memory of
AMELIA BURNETT,
Aged 24.
"Her sins are forgiven her for His name's sake."

beyond
They are

day Mrs
's gover-
from his
ve. The
not told;
h, which
memory
regained
at peace
a great
summer

her face.
e in heart
quiet and
ession in
hadow or
She is a
ed by all
wife walk
treasures
will leave

s her last
and these
linger a