Odd Made Even

Amy Le Feuvre

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ODD MADE EVEN

BY

AMY LE FEUVRE

AUTHOR OF
"HEATHER'S MISTRESS," "ODD," "PROBABLE SONS,"
"TEDDY'S BUTTON," "ON THE EDGE OF A MOOR," ETC.

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TO THE ONE

WHO MADE ME WRITE

IT

‘*And your joy no man taketh from you*’

CONTENTS

PREFACE

I feel this sequel needs an apology, and to the many little ones who have besought me by letter and voice to ‘make more about Betty,’ I offer this apology, for I fear they will be disappointed. The story will be above their heads.

But to their elders who have found enjoyment in the child’s short history, I venture to send her forth when a little of earth’s soil has dusted her feet.

And perhaps some of the little ones who first read ‘Odd,’ may even now be old enough to follow with interest the older Betty.

AMY LE FEUVRE.

Odd Made Even

CHAPTER I

A Child of Moods

. . . Scarcely formed or moulded—
A rose with all its sweetest leaves yet folded.

BYRON.

‘I wish you would not say such things, Betty!’

‘What things?’

‘You know. It only vexes mother; and what is the good of it?’

‘What is the good of anything? I always say what I feel; I can’t help myself!’

‘Well, you ought not to feel like it. You are always so discontented. Other girls——’

‘Oh, shut up, Molly! Don’t quote “other girls.” I hate them all. I hate everybody at this present moment. I’m sick of them; I’m sick of town; I’m —yes, I think I’m sick of life altogether!’

Betty had been poking the fire fiercely as she spoke; now she dashed down the poker and ran out of the room. Molly looked after her with a little sigh.

‘Betty is so—so uneven,’ she said to herself. ‘She is always getting upset over nothing at all. She’ll be back in a minute full of remorse and repentance. It would wear me out to live as she does!’

Her fair head bent over some manuscript paper on the table before her. A dreamy look took possession of her deep blue eyes.

‘Now, where was I when she interrupted me? Poor Elfrida! I must make her see Roderick once again before he dies; she must have the comfort of a last farewell!’

But Molly was not to be left in peace to the woes of her heroine. A maid came into the room.

'Mrs. Stuart would like to see you, miss.'

Molly rose at once.

'All right, Margaret. Has the doctor been?'

'He has just gone, miss.'

Molly left the room, and made her way upstairs to her mother's bedroom.

Mrs. Stuart lay on a couch by the fire. A square table covered with papers was drawn up by her side. She was a very beautiful woman still, though threads of silver ran through her wavy brown hair, and many fine wrinkles and lines were discernible round her dark expressive eyes. She looked at her eldest daughter a little keenly.

Molly was always a fair sight to look upon—a sweet, fresh English maiden, with a sunny golden head and irreproachable features, and soft red lips that looked as if only smiles could come from them. Molly was blest with a happy, sunshiny disposition. She took life easily, and her cares and sorrows at present were bound up in the life of the heroine of her imagination. She was young enough and gay enough to like to revel in imaginary misery. She was devoted to her mother, and now bent down lovingly, and kissed her forehead.

Only Molly dared to be demonstrative with Mrs. Stuart; she was not one who liked or encouraged tokens of affection from her children.

'Are you better, mother?'

'I suppose so. I must be, after this long period of rest and convalescence. Just look at my batch of correspondence! I have been unable to touch it yet, and Dr. Forsyth actually forbade me to write a line to-day. You must give me an hour, and answer all those that are important. Where is Betty? I want her too, for I must speak to you both. Dr. Forsyth wants me to leave town at once.'

Molly looked surprised.

'I will fetch Betty,' she said; and, leaving her mother's room quietly, she sped up another flight of stairs, and knocked at her sister's door.

It was locked. Betty herself was standing by her window, looking down with wistful restless eyes into the dreary rain-sodden London square below

her. Her heart was hot within her. Betty could not take life so easily as Molly did. It did not satisfy her; it was continually disappointing her. She looked for such great things; she had such a capacity for enjoyment; and yet the very gold seemed to turn to dust when she touched it.

Her life was in the same groove as Molly's, they shared their pleasures and friends together; yet what seemed natural and pleasant to the one, worried and irritated the other.

It was as Molly said, over 'nothing at all' that Betty vexed her soul.

For three years the young girls had been enjoying London Society under their mother's wing. Their father had died when they were still in the schoolroom. They had never seen much of him, as his whole life was absorbed in politics; and it was only after their education was finished, and they had been presented at court, that mother and daughters drew nearer together. Mrs. Stuart saw that it was her duty to accompany her daughters to entertainments which otherwise would have been distasteful to her. She was herself more interested in literary clubs and soirées than in ballrooms; and philanthropic objects appealed to her more than garden-parties, regattas, and the various amusements that her daughters were supposed to require.

She conscientiously tried to attempt both lines of living. She took the girls abroad, accompanied them to Scotland every autumn, and gave them the orthodox season in town every year. In addition she followed her own pursuits with untiring and unflagging energy. A member and, in some instances, secretary of many important and influential committees, a patroness of hospitals, clubs, and other charitable institutions, Mrs. Stuart wore herself out with writing, interviewing, and visiting; and at length nature asserted its sway, and a serious breakdown in health occurred. For two months she had been unable to leave her bed, and now, on this rainy day in March, she was for the first time feeling well enough to discuss future plans with her daughters.

When Betty broke away from her sister, the girls had been discussing together a conversation held with their mother the night before. An invitation had arrived for them from an old friend of their mother's—a woman with a large family of young people. She wished them to join her house-party in an old *château* in Brittany, and Mrs. Stuart was willing that they should go. Molly acquiesced. Neither she nor Betty cared much for the girls, who were, as they expressed it, 'silly, empty-headed creatures'; but she would not have thought of rebelling so furiously against the visit as Betty did.

‘Why should we go?’ she had said. ‘Why should we pretend to enjoy their hospitality when all the time we despise them in our hearts? Their talk makes me ashamed of being a girl, and their brothers imagine every other girl is like them! Mrs. Railley is always telling me how Reggie dotes on Molly; how much in love he is with her! Molly scorns him, and yet smiles at his mother’s talk as if she liked it. I hate hypocrisy! I hate pretence! And a visit to the Railleys always makes me sick of everybody and everything. No one is real there. It is all artificiality and affectation!’

Mrs. Stuart had listened to this very quietly; then she said,—

‘You can please yourselves. There is no occasion for such vehemence, Betty. If you feel yourself on such a superior level to the Railleys, you had better decline the invitation, and wait for another that satisfies your requirements. But I think it is better taste to conceal such thoughts about an old friend of mine, who has always been most kind and considerate towards you. Leave me now, for I do not feel able to discuss the matter further with you.’

Betty had dropped the subject then, but she renewed it the next morning, when she and Molly were together in their own sitting-room.

‘It is this continual talk of marriage that sickens me so, Molly. The Railleys can think and talk of nothing else. Mrs. Railley thinks it quite dreadful that neither you nor I are engaged yet. It makes me long to get away from men altogether. I feel I want to be free, and fill my mind with other things. The world is so big, so full, it could be so different to what all these town people make it!’

‘I think,’ said Molly slowly, ‘you sound conceited. Why should you judge every one so hardly?’

Betty did not answer for a moment. Molly never could enter into all her thoughts. She viewed life so differently; she was so placidly content with all that came in her way that it was impossible to ruffle her. But Betty tried hard to defend herself from the charge of conceit, and in the end, as we have seen, she judged retirement the wisest course to pursue. Now, unlocking her door, she presented two flushed cheeks, bright eyes, and an untidy head of hair.

‘Does mother want me? I’ll come at once. Molly dear, I didn’t mean to be cross.’

Mrs. Stuart looked at her as she entered the room, much in the same way as she had looked at Molly, but there was not the same satisfaction in her

eyes.

Betty was not considered a beauty. Many found her interesting, but she owed her chief charm to her expression, and that varied from moment to moment in a bewildering and thoroughly inexplicable fashion. She was tall and graceful, her quick, impulsive movements were never awkward; her little curly head and dark speaking eyes were nearly always in motion; but many wondered at the wistful curves of her sensitive lips, the sadness that seemed to peep out so unexpectedly from under her long curled eyelashes.

'An untamed soul,' her mother would say, shone out of its environment.

Would fashion, love, or religion tame it?

Betty was an interesting study to her mother,—little more.

'Did you want me, mother?' she asked; and Betty was too full of her own thoughts to enquire how the invalid was. Mrs. Stuart noticed the omission.

'Yes, I want you. Sit down. Dr. Forsyth wishes me to leave town at once.'

'And go abroad?' asked Molly.

'No; he wants me to have perfect quiet and seclusion; to vegetate, in fact, if I can manage to do it. And he suggests a country farmhouse out of the beaten track. I think I must let him have his way, but where to go I know not. And then I am wondering about you girls: whether to take you with me, or leave you with your Aunt Dora.'

'Aunt Dora is not going to be in town this season,' said Molly quickly. 'She is going to Switzerland. I met her out yesterday, and she told me so.'

'Of course,' said Mrs. Stuart, 'if you go to Mrs. Railley, she would be delighted to keep you for a couple of months; but Dr. Forsyth wants me to try six months of quiet.'

'Oh, mother, let us go into the country with you!' said Betty eagerly. 'It will be delicious to get away from everybody for a time.'

'Of course we must go with you,' said Molly more quietly. 'We could not think of letting you go alone.'

'I shall put my veto against a farmhouse,' said Mrs. Stuart; 'I could find a small furnished house, I suppose—perhaps a vicarage. Farmhouses are generally uncomfortable except in the height of summer, when one is able to spend all one's time out of doors.'

‘Do you remember, Molly,’ said Betty, turning eagerly to her sister, ‘that delightful farm we went to when we were quite small? Did it not belong to some of nurse’s relations?’

‘You mean where the Fairfaxes used to live? Of course I remember it; but mother doesn’t wish for a farmhouse.’

‘Perhaps the Fairfaxes’ house may be to let,’ said Betty. ‘Mrs. Fairfax was trying to let it before she went abroad with Grace.’

‘You might ask Turnbull,’ said Mrs. Stuart musingly; ‘she always corresponds with nurse. I do not mind where we go, so long as we are comfortable.’

Molly left the room to make enquiries of their housekeeper, who had been with them for many years. Betty got up from her seat and began to pace the room restlessly. Then she turned and confronted her mother.

‘Mother, need I go with Molly to Mrs. Thorn’s “At Home” this afternoon?’

‘Why should you not? I forget who is going to take you. Mrs. Sinclair, is she not?’

‘Yes; but I shall not be missed. We have been to so many lately. I am tired of them.’

‘Is that your only reason?’

A rich colour dyed Betty’s cheeks, making her look very handsome.

‘Hugh Sinclair is going,’ she said, with downcast eyes; ‘and he bothers so.’

There was silence. Mrs. Stuart’s eyebrows contracted slightly.

‘Some months ago you and Hugh were inseparable. Have you quarrelled?’

‘Not exactly.’

Betty’s tone was hesitating. She always found it difficult to talk freely to her mother.

‘If you cannot confide in me, I cannot help you,’ said Mrs. Stuart, a little stiffly.

‘I did like Hugh as a—a friend,’ stammered Betty; ‘but I don’t want him as a husband, and—and he won’t take “No” from me.’

‘When did he speak to you definitely?’

‘Just when you were first taken ill. He says I don’t know my own mind, and that he will wait till I change it.’

‘Do you know your own mind?’ asked Mrs. Stuart. ‘Hugh must notice, as we all do, how many moods you have. Your “friendship”—as you express it—with him, has been very marked. I do not wonder at his mistaking your feelings towards him.’

Betty felt her mother’s censure keenly. Then she threw up her head with a little defiance.

‘It is very hard that I cannot enjoy being with one of Douglas’s old schoolfellows whom I have known since he was a boy, without people talking. That is why I shall be thankful to get into the country.’

‘May I ask why Hugh is objectionable to you? He is a steady young fellow, with good prospects.’

Betty hesitated again.

‘He isn’t my idea of a man,’ she said confusedly. ‘He won’t think deeply on any subject; he laughs at everything, and only goes with the stream.’

‘You require a genius to content you,’ said Mrs. Stuart, with a smile that was tinged with sarcasm. ‘Women who go through life with ideals are seldom satisfied. They are like the dog who snapped at the shadow, and lost his bone.’

‘I think I could live without a bone,’ said Betty hotly.

‘We will not discuss it any more. If you are quite certain of your own mind, stay at home this afternoon, and be more careful in future in your behaviour toward young men.’

Betty slipped out of the room with burning cheeks and tearful eyes.

‘I wish I could be coldly pleasant like Molly,’ she said to herself. ‘I talk too fast, and laugh too much, and then I am sorry afterwards. I shall be thankful to be away from Hugh, and everybody else. I know mother is displeased with me. I think she would like me married and done for. I never seem to please her. But I won’t—oh, I won’t be married to a man without a soul!’

She went into the library and seated herself at a small organ there. It had been a birthday gift to her from her great friend Nesta St. Clair, who was now in India with her husband. If there was one thing of which Betty was

passionately fond, it was music. It soothed and satisfied her as nothing else did; and as Mrs. Stuart listened to the distant strains of passionate melody, now flooding the library, she gave a little sigh, saying,—

'I wish she were settled in a home of her own.'

CHAPTER II

An Old Friend

I cannot but remember such things were,
That were most precious to me.

Macbeth.

Betty stood on a green lawn surrounded by a tangled belt of shrubs and trees. It was a fresh bright spring morning. Blackbirds and thrushes were lifting up their sweet voices in song; the scent of primroses and other spring flowers was in the air, which had that intoxicating life-giving effect that a bright May morning only can give.

Betty glanced at the old vicarage which for the time had become her home. It was a low long grey stone building with casement windows and thatched roof. The walls were covered with creepers—jasmine and clematis, roses and wisteria, vied with one another in clustering round the windows; low beds of daffodils and narcissus edged the gravel walk. The lilacs and laburnums lightened a somewhat dark shrubbery. Between the sprouting chestnuts and elms at the end of the drive peeped the old church tower. Betty glanced at one window darkened by closed shutters. It was only nine o'clock. Her mother was not up. Molly and she had had an early breakfast, and Molly was now making acquaintance with store cupboards and pantries. For the next hour or two she was free; for who would stay indoors to watch their maids unpacking, when the young world outside was so entrancing? Not Betty. She danced over the lawn and down the drive with a song on her lips and in her heart.

'Oh, it is lovely! lovely! And this is only the beginning of it!'

They had arrived the night before. It had not taken long to formulate their plans and carry them out. And, strangely enough, a vicarage had been found in the very place that Betty had proposed visiting again. The vicar had a delicate wife, and had taken her abroad, leaving his parish to the care of his curate, who lodged in the very farmhouse that the little Stuarts had visited when children.

Betty opened the little wicket-gate that led into the churchyard, pausing as a flood of memories came rushing uppermost. How little changed it was! Perhaps smaller than she remembered it, and more crowded with green

graves; the rooks on the top of the old elms did not seem quite so near to heaven as they did in days gone by. When she opened the heavy oak door, and found herself inside the darkened church, it seemed a little dustier and stuffier than it used to be. But when she made her way with soft footsteps up the aisle and saw again the monument of little Violet Russell, it did not disappoint her. The pure, sweet outline of the small figure was all that could be desired, and though the afternoon sun was not streaming through the stained window above, the light seemed to gather round the beautiful bit of sculpture, and make it stand out conspicuously in its dusky surroundings.

Memory took Betty back to when she had her first vision of it, and she smiled when she thought of how much it had meant to her. She looked up at the window, and at the group of little children clustering round their Saviour's knee. A shadow passed over her sensitive face.

'I almost wish I were a child again,' she said. 'I was so sure then of His love.'

She turned and made her way to the organ, that organ which under the influence of Nesta Fairfax's fingers had sent away a little child sobbing her heart out with unexpressed longing. To her delight she found it unlocked.

'Oh, I wish I could get a blower! I will try. I must see if I can make it sound as it used to do in my ears.'

She left the church hastily, and entered the nearest cottage. A fresh-faced young woman was cleaning up her kitchen.

'A blower, miss?' she said in reply to Betty's request. 'I hardly know if there's any one free. The boys and girls be to school, the lads at work. The schoolmaster plays on a Sunday, and his eldest boy do blow for him.'

'Is there no old man?' asked Betty. 'Is the old sexton still alive? I used to know him when I was a child.'

'Bless ye, miss, old Reuben be dead this ten year. 'Tis John Smith be the sexton now, an' he be one of Farmer Gadd's hands at present. Wonder now if Mat Lubbock might oblige ye? He be quite blind from a blasting mishap, and he be a strong fellow too. He works at baskets and such like; but there be not much call for 'em, and he idles away most o' his days. He be just comin' down the road, miss. Would you like to put it to him?'

Betty stepped out into the road, and met the man described. He was a fine, strong-looking fellow, with a powerful face, but an unpleasant smile came to his lips when Betty made her request.

‘Church be not much in my line, mum. It and I be as far as east from west. ’Tis all rotted foolery; an’ I don’t care who hears me say it!’

The fierceness with which he uttered the last sentence startled Betty. For a moment she felt inclined to give it up; then her beloved music conquered.

‘I should be so grateful if you could oblige me this once,’ she said sweetly. ‘I will not keep you long.’

Mat tapped his stick impatiently on the road. Then he said, in a surly tone,—

‘If you be put about this mornin’ for some’un, I’ll oblige ye, but never agen!’

‘Thank you!’ said Betty with delight. ‘Can you follow me? Do you know the way?’

‘I should be a born fool if I didn’t,’ was the gruff retort. ‘I were bell-ringer for eight year or more.’

‘That was before your accident?’

‘You’re right there! Not likely I’d give a helpin’ hand after! I’d cut the cursed bells wi’ pleasure if I could. Don’t know which be worst, the parson’s clapper or theirn! I go two mile every Sunday to get out o’ hearin’ o’ them!’

Betty could think of nothing to say to this character. She judged that it was his trouble that had made him bitter. He followed her into church without another word, groped his way up to the organ, and began to blow with dogged energy.

Betty was soon lost in her music. She was delighted with the full sweet tone of the instrument, and woke up with a start at last, to find that she had been playing nearly an hour.

She apologised to her blower; but he cut her short, and tramped out of the church muttering as he did so,—

‘I’ll never do it agen!’

And Betty sauntered back to the house, a happy light shining in her eyes. She stood for a moment gazing again at the green meadows and woods in the distance, and then at the fresh foliage around her. Then her gaze went upwards to the blue sky above.

‘It is *so* beautiful!’ she murmured. ‘I shall never feel discontented here.’

Mrs. Stuart adapted herself with great ease to her quiet surroundings. She would lie on the couch in the vicarage drawing-room by the open window, with her books and correspondence by her side. Sometimes she would take a short walk round the old-fashioned garden leaning on Molly's arm. In the evenings after dinner the girls would play and sing to her, or read aloud from the current periodicals of the day. A few days after their arrival the curate called. He was a thin, nervously strung man of scholarly tastes. Mrs. Stuart found him a ready and appreciative listener; and he was fascinated and charmed by the society of a well-read, cultured woman. They gradually dropped into discursive arguments, which wearied and bored Molly, but which interested Betty. She would sit in the recess of the farthest window, and listen eagerly to the conversation.

One evening they were talking about the laws of compensation.

'I believe our joys and sorrows are pretty equally divided,' said Mr. Benson. 'I grant you that some appear to suffer more than others, but if their life—the inner one as well as the outer one—were to be mapped out before us, we should see they had their enjoyments in proportion. Those who have the greatest capacity for trouble have also the greatest capacity for joy. The deepest natures feel the most.'

Mrs. Stuart shook her head.

'You do not see the pathos and tragedy of life in these small country villages. Your country people live in a placid happy groove. It is the starving panting struggling population of our big towns that experience the full burden and toil of life. I have cases before me of two generations reared and bred in dogged sullen misery, Ishmaels—every one's hand raised against them; hopelessness and helplessness written on the features of the tiny children, hatred of all, and bitterness against their fate, on the features of their elders.'

'I have only been curate here for five years, and yet in this tiny village alone, amongst those who appear to you to live in a placid happy groove, I have buried three who literally died of broken hearts. I could count five on my fingers who carry about with them a load too heavy to speak about; and there is not a single family which has been exempt from trouble in some shape or form.

'One poor man I have on my heart at present. He was our village Hercules—as handsome a fellow as you could wish to see. He married the sweetest girl in the neighbourhood, and had a baby boy he worshipped. He was a mason, and in superintending some blasting operations one day was

blinded in an explosion. His wife, in bad health at the time, received such a shock when he was carried home to her that she died within twenty-four hours from the effects of it. When he recovered his health, he devoted himself more than ever to his boy. One day he took him down to the river with him. The child fell in, and though the father dashed after him he failed to rescue him, owing to his blindness. He used to be one of our bell-ringers, and a regular communicant, now I cannot get him to enter the church. He cannot see the mercy of God in his affliction. It has embittered and spoiled his life.'

'Poor man!' said Mrs. Stuart; 'his is a sad case. I see you believe that trouble is equally distributed.'

'And joys also,' Mr. Benson said, a light coming over his face.

But Betty listened no more. She slipped out of the room with unshed tears glistening in her eyes.

'Oh, poor man!' she repeated—'poor man! How I wish I could comfort him! How I should love to be somebody's comforter! But I feel it must be the most difficult thing in the world to do. Sympathy isn't comfort, though a good many people think it is. If you cannot alter the facts of trouble—the cause of it, I suppose I mean—you cannot comfort.'

Betty's heart seemed weighed down by another's sorrow as she walked in the evening sunshine along the garden paths. Life was full of perplexities to her at present. Shadows were continually crossing her sensitive little soul, but they only served to make the sunshine brighter when it came.

The next day was Sunday. Molly and she went to church together, and their fair fresh young faces attracted much attention amongst the village congregation. Betty enjoyed everything—the music, the service, the sermon, and her surroundings. There was an open window close to her, and a blackbird sang with his whole heart from a lilac-bush outside. The song and the scent of the lilac sent a throb of joy through her. If, as Molly expressed it, little things upset her, little things also delighted her, and she came out of church in radiant spirits. At the gate Molly stopped to give a message to Mr. Benson from her mother. Betty went out into the green lane, and began picking some budding hawthorn from the hedge. Hearing steps behind her, she looked up, and confronted a tall, grey-haired man. The colour rushed into her cheeks; though it was many years since she had seen him, his face was engraved on her memory. Impulsively she put out her hand.

'I am sure you must be Mr. Russell.'

For an instant he looked astonished, as he raised his hat.

‘Ah,’ said Betty, with a little droop in her smiling lips, ‘I have been forgotten. You do not remember me. I saw you in London the year after we were at the farm, and that must be quite fourteen years ago.’

A light came into Mr. Russell’s eyes.

‘Surely you cannot be little Betty Stuart? And yet you must be. Your eyes have not changed.’

He was shaking her warmly by the hand, and enquired how she came to that part again.

Betty told him briefly. He listened to her rather dreamily.

‘Fourteen years seem such a little bit of my life,’ he said. ‘But it is such a big piece in yours. It seems only the other day that my sweet little child friend was here, stealing into the life of an embittered man, and softening and charming him by her quaint earnestness of sympathy and purpose. Now she is no more. She is dead and gone. A fragrant memory is all that is left me.’

Betty felt rather embarrassed.

‘You only liked the child,’ she said, somewhat wistfully; ‘I cannot count upon your friendship now?’

He looked at her, and a smile came to his lips.

‘My mind must be readjusted,’ he said. ‘But you are a fashionable young lady now. My Betty was always in cotton frocks and sun-bonnets. It will take time for the two to merge into one.’

Betty laughed merrily. Then, in her most winning way, she laid her hand on his arm.

‘I am your little friend still, if you will have me; and though I have grown, I really do not feel so very different from what I did when I was here before.’

‘ “The little odd one,” ’ said Mr. Russell musingly, as he looked her up and down.

‘And I feel “odd” still,’ asserted Betty stoutly. ‘Quite “odd” enough to be very disappointed that one of my old friends is looking at me so disapprovingly.’

Mr. Russell smiled again.

‘You are fast stealing your way back into that old man’s preserves. Is your mother well enough to receive visitors? May I come and renew my very slight acquaintance with her?’

‘I am sure she will be very pleased to see you,’ said Betty, in a sedate tone; then, turning to Molly, who was approaching them, she said,—

‘Molly, do you remember Mr. Russell when we were at Brook Farm with nurse that summer? I have had to introduce myself, for he did not know me.’

‘We looked for you in church,’ said Molly, smiling as she shook hands; ‘but as we were seated in the very front pew, it was difficult to see anybody. I don’t think I should have recognised you; but then you were always Betty’s friend, not mine.’

‘And what has become of your brother, the sturdy pickle? And the two roly-poly boys who always followed his lead?’

‘Oh, Douglas is in the army. He is in the Artillery, and went to India last autumn. Bobby and Billy are both middies now. They are still inseparable, and have had the good fortune to get appointed to the same ship, which is cruising about the Mediterranean at present. Betty and I feel very dull without the boys. Do come and see mother, Mr. Russell! She is an invalid at present, but not too ill to see friends. We are at the vicarage. I think mother will be wondering where we are, Betty. We must go.’

Molly moved away with a sweet grace, and Betty followed her a little reluctantly.

‘Do you ever wish yourself a child again, Molly?’ she asked, as they walked up the vicarage drive together.

‘No,’ said Molly decidedly; ‘grown-up people are much more interesting. There are so many possibilities for them. Children have such a narrow outlook.’

Betty did not answer. She had expected a great deal from this meeting with her old friend, and she had found it distinctly disappointing.

‘I think people liked me better as a child than they do now,’ she mused, a little sadly. ‘I expect I have grown up very uninteresting. I don’t seem to make half so many friends as Molly does.’

Mrs. Stuart expressed herself quite willing to see Mr. Russell when he called.

‘I remember him,’ she said; ‘for his sculpture was in the Academy for some years. Did he not take you as his model, Betty?’

‘Yes,’ said Molly; ‘with her dog. Don’t you remember, Betty? Have you been to see his grave? I wonder if it has been touched, or whether it is still at Brook Farm. We ought to go and see Mrs. Giles, ought we not?’

‘I mean to go this afternoon,’ said Betty decidedly.

‘You had better not go alone,’ said her mother. ‘I shall be lying down for an hour or two, and shall want neither of you.’

So a little later the two girls walked down to the old farm, and were welcomed delightedly by Mrs. Giles.

‘Us have often talked of you—John and me—but really you have grown such grand young leddies, I can hardly believe you be the fly-away children us had here so many year ago! Miss Molly, I might a knowed you, for your face be the same sweet smiling one, but Miss Betty she do look different. I mind her little dark curly head, and her mischievous ways, and the way she were wrapped up in that poor little dog of hern!—Yes, Miss Betty, his grave is still in the orchard, and ’tis a beautiful ornament. Many’s the gentry that I’ve taken to see it, and they all do say that for a stone dog it be wonderful life-like!’

She led the way into the orchard as she spoke; and Betty was soon standing on the spot that was associated with the biggest tragedy in her child life. She looked at the rusty iron railing and the little stone monument with pathetic interest.

‘How do you feel?’ Molly asked, with a little mischief in her eyes. ‘I remember you said you were broken-hearted at the time, but it seems a very small sorrow now, doesn’t it?’

‘I suppose it does—comparatively,’ Betty admitted slowly; ‘but I haven’t forgotten it.’

She stayed there after Molly had wandered away round the flower garden with Mrs. Giles; and her thoughts went backwards with a bound.

‘What a funny little thing I was! How important and grand I felt, in spite of all my broken-heartedness, when I was told it was my bit of tribulation! How near heaven I felt then! As if I were quite fit and ready to be translated at once! I don’t feel half so near it now, and yet I want to be. I don’t know what I want exactly, but I’m not satisfied, my life seems so empty. Molly is so entirely content. When she isn’t occupied with her own love-affairs, she

is quite absorbed with inventing some for her heroines. And she and mother are all in all to each other. I wonder if there is a corner for everybody in this world, for somehow I don't think I have found mine!'

She gave herself a little shake presently, which was a trick of hers, saying to herself as she ran away to find Molly,—

'I will *not* be always thinking about myself and my feelings!'

And she chattered away to Mrs. Giles so merrily for the rest of the time that they were there, that that worthy woman remarked to her husband afterwards,—

'They be two beauties, John, but Miss Betty be as giddy as ever she were, her tongue have the same saucy turn to it, and her eyes be twinkling with mischief all the while. 'Tis Miss Molly that will take the prize, I'm thinking. Her voice and smile be just queenly!'

CHAPTER III

A Strange Encounter

Deep grief is better let alone;
Voices to it are swords.

FABER.

‘Molly, Molly! Where are you?’

‘Here—in the study. What do you want? Oh, Betty, what a noise! you will disturb mother. She is lying down.’

‘How can you stay in this stuffy little room when it’s so lovely out of doors? I have had a little adventure, and I must tell it to some one!’

Betty had jumped in at the low window with a light bound. Her hat was at the back of her head, her curls were flying in disorder over her forehead. She looked flushed and excited, and threw herself into an easy-chair with a little sigh.

Molly was bending over her beloved story. This was her time, when her mother was resting, to pour forth on paper all the pretty thoughts and fancies of her imaginative brain.

She was not best pleased at Betty’s interruption.

‘I suppose you have met some one, or picked some wonderful flower. It can’t be anything very exciting.’

‘It was dreadful!’ Betty said, clasping her little hands over her face, and blushing at the remembrance of it. ‘Listen, Molly,—now you shall listen to me, if I have to throw your manuscript into the fire!’

Molly hastily closed her writing-case, as Betty came towards her.

‘I am listening, so make haste,’ she said, leaning back in her chair with patient resignation.

Betty swung herself up on the table by her sister’s side, and sat there with a mixture of seriousness and fun gleaming out of her eyes.

‘I was taking a walk in the direction of Holly Grange, and I climbed a hill, and skirted a plantation, coming out into a sunny field overlooking such a lovely bit of country! A delightful old red manor house peeped out

between some trees, the river—a silver streak of light—wound along at the foot of some blue hills.'

'Oh, do stop your scenery, and get on to your adventure!' interrupted Molly.

'I am coming to it, only you have quite spoilt my description. I climbed a low hedge at the corner of the field, to get a better view; and there, lying by a sheltered bank, was the body of a man!'

Molly's eyes were open now.

'Not a dead man? I suppose he was drunk.'

'He lay quite motionless, and I stood still staring at him for a minute, and then I was filled with horror, for I thought he might have shot himself by accident, or been murdered; and, without thinking, I rushed up to him, and laid my hand on his shoulder, and asked him if he was hurt.'

'Well?'

For Betty had paused, and her eyes looked troubled.

'He sprang to his feet, Molly, so suddenly, that I sprang away from him. He wasn't a bit hurt.'

Molly laughed.

'You must have looked sillies, both jumping away from each other! I wish I had seen you!'

'Oh, it isn't anything to laugh at! I felt so ashamed of myself, for when he looked at me I saw he was in deep trouble. I don't think I ever saw such misery on any one's face before. He looked as if he had been having an awful fight with himself. His face was knotted and lined, and his eyes full of despair.'

Molly's laugh died away. She was interested now.

'Go on,' she said. 'What did he say?'

'He only looked in my direction for a moment, then he wheeled round, raised his hat, and walked away haughtily. I just caught his words: "I am perfectly well, thanks!" And oh, Molly, I felt so ashamed of intruding upon him at such a time, and I do feel so sorry for him!'

'What was he like?'

‘A tall, good-looking man—not very young—he was in a grey suit of clothes and brown leggings. I only saw his face for a minute—dark eyes—I think. But wouldn’t you have been overwhelmed with confusion if you had been in my place?’

‘I never get myself into such awkward predicaments,’ said Molly. ‘I shouldn’t have dreamt of going up and taking hold of a strange man asleep on the grass!’

‘But he wasn’t asleep. And I thought he was hurt; I couldn’t have passed him by. It would have been heartless!’

‘You might have called out to him, before you went up to him. I should have asked him the way somewhere, to be sure whether he was alive or dead!’

‘Oh, of course you would have done the proper thing! I never do, and—and I’m glad I don’t!’

Betty dashed out of the room, slamming the door after her as she went.

Molly put her hands up to her ears.

‘I wish she were not so vehement. I think this stranger must be rather interesting. I will put him into my book. A kind of Byron, perhaps. Dark and bitter and passionate, and scorned by the one he loves!’

Betty was by this time in her bedroom leaning her elbows on her window-sill, and looking out with dreamy eyes into the sunny garden below.

‘I wish I knew who he was! His hands were clenched as he got up. He looked at me in that one glance as if he hated me. He must have been angry to be found like that. He looked a proud man, and I expect he came out and away from everybody, on purpose to give vent to his feelings. I wonder if he has a wife,—if he has quarrelled with her! I should know him again anywhere. Oh, dear, why is it that even in this sweet country trouble seems to come upon people? It is only the flowers and birds that are really happy, and even they—if I knew it, I expect—have their troubles. I shall go into church and play. It will take my thoughts away from disagreeable things!’

She ran lightly downstairs again, and, softly singing to herself, made her way down the village lane to look for a blower. She came to a standstill when she saw Mat Lubbock smoking his pipe and leaning over a stile.

‘I will try him again,’ she thought; ‘it won’t hurt me if he refuses.’

So, in her pretty winning tones, she asked him if he would oblige her once again.

'There be plenty o' lads in the village without askin' of me,' he said in a gruff tone.

'Yes, but I like you best. You are so strong. I am always afraid of tiring the little boys; and they sometimes blow so jerkily.'

'I'll oblige ye this once,' said Mat, taking his pipe out of his mouth and tapping it against the wooden bar upon which he leant; 'but never agen, mind ye!'

'Not until next time,' Betty murmured under her breath, with a twinkle of amusement in her eye.

Then the two walked off to the church together, and in a minute soft strains were rising and falling, and Betty's face and eyes were shining with a happy light. An hour went by, and still she sat there until the church clock striking, reminded her of the time. Then she finished by singing Gounod's 'King of Love.'

Mat's face in his corner worked strangely as her sweet joyous notes rang out,—

'The King of love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His,
And He is mine, for ever.'

When the last words had died away, Betty, in the fulness of her heart, spoke to him,—

'Aren't those delicious words, Mat? I love them. They always cure my restless, discontented feelings. "I nothing lack if I am His!" If I could feel that through every hour of the day! Not only when I sing them in church!'

'There be very few who be lackin' nothin'!' said Mat in his gruffest tone.

'I suppose,' said Betty, with a wistful look in her eyes, 'there are very few who can say those words that follow,—

I am His, and He is mine, for ever.'

Mat did not reply, but tramped down the side aisle with one of his most sullen looks. Then, as Betty softly followed him, he suddenly turned round and, planting his back against the church door, delivered his mind.

‘A young leddy, as you be, may well sit down and sing them pretty fancical words. Ye know nought of sin nor grief nor wrong; ye may patter on about the loving Shepherd and the pastures, an’ havin’ comfort through death’s darkness. It be a meaningless thing to ye, arter all said and done. I tell ye, missy, if you had bin treated by the God ye sings such nice things of, as He have treated me, you wouldn’t be so ready to sing His praises! A good Shepherd! A King of Love! He be a cruel Tyrant, to my thinkin’!’

‘Oh, hush, hush, Mat! How can you speak so in God’s house? But I’ve heard of your troubles, and I do feel so sorry for you.’

She put her little hand on his arm, and looked up at him with tears in her eyes. Then she said,—

‘When I was a little girl I used to long for trouble, for I thought that all God’s people must have it; I never dreamt then that trouble would keep people away from God; I thought it must bring them closer to Him. I believe God means it to do so still. But, as you say, I have no experience, so I cannot talk to you. Only I was thinking as I was singing that verse,

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love He sought me,

that we shall never see God’s love in anything in our lives, if our backs are turned to it. We stray on away from it, and perhaps some of our troubles are our own making. If you turned right round, Mat, you would meet the love that is following you. You never will see it so long as your back is turned to it.’

Mat made no reply. He opened the door and went out. It was astonishing to Betty how easily he felt his way along with his stick. She called out ‘Good-afternoon’ to him, but he did not answer.

As she went up the drive she sang again,

‘I nothing lack if I am His,
And He is mine, for ever.’

And the words reached Mat’s ear, and a heavy sigh escaped him.

Tea was in the drawing-room when Betty came in, and a visitor; Mr. Russell was seated by the window talking to Mrs. Stuart.

‘Ah,’ he said, rising and taking Betty’s hand in his; ‘here is my little friend. I am not going to make a stranger of her, Mrs. Stuart. I am going to take up my friendship with her where I left off. And she must adopt no young lady airs and graces with me, for I will have none of them.’

He spoke playfully, and Betty answered him in the same spirit.

‘I promise you to put on a white sun-bonnet and holland gown the next time you call. And I am quite sure I shall enjoy a drive in your high dog-cart now as much as I used to do.’

‘Which means I must take you for a drive. When will you come? To-morrow?’

‘If mother can spare me,’ said Betty demurely.

‘Oh yes,’ Mrs. Stuart replied; ‘Molly will be here. It will be very kind of you, Mr. Russell.’

Conversation turned on other topics. Then a certain Gerald Arundel was mentioned, whom Mrs. Stuart knew in town, and who was now living at the Red Manor near.

‘I remember his maiden speech in the House,’ Mrs. Stuart said; ‘my husband thought a great deal of it, and he often dined with us. He was interested in philanthropy, and was very strong on the Temperance Question. I always thought him a particularly well-read, cultured man, and wondered that he so soon sank into obscurity.’

‘It was his mother’s doing. She was an irascible old lady, who quarrelled with the land agents so often, that no one could be got to stay. The property became hopelessly involved, and the only thing was for Gerald to come home and turn agent himself. He gave up his seat at the following election; said he could not work both—and I think he was right. Mrs. Arundel died two years ago. But Gerald has lost his taste for London life. He always was devoted to his home, and he is still full of philanthropic schemes for his tenants. It is a large property. I have known him since he was a boy, and I admire his grip and grit of purpose. Nothing daunts him.’

‘Is he married?’

‘No; he spends his leisure time in his library, which is a very rare unique collection. His father, if you remember, was a great bookworm, and the son inherits his tastes.’

‘It is a good thing to have a hobby,’ remarked Mrs. Stuart. ‘I am always telling my girls to get a purpose into their lives. Something that will interest and occupy them if their surroundings should not be congenial. Half the misery in the world is caused through lack of occupation.’

‘And the other half through lack of rest,’ said Mr. Russell musingly.

‘Molly has her hobby,’ said Betty impulsively; ‘but I haven’t found mine yet.’

Molly blushed as she met Mr. Russell’s keen searching gaze.

‘And what is it?’ he asked her.

‘I mean to write books,’ she said modestly.

Mrs. Stuart smiled at her favourite daughter.

‘Molly has a riotous imagination,’ she said. ‘If that were all that is necessary for successful authorship, she would succeed. But, as I tell her, imagination may amuse or distract; it cannot uplift or instruct; and, to my mind, the world will never lack amusing books. I wish her a nobler pursuit.’

‘I don’t feel I shall ever do anything grand or noble,’ said Molly. ‘I am sure I am not made for it.’

She did not look crushed by her mother’s criticism.

‘And Betty is lacking in this gift of imagination?’ said Mr. Russell enquiringly.

Betty laughed.

‘I couldn’t have the patience to wade through imaginary sorrows as Molly does. She makes herself miserable sometimes. I think it is quite wicked. It’s like deliberately cutting a fly in half, and crying as you do it! Douglas used to do that when he was a small boy!’

‘And so you have no hobbies?’

Betty shook her small head.

‘I love playing the organ,’ she said; ‘but I seem to like something different every day. And then there are days that I like nothing. Mother says I’m undisciplined.’

‘I shall have to take you in hand,’ said Mr. Russell, smiling at her.

He lingered on, unwilling to leave the old-fashioned vicarage drawing-room, with the scent of roses in the air, the two young girls in their white dresses, and their mother with her graceful beauty. His artistic soul was satisfied with its environment.

When he left at last, Betty accompanied him down the drive. Stretching out her hand to a bush of pink roses, she gathered some, and put them into her belt.

‘I wish it was sunshine and roses all the year round,’ she said enthusiastically. ‘Isn’t early summer delicious, Mr. Russell? and isn’t the country the place to live in, if you wish to be happy and good?’

‘You would like to be a lotus-eater?’ said Mr. Russell, shaking his head at her. ‘Don’t wish to shirk the stern realities of life, Betty; your character will suffer if you do. Sunshine and roses do not brace and strengthen; they too often enervate. Women, as well as men, want adverse winds to prove the grit and purpose in them.’

Betty’s merry smile faded, her lips took a wistful curve.

‘I haven’t found the purpose of my life yet,’ she said, stealing a shy look up at her old friend through her long lashes. ‘I wonder if you will help me to discover it, Mr. Russell? Only’—here dimples and smiles appeared again —‘don’t tell me it is to be married!’

‘Is that what most people tell you?’

‘They infer it.’

‘And is it a fate that you despise? Have you developed into one of those young women who think a married life a state of slavery?’

‘I don’t think I have,’ said Betty demurely, ‘for that idea has never entered my mind. But I really hear so much about the subject in town that I am quite sick of it. Now I am in the country I mean to forget all about it. I want to fill my mind with other things.’

‘I will try to help you.’

‘Yes, please do. You’re a man; your head isn’t full of the nonsense that a girl’s is! I want—oh, I want so much to have a full and happy life. Tell me what fills yours.’

Betty looked so earnest and child-like in her unconventional speech, that Mr. Russell refrained from smiling. He was touched to the heart.

‘My dear little friend,’ he said, ‘you came into my life many years ago when it was an empty one. You were the means of leading me to the source of true satisfaction and fulness. I would that I could help you now. I am sorry that your life is not a full one. You have everything in this world to make you happy—youth and health and strength, and, may I hope that you have not lost, what you possessed so strongly as a child, your faith in and love of God?’

Betty flushed with deep feeling.

‘No, I haven’t lost that, Mr. Russell, but I am doing no good to any one; and I get moody and discontented, and sometimes I’m enchanted with everybody and everything, and then I hate them all just as heartily! And I’m not a bit good. I don’t think I ever was. I always long to be, but I can never manage it. There now, I’ve made you my father confessor! Now what are you going to say to me?’

They were standing by the gate at the end of the drive, and Betty raised mischievous eyes to Mr. Russell’s face. In spite of the fun sparkling in them, he saw they were trembling with unshed tears.

‘I will keep my lecture for another day,’ he said lightly.

Betty dropped a little curtsey.

‘Thank you, sir.’

Then she gave him her hand.

‘Good-bye; and next time you will see me in a white sun-bonnet!’

She tripped away singing, ‘I know a bank whereon the wild thyme grows;’ and Mr. Russell walked home feeling that, in spite of years, growth, and change, Betty was Betty still, with her quicksilvery transition of mood and thought.

CHAPTER IV

Rose Songs

That music breathes all through my spirit,
  As the breezes blow through a tree;
And my soul gives light as it quivers,
  Like moons on a tremulous sea.

New passions are wakened within me,
  New passions that have not a name
Dim truths that I knew but as phantoms
  Stand up clear and bright in the flame.

And my soul is possessed with yearnings
  Which make my life broaden and swell;
And I hear strange things that are soundless,
  And I see the invisible.

FABER.

It was an exquisite evening. Mrs. Stuart lay on her couch by the open window. Molly was seated on a low chair, gazing out into the dusky garden. Her hands were idly clasped in her lap, and her blue eyes were filled with dreaminess and content. Bowls of roses—pink, crimson, and white—scented the room with their fragrance. At the piano sat Betty; an old-fashioned silver lamp above her threw its soft light upon her small dark curly head, her eager sensitive face, and her slight graceful little figure. She was singing, and singing in one of her most pathetic moods. Her voice thrilled to the soul, one unseen hearer outside.

‘ “Where blooms, O my father, a thornless rose?”
“That can I not tell thee, my child;
Not one on the bosom of earth ever grows
But wounds whom its charms have beguiled.”

“Would I’d a rose on my bosom to lie,
But I shrink from the piercing thorn:
I long, but I dare not its point defy;
I long, and I gaze forlorn.”

“Not so, O my child; round the stem again
Thy resolute fingers entwine;
Forego not the joy for its sister, pain—
Let the rose, the sweet rose, be thine.” ’

Steps on the gravel made themselves heard as her voice died away.

And then Mr. Russell’s voice broke upon them,—

‘Mrs. Stuart, may we come in? This is very unceremonious, but Arundel has been dining with me, and the night is such a lovely one that we have been tempted out for a stroll. Let me introduce him to you—but you have met before.’

The two men stepped in through the open French window. Mrs. Stuart welcomed them gladly. She missed the constant intercourse with her acquaintances in town, and always enjoyed a chat with Betty’s old friend.

Betty rose from the piano with a pretty flush of pleasure on her cheeks, as she shook hands with Mr. Russell.

‘You are not to leave the piano,’ he said. ‘We have been enjoying your music outside. We saw a little white figure surrounded by roses in a pale light, and we stood still to watch and listen, only half believing that she was real flesh and blood. No! please, Mrs. Stuart, do not ring for lights. May we sit in the dusk and listen to another song? And let it be about roses still, Betty, only let us forget they have thorns.’

Betty turned over the leaves of her music irresolutely.

‘I have not many songs about roses, Mr. Russell,’ she said. Then, sitting down again, she sang,—

‘It was peeping through the brambles—
That little wild white rose,
Where the hawthorn hedge was planted,
My garden to enclose.
All beyond was fern or heather
On the breezy open moor;
All within was sun and shelter
And the wealth of beauty’s store.
But I did not heed the fragrance
Of floweret or of tree,
For my eyes were on that rosebud,
And it grew too high for me.

In vain I strove to reach it,
Through the tangled mass of green—
It only smiled and nodded
Behind its thorny screen.
Yet through that summer morning
I lingered near the spot;
Oh! why do things look sweeter
If we possess them not?
My garden buds were blooming,
But all that I could see
Was that mocking little white rose,
Hanging—just too high for me!’

‘Thank you, Betty,’ said Mr. Russell, as she shut up her music and came away from the piano. ‘You are bent upon teaching us to-night the undesirability of taking possession of roses. We must look at them, but they are not to be ours.’

‘A high standard ensures a high aim,’ said Gerald Arundel. ‘An easy possession is apt to be despised.’

He had a pleasant, mellow voice, and as Molly turned up a lamp in her corner, which shed its light full in his face, Betty started violently. Where had she seen him before? Surely this calm, self-assured man was not the same whom she had seen in the full violence of emotion in that quiet field corner a few days before! Yet even in that short glimpse she had had of him, his face was too riveted on her memory ever to be forgotten. She sat down by Molly, and listened to the conversation without taking part in it.

‘You would not sit down contented with that singer’s conclusion,’ said Mr. Russell, smiling—‘that it is “just too high for me”?’

Gerald’s eyes looked mirthful.

‘There are always ladders,’ he said, ‘to everything!’

‘But forbidden fruit is best not touched,’ said Mrs. Stuart.

‘It depends on who forbids it.’

‘Arundel has the fighting element in him,’ said Mr. Russell. ‘I often tell him that his blood will cool with age.’

‘We want combativeness,’ said Mrs. Stuart, smiling; ‘I think the sin of our age is easy indifference.’

‘Yes; combativeness on the side of right is good, but not combativeness with fate.’

‘What is fate?’

‘I will not use that word, for I do not believe in it. With what Providence ordains for us.’

‘Our circumstances, you mean? Do you preach the gospel of resignation, Mr. Russell, to all things that befall us? I must allow that I cannot tolerate those who drift with every wind that blows. I am on Mr. Arundel’s side. The greater the difficulties, the more effort I should make to overcome them. I do not like that word “Providence.” It is made use of to excuse laziness and indifference.’

‘I have expressed myself badly,’ said Mr. Russell. ‘I quite agree that easy acquiescence to whatever comes to us, without any effort to remedy the evil, is cowardly and weak. But there is a crisis in men’s lives sometimes, when it is useless to fight with the inevitable.’

‘Your argument is, to fight till you know you are conquered, and then make the best you can of your defeat?’

It was Gerald Arundel who spoke, but he spoke as a man in a dream.

‘Come,’ said Mrs. Stuart lightly, ‘let us leave arguments alone. Mr. Arundel, tell me what you have been doing since I saw you last.’

‘That seems a long time ago. I do not think I have been idle.’

He drew up a chair to her, and was soon deep in many philanthropic subjects which seemed as dear to his heart as to hers.

Mr. Russell turned to the girls.

‘When are you coming over to see me?’ he said. ‘Betty, I want you to sit for me again. Will you?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said, a little mischievously; ‘I have a vivid recollection of the torture I underwent when you made me lie down and pretend to be asleep. How I longed to move! And how frightened I felt if I so much as winked my eyelid! It is like an endless photo being taken. I am afraid I could not have the patience to sit still.’

‘But you could talk,’ said Mr. Russell; ‘and I fancy that would compensate for a good deal.’

Betty laughed merrily. Gerald Arundel, catching the sound of her laugh, turned round for a minute, then went on with what he was saying.

‘I chatter too much, don’t I, Molly? My tongue is always getting me into hot water.’

‘You never think out what you’re going to say before you say it,’ said Molly.

‘Who does? Only prigs and preachers—and I hope I’m not that sort.’

‘Molly,’ said Mrs. Stuart, turning to her eldest daughter, ‘can you find me the last report I had of the S.P.S.H.? I want to show it to Mr. Arundel.’

‘What are those magic letters?’ asked Mr. Russell, as Molly left the room in quest of the pamphlet.

‘The Society for Promoting Self-Help,’ said Betty promptly.

‘One of the best societies going,’ said Mrs. Stuart warmly. ‘I thoroughly approve of its principles. It is true charity to teach those in need to help themselves.’

‘Yes,’ said Gerald Arundel musingly; ‘but I have come across some who are absolutely helpless to help themselves.’

‘Are you sure? Such cases are few and far between. I want to show you how this society meets the needs of the most improbable cases. Even bedridden cripples have been taught to support themselves. And you do not feel, in supporting such a charity, that your money will be wasted or thrown away.’

‘I don’t see that it is a charity at all, mother,’ said Betty, in her reckless fashion. ‘I would much rather help the poor in the good old-fashioned way.

Every one is so dreadfully afraid nowadays of giving to the undeserving. It makes me always want to do it. I hate all these societies, made up with red-tape machinery! Feeling and sympathy and love are all wrong, they say. I'm sure the Bible doesn't tell us to help our neighbours through societies!'

'You are on the side of freedom, Miss Stuart,' said Gerald Arundel, smiling. 'But if you have had any experience in charity, you will know that indiscriminate almsgiving sometimes aggravates the misery that you are anxious to relieve.'

'Yes, that is what mother says, and I know she must be right; but I do hate to be tied and bound down by rules and regulations, don't you?'

'Mr. Arundel has seen a little more of life than you have,' said Mrs. Stuart pleasantly. 'It is only a question of time, Betty; you want a wider view of life.'

'But, mother, I think I take a wider view than you do.'

'Of course you think so. All young people do.'

Molly came in at that minute, and soon afterwards, the gentlemen took their leave.

But before they went, Gerald Arundel asked Mrs. Stuart to bring her daughters over with her to lunch with him one day.

'I should like you to see my library,' he said. 'I am sure you would enjoy it. It is almost a snare to me sometimes, for when I get inside it I become entirely engrossed, and forget the outside world altogether.'

'Perhaps we might drive over one day when I feel a little stronger,' said Mrs. Stuart. 'I should like to come very much.'

They went; and Betty watched them go down the drive with interest. Gerald Arundel was filling her mind and thoughts. She dwelt again on every word that she had heard him say. His tone of voice was light and pleasant; his grey-blue eyes had a frank, honest look in them, with an occasional twinkle of humour, which lightened up his naturally stern face. Nothing in his manner or conversation betrayed any secret passion or grief. Yet she could not forget the glimpse she had caught of him a short time before.

'He is not married,' she said to herself. 'He lives in that sweet old Red Manor House. He has everything that the world can give him. What can his trouble be? Was it only a passing feeling, I wonder? But his face looked so fiercely miserable. I wish I knew more about him. Perhaps Mr. Russell knows, and yet I would not tell any one for worlds. I shall not tell Molly that

I have seen my unknown hero. She is putting him into her story already. I am sure that he did not recognise me, and that is one thing for which I am thankful!'

Down the drive, the two men were discussing their visit.

'Mrs. Stuart has changed very little since I last saw her. What a handsome woman she is!'

'Yes; and the girls take after her—only in a different style.'

Gerald was silent; then he said,—

'Little Miss Betty is your favourite.'

'She used to be as a child; I cannot quite get reconciled to the change in her, but she is a winsome little creature still. Molly is too sedate, too placid, to interest me much.'

Another silence. Then Gerald spoke in a different tone.

'My fighting powers are at an end, Russell. I knew what you were driving at when you talked of being resigned to the inevitable. You were only continuing our conversation of a few days ago. I told you then that I was fighting what I hoped would prove a shadow, but it has turned into a very substantial foe, and I am worsted in the combat.'

'I wish you would enlighten me a little.'

'I can't. It is only a question of time, and then you will know fast enough.'

'Then I can only assure you of my sympathy, and hope that the inevitable may prove a blessing.'

Gerald gave a short hard laugh. Then he said,—

'You had better turn that into a prayer. You and I both believe in its power; but I tell you the powers of evil seem to have been let loose on my soul! I have not, I will not, lose my faith; but it has been tested to breaking point.'

'Thank God it is not broken. Faith, to some, seems mere acquiescence in what they see and understand. True faith can only be tested in the dark, when sight and understanding have been swept away—when it has been strained to breaking point, and does not break!'

Gerald stood still and bared his head in the moonlight.

Mr. Russell noted his upward gaze, and the light that was reflected on his face from within seemed to match the soft chastened beams from without. It is good to watch the sunshine pour out from a human soul; it is better to see the impress of the peaceful silvery light that only comes in black darkness.

They walked on in silence; then Gerald spoke again,—

'I have been roused to-night by a quick, sweet vision of what might have been, and what can never be. Thank you for your words. They have helped me.'

He began to talk of other things, and the deep earnestness that had vibrated in his tone died away. Gerald could be very good company when he chose. He struck his friend as being singularly light-hearted when they parted that night, and Mr. Russell said to himself as he turned into his lonely home,—

'He is young, and troubles will not vex him long. A good constitution, a hopeful disposition, and a firm belief in God above, will carry him through triumphantly.'

But he would not have spoken so certainly if he had seen Gerald in his library that night.

Till the small hours of the morning he was pacing to and fro; his brows were knitted and his hands clenched, but his lips moved in prayer.

As the dawn broke he flung open the window shutters, and leaning out, drew in with deep long breaths the dewy sweetness of the morning. And then a subtle fragrance stealing upwards took his thoughts back with a bound to a sweet little figure framed in roses, and a still sweeter voice.

He put his hand out of the window and plucked a small climbing rose, then a smile played about his eyes and lips, and he murmured,—

'But all that I could see
Was that mocking little white rose,
Hanging—just too high for me!'

CHAPTER V

The Red Manor

His home, the spot of earth supremely blest,
A dearer, sweeter spot than all the rest.

J. MONTGOMERY.

About a week later, Mr. Russell drove Mrs. Stuart and the two girls to the Red Manor to lunch. Betty was very quiet, and her old friend rallied her on her loss of spirits.

But if her tongue was still, her eyes were busy. As they drove up an old chestnut drive, with long sweeps of green lawn on either side, she noted every tree and flowering shrub they passed. She felt an intense interest in the Red Manor and its master. She could not get him out of her thoughts. The house itself, with its Elizabethan turrets and gables, its casement windows, and glowing weather-beaten walls, charmed her. Gerald was on the steps to welcome them, and by his side were two handsome deerhounds. As Betty glanced shyly at him, again she wondered if the past might have been a bad dream. He looked so strong, so self-contained, so free from anxious thought or care. He led them into a square hall which seemed abounding in antiquities, but withal had a very habitable and cosy look about it. Large pots of geraniums and hydrangeas lightened up its sombreness, and the sunshine streamed freely through an old stained window on the staircase. The drawing-room was rather stiff and decorous, but rare old china and paintings adorned its walls, and four large windows looked over an expanse of wooded park and hills. They lunched in the dining-room, a handsome oak-panelled room, with family portraits hanging on its walls. Gerald was a delightful host, and though the conversation was carried on chiefly between Mrs. Stuart and himself, Betty and Molly enjoyed themselves thoroughly. Afterwards he took them to his library, and here Mrs. Stuart became completely absorbed in looking over the many rare and valuable works on the shelves.

'This is where I live,' he said, smiling, as he turned to the girls. 'If I had only this one room, I could be content for the rest of my life.'

Mrs. Stuart looked up from a book of which she had taken possession.

'There is no sense of loneliness amongst books,' she said.

‘But it is a one-sided companionship,’ said impulsive Betty. ‘Books talk to me, but I can’t talk back; that is what I should want—some one to talk to!’

‘Don’t you ever feel lonely here, Mr. Arundel?’ asked Molly.

‘I never have yet,’ he replied, passing his hand caressingly across some of his calf-bound favourites.

Then a shadow fell across his face.

‘It is all part and parcel of my life. I have loved it too much. As a little chap at school I was a puzzle to many, because I would spend my holidays alone here, in preference to visiting some cousins of mine in London. That is one thing I shall look back to with thankfulness hereafter—that I made the best use of the opportunities that were given to me, of spending all the time I could here.’

His tone vibrated with earnestness and feeling. Again Betty wondered at his words. She wandered round the room whilst he and her mother pored over his books. One of the deerhounds followed her. She laid her hand on his head. ‘I wonder how much you know, or how little?’ she said softly, under her breath. ‘Do you ever sit beside your master when he is going through a bad time? Do you stuff your nose into his hand and assure him of your love and faithfulness?’ Floy, the hound, looked at her with intelligent eyes, but only wagged his tail in response. Then Betty walked to the window, and as she looked out upon the sweep of green turf and grand old trees, with a few cattle grazing in the distance, and then again at the comfortably furnished library within, with its lounge chairs and every convenience for writing or reading, she announced in a dreamy tone,—

‘If I were the mistress of this house, I should be perfectly happy.’

Mrs. Stuart looked up with a little consternation in her eyes. Gerald laughed aloud.

‘And which room would you make your headquarters?’ he asked.

Betty was so utterly unconscious that she had said anything at all peculiar, that she continued in the same tone, ‘I should use them all; but I would come in here when I wanted to think and be good.’

‘And would that be often?’

‘Sometimes it would.’

‘We must not monopolise your time too much,’ said Mrs. Stuart, rising from her seat. ‘I think you said you would like to show us round the house, so shall we make a move? I cannot tell you how I envy you such a library. I think, with Betty, that I should spend a good bit of my time here, were it mine.’

Gerald led them up the old staircase to the music-room.

‘This is where I fancy you would be found oftenest,’ he said, turning to Betty, with an amused sparkle in his eyes.

‘Yes—what a lovely piano! May I try it? But an organ is what I love. Ah, you have one over there!’

‘It has never been touched since my mother died,’ said Gerald gravely. ‘She used to play on it. I am afraid it may be out of repair. Would you like to try it?’

Betty shrank back and shook her head.

‘Oh no; it would be—be sacrilege. You must keep it from being touched by any one else. She must have been fond of music?’

‘Very fond. She handed on the love of it to me, but not the power of execution.’

‘That is sometimes the better gift of the two,’ said Mrs. Stuart. ‘An appreciative soul has the power of bringing more happiness to others, I think, than mere talent and execution. Genius is apt to be very selfish and autocratic in its demands.’

‘And the world wants more sympathy and appreciation than genius,’ said Gerald musingly; ‘and that is in a beggar’s power to give.’

‘And the moral is,’ broke in Betty, with twinkling eyes, ‘that no one need live in vain.’

Gerald looked at her.

‘I wish all would believe that, Miss Betty. It would save many from despair.’

Betty did not reply, but a thoughtful look stole into her pretty eyes.

They soon wandered out into the grounds. Molly was busy peopling every nook and corner with her imaginary heroes and heroines. To her, Gerald was ‘copy’—nothing more. His house, his lands, were interesting to her from that view alone. She lived in a land of dreams at present, which the

quiet seclusion of the country vicarage only served to foster and encourage. Betty's quick eager eyes were everywhere. She loved the old-fashioned shrubs and flowers in the walled kitchen gardens, the roses on the terraces, and the quaint old summer-houses in unfrequented spots; but through it all, the master, with his hidden trouble, stood persistently forward in her thoughts. She listened to his conversation with her mother with wonder and increasing interest. How much he seemed to know! How every subject interested him! What a busy useful life he seemed to lead!

Just before the carriage came round to take them home, Betty caught sight of her organ-blower leaving the stable yard.

'Do you know Mat Lubbock?' she asked.

'Indeed I do, and feel an intense pity for him.'

'But,' said Betty, a little pucker settling between her eyes, 'pity does him no good. Everybody pities him. I want to do more than that for him!'

Gerald looked at her with a grave smile.

Mrs. Stuart was resting on an old stone seat by the hall door. Molly was carefully wrapping a shawl round her. For a moment Betty was alone with her host.

'What do you want to do for him?' he asked.

'Oh, I want to comfort him, to make him pleased and satisfied with life.'

'That can be done, but not by you or me.'

Gerald spoke with a far-away look in his eyes.

'I don't think any one can do it,' said Betty, with a little sigh.

There was silence for a minute, then very slowly, almost under his breath, Gerald said,—

' "I have seen his ways, and will heal him; I will lead him also, and restore comforts unto him." '

A light came into Betty's face. She looked up at her companion with a radiant smile, though a rush of feeling had almost brought tears to her eyes.

'That is from the Bible,' she said, 'but I don't remember where it comes. It is lovely. And it is true. Oh, Mr. Arundel, make him believe it!'

She turned away. The carriage was at the foot of the steps, and not another word passed between them.

When Betty went to her room that night, she took out her Bible, and began to search for the verse that Gerald had quoted to her. With the help of her Concordance, she found it.

'I knew it would be in Isaiah,' she mused. 'He is always so comforting; and I am glad that Mr. Arundel is a good man, for he will know where to get comfort himself. I wonder that he has such a trouble, if he is good, or rather that he feels it so. But I suppose he wouldn't be human if he didn't feel. He would be a stoic!'

She repeated the verse over to herself.

'I shall certainly say it to Mat next time I see him. It can't do him harm, and it may do him good.'

But it was some days before she saw her blower. Mrs. Stuart had one of her bad attacks, and the two girls were anxious and engrossed with her. When she rallied and came downstairs again, she was difficult to please, and though Molly never incurred her displeasure, Betty did, and was too young and impatient to realise that her mother's irritation was due to weakness of nerves and bad health.

'Can you not keep still, Betty?' Mrs. Stuart demanded sharply one afternoon, as she was wandering about the drawing-room touching things with restless fingers, and singing softly to herself.

Betty dropped into a chair at once.

'I'm sorry, mother; I wasn't thinking.'

'A restless woman is my special aversion,' went on Mrs. Stuart irritably. 'Why cannot you have the repose of manner that Molly has? It is so ill-bred to be constantly fidgeting. I have seen you entertain visitors in the same excited jerky state.'

'I can't be an exact duplicate of Molly,' said Betty, a little hotly, 'and I shouldn't like to be if I could. She is distinctly heavy sometimes.'

'Disparaging others does not excuse yourself. It is want of occupation that is your failing. Molly is never idle; you are perpetually so.'

Betty began to feel that this was unjust. She had stayed in with her mother to let Molly have a drive with Mr. Russell, who had in reality called to take her out. But Molly had been tied to the house for several days, and she persuaded her to go in her stead.

Mrs. Stuart was glad, for Molly's sake, that she had gone, but she found Betty a poor substitute.

'I haven't anything to do now,' said Betty, 'because I am sitting with you. You don't like me to write your letters for you, and you won't let me read to you. I have finished my work. Would you like me to play to you?'

'No, thank you. My head is not in a fit state to stand it.'

There was silence. Then Mrs. Stuart continued,—

'You are always so ready to excuse yourself, Betty, that you will never learn to remedy your faults. You are wasting your life at present. You have no pursuits, no resources. I have given you a good education, but you seem to have derived no benefit from it. When I was your age I was the secretary of an essay society, the treasurer for our local Girls' Friendly Society, and founder of a small Workmen's Club. You seem to take no interest in anything.'

'I hadn't much chance in town to do anything but go to stupid "At Homes" and evening parties,' said Betty. 'I want to find something to do, but I can't bear writing. I like to be out of doors always. I wish I could live my life in a gipsy camp, and have perpetual summer.'

'You only think of life as it may affect yourself,' said her mother severely. 'It seems impossible to instil the sense of responsibility into your motives. I often wonder if any forces will make you see differently, or if you will drift into an aimless, discontented woman, who will live and die a slave to her self-indulgence and indolence.'

Betty's lower lip drooped. An overwhelming sense of her own shortcomings seized her. Her mother's plain speaking always had the result of depressing her. It never stimulated her.

Mrs. Stuart continued for some minutes in the same strain, and then Molly's entrance set Betty free, and she rushed out of doors with a sore heart.

'Mother always scolds me so. She only likes Molly. I never please her. I am a dead failure, and I am good for nothing. Oh, what was I made for? And how is it I seem to have missed my vocation? I should like to leave home altogether, and go thousands of miles away to the other end of the globe and never come back again till I had become a brilliant success. Men do that. They have been dunces at schools, and have been plucked in exams., and sent down from college; and then they go abroad, and the ne'er-do-weels turn into millionaires, or governors or presidents of some colony; and they

come home in triumph, and everybody worships them. But girls can't do that kind of thing. I am one too many in our family. I always felt I was. I wonder——'

She was leaning over a stile in the meadows as she mused, and a look up into the deep blue sky formulated the thought.

'I wonder what God means me to do with my life. I wish He would show me. I do believe I am His child. In a kind of way I have always tried to serve Him, and I do love Him; but my life is full of faults, and I am always forgetting. Mother is hopeless about me. I wonder if God is!'

Betty's eyes were filling with tears. A brisk 'Good afternoon' made her start.

Gerald Arundel was behind her, waiting to pass.

She hastily brushed away her tears, and spoke in an extra cheerful tone, —

'Oh, good afternoon, Mr. Arundel. Where are you going? May I come with you?'

Then, as she met a surprised look in his eyes, she laughed confusedly.

'Of course, that's a thing I should not have said—at least, not to you. Mr. Russell would have understood. I want some one to talk to dreadfully.'

Gerald smiled at her, and there was something in his smile that seemed to warm her heart.

'I shall be delighted to talk to you,' he said. 'Shall we walk down to the village? I want to see an old woman who has applied for a vacant place in my almshouses.'

'Oh, have you an almshouse? How delightful! I always think I should like to end my days in one. They are so restful.'

'Don't you think that depends on the inmates?'

'No; because they are always old, and they all sit by their fires with their cups of tea on the hob, and knit and nod by turns.'

'I wish you would visit mine, and see if they come up to your expectation.'

'Tell me where they are, and I will go at once,' cried Betty enthusiastically. 'I was just feeling how empty my life was, and wishing for something to do.'

‘I think you would find it too far to walk; it is a good three miles.’

‘Perhaps I had better not go to-day. Mother will wonder where I am.’

Silence fell upon them as they trod the green meadow together, then Gerald broke it,—

‘What has happened to take away your sunshine to-day?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘When I last saw you, you were the personification of sunshine; now ____’

‘Ah, yes,’ interrupted Betty; ‘I know I am dull and doleful. It is from thinking over my failings. I am no good to any one. I am not wanted at home, and I am not wanted away from it. And I sometimes long to be a real help to some one.’

Gerald did not speak, but it was not want of sympathy that kept him silent. The wistful hesitation in her tone vibrated through him. She added, with an attempt at playfulness,—

‘So if you come across an empty corner that you think I might fill, I wish you would let me know.’

Gerald gazed down upon her with a strange look in his eyes.

‘And if I did, would you promise to fill it?’

Betty shook her head, and laughter came to her lips.

‘It must be the right corner,’ she said; ‘a corner that would fit me, and that I could fill satisfactorily. I have always felt an odd one left out in the cold, a “puss” trying to get in at some corner, but never succeeding.’

Gerald caught the infection of her bright face, and smiled.

‘I will remember,’ he said simply.

Silence again. Talkative as Betty usually was, she did not break it. A restfulness stole into her heart as she paced by Gerald’s side. She felt small and childish beside him, but was content to have it so. His quiet strength was brought into greater prominence thereby. They had reached the village, and when Gerald turned in at a small cottage, Betty wished him good-bye.

‘I wish I could offer to drive you over to the almshouses,’ he said, as he held her hand for a moment in his; ‘but I am going up to town almost

immediately on business. Ask Mr. Russell to take you. My old women will be enchanted to see you, for they love visitors.'

Betty's face brightened.

'I shall like to see them.'

'May a comparative stranger offer you a bit of advice?'

'Of course; what is it?'

'If you are feeling that your life is empty fill it with others' interests. We are all stewards entrusted with gifts to pass on.'

'Thank you, Mr. Arundel.'

Betty said no more, but walked away very soberly.

'What a good man he is! I wish I were like him! How I wonder what his secret trouble is! His face is different from most people's. He knows how to screen his soul from public view, but sometimes when he speaks, as he did just now, one gets a glimpse of it. I wonder if I am a steward. I must think it out, but I don't believe that I have any gifts to pass on.'

CHAPTER VI

Altered Circumstances

(For) of Fortune's sharp adversity
The worste kinde of infortune it this,
A man to have been in prosperite
And it remember when it passed is.

CHAUCER.

'There, Mat, haven't I tired you out?'

' 'Twould take more nor that, miss, to tire me. And a tired body can soon be put right. If there were no worse ills in life than that, us would be happy!'

'You mean that your soul and spirit are tired. Well, I can give you a text that was given me the other day. And I think it is a lovely one for you: "I have seen his ways, and will heal him; I will lead him also, and restore comforts unto him." '

'Nothin' but words,' muttered Mat, under his breath.

'Oh, Mat, you mustn't say that, because they aren't my words, they are God's; and His words and promises are facts.'

Mat began to shuffle down the aisle of the church. Betty had been playing the organ for over an hour and a half; she found now that Mat was always ready to act as her blower. His protests waxed fainter each time, and a wintry smile would pass over his face when he heard Betty's fresh young voice.

She would not let him go now, but laid her arm on his coat-sleeve.

'Listen, Mat; I long to comfort you and make you happy, but only God can do this. Listen again to what He says, for I have thought over this verse so much: "*I have seen his ways*." Your ways, that means, your troubles, and difficulties, and doubts of God's goodness; "*and will heal him*," heal your broken heart, and all your soul's aches and pains "*I will lead him also*." He won't leave you. When He comes to comfort and heal, He will stay by you, and lead you day by day, so that temptation and trial will not be too much for you, with His hand in yours. And now this is the best part of all: "I will *restore comforts unto him*." You will be like Job, who had everything taken

away from him, and then had it restored fourfold. I don't think you can need more than that.'

Mat cleared his throat.

'Ye be a wunnerful praycher, miss. Good arternoon.'

He hurried out of the church; and Betty sighed heavily, little knowing that every word she uttered remained riveted on the blind man's memory.

Mat went to his solitary home, and sat down to his tea like a man stunned. Slowly repeating the verse over to himself, the beauty and simplicity of it seemed to strike him afresh.

'Ay!' he said at last, with a groan; ' 'tis more than I can expect, if He have seen my goin's on! I be in sore need of healin' an' comfort, an' as I can't get it nowhere else, I'd best let the Almighty have His dealin's with me!'

His tea remained untouched, but the frozen ground in his soul was thawing and softening rapidly. That night it yielded to the seed of life, and though it was long before the sower knew about it, the seed took root and sprang up.

When Betty left the church and retraced her steps to the vicarage, she was met in the drive by Molly and Mr. Russell.

'Oh, here she is!' cried Molly joyously. 'Betty, Mr. Russell is going to carry us off to dinner with him. Mother has given her permission, and he is going to let us see a new planet through his telescope this evening.'

'And as I have been waiting for your return for a full hour, I am going to lay violent hands on you, and insist upon your coming with me this very moment,' said Mr. Russell.

'But,' hesitated Betty, looking down at her dress, 'I must——'

'You must do nothing but step into my trap, which is waiting for us at the blacksmith's. My horse has been shoed. You young ladies are always in such dainty white frocks that you do not need any extra adorning to grace a bachelor's table!'

They were a merry party driving out to the Hall. Molly and Betty vied with one another in old reminiscences, and Mr. Russell listened and laughed at them.

But as they drove up to the front door he made a comical face of dismay.

‘Visitors! Now if only we had been five minutes later! It is Mrs. Fitz Hume and her sister; that means a good hour’s gossip!’

‘Let us go round to the stables before they see us!’ cried Betty.

But it was too late. A stout lady in the act of descending the steps caught sight of them approaching, and called out gaily,—

‘Ah, Mr. Russell, here you are! What a blessing! My poor horses have driven twenty-five miles to-day, and I have found no one at home.’

In a few minutes they were all in the drawing-room, and tea was brought in.

Mrs. Fitz Hume’s sister, a Miss Allison, was as silent as Mrs. Fitz Hume was discursive; but when she did make a remark, it was pithy and to the point; only, as Betty afterwards remarked, she viewed life through dark blue spectacles.

When Mrs. Fitz Hume had taken her second cup of tea she became impressive.

‘Now, my dear Mr. Russell, have you heard the news? And can you enlighten us at all? For I assure you it was the greatest shock to me. I always have liked Gerald Arundel. My dear husband used to say that you and he were the only intellectual men in the county—men of books and thought. And I know Gerald is a great crony of yours, so I suppose he has told you all. I have heard rumours for some time that he was in some difficulty, but I never dreamt of anything like this.’

Betty’s breath came and went quickly. Mr. Russell quietly helped himself to another cup of tea. Not a muscle of his face moved. Mrs. Fitz Hume looked at him, then gave a little laugh.

‘Oh, how stolid and unemotional you men are! Matters of life and death will not move you.’

‘Arundel was in good health when I saw him yesterday,’ Mr. Russell remarked.

‘It is a wonder that he is! If any man was ever wedded to his property, he was, and now, at one blow, it is all taken from him!’

Molly opened her blue eyes in astonishment.

‘Is Mr. Arundel going to leave that dear old house of his?’ she asked.

‘It is going to be put up for sale to-morrow fortnight,’ said Miss Allison, in a sepulchral tone.

‘And it is a marvel to me why he has kept his friends so in the dark,’ said Mrs. Fitz Hume. ‘I actually saw a notice of the sale in the paper yesterday morning, and till then I had not the remotest idea of such a catastrophe! There are the wildest stories afloat, but none quite so interesting as the truest version, and that I have heard from Dr. Strong, who has Gerald’s permission to make it public. Of course details are wanting, so I should be glad to hear your version of it, Mr. Russell. Is it true that an unknown uncle of his in Australia has been discovered, and claims the whole property as his? And that, having no love for the old place and no desire to live in it, he has written to give directions for it to be sold? How is it that he can lay claim to it? Is he senior to Gerald’s father? And where has he been all this time? Why did he not come forward before? And is he so desperately mean as to make no allowance to his nephew? From what I gathered, Gerald will be absolutely penniless.’

‘My dear Mrs. Fitz Hume,’ said Mr. Russell quietly, ‘you require no information from me, for you have told me more than I know myself.’

‘Oh, poor Mr. Arundel!’ said Molly; ‘how dreadful for him! Will he have to sell that lovely old library?’

‘It is most distressing; he will have to part with all that he loves and values, and will not get a halfpenny himself! I feel inclined to open my house to him, and offer him a home, but he is so proud that I should be afraid of suggesting it.’

‘He is not too proud to thank you for the kindness of heart that prompts such a suggestion.’

Mrs. Fitz Hume looked round startled, and was not reassured when she saw it was Gerald himself, who had entered the room unperceived. There was an awkward silence. Gerald was the only one who seemed at ease. He shook hands with Molly and Betty, bowed to Miss Allison, and took a seat near Mrs. Fitz Hume.

‘Please don’t mind me,’ he said, a little twinkle of humour stealing into the corners of his eyes. ‘I have had to pay three calls this afternoon, and each time found myself the absorbing topic of conversation. I came over here thinking that I could not be an interruption. But I am afraid I was mistaken.’

‘Now, my dear Mr. Arundel,’ said Mrs. Fitz Hume, with more kindness than tact, ‘let us be quite frank with each other. We are all friends here; and

I'm most distressed at this appalling news. Have you no way out of your difficulties, except by the sale of the Red Manor? Just think, some City man may buy it, and we shall have neighbours whom none of us will care to visit! Can't you persuade this unknown uncle of yours to come over and settle here himself? It is such a pity when a sweet old family place like yours goes out of the family.'

Gerald looked grave. Betty glanced at him shyly, wondering how he could stand Mrs. Fitz Hume's well-meant sympathy.

She went on, unheeding Mr. Russell's frown,—

'Do tell me, now, what you mean to do? Are you going away? And are you going to sell that valuable old library of yours?'

'I will send you a catalogue of the sale,' answered Gerald imperturbably, 'and then you will see all the "goods and effects." As for my own plans, they are not quite formulated yet; but when they are, I will let you know.'

'Meanwhile, it is kindest to leave you in peace,' said Miss Allison drily; then, turning to her sister, she said,—

'Marion, my dear, I don't want to take the initiative, but our drive is a long one, and it is getting late.'

Mrs. Fitz Hume reluctantly took her sister's hint, and rose from her seat.

'You will come and dine with us, Mr. Arundel, one day this week? I won't take a refusal. As I was saying to Mr. Russell just now, my dear husband always had such a regard and liking for you. I don't know what he would have said, had he known——'

Mr. Russell came to Gerald's rescue; he asked Mrs. Fitz Hume to give her opinion on a picture in the hall that he had lately bought, and a few minutes after her carriage rolled away. Gerald stayed to dinner. His family affairs were not touched upon; but both the girls wondered at his calm and cheerful composure. Betty was so full of his trouble that she could not regain her spirits; and when, after they had dined, they adjourned to the observatory, Mr. Russell rallied her on her silence.

'Are abstruse calculations filling your mind and thoughts, or have you made a resolve to practise discretion of speech, and think before you speak?'

'I always try to do that,' said Betty naïvely, 'except when I'm in a hurry and forget.'

When, a few minutes after, Molly took up her position behind the big telescope, and Mr. Russell was instructing her in the mysteries of the planets, Betty turned to Gerald.

'Let us look up at the stars without a telescope, Mr. Arundel, like—I was going to say—God meant us to do. Will you think me very silly if I venture to criticise the telescope? Don't you think, if God had meant us to see so much, He would have given us eyes to do so?'

Gerald smiled. He opened a window, and they leant out together. It was a sweet, still June evening. The scent of mignonette and roses came upwards from the garden. The sky was studded with its diamond-like constellations; in the stillness the plaintive hoot of the owl and the croaking of the frog in the meadow stream close by were the only sounds that were heard.

'I don't think I can agree with you, Miss Betty. Every bit of science discovered, by the intelligence given to us from above, only serves to bring one great and important truth to light, and that is,—"O the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!" '

Betty raised her eyes to the dark blue above her. Gerald added almost under his breath,—

'And His ways with us, though incomprehensible to our intelligence, are full of the same riches and wisdom.'

Then Betty turned impulsively to him, and her voice was unsteady,—

'Mr. Arundel, may I say how sorry I am for you? I do feel it. I wish I could do something, but none of us can. How will you bear it?'

'Thank you for your sympathy,' he said very quietly. 'It is a wrench, but the bitterness, thank God, is over.'

'Now, Betty, it is your turn,' cried Molly.

Betty turned, but her first peep through the telescope was not a successful one, for her eyes were dim with tears.

Mr. Russell drove them home in his trap that evening, and on the way told them a little more of Gerald's trouble.

'It was his father's eldest brother who ran away, and was supposed to be dead. The property is really his, but it was only quite lately that he wrote to the family lawyer saying that he was alive, and meant to have his rights. He married a rich woman out in Australia—beneath him in station, I believe,

and has one son. Lately he has lost a good bit of money, and for the first time seems to have thought of his property here. I fancy, owing to his wildness in his youth and a quarrel with his father, he believed old Mr. Arundel had disinherited him; but he had no power to do so. It has always gone to the eldest son, with no reservations. Owing to a flaw in the will, Gerald comes in for nothing, and his uncle, whose only need seems to be ready money, with his son's consent has the power of selling the whole for his own selfish gratification. It comes very hard on Gerald, as he has such a love for the place.'

'What is he going to do?' asked Molly pityingly; 'it is just like a story-book. He can't starve. Will he write books, and make a name in London?'

Betty gave a little impatient laugh.

'Your one idea is writing books, Molly! Too many people do that now.'

'I am advising him to take a farm in this neighbourhood,' said Mr. Russell. 'He has farming at his finger's ends, and has always been accustomed to an outdoor life.'

'But will he like seeing his own home in the hands of strangers?' said Betty dubiously.

'Oh,' cried Molly enthusiastically, 'I see a way out. There must be an only daughter, and he must fall in love with her, and marry; and then in the end he will live in his old home again!'

'A delightful thought,' said Mr. Russell, a little drily; 'you had better suggest that a stipulation should be made as to the buyer of the estate: "Only people with a marriageable daughter need apply." '

'As if that would ever be the same!' cried Betty scornfully. 'I hate men who marry women with money; it is quite the wrong way round. Money makes you the master of everything, and a woman ought not to be the master of her husband.'

'You have not advanced with the times,' said Mr. Russell. 'I thought all young ladies liked to rule nowadays.'

'I don't,' said Betty emphatically; 'at least I shouldn't like to rule a man.'

'No, I don't think that is your *rôle*, and I hope it never will be.'

CHAPTER VII

Old Women

Each word of kindness,
Come whence it may, is welcome to the poor.
Her presence
Fell on their hearts like a ray of sun on the walls of a prison.

LONGFELLOW.

Mrs. Stuart was very interested in hearing from her girls about the Red Manor and its master. Betty felt impatient at her mother's view of the case, and thought she did not show sufficient sympathy for Gerald. She heard with consternation her mother discussing with Molly the advisability of attending the sale, in order to obtain some of the treasures in the library. Mrs. Stuart was a keen lover of books, and the joy of obtaining at a moderate price some of the valuable works she had so admired when lunching there, over-balanced the pity she felt for their owner.

There was much excitement in the neighbourhood when it was known that the goods and effects of the Red Manor were to be sold by auction. Most of Gerald's friends and neighbours expressed their intention of being present; and Betty grew angry and disgusted by turns, when she heard the matter being so lightly discussed. She watched her mother and sister drive off to the sale, when the day came round with a sore heart. She was ashamed to own even to herself how much her thoughts were with Gerald Arundel.

She pictured him taking his last farewell of his old home, with a happy past behind him, and the future uncertain and dreary. She dwelt in thought over his words in the library, when she asked him if he were ever lonely,—

'The one thing I shall look back to with thankfulness hereafter is, that I have made the best use of the opportunities that have been given to me of spending all the time I could here.'

Now that time was gone; and he knew, when he said those words, that perhaps it would be the last time he could show friends over his house.

Betty went out into the garden, and paced the paths dejectedly. At last her feelings got the better of her, and, sitting down on a low garden-chair

under an old elm, she buried her face in her hands, and gave way to tears. She was startled by a voice close to her a few minutes later.

'What is the matter with my little friend?'

Betty looked hastily up, and confronted Mr. Russell.

'Oh!' she said, stretching out her hand to him impulsively; 'it is all so miserable, Mr. Russell. Why does God let things all go wrong? Why should some people have such trouble, and others none at all?'

'Are you in trouble?'

'No; I am thinking about Mr. Arundel. He seems so brave and cheerful about it; and people say such things, that he doesn't care a bit, and has no heart, and is so cold-blooded,—and it makes my blood boil to hear them! If they only knew!'

Mr. Russell's eyebrows elevated themselves very slightly.

'Don't take other people's troubles too hardly, Betty. You will have enough to bear of your own, without adding to them.'

'I hate people to be unhappy!' Betty cried vehemently; 'and good people oughtn't to be.'

'Hush! Remember who sends trouble. You taught me that lesson long, long ago. Gerald is not unhappy, he will tell you.'

Betty was silent.

'The bitterness is over,' he had said to her, as they looked up at the starry heaven above them. But she had seen him when it was full upon him, and she could not forget that time.

'You feel things too much,' Mr. Russell continued. 'Come out for a drive with me, and forget it all.'

'And you call yourself his friend!' Betty said reproachfully. 'I thought Mat's trouble bad enough, but I think this is almost worse.'

'No, no,' said Mr. Russell quickly. 'Death is a worse foe than poverty. And Gerald has health and strength, and all his faculties perfect. Did you not want to go and see the Red Manor almshouses? Shall we drive there now?'

'Will those be sold too?' Betty enquired dolefully. 'And why are you not at the sale? Everybody is. It is quite a gala day.'

‘Do not let me see that twist to your lips, my little friend! I hope you will leave sarcasm alone. It never suits a woman. I have now just come from the sale.’

Betty rose a little reluctantly from her seat. She would have been better content if Mr. Russell had not roused her from her musings; but a few minutes later, when she was driving swiftly along the roads in his high dog-cart, her spirit revived.

‘Isn’t the world delicious?’ she said, looking up at him with sparkling eyes. ‘And aren’t those bright green fields a picture in the sun? Young wheat, is it not? And the smell of the hay is enchanting! Oh, I wish I could be always in the country! I mean to make the very most of my summer here.’

For the rest of the drive Mr. Russell could not complain of Betty’s dulness; she seemed to have entirely shaken off her fit of the blues. When they arrived at the almshouses, she was delighted afresh. They were picturesque, red-bricked buildings with thatched roofs, built in a row in a green meadow, with some old chestnuts standing like sentinels in front.

‘Now,’ said Mr. Russell, as he helped her to alight, ‘I am going to leave you here while I drive on farther. There are six old women to visit, and you must not leave out one, or you will hurt their feelings. Will an hour be long enough for you?’

‘Oh yes,’ Betty replied. ‘Perhaps I shall find they do not want me so long. Must I portion out the time equally? Ten minutes to each?’

She laughed gaily, and waved her hand to him as he drove off, then made her way to the first cottage. She was welcomed by a cheery talkative old woman, who was cleaning up her hearth, and apologised for her appearance.

‘I’ve just bin a cookin’ meself an apple pastie, me dear. Sit ’ee down, for master did tell us of a young leddy a-comin’ a visitin’. I be allays on me feet, for I be a terrible active body, an’ if the place be small, it takes a brave lot o’ cleanin’. Now, Mary Dunster nex’ door, her be just t’other way. Her be allays groanin’ an’ wantin’ folk to do for her, an’ never a word o’ thanks. Her thinketh her be of higher stock than me, because her lived in Lunnon town for a spell, an’ her took in dressmakin’. Her were maid to old Mrs. Fitz Hume, an’ her be allays mindin’ us o’ the quality her have a lived with. All said an’ done, I be an independent stock; for my father were head shepherd to Farmer Watson, an’ I kep’ house after mother died, an’ never went to

service, an' me dear husband were Squire Arundel's carpenter. Ah, dearie me! What a day to see! 'Tis true what the Scripture saith, "He putteth down one, an' setteth up another." '

Betty fancied there was a little suppressed satisfaction in her tone, and felt indignant at once.

'I don't know what you will all do when your squire goes away. You will never get another like him.'

'Maybe not. He be a well-meanin' young man, an' I hath nought to say agen he. But 'tis pitiful to see how folks taketh of him in; an' Martha Button be a proper one to do it. Her be two door off, me dear, an' were nurse to the fam'ly. You'm be pretty well wearied wi' her lasting chatteration of the squire's sayin's and doin's, when her tongue be started. Her be allays looked to first an foremost, an' her seeth to it that her be so!'

'And who are your other neighbours?' asked Betty, not feeling quite sure whether she liked this garrulous old woman.

'There be Widder Newcombe and Widder Long, an' they be that thick together that, 'pon me word, us don't know which house belangs to which. If so be you droppeth in to Widder Newcombe's, Widder Long be havin' her cup o' tay by the fireside, if you looketh in at Widder Long, Widder Newcombe be sittin' wi' her knittin' as if her never be goin' to leave. An' then on washin' day there be a gran' bust up, an' they be callin' each other all the bad names they can think on. Us always calleth them the widders, though us be all that, save our newcomer Susan Crane; but they losted their husban's in the same day in a quarry explosion, an' allays have worked on the gentry's feelin's. They be both out, for they be gone to the Red Manor sale, which is onfeelin', to say nothin' of the disrespec', in thinkin' o' buyin' the squire's saucepans an' such like. But Widder Newcombe be very savin', an' her always go to the sales, and nice rubbish her doth pick up at 'em!'

'Susan Crane came from our village, did she not?' asked Betty, wishing to stop this flow of talk.

'Her did that; but her be not much company for us. Her be the village nurse, and maybe it made her turn pious. Her be overmuch that way, if so be it be real, but I have me doubts. Folks can sit wi' the Scriptures open before 'em, when squire cometh by, an' spout streams of texes an' hymns till they right daze one; but 'tis a different song when there be none to see an' praise 'em, an' Susan be too holy, I fancy!'

‘I don’t think any one can be that,’ said Betty gravely. ‘I couldn’t; could you?’

‘No, me dear, Lucy Finch be just a poor sinner, like the rest o’ the world. I doth not set meself above me neighbours.’

Betty stayed a little longer, but she was glad to leave Mrs. Finch. She did not seem to her to be her ideal old woman in an almshouse.

Mary Dunster was a pale, sweet-faced woman, sitting in her chair, stiff with rheumatism. To Betty, her little kitchen perhaps lacked the shine and polish of her neighbour’s, but it was clean and comfortable.

She brightened up at the sight of a visitor.

‘I heard the voices through the wall, miss; and I hoped you might be looking in here. We get very tired of each other, and the days are long.’

‘I have been envying you,’ Betty said brightly. ‘I thought it must be so restful in these sweet little cottages. Aren’t you very happy here?’

Mrs. Dunster gave a heavy sigh.

‘ ’Tis a difficult matter to be happy, when you suffer so, miss. I never spend a night without pain. I am crippled up with rheumatism, just a useless old creature sitting here till I die.’

‘But,’ said Betty, with shining eyes, ‘in all probability you are nearer heaven than I am. You have that to look forward to, haven’t you? No more pain.’

Mrs. Dunster sighed again.

‘It seems unreal to me. I doubt sometimes if I shall get there.’

‘Why?’

Mrs. Dunster looked uneasy, but said nothing.

‘May I come and read to you about heaven, to make it real?’ asked Betty eagerly. ‘Ever since I was quite a little girl I have loved reading about it. It makes everything so bright when you think of it; and it is the way to make it real to one. I have a brother out in India, he is at a place called Quetta. I never took any interest in it before he went there, but he tells us so much about it in his letters, and sends us so many photos of it, and curiosities, that now I feel I know it quite well.’

‘It would pass the time,’ said Mrs. Dunster, with a sigh. ‘It is such a treat to hear a young lady speak. My neighbours have not received any education,

and I've always been accustomed to the gentry. What a sad pity 'tis about the squire! Have you heard, miss, whether the place have been bought? I've thought lately how worried the squire has been looking! 'Tis a crying shame to turn him out so sudden like. And they do say he hasn't a penny now! 'Tis a terrible business!'

'Yes,' said Betty soberly, 'it is. I can't think how he must feel to-day.'

' 'Tis likely he'll be upset.'

Betty stayed some time with Mrs. Dunster, then she went on to Mrs. Button's. Here she met with a surprise. Mrs. Button was seated at a round tea-table, and opposite her, leaning back in a grandfather's chair with a smile on his face, and a cup of tea halfway to his lips, was Gerald Arundel. The tea-table was daintily spread—a snow-white cloth with a glass of old-fashioned moss-roses in the centre. A home-made loaf, some honey in a glass dish, and some clotted cream, all made a cosy picture; and Martha Button, in her snow-white cap and apron, with her rosy cheeks and kindly smile, was the chief attraction in it.

For an instant Betty hesitated, but Gerald was on his feet in an second.

'Why, nurse, here is Miss Stuart come to see you. Do you think you have another cup of your excellent tea to give her?'

'Indeed I have, sir,' said Martha, dropping Betty a curtsey; 'and I do feel highly honoured to have you both to tea.'

'I feel I am intruding,' Betty said, as she shook hands with Gerald; 'but you do look so cosy that I cannot resist joining you.'

'When I am tired or low-spirited, I always come to my old nurse to be heartened up,' Gerald said, smiling. 'She does me more good than some of the medicines she is fond of recommending.'

'Ay, sir, but there be always two ways of looking at life, like both ends of a spyglass—one makes all our trouble bigger than they be by rights, the other smaller.'

'You have made mine look much smaller this afternoon.'

'She must be a wonderful person!' said Betty, almost under her breath.

Gerald laughed aloud.

'Now, Miss Betty, come and sit down. Do you like honey? Ah, that is right! Nurse keeps bees, and always has a store of it. Well, have you seen any of our inmates here?'

‘Yes,’ said Betty brightly, ‘I have. Mrs. Finch kept me with her a long time.’

Mrs. Button smiled.

‘She is a rare talker, is Lucy Finch. I dare say she have told you all about us, miss; and I’m afraid not any of us stand in her good books.’

‘I didn’t like the way she talked.’

‘ ’Tis only her tongue, miss. She can’t help herself. If any one is really ill or in trouble, Lucy comes to them at once, and is first rate. But she be a bit jealous of folks.’

‘So I gathered. And then I went to see Mrs. Dunster. And I am coming another day to read to her. She seems so unhappy.’

‘She does suffer cruel with rheumatics, and if a body never goes outside the door, ’tis very lonesome.’

‘I think there is only one more to see,’ Betty continued, ‘for two are out.’

‘Yes,’ said Gerald quietly. ‘I met them on their way to the Manor. Pots and pans at any sale are Mrs. Newcombe’s specialties. I hope she will pick up some bargain, poor soul!’

Betty wondered that he could speak so calmly. She thoroughly enjoyed her tea, and, taking her cue from Gerald’s mood, was as gay and joyous as if no cloud had darkened her sunshine that day.

Mrs. Button’s cheery society was certainly inspiriting.

‘I’ve been telling the squire, miss, that he be only on the threshold o’ his life, and there be many greater things coming to him than the Red Manor. ’Twas just a trust lent him by the Lord, and when he were found faithful to it, the Lord took it away, to hand on to another and give him a chance; and now another trust be waitin’ for the squire. It doesn’t matter if it be a high or a low position, ’tis only a stewardship. The Lord have small bits o’ land as well as big that want a steward; and ’tis faithfulness He looks for.’

‘We are all stewards, Miss Betty, are we not?’ said Gerald, looking across at her with a smile.

‘I am not sure of my stewardship yet,’ replied Betty thoughtfully. Then she got up to go.

‘I was told I was not to miss seeing any one; so I must go to Mrs. Crane. Good-bye, Mrs. Button, and thank you for your delicious tea. May I come

and see you another day? Good-bye, Mr. Arundel.'

'I shall see you again, for I want to speak to Russell when he comes. Well, nurse, I must be bidding you good-day.'

'God bless you, sir! He will. I be quite sure of that. And I'm hopin' that you will find a nice wife one o' these days. She'll be a comfort to you, and make up for all you've lost.'

A shadow fell across Gerald's face. He made no response, but crossed the flagstones with Betty to Susan Crane's door.

They were both silent. Betty's smiles and dimples had disappeared. She was thinking over stewardships and their responsibilities, wondering if she were unknowingly wasting or hoarding what had been entrusted to her care.

And Gerald's thoughts had wandered from stewardships to dreams in the future.

He saw himself a lonely man in a dreary farm, forsaken by those who judged a man by his possessions. He wondered if such comfort as his old nurse had mentioned would ever be his lot.

Betty left him outside Susan Crane's door. She found her at her tea, and was welcomed warmly.

'This be a lonesome place, miss. 'Tis right off the high road, and us sees nought go by. I have bin accustomed to live in the middle of a village where there be a good bit o' life goin' on, so I miss it sorely, and get down-hearted at times. I fretted to give up my work, but I be gettin' old, and the young squire be good enough to offer me these rooms. It was just an answer to prayer, so I ought to be content, but it do seem nice to see a visitor. Us six old women living here together do rub each other up wonderful. I tries to keep myself to myself, but there be always such a lot o' talk one agen another that I do be fair puzzled which side to take.'

'I thought an almshouse was an abode of rest and peace,' said Betty. 'I am a little disappointed to-day.'

'So it be, miss, to most; and 'tis our own fault if us makes it other than that. When us have the Lord and His goodness with us, what more can us want?'

' "I nothing lack if I am His, and He is mine, for ever," ' quoted Betty with a smile. 'But we do forget it so, Mrs. Crane. I do, dreadfully.'

They chatted on. Mrs. Crane,—for though she was not a married woman, she had always been given that tide, in respect for her office of sick nurse,—was a tiny, wiry-looking old woman. She was an earnest Christian, and could not perhaps understand why every one was not the same as herself. She had scant sympathy with Lucy Finch, or with the two friendly widows.

'They be all such ill-natured gossips, miss, and so hard of heart and slow to believe.'

'You will be a help to them,' Betty suggested.

'Eh dear, no, miss; they don't take no notice of the likes o' me, leastways only to make mock of. Now Mrs. Button and me does have some nice talk together, but they say us holds ourselves too high.'

'I shall come and see you all again soon,' said Betty, as she departed; 'and I think I shall give you a scolding all round, for not living at peace in such a sweet old resting-place.'

She laughed merrily when she saw Susan Crane's face of dismay.

'Eh, dearie me! Us be like a set o' quarrelsome children; but us will try to like each other better afore your nex' visit comes round.'

The wheels of Mr. Russell's trap were heard on the high road. Betty ran out, and found Gerald already at the gate waiting for his friend.

Mr. Russell insisted upon driving him back to his house to dine and sleep that night.

'And we will drop this young lady on her way. I have just met Mrs. Stuart on her way home.'

'Mrs. Stuart is able to drive out again?' Gerald asked Betty.

'Yes,' said Betty confusedly. Then with crimson cheeks she blurted out,—

'She was—at the sale to-day.'

There was a minute's silence, then Gerald said quietly,—

'I am so glad. I can guess what attracted her there. If you are benefited by any of my well-worn favourites, Miss Betty, I shall be very pleased.'

Betty made no reply. She felt she could not. For the rest of the drive she was strangely silent.

CHAPTER VIII

New Owners

We leave the well-beloved place
Where first we gazed upon the sky;
The roofs that heard our earliest cry,
Will shelter one of stranger race.

In Memoriam.

Mr. Russell and Gerald sat out a couple of hours later on the smoking-room verandah. Politics and county news had been discussed during dinner; but now, as dusky silence began to steal over the sweet-scented garden in front of them, Gerald lost his reserve and spoke freely to his old friend.

'You can't think what a relief it will be to me when this day is over. I wish I had gone up to town, but I had so many things to arrange this morning, and then I wanted this talk with you, so I have been hanging about all the afternoon trying to kill time!'

'Yes, I think you would have been better away. Now, about this farm. I hope you are going to take it. You will be doing me a service, for I want a good tenant. It seems to have fallen vacant at the right time.'

'It is a generous offer of yours, but I do not know whether it is quite wise to live on in this neighbourhood. I am not proud; it isn't that, for I've lost the estate through no fault of mine, and I'm not ashamed of any honest work. I mean to be a working farmer if I take your place, and I don't care who knows it!'

'It isn't very near the Manor; it's a good eight miles away from it. I don't think you would find it too close.'

'It isn't that.'

Gerald was looking out into the garden with an unfathomable expression in his eyes. He did not speak for some minutes; then his question sounded rather irrelevant,—

'How long are Mrs. Stuart and her daughters going to stay here?'

'They came for the summer. Why, Gerald, are they the attraction?'

‘Good heavens! No!’ exclaimed Gerald, almost fiercely. ‘Rather the reverse. I want time to get over this. If only you would let me defer my taking your farm till the autumn, I think I would go off to Norway in Tom Deane’s yacht. He wrote inviting me again yesterday.’

‘The very best thing you could do,’ said Mr. Russell, looking at him gravely; ‘and I think I can tide over the next two months, by keeping on the farm hands, and making my bailiff overseer.’

‘Thank you.’

There was a silence; then Mr. Russell said,—

‘Gerald, I hope you are heart whole.’

Gerald threw his head back with a little laugh, but it was a forced one.

‘It will be a bad business if I’m not. A man in my position is out of the running.’

‘Not my little Betty?’

Another silence; then, very slowly,—

‘I owe you a grudge for taking me over that evening and introducing me ____’

‘My dear fellow!’

Mr. Russell could say no more; he seemed lost in thought.

‘I’m only human,’ Gerald said, with an effort; ‘and the plain fact is that I cannot stand meeting her so often.’

‘I found her weeping over your troubles this afternoon,’ said Mr. Russell, unguardedly.

Gerald’s gaze of astonishment and concern made his friend add hastily, —

‘She weeps over everybody. That is one thing she has kept from her childhood—a tender, sympathetic heart. She takes everything in dead earnest—her pleasures, and others’ sorrows.’ Then, after further thought, he added, ‘I would give a good deal to see you two brought together; but circumstances are against you at present, and you are wise to go away before she sees too much of you. She has the making of a splendid woman in her, and would be as happy in a farmhouse as in a palace.’

‘Is she fitted to be a farmer’s wife?’ exclaimed Gerald. ‘Do you think I could contemplate it for a moment?’

‘I think her mother would very strongly object. Mrs. Stuart is ambitious for her daughters. No, you are right. It is best not to contemplate it at all.’

Gerald felt unreasonably provoked by his friend’s calmness. He curbed his irritation, however, and began talking about his projected yachting trip.

Betty was not mentioned again; but when the friends had parted for the night, Mr. Russell paced his room with anxious brow.

‘I don’t half like her interest in him. My poor little Betty! May God preserve you from real trouble coming into your life! It will go hardly with you, if you are not heart whole!’

Betty had arrived home that afternoon, to find Molly in a great state of excitement.

‘Oh, Betty, it was a pity you did not come! Every one was there, and fancy! Who do you think has bought the Manor? General Dormer! and Frank was at the sale!’

Betty expressed her astonishment. The Dormers were very old friends of theirs. Frank and Ella had played with them when children, and they had all grown up together.

‘But, Molly, the Dormers have their lovely place in Berkshire; why do they want another?’

‘Berkshire doesn’t suit Mrs. Dormer; she is always ill there, and they are selling it. They know the Fitz Humes here; and it was Mrs. Fitz Hume who told them about the Red Manor. The general came down to see it a week ago, and he settled it all within a very few days. Mother says she can’t think why he didn’t buy the library as it stood, but I believe he couldn’t afford it. Frank told me as much. Frank was delighted to see us. Mother has asked him to dinner to-morrow. He is staying at a country inn, and isn’t very comfortable. He has a lot of business to do for his father, and he will be here for a week or two.’

‘And will they be moving in at once?’

‘Yes, in about a month’s time. Isn’t it delightful? I’m longing to see Ella. It makes me wish that we were going to stay on here altogether.’

‘I shall hate seeing them in the Red Manor!’ Betty exclaimed vehemently. ‘It doesn’t properly belong to them. People have no business to

buy old family places and settle in them, when they have no love for, or associations with them.'

'But,' said Molly, mysteriously and eagerly, 'I have been thinking it all out; and Mr. Arundel must fall in love with Ella, and marry her. I shall try and make up the match.'

'Don't be so stupid, Molly! What good would that do? The Manor will belong to Frank, not to Ella, after General Dormer dies.'

'Oh, Frank must have another place somewhere. I think it can be managed. It could be in a story-book, and people say that facts are stranger than fiction——'

Betty turned away impatiently from her sister, and went to the drawing-room, where her mother was resting.

'Did you buy any books, mother?' she said.

'I was rather disappointed,' her mother replied; 'there were several old savants down from town, and the most valuable were beyond my means. Mr. Russell bought the greater part of them. I have that illustrated copy of Chaucer we were looking at, and one or two very old editions of Shakespeare and Froissart's Chronicles. It went to my heart to see that library demolished; and I suppose Molly has told you that General Dormer has bought the property?'

'Yes.'

'Such a pity! for not one of them have any literary tastes. Of course, they have just let the library go. The collection of two or three generations will now be scattered. I am glad to think that Mr. Russell has taken the best part of it.'

Betty took up the old vellum volume of Chaucer, and walked to the window with it in her hand. The quaint woodcuts interested her, and she turned the well-worn pages, wondering whose hand had scored pencil lines here and there. She read the description of the knight in the Canterbury pilgrims, and her heart quickened at the words,

> A knighte there was, and that a worthy man,
> That from the tyme that he first beganne
> To ryden out had lovèd chivalry,
> Truth and honours, freedom and courtesie.

In the margin was written in round schoolboy hand: 'My father. Gerald Arundel.' Further down, against the words,

And of his port as meek as is a maid,
He never yet no vilanie ne'er said,
In all his lyfe unto no manner wight,
He was a very perfait gentle knighte!

upon the margin was written,

'A gentleman's model.

'G. A.'

It was the same handwriting, but was dated ten years later.

Betty looked at it with eager interest, then, with flushed cheeks, she murmured to herself,—

'It is a portrait of himself, "A very . . . gentle knighte." '

Then, putting the book down, she left the room, for she felt in no mood for talking.

Frank Dormer was very much at the vicarage during the few weeks that followed. He was a barrister by profession, but as yet was not a very busy one, and had a great deal of idle time on his hands. Mrs. Stuart liked him; in fact, there were few who did not, for he was one of the bright sunshiny spirits in the world who carry a fresh breeze with them wherever they go, and his life about town had not spoilt his simple straightforward nature.

'Betty,' he demanded one morning, coming into the breakfast-room where the two girls were sitting together, 'I want you to make your mother bring you over to the Red Manor to a picnic tea this afternoon. I want you and Molly to advise me about a cartload of furniture arriving down. We will have tea on the terrace.'

'You won't get me to go,' said Betty stoutly. 'I don't want to see the place again.'

Molly looked up from her pile of manuscript.

'How do you spell inextinguishable?' she asked.

'Who is it?—a man or a woman?' asked Frank deferentially.

'It is "the inextinguishable lightning fire in his eye," that's how it comes!'

Frank and Betty burst out laughing.

‘Give it to him, Molly. “The inexpressible roll of murderous thunder that escaped from his soul!” Oh, what rot you waste your time over! Can’t you stop her from such folly, Betty? She lives in a world of unreality all her days. She has not heard my invitation. Here! give me your productions!’

He made a feint of snatching some of her papers. Molly stood at bay, making a pretty picture with her flushed cheeks and disordered hair, as she began to remonstrate.

‘Frank! I will never forgive you! You are like a great schoolboy. No one told you to come here in the morning and interrupt us when we are busy!’

‘Busy, are you? Here is Betty twirling her thumbs on the window-seat, and counting the flies on the window-panes! And you wasting your ink and paper on love-making between imaginary puppets with “inextinguishable sparks of fire in their eyes”! You want a little real love-making to come into your life, then you would throw away this rubbish.’

‘Now, Frank, you are going too far!’

The placid Molly was roused at last, and Frank looked at her hot cheeks in surprise.

‘Oh, I beg your pardon. I didn’t mean to be too hard on you! Now I must cry forgiveness, or you won’t come to tea with me; and you are my only hope, for Betty is obdurate.’

Peace was soon made, for no one was ever angry with Frank for long. Betty asked him if he had met Gerald yet.

‘Oh yes; he came over yesterday to superintend the removal of a small organ. I believe his mother used it, and he is having it taken to the farm where he is going to settle. It’s rather out of place there, and I believe he does not play a note of music himself, so I think it is very stupid of him making such a fuss over it. He is having some other bits of furniture taken over too. He seems a nice friendly, cheerful kind of fellow. I feel rather sorry for him.’

‘Well,’ said Molly, putting on a most mournful look, ‘he is a hero going through the darkest hour of his life; but it is not going to last. And I have a plan for him by-and-bye.’

‘You’re a silly goose!’ exclaimed Betty. ‘He wouldn’t thank you for your plans, nor any one else whom they concern.’

‘I must be off,’ announced Frank. ‘Molly, take my best respects to your lady mother, and ask her to bring you over.’

Molly left the room. Betty went to the sideboard and took a plate of pears off it.

‘Here, Frank, will you have one? I am going to.’

He assented boyishly; Betty sat on the low window-sill and commenced paring hers. As she did so, she swung her feet lightly to and fro, and began singing under her breath,—

‘If I but knew how the lilies brew
Nectar rare from a drop of dew.’

Frank looked at her contemplatively.

‘Betty, you’re improving in looks.’

‘Thank you,’ said Betty, laughing. ‘I know you think there is great room for improvement. You used to call me “Froggie,”—I remember.’

‘Yes, because of your big eyes and your jumping ways. You were never still a minute.’

‘I’m not often still now,’ Betty said. ‘I hate it. I always want to be on the move.’

‘Molly wants to be shaken up with you! Betty, tell me like a sister, has Molly any one after her?’

‘What do you mean? You speak as if she is a cook! “Any one after her!” It sounds quite vulgar.’

‘Don’t fence round the bush. I want to know.’

‘And why should you want to know? You are most impertinent this morning.’

‘You are a little spitfire!’

‘And you are impudence personified!’

Betty and Frank always engaged in a war of words, which meant very little. When Molly came down from her mother’s room, and said that Mrs. Stuart would be glad to help Frank in any way, he rose to go.

‘Good-bye, Molly. I wish I could get your “hero” to meet you this afternoon, but he fights shy of the place. Betty, walk down the drive with me —do!’

Betty was nothing loth. She laughed and chatted as if she had not a care. She accompanied him through the village, and on the way they met Gerald

Arundel, followed by his faithful hound Floy.

He did not stop, but only raised his hat and passed on. Betty thought he was looking tired and careworn, and her gay laughter died away.

‘Looks glum, doesn’t he? Poor chap! I wouldn’t be in his shoes for something!’

Frank’s tone was a little self-complacent.

Betty turned upon him in a fury.

‘He has a good deal more in his shoes than you have! Money and a house and all outside show aren’t much to lose! He doesn’t count his wealth in the way you do; and I know which is the richest and the wisest and the better man of the two!’

Frank burst into his rollicking laugh.

‘You and Molly are a pair! This exalted, ill-treated saint and hero ought to hear you fighting his battles! I am not worthy to enter into the lists with him. I must take a back seat, I see!’

‘You are always so sure of yourself,’ went on Betty scathingly. ‘If you sometimes realised that you were inferior to men of brains and cultivated intellect, there would be some hope of you.’

This was going too far.

Frank stood still in the middle of the road, and made her a grand bow.

‘I am sure of one thing, my lady—that my presence is required no longer, so I will dismiss myself. Good morning!’

He walked away from her with offended dignity; but Betty, remembering her woman’s privilege, called after him,—

‘I never asked you for your company; you asked for mine, and I shall tell mother and Molly how rudely you have treated me!’

CHAPTER IX

Through a Dark Cloud

To meet, to know, to love—and then to part,
Is the sad tale of many a human heart.

COLERIDGE.

Betty's spirits were always variable, but never quite so much as they were in these days. One day she would puzzle and distract Molly by her sparkling mirth; the next she would be plunged into the deepest moodiness and melancholy. She spent a great deal of time at her organ, and would come away from it wistful and sad. Molly always knew that she would be unusually sweet and obliging for some hours following.

Betty went over several times to the old almswomen, and felt herself the better for the interest they gave her. One afternoon she went to the Hall with a message to Mr. Russell from her mother. She was told by the butler that he was in the garden, and being on familiar ground, she went in search of him. She was sauntering through a covered archway of roses, when voices the other side of it brought her to a standstill. It was an old-fashioned garden, and a high box-hedge hid her from view.

'If you are bidding some friends good-bye, I think it would be polite to include Mrs. Stuart.'

'I feel I cannot risk it, unless you could guarantee to have *her* here while I do it.'

'Who? My little Betty? My dear fellow, you are bound to come across her. Pluck up your courage. It is the very way to make her suspect your frame of mind.'

Betty's heart almost stood still. She realised that she was a listener, yet her tongue seemed to cleave to her mouth, her feet seemed rooted to the ground. She heard Gerald sigh.

'I am a fool, for I expect she considers me old enough to be her father. But, Russell, the older you get, the deeper you feel! I shall be thankful to be away, to have only memories left!'

Betty made a frantic rustle and rush along the path, then, in trying to escape them and make her way back to the house unperceived, she took the wrong turn and came out in front of them.

Mr. Russell turned to her at once.

'I—I have brought you a message from mother, and I told Sims that I would come out and find you; but if you are engaged I can wait.'

'We are two idle men,' said Gerald, with remarkable self-possession, as he shook hands with her. 'We are enjoying a chat and a smoke.'

'Come along to the lawn, and we shall have some tea sent out to us,' said Mr. Russell.

But Betty refused.

'I will not stop to-day, thank you. Here is mother's note. It is about a book you said you would lend her.'

'Oh yes, I remember. I will go and get it; but I insist upon your having a cup of tea. Bring her along, Gerald.'

He hastened to the house. Betty felt instinctively that a crucial moment in her life had arrived. Her heart was beating rapidly; her whole soul was in a tumult, from the words that she had heard. And then she felt a longing that this short walk towards the house would last for ever and for ever. It seemed as if it was an eternity before Gerald opened his lips, and then his calm, well-chosen words did much to restore her self-possession and common sense.

'I am glad to have the opportunity of saying good-bye to you, Miss Betty. I am off to-morrow on a trip to Norway, and before I return I expect you will have gone back to London.'

Betty plucked some roses that grew along the path nervously.

'I expect we shall,' she said, with a slight quiver in her voice. 'I—I hope you will enjoy your trip, Mr. Arundel.'

'Thank you. I hope I shall.'

A pause. Then he said,—

'I must thank you for the pleasure you have given my old women. We shall most likely never meet again, so may I offer you a bit of advice, which I have gained by experience? If you get moody, discontented, or restless

with your circumstances, set to work to help or benefit others. It is the surest way to bring happiness to yourself.'

Betty struggled to speak, and as they drew near the house she came to a standstill, and looked up at him bravely and sweetly. She did not know that tears were glittering on her eyelashes, but Gerald's quick eyes noted it, and took in, as if for the last time, every bit of the sweet earnest little face raised towards his.

'Thank you, Mr. Arundel. It has done me good knowing you, for it shows me how real trouble can be borne. And I hope that the verse you gave me for Mat will come true to you. "I will restore comforts to him." Good-bye; I see Mr. Russell coming, and I can't stay to tea.'

She held out her hand. Gerald took it, and kept it for an instant in his. For one moment their eyes met, and their tale was told. Betty caught her breath, and resolutely turned away. Gerald's voice was hoarse with emotion as he said,—

'May God bless and keep you till we meet above!'

And then Betty sped away, and seized the book out of Mr. Russell's hand with the incoherent words,—

'I can't stay. Mother is waiting. I must get home, and I can't stop to say good-bye.'

She was off and away before Mr. Russell could understand her haste.

And Gerald was still standing in the same spot where she had left him, and in his hand was one of the white roses she had gathered, and dropped in her confusion.

He put it into his breast-pocket as Mr. Russell came in sight, and he murmured to himself a few lines he had added to Betty's little song of the white rose,—

‘The summer sun had faded
   The flowers had drooped and died.
The clouds above were heavy,
   And care was by my side,
I longed to shield the rose-bud
   From storm and wind around,
But I dared not lift my hand
   To drag it to the ground.

So through the gath’ring darkness
   It hung and smiled on me;
Its fragrance seemed the sweeter,
   When its form I could not see.
And I thought, as I gazed upwards,
   And scanned the wintry sky,
“The future holds the summer;
   There’ll be roses by-and-bye.

If my rose is now beyond me,
   If my hopes seem all in vain,
There is a bright time coming,
   I shall see the bud again;
It may be I shall reach it,
   In its nest above so high;
It may be I shall gather
   That rose-bud by-and-bye.” ’

Mr. Russell joined him with a grave face.

‘I am afraid that child must have overheard us.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Gerald replied quietly; ‘she would not understand if she did. Can you let me have a “Baedeker”? I want to look out our first stopping-place.’

Mr. Russell wisely fell in with his mood, and though his thoughts were much with Betty, he did not mention her name again.

Betty, meanwhile, had hurried home as if her life depended on it. She tried not to let herself think. She took the book into her mother’s room, and Mrs. Stuart expressed her surprise at her quick return.

‘I did not stay, mother; Mr. Arundel was there, and he and Mr. Russell were busy talking. Mr. Arundel is going away to-morrow.’

‘I am glad to hear it. I think he would have shown better taste if he had gone before.’

‘Why, mother?’ asked Molly, looking up from a piece of fancy-work she was doing. ‘He is going to stay in the neighbourhood; why ought he to go away?’

‘I am astonished to hear he is going to live near his old home. I don’t think he can realise the difference this will make in his position. He will make it very awkward for all his former friends.’

‘I don’t see why it should,’ Molly said wonderingly.

‘Oh, my dear child, surely you have lived long enough in the world to know that a young man in a penniless state, who is going to turn working farmer, cannot be welcomed into society in the way that he has been before his misfortunes! Mothers would not care to introduce him to their daughters ____’

‘Mercenary mothers would not,’ said Betty, from the window where she stood looking out. ‘People who value a man by his money of course will cut him dead—no one else will.’

‘It ought to make his friends rally round him,’ said Molly hotly.

‘That is the way all romantic young girls talk. Now, listen both of you, while I tell you of an old schoolfriend of mine. A young fellow to whom she was virtually engaged lost all his money, and honourably, of course, wished to release her. She would not hear of it. Her mother tried to reason with her; but she would not listen, and as her family were all of her mother’s mind, she actually persuaded him to marry her secretly. Of course, when it came out, her parents did all they could to help them, though it was more than they deserved. After some years of miserable penury, in which two children came upon the scene to add to their cares, the young wife became a hopeless invalid. The husband took to drink, and the last I heard of her was that she was an inmate of her county infirmary, and the two children in the workhouse.’

‘Oh, mother,’ said Molly, half-laughing; ‘you need not think we are in want of such an awful warning! But if a penniless young man marries a rich wife it is all right, and I have plans about Mr. Arundel.’

‘My dear child, Mr. Arundel has passed out of our lives; so do not let us discuss him any further.’

‘He hasn’t passed out of mine,’ thought Betty, as she slipped out of the room.

Upstairs in her own little bedroom, she laid her head down on the low window-sill, and cried as if her heart would break.

Oh, why was life so perplexing and so sad? In turning over the events that had happened since she had come to the old vicarage, Betty almost wished she had not left London. And yet she would not for all the present pain have foregone the experience that had come to her. She knew the secret of her heart now; she knew what had caused her uneasy restlessness, her ceaseless surmises of what each day would bring her. She was not ignorant of the meaning of the few words she had overheard, and she wondered why she had been brought into contact with one who would influence her so powerfully, to be separated from him, and to know that the happiness that might have been hers was only just missed through misfortune. Her cheeks grew hot as she dwelt again upon his farewell look and words. She cried out passionately to herself,—

‘I would scrub the farmhouse floors, I would go without servants, and do what a poor farmer’s wife does every day of my life, if I could only be with him! And it is only the false ideas people have of money and position that prevents my doing it!’

Life looked very empty and forlorn to her. And then she turned to the One to whom she had always gone in trouble, even when she was quite a little child.

‘O God,’ she murmured, ‘it must be Thy will, but it seems so hard. Do have pity upon me; I am so lonely; I have nothing to live for, and I feel as if I always shall be alone now for the rest of my life. Do comfort me; do help me! Do make me happy serving Thee. It is all that is left to me.’

Betty stopped here; the selfish spirit of her prayer struck her. And a still, small voice that reached to her heart’s depths seemed to say, ‘Am not I sufficient for Thee? Seek ye *first* the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.’

Betty bowed her head again in true contrition of soul. She knew lately that thoughts of her own happiness had been absorbing her to the exclusion of all higher things.

‘God means to show me,’ she thought, ‘that His service must come first, not last. And if He didn’t put me into this world to have earthly love and happiness, He must have put me here for something. He has work for me to

do, I know, and I will find it and do it; and perhaps He will make me happy doing it.'

Then very silently at her bedside, Betty definitely offered herself to be taken body and soul for service for her King; and when she rose a little later, she had the sweet realisation that her service had been accepted.

When Betty came into the drawing-room that evening, Molly wondered what made her look so strangely calm and restful. And when Mrs. Stuart asked one of them to read her the articles in the *Times*, Betty offered at once to do it, though usually she would fidget through the whole time of Molly's reading, and declare that the *Times* was a dry old-fashioned paper, with no spark of life or humour in it.

For the next few days Betty's new-found peace brought great restfulness into her life; then when she thought she was quite secure from all moody feelings, they came back in an overwhelming rush, and the struggle began.

Mr. Russell met her walking along the country lanes with a wistful eagerness that went to his heart.

'Oh, I am so glad to see you!' she cried. 'Talk to me, and make me feel good and happy again. I am so disappointed in myself.'

'That little self of yours must just be pushed into the background,' said Mr. Russell playfully. 'I have told you before that I think you suffer from want of occupation. Have you been to see your old almswomen?'

'Yes, last week. Mother won't let me go more than once a week. I enjoy seeing them so much; but, Mr. Russell, I want a real serious talk with you!'

'I am ready.'

'And you won't laugh at me?'

With those grey eyes raised so trustingly to his, and the slight quiver in the brave young voice, Mr. Russell could confidently assure her that he would be serious.

'I have been thinking lately, and I know you will agree with me, from what you have just said, that I ought to be doing something with my life. I am idle now; there is so little to do here except amuse myself; and I want you to come round and talk to mother; I want to leave home. I think I should like to be a missionary best, if mother would let me go. Because I want to do some work for God, and I know missionaries are wanted, and no one wants me at home; and if I'm not to be a missionary, I think there are other things in towns that I might do. I'm rather afraid of being a hospital nurse, to tell

you the truth, because I'm such a coward about pain. I can't help crying when I see any one suffering; but perhaps I would be able to get over that. What do you think?'

Mr. Russell did not answer for a few minutes, then he said,—

'This is rather a sudden resolution on your part, Betty. I do honestly think you want more occupation; but leaving home is a serious step, and I do not think for one moment that your mother would consent. You are too young.'

'Oh, don't say that!'

Betty's eyes filled with tears. She slipped her hand into his arm confidingly, and went on in a hushed tone,—

'I do believe that God wants me to do something for Him, Mr. Russell. And I have been so happy since I have believed it. You will help me, will you not? I have never found my corner yet; I have always been the "odd one" at home, and I am sure a corner is waiting for me somewhere.'

Her pathetic voice touched Mr. Russell's heart; he guessed the reason of this desire to work, and admired her courage in thus facing her future.

'I won't be the one to put hindrances in your path, child; but we must think matters over, and must not act in a hurry. I do not think myself that you are fitted to be a missionary. You are too nervously strung. You would be invalided home as soon as you got out abroad. I quite approve of your desire for work, and I will do my best to help you.'

'Thank you; and you'll come round and talk to mother to-night. I must tell her. I can't keep it to myself any longer.'

'Little Impatience! You must wait till to-morrow. I have an engagement to-night.'

Betty sighed.

'I think mother ought to be glad; she is always wanting me to do something. I want to fill my life so full, Mr. Russell, that I shan't ever have time to think!'

Poor little Betty! Her laugh as she spoke had a trembling note in it—a note that was very near tears.

When she had left him, Mr. Russell repeated her words to himself,—

'I want to fill my life so full that I shan't ever have time to think!'

It had come to that, then. Memories must not be allowed full sway, and quiet thought was too full of pain to be borne.

‘My poor little Betty! No one can help her; but it has been done by the One who loves her best, and I can leave her to Him.’

CHAPTER X

Home Duties

Duty, demands the parent's voice,
Should sanctify the daughter's choice,
In that is due obedience shown;
To choose, belongs to her alone.

THOMAS MOORE.

Mr. Russell was as good as his word. He came round to the vicarage the next evening, and Betty's desire for work was discussed. Mrs. Stuart, as her daughter feared, would not hear of her leaving home.

'I know it is the fashion nowadays,' she said, 'but I will not allow one of my girls to do it. Betty's first duty is to make herself useful at home; and until she does that, she will be of no use anywhere else. I can find plenty of occupation for her. Molly will be glad of more leisure, and Betty can take some of my correspondence off my hands.'

'But, mother,' pleaded Betty, 'you say I write so untidily. I give you more trouble than help when I take Molly's place.'

'Is it not possible to improve in that respect?'

Betty coloured at her mother's words. Then, with a little burst of enthusiasm, she made one more effort to obtain her freedom,—

'Oh, mother, don't keep me at home! You don't really want me. You would never miss me if I went, and I want to do great things. I want to take up a vocation. There is so much in the world to be done, and so few to do it! You are always telling us so. You don't want us to be idlers. Let me go!'

'Go where?' asked Mrs. Stuart. 'You are not fitted for an independent *rôle*, Betty. You are too unformed and childish—too uncontrolled. I will never give my consent to your going into the Mission Field. You have neither the health nor qualifications necessary. If you are anxious for work, you can do it from your own home. We are going back to town soon, and I shall be able, through various friends, to find you plenty of occupation. Do not you agree with me, Mr. Russell? Is she fitted to sally out into the world as so many young girls are doing in this present generation, and discard her home and friends as if she had no belongings?'

‘I should not be happy if she did that,’ said Mr. Russell, smiling. ‘I think she would be better for outside interests, and I am sure they will be given her.’

‘This discontent with home is very sudden,’ Mrs. Stuart said. ‘I can only suppose this country life is not to her taste.’

The conversation was not satisfactory. Man like, Mr. Russell felt it was useless to argue with such a woman as Mrs. Stuart. He tried to comfort Betty afterwards.

‘Your mother is right in her wish to keep you still under her wing. Your life is all before you. There is plenty of time, and you know I have a great belief in the corners first being filled up at home.’

Betty sighed.

‘I will try to be willing and patient. But I know what our London life is, and I am sick of it. I love the country; I always feel it is so much easier to be good in it. And I—I can’t say it well, Mr. Russell, but I’ve given myself for God’s service, and I did hope He was going to take me.’

‘You need not doubt that,’ said Mr. Russell, smiling; ‘but I think you had better look up the subject of service in your Bible. St. Paul advises some of the converts—in fact, all of them—to “abide in the calling wherein they are called.” I am certain you can serve God in your own home. Read the first chapter of the Epistle to the Colossians when you get home, and see what was St. Paul’s prayer and desire for the young Christians—not that they should go out and do great things, but that they might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God.’

‘Yes, “good works,” ’ interrupted Betty; ‘and that is what I want to do.’

‘Wait a bit. If I remember rightly the passage goes on, “Strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power.” Now what does a young Christian want this glorious, mighty strength for? Why should he need God’s almighty power? Is he to work miracles, or preach to thousands? No. It is to teach him to practise or bring forth in his own home three fruits of the Spirit—“Patience, long-suffering, joyfulness.” ’

‘I will look at that chapter,’ said Betty thoughtfully; ‘I know I am not patient or long-suffering. Joyfulness seems a strange thing to practise.’

‘It is most essential to recommend our religion to the world at large. Can’t you imagine the young Christian practising a mournful patience, and a

melancholy long-suffering, and exasperating all the members of her family thereby.'

Betty laughed.

'Yes, Mr. Russell, and I do hope I shan't turn into that type. I know a girl in London who always adopts a superior kind of patience, as if she were a long-suffering martyr, and she drives her sisters nearly mad!'

'Don't lose your gay spirits, Betty. It is a gift for which you will have to account, and very few keep it when their youth slips away. I often think it is such a pity, for it brightens and gladdens all who come in contact with it.'

'I was wondering if I had any gifts,' said Betty; 'but I am afraid joyfulness is not mine now.'

'I think it is. There is no reason why it should not be. If clouds come, let them pass; don't hug hold of them, and coax them to stay.'

A pink colour rose to Betty's cheeks. She was walking down the drive with Mr. Russell, and her eyes wandered to the hills in the distance, which formed a blue foreground to a golden sky behind them.

'The sun isn't always shining,' she said wistfully; 'but I'm going to try hard, Mr. Russell, and if I sit indoors all day at mother's writing-desk, and keep happy all the time, you think that will be a kind of service?'

'I don't think your mother will be such a hard task-mistress as that,' was Mr. Russell's amused reply; but Betty shook her little curly head very doubtfully.

It was very soon after this that General Dormer and his family came to the Red Manor. Ella Dormer, a bright, handsome girl about Molly's age, appeared very often at the vicarage with her brother, and the request,—

'Please, Mrs. Stuart, may Molly and Betty come over and spend the day with us? We want to make up a set for tennis or croquet.'

Molly generally ended by going with them, but Betty withstood all their invitations, and gradually began to take Molly's place in her mother's sick-room. It was a trial to her at first, for Betty, as she acknowledged, 'was not an indoor person,' and the bright summer weather tempted her sorely to spend her time in the open air. But she had set herself to learn lessons of 'patience and long-suffering with joyfulness,' and if the little songs that she sang about the house had a somewhat plaintive melody, they sweetened and enlivened her mother's many quiet hours of seclusion and solitude.

The summer faded; the young green leaves turned from their early freshness to their dull August tint, and then to their bright September hues; the woods were clothed in their glorious russet and golden coats, the days began to shorten, and the nights became cold and misty. And Mrs. Stuart announced her intention of returning to town.

Molly was invited to stay at the Red Manor with her young friends for a month later, and so it happened that Betty and her mother went up to London together.

Betty walked over to wish her old women at the almshouses good-bye the day before she left. Her heart was full; she tried to face the future bravely, but it looked dreary and forlorn. There was much lamentation over her departure; for by this time she had endeared herself to their hearts. Even Lucy Finch had learnt to restrain her tongue a little during Betty's visits.

'Eh, me dear, us will say nought about our neighbours to-day. They be no better nor worse than usual, an uninterestin' set, it seems to me, an' the fewer words us do have about 'em, the better you'll be pleased. I've larned that from yer pretty face. For I sez to Mary Dunster yester-morn, 'tis hard work for such a bright young leddy to listen to the groans an' moans of those who make such a clamour over their aches an' pains; an' for meself I allays have kep' a brave heart, an' should be 'shamed to whine like some folks that I could tell on. Yes, me dear, I've done; an' I wipe me hands o' their ways an' their folly! But what us will do when you'm gone be more than I can tell!'

Mary Dunster had a smile for her.

'You have brought sunshine to my heart, missy, for I'm learnin' fast to look up and on. Hope keeps the heart young, they say; an' hope is makin' my old heart quicken an' throb with expectation. When my rheumatics keep me awake at night, I just count over the blessin's that are comin' to me in the other land, an' my dreams are often on it now. I shall miss our talks sorely.'

Widow Newcombe and Widow Long received her with long faces. The latter was always spokeswoman, and her friend echoed her words.

'Well to be sure, Miss Stuart. Us have only just begun to be friendly wi' 'ee, and now you be departin'; an' 'tis the way o' the world—here to-day and gone to-morrow; an' the young squire be gone too, and a fam'ly already come in his stead. 'Tis to be hoped they have come to stay. Us be very sorry to lose 'ee, miss. It whiles the time away to see a young lady.'

‘It do,’ assented Widow Newcombe fervently.

Susan Crane cried as she wished her good-bye.

‘It has been good, miss, to have a talk about good things. My prayers will foller you, an’ I hope us may see you down in these parts agen. I have picked up wonderful since I had your visits to look to, an’ I’m settlin’ in most comfortable!’

But Betty lingered longest at Martha Button’s.

‘Martha,’ she said, ‘give me some advice to take up to London. I remember some time ago—the first time I called—you were talking about stewards. Do you think I am one? Have I anything entrusted to me?’

Martha’s face beamed.

‘Ay, Miss Betty, ye have. Surely your youth and brightness is like dew to the dry, parched ground. You have brought sunshine to us in this little community; take it about wi’ you in London, for that be a place that wants a power o’ sunshine, I hear. And there be few folks that make the best of life, and pick out their mercies; ’tis always the other way. If only the Lord’s people would mind that sunbeams glorify the sun they come from, perchance they might think a bright face and word as much their dooty as hymns an’ prayers!’

‘But, Martha, one can’t always be bright. It is strange your talking to me, too, about being happy. Mr. Russell—a friend of mine—said much the same thing to me the other day. It seems that I am not to be allowed to take life gravely. I hope I shan’t be like the clown who looked upon tears as an expensive luxury.’

‘We’ll hope trouble will not touch you for many a day,’ said Martha.

Betty left her with a brave smile; but she felt that trouble which had to be hidden, and which in a sense was not lawful, was a difficult burden to carry. As she neared home she met Mat Lubbock.

‘Arternoon, missy. Have ’ee said good-bye to the organ?’

‘I’m afraid I have,’ Betty said, a sorrowful look coming to her face.

‘I have a short time now at your biddin’, missy.’

‘Then let us come into church now for half an hour,’ said Betty, wondering that Mat should propose what once he had been so loth to do. She was more surprised when, after she had played over several of her favourite refrains, Mat said in his gruffest tone,—

‘Will ’ee sing that there hymn, missy, on “The King o’ love my Shepherd is”?’

Betty gladly complied with his request. When her sweet, glad notes rang through the little church,—

‘The King of Love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His,
And He is mine, for ever,’

she fancied she heard a hoarse echo of her words, but, thinking she was mistaken, she said nothing.

As she was shutting up the organ, Mat came out of his corner, and stood at her elbow. She looked at him, and, seeing he was struggling to speak, said gently,—

‘What is it, Mat?’

‘I thought I’d tell ’ee that I hath bin up to passon an’ given my name for bell-ringer agen.’

‘Oh, Mat, I am so glad! I thought you were looking happier.’

‘I be that. Tell ’ee missy, I be fair overcome by the King o’ Love. He have bin hammer, hammer at my hard old heart, till He smashed un all to shiver, an’ then He have been soothin’, an’ comfortin’, an’ puttin’ of it together agen, till He have got a heart that’ll hold Him, an’ bless Him all its days. Do ’ee mind the tex’ that the young squire did pass to ’ee to pass on to me? “I have seen his ways, and will heal him. I will lead him also, an’ restore comforts unto him.” That be a powerfu’ tex’, missy, and when I heerd the young squire were a holdin’ his head so straight an’ cheerfu’-like for all his own trouble; an’ when he met me the day afore he went ower the sea, an’ “Mat, my man,” sez he, “shake hands, an’ wish me well, for I’m beginnin’ life at the bottom o’ the ladder,” sez he, I fair broke down, an’ I sez to un, “If the Lord have dealt me hard knocks, certain He have thee, an’ if thee hath not turned agen Him, more shame to I that have.” “Ah, Mat,” he sez, “we’ll both live to thank Him yet, and to own up He did just the very best for us.” An’ I come home, and the tex’ kept repeatin’ of itself, till I thought it would send me daft; but thank the Lord,

‘Perverse an’ foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love He sought me,
And on His shoulder gently laid,
An’ home, rejoicin’, brought me.’

Betty's eyes filled with happy tears.

'Oh, I am so glad, Mat,—so glad!'

She could say no more, but just outside the church porch she took the man's hand in hers.

'Good-bye, Mat. I shan't forget you. We must both remember our favourite hymn when things don't go well with us—

'I nothing lack if I am His,
And He is mine, for ever.'

'Ay,' said Mat, grasping her little hand with both his; 'an' I'd thank the King o' Love's messenger for what her hath brought me!'

Betty came into her mother's presence a little later with such a sparkling, radiant face, that Mrs. Stuart asked her where she had been.

'Saying good-bye to the old almswomen and to Mat, mother.'

'You seem glad to get back to town,' Mrs. Stuart said, looking at her.

'I shall be glad to go or stay now,' was the happy reply.

And her mother looked at her again, and wondered.

CHAPTER XI

In Town Again

Experience, like a pale musician, holds
A dulcimer of patience in his hand;
Whence harmonies we cannot understand,
Of God's will in His worlds, the strain unfolds
In sad perplexed minors. Deathly colds
Fall on us while we hear, and countermand
Our sanguine heart back from the fancy-land,
With nightingales in visionary wolds.
We murmur—'Where is any certain tune
Or measured music in such notes as these?'
But angels, leaning from the golden seat,
Are not so minded! their fine ear hath won
The issue of completed cadences;
And smiling down the stars, they whisper—'Sweet.'

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

The month that Betty and her mother were together without Molly was beneficial to them both.

Betty set her mind and body to fulfil her different duties cheerfully, but her heedless, impulsive ways were a sad trial to her mother. If Betty had to bear with an invalid's exactness and irritability, Mrs. Stuart also needed her share of patience for her youngest daughter's incompetence.

'It is no good, mother,' was Betty's despondent complaint one foggy morning in November, as she sat at her mother's writing-desk, and for the third time tore up a letter she was writing at Mrs. Stuart's dictation. 'You will never make a satisfactory secretary of me. I think I was born to be an out-of-door person, not an indoor one. I'm trying my very best this morning, but the first sheet blotted itself, and the second I misspelt, and now this sheet I have upset a vase of flowers over! Things will go wrong when I mean them to go right with all my heart and soul.'

'If you were a little quieter, and not quite so emphatic, you would do better,' remarked Mrs. Stuart drily.

‘I thought I had been as quiet as a lamb this morning,’ Betty rejoined; ‘at least, until this last half an hour, when I got the fidgets. Perhaps if I went to the pantry and got a duster to wipe up the water here, I should do better. A run will calm my fidgets.’

She quitted the room as she spoke, and went singing down the passage at the top of her fresh young voice,—

Yet when a tale comes i’ my head,
Or lasses gie my heart a screed,
As whyles they’re like to be my deed,
Oh, sad disease;
I kittle up my rustic reed,
It gies me ease!’

Mrs. Stuart gave a sigh.

‘Molly will be back next week. Betty means well, but she is so undisciplined.’

Yet Betty was learning lessons in God’s own school, and He Himself was her Teacher. ‘Patience, long-suffering, with joyfulness,’ she kept repeating to herself, and she chased away the shadows, and basked in the sun whenever she got the chance. On this particular morning she had just reseated herself at her desk, when the door suddenly opened, and a tall figure wrapped in a thick ulster appeared.

‘Harry!’ exclaimed Mrs. Stuart, in astonishment.

‘Uncle Harry! Where have you come from? We thought you were at Gibraltar.’

‘Home on sick leave. Don’t I look the invalid?’

Major Stuart’s tones certainly did not sound like those of one; they were as full and hearty as ever. He threw off his coat and sat down by his sister-in-law, stretching out his long legs with infinite satisfaction towards the ruddy blaze of the fire.

‘I’ve been pretty nearly choked by this fog. We ought to have got in last night. I landed at the Victoria Docks, and came straight here. Where is Madam Molly?’

‘Down in the country. You can have had no breakfast.’

‘No; I am starving, but I would rather wait till luncheon. That must be pretty near—isn’t it?’

‘Oh, you must have something at once. I will go and see about it.’

Betty tripped out of the room, delighted at the interruption to the writing. Her uncle looked after her.

‘Is Molly still the beauty?’ he asked. ‘I haven’t seen any of you for three years.’

‘Is it really so long? I think Molly is still the most admired; Betty is too variable. Now tell me about yourself. Have you been ill?’

‘Nothing to speak of. A touch of fever again. Can you take me in for a short time?’

‘You know I shall be delighted.’

Major Stuart brought a good deal of life into the house. He chaffed Betty a good bit, and uncle and niece grew almost uproarious at times; but they were firm friends notwithstanding, for Betty had always occupied a big corner in her uncle’s heart.

‘Now, Betty, what is your present fad?’ he asked her one afternoon, as they were walking in the Park together.

‘I haven’t any,’ was the prompt reply.

‘Rubbish! When you were eight, it was angels, when you were eighteen it was dancing, now I suppose it is lovers!’

‘Indeed it is not!’

Betty’s cheeks grew hot at such an accusation.

‘Well, upon what are you expending your superfluous energy?’

‘On learning to sit still,’ Betty said, laughing, though there was a little wistfulness in her tone.

Major Stuart gave a low whistle.

‘And who has set you such a cruel and superhuman task as that?’

‘It is time I learnt it,’ Betty said, gravity stealing into her sunny eyes. ‘I have been taking Molly’s place while she has been away. I wanted work to do, so mother has been giving me plenty of it.’

‘And why did a young thing like you want work? You talk as if you were a charwoman. Isn’t that the name of the good lady who is always looking out for jobs of work?’

‘I had nothing to do,’ Betty said earnestly. ‘I wanted to go right away from home, only mother wouldn’t let me. When Molly comes back I shall fare badly. I bungle so that mother will thankfully dismiss me. It isn’t the kind of work I am fit for—writing and reading and planning societies, but it seems the only thing that mother likes for me.’

‘I see, I see. I might have known that the dancing fervour would not last. Work, with a big W, is now the cry. My dear child, we must get you married, or there is no saying what you will not develop into.’

Betty turned upon him indignantly.

‘You are a man, and talk such stuff! As if girls cannot do something with their lives as well as men.’

‘Well, what do you want to do? Go into the Army or Navy, study law and buy a flaxen wig, or walk a hospital, and dissect cats and dogs and human beings? Perhaps you would prefer the Church? In your young days, I remember, you were much given to churches and graves.’

‘You never will be serious, Uncle Harry. I thought you might help me, but you only laugh at me.’

Major Stuart dropped his banter.

‘My dear Betty, girls are needed at home, especially when their mothers are delicate. You would repent it all your life if you left your mother now.’

Betty looked up alarmed.

‘Uncle Harry, you don’t think mother is really ill?’

Major Stuart was silent. He knew what his young nieces did not know—that Mrs. Stuart’s days were numbered.

‘Tell me,’ Betty urged. ‘Why do you think I ought not to leave mother?’

‘Because she is an invalid,’ Major Stuart said, trying to speak lightly; ‘and invalids want cheery companionship. You can give her that even better than Molly can.’

‘No,’ said Betty, shaking her head; ‘I am not quiet enough. I bang doors, and I let things tumble, and I sing when I ought to be silent. Molly suits mother perfectly. I never did.’

‘Your mother told me you had cheered her a good deal lately,’ said Major Stuart.

‘Did she really?’ Betty exclaimed, whilst a flush of pleasure came to her cheeks. ‘I have tried hard to supply Molly’s place, but I did not know I had been at all successful.’

A few days later, and Molly returned. Betty welcomed her gladly. Everything concerning the Red Manor and its neighbourhood interested her, and the sisters had much to tell each other. They sat over their sitting-room fire the day after Molly’s return. Mrs. Stuart was resting in her room, and they hoped they would be undisturbed.

Molly puzzled Betty by her manner; she seemed reticent and self-absorbed, but it did not last long. She placed a cushion behind her head, leant back in her easy-chair, and, gazing dreamily into the fire, announced, —

‘Something happened to me at the Dormers, Betty.’

‘What?’ asked Betty, eyeing her curiously.

‘Well, Frank made a stupid of himself.’

‘Oh, Molly, not Frank? I should have thought he was the last person to do it. He is just like Douglas. Do you mean to say he proposed to you?’

‘I’ll tell you how he did it, and then you can say if you would have liked it.’

Molly roused herself to poke the fire viciously.

‘Of course, we were always about together, and one day Ella had a headache, and Frank drove me out in his trap to see an old ruin about eight miles off. It was coming home—he asked me how my story was getting on, and then he said, “How do your heroes make love, Molly?” I said, “Different ways.” “But,” he said, “how do you think it ought to be done to ensure success?” Of course, I hadn’t a notion of what was coming, so I considered, and I said I preferred one who did it in a masterly way, and not in agitation. “My hero,” I said, “generally clasps the heroine in his arms, before she knows what he is about.”

‘ “And does the heroine always like that?”

‘ “If he is the right man she does.”

‘ “And if he isn’t?”

‘ “Oh, then he wouldn’t have the cheek to do it,” I said.

‘Frank seemed to think that over. “He might be in a position where such a proceeding would be risky,” he said. “For instance, if he was driving like I am, and the horse wanted a bit of holding in like Boy does, while he is clasping his lady-love to his heart, the horse would bolt, and the result would be a catastrophe!” “Yes,” I said; “but I have never made any one propose when driving. It would want a good deal of thought and care.” “Thought and care be hanged!” Frank said quickly. “I’m going to do it, Molly, so now you’ll see how it can be done.” ’

Molly paused.

‘Well,’ said Betty eagerly. ‘This is very exciting. How did he go on? I wish it had been any one but Frank.’

‘Oh, I can’t remember all he said. He talked a lot of nonsense. He said he was perfectly certain we should suit each other down to the ground, and he said he had always liked me, and he was really in dead earnest, and I would break his heart if I didn’t say “Yes.” At first I thought he was chaffing me, but I soon saw he wasn’t, and he kept twitching Boy’s mouth till I thought the creature would rear and fall back on the top of us! It wasn’t a pleasant proposal at all, Betty.’

‘What did you say?’

‘I told him it was absurd, that he was like a brother, and nothing else. And then he was furious, and said I hadn’t any heart, and wasted all my best feelings on paper men and women. That was when I told him I had no desire to marry; I only wanted to write a book. He was very rude, but he begged my pardon before the end of the drive, and besought me to give him another answer.’

‘I expect,’ Betty said soberly, ‘he will make some one a good husband. He is a very steady fellow, and every one likes him. He isn’t a bit conceited, and he has plenty of fun in him.’

‘Yes,’ assented Molly dreamily, her eyes trying to read her future in the glowing coals in front of her. ‘But he is not my ideal, Betty. I know him too well. I think, if I ever marry, I shall like my husband to be a dark stern man, with a mystery about him—one who will give me little shivers of delight and awe, and who will be a surprise to me even after I marry him. A man who will overwhelm me with love and tenderness when we are alone together, but who will be cold and unapproachable to any one else.’

‘Yes, that sounds nice in—in a book,’ said Betty thoughtfully; ‘but I would like to be quite sure of a man before I married him.’

There was a little silence. The girls were following out their youthful fancies; then Molly said abruptly,—

'Anyhow, Frank is too—commonplace and unromantic for me. I would rather not be married at all than to him.'

'If you would marry him, I suppose by-and-bye the Red Manor would be your home.'

'But you forget, Betty,' said Molly, who was singularly unworldly, 'that I want to arrange a match between Ella and Mr. Arundel; and I want Ella to inherit the Red Manor, not Frank, only I don't quite know how it is to be done. I was a little disappointed when they met the other day.'

'When was that?' asked Betty quietly, but her heart began fluttering in a most uncomfortable way.

'We were riding out—Frank and Ella and I—and we met Mr. Arundel on the way to his farm. He was going to pass us, but I would not let him, and I introduced him to Ella, and then I asked him if we might see his farm. He did not seem to mind a bit, and I tried to make Ella ride behind with him, while I went on with Frank, but she wouldn't. I asked her afterwards what she thought of him, and she said he was rather grave and uninteresting, but she liked his farmhouse.'

'What is it like?' asked Betty.

'It has a thatched roof and casement windows, and some late roses were still climbing up it. I shouldn't mind living in it a bit, but, of course, after the Manor it must be dreadfully cramped, and he hasn't got it very tidy. It looks like a man's house. It is rather pretty when you go in, or it might easily be made so. You step into what was the old farmhouse kitchen, and a broad wooden staircase goes up from the middle of it, so it really is the hall. I think he smokes there. The fire was burning, and a chair was by it, with a book and a pipe on it, and his coats and hats were lying about anywhere. One door to the left led into the kitchen and dairy; the other into the dining-room, and then there was another door which he never opened; he said it was the best parlour, and had at present no furniture in it. The garden is sweet, old-fashioned, and quaint, and there is a nice walled kitchen garden. Ella asked him if he felt lonely, and he smiled, but it was a sad smile. It made me feel quite unhappy to see him there. He has a woman to cook and look after him; the rest of them there are farm men and lads.'

'Where is his mother's organ?' asked Betty.

‘I never asked him. I forgot all about it. In the best parlour, I expect, if the room is high enough to take it. We didn’t go upstairs.’

‘I think it was intruding as it was,’ Betty said, with hot cheeks. ‘I can’t think how you could do it.’

‘You see, I was so anxious for him to know Ella. And I’m afraid I did myself harm,’ Molly added, with a little sigh, ‘for Frank got it into his head that I wanted to be with him. Stupid fellow! it was only to give the others a chance, that I took him away.’

‘How long did you stay?’

‘Not very long. He offered us a cup of tea, but I thought he wouldn’t be able to manage it very well. It looked so funny to see him there doing everything himself. He went out into the yard, and brought some logs to put on the fire. Of course, Floy was there. He lay on the rug and looked just as comfortable as he did at the Manor. I told Ella how dreadfully Mr. Arundel was to be pitied, and she made me angry by saying it would have been much better if he had left the neighbourhood altogether. She said it would be so awkward meeting him, though of course she was very sorry for him.’

‘I am sure he doesn’t need *her* pity!’

Betty’s tone was so emphatic that Molly looked up surprised.

‘Well, of course, everybody is sorry for him, aren’t you?’

‘Not a bit,’ said Betty passionately, rising from her seat as she spoke. ‘He has done nothing to be sorry for. He is not a poor weak ailing creature that needs a girl’s pity. He is one that is to be envied, and people who talk about being sorry for him are fools!’

With which hasty, incoherent statement Betty left the room, shutting the door behind her more quickly than quietly.

Molly shrugged her shoulders.

‘Betty is so contradictious! I thought she quite felt for him in his misfortunes. Now she doesn’t seem to care a bit. I believe I am the only one that really sympathises with him.’

For the rest of the day Betty went about in a dream. One picture was in her mind’s eye.

The old hall, with a blazing log fire, and the staircase leading up out of it. In a chair, leaning his head on his hand, the master of the house. Stretched

at his feet his faithful hound. A book open on his knee, but unread. Where are his thoughts?

'Alone and silent, only his dog left, all his friends giving him the cold shoulder. And yet I can see him smiling, and his eyes clear and untroubled. Oh, God will "restore comforts unto him." I must not think of him. It will make me miserable.'

But thoughts are difficult to control, and Betty found them so. She comforted herself by praying for him.

'I am sure it isn't wrong to do that,' she said to herself, a little defiantly. 'And I shall pray that he may be made happy, and if he marries Ella and goes back to the Red Manor I shall be glad—yes, really glad! I hope I shall be!'

Poor little Betty! She was very courageous in these days, very earnest and conscientious in all she said and did, but her heart was in the old thatched farmhouse, and there it remained, day after day, much as she strove to tear it thence.

CHAPTER XII

A Thunderbolt

We scarce breathed anything but grief,
We almost held our breath:
We were inwardly unmanned and numbed
With the looking out for death.

FABER.

'Now, girls, what are you doing? I am to take you for a constitutional in the Park—act nursemaid, in fact—your mother says so! What! Betty deep with ink and paper! Heaven forbid that you should follow in your sister's steps!'

'It is only a letter,' said Betty, looking up with flushed face and tearful eyes. 'I am writing to Mrs. Fairfax. I heard such dreadful news from Mrs. St. Clair this morning. And Molly and I have decided not to tell mother. It is one of her bad days.'

'I see it is; but I heard from St. Clair last mail, and they were all first rate.'

'He is dead,' said Betty softly; 'haven't you heard?'

'Good heavens! No! You don't mean it?'

Major Stuart sat down heavily on a chair. Colonel St. Clair was an old friend of his, and they corresponded as frequently as two men do who have perfect confidence in each other.

'His horse bolted with him on parade, and threw him on a heap of stones. He only lived four hours. He had concussion of the brain, and never recovered.'

'And his wife?'

'She is coming home at once. She has been very ill, and is still quite an invalid.'

'I wish he hadn't gone out to India,' said Major Stuart slowly. 'I always told him it was a mistake—seconding from his battalion. It has ruined his wife's health, and now killed him.'

‘But the accident might have happened anywhere,’ said Molly.

Major Stuart was silent. Then he asked,—

‘May I see Mrs. St. Clair’s letter, Betty? We were like brothers—he and I. What steamer does she return in?’

‘The Arethusa, I think. She will be here in another week. Do advise us, Uncle Harry. You know, Mrs. Fairfax is still in the south of France. She has been there since Miss Grace’s death. Mrs. St. Clair wants to go to their old home. It was let to some friends of theirs, but they left at the same time we left the vicarage. Some one ought to go down and make it ready for her. Do you think Molly or I could?’

‘That is a question your mother must settle. She ought to know——’

‘I am writing to Mrs. Fairfax,’ said Betty, ‘to ask her if she is coming over. But she was ill when we last heard from her. It seems nothing but trouble.’

‘Your mother will ask Mrs. St. Clair here, perhaps?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Molly said decidedly. ‘Mother refused to have Aunt Dora, who wanted to come last week. She seems to get so worried if people are staying in the house.’

‘But she lets me come in and out.’

‘Yes, but you are at your club. That is different.’

‘Well, I shall be in town for some time longer, so I can easily offer my services to Mrs. St. Clair on arrival. She can put up at an hotel for the time being. Now get your hats, and come along. If we have had bad news, we can bear it in the open air as well as in a stuffy house.’

‘I’m sure Betty inherits her love of being out of doors from you, Uncle Harry,’ said Molly, as she left the room in obedience to her uncle’s wish. ‘You and she ought to have been born tramps.’

Neither Major Stuart nor Betty replied; they were both absorbed in their thoughts.

Betty had not seen Nesta St. Clair for seven years. She had as a child worshipped her with a loving adoration, and though as she grew up she had only seen her at rare intervals, her love had not lessened with time. Nesta had never forgotten her little friend, and had corresponded with her regularly from the time she went out to India. She had not been without her own

troubles, for she had lost three of her children out there, and now had only her youngest boy left, who was about eight years old.

Mrs. Stuart was told the news the following day; but she negatived the idea of either of her girls going down to Holly Grange.

So when Nesta arrived in town, about a week later, she went with her boy to a quiet private hotel, and there it was that Major Stuart took Betty to see her one foggy afternoon.

Betty had been beside herself with excitement all the morning. When Molly remonstrated with her, and begged her not to greet Nesta with such abundant cheerfulness, Betty turned upon her,—

'Be quiet, Molly. How should you know my feelings? I am not going to pretend I am sorry to see her, when in reality I am wild with joy. Of course, I am sorry about her husband, but she is the only real woman friend that I have got, and I love her!'

When Betty found herself face to face with Mrs. St. Clair she was tongue-tied. Was this gentle fragile-looking woman in her widow weeds, with her white, worn face and large sad eyes, the same as the bonny young wife and mother that Betty had seen seven years previously? She could hardly believe it, but when Nesta spoke, her low mellow voice awoke a thousand memories in Betty's mind.

'Is this tall, fashionable young lady indeed my little Betty?'

Betty rushed at her impulsively.

'Oh, I hope I shall be your Betty still. I have wanted you so sometimes, and now this is such a sad home-coming.'

Tears were in her eyes as she kissed her friend, but Nesta was strangely calm and collected. The time of tears for her was past; only the dull constant ache of loneliness and bereavement remained.

'Dear child, I am so pleased to see you. Now let me introduce my boy to you. He is your godson, remember.'

She drew her boy forward. He was a white-faced, delicate-looking child, but upright as a dart, and with a vigour and a briskness in his tone that was a great contrast to his mother's sweet languor.

'How do you do, godmother? I want mother to come out of doors with me and show me England, but it is full of dirty smoke this morning. Would you like to see my parrot? Her name is Tittle-tattle. The captain on the ship

gave her that name, and when I grow up I'm going to have a ship of my own, and a coat with *very* big pockets, and I'm going to walk up and down the bridge with my spyglass, and always keep my hands in my pockets.'

'What is your name?' asked Betty, smiling down upon the eager little face. 'Jocelyn, isn't it?'

'Jossy, I'm called. Will you come and see Tittle-tattle?'

'Not just now, dear,' said his mother. 'I want to talk to her first.'

'Here, young shaver, we'll go off together, and give your mother a little quiet.'

Major Stuart took him off, and Betty sat with her friend. Nesta, with her usual unselfishness, did not touch much upon her own sorrow. She was full of interest in Betty and her surroundings.

'I did so enjoy your letters about Tiverstoke, Betty; it brought up so many happy memories! I hope my mother may like to come back to Holly Grange, and live with me there. I am sure Jossy will brighten her up. I have found a letter from her waiting for me here. Her doctor will not let her return to England just yet. Do you think your mother would let you come and stay with me till she can join me?'

A rush of colour swept into Betty's face. Mrs. St. Clair wondered a little at the brilliant light in her eyes. She thought that she was growing into a beautiful woman.

'It would be heavenly!' was Betty's earnest ejaculation.

Nesta smiled.

'You are the same earnest little soul, Betty. What have you been doing with your life since you left school?'

'Not much,' said Betty, shaking her head, and a shadow creeping across her eyes. 'I have been wasting a good part of it in discontent and restlessness.'

'Have you passed that stage now?' asked Nesta sympathetically.

'I am trying hard to,' said Betty gravely. 'I have longed to go out in the world and work, Mrs. St. Clair. I felt I *must* a little time ago, but mother would not let me, and so I'm trying to do my best at home. Mr. Russell helped me so when we were at Tiverstoke.'

'You were very happy there?'

Betty did not answer. She looked dreamily into the blazing fire in front of her; then she turned her speaking eyes upon her friend, and there were truth and candour in her glance.

'I was very happy, and very miserable, and now, I think, I am content.'

Nesta leant forward and kissed her.

'You have been learning in a great school, dear, if you have learnt that lesson.'

'I haven't learnt it yet—not perfectly,' said Betty wistfully. 'I get such sudden overpowering longings, that they almost run away with me. But I do want to do what is right. Mr. Russell gave me such a beautiful text to practise. Three things to think of every day, when worries come, —"Patience, long-suffering, with joyfulness!" '

As Nesta looked into the sweet girlish face by her side, she could almost see the impress of those three virtues stamped upon it. But she wondered dimly what trouble had crept into Betty's life at Tiverstoke, and being a woman she nearly understood.

When Betty left her that morning, she said enthusiastically to her uncle, —

'Isn't she perfectly charming? Do you think mother would let me go to Holly Grange? I think I should be doing some good if I went. Do persuade her, Uncle Harry.'

'I think,' said Major Stuart gravely, 'that you and Molly should stay with your mother this winter. Do not urge her to send you away from her.'

Betty's face fell. She could not understand her uncle's wish to keep them both in attendance on their mother; and when he insisted upon taking them out in turn, and in persuading Mrs. Stuart to let them each spend an equal time in her sick-room, Betty thought he was very lacking in discernment.

'Every one can see how much rather mother would have Molly than me. She looks quite plaintive when the door opens, and it is only I.'

Nesta came the next day, and had a long interview with Mrs. Stuart. Betty was summoned to her mother's room before she went away.

'Come here, Betty. Mrs. St. Clair has been telling me that she would like to take you to Holly Grange with her. Do you wish to go?'

Betty looked at her mother, then at Nesta. She felt tongue-tied. Her uncle's words rang in her ears.

‘Can you spare me, mother?’ she asked.

‘Your mother is willing to spare you,’ said Nesta, a little hastily; ‘but I have told her that I would not have asked you, had I known—had I known she was such an invalid!’

‘Am I of any use to you, mother?’ Betty asked appealingly. She longed for some assurance that her mother would miss her.

Mrs. Stuart did not reply for a moment. She shaded her eyes with her hand; then she said quietly,—

‘If you are away, Molly will be tied a great deal to the house. Of course, she never complains, but——’

‘I will not go, mother. I will stay with you.’

Her decision made, she left the room; but there was a little bitter feeling in her heart.

‘Mother only thinks of Molly. It is only to ease her that she wants me. Oh, it is a disappointment!’

She crept to her room, then took herself to task for such feelings.

‘And it is quite right I should not go to Holly Grange. It would be much better not. It would only bring up a lot of things that I ought not to think about. I should be too near. Oh, but I did want just to see if he was looking happy! I would not wish to meet him or speak to him, but if I could have seen him going by without being seen, I think it would have made me happy for a twelvemonth!’

Nesta did not stay very long in town. The time flew by too swiftly for Betty. When she went to Paddington Station to see her off, she had much difficulty in keeping the tears out of her eyes.

‘I have only just met you to lose you,’ she said mournfully. ‘Do write to me often. I wish mother would take the vicarage again next spring.’

‘We are nearer each other now,’ Nesta said brightly. ‘We have no ocean between us, remember. And, Betty dear, I think you will be happy in London this winter. Be good to your mother. She wants all the love of her daughters just now.’

‘Sometimes,’ said Betty, looking at Mrs. St. Clair strangely, ‘you speak as if mother is very ill. I suppose we have got accustomed to her being an invalid. But you know it is nothing serious. The doctor told us ages ago she only needed care and nursing.’

Nesta did not answer for a minute; then she said,—

'You must give it to her, Betty—care, nursing—and love.'

Betty sighed. She looked after the departing train with earnest longing, then brought down her little foot with a resolute stamp on the platform, and arrived home with a bright and smiling face. Molly wondered at her, but wisely said nothing. A few days after, when Betty came to summon her sister to their mother, Molly looked up from her manuscript with a flushed and eager face.

'Oh, Betty, I have been weaving his history into my story, and I have quite changed my plans for him. You know that Uncle Harry said the other day that Mrs. St. Clair was very well off?'

'What of that?' asked Betty shortly.

She had not much patience with many of Molly's dreams and fancies.

'Why, of course, she will meet Mr. Arundel down there, and she will be sorry for him and be kind to him, and ask him to her house. She is so sweet, and sad and lonely, that he will try to comfort her, and she will try to comfort him. And then General Dormer's bank will fail, or his dividends, or whatever his money is in, and then Mrs. St. Clair will buy the Red Manor from him, and they will marry, and live happy ever after. I am sure they are just suited to each other, and it will be trouble that will bring them together and bind them in the unbreakable bond.'

Betty turned upon her sister, with hot cheeks and angry eyes.

'I do wish you wouldn't talk such utter nonsense, Molly! Make up what you like about your imaginary men and women, but not about real people in real life. Mrs. St. Clair has only just lost her husband, whom she idolised. She will never think of marrying again, and it is wicked of you to think she will. I am sick of all your talk about people marrying each other. Things like that don't happen in real life, and the world would go on just as well without any love-making or marriages!'

With which very startling and sweeping assertion Betty sent her sister off to the sick-room, and took her place by the fire.

The winter passed very quietly, and then one day came into Betty's life that stood out sharply and darkly, as a black cloud against a sunset sky. Major Stuart's battalion was now stationed in London, so that he was in and out a good deal. He had come in to visit his sister-in-law one morning, and

now, with a very grave, set face, entered the girls' sitting-room and called them to him.

'Your mother has asked me to tell you something,' he said. 'She does not feel strong enough to tell you herself, and she would rather you made no allusion to it when you see her next. I suppose you have both seen that she is not gaining strength?'

Molly looked up with frightened eyes.

'It is the winter, Uncle Harry,' she gasped. 'Mother will be better when the spring comes.'

'She was much better in the country,' said Betty breathlessly; 'it was coming back to London made her worse. But we will take her away in the spring.'

'Some One Else is going to take her away first,' Major Stuart said very quietly, staring hard out of the window as he spoke.

There was dead silence. The girls looked into each others' eyes for hope that they did not find there. Then Betty stepped forward and seized her uncle's arm.

'Uncle Harry, don't hint! Tell us straight out what you mean. Mother is not dangerously ill? She is not—oh, you don't mean that she is going to die?'

'Your mother is very, very ill, Betty—I wonder you have not seen it—and the end is very near.'

Molly burst into a passion of tears. Betty surprised him by her calmness.

'Who says so? The doctors? They are often mistaken.'

'Not in this case. Your mother has known all the winter that she would never see another spring.'

Then, after a pause, he said,—

'You and Molly will have to exercise all your fortitude and cheerfulness now. A scene would be most dangerous to your mother. Be her careful and cheerful little nurses, as you have been. But your labours will be shared by another. That is why I have spoken to you to-day. The doctor is sending a trained nurse into the house to-night.'

Neither of the girls spoke. Molly sobbed as if her heart would break; Betty looked into the fire with a white, stunned face.

Their uncle left them. He felt powerless to comfort, and was relieved that his sad business of opening their eyes was over.

Molly looked up at last.

‘Oh, Betty, what shall we do? How cruel it seems to be!’

Betty did not answer. In her heart she was saying,—

‘O God! come close to us now, for no one can help us but Thee!’

CHAPTER XIII

Motherless

Thou art beyond the shadow;
  Why should we weep for thee,
That thou from care and pain and death
  Art set for ever free?
Well may we cease to sorrow;
  Or if we weep at all,
Not for thy fate, but for our own,
  Our bitter tears shall fall.

G. Wilson.

‘Molly, one of us must go to mother.’

‘You must. How can I?’

And Molly raised her red and swollen eyes, with another deep sob.

Betty stood irresolutely in the middle of the room.

‘I am sure mother will expect to see you first.’

‘I can’t go, Betty. I can’t! I don’t believe you feel it like I do. Oh, mother! mother!’

Down went her head into her arms. She was crying as if her heart would break. Betty walked out of the room and upstairs, wondering if she were in a dream. Surely such an awful trouble as this would be averted even yet!

She stole into her mother’s room, hardly daring to look at her as she lay on her couch. The room was darkened. Mrs. Stuart was lying with closed eyes, and did not open them.

‘Is that Molly?’

‘No, mother, it is I. Can I do anything for you?’

Betty’s voice sounded strange to herself. It was almost stony in its quietness.

‘Is Molly in?’

‘Yes; she—she will come up soon.’

Mrs. Stuart was silent. Betty nervously began to move a tray with a cup of beef-tea upon it from the side of the couch. Then her mother said quietly, —

'I suppose your uncle told you that Dr. Forsyth wishes me to have a night nurse? She will come at five o'clock, and will want some tea. She had better have the dressing-room on the other side of the passage. You must see about it being got ready for her.'

A great lump rose in Betty's throat; her mother's care and thought for the nurse who was going to see her die seemed infinitely pathetic. She wished her uncle had not told them that no allusion must be made to their mother's danger in her presence, for she felt tongue-tied now; afraid to offer the slightest remark, for fear of breaking down. She walked to the window, and, in her desperation, began humming a little air to herself. Then, in surprisingly cheerful tones, she said,—

'I will see that she has everything she wants, mother. It is such a lovely day. Would you like me to draw up the blind a little? Fancy! I heard from Lottie Ward this morning, and she is going to be married to Martin Yates!'

She was talking at random. The lump in her throat seemed almost to choke her. What could she say to her mother? What could she do at a crisis like this?

Mrs. Stuart, as usual, misunderstood her. Though it had been her own wish that her girls should not recognise the truth of her state to herself, she was taken aback by Betty's apparent indifference.

'I need not have feared she would make a scene,' she thought, a little bitterly, to herself. 'It is only from compulsion that she is staying at home this winter. She will be free to do and go where she likes soon. I dare say she will be glad. My poor little Molly has quite broken down, evidently. Well, it is all for the best! One of my daughters will be able to attend on me, without any violation of her feelings. There will be no fear of Betty's breaking down. I wonder if she has any love for me at all?'

'You can read the articles in the *Times* to me as usual,' Mrs. Stuart said presently. 'Sit by the window and draw up part of the blind.'

Betty got the paper, and read it in a monotonous level tone. How could her mother care for the newspapers? she wondered. What was the good of anything, when her life was gradually ebbing away? Now and again a little choke came into her voice, but she conquered it.

The hour that she was with her mother seemed almost twenty-four hours in length. She was released at last, for her mother's maid came in. Just for a minute before she went, Betty stood looking down at the invalid.

'Is there nothing I can do for you, mother?'

There was wistful longing in her tone, but Mrs. Stuart's matter-of-fact reply sent her from the room with mingled feelings of despair and astonishment.

'Nothing, thank you. Send Molly to me soon. The reports of the S.P.S.H. have just arrived, and I want them sent off as soon as possible.'

Betty went down to Molly, with eyes full of consternation and dismay. She found her, poker in hand, kneeling by the fire, and a strong smell of burning filled the room.

'Molly, how soon can you go to mother? She wants you.'

Molly stood up and faced her sister. She was red-eyed still, but her face was white and set, and there was a look of determined resolve on it that Betty had never seen before.

'What have you been doing?' faltered Betty.

'I have been burning my manuscripts,' said Molly. Her voice was almost stern in tone. 'I can't play with life any longer, Betty. I shall never forgive myself, that I have been so absorbed in fictitious tragedies, that a tragedy taking place under our own roof has been unnoticed by us. Oh, Betty! why have they kept us in ignorance of it? All this year mother has been slowly dying. Think of it! And she has known it, and borne the burden of it all alone!'

'It is awful!' cried Betty. 'Why doesn't everything stop, Molly? What is the good of eating, and drinking, and reading the newspapers, when death is coming nearer every day?'

She shuddered as she spoke; then added quickly,—

'Mother gives me such a shock. She is just the same as she was yesterday. I have been reading the newspaper to her, and she talks so calmly of everything. Do you think Uncle Harry may have been mistaken? I can't believe it.'

'The nurse!' Molly said. 'How could you read, Betty? How can you keep so calm? You are generally so much more excited than I am. Yes, the nurse must mean that there is danger.'

She began to cry again. Betty kissed her with quivering lips.

‘Oh, Molly, you mustn’t! Mother is wanting you so! Do get calm, and go into her room, as if nothing had happened. Don’t cry any more. Mother is wanting you to send off some reports!’

Betty finished by a little hysterical laugh. Molly dried her eyes, and looked at her in wonder.

‘Reports? What do they matter? I shall burn them all. Oh, Betty, Douglas ought to know, and Bobby and Billy! How can we get them here?’

‘I will write at once. Go upstairs and brush your hair. Oh, don’t begin to cry again, for pity’s sake! Do go to mother. It is you that she wants!’

In the days that followed it was Betty that took the lead. Molly was beside herself with terror and anxiety. It was some time before Mrs. Stuart mentioned her state to her daughters. She had always been a reserved woman in matters that belonged to herself, and though she grew rapidly weaker, she insisted upon continuing her large correspondence. The day came, however, when she said to Molly,—

‘There, dear, that is my last letter. You must attend to everything now without reference to me.’

Once Betty entered the room, and found her mother with an open Bible by her side. She longed to say something, but felt paralysed. Mrs. Stuart had never talked with her children upon religious subjects. She rarely allowed religious discussions; but now, seeing Betty’s earnest eyes, she spoke,—

‘I have had Mr. Fosberry here; he has been reading to me.’

Mr. Fosberry was their clergyman.

‘I am so glad, mother.’ Then with an effort she added, ‘It is the only Book that comforts, because it is true.’

Mrs. Stuart smiled, and her smiles were so rare that Betty’s heart was warmed and quickened.

Very shyly she laid her hand on her mother’s thin, wasted one.

‘You will be happy,’ she said. ‘It is we who shall be miserable.’

‘A sick bed is not a happy place, Betty,’ Mrs. Stuart said sorrowfully, and with strange gentleness. ‘You see your past, with all its failures, and mistakes, with such distinctness.’

‘But your past, mother, has been a life lived for others, and not for yourself. You can have nothing to regret.’

And Betty thought of the avalanche of sympathetic letters that came pouring in day by day by post, letters from all quarters of the globe, in which the writers, one and all, agreed in lamenting that such a valuable and useful life was about to be taken away.

‘Betty,’ said Mrs. Stuart slowly, ‘listen to me, and profit by my experience. You are longing to take up work, and when I am gone, of course, you will be a free agent. I would warn you not to fill your life with work to the exclusion of the One who should come first. I may have lived for others; I have failed to live for Him. Take up the Bible and read me that verse which is marked in it.’

Betty obeyed, but her voice trembled as she read,—

‘ “Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.” ’

‘That will do. Now leave me. I want to be alone.’

And this was the only talk that Betty had with her mother concerning her state.

Not one of their brothers could come home. Major Stuart did all he could, and his nieces felt that without him they could not have lived through that trying time. When the first lilac buds were bursting forth in the London parks, Mrs. Stuart died, reserved and silent until the last. She had no farewell with her daughters. She gave them no parting wishes. Major Stuart was the only one with whom she consulted, and so, as the faint spring sunshine streamed into the rooms that were open once more to its rays, it fell on the white, anxious faces of the two motherless girls, as together they turned to their uncle,—

‘And now, Uncle Harry, what are we to do?’

Major Stuart looked at them and sighed. He wished they were a little older, a little less pretty; and then he wished he were a married man, with a home to offer them. He dared not utter his next thought, ‘They must get married.’

‘Your Aunt Dora has offered one of you a home,’ he said slowly.

‘Only one of us?’ gasped Molly. ‘Well, we shall have money enough to be independent, shall we not? We need not separate. We shall keep a home together for the boys. Neither of us will need to go to Aunt Dora.’

Mrs. Eagleton was not a favourite with her nieces. She and her husband lived in Yorkshire. They had no children, and were rather fidgety and particular in their ways. Their house was a dull one, and hardly an attractive place for a young girl.

'You two girls cannot live alone. It is out of the question. Betty, would Mrs. St. Clair still like to have you?'

Betty flushed. She felt ashamed of the throb of pleasure that her uncle's words gave her.

'Yes, I believe she would. She wrote again yesterday about it, but I couldn't leave Molly.'

'And I cannot go to Aunt Dora's,' said Molly, sitting down on a chair and beginning to cry. 'I really cannot, Uncle Harry. I shall go mad if I do! She will grind me down, and refuse to let me move my little finger without her permission. She will starve me in soul and body. She and Uncle Tom are on vegetarian diet at present. I would rather take poison at once than be slowly killed by her. I couldn't live with her! Oh, do have pity, and don't suggest such a thing!'

'Did mother say nothing about us to you?' asked Betty.

'Yes,' replied her uncle, hesitating; 'she did. She thought you, Betty, might like to go to Holly Grange for a time, and then, if you liked to take up work of any kind, you could do so—that is, provided Mrs. St. Clair and I approved. I am your guardian, remember.'

'And me?' Molly asked breathlessly.

'Well—er—we did not arrive at any conclusion about you. I think it would be well to go to Mrs. Eagleton for a time, and then you might pay a few visits from her. You have plenty of friends. What about the Dormers?'

'Oh,' said Molly, with a rising blush, 'I shall never go and see them again—never!'

Her uncle looked curiously at her.

'I thought Ella was such a friend of yours—and Frank?'

'Uncle Harry,' said Betty, trying to cover her sister's confusion, 'why cannot Molly and I stay on in this house? You say it is ours to do what we like with.'

Major Stuart shrugged his shoulders.

‘Because of Mrs. Grundy. I might look out for some matron or elderly spinster to come and look after you, but I fancy the best plan would be to shut it up at present. Perhaps Mrs. St. Clair will take you both for a time. We will see.’

And this was what was finally arranged; Molly and Betty both went down to Holly Grange. Nesta wrote them a warm entreaty to make her house at present their home. They arrived at Tiverstoke Station on a cold, windy afternoon in March.

‘It was only a year ago we came down with mother,’ said Molly sadly. ‘It seems as if we are fated to be in this part.’

‘Don’t you like it?’ asked Betty. ‘We have friends here. I shall much prefer it to London. But I never thought, when we left it last year, that we should come back again.’

‘There will be nothing to do,’ said Molly, with a weary sigh. ‘And the Dormers are abroad. I—I am glad of that.’

She did not look glad. Nesta thought, when she met them, that Molly had the saddest face of the two. There had been a great deal to do after their mother’s death, and as long as Molly was employed she was content, but with leisure on her hands she was wretched. She seemed for the time to have lost all her sweet placidity. And Betty found that nothing she did or said could please her.

Nesta did not meet them at the station, though she sent her carriage. As they stepped into the hall she came forward with her little son to welcome them, and with a sudden rush of memories Betty seemed to see herself again a little white-frocked child, being led out of the sun into the cool, shady hall. Everything looked just the same. The same old-fashioned pot-pourri pots stood about the hall and stairs, the glass garden doors at the end of the hall showed glimpses of bright hyacinths and tulips, where Betty as a child had seen lilies and roses, and when stately Mrs. Fairfax moved slowly across the drawing-room to greet them, Betty almost fancied time had slipped back to fifteen years ago. There was one small person who soon disturbed this fancy.

‘You’re Godmother Betty! Granny, have you ever seen her before, and don’t you think she—is a very pretty godmother? At least’—here Jossy paused and eyed her doubtfully—‘you’re not very pretty in that black dress. You had a red dress in London, and your eyes were more laughing. Everybody wears black dresses in England. It’s so ugly. We don’t wear black in India.’

He was holding his grandmother's hand as he spoke, and dancing up and down with excitement.

Mrs. Fairfax had changed little with time. Her hair was white now where it had been grey, her face a little more lined, but her figure was as erect as ever, and her voice exactly the same.

She held Betty's hand in hers for a minute and looked at her keenly.

'I should have known you anywhere,' she said. 'But I have not seen you since Nesta's wedding.'

'No,' said Betty, flushing a little under her inspection. 'I am glad I have not changed much. I feel just the same—only older, and—sadder.'

'You wanted to hurry trouble into your young life when I first made your acquaintance,' said Mrs. Fairfax. 'I suppose you have found it has come quickly enough.'

'This last year it has,' answered Betty slowly.

There was a look in her face that told Mrs. Fairfax there had been more to trouble her than her recent bereavement. No more was said, for Nesta came forward to show her to her room.

The girls had a bedroom each side by side. Betty sat down by her window and looked out. A feeling of peace and rest stole into her heart.

'I can enjoy this now,' she said to herself. 'I am thankful I was prevented from coming before. I should never have forgiven myself had I done so. Oh, mother! I wonder where you are, and what you are doing! Molly and I are lost without you!'

CHAPTER XIV

A Meeting

It gives me wonder, great as my content,
To see you here before me.

Othello.

It was a very quiet life at Holly Grange. Nesta naturally, in these first days of her widowhood, saw very few people, and did not go out. Mrs. Fairfax kept much to her own rooms, and Molly and Betty were content to wander round the garden and grounds talking over, and making many plans for, their future.

Poor Molly was most to be pitied. All her resources were gone. She would not touch a pen and paper.

'I haven't the heart, Betty,' she said piteously. 'I can't forgive myself for being so engrossed in it, when mother was dying. It was all rubbish. I wasted hours over it, and I will never attempt to take it up again.'

Much as she missed her writing, she missed her occupation of attending on her mother more. Nesta, seeing how languidly she moved about, how uninterested she was in work or books, suggested to her that she should take up some of her mother's work, and carry it on. But Molly shook her head.

'I am not fit for it. I have no head. I can carry out people's wishes and write at their dictation, but I never could be responsible for anything more.'

'I am interested in these girls,' Mrs. Fairfax said to Nesta one day. 'Molly, I fear, will develop into an aimless, hopeless woman unless she marries. She wants to be roused, and to be made to work. It would be better for her if she had to earn her own living, while Betty is just the other way. She has a thousand unpractical schemes in her little head. She has too much enthusiasm. No amount of trouble will crush it.'

'We don't want it crushed,' said Nesta quickly. 'We only want to divert it into right channels.'

One afternoon Mr. Russell called. Nesta immediately began to consult him about a new organ she wished to have placed in the little village church close to them.

‘There is only a harmonium at present. I have promised the vicar to give it——’

Her voice faltered, and Betty finished her sentence.

‘It is to be in memory of Colonel St. Clair,’ she said softly.

Mr. Russell gave all the advice he could about it, and then they walked down to the little church. They met the vicar on the way, and while he was talking to Nesta, Betty dropped behind with Mr. Russell. It was the first time she had seen him alone.

‘Well, Betty,’ he said kindly, ‘you have had a sad winter, poor child; but I don’t think you will have regretted giving in to your dear mother’s decision to stay at home.’

‘No,’ said Betty earnestly. ‘I can only be thankful I was not allowed to have my own way, Mr. Russell.’

‘And what are your plans now?’

‘Molly and I make a great many. If I were quite by myself it would be very easy; there is so much I want to do, but Molly says she does not want to be separated from me, and it makes it difficult.’

‘How?’

‘I want to spend my money in making people happy, Mr. Russell. I feel now I am a steward with something given to me to use rightly. I don’t want to waste or hoard it, and it is a care. I lie awake at night and think about it.’

‘You want to spend it on the unhappy people in the world?’

‘Yes; you understand me, don’t you? But it is a puzzle. I think of so many different ways I could use it.’

She gave a little laugh as she continued,—

‘I think of something different every day. I believe I really should like to build a home of some sort, where I could live myself, and take in cripple children or orphans or workhouse people, or old soldiers and old servants, and anybody who has tried to earn their living and failed, like schoolmistresses and artists, and poor old maids who have lost their money.’

‘Go on,’ said Mr. Russell, smiling; ‘your list is not nearly long enough. You would be like the old woman who lived in a shoe. I have a vision of your happy mixture. Gentle, timid spinsters and “old soldiers,” tramps and lazy ruffians from the workhouse, with orphan babies, and you in their

midst, controlling and managing them all. Your heart is big enough, my child, but I don't think that your home would be, and certainly not your purse!'

'You're laughing at me, of course. I only tell you my thoughts. Then there is another way; I can divide up my income and send subscriptions to every home that has been started, or I can send it to some missionary society, or, better still, I could go myself and take my money with me.'

'Go where?'

'To India, or New Zealand,' said Betty vaguely. 'Anywhere, as long as I could do some good to some one.'

'Is that your aim in life?'

Betty was silent for a minute. She seemed to be considering, and then she looked up.

'Well, no, Mr. Russell. I don't believe it is. My aim is to serve God, to do His will.'

'That is right. Many people put *work* for God before His *will*. I think you were carrying out God's will this winter, when you gave up your time and attention to your mother, and practised "patience, and long-suffering, with joyfulness." Don't go ahead; just take your steps slowly. His will can be done every day in the very circumstances in which you are placed. His work will be shown you, if you are doing His will.'

There was no opportunity for further talk, for they had joined the others; but, in spite of her keen interest about the proposed organ, Betty was strangely silent and absorbed.

'I am so glad you will be here, Betty,' said Nesta to her on the way home. 'Mr. Adams has been telling me his difficulty about an organist. He says he has not one parishioner who is sufficiently musical to learn it. I wonder it you will like to help him, and take the services.'

'Oh, Mrs. St. Clair, I shall be proud, delighted!' exclaimed Betty. 'But how can you ask me? Surely you will love to do it yourself?'

Nesta shook her head.

'Not yet, Betty, and not *this* organ. I am not brave enough; not sure enough of my self-control. I hope by-and-bye I may conquer my weakness. I shall steal into church when no one is there, and get real comfort and

refreshment from it, but I could not play in public—not for a long while to come, I am afraid.'

Betty was silent. Nesta touched so little on her own sorrow that it was difficult to allude to it, but Nesta now quietly drew her arm into hers.

'You remember, Betty, how an organ must be for ever associated in my mind with him. You and that brought us together. And he was always so fond of it. It was a dream of ours to come back from India to this dear old house; and he always said that the first thing he would do, would be to put an organ in our little church here, so that he could come and hear me play.'

'Oh,' said Betty, with trembling lips, 'why does God make life so sad? It must be right, but the older I get the more trouble there seems to be.'

'But it is only for such a little time,' said Nesta, raising her pale face to the spring sky above. 'There is no harshness in a Father wishing to have His children with Him. It is a trouble that has more sweetness than bitterness in it, Betty. Do you remember those lines—

Love craves the presence and the sight of all its well-beloved,
And therefore weep we in the homes whence they are far removed;
Love craves the presence and the sight of each beloved one,
And therefore Jesus spake the word which caught them to His throne.'

'Yes,' said Betty slowly, 'that comforts one.'

'And now,' said Nesta brightly, 'I want to talk about another matter. You know that Major Stuart has been choosing a pony for Jossy, and another one that I can either ride or drive. He writes to me this morning to say that they are coming down in charge of his groom. He says the mare has been ridden by a lady who is going abroad, and is perfectly safe and quiet, with no vice. I know you like riding. Will you use her while you are here, and take your little godson out with you?'

Betty's face flushed and sparkled with pleasure.

'Oh, how delightful! I shall love to. As you know, when mother was taken ill we gave up our riding. It was expensive, too, in town, as we always had to hire. I have longed sometimes to be on horseback, and was only saying the other day to Molly that we might attempt it again. Will you really trust me with Jossy? Does he like riding?'

Nesta caught her breath.

'Ah, doesn't he? He rode with his father every morning from the time he was four years old, and then after the—the accident I felt I could never let

him ride again. I thanked God with all my heart that Jossy wasn't with him that morning. But I talked to your uncle about it, and I have come to the conclusion that it would be wrong to give way to unreasonable fears. So Jossy must have his pony, and in time perhaps I may be able to accompany him. Till then, I shall be so glad if you will. Molly does not seem to care for it at present.'

'Molly cares for nothing. Am I heartless, Mrs. St. Clair, because so soon after—our trouble—I am beginning to care for everything so very much again? It is the spring, I think, and the country; and now this organ and the riding—why, it is all delicious!'

Betty looked radiant as she spoke. Nesta found her bright voice and face the sunshine of the house, yet she sometimes puzzled over Betty still, and she would say to herself,—

'There has been something in her life that she has not told me. Her bright winsomeness is not that of an untaught, undisciplined child; it is that which has been acquired and held fast to through real trouble. It is a steady fount of joy, not a fitful ebb and flow.'

A few days after, Betty and Jossy took their first ride together. The groom accompanied them the first day, but they soon dispensed with his services, and it was difficult to say who enjoyed it most, godson or godmother.

As they cantered through the lanes, now bursting with their young fresh green, Betty's mirth and chatter were fascinating to the small boy.

'You know how to pretend so beautifully,' Jossy said one day. 'Some people won't pretend; they won't make themselves into different people. Now, Aunt Betty' (he had substituted 'aunt' for 'godmother'), 'you must be a great lady, and your husband is fighting far away. I'm his page, and he has sent me to bring you to him.'

'All right,' responded Betty gaily. 'And now, Alphonso, how is my lord? My heart is awearying for him. Am I indeed to be taken to his presence, in the midst of armed men encamped around him?'

'Yes, my mistress,' piped Jossy, in all solemnity. 'We are now going through the enemy's ground, but I have my pistols, and I'll shoot the first man dead who stops us! Let me ride first. If we meet a woman, I will ask if we're on the right road, but if we meet a man, he must be either friend or foe, and that must be settled at once.'

It was characteristic of Jossy that he could throw himself into any one of his fictitious personalities without the slightest difficulty, but it took a long time to bring him back to real life again. Betty and he would ride along personating many characters, for Jossy's imagination was wide and keenly vivid, and Betty entered into his spirit with a zest that enchanted him. Sometimes he was Robin Hood and she Maid Marian, sometimes they were Beauty and the Beast, sometimes he was a bandit chief and she his captive. He drank in stories, 'like water' Betty would declare, and she delighted in telling him as many as he could listen to.

Now, as they rode along, his quick eyes were roving to and fro.

'It is a dangerous road, mistress,' he said presently. 'I spy a horseman in the distance. Is he friend or foe?'

Betty's heart gave a sudden leap, then almost stopped beating. She recognised the distant figure, and it was the one she had feared she must meet sooner or later, but now felt it would be more than she could bear. He was almost upon them before she had the presence of mind to speak, and Jossy was bristling all over with excitement and aggressiveness.

'He shall not pass us. He means foul play!'

'Hush, hush, Jossy! He is a gentleman that I know,' Betty said hastily.

The boy was carried away entirely by his game.

'He's a friend, then!' he shouted. Then, as Gerald Arundel came up, he added excitedly, with a wave of his hand from Betty to Gerald, 'Behold your dear husband! And you, sir, this is your faithful wife who has come to meet you!'

Gerald's eyes met Betty's in undisguised astonishment at this introduction. Her face had whitened in her consternation and dismay, and terror peeped out of her eyes. Then she pulled herself together, and turned upon Jossy, who, with flashing eyes and crimson cheeks, was the only one who thoroughly enjoyed the situation.

'Now,' he exclaimed, reining in his pony and barring Gerald's path, 'dismount, my lord, and kiss your lady's hand!'

'Jossy!' Betty gasped, 'Mr. Arundel does not understand; do be quiet!'

Then her sense of humour came to her aid, and she laughed at the absurdity of it. To her inexpressible relief, Gerald joined her.

‘Oh, what will you think of us, Mr. Arundel?’ said Betty, turning to him, with smiles and blushes. ‘Jossy and I have been playing a game, and he forgets that every one isn’t in it.’

‘But I should like to be in it,’ said Gerald hastily; then he checked himself, as Betty’s mare swerved and shied: her mistress’s quivering little hands were tugging at her unmercifully.

‘May I be introduced to your young squire?’ he asked, in a different tone.

‘This is Jossy St. Clair. I am staying with his mother.’ Betty was steadying her voice and her heart. ‘Wake up, Jossy, and speak to this gentleman properly.’

The boy pulled off his cap.

‘It is a pity,’ he said, with a heavy sigh. ‘We were getting on so splendidly. You ought to have carried it on properly.’

This was added with such a reproachful look at Gerald, that he laughed outright.

‘Perhaps another day I shall be prepared; and then you will find me all that you can wish.’

Betty was moving on.

‘I heard from Mr. Russell that you were in these parts again,’ said Gerald, turning to her gravely. ‘Are you going to make a long stay?’

‘I do not know.’

Betty’s voice faltered a little, then she braced herself and looked up at Gerald with her old straightforward glance.

‘I love the country, as you know; so I hope to be here some time.’

He was silent, then said quietly,—

‘May I offer my sympathy for your loss?’

‘Thank you. It makes this time so sad, when I remember last year.’

She passed him. He raised his hat and moved on, then drew up his horse and looked at her retreating figure. Jossy turned round and waved his hat with a shout.

‘Next time I shall shoot you. If you won’t be a friend, you are a foe!’

Gerald smiled, and there was no bitterness in his smile.

‘A friend I shall always be, if nothing more. And the meeting I have so dreaded has come and gone. It was short enough, but I could not trust myself, and she did not wish to prolong it. I wonder if she knows she is passing by my fields, and if she does, will she care?’

His horse fidgeted. He turned his back on Betty resolutely.

‘I will not think of her,’ was his mental resolve; ‘but oh, how sweet she has grown! It is a cross between joy and torture to set my eyes on her again.’

He rode to the town for which he was bound, did his business satisfactorily, and then retraced his steps homewards. Arrived there, he sank into his chair by the fire. Floy crept up, laid his head on his master’s knee, and looked the affection and sympathy that he could not utter. Gerald laid his hand on his silky head:

‘Still “too high for me,” Floy. But I am to have the privilege of watching her from afar.’

CHAPTER XV

Molly's Invitation

True happiness
Consists not in the multitude of friends,
But in the worth and choice.

BEN JONSON.

Jossy had found Betty very dull for the rest of their ride. She would 'pretend' no longer with him.

'You carry it too far, Jossy. You don't know when you ought to stop.'

'That man didn't mind. I liked him. Does mother know him? I'd like her to!'

'No, she doesn't, and I don't know him well; and we oughtn't to have stopped him at all. You made a regular muddle of it, Jossy.'

'You and him made a muddle of our game!' retorted Jossy ungrammatically.

When they arrived home he went in search of his mother. He found her at her davenport writing a letter.

'Mummy, I've come back.'

'I see you have, my boy. Have you had a nice time?'

Nesta laid her pen down, and drew her boy into her arms.

'No, I haven't, not very much. You see, we began well, but we met a stupid man who spoiled it all. And he made Aunt Betty stupid, too, for she wouldn't play properly after.'

'Mr. Russell, I suppose?'

'Oh no, quite a strange man. He had a black nose beard.' (Jossy's name for moustache.) 'He would have done nicely for the husband away at the war, only he wouldn't play at it.'

'Oh, Jossy,' said Nesta, smiling, 'every one doesn't understand your games. Now run upstairs, for the luncheon bell is going to ring.'

Nesta had got the clue at last. At the luncheon table Jossy alluded again to the ‘strange man.’

‘It was Mr. Arundel,’ Betty said, turning to Molly; ‘he met us.’

‘Did he?’ enquired Molly, with interest. ‘How did he look, Betty? Was he shabby and sad? And were you very kind to him?’

‘Who is this Mr. Arundel?’ asked Nesta, noting Molly’s eagerness, and Betty’s quiet silence.

‘Oh,’ said Molly, ‘I wish you would ask him to dinner, Mrs. St. Clair. People have been so horrid; they have given him the cold shoulder, and only because he is poor. He used to live in the Red Manor—such a lovely place! Do you know it?’

‘I have never been there, but I have heard about it. We only knew old Mr. Arundel very slightly. What has happened, then?’

Molly related the story of Gerald’s misfortune, winding up with,—

‘His changed prospects ought not to make any difference to his friends, and I had a long talk with the Dormers about it. Mrs. Dormer does not like him staying in the neighbourhood. I admire him for doing it.’

‘He was looking quite well and happy, Molly. I do not think he needs our pity. Jossy, after lunch I will mend your whip. We must not forget it.’

Jossy eagerly began to state several other of his belongings that he would like mended, and Gerald’s name dropped out of the conversation.

Later that afternoon Nesta found Betty by herself pacing up and down the green grassy walk outside the garden wall that led through the wood.

She joined her quietly, and slipped her arm through hers.

‘I am not interrupting your meditations, am I? Jossy monopolises you so much that I am getting quite jealous. Is it not delicious here?’

Betty looked up at her gravely and sweetly.

‘I don’t wonder that Isaac went out into the fields at eventide to meditate. It is so soothing. I remember when I was here as a little child there always seemed a kind of holy hush about this walk.’

Then she added impulsively, with a glow in her grey eyes that made Nesta think them lovely,—

‘Oh, Mrs. St. Clair, why do we forget heaven so? Why are we always thinking of our happiness, and what will make it on earth? Why, if I were a homeless, friendless, starving beggar, the hope of heaven would be abundantly satisfying. I do get so disgusted with myself sometimes!’

Nesta had a faint inkling of what Betty’s meditations had been about.

‘Don’t be too hard upon yourself, dear. I am not one of those people who think that God does not wish His children to enjoy their life on earth. I believe He does. He gives us all things richly to enjoy. Our joys and pleasures ought to bring heaven nearer.’

There was silence. Betty looked up through the arched green trees above them, then she smiled.

‘I always felt solitary as a child, but somehow lately I have felt it is good to recognise that perhaps God may mean me to stand alone all my life, so that I may lean harder on Him. Don’t you think so?’

‘Do not be anxious about the future, Betty; a little bit of your way may seem lonely. By-and-bye, perhaps, it will not be so. We never know what God will send us, but be sure of this—it will be the very best.’

Betty shook off her grave thoughts.

‘I have so much to be thankful for. It is so delicious to be here, and I am now longing for the organ to arrive. When do you think it will be ready to use?’

‘In another ten days. Have you seen Mr. Russell lately?’

‘No; he was to be up in London this week.’

‘I fancy I heard him mention this Mr. Arundel’s name. Is he a friend of his?’

‘Yes, a great friend.’

There was a little tremor in the hand on Nesta’s arm. She felt it, and took note accordingly.

‘I suppose you met him a good deal when you were here last year?’

‘Not very often. We lunched with him once at the Red Manor.’

‘It is very sad for him,’ said Nesta musingly. ‘I should think he must be bearing his trouble well and bravely, to stay on in this neighbourhood, and work for his living. Most men would not have the pluck to do it.’

‘He is different from most men.’

Betty tried to make her tone indifferent, but she failed entirely.

‘I should like to meet him,’ Nesta said. ‘I think I must ask Mr. Russell to bring him here.’

Betty was absolutely silent, and Nesta, seeing that she was not to be taken into her confidence, began to talk of other things.

It was the day after this that the Dormers returned from abroad, and came down to the Red Manor. Ella was not long before she had appropriated Molly, as of yore, and very quietly Molly dropped into her old ways of driving and riding out with her. When Frank made his appearance on the scene there was no awkwardness; he relapsed into his chaffing, brotherly ways, and Molly no longer shunned his society. Betty occasionally made one of the party, but not often. It was more pain than pleasure to her to go to the Red Manor, and she was happiest at Holly Grange. She amused Jossy for hours together; she read to old Mrs. Fairfax, and waited on her like a daughter; she was always ready to help Nesta in her housekeeping duties, for her long sojourn in India had unfitted her for English servants and their ways. And when the organ was placed in the little church much of her time was taken up in practising for the services, and training the small village choir. The vicar was a busy man, and his wife a great invalid, so that they were only too pleased to have help in many parish matters.

Nesta already had made friends with most of the villagers, and Betty was only too willing to take a little pudding down to an invalid, to read to a bedridden woman, or chat with an old blind man. Her days were filled with such interests, and it was only at times that her brightness failed, and a wistful look stole across her face. Nesta watched her lovingly and carefully, but at such times she kept her well employed, and soon the shadow would pass, and her clear bright laugh would ring out, as if she had not a thought or care.

The first Sunday that she played the organ was rather a trying one to her. She was nervous, and her nervousness had given her a headache. Jossy insisted upon sitting close beside her, and before she had finished her voluntary he announced to her in a loud whisper,—

‘There’s that man we met out riding the other day. He’s sitting just inside the door, and he won’t come higher up.’

This announcement did not steady her nerves. She strove to exclude him from her thoughts, and to a great extent she was able to do so, but the

consciousness of his presence in church never left her. She purposely prolonged her voluntary when the service was over, and yet when she came out of church and found he had disappeared, felt distinctly disappointed. When the evening service was over she retired to bed, and Nesta went up to her with great concern.

'It is too much for you, Betty dear. I was wrong to let you undertake it. But you have done it so beautifully that I can hardly realise the effort it must have been to you.'

Betty raised a white face and throbbing head from the pillow.

'I shall love doing it,' she said. 'It is only beginning. It has made me anxious.'

Nesta smoothed her hair softly off her forehead; and then Betty pushed her hand down, and laying her cheek against it burst into tears.

'Don't mind me. The organ always gives me such longings, and somehow to-day wrong longings got mixed up with it, and I do so want to be contented.'

Nesta kissed her lovingly.

'You are contented, dear, I am sure. You are only tired to-night.'

'Yes, I am tired,' sobbed Betty; 'and I feel I have got such a long life to live, and—and it will be so difficult to live it!'

Nesta tried to speak lightly.

'Why, Betty dear, you will soon be finding that the years slip too quickly away, for all you want to do in them.'

She kissed her again, and with a few more loving words left her; but she said to herself, as she went downstairs,—

'It is another tangled skein, and I will do my best to unravel it. She unravelled my skein for me years ago. I should like to do the same for her.'

'Betty, come into my room; I want you.'

It was Molly who spoke, one morning after breakfast, and her hands were full of letters.

'Our correspondence is growing,' Betty remarked, following her sister into her pretty bedroom, and sitting down in the chintz-covered easy-chair by the window. 'Why does every one take it into their heads to write and pester us with their assurances of friendship?'

‘I suppose they think our time of seclusion is over, but they all take care to say that they are very quiet. Oh, Betty, don’t you feel a forlorn, homeless creature sometimes? I do.’

Betty nodded soberly.

‘Who has written to you this morning?’

‘Mrs. Railley. She is going to the Italian lakes for Easter, and proposes that we should go with her, as the quiet will do us good, and we must be very dull, she presumes.’

‘Horrid woman! I suppose Reggie is going with them?’

‘Yes. Then I have heard from Lady Cecil. She says she knows we cannot go out at present, but we may be making plans, and she offers to chaperon us for the next season.’

‘I’m never going to stay in town again, if I can help it,’ said Betty hotly. ‘But all the same, it is very kind of her.’

‘And Miss Turnbull has invited us to go over to her Irish castle with her for an indefinite time.’

Betty laughed.

‘Poor Miss Turnbull! Frank Dormer says her castle is four roofless ivied walls, and at one corner is a kind of Irish cabin, in which she lives. You must write very nicely, Molly, so as not to hurt her feelings.’

‘They are all very kind,’ said Molly thoughtfully. ‘I was telling the Dormers yesterday how many invitations we were getting, and Ella made me cross. She said if it wasn’t known that we were both so well off, we shouldn’t have so many friends.’

‘That’s a horrid thing to think,’ Betty said, leaning out of the open window and picking an early rose. ‘Well, Molly, these letters are easy to answer. What is your difficulty?’

Molly sat down on the edge of her sofa, and looked dreamily into space.

‘Mrs. Dormer wants me to go to the Lakes with them next week. I—I told her I would talk to you about it. They will be quite by themselves.’

‘Who are they?’ demanded Betty, looking at her sister curiously.

‘Mrs. Dormer and Ella. General Dormer will not leave home.’

‘And Frank?’

‘Frank—er—Frank may be there the first part of the time.’

Betty did not speak. Molly continued,—

‘I think I shall like to go. I have never seen the Lakes, and early summer is delicious there, they say.’

‘How long will you be away?’

‘I don’t know.’

Then Molly sprang up, and impulsively threw her arms round Betty.

‘Oh, Betty, I’m so miserable here! I try not to be, but I do miss mother so, and I want a home so badly. You are so easily made happy, and every one likes you here—Mrs. Fairfax and Mrs. St. Clair and Jossy and all the poor people! I feel I am in the way. I have nothing to do, and it is a home I want.’

Betty kissed her sister affectionately.

‘Molly dear, I’m so sorry for you! I should like to say something, only I don’t know how to say it. Take care you don’t do something to get a home that you will be sorry for afterwards. I know how you feel, and how you miss mother. But I would rather be homeless all my life, than have a home with some one I didn’t care for.’

Molly’s cheeks felt hot as they pressed against Betty’s.

‘I shan’t do anything I shall be sorry for,’ she said unsteadily. ‘I don’t expect I shall do anything at all, only I should like to go with the Dormers.’

‘Then you shall,’ said Betty heartily; ‘and I hope you will enjoy yourself.’

Molly went away, and about three weeks afterwards Betty was not at all surprised when she received the following letter from her,—

‘Dearest Betty,—

‘Don’t you often find yourself altering your mind about things? I do. I suppose it is a sign we are growing older—and wiser, I hope! But I think I am wiser since I left off writing romances. Real life is much more interesting. I don’t know that it doesn’t make one selfish. I mean that where I used to be quite wrapped up in my heroes and heroines, I am now wrapped up in myself—and in one other. I am sure you will guess, so I will beat about the bush no longer. I am engaged to Frank, and everything seems delicious again. Ella told me a dreadful story about a girl

who married a mysterious foreign prince, and it rather shook my faith in my ideal hero. Don't you know you said to me that Frank would make a good husband? I am quite sure he will, and he is sure he will too. I am very happy, Betty, and Mrs. Dormer is so pleased. Frank is going back to town to work hard, and then we think we may find a little house in the autumn near town, and perhaps next winter, Betty,—think of it!—I shall have a home of my own. Frank sends you his love and says you're to write a *very* nice sisterly letter to him. He is waiting for me to go out with him now, so good-bye.

'Your loving
'MOLLY.'

Betty read this with mingled feelings. She was sincerely glad that Molly was going to marry Frank. But she was disappointed with the tone of her letter.

'She is not in love with him—not what I should call love—and after all her romantic talk it does not seem right. I feel afraid lest it is a home that she wants, and the husband is the means to the end.'

Then she made known the news to Nesta and her mother, and in their congratulations she was a little comforted.

CHAPTER XVI

His Home

All places that the eye of heaven visits
Are to a wise man ports and happy havens.
Teach thy necessity to reason thus;
There is no virtue like necessity.

SHAKESPEARE.

'Jossy, I think we have ridden far enough. I don't know this part of the country.'

'But that's the fun of it. Oh, do come on. Let us have a tiny little gallop, and then we'll turn back.'

Betty and Jossy were riding out together, and had come to the edge of a wild bit of common or moorland that seemed to stretch away almost to the horizon without a break. The turf under their horses' feet was soft and springy. Jossy's pony threw his head up and snorted with delight at the prospect in front of him, but Betty demurred.

'It seems rather boggy, Jossy. Look at the rushes over there.'

'We won't go near the rushes. Oh, Aunt Betty, come on; we'll have a glorious charge against fifty thousand rebel Roundheads, and we'll be two princely Royalists! One, two, three, away! Charge!'

He galloped off, his fair curls flying in the breeze, and Betty, casting prudence to the wind, followed him recklessly. It was a short, wild gallop, for suddenly, without any warning, Jossy's pony plunged, and sank up to his saddle girth in deep black bog. The boy screamed,—

'Turn back, Aunt Betty! Don't come near me!'

But Betty's one idea was to reach him. The pony was making frantic struggles to extricate himself, but seemed to be sinking deeper in consequence. Betty fortunately found a bit of firm ground.

'Leave your pony and jump over here, Jossy!'

'I can't leave him. He'll drown; it's all water here!'

Another terrific struggle; the pony succeeded in freeing himself, and landed on Betty's bit of dry turf. But his poor little master was unhorsed in the effort, and fell head foremost into the bog. Betty sprang off her horse in a second, and pulled him out, though she sank up to her waist in doing so. Gasping and spluttering for breath, Jossy leant against her, when she had regained her footing, and began to sob with fright and misery.

'Oh, I'm so wet, so cold, so dirty! What shall I do?'

Betty began to laugh, now their danger was past.

'Did you ever see such guys as we are? Why, Jossy, you're a little brown nigger! You must get on your horse—or stop, you had better lead him. That's what people do in bogs, and it is safer. I will go first. Follow me. I'll go back the way I came. Come on. Don't stop to clean yourself, or your pony may slip again. Be careful now.'

Very warily they made their way past the treacherous bog; but when they were on safe ground again, Betty's heart misgave her.

Jossy was shivering with fright and cold. He was a delicate child, and she knew what an anxiety his health was to his mother. She tried to wipe his clothes, but it seemed a hopeless task. He was encased in thick black slime, and his courage and pluck had quite deserted him. With difficulty she persuaded him to mount his pony. She was in a sorry plight herself, but tried to make light of it.

'Now, Jossy, let us ride for our lives, and get home as fast as possible. Five hundred rebel Roundheads are chasing us, but we shall escape them yet!'

But even this failed to inspirit Jossy. His Anglo-Indian constitution could not shake off his fright and wetting, and his fastidious taste was outraged.

'It's perfectly disgusting,' he sobbed; 'the mud is trickling down my neck, and I'm so greasy and slippery that I don't know how to keep to my saddle. I *must* be washed, Aunt Betty. I can't go home like this.'

'We will stop at the first cottage we come to,' said Betty cheerfully. 'Come on! the quicker we ride, the quicker we shall get there.'

She urged him on. They left the common behind them, and were soon cantering along the high road. Betty scanned the fields on either side of the hedges in vain for a farmhouse or cottage. The country seemed deserted, but presently they overtook a stout, respectable-looking country woman with a

basket on her arm. She stared at them in astonishment, and Betty pulled up by her side.

'We have fallen into a bog,' she explained; 'and I am so anxious for this little boy to get into dry clothes. Can you tell me if there is any cottage near at hand?'

'Sakes! Ye do look in a sorry plight, miss! I'm not so far from our place. Ye had best come home with me. The measter be out, and I'll dry your clothes for you. 'Tis the next field; turn in at the white gate and ride close up by the hedge, then through another gate, and ye'll find yourself there. I'll hurry all I can!'

'Thank you so very much,' Betty said gratefully; and Jossy brightened up at once.

They turned into the field as she told them, then passed through another, and came out before a quaint, old-fashioned farmhouse, with thatched roof and casement windows, and a wealth of old-fashioned climbing roses and creepers up its walls. The sun was shining full upon it. It seemed strangely quiet. A row of beehives stood along the green lawn in front, and a sweet scent of lavender from some flower beds close to the house was borne upon the air towards them. As they came to a standstill before the door, Betty exclaimed,—

'Oh, Jossy, isn't this a sweet little farm? I do love farmhouses. They always have such peace about them, without being deadly dull. Can you slip off your pony? That is right! Now let us try the door. It is locked. Ah, here comes the farmer's wife!'

The good woman appeared, very warm and breathless.

'Come straight into the kitchen, miss, and take your skirt off. I'll see to the young gentleman.'

In an incredibly short time Jossy was sitting before the kitchen fire wrapped up in a blanket. Betty had borrowed a blue serge skirt from Mrs. Winstone, as she was called, and both were enjoying a cup of hot tea. The kitchen with its oak beams and dresser, the shining crockery on its shelves, and its well-scoured floor and tables, was fascinating in Betty's eyes.

She sat in a wooden rocking-chair in perfect content, whilst Mrs. Winstone was bustling about, trying to dry Jossy's suit of clothes before the blazing fire, with many comments and ejaculations.

‘I mind a man last Christmas twelvemonth got dropped into the bog out there, by his horse. They said he were a little unsteady from an extra glass or two at the Three Anchors, but he were found nex’ mornin’ by one boot stickin’ up. An’ his poor wife went off her head when his corpse were broughted in.’

‘Oh, please, Mrs. Winstone, don’t tell us any more! Jossy will dream of it. What pretty flowers you have in the window!’

‘Yes, miss, I be powerful fond o’ flowers. But the measter—he only seem to care for roses, and they be the white ones that be climbin’ over the house. He allays has a jar on ’em in t’other room, but I haves my favourites in here.’

‘May I peep into the other room? If I were your husband, I should always sit in the kitchen. I should like it much the best.’

Mrs. Winstone opened a door, and Betty walked through into a room that made her look round her with a dazed bewildered glance. Who had described this room to her? The broad wooden staircase going up out of the middle of it; the old-fashioned fireplace with the armchair in front, and a pipe and a book close by. A table with papers, and a bunch of white roses in the middle; a cap and gloves on one chair, an overcoat on another. A gun slung up on the wall, a whip lying on the floor; many other indications of a man’s constant presence. Betty stood with white face and quickened breath, then she turned upon Mrs. Winstone like a flash of lightning,—

‘Who is your master? This is not your husband’s room?’

‘Eh, dear no, miss! My good husband be in the churchyard this ten year or more. ’Tis Mr. Arundel—Squire Arundel that used so to be!’

‘Then why didn’t you say so? We must go this very minute! I wouldn’t have dreamed of coming in, if I had known this was a gentleman’s house. Jossy, put on your clothes, quick! We have stayed too long already!’

Betty swept back into the kitchen with hot cheeks and flashing eyes. Mrs. Winstone followed her in wonder at her impetuosity.

‘Indeed, miss, the measter would wish to befriend any fellow-creature in need, and the young gent’s clothes be not dry yet, though they be coming on nicely. The measter will not be in till late, I fancy. Will you not sit down for a half-hour more? One o’ the lads be rubbin’ down the horses, but they’ll not be ready for a bit.’

Betty calmed down after her first fright; but she was anxious and ill at ease, starting at every footfall, and longing to be away. What would Gerald think or say, if he came back and found them in possession of his rooms? She paced up and down the kitchen restlessly, then could not resist going back to that room, which for months past had been photographed upon her mind.

She stood in the middle of it, and Jossy, with a boy's curiosity, put his head in at the door to see what she was doing. He saw her move across to the chair by the fireplace, rest her hand on the back of it, then stoop and put her lips to it. After which she took up the book which was lying face downwards, and then for some minutes stood reading a well-worn passage in Tennyson's *Love and Duty*. Deeply scored in pencil were the lines, and more deeply were they to be scored on Betty's soul.

> So let me think 'tis well for thee and me,
> Ill-fated that I am, what lot is mine,
> Whose foresight preaches peace, my heart so slow
> To feel it! For how hard it seemed to me,
> When eyes, love-languid through half tears would dwell
> One earnest, earnest moment upon mine,
> Then not to dare to see! when thy low voice,
> Faltering, would break its syllables, to keep
> My own full-tuned—hold passion in a leash,
> And not leap forth and fall about thy neck,
> And on thy bosom (deep desired relief!)
> Rain out the heavy mist of tears, that weighed
> Upon my brain, my senses and my soul!
> For Love himself took part against himself
> To warn us off, and Duty loved of Love—
> O this world's curse—beloved but hated—came
> Like death betwixt thy dear embrace and mine.
> And crying, 'Who is this? behold thy bride,'
> She pushed me from thee.
> If the sense is hard
> To alien ears, I did not speak to these—
> No, not to thee, but to thyself in me:
> Hard is my doom and thine: thou knowest it all.
> Could Love part thus? Was it not well to speak,
> To have spoken once? It could not but be well.

With parted lips and heaving breast, Betty drank in these pathetic lines, and then she noticed one little word written in the margin against—

It could not but be well.

The word was '*No*.'

She read and re-read the lines in a dream, and tears slowly filled her eyes.

Then she dropped the book with a violent start, for horses' hoofs were heard outside; and she had only time to get back to the kitchen before the master of the house had flung open the door. Jossy was buttoning up his jacket with a wry face.

'Aren't you ready, Jossy? Come along. Oh, never mind your collar; let us get away!'

She hastened his steps. Mrs. Winstone had not heard Gerald's approach, and wondered at their haste, but she accompanied them out to the yard, where their horses were in readiness for them, and in a few minutes they were riding across the fields again, before Gerald was aware that he had had visitors in his domain.

He was very tired, and, sitting down in his chair, took his pipe out and lighted it. What was it that made his thoughts turn to a little figure flitting in and out of these quaint old rooms? He shut his eyes, and seemed to see her tripping up and down the old wooden stairs—a dark curly head, a pure white clinging dress, and a bunch of white roses in her belt.

'Oh,' he groaned, 'I believe even here I could make her happy!'

HIS FACE WAS FULL OF BEWILDERMENT AS HE HELD IN HIS HAND A LADY'S RIDING GLOVE

Then he picked up his book that was lying on the floor, but he picked up something else as well, and his face was full of bewilderment as he held in his hand a lady's riding glove.

For some minutes he fingered it thoughtfully, then he strode to the kitchen door.

'Mrs. Winstone, has any one been here this afternoon?'

His tone was so abrupt and fierce that Mrs. Winstone dropped an apologetic curtsey at once.

'If you please, sir, I hope as no harm has been done or said, but I did make free to offer to dry their wet things, for 'twas a reg'lar tumble into the bog they had, and the young gent so small and frail like, and they were that anxious to be gone when they found out 'twas a gen'leman's house that I thought as how you wouldn't have minded them havin' a cup o' tea. And 'tis only five minutes gone that they rode away; and please, sir, I wasn't aware that you be home.'

'Who were they?'

'They didn't give no names, sir, and I didn't think it manners to ask. The young lady be a bonny young creature as straight as a dart, and like a bit o' quicksilver, with a proud turn o' the head, and a sweet, merry smile.'

'Was she in here?'

'Well, sir, b'lieve me, not above a minute or two. Her were terrible anxious to get away.'

Gerald returned to his room, slamming the door violently behind him. He stood at the table, with the glove in his hand. Floy crept up to him and sniffed at it suspiciously, but his master did not heed him.

'She was here in this very room a few minutes ago! And I was just too late. Well——' A deep sigh followed. 'It is better so. The less we meet the better.'

He looked down at the glove, then he put it into his breast-pocket with a smile.

'I must return her her property, but till I do it will stay there!'

Betty, meanwhile, was riding home as fast as she could, and when they arrived there, Jossy was the object of so much care and attention from his anxious mother, that her own hot cheeks and perturbed spirits were unnoticed.

When she went to bed that night she sat long in thought at her window, with a copy of Tennyson's poems on her lap.

Was it not well to speak,
To have spoken once?

rang through her heart and brain like a chiming bell, and then like a knell rang the one little word written on the page, '*No*.'

At last she rose and put the book away, then, kneeling at her window, she spoke, and her eyes were gazing at the starry heavens outside,—

‘O, God, I am happy. Thou hast made me happy. Help me not to dwell on thoughts that bring discontent and longing. Comfort and bless him, comfort and bless me. I don’t want to ask Thee for anything that Thou dost not want me to have.’

And then she went to bed, and slept peacefully.

CHAPTER XVII

Mr. Russell's Picture

. . . Why ever met,
If they must be strangers yet?

LORD HOUGHTON.

It was two months later. Mr. Russell was dispensing afternoon tea to a few of his friends on his shady lawn. Nesta and her boy, Betty, Molly, and Frank Dormer were all there. It was the first time Nesta had been persuaded to attend any little festivity, and this was a farewell to Mr. Russell, who was going to Switzerland the next day for his health. He was telling Nesta about it, as he leant against one of the old elms, and she was looking at him with that wonderful interest and sympathy that she showed in every one else's concerns.

'They say I am overworked,' he said, with a short laugh. 'I suppose as one gets older, one cannot play tricks with one's constitution. I forget I am no longer a young man, and I have had one of my painting fits on lately. I must tell you, Mrs. St. Clair, that for some years I have had no desire to work. I have done a little bit of sculpture occasionally, but my property has taken up my time and thoughts. I am beginning to think that riches and prosperity are foes to genius. However, about three months ago I was seized with an inspiration for a picture, and I have been hard at it ever since. Perhaps I have let my meals slip. One longs at such times for no troublesome interruptions. And my doctor tells me I have not been wise.'

'I am sure the change of air will do you good. Are you going alone?'

'I am going to carry off Gerald Arundel with me. You know him, do you not? The nicest fellow that ever lived, but the last year has been a trying one to him. He may be here this afternoon.'

'I have never spoken to him,' said Nesta, her eyes wandering towards Betty, in spite of herself. 'He walks over to our church sometimes on Sunday, generally in the evening. I have had him pointed out to me, but he always seems in a hurry to get away. How is he getting on as a farmer? I have heard his story.'

‘He is a first-rate farmer. He has the pluck and grit and perseverance that makes a good one.’

‘But farming is a poor prospect for a gentleman nowadays,’ said Nesta meditatively.

‘Not necessarily, if his tastes are simple, and he does not take upon himself the *rôle* of a sporting squire.’

‘Yes; and as long as he is not a married man.’

‘Tuts!’ exclaimed Mr. Russell impatiently. ‘Let him look about for a wife with simple tastes like himself, and I would back him amongst a hundred millionaires to make her truly happy!’

Nesta smiled.

‘Two of our young people here will have to have simple tastes if they set up housekeeping as soon as they meditate doing.’

‘Oh!’ said Mr. Russell, looking across at Frank and Molly, who were deep in some serious discussion on the same garden seat. ‘And when are they going to take the cares of married life upon their shoulders?’

‘Next November, I believe. The house has already been chosen close to town.’

‘He has brains, and will succeed in his profession,’ said Mr. Russell. ‘But I should think they will have a very comfortable income between them.’

‘Not too much for the claims that society will make upon them.’

‘I dare say not. Is our little friend going to stay on with you?’

‘I want her to, but she is very anxious to take up some distinct work. A friend of her mother has written to ask her to give her some help this winter in managing a small home for the blind. Betty wants to go, for she feels her music may cheer them. And I do not want to keep her back.’

‘She is a cheering little personality anywhere,’ said Mr. Russell.

‘Indeed she is. We shall miss her terribly. She has helped me to get through a sad time, and I cannot be grateful enough.’

Betty walked up to them at this minute.

‘Mr. Russell, will you let me pour out tea? I always like doing the honours of your house for you. Here it comes. May I? Thank you ever so

much. Jossy is showing the gardener's boy how to stand on his head. They are practising against a hay-rick in the field, and as I couldn't join them I came away. I can do most things that Jossy does, but I can't do that!'

She laughed merrily, then took her seat by the tea-table with an important air, but a sudden quick change of face and manner made Nesta glance up. Gerald Arundel was crossing the lawn. He looked slightly embarrassed as he came amongst them all.

'You did not tell me you were having company,' he said, after he had been introduced to Nesta, and had held Betty's little hand for one instant in his own.

'No,' Mr. Russell said, looking at him with a twinkle in his eyes; 'I knew you were such a recluse that your fellow-creatures' society would repel rather than attract you. But I had a fancy to gather my friends round me before I went abroad, and I hope you will humour me by staying with us.'

Gerald smiled one of his rare smiles, which always lightened both his face and the faces of those near him.

'Miss Betty, you must let me help you with those teacups,' he said.

Betty's fingers were rather tremulous for a minute, as she wielded the massive silver teapot, but she soon recovered herself, and she talked as sweetly and gaily to him as if she had been in the habit of meeting him daily.

'When you have all finished your tea,' announced Mr. Russell presently, 'I am going to take you to see my picture.'

'What is it about?' asked Molly, with interest.

'I shall leave it to explain itself.'

A few minutes later, and they were standing in his studio. As he drew aside a curtain, a little murmur of surprise and delight made itself heard.

Two boats, side by side on a river. Arched green trees met overhead, but the rays of golden sunshine streamed through on one of the rowers. It was a girl's figure. She poised her oars lightly and well, though there was a little droop in her shoulders, a wistful sadness and weariness on her beautiful face that betrayed itself through her speaking eyes. She was all in white, and was the centre-piece of sunshine in the picture. Only an arm's length from her rowed a man, but his boat was in shadow, and it needed a careful inspection to denote the eager fervent light that seemed to be flashing forth from his keen dark eyes. His whole attitude denoted strength of purpose and will; yet there was hopelessness in his glance, a despairing expression across his

earnest face. His eyes were fixed on her, but she was looking away from him, as if her maidenly modesty forbade her to meet his eye.

'It is a beautiful picture,' said Nesta softly.

'What shall be its name?' asked Mr. Russell lightly. 'I am open to all suggestions.'

' "Cross Currents," ' said Frank quickly.

'They haven't quarrelled,' said Molly, looking at them with knitted brows. 'What is it that they want? for they are not happy, one can see that. I expect'—and she gave a little laugh—'they want to be made into a couple, as Betty used to say. I think I should call it "So near, and yet so far!" '

'What does Mrs. St. Clair say?'

Nesta smiled rather sadly.

' "Drifting," ' she said.

'Well, Gerald, what do you say?'

Gerald gazed at the picture as if in a dream, then he said slowly,—

> 'For Love himself took part against himself,
> To warn us off.'

'And Betty?'

But Betty could not speak for a minute. Gerald's quotation, and the earnestness that vibrated through his tone as he gave it, had brought the tears with a rush to her eyes. She was standing a little behind the others, and now lightly laid her hand on Mr. Russell's arm.

'I do not know,' she said, with wonderful self-control. 'It is a sad picture, Mr. Russell, but it is a lovely one. Will you not give us your own name for it?'

'I will not have you call it sad. I see a time ahead when those two will be rowing in one boat, and there will be no shadows upon their faces. Now shall we come out into the garden again?'

He kept Betty's hand on his arm, and marched her off to see a new orchid of his, and talked her back into her light, gay humour. Nesta paced the garden paths with Gerald. He found himself involuntarily confiding in her about his life and prospects, in a way that astonished himself. She listened, and gave him not only womanly sympathy, but advice.

‘Do not shun your neighbours,’ she said; ‘and when your old friends still show themselves friendly, do not repulse them. Friends are easily lost, and not easily made.’

‘I am not in a position to entertain,’ said Gerald. ‘I cannot continue to accept their hospitality, when I am unable to return it.’

‘But I think that is where you may make a mistake,’ said Nesta gently. ‘Surely the highest friendship does not exist on such give-and-take principles. If they do not wish to lose your society for your own sake, why should you hurt their feelings by concluding that they only want your hospitality? There is a lot of pretentious pride about us, and it does us all good to have the highest and best motives ascribed to us. Think the best of your friends, and they will not disappoint you.’

‘The truth is, I prefer to live my life alone,’ admitted Gerald.

‘Yes, but you will lose many opportunities of helping others if you do so, will you not? And then look on to the future. The time may come when you will bring a wife to your home. She will need the companionship of your friends, and will be the better and the brighter for her intercourse with them. You will be sorry then, for her sake, if you have allowed yourself to drift away from those who really care for you.’

‘That is a very remote contingency,’ said Gerald quietly. ‘Do you honestly think, Mrs. St. Clair, I have anything worth offering a woman?’

‘Do you rank money amongst the highest of earth’s—no, I will say, God’s own gifts?’

‘Money brings comfort and ease and absence from care.’

‘Not always. Some women, I allow, esteem it essential to their happiness. Others would consider honest faithful tender love a far higher gift to offer them. Do not think I am advocating heedless, improvident marriages. Personally, you have enough to keep the wolf from the door, and, provided your wife was content to live a quiet country life, you would be able to shield her from worrying care and anxiety as to all temporal needs, would you not?’

The blood rushed through Gerald’s veins at such a possibility.

‘Yes,’ he replied. ‘She would not be in need of the necessaries of life, but she might be in need of luxuries.’

‘Which she could very well dispense with,’ said Nesta; ‘and she would count herself happy in doing so. I must tell you, Mr. Arundel, I had a

shadowed girlhood myself; many years of waiting before I could receive the love that had been rightly mine long, long before. And though I know it was all for the best, I sometimes long that young people should not suffer unnecessarily, that their wedded life should be longer than my own has been.'

Gerald did not answer, but his right hand clenched and unclenched itself to hide his emotion, and Nesta's quick eyes noted it. She felt her whole heart go out to this lonely, sorrowful man.

And then she said softly,—

'Men suffer, and are silent: they think they are sparing the one they love, and little realise that her suffering is keener and more intense than their own, for her helplessness is greater. The man has the woman's fate in his hands, if there is mutual love between them. But never let him think that in torturing himself by his restraint and silence he is sparing her.'

Then Gerald turned upon her almost fiercely,—

'Would you have a man who has nothing in the world but bare sustenance to offer a woman, drag her down from her comfortable life to his? Would it be true love to link her fate to one who is spoken of, even now, with pitying contempt as a failure?'

'I would give the woman a chance of choosing or refusing such a fate,' said Nesta firmly.

'You are a good woman,' he said huskily; and abruptly he left her.

Betty was having some last words with her old friend.

'Are you happy, child?' he asked. 'Are you still finding it difficult to learn those three lessons—that trio that ought to be interwoven into our lives, and never separated one from the other?'

'You mean "patience, endurance, and joyfulness"?' said Betty, with shining eyes. 'You have helped me so much, Mr. Russell. I think I am learning slowly, that there is a certain joyfulness we get given us, that comes quite apart from our circumstances. It is just as my favourite hymn says—

I nothing lack if I am His,
And He is mine, for ever.

And it is realising this that makes one feel cheerful, even when everything is going wrong.'

'And about work? How far on have you got in that school, I wonder?'

Betty looked up at him sweetly.

'You mean, I expect, that you want me to learn that the will of God is His work. But, Mr. Russell, I have been trying to fill up the empty corners at Holly Grange, and I do believe it was God's will that I should do so. Now one by one has been taken from me, and I think it is God's will to give me another corner away from here. Has Mrs. St. Clair told you about it?'

'She has mentioned it. Who has filled your corners at Holly Grange?'

'Let me tell you about them,' said Betty brightly. 'First, there was Molly. She clung to me, and she has been so lonely that I have tried to be with her as much as possible, and cheer her up. Now she has Frank, and wants me no longer. Then Jossy. I have kept him out of mischief, and have shared his games and pleasures. But he is going to school almost immediately. Then there is the organ—and oh! how I have loved it—but Mrs. St. Clair is going to take the services soon, and it will do her as much good as it has done me. I don't feel she needs me so much as she did. Mrs. Fairfax is with her, and they are so happy together. I don't think I shall be missed.'

'In fact, you will soon be feeling that you are a little "odd one" again, without a corner.'

'Oh, but there is one waiting for me, and such a nice one! I have always liked blind people since I knew Mat Lubbock a year ago. By-the-bye, I must tell you. On the way here to-day I met him. Holly Grange is so far off that I hardly ever see him. I stopped and spoke to him, and do you know, Mr. Russell, his face was perfectly radiant? He said to me, "The good Lord is 'restoring comforts' to me, missy. The best little woman in our village has promised to be my wife. I shan't be solitary no more, and 'His goodness faileth never.' " It was rather a shock to hear that he was going to marry again, but I am sure it will be a splendid thing for him.'

'The best thing in the world,' said Mr. Russell heartily.

'And so,' continued Betty, in her pretty eager way, 'I am going to help a Miss Miller amuse and look after a lot of old blind people. She wants some one who can play and sing to them, and they have a little evening service every day, and they love singing hymns. There is a small organ, and I shall be able to use it. And she is wanting help so badly. Don't you think this bit of work for God is indeed His will?'

Mr. Russell laid his hand on her shoulder.

'God bless you, my child.' Then, after a minute's silence, he said, with apparent irrelevance, 'I am sure I was right in my picture. The girl's face

must be in the sunshine.'

A little time afterwards Betty was helping Jossy to cut a whistle. They were standing under one of the old elms, and Betty in her broad-brimmed hat and white gown looked the picture of dainty sweetness.

Gerald Arundel striding up to them, with a purpose in his face, drew his breath hard, as he gazed upon them.

'Jossy,' he said quietly, 'your mother wants to speak to you.'

The boy looked up.

'Does she? I'm coming. That's first rate, Betty!'

He sped away, ear-splitting shrieks issuing from his new toy.

Betty looked after him and smiled.

'Why do boys love any noise so much?' she asked.

'The love of power,' said Gerald, drawing a wicker chair forward. 'Will you sit down, Miss Betty? I have hardly seen you this afternoon.'

Betty's heart began to beat, but she laughed gaily.

'I have been wandering about with Mr. Russell, and then Jossy carried me off. You will take care of my old friend, will you not, Mr. Arundel? He is not looking well. I hope he will enjoy himself. He seems to leave home so seldom now, and it is always such a lonely life for him here.'

'I will take the best care of him that I can, I promise you,' said Gerald, leaning against the elm, and looking down upon her with wistful longing in his eyes. 'Do you think he is lonely, Miss Betty? Not more lonely than I am.'

Betty looked up. Her little sympathetic soul overcame the strange wave of shyness that was stealing over her.

'I am so sorry. I am sure you must be lonely too. It will be good for you to get away with him for a little while.'

Her eyes met the look in his; she dropped them at once.

'What did you think of the picture?' Gerald asked.

He was putting strong restraint upon himself.

'It was beautiful,' said Betty softly.

'Did you like my title for it?'

‘No,’ she said, with an effort. ‘It was too sad. I like people to be happy.’

‘But life is not always happy,’ said Gerald.

Then he added, trying to speak lightly,—

‘Let us make a story about that young couple in the picture, Miss Betty. The man is poor, he has nothing to offer her. He dare not tell her what is in his heart. She has been accustomed to luxury; he knows she will find it lacking if she links her life to his. She has many friends; he has none. She may meet some one who can offer her everything that the world can give. Is he to spoil this possibility, and expect her to listen to him? Is it likely that she will prefer his boat to her own? Is it not his duty to be silent, and let her glide on down life’s stream, passing him as he rows by her side in the shade?’

‘It might be his duty,’ said Betty tremulously, as she interlaced her fingers tightly in her lap, ‘but it wouldn’t be love.

Could Love part thus? Was it not well to speak,
To have spoken once? It could not but be well.’

She almost breathed these words.

Gerald’s eyes glowed. He leant forward.

‘Would the speaking bring pain to her?’ he said. ‘Would it be but the prelude of bidding “adieu for ever”?’

Betty’s nerves were highly strung. She was frightened at the audacity of her last words, and following an impulse for which she could not account, she said, with a little laugh,—

‘You must ask Mr. Russell. It is his story, not mine.’

And then she rose from her seat.

Gerald drew his breath in sharply, but he said not a word, only followed her in silence to the little group on the lawn. Betty seemed in the highest spirits; she laughed and she chattered so much that Nesta, with her quick intuition, saw that something had gone wrong. Gerald looked on silently. In his heart he was murmuring,—

‘In vain I strove to reach it
Through the tangled mass of green;
It only smiled and nodded
Behind its thorny screen.’

And Betty, poor Betty, was nearer tears than laughter; for she had a dull miserable ache in her heart, and was keenly conscious that with her light indifferent words she had put away a great happiness from herself, and wounded to the quick the one she would have given her life to comfort. She was glad when Nesta's carriage came round. Gerald did not speak to her till he held out his hand to say good-bye, and then Betty's forced cheerfulness forsook her. He looked down upon her so kindly, and with such a tender reverence in his eyes, that her sensitive little soul was filled with remorse, and tears trembled on her eyelashes as she looked up at him.

'Good-bye, Mr. Arundel. I—I hope you will have a nice time.'

'I hope we shall,' he said; 'and I promise you to look after Mr. Russell.'

That gentleman came up and laid his hand affectionately on Betty's shoulder.

'Good-bye, little woman. You must be here to welcome me back. We shall only be gone six weeks. God bless you.'

Why did a sudden cold fear sweep down upon Betty's heart as she looked into the face of her friend? He stood there in the sunshine, smiling at her, and then, seeing a distressed look in her eyes, he did what he had never done before—stooped down and kissed her.

'That is in memory of my little short-frocked Betty many years ago,' he said.

'Just tell me that I'm the same,' said Betty, clasping her hands round his arm; 'tell me I'm every bit the same to you.'

'Every bit the same,' he repeated, smiling at her; 'the "little odd one" still!'

They drove away; the evening shadows were already falling, the sun slowly faded; and darker shadows hovered over Betty's soul, and for the time reduced her to pensive, brooding silence.

CHAPTER XVIII

Terrible News

Ah! when the infinite burden of life descendeth upon us,
Crushes to earth our hope, and under the earth, in the graveyard—
Then it is good to pray unto God; for His sorrowing children,
Turns He ne'er from His door, but He heals and helps and consoles them.

LONGFELLOW.

The days glided by. Betty, always occupied and busy, did not find time heavy on her hands. She corresponded with Mr. Russell, and his letters were her great delight. She followed them in imagination through all their wanderings; especially over the ground that was familiar to her. Mr. Russell told her that he was growing stronger daily, and was enjoying the exhilarating air of the Swiss mountains with increasing pleasure.

'And it is pleasant to have intercourse with such a well-stored mind as Gerald Arundel's,' he wrote. 'I tell him he ought not to miss the Red Manor library, for though the books are no longer his, their contents are stored in his brain. He and I find our walks and talks give us mutual benefit and satisfaction.'

They had been staying at Lucerne when he last wrote, and were making their way up the Rhone Valley to Zermatt, where they hoped to do a little mountaineering.

One morning after breakfast Nesta was looking at the daily paper, when she gave an exclamation of dismay.

Betty was filling a china bowl with roses.

'What is the matter?' she asked carelessly. 'No horrible catastrophe, is there?'

Nesta did not answer, and when Betty came over to her, she closed the paper hastily.

'There is no need for us to be anxious,' she said.

'What about? Is there prospect of another war? Don't be so mysterious, please!'

Then Nesta recovered her self-possession.

‘It is about our travellers.’

Betty’s face blanched at once.

‘Give me the paper. Oh, let me see!’

Nesta pointed to a small paragraph, headed ‘Zermatt.’

‘A party of Englishmen yesterday started to scale the Matterhorn. A very heavy storm of snow, however, made them retrace their steps. During the descent the party divided. Two Englishmen and two guides arrived in safety early this morning at the hotel, after experiencing great difficulty in finding their way home. No tidings have as yet been received of the others, and it is feared that some accident has befallen them. A rescue party has been out all day, but up to the present has been unsuccessful in the search. The names of the missing Englishmen are Mr. Russell and Mr. Arundel. They had one guide with them.’

Betty read it, and seemed unable to speak.

‘We must hope that they are safe,’ said Mrs. St. Clair, putting an arm round her. ‘Perhaps they have been found by this time. We will not think the worst.’

‘But how can we know?’ Betty said at last, in a strangely quiet tone. ‘Who can tell us?’

‘We will telegraph to the hotel,’ said Nesta promptly. ‘Let us drive to the station and do it at once.’

Betty drew a breath.

‘Oh yes,’ she said feverishly; ‘don’t let us waste a minute. Do let us go!’

It took a certain time for the carriage to be brought round, and to Betty, who was pacing the hall in agony of mind, it seemed as if it were years. She tried to control herself, but her face of hopeless misery as she sat opposite to Nesta made her friend’s heart ache.

They telegraphed and paid for the reply; then came home to wait for news.

Betty went about the house trying to do her usual little duties, but her eyes were far away, and she did not seem to hear when spoken to. Nesta left her alone; she felt it was the kindest thing to do. Once she said to her,—

‘Pray, Betty dear; don’t forget to pray.’

Betty nodded. She started and shivered at every bell-ring, but the day wore slowly away and the evening was well on before the message came. Betty stepped into the hall herself, and took the yellow envelope from the boy. She did not open it. She carried it with a trembling hand into the drawing-room to Nesta, and she stood with her hands lightly clasped behind her back, whilst Nesta read it in a faltering voice,—

'Bodies just found and brought in. Will friends come and identify?'

There was a dead silence. Neither Mrs. Fairfax nor Molly were in the room.

Betty's face whitened to her very lips.

'It *cant* be true!' she gasped. 'Oh, say it isn't! It is too sudden, too unreal!'

Nesta took her straight into her arms.

'My poor darling, God will comfort you! Look straight up to Him!'

Betty clasped her hands over her eyes, and shuddered from head to foot. No tears would come. Her head was throbbing and well-nigh bursting with sudden pain. For a minute she leant it against Nesta's shoulder. Then she raised it.

'May I go to bed?' she asked wearily. 'There is nothing to wait for now.'

Nothing to wait for! As Betty crept upstairs and sought the solitude and darkness of her own room she felt that an end had come to her own life as well as theirs.

She could not at first think of any details.

Mr. Russell was with his little girl at last, the child whom he had never forgotten or ceased to mourn. Surely it was well with him! His life had been a sad and lonely one. It was bright now with infinite possibilities of increasing joy. Was it not selfish to wish him back?

And as she thought thus, she could not but own that it was well with him.

But with Gerald Arundel? She felt stunned and voiceless. She knew as she had never known before how her own life had secretly been twining round his. Not exactly unbidden. She had realised long ago that Gerald's heart was given to her, that it was only his prospects had made him tongue-tied; and she could not forget how flippantly she had stopped him, when he was trying to tell her of his diffidence in approaching her.

Oh, to unsay those words! How many times through life the powerlessness to remedy some thoughtless speech has made us realise the awful responsibility of our tongues!

She sat by her window, gazing out in speechless misery upon the still darkness without.

Nesta at last came to rouse her.

'Do not think me unsympathising, darling!' she said, coming over to her and putting her hand softly on her curly head. 'But I have had a great deal to do. Frank has been here, and is such a help. He has found out the address of Mr. Russell's cousin, his nearest relative, and has wired to him, and Frank has offered to go over to Zermatt himself. Mr. Russell is such an old friend of ours. Frank is going up to town by the late mail train, and leaves Dover to-morrow morning.'

'And has Mr. Arundel no friends to think of him?' demanded Betty, looking at Nesta with wide-open, tearless eyes. 'Has no one given him a thought?'

'He seems to have no relatives in England,' said Nesta sadly, as she pressed Betty's head lovingly against her shoulder; 'but, of course, Frank is going on his account as well.'

Betty shook off Nesta's hand, and began to pace the room restlessly, two spots of colour burning in her cheeks.

'If Frank can go, I can go. Why should I not? I *must* go. I *must* see them again. Oh, Mrs. St. Clair, you will take me; will you not? I know how they bury people abroad! I must see them once again; it will be too late if I do not go at once. I never said good-bye to him; I thought he was coming back again. I thought I should be able to tell him how sorry I was for what I said. I was afraid I had been too forward, so I was cruel to him. I saw it in his eyes, as if I had struck him. I can see him now, and he never said one word. Not one word, though I had killed all the hope in his heart; and when he shook hands, though I had been so unkind, he looked at me as kindly as ever. Oh, I can never, never, never forgive myself! If I could only tell him just a little of what I have always thought of him! I feel I could bring him back to life, if I could only—only touch him, cry to him, beseech him for forgiveness!'

Betty poured this forth excitedly and incoherently. Nesta, with aching heart, could only listen.

But when she besought her again to take her out to Switzerland, Nesta spoke quietly and firmly.

'No, Betty dear; it is not to be thought of. Frank will do all that is necessary, and will tell us all we wish to know.'

'Let me see the telegram once more,' urged Betty. 'Do you think they may be still alive? It doesn't say they are dead.'

Nesta placed the telegram in her hand. Betty read it and shuddered. Her talkativeness died away. She relapsed into hopeless silence, and at last was persuaded to go to bed. She did not sleep; hour by hour went by, and she lay with open eyes in the darkness. She could not pray. She seemed to lose the realisation of the Presence that always comforted her. It was a dark hour in her life, and when the next morning dawned fair and sunny, and a blackbird perched under her window on a bush and burst into song, and the village chimes began to ring out, reminding all that it was Sunday morning, it seemed to her perfect mockery.

She rose from her bed unrefreshed, and with an aching head. Half-way through her dressing she opened her window and leant out. Then she looked from the dew-laden garden below to the serene blue above.

'O God,' she murmured, 'I am wicked and rebellious. I gave myself long ago to Thee for Thy service, and I ought to want nothing more! I thought I was going to be quite happy in doing work for Thee, and I was content. Now it is worse than ever! I am miserable—and I always shall be miserable. Nothing will ever be the same to me again! And why, oh why, need such a dreadful thing have happened? Just when everything seemed going right!'

It was more a meditation than a prayer, perhaps; the clouds did not seem to lift, and Betty came down to breakfast with white face and tired eyes.

She persisted in going to church, though Nesta suggested her staying at home. Molly was full of horror and concern at it all; but her incessant surmises and conjectures as to what had really taken place rasped and irritated Betty's nerves. She maintained a stolid, imperturbable silence; only Nesta saw how she was suffering.

Nesta took the organ herself. Betty mechanically joined in the responses and singing. She never heard a word of the sermon. Her thoughts were entirely upon crevasses, precipices, and avalanches; step by step she was pursuing in imagination that ill-fated little party trying to ascend the Matterhorn. She walked home in silence, ate her luncheon as in a dream, and announced her intention of going to the afternoon service again.

‘Why are you going, dear?’ Nesta asked her gently. ‘You did not enjoy the service this morning.’

‘Enjoy it?’ Betty looked at her friend in a dazed kind of way. ‘I think it would be a miracle if I did. I never meant a word of what I said or sung. I can’t believe in the love of it, Mrs. St. Clair. It is too sudden and too awful!’

‘It has been a great shock,’ said Nesta, looking at her with tears of sympathy; ‘but, Betty darling, it was a gloriously quick entrance into the kingdom above. Think of their joy!’

‘Oh, why can’t we all be taken?’ exclaimed Betty. ‘I wish—oh, I wish some accident would happen to me!’

Nesta did not reproach her, as another might have done. She knew that it was too soon for her to see things as she would by-and-bye. She let her go to church with her, and offered no further remonstrance. When the service was over Betty waited in her seat whilst Nesta played the voluntary. The rector was in haste to leave, as he had to go over to a neighbouring parish and take the evening service, so the two of them were left in the church alone. The sexton lingered at the door. Nesta told him to go, as she would bring him the keys, and then she asked Betty to wait whilst she played on. There was nothing that Betty loved better as a rule. Now she sat up in her seat, white and tearless. Nesta played softly one sacred refrain after another—‘O rest in the Lord,’ ‘Comfort ye, comfort ye My people,’ and then she sang David’s pathetic refrain in ‘Resignation.’

Betty listened, but none of them touched her; she felt herself that grief and misery were turning her to stone.

Nesta paused, then suddenly she began to play and sing the beautiful anthem that had so touched Betty as a little child. She had not sung it for years, but she threw her whole soul into it, and her beautiful voice rose and fell in the silent church, till the arched roof seemed to send back sweet mysterious echoes of the words,—

‘These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’

Betty shivered at first, then a light came into her eyes. She lifted her head, with a long-drawn sigh. The horror of death had left her; she saw her old friend, after his long, sad life, entering that blood-bought, happy throng; his little child, with outstretched arms, coming to meet him. How could she —how could she wish him back? The old associations and fascination of the verse took possession of her. The gate of heaven seemed thrown open to her,

and standing by that golden portal she was conscious of the exquisite bliss of those within.

‘These are they—these are they which came out of great tribulation.’

Nesta’s voice rang out triumphantly, assuredly. Doubts and fears of the unknown world vanished; Betty’s soul escaped from the snare of the fowler, and when the last notes died away, Nesta looked round and saw that tears had come to her relief. Betty was sobbing in her seat.

She stole up to her and put her arms round her.

‘My dear little Betty,’ she whispered, ‘God is love.’

‘All love,’ Betty sobbed; ‘all love, and I have pained Him by my wicked, selfish, unbelieving thoughts!’

Nesta let her cry on; she knew that her tears would relieve the tension of her nerves and brain.

And then, shortly after, when Betty had sufficiently recovered herself, they walked home together.

Nesta was not afraid when Betty shut herself up in her bedroom again. Deep though her grief would be still, it would be untainted with bitterness and despair.

When Mrs. Fairfax asked anxiously after her, Nesta was able to say,—

‘She is better, mother dear. She will be her dear little self to-morrow.’

CHAPTER XIX

For Little Betty's Sake

Love sacrifices all things
To bless the thing it loves.

BULWER LYTTON.

Two days passed without a word from Frank. Then came a letter for Nesta. She took it to her own room, and read it before she told Betty she had received it.

'DEAR MRS. ST. CLAIR,—

'I have been waiting to write till I knew what to write. Poor Russell was buried to-day, and the guide as well. But Arundel is living, though it is touch and go whether he will last another day. It appears they lost their way, and the guide went on ahead. He never came back, having fallen over the edge of a crevasse, and they, roped together, followed in his steps. When I got here, I must tell you, Arundel was conscious, and able to give me details. He seemed anxious to do so, though he spoke with difficulty. Russell went first, and suddenly vanished into space. The jerk to the rope nearly pulled Arundel over, but he steadied himself and tried with all his might and main to pull Russell up. Russell, as you know, was the heavier man of the two, and Arundel, inch by inch, was being dragged over. Russell was clinging to the rope in mid-air; he looked up and grasped the situation instantly. In a second he had out his clasp-knife, and cut the rope as he might have cut a piece of string. He dropped, and Arundel—how he did it, no one can imagine—scrambled down over forty feet after him. He reached his body, but found him dead; and then he collapsed himself. He was insensible when he was found, and they thought him dead, so sent the telegram. He was lying out all night, and has some broken ribs, for he had more than one nasty fall descending after Russell. Now fever has set in, and the doctor thinks badly of him. I won't leave him till it's one thing or the other. Russell's cousin here. No time for more.

'Yours very sincerely,

Nesta sat with this letter in her lap fully ten minutes before she could decide what to do. Her mother coming in advised her.

‘You had better let Betty read it. Is this Mr. Arundel much to her? I cannot think that Mr. Russell is her chief and only cause for grief.’

‘Yes, I think he is a great deal to her, and that is why it will torture her afresh to hear he is alive, when the second letter may be to say that he has gone. It will be such suspense again. Still, I think she ought to see it.’

Betty was called in.

She took the tidings with wonderful composure.

‘I am glad Frank is with him,’ she said quietly; ‘but oh, Mrs. St. Clair, dear, dear Mr. Russell! Was it not just like him? I shall never have such a friend again—never!’

She hardly seemed to take in that Gerald was alive, for later on she said to Nesta,—

‘They will be buried together, and then, Mrs. St. Clair, do you think I could go and see their graves?’

Nesta felt she dared not instil any feelings of hope in her breast, so wisely said little, but she noticed Betty’s breathless anxiety when the post came in, and her look of patient disappointment when it brought nothing from Zermatt.

Then, by the late post one evening, Frank wrote again, and this time Molly was the recipient of his letter.

She came in delightedly to Betty, as she sat in the drawing-room, winding wool for Mrs. Fairfax.

‘Oh, Betty, he has turned the corner and is doing well, and he has got a splendid nurse, and Frank is coming home. The doctors say he will get on all right now.’

Betty dropped her wool and fled from the room. Out into the garden she went; her heart and pulses all throbbing with excitement and joy. She was ashamed that any one should see her face, but she was not ashamed to lift it up to the One who had so mercifully dealt with her. And her prayer of thanksgiving and of praise burst forth from her, in a flood of happy tears, when she found herself on her favourite grass walk in the wood.

‘I won’t even wish to see him again; he is alive—he is going to live—he will come back to his farm. I don’t care what becomes of me, but I shall be living in the same world with him still. It is enough.’

Such were some of her thoughts.

She confided in Nesta later.

‘And, Mrs. St. Clair, may I go up to London now to Miss Miller? I want to work. I want to do something to show I am grateful. And, please’—here she buried her hot cheeks on Nesta’s shoulder—‘don’t let people know how very happy I am.’

Nesta came to the conclusion that work would be the best thing for her. So in a very short time Betty was in London trying to live in the present, and bring sunshine to the hearts of those whose lives were cast in the shade, not sorrowing too much over the past, and leaving the future in God’s hands. Miss Miller was a practical, matter-of-fact woman; her never-failing brightness was good for Betty, who still was apt to have her moods. But she soon won the hearts of the old blind people, and they loved the sound of her fresh young voice. Betty sang to them, and read to them, and amused them for hours; but there were quiet times when she would talk to them one by one, and her topic was always the same—

The old, old story
Of Jesus and His love.

‘Ay, dearie,’ said an old woman, wiping the tears from her sightless eyes, ‘ye do seem to put it so life-like that I can’t stand up against it. Why, bless my soul, as I sits and listens to ye, I fancy in the hush that comes to ye, that the Lord be just a-comin’ in at the door, and He be standin’ by my side a-ready and a-waitin’ to see if I be meanin’ to open my hard old heart and let Him in. I’ve had a power o’ trouble in my life that has kep’ me from bein’ religious. ’Tis t’other way with some folks, but it never were with me. But ye seems to know a little about trouble yourself, and it makes your tones shake a bit, for all that ye are so blithe. And yer faith in religion is so real that it do shame me. Now sing us that there favourite hymn of yours, and we’ll be greatly obliged.’

So Betty sang,—

‘The King of love my Shepherd is,
  His goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His,
  And He is mine, for ever.’

And the old people smiled, and repeated the lines to themselves, with a quickened realisation of the Shepherd's care for His flock, and a longing to be numbered amongst the sheep of His fold.

One morning Betty was writing letters for Miss Miller in that lady's private sitting-room, when she was told a gentleman wished to see her. She told the maid to show him up, thinking it would be her uncle. Major Stuart often came to see her, and would insist upon taking her out. He did not half approve of this work for her, though he was always coaxed and persuaded by his niece in the end that it was just the corner that fitted her.

As the door opened, she said, without turning round, 'One minute, Uncle Harry. I must finish this letter, and then I shall be free.'

The dead silence that followed this speech made her drop her pen and look up.

With a little cry, she sprang up, for it was Gerald Arundel who confronted her.

Very thin and worn he looked, and his hair that had been so dark was now plentifully streaked with grey. That had been done in the few minutes in which he and Mr. Russell had swayed together over the abyss.

Betty's colour ebbed away. She could not find voice to speak. She had not heard of his return home, and the shock was almost too much for her.

'You must forgive me coming to you,' he said apologetically; 'but Mrs. St. Clair gave me your address. She thought—I hoped—you might like to see me.'

'And so I do,' said Betty, holding out her hand, and trying to speak bravely. 'Only you came in so unexpectedly. And you look so ill. You have been given back from the grave to us. I can't greet you like any ordinary person.'

She was biting her lips to keep her tears back.

He looked at her, then said sadly,—

'I want to tell you how it is I come back alone; how it is that I have failed to keep my promise to you.'

'I have heard,' said Betty. 'God wanted him, and He is the best One to take care of him.'

'He was a noble man,' said Gerald. 'I shall never to my dying day forget his face as he looked up at me. I had given myself up for lost. I knew I could

not save him, and his face suddenly seemed illumined from heaven above. He smiled at me. Just think of his position! And—would you like to hear his words?'

Betty nodded breathlessly.

'They were, "For little Betty's sake!" And then he cut the rope!'

Betty covered her face with her hands. Tears came fast. She could not speak for some minutes. Then she looked up. Gerald was standing by her side.

'Sit down,' she said. 'You look so ill. Do tell me more, not'—here she shuddered—'not of that dreadful day, but of before it happened. Tell me all he said and did. At least, will it tire you?'

Her tone of anxious concern was very sweet to Gerald. He complied with her wishes, and gave her an account of their start.

'I am thankful the responsibility of that ill-fated expedition does not rest on me. I felt it would be too much for Russell, and did all in my power to dissuade him from going. But others overruled me. Russell asked me as we were starting, why I looked so gloomy. I told him I did not like the idea of it for him, and he said, with his cheerful laugh, "My dear fellow, I am as fit as a fiddle. I am going to prove my new-gained strength before I return home!" '

'Oh, it all seems so dreadful, so unnecessary,' said Betty. 'Tell me more about him.'

'When the snowstorm came on, and we separated from the others, he put his hand into his breast-pocket and took out this little packet for you. "I am not so young as you, and my heart is not so strong; if I should succumb to this cold, will you take this home to Betty, and give it to her from me, with my dear love?" And he would not be content till I took it from him, and promised him to deliver it to you with my own hands.'

Gerald placed the packet in Betty's hand. She looked at it with loving reverence; then listened eagerly to more details from Gerald of his last conversation with his friend. When he had finished, Betty said sorrowfully,—

'I have lost my best friend.'

'And so have I—my only one.'

There was a little silence between them. Then she said rather timidly,—

‘Are you going back to your farm?’

‘Yes. I must tell you that Russell has bequeathed it to me in his will, as well as a legacy which will take away the sting of poverty, and make me comfortable for the rest of my days.’

Betty smiled rather sadly.

‘But you can’t enjoy it when he is gone, can you? I feel as if I can never go back to Tiverstoke. I should miss him so intensely. Does his cousin succeed to his estate?’

‘Yes; he is a nice fellow—a married man with eight children, he tells me. Are you here for the winter, Miss Betty?’

‘Yes; and for longer, perhaps. I shall leave for Molly’s wedding, which will be taking place the beginning of next month; but I hope to return after it.’

‘And you are happy here? Forgive me, but you are looking white and tired.’

‘I am happy, as happy as I can be at present. Sorrow makes you tired. I did love him so.’

‘Love him still. He is not dead, but living a fuller life than ever he lived before.’

‘Yes;’ and Betty looked up with sparkling eyes. ‘Oh, don’t you wish, Mr. Arundel, that this world would come to an end? It seems such a long time to wait.’

Gerald smiled. He loved to hear her old childish impetuosity break out. Then he rose and held out his hand.

‘May I come and see you when I am in town again?’

‘Yes, do. I shall be so pleased. Are you going back to Tiverstoke to-day?’

‘This afternoon.’

They shook hands, and he left her. Then tremulously Betty broke the seal of her letter, and read,—

‘Dear little Friend,—

‘Sometimes I think I shall not see your bright young face again; I feel my intercourse with you has come to a close. I do not

know why I should think so, for I am no longer an invalid, and feel as strong and well as I did ten years ago. But the impression remains with me, and so I am writing this, which will only reach you after my death. My little Betty! I wonder if you have any idea what a pleasure it has been to me to see you the same trustful, earnest little soul that you were fifteen years ago! You wound yourself round my heart in those days, and when you went away, and gradually drifted away from me, I thought I had lost you for ever. Then you came back, and I found your soul unchanged. I have wondered sometimes, if my little daughter had lived, whether she could be much dearer to me than you are. I have watched you keenly, and I have seen you in trouble, my child, trouble in which I was powerless to help or comfort you, but which trouble One above, who loves you better than I, has sanctified and blessed to your soul.

'And as an old man sees, I fancy this trouble will not be a lasting one. I can already see the time when earthly joy will be your portion. I believe God in His tenderness will lead you very soon into green pastures, and if my leaving you will hasten this time, I shall be doubly glad to go. I am bequeathing you my picture, Betty,—an old man's last attempt to bring the two together that he loves best. And now, farewell. May God guard and guide you, and keep the spring of living water in your soul always fresh and bountiful! May He use you for His glory, and give you an abundant entrance into His kingdom, when your work is done!

'Your affectionate old friend,
'Frank Russell.'

Betty read and re-read this precious letter, regarding it as a voice from the dead. She went about her daily duties with a serene and peaceful face. She could look up and thank God for His goodness in giving her such a friend, and counted herself better in every way for his friendship. He had helped her in her times of perplexity and doubt. Now he had left her, but his memory would help her still. And so she was comforted.

CHAPTER XX

Changing Corners

Were my whole life to come one heap of troubles,
The pleasure of this moment would suffice,
And sweeten all my griefs with its remembrance.

LEE.

Molly's wedding was the next event. It was a very quiet one, and she was married from Holly Grange. Betty went down for it. Nesta thought her looking thin and pale, and wanted her to stay on with her for a little, but this Betty said she could not do.

'Miss Miller is tired, and is going away for a holiday. I have promised to take charge during her absence.'

'But it will be too great a responsibility for you.'

Betty laughed.

'It won't be a feather's weight. They have such a good matron. She really does all the work.'

The sisters had a long talk together before Molly's wedding day. Molly was waking up to a sense of her responsibility in life.

'I want to be a good wife, Betty. I shall not dream any more; and Frank and I are going to try and help each other to be good. I know I am not clever, but mother taught me to be useful, and I shall try to help some of those that she tried to help.'

'That will be lovely, Molly.'

Then Betty threw her arms round her neck.

'Oh, Molly, I shall miss you. I shall be left quite alone. We shall never be quite the same to each other again.'

'But you will come and stay with me, and you will help me about the poor and those who need relief. I can never be so clever as mother, but I want to be just like her, to have a full and a busy life.'

Betty was silent for a minute, then she said softly,—

‘I should like to tell you, Molly, what mother said to me in almost the last conversation I had with her. She was alluding to my taking up some work, and she said, “I would warn you not to fill your life with work, to the exclusion of the One who should come first.” And then she made me read that verse to her, “Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.” I have never forgotten it. It has helped me so much.’

Molly looked very thoughtful.

‘I am not as good as you are, Betty. I believe you love God, and love the Bible. I have a respect and reverence for—for religion, but it doesn’t come first to me, and it doesn’t make me happy. I believe if you were stripped of everything you would be happy. You always have a fund of happiness stowed away somewhere. It shows itself in your face and voice sometimes when one least expects it, and I believe you get it from’—Molly lowered her voice—‘from God Himself.’

‘Oh, Molly dear, why shouldn’t He give you happiness too?’

‘I think I am happy, as a rule,’ said Molly. ‘I haven’t so many ups and downs as you have, or as you used to have, but I am earnestly going to try to do right now.’

‘If you set your heart, Molly, to seek Christ, He will come into your heart and put you straight and keep you straight. Don’t think I am preaching, but you know what the hymn says—

O, Jesus, Thou art standing
Outside the fast-closed door,
In lowly patience waiting
To pass the threshold o’er.’

There was silence. Molly looked out of her window wistfully. This last day of her girlhood had been a heart-searching time with her. She realised that a chapter in her young life was closing, and another beginning.

Then she bent down her fair head to Betty’s dark one, and whispered,—

‘I have kept Him out, Betty,—all my life long I have,—but if He will forgive me, I will open my heart to Him now.’

And Betty left her, and stole softly away to pray for her.

Major Stuart came down for the wedding, for he was going to give Molly away.

He said to Betty, when the ceremony was over, and the sisters had taken a farewell of each other before Molly was driven off to the station with her bridegroom,—

'And now one niece is off my hands! When are you going to follow her example?'

'You won't get rid of me yet, Uncle Harry,' said Betty, laughing; 'but I am sure I am very harmless. I cannot be a worry to you where I am in town.'

'You are an infinite worry. A young lady with fads is a tremendous responsibility. You never know what mine she may spring upon you suddenly. It is a friend of the blind to-day, it may be a nurse to the lepers to-morrow, or a partisan of woman's rights. I don't know which contingency would be the worst! I'm sure the old-fashioned plan was best. Keep young women tight and fast in their homes till they marry. They will never be any anxiety then.'

'But,' said Betty, with something between fun and sadness lurking in her eyes, 'I am homeless, and I never could be kept "tight and fast" anywhere. I should suffocate and die. And I don't think I shall ever marry, so I shall be an anxiety to you for many a long day yet.'

'You're going to marry me,' observed Jossy, with determination. He was standing by, very proud of his big buttonhole and light kid gloves. 'I made up my mind fresh in church to-day, that I would marry you directly I grew to be bigger than you. And I'm growing awfully fast, mother says so!'

Betty laughed at him, but her heart was a little sad. Molly had gone, and she was alone. She wondered as she threw a look back over the past year, whether every year would bring so many changes as this one had done to her. And then again the music danced in her heart—

I nothing lack if I am His,
And He is mine, for ever.

She went back to London very soon. She saw nothing of Gerald, but heard he was up in town on business, and when she returned found he had called to see her the very day before she arrived.

'He said, miss, he was sorry to miss you, for he was going out of town immediately,' the maid told her.

Betty smiled and sighed; then settled down with great content to her old blind people.

A few weeks later, Nesta received a letter from Miss Miller, to say that she had just returned from her holiday, and found Betty struggling against an attack of influenza.

'She is very much pulled down by it, and does not seem able to throw it off. The doctor advises thorough rest and change of scene. I thought I had better let you know at once.'

So it came to pass that Betty was once more at Holly Grange, looking white and frail, with a nasty cough, but in fairly good spirits.

'I am just ill enough to like nursing and petting, and to enjoy the luxury of idleness,' she said to Nesta one afternoon, when she was settling her in a sunny corner in the drawing-room, with a book and a plate of grapes by her side.

'You will not mind being alone, dear, will you? Mother wants me to drive out with her.'

Nesta was making up a cheerful fire, and arranging Betty's cushion in the big easy-chair as she spoke.

She stooped and kissed her, for Betty looked very small and white and forlorn, as she sat there, and Nesta's heart went out to her.

'I shall be perfectly happy. I feel I can sleep and sleep and sleep here! It is so quiet and restful. I longed for silence in town so; everything seemed to get on my nerves, the horses and carriages in the street, and everybody's footstep. Please don't think of me at all, except that I am enjoying it all so here. And stay out as long as you can. It is such a sunny afternoon.'

She was left, and for a time she dozed. Then the door quietly opened, and a maid appeared.

'If you please, miss, Mr. Arundel called to ask how you were. He asked if you were well enough to see him.'

'Yes, show him in here,' Betty said, and a pink flush rose in her cheeks as Gerald came in.

He came up to her and took her hand. Betty could not meet his eyes; and then he sat down.

'I heard that you had been ill, and I met Mrs. St. Clair this afternoon. She thought perhaps a visit from me would not hurt you.'

'Indeed it will not,' said Betty quietly. 'Tell me about your farm; it always sounds so nice.'

‘I am thankful to say it is doing well. It keeps me very busy, except in the evenings. A farmer cannot do much after dark. If the time does drag at all with me, it is then.’

‘But you have your books?’

‘Yes—and my thoughts.’

There was a little silence, then he turned to her.

‘You are working yourself to death, Miss Betty. I am sure London is not the right corner for you.’

‘But I think it is,’ said Betty, with some spirit. ‘Influenza has had me in its grip. The idlest people get that. It isn’t the work.’

‘It is not the right corner for you,’ Gerald persisted. ‘You were run down before the influenza attacked you.’

‘You mustn’t abuse my corner,’ said Betty, smiling.

‘Do you remember asking me long ago to let you know if I found an empty corner that wanted filling?’

‘Yes,’ Betty replied, looking up at him. ‘But I can’t fill two corners at once.’

‘And you would rather not hear of another one?’

Betty’s gaze was a wistful and a dubious one.

‘Is it anything to do with your almshouses?’ she asked.

He gave a short laugh, then bent forward earnestly.

‘It is a corner that is very empty and desolate; that wants some sunshine in it. I think I may say truly that it is quite as comfortable a one as the one you are now filling, but whether it would be good enough for you is what I doubt. It is a corner that I thought would have to remain empty for good and all, but I wondered lately if I might venture to tell you of it.’

There was something in the gentle diffidence of this strong, self-restrained man, that almost brought the tears to Betty’s eyes. She knew now what was coming, and caught her breath. Then, obeying an impulse that seized her, she put out her little hand, and laid it on his very softly.

‘Tell me,’ she said.

And then he told her. He took her hand in his, and drew her very gently to him.

‘Oh, Betty, my little Betty, I have so little to offer you. Will you cheer the life of a very lonely man by your sweet, sunshiny presence? Will it be asking you to give up too much?’

Betty could not answer; she only gave a little sob of happiness. All the past, with its aches and pains, its struggles and disappointments, was swallowed up by the present sweet moment, and presently she found courage to raise her eyes to the ones regarding her so tenderly.

‘It will be taking all,’ she said, ‘and giving up nothing.’

Later on, Nesta found them together, and Gerald stood up to greet her with a light upon his face that she had never seen on it before.

‘I am sure you will give us your blessing,’ he said, ‘for your advice did much to instil into me the courage I needed.’

Nesta bent down and kissed Betty, with smiles and tears.

‘I am so glad, darling,’ she said; ‘for I know you will be happy. It has been my greatest wish to see you two come together, and it was somebody else’s wish too.’

‘You mean Mr. Russell,’ said Betty softly; and then she shyly laid her hand on Gerald’s arm. ‘It almost seemed to be his last thought.’

‘It was,’ Gerald said.

Jossy’s entrance chased away the momentary sadness that filled Betty’s eyes.

‘Come here, young man,’ Gerald said. ‘Do you remember our first meeting? You introduced me to this lady as her “dear husband”? I am going to be so. Do you approve?’

Jossy’s quick eyes wandered from Gerald’s humorous glance to Betty’s confusion and blushes.

‘Are you playing that game?’ he asked; ‘is it make-believe or really true?’

‘Really and soberly true.’

‘And you are going to be her lord, and take her away to your castle?’ said the boy, with kindling eyes. Then his face fell. ‘You haven’t got a castle,’ he added; ‘it’s only a common farmhouse.’

If Gerald winced in his heart, he showed no outward discomposure.

‘Only a common farmhouse,’ he repeated quietly. ‘Do you think my lady can be happy in it?’

Jossy looked at Betty rather doubtfully.

‘She seemed to think it a very nice place when we were drying our clothes, but when she was in your room she nearly cried over your book she was reading, and she kissed the back of your chair. Why did you do that, Betty?’

‘Oh, Jossy, you awful boy! Do stop!’

His mother took him promptly out of the room. Gerald put his hand into his breast-pocket and laid something very softly on Betty’s lap. She looked up startled.

‘I kept it,’ he said, kneeling down by her chair again and taking both her hands in his. ‘I determined not to give it back to its owner till I could claim the hand as my own.’

Betty looked at the little brown glove with pretty confusion.

Gerald went on earnestly.

‘I am glad you have seen what a poor home I can offer you. But with our dear friend’s legacy I am going to enlarge it. I would not bring you to it in its present condition.’

‘But,’ said Betty, with sudden warmth and impetuosity, ‘I love it as it is. You must not alter it. It is a sweet home, and I shall only come to it under condition that it remains unaltered. I have always thought, ever since I was a child, that a farmhouse is an ideal place to be in.’

‘In theory, not in practice,’ said Gerald, smiling.

But Betty stoutly insisted that it was both.

‘And what about your London corner?’ he asked her before they separated that day. ‘Will you feel giving up that? Can any one else be found to take your place?’

‘Yes,’ said Betty, smiling up at him. ‘I have tried to brighten and cheer their lives, but there are others who will do that as well and better than I can. And now I am going to turn my attention to a *very* neglected spot. After all, it will be only changing corners.’

CHAPTER XXI

Odd made Even

Yes, it was love, if thoughts of tenderness,
Tried in temptation, strengthened by distress,
Unmoved by absence, firm in every clime,
And yet—oh, more than all!—untired by time.

BYRON.

Molly wrote Betty delighted congratulations when she heard the news.

'To think that you should be the one to comfort my hero! I can't forget how I tried with all my might to get up a match between him and Ella. Perhaps it is best as it is, for Ella is going to marry a naval cousin of hers whom she has always liked. Does it not seem strange, Betty, that you and I are both perhaps to settle eventually in the same neighbourhood? Do tell Mr. Arundel I am so delighted to welcome him as a brother. I used to think I was more interested in him than you were, for you were always so silent about him. I suppose you thought the more!'

Major Stuart came down in person to offer his congratulations. He drove up one afternoon unexpectedly, and found Betty in the garden picking some early primroses.

'Now, what do you mean by this?' he demanded, after the first greetings were over. 'It is like springing a mine under my feet! When I advised you to follow Molly's example a short time ago, you told me you were never going to marry. I suppose you were laughing in your sleeve at me!'

'No, indeed I wasn't,' said Betty earnestly; 'I really thought it then.'

'I'm sorry to hear it,' and Major Stuart assumed a very grave air; 'for it shows this is too sudden an affair to be a really genuine one.'

'Oh, Uncle Harry, don't tease so!'

'I assure you I am in dead earnest. Why have I not been told of this gentleman? Why has he kept behind the scenes so? I do not remember to have heard his name.'

'I am sure we must have told you about him,' said Betty, with distressed eyes. 'Oh, Uncle Harry, you make it so difficult for me to tell you. I cared

too much for him to talk about him, and though we both knew each other, he felt he ought not to speak. You see, he lost all his money and property. The Red Manor belonged to him, and he had to sell it, and he has been farming since, and now he is succeeding with it; and then Mr. Russell left him a lot of money, so he thought he might speak. It was his foolish idea that I ought to have every luxury. I should have been content with a labourer's cottage. Do be nice, and say you are pleased, for I am so happy!'

Betty had wound her arms round his and lifted a very coaxing face up at him. Major Stuart looked at her, then stroked his long moustache grimly.

'This is a blow to me! You have forsaken your *rôle* of the "odd one." I suppose it is a case of odd being made even, and, like the rest, you must be made into a couple. I must see him first, before I pronounce any opinion. A farmer is not a fit match for one of my nieces, and a fellow who has come down in the world rarely makes it pay. He must be something very special, if ——'

Then Betty flashed out at him,—

'You are a horrid, mercenary man, and I won't stay with you to hear Gerald abused! He is special, *very* special; there isn't another man as good as he is in the whole world, and I am not fit to be his wife. If he were a butcher or a coal-heaver, if he swept a crossing in London, I would be proud to belong to him, and if you have come down here to be rude to him, you had better go back to London by the next train!'

Major Stuart looked at his niece's changing colour, quick-heaving breast, and sparkling eyes, with great amusement.

'Well done, Betty!' he said. 'Whatever he is, he has managed to steal your heart. I am quite relieved to see you have a little of your old impetuous temper left. We will patch up a truce, and I will think your lover all that you describe him, until I set eyes on him myself and can form my own judgment. You see,' he added, giving her a little friendly pat on her shoulder, 'my anxiety about my nieces is due to perhaps my over-estimation of their charms. I don't like to think of your being wasted on a heavy country man, however worthy he may be!'

Then Betty laughed. She could not be angry for long with her uncle.

'You will see the heavy country man this evening. He is coming over to dine. And now here comes Mrs. St. Clair, and you must scold her for allowing us to meet!'

She ran away, and did not see her uncle again till just before dinner, when she came towards him with Gerald, looking very winsome and mischievous in her white lace dress, with a bunch of real neapolitans in her waistbelt.

'Uncle Harry, let me introduce Mr. Arundel to you. I have told him you have come down to inspect him.'

The men shook hands, and measured glances courteously, then Major Stuart asked if he might have a private talk with Gerald after dinner.

'I can congratulate you very heartily on having won my niece's affection,' he said; 'for she is a very particular little lady, and, I fancied, had taken up the *rôle* of independence.'

Betty had moved off, so did not hear this speech. Gerald responded quietly,—

'I am quite ready with my explanation. I am sure you are astonished at my presumption. But Betty's happiness will be dearer to you than her position in society.'

Which remark gave food for thought to Major Stuart throughout dinner, but which made him mutter as he took Nesta into the dining-room,—

'He takes matters with too high a hand.'

However, the result of their private conversation was satisfactory. Major Stuart came into the drawing-room with a placid countenance, and Betty flew to meet him.

'Now, Uncle Harry, congratulate me. I insist upon it or I shall never speak to you again!'

'He is a good-looking fellow,' he said, looking at her with a twinkle in his eye.

'Go on,' said Betty sternly.

'He seems to have honourable principles.'

'Go on.'

'And I really think I must congratulate you upon having found some one who will keep you in better order than I can!'

Betty laughed, and was content. She knew now that Gerald and her uncle would be the best of friends.

When her health was quite restored, she went back to London; for she would not forsake her work until it was absolutely necessary for her to do so. Gerald had persuaded her to let him make a few alterations to his farm, and the wedding day was fixed for June 18.

'That was the day I first saw you,' he said to her. 'I never shall forget it. Do you remember your little songs about the roses? I have had one of them in my heart ever since.'

'I know,' said Betty, nodding at him mischievously. She carolled out gaily,—

' "Where blooms, O my father, a thornless rose?"
"That can I not tell thee, my child,
Not one on the bosom of earth ever grows,
But wounds whom its charms have beguiled." '

'That is not the one.'

'Isn't it? Then it was the other, "The little wild white rose." Yes; I remember that evening well, but it was not my first sight of you. I had seen you before.'

'Where?'

Betty coloured and hesitated; then looked up with a pretty shyness.

'I will tell you when—when we are married, not before.'

She was greeted by her blind friends, when she returned to them, with great delight, and loud were their lamentations when they heard she was going to leave them.

'I feel quite guilty,' she said to Miss Miller one day; 'as if I have put my hand to the plough, and am drawing it back.'

'No, dear,' her friend replied; 'you are changing your sphere of work, that is all. You will find opportunities of helping others wherever you go. Of course, we shall miss you, but we must be thankful that we have had you for so long.'

'If—if Gerald had not gone through such deep trouble,' said Betty, in a low, meditative voice; 'if he hadn't been so lonely and homeless and friendless, I think I should not have thought it right to marry.'

Miss Miller smiled.

'But pity is not the right foundation for a married life.'

‘No,’ said Betty hastily; ‘of course not. And I never really pitied him, except deep down in the bottom of my heart, for he was above pity. He was always so brave and cheerful, keeping his own feelings in the background. Oh, Miss Miller, you must come down to stay with us when you want a rest! I long for you to know him. I am not good enough for him. God has been so very good to me.’

Occasionally she had visits from Gerald, but they were necessarily very short ones. She saw a good deal of Molly in town, and by-and-bye they began to busy themselves with her trousseau.

Nesta came up for a fortnight to help them. Molly was full of life and interest, but Betty used to have fits of dreaminess, and she seemed strangely indifferent to her shopping.

‘It is such a fuss,’ she said. ‘Why should I spend so much on myself? I am going to be a farmer’s wife. I shall dress in cotton frocks and sun-bonnets, and these fine things will lie by in drawers and boxes. I shall never wear them.’

But Molly did not agree with her.

‘You must dress for your husband now. He will like your clothes, if you don’t. I’ve discovered that men pretend to be supremely indifferent to such matters, when in reality there are no more discerning and severe judges than they are. And you are not going to be a farmer’s wife, Betty. You will have lots of nice neighbours calling upon you. Frank’s people do not mean you to rusticate.’

‘Oh, Molly,’ said Betty wistfully. ‘Do you selfishly wish sometimes to be in a kind of garden of Eden—to be the only people in existence, just two?’

Molly laughed, and shook her head.

‘I am shocked at you, who are so anxious to comfort and relieve your fellow-creatures! I don’t think I have ever had such a desire.’

‘It is selfish,’ admitted Betty. ‘I think in London we crowd over each other so, that it makes me long to be alone.’

‘I like people,’ said Molly; ‘and I know I shall never be so happy at the Red Manor as I am now in our tiny town house.’

The time slipped by, and then in the beginning of June Betty said good-bye to her friends in London, and went down to Holly Grange. Upon the afternoon before her wedding day, she slipped out of the house unperceived,

and walked over to the little village of Tiverstoke. She made her way to the church, and saw herself, as a little hot, dusty child, push open the door for the first time and enter in. She passed up the same aisle that her little feet had trodden so long before, and once more she paused by Violet Russell's tomb, and let her gaze wander upwards to the stained window that had been the object of her childish admiration and awe.

And then she started, for by the side of the window was a brass inscription, and she read it with tearful eyes,—

TO THE MEMORY OF

FRANK RUSSELL,

SQUIRE OF THIS PARISH.

DIED AT ZERMATT,
SEPTEMBER 20, 18—,

Aged 58.

> 'These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

Such a flood of memories swept over her soul as she read this verse! It took her back to her earnest search in childhood, to all the mystery and joy and grief connected with it; to all her serious discussions with the old friend now gone; and she covered her face with her hands and sobbed aloud. She was not surprised when a step that she knew well approached, and a hand was gently laid on her shoulder. She turned to him at once.

'Oh, Gerald, who put this here? Did you?'

'Yes.'

'Did you know it was the verse I loved above all others as a child?'

'It was the verse he loved to his dying day.'

They stood there in silence together. Then Gerald said in a low voice,—

'Betty, we shall stand here to-morrow in different circumstances. Shall we ask God's blessing on that coming ceremony now?'

Betty bowed her head. Then, hand in hand, they knelt under the stained window, and Gerald breathed out a few heart-felt words.

‘Our Father, wilt Thou grant to us Thy blessing? We give ourselves to Thy service together for evermore. Teach us to follow in the steps of one who died to bring us together, and may we take our place one day in that blood-washed throng. For Christ our Saviour’s sake. Amen.’

Was it a strange coincidence that the sun should stream through that stained window, and crown those bowed heads with its golden rays?

In the hush that followed, Betty almost felt conscious that the spirits of the departed were hovering near them, rejoicing in their joy, and when she rose from her knees, her face was as if she had beheld a vision.

Walking home, as the evening shadows were beginning to fall, Gerald spoke of their friend again.

‘He asked me to have that put on his tombstone, should anything happen to him. I think I told you he seemed to have a presentiment of his sudden death. And, Betty darling, he told me how you came to him as a little child, when his heart was cold and hard and bitter, and his troubles were alienating him from the only Comforter; how by your persistent allusion to that verse, your childish faith and earnestness, and your confidence in the love of God, you brought him, step by step, into the light and peace of God’s forgiveness and comfort. He told me he owed to you more than he could ever repay.’

‘Oh,’ said Betty, awed and startled, ‘I never knew. I never guessed. He always seemed to me a sad and sorrowful man; but I have only remembrances of his goodness and kindness to me as a child. I remember him comforting me when no one else could, in my first real childish trouble. He was such a comfort and help to me all last year; and, Gerald’—her voice sank to a whisper—‘his very last thought and act was to give you to me. What a friend he has been to us both!’

CHAPTER XXII

‘The Little White Wild Rose’

Across the threshold led,
And every tear kissed off as soon as shed,
His house she enters, there to be a light;
Shining within when all without is night,
A guardian-angel o’er his life presiding,
Doubling his pleasure, and his cares dividing!

ROGERS.

It was five o’clock in the afternoon. Sycamore Farm lay bathed in golden sunshine, save where the old trees from which it got its name cast soft shadows across the green lawn. The front of the house preserved that peculiar stillness that was always its characteristic on summer afternoons. The very bees seemed sleeping in their hives; a few butterflies drowsily flitted to and fro. The old-fashioned roses filled the air with their fragrance, and the house itself, covered with its wealth of creepers, seemed to be in an attitude of quiet waiting. Inside, the atmosphere was one of expectancy. Mrs. Winstone, in her Sunday best, was wandering from room to room. A bright rosy-faced maid, in black dress and white cap and apron, was following in her steps, duster in hand, giving a touch here, and a rub there, to articles of furniture that were already shining from the care and attention that had been bestowed upon them. Every few minutes Mrs. Winstone would glance out of the windows anxiously; and at last the sound of wheels, for which she had been waiting, sent her flying to the door, her face wreathed in smiles; and the little maid followed behind, in a fluttering state of curiosity and awe.

The bridegroom was bringing home his bride. As Betty stepped in, she held out both hands to Mrs. Winstone, and greeted her with pretty frankness.

‘We are home, Mrs. Winstone, and it looks as I have always pictured it in my dreams.’

Then Gerald put her arm in his, and led her from room to room. The hall, with its old hearth and staircase, was much as she remembered it, but the dining-room had been enlarged and a study had been built out. In the dining-room tea was spread on a snowy cloth, and a bowl of pink roses and

jessamine reposed on the centre of the table. The study led out of the dining-room, and Betty exclaimed, as she gazed at the well-filled bookshelves,—

'Why, Gerald, it looks just like the Red Manor library? Oh, how comfortable you will be here!'

'Our dear old friend's thought again,' said Gerald. 'He bought all these at the sale, and left them to me in his will. He seemed determined that I should suffer as little as possible from the loss of what I valued most.'

'And this is where I shall spend most of my time,' said Betty, looking up into his face archly. 'You must not monopolise this room entirely. I love books as well as you. I have a Chaucer of yours that I almost know by heart; I have read every page of it, and some of them two or three times over.'

He smiled.

'But my little wife has a room of her own; a room that I shall come to when I want to be comforted and rested. Shall we come back to it?'

He led her into the hall again, and opened the door that Molly had once described to her as the one that was kept locked, and was that of the best parlour.

Now, as he opened it, Betty caught her breath and gave an exclamation of delight. It was a room which had been enlarged, and contained, in one deep recess, the beautiful little organ that Betty had seen in the music-room at the Red Manor. A deep bay window looked out on a green lawn with old-fashioned flower beds bordering a winding path, and in the window recess, at one corner was a Chippendale writing-cabinet, and in the other, an old-fashioned inlaid work-table. The room was papered with a soft dull green, bordered by a dado of white roses on a green background; the carpet was a green of a darker tone, with a border of white roses, and the chintzes, again, were white rosebuds on a soft green ground. China bowls and vases of white roses were in every direction, and on one side of the room hung, in its gold frame, Mr. Russell's last picture. The sun was just touching it as Betty looked, and it seemed to throw out the wistful longing in the young girl's face. She looked round the room again, but her gaze came back to the picture.

'Why did he paint it?' she whispered. 'How did he think it would bring us together?'

Gerald gazed at it with a smile.

‘He wanted me to hasten matters. He used to tell me I was too diffident and cautious; and then he set to work and painted this as typical of our two lives. He called me in to see it, and asked me if I liked his name for it.’

‘What was it?’ asked Betty. ‘I remember so well when he took us in and showed it to us; I thought he wanted us to choose the name.’

‘He had written under it, “Divided by Diffidence,” but I made him paint it out the morning before you came over. He said he would not do it, unless I promised him to speak to you that day. And you know how I tried, and how you snubbed me.’

‘I was so frightened,’ said Betty, pressing closer against the strong arm that was round her. ‘I hated your name for it—“Love and Duty.” I hated Tennyson for writing it, I remember, and I think I almost hated you for disagreeing with the only lines that would have brought me comfort. I found the book open, when I came over here that day, and I almost rubbed your “No” out on the margin of it, and wrote “Yes.” What would you have thought of me if I had done so? But when you spoke to me in the garden, I tried to encourage you. You can’t say I didn’t!’

‘Yes, you did in one breath, but you brought despair into my heart in the next.’

‘I knew I had, by the look in your face, and I was so miserable. Gerald, tell me, why did you wait so long?’

Gerald did not answer at first. He looked round the room, and then he stooped down and drew his wife closer to him, and kissed her tenderly.

‘My little white rose,’ he said. ‘You “hung too high for me.” I did not wish to soil your petals or bend your head by bringing you into my humble life.’

Betty looked up at him wonderingly, then she smiled.

‘Oh, Gerald, Gerald, do you think your love would not reach far enough? Why did you place me on such a pedestal? If I was like a little wild rose at all, I was in the ditch below your feet, waiting for you to pick me up. I understand this room. You are full of romance and poetry; and you have carried it into your furnishing. It is too beautiful for me, but I just love it.’

Laughter and tears were struggling for predominance in her voice.

‘Mrs. St. Clair helped me with it. I told her what I wanted.’

‘And your mother’s organ,’ said Betty, looking towards it reverently. ‘Shall I ever dare to touch it?’

‘I brought it into this house with thoughts of you. And if you had never come to me, no other hand should ever have touched it. I have wandered into this room before it was properly furnished, when the organ was the only thing in it, and I have tried to imagine myself coming in here, tired and weary, and listening to you playing. I want you to play on it to-night.’

‘I will,’ said Betty softly. ‘I shall love to.’

They went back to the dining-room then, and Betty poured out tea with a pretty importance. Afterwards, they went over the upper part of the house, and then inspected the farmyard and outside premises. It was getting dusk when they came back to Betty’s drawing-room, and they stood together at the open window looking out into the still, silent garden. A sweet smell of newly cut hay, and the scent of mignonette under the window, made Betty open her lips and draw in a long breath. Then Gerald spoke.

‘Betty darling, I want to know when you first saw me. You said you would tell me. I think the time has come for you to do it.’

Betty was silent for a minute, then she said very quietly,—

‘I saw you, Gerald, lying face downwards in a field, and when you looked up trouble seemed to be breaking your heart. I went home; but your face haunted me and—I can tell you now—I prayed that night, and every night after, that God Himself would comfort you.’

Gerald was profoundly touched.

‘I have a dim remembrance of shaking off somebody’s touch and dashing away, for I was beside myself with grief. I had heard that afternoon from my lawyer of my uncle’s existence and intention, and it seemed more than I could bear. Was it really you who touched me? How little I thought you would be the comfort that God would send me! Life seemed so hopelessly dark to me then.’

‘But you did not succumb,’ said Betty. ‘That was what made me wonder at you so. You were so bright and brave when I met you; so full of thought about others. Do you remember giving me a verse for Mat? And asking me to visit your almshouses? Oh, Gerald, I knew then what Christianity was worth, when it could hold you up, and make you face the world so brightly at such a time as that which followed!’

‘Yes,’ assented her husband. ‘It needs God’s own presence and grip through the deep waters. Then we have the promise, “they shall not overflow thee.” ’

‘I remember,’ said Betty musingly, ‘how I used to long for tribulation as a little child. I used to fancy that it was a sign that we were being made fit for heaven. I suppose I was right, but when it comes to us in older life it seems so mysterious and inexplicable. Yet if I have learnt any lesson in the past two years which have brought me the greatest sorrow and the greatest joy in my life, it is, that we can have joy and peace outside our circumstances. And, Gerald, I was looking through the last chapters of St. John the other day—the chapters that Christ speaks to His disciples when their hearts must have been heavy with doubt and dread, and I was astonished to see how often He mentioned “joy” to them. Don’t you think that Mr. Russell was right when he said to me that “joy” was an important Christian virtue, for it recommended our religion to the world at large?’

‘ “And your joy no man taketh from you!” ’

Betty’s expressive little face looked radiant.

‘It is true,’ she said, with a little nod; ‘for I have learned to find it so.’

A few minutes later she was seated at the organ, and her husband, leaning back in an easy-chair, listened with a rested soul.

‘What are these which are arrayed in white robes, and whence come they? These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.’

Again and again the sweet notes sounded out—

‘They came out of great tribulation.’

The triumphant strain at the close sent a little thrill through the hearts of singer and listener. They seemed to be brought into close touch with the one who had left them; and as the last notes died away silence fell in the room.

Then, very softly, again Betty laid her hands on the keys, and her voice vibrated with happy assurance as she sang—

‘The King of love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am His,
And He is mine, for ever.

Where streams of living water flow
My ransomed soul He leadeth,
And where the verdant pastures grow,
With food celestial feedeth.

Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love He sought me,
And on His shoulder gently laid,
And home, rejoicing, brought me.

In death’s dark vale I fear no ill,
With Thee, dear Lord, beside me;
Thy rod and staff my comfort still,
Thy cross before to guide me.

And so through all the length of days
Thy goodness faileth never;
Good Shepherd, may I sing Thy praise
Within Thy house for ever!’

FINIS.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Illustrations have been relocated due to using a non-page layout.

[The end of *Odd Made Even* by Amy Le Feuvre]