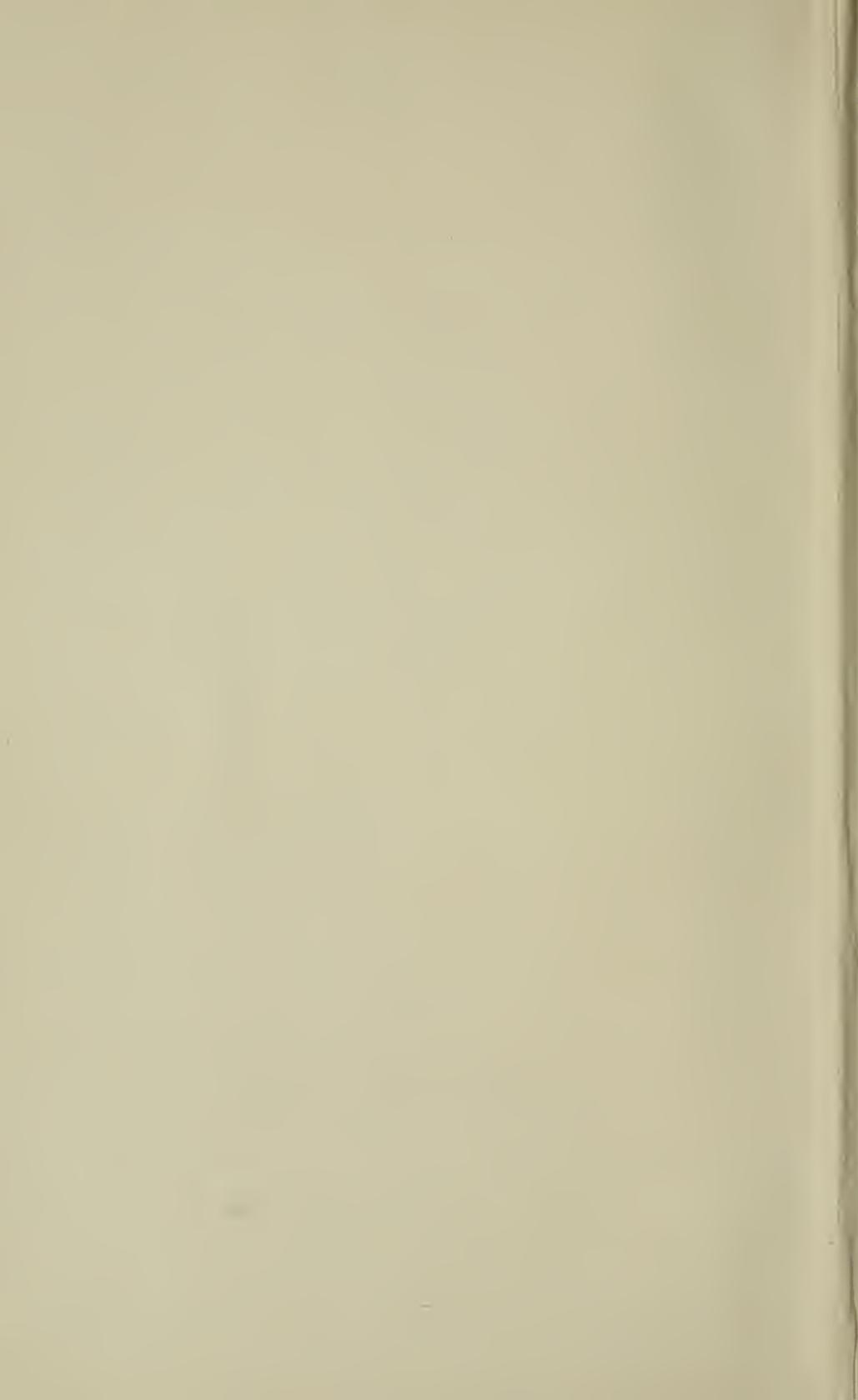


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A ROMANCE OF LINCOLN'S INN



A ROMANCE OF LINCOLN'S INN

BY

SARAH DOUDNEY

AUTHOR OF

"THROUGH PAIN TO PEACE," "WHERE THE DEW FALLS IN LONDON,"

"WHERE TWO WAYS MEET," "GODIVA DURLEIGH,"

"A CHILD OF THE PRECINCT," ETC.

"And this is an old fairy tale of the heart.
It is told in all lands, in a different tongue;
Told with tears by the old, heard with smiles by the young.
And the tale to each heart unto which it is known
Has a different sense. It has puzzled my own."

"LUCILE," BY OWEN MEREDITH.

"Nay," said Sir Dinadan, "for the joy of love is too short,
and the sorrow thereof. and what cometh thereof, dureth
over long."

MORTE D'ARTHUR.

IN TWO VOLUMES—VOL. II

With
Hutchinson & Co.'s
Compliments.

London 1893

HUTCHINSON & CO.

34 PATERNOSTER ROW

PRINTED AT NIMEGUEN (HOLLAND)
BY H. C. A. THIEME OF NIMEGUEN (HOLLAND)
AND
TALBOT HOUSE, ARUNDEL STREET
LONDON, W.C.

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C O N T E N T S

CHAPTER	PAGE
XIX. FAINT SHADOWS	I
XX. THE SHADOW DARKENS	12
XXI. AN OLD STORY	28
XXII. UNCERTAINTY	43
XXIII. HARD PRESSED	53
XXIV. THE WAY SHE TOOK	70
XXV. THE END OF THE DREAM	86
XXVI. THE SICK-ROOM.	98
XXVII. PARTED WAYS	112
XXVIII. FETTERED	127
XXIX. COMING BACK	142
XXX. NELLY'S MISGIVINGS.	156
XXXI. THORNS UNDER ROSES.	172
XXXII. MAYNE'S ROMANCE	184
XXXIII. THE LAST STRUGGLE	197
XXXIV. IN DEADLY PERIL.	209
XXXV. THE END OF THE STORY.	228

A ROMANCE OF LINCOLN'S INN.

CHAPTER XIX.

FAINT SHADOWS.

That which we are, we are. 'Twere vain
To plant with toil what may not blow;
The cloud will break and bring the rain,
Whether we reap or sow.

OWEN MEREDITH.

“I WISH I knew if it really did mean anything,” thought Nelly, in her room that night. “Of course I hope it didn't, and I was dreadfully frightened.”

She had a pretty bedroom of her own, decorated in a fanciful way which Lady Florence had noticed. Nelly had not much money,

to spend on decorations, it is true; but she had bought two or three cheap scarlet fans and hand-screens for the mantelpiece and walls. Angela's portrait was conspicuous in a frame softly draped with golden silk; there were touches of rich colour here and there, which gave the apartment an air of being inhabited by Nelly, and no one else.

She glanced half nervously into the toilet-glass; but it only gave back the reflection of her own face, framed in a cloud of brown hair.

"If Mayne had known what I saw!" she murmured, twisting up her tresses with nimble fingers. "It was impossible to tell him the truth; and he was quite satisfied with that little fib of mine. There could not possibly be any harm in such a very innocent fib as that was."

If he had known! She closed her eyes for an instant and the scene rose up before her again.

She had seen it only for a moment. It was a perfectly distinct picture, as clear as a photograph, but far more life-like, enshrined within the crystal.

There was the chancel of a church; clergymen within the altar rails, and a bride and bridegroom standing before them.

The bride, white-robed and crowned with flowers, was Nelly herself; but it was not Mayne who stood by her side. It was Lord Wyburn who stood where Mayne ought to have been. Other forms were pressing near these two central figures; Nelly had received the vague impression that there were many people present; but then she had given that involuntary cry of fright, and the picture had passed away in a moment.

On their way back to Russell Square Mayne had renewed his questioning. And Nelly, overworn, had invented a satisfactory little story to quiet him.

“I thought I saw my own face looking dreadfully white and ghastly,” she had told him in a confidential voice. “It was rather startling, wasn’t it? But I feel perfectly well, and I don’t believe I shall be ill unless you worry me into an illness.”

“Is it likely that I shall ever worry you, my darling?” he had asked, sublimely unconscious that he had been worrying her half the afternoon. “But of course you never really saw anything in the horrid thing. However, I’ll break open the cabinet, and smash it.”

“Smashing it wouldn’t alter anything,” she had answered. “It is a horrid thing, as you say, and it has given me a headache. The best thing to do is to forget it altogether. We will never even mention it again. Oh, Mayne, I like Mr. Cottrell very much ; but I am half afraid of him. He is a sort of magician, you know!”

“A very harmless one,” he had replied, laughing.

That night, in the solitude of her room, the girl was going over this conversation with a troubled mind.

“He is a sort of magician,” she thought. “Did he find out the falseness lurking in the depths of my heart, and force it into the light? What a fearful thing it would be if our thoughts took shape and stood before us!”

She shuddered, and turned away from the toilet-glass to look at Mayne’s portrait.

“Dear face,” she murmured, kissing the picture, “I have loved you from the moment when I saw you first, and I knew that you would be more to me than any other face had ever been. Oh, Mayne, I want to be true to you! I want to be so true that nothing which the crystal could show me would ever frighten me again. He was right—that strange old man; we see the visions that we ourselves have made. I have always coveted rank and wealth; no one has ever

guessed how ambitious a poor little governess may be."

She kissed the portrait again, and shut it up in its leather case.

"I wish," she sighed to herself, "I do wish that somebody would die, and leave him at least two thousand a year. But, if they did, he would insist on giving half his income to his mother and sisters. Mayne would be quite perfect if he had no relations."

That little burst of genuine love for her lover was over. It had welled up, fresh and strong, from the bottom of her heart, forcing its way through the upper crust which was getting a little harder every day; and now it had spent itself. It is a fact that when Miss Stanley laid her curly brown head on the pillow she was wondering how soon Lord Brookstone and his wife would return from Rome. And then she began to wonder if her portrait would ever be exhibited, and what Lord Wyburn would think of it when it was finished?

Lady Brookstone and Nelly met again before many weeks had gone over their heads. One of the Hilton boys was taken ill, and the father and mother had hurried home to nurse him.

The illness proved to be more tedious than dangerous. The lad, Robert Hilton, was laid up in the house in Park Lane, and was nursed devotedly by the dark-eyed mother whom he loved so well.

It was not an infectious sickness; Lady Florence was good-natured as usual, and let Nelly go to Park Lane sometimes to cheer Lady Brookstone. And so the intimacy grew and strengthened, and flourished in a half-stealthy way, for it was perfectly understood by Nelly's friends that Mayne did not approve of it.

Christmas came; and Mayne was expected at the manor, but he was unwilling to leave London. Nelly softly persuaded him to go to his own people.

"It would be cruel to desert them," she said. "If you stay here, Mayne, they will blame me for detaining you."

"You are always thinking that they blame you, dear," he answered. "If I must go to Hartside, won't you come with me?"

She shook her head with a decided air.

"No, that is not to be thought of, Mayne. The children would be frantic. Besides, Lady Florence would not spare me."

"Will the time ever come, Nelly, when you will belong only to me?"

"I hope so," she said, looking up at him with eloquent eyes. "But we must make the best of the present state of things. You will not be long away?"

"A fortnight. Mr. Cottrell has made up his mind to go with me, and he won't be satisfied with a week's holiday."

"A fortnight! Well, that really is rather a long time. It is a good thing that I shall

have my head and hands full. What with the Christmas tree, and the children's party, there won't be much leisure for pining, you see."

"You are a busy little woman, Nelly," he said tenderly.

"Yes; but I am not very fond of being busy. Nature never intended me for a working bee. I should love to be idle in a luxurious fashion—a gay, glittering idleness. I don't want to improve the shining hour, I just want to see it shine. At heart, Mayne, I'm a frivolous, lazy person, I assure you."

He contradicted this statement at once, and she laughed. But there was a faint, inexplicable shadow on her face which haunted him for days afterwards.

Even at Hartside, when he was petted and made much of by his own people, he could not forget that shadow. His mother rejoiced over him in her old fond fashion; but she could not help seeing that his thoughts were far away.

“My boy will never be mine again,” she said sadly to Mr. Cottrell. “Nelly Stanley fills his whole heart; there is not even a little corner for me.”

“Wait,” the old man answered. “He may yet come to you for sympathy and solace. If he does, he will not be the first man who turns back to the first love that he ever knew. A mother is the boy’s earliest idol, and often enough she is the man’s last comforter.”

Mrs. Comberford gave him a look of gratitude; and then her eyes followed Mayne with a wistful glance. He was walking down the carriage-drive with a sister on each side of him, and the little ones playing round them. It was a sunshiny morning, and the fresh light shone on the young man’s handsome face, showing all the changes that a deep feeling had wrought there.

“He has grown thinner and older,” the mother said, with a sigh.

“Life is beginning to write a story on his

face," Mr. Cottrell replied. "It must be so. If a man is worth anything he will show the traces left by love and thought and aspiration. The heart—the brain—the soul—they all set their marks upon a man's face, each in its turn. As to Mayne, you can read the heart's prints in every feature now."

"I wish I could control his destiny," Mrs. Comberford murmured.

"An old wish—as old as motherhood—and a most unwise one," returned Mr. Cottrell. "You can control the cherub who nestles in your arms; but the lad escapes you, and the man goes where you will never follow. Be glad because he has within him a noble capacity for suffering; do not wish to spare him a single pang. Wait, and you will see him pass through pain to the security of peace."

The old man looked kindly down at her as he spoke. She turned to him with a puzzled, inquiring gaze.

“Poor mother,” he said gently, “only wait. When a man gains the highest wisdom he knows the worth of a mother’s love. It is the last lesson that teaches him that first things are best.”

“Thank you,” she whispered with tearful eyes, “you have comforted me.”

CHAPTER XX.

THE SHADOW DARKENS.

Behold thou art over fair, thou art over wise;
The sweetness of spring in thine hair, and
the light in thine eyes;
The light of the spring in thine eyes, and
the sound in thine ears;
Yet thine heart shall wax heavy with sighs
and thine eyelids with tears.

A. C. SWINBURNE.

MR. COTTRELL and his godson spent a fortnight at Hartside, and came back together on a Saturday night to Lincoln’s Inn Fields.

The new year had set in cold and clear; stars shone with a frosty light; a sharp wind went whistling through the streets. In Mr. Cottrell's chambers there were blazing fires, and thick curtains shutting out the keen air; and the sight of a well-spread table was welcome to the hungry travellers. Mayne glanced anxiously at the mantelpiece, expecting to find a letter there. Nor was he disappointed; one addressed to him in Nelly's handwriting met his glance at once, and he pounced upon it with an eagerness which was not lost on his companion.

A shade of vexation crossed his face when he tore off the cover. It contained a New Year's card, a pretty thing enough, but hardly sufficient to satisfy the craving of a half-starved heart. There were some printed lines of love and greeting, but not a word from Nelly herself. He put the card away with a sigh, and sat down opposite to Mr. Cottrell at the table,

unconscious that the old man could read his thoughts. It was a proof of Mr. Cottrell's tact that Mayne never found out how closely he was watched and studied.

"We miss the family circle to-night, Mayne; and I dare say that they are looking mournfully at your vacant place down at the manor."

The words roused the young fellow from his reverie. "Yes," he answered. "But I am glad to come back to town. Once get used to London, and you lose all desire for the country."

"It's a capital place," said Mr. Cottrell, busy with the wing of a chicken. "A man doesn't discover what a capital place it is till he sets to work in earnest. Then he finds help in unexpected quarters; and just when the work is hardest the aid comes. London is for working men and women who are putting the best of themselves into their labour. It is not until you put your best into your toil that you feel the need of help, you know."

“I have sometimes felt,” Mayne remarked, staring vacantly into his claret glass, “that I have never yet put my best into any work at all. It may be a very poor best, but it ought to be used somehow.”

“Ah,” said the old man softly, “it *is* used—somehow!”

A flush mounted to the roots of Mayne’s hair.

“I know what you mean,” he said, in a low tone. “You are right, I suppose. But I can’t help it.”

“No,” responded the other quietly, “no, you can’t help it.”

There was a light powdering of hoar-frost over the trees on Sunday morning. Twigs and branches sparkled in the winter sunlight; the grass glittered as if it had been strewn with fairy jewels. Mayne lingered outside the chapel, watching for Nelly, till Laurice came out of his door and gave him a piece of information.

“She is inside,” the barrister said. “I saw her go in with the two kids. She was very early this morning.”

Very early indeed. Mayne wondered at this unusual haste; the bell had only just begun its brazen clamour, striking fiercely on his brain. He entered the chapel, and presently he saw her standing up in her place in the dim light.

The service began, went on, and came to an end. Mayne stood waiting in the windy vestibule with some impatience.

She came out at last, closely attended by the children; a charming apparition of freshness in the wintry morning, dressed in dark blue, trimmed deeply with chinchilla. Her lovely face looked up at him from its soft grey setting, and he thought he had never seen her look so distinguished and composed. She met him with one of her slow smiles, caressing and sweet.

“At last!” he said, taking her hand in his.

“At last,” she repeated softly. “You have been away at least a hundred years. Don’t you feel something like Rip van Winkle?”

“A little,” he answered. “There is an unfamiliar look about you. It must be that sumptuous grey fur which gives you a new aspect.”

“I hope you like it,” she said, looking down at her costume contentedly.

“Indeed I do; it is so delicate and soft;—you must have borrowed the silver lining of a sable cloud. But has somebody left you a fortune?”

“Oh, no;” she said lightly. “It isn’t as expensive as it looks. Men are not expected to understand the cost of these things.”

“It must have cost a good deal; I heard Aunt Flo say so,” Louie remarked.

“Nonsense,” Nelly replied, with just a faint note of asperity in her sweet voice. “You are always listening, and making mistakes.”

Louie pouted, and was silent for a minute

or two. Then, as they all walked slowly away from the chapel she burst out suddenly with a startling question.

“Mr. Comberford, what do you think of our wonderful news?”

Nelly's colour deepened, and she pressed her lips together tightly.

“News?” Mayne echoed. “I have heard nothing, Louie; what do you mean.”

“Why, don't you know? Father is coming home from India with a new wife, and we are going to live with him. And Miss Stanley——”

“Supposing you let Miss Stanley speak for herself, Louie,” interrupted that young lady quietly. “I did not care to put the news into a letter, Mayne; I preferred to wait and talk it over,” she added, seeing a question in his face.

She made a quick sign to the children, and they walked on ahead, leaving the pair a little way behind.

“Then you will lose your home, Nelly?”

Mayne said, in a troubled tone. "There will be changes, of course."

"There will be changes—yes." The bloom on her cheek paled a little, but her smile was very bright. "I'm beginning to think myself a lucky girl, dear. People are so kind, and a new home is offered already."

"Already? I hope you have not accepted the offer too hastily, Nelly?"

"Oh, no," she answered; "I have been very prudent indeed. But it was quite impossible to refuse such an offer as I have had. And Lady Florence would not hear of a refusal."

"Lady Florence is not the ruler of your destiny," he rejoined haughtily.

"No," she said; and the level coolness of her voice was a forcible contrast to his own. "No, but she has been my best friend."

"Your best friend! Then what am I?" he demanded bitterly.

"Not a friend at all, I hope," replied the

girl beside him. "Something a thousand times more."

He was satisfied for a moment, and smiled. They were walking through a flock of pigeons; the tame grey things gathered round their feet unscared. The winter sunshine rested on the broad path under the trees where they had first met as lovers in the warm summer-time.

"Nelly, my darling," he said, after a moment's pause. "It seems an age since we got engaged, doesn't it? Let us marry; never mind if people call us fools; the fools are always the happiest creatures in the world. Why should we lose our youth in waiting? Why are we bound to endure years of separation? Let our lives blend and blossom together in these, our best days!"

His imagination revelled in the picture of this bright union, and for an instant the dream seemed life-like in its loveliness.

"You dear, silly old boy," said Nelly, laying

her hand lightly on his arm. "It is a good thing that I am not so romantic as you are. What could we marry on, dear? Youth, and good looks, and two hundred a year? Remember that your salary depends entirely on Mr. Cottrell, and he may die any day."

"*We* may die any day, Nelly. And it is that thought that makes me long intensely for a little space of warmth and love. If we could only have one glorious, sunlit year!"

"We shall have a great many glorious, sunlit years—so many, that perhaps we shall get tired of them, and sigh for a cloud or two," the girl answered, with a little laugh. "Don't spoil everything by being in a hurry, Mayne."

She turned towards him, and for a moment they looked into each other's eyes; hers were shining with a tender brown light; his were troubled and sad.

"I dare say you are right, Nelly," he ad-

mitted in a resigned tone. "But if you were very much in love, you wouldn't be quite so prudent and practical."

"Oh," she said reproachfully, "just because I put things in a woman's way, you think me cold and worldly! It is too hard."

"You make me feel myself a heartless brute," he answered. "But we are a long way from your new home, Nelly. Where is it to be?"

"I shall have more homes than one," she replied, her eyes shining still and her head erect. "Mayne, I am not going to be a poor little governess any more. Lord and Lady Brookstone want me to live with them as their own daughter."

For an instant there was silence. Then with a sudden step forward Mayne scattered the pigeons, and startled Louie and Robby. His voice rang out angrily in the wintry stillness of the place.

"Nelly, you shall not go to them," he cried.

“I won’t have these people patronizing and adopting you; I swear I will not! If you cannot stay in Russell Square you shall go to Hartside, and my old home shall shelter you till you are my wife.”

The children stood still and stared at them both. There was a moment’s pause, and then Nelly answered him in a soft, level voice.

“You are unreasonable,” she said. “But we have been sauntering too long. Come, Louie and Robby, we must walk home as fast as we can.”

She held out her hand to Robby, and he took it with a bewildered look. Louie bestowed a slightly contemptuous glance upon Mayne. It was silly of him to get angry, she thought. If this was a lover’s quarrel it was rather amusing, and Mr. Comberford was certainly getting the worst of it.

Mayne parted with them almost abruptly; and Nelly, with a sad, proud little smile, said

good-bye, and went her way with her young companions.

She knew that this was not a final parting, although Mayne had gone away in a rage. He would come back to her that very afternoon—she was sure that he would—and then she meant to put forth all her powers of soothing.

The new costume, trimmed with chinchilla, was Lady Brookstone's gift. She knew when she accepted it that it was the first link in the chain which would soon bind her fast to the giver. But this was a bondage from which she did not shrink. What she did shrink from was the thought of going to Hartside, and living as a sort of pensioner on the bounty of Mayne's parents.

“That was a preposterous idea,” she thought, as she stood before the glass in her own room, and admired her dark-blue gown.

She was alone in the breakfast-room in the afternoon. It was the quiet hour before tea,

and the children were with their uncle and aunt in the drawing-room. Mayne, coming in half-angry and half-repentant, found her reclining on a small couch near the fire.

She opened her eyes languidly and looked at him as if she had just come out of a dream. Then, with a gentle movement, she sat up, and held out her hand with a smile.

He sat down by her side, gazed at her for a moment, caught her in his arms, and was enslaved again.

When he was thoroughly subjugated, Nelly sat with her hand in his, and told him the story of Lady Brookstone's lost child, just as the poor mother had told it to her.

"There is not a scrap of evidence to prove that I am her daughter," said the girl frankly. "But it makes her happy to believe that I am; and her husband humours her. Surely, Mayne, it will be right for me to go to her till you can claim me. Let me give her all the com-

fort I can; poor thing, she has had a long, long heartache!"

Mayne was touched in spite of himself. He began to feel more kindly to "the dark ladye."

"Besides, dear," Nelly went on, "I shall want a home when I am no longer needed here. You must never think again of my going to Hartside. Your people are not rich, and I have acquired expensive little ways which would provoke them to wrath. I have lived in luxury, you see, ever since I left school; and I cannot give up luxurious habits all at once. Are you sure you are not angry now?"

How could he be angry then? She was sitting close to him and looking up into his face; a scent of heliotrope floated from her hair and dress; her eyes were shining in the firelight. It was an enchanted hour.

"No, darling, I am not angry now," he answered. "Only you must promise one thing. You will have to see that brute Wyburn, I

suppose. Never suffer him to be alone with you for a moment."

"Oh," she cried, with a quick, graceful little toss of her head, "there is no need for that promise. Of course I will swear by the graves of my ancestors if you like; but Lady Brookstone will take very good care of me. As to Lord Brookstone, he perfectly detests the objectionable person you have mentioned."

"Do you detest the objectionable person, too?" he asked.

"I do," she said. "Immensely."

CHAPTER XXI.

AN OLD STORY.

The branches cross above our eyes,
The skies are in a net;
And what's the thing beneath the skies
We two would most forget?
Not birth, my love, no, no,—
Not death, my love, no, no,—
The love once ours, but ours long hours ago.

D. G. ROSSETTI.

“DOES not Mayne come here now?” asked Susie Comberford.

“Never,” Seabert Laurice replied. “I don't know where Miss Stanley worships in these days; but when she came to this chapel we saw him week after week, a regular attendant. I think he would have come if the preacher had divided his sermon into twelve heads.”

“But the preacher doesn't do anything so

dreadful as that, does he?" said Susie anxiously.

"Oh, dear, no. He is a successor of many great divines who have held the office. You may not believe me, but I can assure you that an account of the 'profound schoolmen' who have filled our pulpit would be very interesting. The second preacher—appointed in 1594—was a friend of Hooker and Sir Henry Saville. His name was Field, and old Fuller said his 'memory smelleth like a Field the Lord hath blessed.' Bad taste to make a pun on a man's name, wasn't it? James the First had him as chaplain in ordinary, and made the same sort of pious pun on hearing him preach for the first time."

"And Reginald Heber?" said Susie.

"Yes; he preached his last sermon here before he sailed for 'India's coral strand.' Look at the crypt; Mr. Pepys and his friends used to walk here by agreement—a chilly spot

for a trysting-place. I fancy Mayne preferred the garden yonder. There is time for a turn there before the service begins."

And Susie, nothing loth, was led along the gravelled paths which Nelly knew so well. It was April; the delicate tracery of the boughs was touched with green; even here, in the heart of the great city, there was that subtle hint of new life which never fails to come to us at Easter-tide.

Nelly's beauty had been like a perfect day in summer, rich and warm and glowing with sumptuous bloom. In Susie there was a suggestion of spring; she had something of the chilly sweetness of early flowers—something, too, of that hardiness which fears not rain nor wind. She did not give all at once; hers was a nature which held its stores in reserve. Seabert Laurice looked approvingly at her tall, straight figure as she walked by his side; and thought of those whose

“Tranquil faces bore the light
Of duties beautifully done.”

“Is not Mayne very glad to see you in London?” he asked, after a pause.

“Yes, dear fellow! I am sure he is,” she answered after an instant’s hesitation. “It was Mr. Cottrell who arranged everything. He felt that our mother really needed change of scene, and he thought it would be good for her to spend a month near her boy. So he found comfortable room for us in that dear old house in Mecklenburg Square, as you already know.”

“He is one of the kindest old men in the world,” said Seabert warmly. “Many people fancy that he thinks of nothing outside his books, but they are quite wrong. Even Mayne hardly appreciates him, although they get on admirably together.”

“Mayne is a person with one idea,” said Susie, with a little sigh.

“Ah yes,” Laurice replied quietly. “He can’t help it, I suppose. And your future sister-in-law—have you seen her yet?”

“Yes.” There was a faint, troubled smile on Susie’s face. “We went to call on her in Park Lane yesterday, and she received us in the prettiest way imaginable. What struck me was the wonderful ease with which she adapted herself to her new position. But it almost seems as if the position had adapted itself to her. Things always seem to arrange themselves into a charming background for Nelly.”

“She has the magnetic temperament,” Seabert said. “A dangerous temperament it is, even when it is not allied to such remarkable beauty as hers.”

“Her beauty is more striking than ever,” Susie went on. “She was always prettily dressed, but now she has all the advantages that perfect costumes can give. I never saw any one so brilliant, and yet so soft as she is. It is

no marvel that Mayne is spell-bound; but I am afraid——”

“Afraid of what?” asked Seabert, when she paused.

“That others will be charmed too. He will have a score of rivals, Mr. Laurice.”

“True,” Seabert answered. “But she has promised herself to him, you see.”

“Yes, but she wears her fetters lightly. There are natures that refuse to be too strictly bound. A promise does not mean as much to Nelly as it would mean to me.”

He turned and looked into her face; and then she blushed slightly. His look seemed somehow to give an importance to her words which she had not attached to them herself.

“It would mean a great deal to you,” he said, in a quiet voice.

The bell began to ring for service. And presently Susie was sitting, with her mother and Phyllis, in one of those carved oaken seats

which remain as specimens of the taste of James the First's day. She was at rest in this old chapel, and looked up at the brilliant stained glass windows with thoughtful eyes. A quiet, devout soul, like Susie, loves to worship in ancient fanes; and yet knows that the world is full of sanctuaries which have never been consecrated by priestly hands. All that had been good and holy in bygone worship seemed to cling to these walls. She thought of the parting blessing which Heber had left here; and of another voice, hushed not so long ago,* whose echoes are still lingering in many hearts, and whose message was the gospel of hope and love.

All the Comberfords had been invited to lunch in Mr. Cottrell's chambers, and Laurice joined the party. It was a cheerful gathering, although Mayne's high spirits were evidently false. His mother detected the unreal tone in all that he said, and her heart ached for him

* Frederick Denison Maurice.

in secret. He was looking careworn; there were black marks under his eyes, and lines graven on his forehead. All were sorry for him; none could help him; they could only stand and wait.

“If he could but get a good appointment, and be married out of hand!” said Phyllis to her sister that night.

They were talking in the bed-room in Mecklenburg Square, just as they talked at home.

“Mr. Cottrell has done his best,” Susie replied. “But a good appointment is not to be had every day. And unless the appointment was *very* good, I don’t think Nelly would marry him.”

“You think,” said Phyllis, speaking slowly, “that she would not care to give up ease and luxury and admiration to share a poor home with him?”

Susie hesitated.

“She would have to give up a great deal,

you see, Phyllis. This life that she is living has all the charm of novelty, and it suits her exactly. No one can be surprised that she enjoys herself."

"But 'Love must still be lord of all'!" said Phyllis in her dramatic way. "Heigho, I mean to treat my lover better when he comes! Why tarry the wheels of his chariot?"

It was ten o'clock, and the sisters were going to bed, tired with their long day; but Mayne, in the back drawing-room at Park Lane, was in the midst of an unsatisfactory talk with Nelly.

He had dined with the Brookstone family, and had been received with all due courtesy and friendliness as Miss Stanley's acknowledged lover. But nothing seemed to satisfy him, as his betrothed was always saying to herself. He lived in a continual state of restlessness, and disapproval of things in general. Nelly was getting weary of it all; and he was losing his influence over her very fast.

"I have told you a thousand times that I'm

not changed," she said in a fatigued voice. "I hate repeating things; I detest everything that is monotonous, like church bells and street-organs. If you mean a thing just say it once, and no more."

She was sitting in a low easy-chair; and she looked down at her small shoe resting on a footstool, then up at him with a mutinous face.

"I think you are changed," he said. "You are more brilliant."

"Oh, I'm glad you don't find me duller," she answered, with an airy laugh. "It would be too terrible to be told that I could no longer shine."

"You are always shining, Nelly. It would be a relief if you retired into the shade sometimes," he replied.

"I believe, Mayne, that you would like to bind me with Merlin's charm. It is to be hoped that the Wizard of Lincoln's Inn won't

teach it to you!" she cried, with a pretty little shudder. "You look quite savagely at me sometimes, and I am constantly expecting you to advance 'with woven paces and with waving arms'."

He did not smile, and the faint shadow of a frown darkened her lovely face for a moment. Lady Brookstone, glancing in upon the pair through the half-drawn curtains, caught that fleeting expression, and interpreted it aright.

"Mamma is thinking that it is near bed-time," she said, rising. "Mayne, you must go. I don't want to lose any of my beauty-sleep."

"I suppose not," he answered. "How quickly you have learnt to love Lady Brookstone! My mother would have been a mother to you, Nelly, if you had let her take care of you."

"That is all fiction, Mayne. Your mother always hated me from the first," said the girl passionately.

She stood before him for an instant a new

creature, her eyes large and lustrous with anger, a rich red burning on her cheeks. He was so bewildered and impressed by her manner that he was slow to speak; and, when he began, he felt himself at a terrible disadvantage.

“She never hated any one——” he tried to say.

But Nelly stopped him.

“Perhaps not, till I came,” she interrupted. “We can all be saints till we are put to the test. There was no need for her to express her dislike in words; her looks proclaimed it plainly enough. And you are like her; your eyes speak the same language. You disapprove of my gaiety; you judge me severely when I am frivolous. Well, I *am* frivolous, and I like to be. I have no high-soaring aspirations, no lofty ideals. I don’t want to live an exalted kind of life. It will be charitable in you to let me go the way of hollow worldlings, and not try to descend to the path which I tread!”

She was trembling; he had never seen her so excited before.

"Nelly," he said, "you don't mean what you have been saying. At first—last summer when we used to meet under the trees in Lincoln's Inn — you were——"

"Last summer is a hundred years ago!" she interrupted again. "I am talking of to-night, and it is time that I undeceived you."

"Have you deceived me?" he asked.

"Not so much as you have deceived yourself. I have always felt that you fell in love with some angel you had met in your dreams, and that you have mistaken me for her. I want you to realize that I'm not an angel, but an everyday girl of flesh and blood, prettier than most of her sisters, perhaps; but superior to them in no other respect. Go back to dreamland, Mayne, and find your angel. She is not here."

"If she is not here," he answered, "I have never met her at all."

“I have done my best,” she said, with an impatient little gesture. “I have tried to live up to your ideal. But with the best intentions in the world I could not grow a pair of wings. Let us make an end of this, Mayne, for heaven’s sake! Why should I waste my vital energies in trying to persuade a man that I am what he wants me to be? Good-night, and good-bye.”

“I will not say good-bye,” he cried vehemently.

“Well, say something, then, and go;” she said, recovering her old light manner. “It must be nearly eleven o’clock.”

“No, Nelly; it is not. But I will go;” he answered, grimly. “It is good-night, you understand; not good-bye.”

When he was gone she went swiftly into the adjoining room, and found it empty. Lord Brookstone was in his smoking-den downstairs, and his wife was with him. With a sigh of

weariness Nelly glanced at herself in one of the mirrors, and then hastened off to her own room.

“If we are to have many quarrels,” she thought, “I shall get quite haggard. Things cannot go on like this.”

The spring night was chilly, and a bright fire was burning cheerily behind a brass fender; a large bearskin rug was spread upon the hearth before it, and upon the rug stood a deep easy-chair. Nelly was shivering, partly from cold and partly from excitement, and the sight of the fire was welcome. So having half undressed, and thrown on a loose wrap, she sat down, and drew close to the blaze.

A time-piece ticked away the minutes while she sat gazing at the flickering flames, lost in a reverie. And then came a low knock at the door, and a voice that gently called her by her name.

“Nelly,” it said, “Nelly, are you asleep?”

When she rose quickly and unlocked the door, Lady Brookstone was standing on the threshold. She, too, had partly undressed, and had put on a long crimson dressing-gown, bordered with white fox fur. Perhaps she, also, was excited just then, for Nelly thought her dark beauty seemed even more splendid than usual.

CHAPTER XXII.

UNCERTAINTY.

Sweet, thou hast trod on a heart,
Pass! There's a world full of men,
And women as fair as thou art
Must do such things now and then.

E. B. BROWNING.

“NELLY,” Lady Brookstone began, “I had a sort of conviction that you would not go to bed yet. It is not good for you to sit up late.”

She sat down in 'the large arm-chair, and drew the girl into her arms; the black coils of her hair were pressed against the curly brown head; the sweet, flushed face lay upon her breast.

"I cannot go to sleep yet," Nelly murmured. "I am glad you have come."

"Mayne Comberford has troubled you, dearest," said Lady Brookstone, in a soft, caressing voice. "He has a jealous, suspicious nature; he would make a slave of you if he could. Ah, Nelly, his temper will be always fretting and wearing you, and faint lines will come into your face, and a weary look into your eyes. Men of his stamp are the destroyers of a girl's beauty; they are never satisfied, never at peace."

"He is not always so tiresome as he was to-night," said the girl, with a sigh. "But he was angry, and so was I. Of course I said a great many bitter things. It is not like me

to say bitter things ; I prefer being peaceful and pleasant."

"You would not have said anything bitter if he had not provoked you," Lady Brookstone replied. "Your lips were only made to utter soft words. Oh, Nelly, my pet, I want you to have an easy, sunshiny life! But no woman can enjoy ease and sunshine with him."

"You don't like him, mamma."

"He does not like me. If he could have kept my child from me he would have done it. Nelly, if you marry him you will be parted from me for ever."

There was a ring of passionate pain in the sweet voice. Nelly lifted up her face for a kiss.

"He shan't part us, mamma," she said. "And as to marriage, it is as far off as the millennium. Mayne is one of those unfortunate men who will never be rich. If we ever do set up housekeeping we shall be economical in the extreme."

“And you hate economy, Nelly. You were never made for it.”

“I do hate it. But—I like *him*.”

“You like him, dear, because he was your first lover. But the feeling will not last, Nelly.”

The girl raised her head from its resting-place, and looked up at Lady Brookstone with questioning eyes.

“How can you say that, mamma?” she asked. “Has not your feeling for Lord Brookstone lasted? I know that it has.”

“Ah, yes.” The dark face softened. “But remember all that my husband has done for me. Do you think Mayne would have wanted to marry you if he had first seen you in a ragged gown, sitting by a gipsy fire? You have always been a young lady. *He* would never have picked up a rough diamond.”

“He doesn't even like me to speak of my babyhood. He hates to think that I was found by the roadside,” said Nelly, in a gloomy tone.

Lady Brookstone trembled with indignation.

“He dares to scorn a child of mine!” she muttered. “What has a true love to do with scorn? Do you think the two feelings can ever mingle? No; he is not a true lover.”

“You are hard upon him, mamma. He is true in his own fashion; passionately, uncomfortably true. His truth hurts me sometimes. It makes me feel the falseness that is in my own heart.”

A light flickered up from the fire, and fell upon her face. Lady Brookstone looked at her keenly.

“Then you are not quite sure about your own heart,” she said. “It is a very young heart, Nelly. That which you call falseness is only uncertainty.”

“I think,” Nelly answered, “that it is best to call things by their right names. Falseness is the right word. I know it.”

There was a brief pause. Then Lady Brookstone spoke in a hushed voice.

"If you know it, Nelly, you ought to give him up. It will be best for him."

She could feel that the girl started.

"I am tired out, mamma," she said half fretfully. "I must go to bed. I ought not to have sat here."

But Lady Brookstone held her fast. She had grown very pale herself, and there was a thrill of intense feeling in her next words.

"Do you think I would let you go now," she asked, "until you had told me everything? Do you think I did not know there was something you were struggling with? I have been trying to help you to speak. You *must* tell me everything now. What barrier can there be between mother and child?"

Nelly slipped from her grasp and fell upon her knees, covering her face.

"Mamma," she cried, "I never meant to speak. Don't look at me! I don't know what it all means. I am sure that I love him, better,

a thousand times better, than I shall ever love any one else. And yet, as you say, it may be best for him if I give him up."

She uncovered her face, throwing out her little hands with a despairing gesture. There were some slender gold bangles on her wrists which jingled as she shook them.

"I want to know," said Lady Brookstone, "how you reached this conviction?"

"I have been a long time in reaching it." The answer came with bitterness. "Perhaps I ought to have known myself better from the first, but I did not. I thought his love would be quite sufficient for me; I thought that I should never feel any longing for wealth and rank and all the things that girls usually desire. But, later on, I began to develop new wants. The worldliness was always in me, I suppose, and it worked its way to the surface."

"It wasn't worldliness," Lady Brookstone cried impatiently. "It was just a consciousness

that you were made for a higher destiny."

Nelly shook her head with a sad little smile.

"Mamma, you *will* call things by wrong names; but you can't change anything by giving it a name that doesn't belong to it. I *am* worldly, and selfish, and frivolous. I am not made for a higher destiny, but a lower. I cannot rise to his level, so I must sink below it."

"Then sink, and be comfortable," exclaimed Lady Brookstone, with intense irritation. "Why should he want you to live up in the clouds with him? And if you were to descend, ever so little, from his cloud-land his relations would fasten on you tooth and nail."

"I think they would," Nelly admitted. "I am not fond of them. Mrs. Comberford could scarcely hide her aversion to me. As to Susie, she was coldly kind; and Phyllis was a feeble imitation of Susie; they were both profoundly uncomfortable when they called here the other day."

“They were detestable,” Lady Brookstone declared. “Two stiff, self-conscious creatures, eaten up with country pride and ignorance. How could you ever take them into society?”

“You forget, mamma, that I shall not go into society when I am married. Mayne will be poor.”

“But you must not be poor, my darling. How could I bear to see you fretted and worn with all the petty trials of life? You would have to wrestle with a hundred difficulties of which you do not dream. Girls don’t know what a wretched thing a poor marriage is; they look at wedlock through a mist of romance. Oh, Nelly, let me save you from *him!*”

She had drawn the girl into her arms again, and for a few seconds they sat in silence. Then Lady Brookstone rose, and gave Nelly a good-night kiss.

The door closed softly behind her; the coals dropped through the grate bars, and a musical

clock downstairs chimed half past eleven. Still shivering a little, Nelly crept quickly into her white nest, and lay under a canopy of delicate chintz which looked as if it had been woven of flowers. The firelight flickered over the pretty room, gleaming on the dainty trifles on the toilet-table, and touching all the numerous tokens of luxury and refinement which were gathered here. How could she exist without these things, she wondered?

While she remained with the Brookstones she would always keep her place as their adopted child. But, as Mayne's wife, she must take another position. He would set himself steadfastly against Lady Brookstone's influence, and reject her gifts. Nelly foresaw how stiff-necked he would be, and gave a long sigh of trouble.

Impossible to give him up! Impossible to sacrifice all for his sake! What was to be the end of this?

CHAPTER XXIII.

HARD PRESSED.

“And see ye not that braid, braid road,
That lies across that lily leven?”

THOMAS THE RHYMER.

“I DO hate him, Leonard,” said Lady Brookstone to her husband. “I should like to put a knife into his heart.”

“You are still a little bit of a savage, Ursula,” he responded. “Why do you cherish such sanguinary desires, my dear? He really isn’t a bad fellow.”

“He is making her miserable.”

“That’s because he is so lamentably and disastrously in love. If he could only care for her a little less there would be a smoother time for them both.”

“You loved me as passionately as he loves

Nelly, but you did not make me miserable, Leonard!"

"No, dear, because you gave me good measure in return."

As he spoke he stooped and kissed her soft red lips. Lord Brookstone was a lover still.

"I think we are an exceptional couple," she said, resting her dark head on his shoulder for a moment. "But then our love began in such a beautiful way. The flowers and bees, and the soft wind that came blowing across the heath, were all in harmony with us. We felt how good it was to *be*."

"It was very sweet," he replied. "And the best of it all is that the sweetness lingers still. Well, Ursula, where is this pretty Nelly of yours? Not downstairs yet?"

"No; *he* gave her a headache last night, and I have sent up her breakfast. Now I must go and see how she is."

"Oh, if he takes to giving her headaches——"

Lord Brookstone began. But his wife had vanished.

Nelly's brown eyes were languid this morning, and her cheeks were a little paler than usual. Lady Brookstone's keen glance took note of these slight changes, and her anger against Mayne Comberford waxed hotter every instant. It seemed to her that he was a monster, destroying the peace and beauty of her darling's life. In her opinion nothing was too bad for him.

"You have had a bad night, my child; I am sure of it," she exclaimed. "He came to you in your dreams with his odious, threatening face!"

Nelly laughed, but it was a melancholy little laugh without any true mirth in it.

"I did not sleep well," she confessed. "But as to dreams, one doesn't think twice about them."

"Some people think more than twice about

them. If you were to tell me yours, perhaps I could interpret them," said Lady Brookstone mysteriously.

"Mamma, you could not interpret aright. Your hatred colours everything. If I could only make you see that I am more to blame than Mayne!"

"Nelly, you are torturing yourself on his account. Even supposing that you make him suffer a little, what of it? Ten women suffer to one man."

Nelly meditated, with one little hand hidden in the crumpled masses of her brown hair. While she mused, Lady Brookstone looked at her in silence; and then there was a knock at the door.

A maid entered, and the next moment the room was filled with a perfume so deliciously fresh and sweet that it seemed as if the gate of paradise had opened suddenly. The woman was carrying an immense bouquet of

lilies of the valley, loosely tied with pale green ribbons. Nelly gave a faint cry of delight and held out her hands.

“From Mayne,” she murmured, with a flush of gratification which spoke volumes.

“From Lord Wyburn,” said Lady Brookstone, pointing to his card with an air of quiet triumph.

Nelly was disappointed and flattered in the same minute. The chill was quickly followed by the glow. It was a costly offering; she had scarcely ever seen such lilies before; they were so large, and so intensely fragrant that she wondered at them in silent rapture. The colour had come back to her cheeks and the light to her eyes.

“Do you know that you are a very fortunate girl?” Lady Brookstone asked. “How you would be envied if the other women only knew! I mean those other women who have been angling for him ever since he came of age.”

Nelly hid her sweet face among the lilies.

“He loves like a man,” her adopted mother

went on. "He gives like a prince. If he has sinned, this great sea of love will overflow and cleanse his whole life. You will wear some of these lilies this evening."

"I do not want to wear them," the girl answered. "They are lovely, just as they are."

"But you *must* wear a spray or two. To please me, my child. Already you are brighter and better for this gift; ah, what a sunny path lies before you if only you will take the first step towards it!"

"The first step," Nelly repeated, in a dreamy tone. Perhaps her heart told her that she had already taken it.

It would be better for Mayne if she gave him up. The suggestion haunted her all day long, and it was still in her mind when she was dressed for dinner, and wore a cluster of Lord Wyburn's lilies at her breast. No one had told her that he would dine with the Brookstones that night, but she knew it. When he entered

he found her standing near one of the windows looking down at the gorgeous butterflies painted on her fan, and evidently not seeing them. The lilies caught his eye at once.

“Isn’t this the kind of day that sets you longing for the country?” he asked, after the first greetings. “It has been wonderfully warm and bright for an English May.”

“Yes,” she answered, with one of her slow smiles.” But you sent me a charming bit of the country. I am reminded of a Norfolk wood where I used to play. The lilies grew wild there.”

“I am glad,” he said, “to remind you of anything pleasant. I’m always afraid of bringing up visions of horror and fright.”

She was looking at her fan again, and opening and shutting it slowly, conscious that there was no change in her face that he did not see.

“The visions of horror and fright have quite vanished,” she replied after a little pause. “I

have a convenient memory: I efface all the impressions that I don't wish to keep."

"Ah," he said, lowering his voice, "I hope I am not destined to be effaced. If I had the shadow of a reason for supposing that you would keep me in your mind I should be very grateful."

She lifted her beautiful eyes gently. Something in their look emboldened him to go on.

"I suppose I am losing my last atom of self-respect," he continued, drawing a step nearer to her. "Presently you will freeze me into silence."

"No," she said softly, "I have never frozen anything. Mine is a sunny nature, and I hate a wintry atmosphere. And you——are very kind to me."

"Kind to *you!*" he repeated. And at that moment his face assumed a new aspect; it was strangely beautified with the glow of intense feeling.

Nelly went in to dinner with her heart in a tumult; but she was entirely herself so far as outer bearing went. She talked gaily when she was required to talk, and endeared herself beyond measure to old Sir Malcolm Macgregor, who was a distant cousin of Lord Brookstone's, and who was always asked to dine when he came to town with his sister. Miss Macgregor found Lord Wyburn less agreeable than she had expected him to be; but she was a well-contented spinster of sixty, and did not feel herself aggrieved by a young man's lack of interest in her.

Meanwhile Lord Wyburn, dominated by the most genuine feeling he had ever known, was gazing at his idol across the table. It was a family party, and he did not practise the art of self-control as carefully as he might have done under other circumstances.

Moreover, he understood his hostess without words. He knew that if he could not feel comfortable without Nelly, he might have her

with Lady Brookstone's consent. He was quite certain to-night that he could not feel comfortable without her, and he was determined to marry her. The only obstacle that he felt doubtful of overcoming lay in the girl herself.

She was engaged, and it was possible that she liked Comberford well enough to make a fuss about parting with him. He would not see giving her up, of course; Wyburn had seen him wrung with the bitter pangs of jealousy; there was no reason to think that he would submit tamely to his fate.

When the three women repaired to the drawing-room, Nelly left all the talking to Lady Brookstone. She felt that she must have a rest. Her mind was in such a state of confusion that she needed silence and solitude. Where was Mayne? She must think of him with all her might if she wanted to keep true. Did it cost such a mighty effort to be constant? Yes, it did; the first freshness and sweetness of love

were gone; the glow of romance had faded. Lincoln's Inn was a thousand miles away; the old chapel, with its oaken carving and rich windows, was a dream; the girl who had worn simple gowns, and sat there with Louie and Robby, was a phantom. And yet those days were sweet, and the phantom-girl had known some hours of unalloyed happiness.

Lady Brookstone talked diligently to Miss Macgregor, and then went to the piano and sang her an old Scotch song. The men came in while she was singing; Wyburn saw Nelly's figure behind the filmy screen of the lace curtain, and hastened to her side at once.

"At last!" he said. "I thought they were never coming out. It was a happy thought of Lady Brookstone's to sing "Banks and Braes"; the Macgregor was as firmly rooted as one of his own pines till he heard that air. You don't know how impatiently I've been waiting for this moment, Miss Stanley."

She was trying not to show her agitation in her face. But there was a look of soft trouble about her eyes and mouth which he interpreted plainly enough. She was afraid to speak lest there should be an unnatural tone in her voice, and yet she knew the danger that lurked in her silence.

"Nelly," he said, in a low voice, "I'm so tired of being miserable."

He saw that she was trembling.

"Why should you be miserable?" she asked desperately, saying the first thing that came into her head. "Hundreds of people envy you, and there are thousands of things that you can enjoy every day."

"Supposing that the one thing I want is denied me? Supposing that life isn't worth living unless I can get that one thing?"

She closed her eyes an instant, and he looked down at the silky dark lashes resting on her cheek. In the pause that followed her heart

throbbled violently, and she grew visibly paler.

“I cannot help you,” she murmured at last.

“Hush!” he said, “don’t speak again till you can give me some comfort. I can’t be soothed by a few kind words which mean nothing. Give me hope, Nelly; give me something to feed upon. Tell me that you will give yourself to me, and to no one else.”

“But I have promised myself to some one else. You know it;” she faltered confusedly.

“Yes, I know it,” he said, knitting his brows, and dragging at his moustache. “But he can’t keep you bound against your will. Women have thrown men over often enough, and no one has been any the worse for it.”

“*He* would be the worse for it,” she answered in a faint voice.

“Would he?” His tone was low, but savage. “Then there is nothing left for me but to say good-bye. When a man loves a girl as I love you, he must be with her for ever or not at all.”

There was another pause;—to how many dramas has such a pause been the prologue? The nook in which they sat was an alcove, where a shaded lamp was burning on a little table covered with flowers. Outside a window was the chaste beauty of a night in May; the lace curtains, falling round them, partially concealed them from the other people in the room.

Nelly looked absently at the flower-table, and wondered whether this was all a dream? The white arum lilies lifted their pure chalices to the light, and some crimson leaves glowed as if they had been steeped in wine. Lord Brookstone and old Sir Malcolm sat with their backs to the alcove at the other end of the room. Miss Macgregor and her hostess occupied a sofa turned sidewise towards the nook which sheltered the young people. Lady Brookstone talked on, or listened, laughing pleasantly now and then; but Nelly felt that she knew what kind of scene was being enacted in the recess.

Lady Brookstone did know, and felt that the time had come for her to interfere. If the girl were left without aid she might give an unqualified refusal and spoil everything.

“You must decide quickly,” said Wyburn, breaking the silence in a gloomy tone. “I must have you for my very own, or I must leave you. I’m sick of dreaming of you, and wanting you all day and all night. At present you are a torture to me.”

“Oh,” she thought, “I am giving up a great deal! To say ‘no’ now, and think of it to-morrow, will be hard. And yet my heart cries out for Mayne.”

“Speak,” he said passionately.

She clasped her hands nervously in her lap, tried to say something, and looked at him with imploring eyes.

Just then, with a swift rush of soft silken skirts, Lady Brookstone crossed over to the alcove, and gently drew the misty curtains aside.

“Lord Wyburn,” she said, “I am concerned about this child of mine. She was quite pale and languid this morning, and she hasn’t been herself all day. What is to be done with her?”

The girl drew a deep breath of relief, and raised one little hand to her forehead. The man looked at her with a glance that was half pitying, half-questioning. Perhaps he had pressed her too far. There were real tears glistening in her eyes.

“I have been asking her to answer an important question,” he said, still too much in earnest to drop into the usual society manner.

“The dark ladye” looked at him with a smile of intelligence—a smile which somehow conveyed to him the impression that she was entirely on his side.

“This is a bad time for asking questions,” she rejoined quietly. “Nelly is nervous, and I must send her early to her room. To do her justice she is less troubled with nerves than

most girls are, so I shall treat this attack indulgently."

The tête-à-tête in the alcove was broken up, but Lord Wyburn was not sent away in despair. Nelly collected herself, and told him about the troublesome headache which had come on early in the morning; and when he departed he carried with him the memory of a farewell glance which invited him to come again.

Lady Brookstone went into Nelly's room that night, but she was far too wise to let her sit up and talk. She dismissed the maid and undressed the girl herself, soothing her as tenderly as if she had been a sick child.

"You will never know any peace till you have decided to part with Mayne," she said, stroking the rich hair with gentle touches. "A decision is a troublesome thing; but indecision is simple torture. Go to sleep, and dream of the splendid lot which awaits Lady Wyburn. I'll save you from yourself, dear, if I can."

“It would be a sin to marry Lord Wyburn without loving him,” murmured Nelly, half magnetized by the caressing hand.

“It is a sin which all the girls in society are very anxious to commit,” said Lady Brookstone with a cynical smile. “Good night, my sweet.”

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WAY SHE TOOK.

Pleasure, with pain for leaven;
Summer, with flowers that fell;
Remembrance fallen from heaven,
And madness risen from hell.

SWINBURNE.

FOR an hour or more did “the dark ladye” sit by Nelly’s pillow, watching her after she had fallen asleep, and rejoicing silently in that unbroken slumber.

As she watched, she recalled the brown baby face which had rested on her bosom in the early days of her married life. Oh, the aching void which had never closed up after her loss! And at last, after years of passionate sorrow, the child had been given back; a child no longer, but a woman, beautiful enough to realize the visions that she had seen. Never for an instant did Ursula doubt that Nelly was her own daughter. The idea had taken such a firm root in her mind that it could hardly have been torn up, even if there had arisen some positive proof that it had originated in a mistake.

Nor did Lord Brookstone even attempt to reason his wife out of her belief. If it was an error it had, at any rate, a most happy effect on Ursula's life.

Moreover he thought it quite likely that her instinct was right. The likeness between those two beautiful faces seemed daily to increase;

their voices were the echoes of each other. Ursula had a darker skin and a deeper tone; but Nelly's features had the same outlines; her figure the same curves; her eyes the same strange witchery of expression. Lord Brookstone was getting very fond of the girl himself, although he felt that her love-affairs were becoming perplexing to the last degree.

To let her marry Mayne Comberford was to ensure her final separation from Ursula. Mayne had been strongly opposed to the intercourse from its very beginning; even to Brookstone himself he was only coldly civil, resenting Nelly's position in his house, and continually throwing out hints of her speedy removal. Brookstone, whose lazy, easy-going nature made him slow in taking offence, forgave a good deal that would have irritated a less amiable man, and pitied Comberford rather than blamed him. But even the most tolerant temper has its limits, and Leonard began at last

to take Ursula's view of Nelly's betrothed.

He could not help seeing, as the weeks went on, that Nelly herself was feeling the weight of her chain. Her brow was always clouded after a visit from Mayne; he invariably left her silent and depressed. Clearly there was "a little rift" which widened every time they met, and would soon be past mending.

He was sorry for the girl; but if the truth must be told, he was still more sorry for the man. In spite of a slowly-increasing dislike to Mayne, he realized that here was a nature which a great passion was spoiling very fast. The chances were that if he had met Comberford in the backwoods, or on a desert island, they would have been true friends and comrades to the end of their days. And some consciousness of that undeveloped possibility made him bestow many a compassionate thought on Mayne, even when that luckless fellow had given Nelly a headache, and roused all the

savage instincts lurking in the bosom of Lady Brookstone.

Still, he felt that the matter must, in one way or another, be brought to a conclusion.

But if Nelly were free, what would she do with her freedom? Lord Brookstone was not blind to the fact of Wyburn's admiration, and guessed that Nelly's release would only be the beginning of a new bondage.

"Comberford is far the better man of the two," he mused. "If she married him she might reasonably expect a life of happiness of the good, tranquil kind. But the other fellow! Well, he hasn't been any worse, perhaps, than most men of his stamp; but there's something about him that one doesn't like. Is it the shifty look in the eyes, I wonder? I don't know, and don't see why I should try to know. Nelly is a sweet girl, but she will have to take her chance in common with all the other sweet girls who leap into matrimony."

After a night's refreshing sleep, Nelly awoke to the consciousness that she had a decision to make, and it must be made soon. Lady Brookstone was tender and caressing; but she wisely left the girl to herself.

"To-morrow is Sunday," Nelly said thoughtfully. "Mamma, I should like to go once more to the chapel at Lincoln's Inn and sit in the old pew with Louie and Robby."

"Why do you weaken your mind by thinking of that dreary place?" Lady Brookstone asked. "What fascination it is, my child, which draws you to gloomy chapels and ugly legal buildings in this lovely weather, I can't imagine!"

"But Louie and Robby——"

"They are gone into the country. Lady Florence will follow them very soon. She is perfectly devoted to those children, and it is the greatest relief to know that they are not to be taken from her after all. You see, her

brother's new wife turns out to be too delicate to take charge of them."

"If I had known——" Nelly began.

Lady Brookstone looked at her with tender reproach in her glance.

"Would you have given me up for them?" she said. "No, child, you would not. There is a sort of glamour hanging over those days in Russell Square; but it is all illusion, Nelly. You forget that you were always longing for greater things when you were a little governess."

The girl was silent, but something within her assented to Lady Brookstone's words.

"As I have already said, Nelly, I will try to save you from yourself," the other continued. "I sometimes see a vision of you which makes my heart ache. I see you sitting by your fireside in a poor man's home, mending his children's clothes, darning, patching, saving, as the wives of poor men have to do. Your face is pinched and thin, your dress is old-fashioned

and faded, the bloom of your life is gone.”

Nelly was silent still.

“There is another vision which pleases me better, dear. I see you queen of a rich man’s house and heart. I see you wearing your title with that easy grace which comes to you by nature; I watch you while you accept the homage of the world around you; I find your beauty unfaded, your mind untroubled by petty cares. And I want to make this dream of mine a true thing.”

“Perhaps,” Nelly said slowly, “the first vision is the right one.”

“Oh, Nelly, you cannot mean *that!*”

“I don’t know what I mean, mamma. Only it is possible to have a faded face and a fresh heart. One has to choose between the outside things and the inside things.”

“The outer things work to the innermost,” Lady Brookstone answered gravely. And then she went away.

Nelly sat alone, and pondered deeply. She dreaded her next interview with Mayne, and yet she had a yearning to see his face and hear his voice. There was a little note crushed in her hand, and she smoothed the crumpled paper, and read it over carefully again.

“DEAREST NELLY,” (it ran,)

“I shall come early to-morrow afternoon and take you for a walk. We always misunderstand each other in that house. Let us go to our old haunt under the trees in Lincoln's Inn, and see how we get on. It is the most sacred spot on earth to me.

“Yours ever and ever,

“MAYNE.”

If she permitted herself to be lured to the old trysting-place there could be but one end to the interview. Everything there would plead

for Mayne; the very trees and birds would take his side. If parting words were to be spoken, it was not there that she could speak them; not there, where she had listened to the first avowal of his love, and felt the first touch of his lips.

There was still an hour and a half before dinner. She was sitting in the pretty bed-room which Lady Brookstone had fitted up for her use; and she looked round musingly at the faint pink and delicate blue of the flowered draperies; the padded sofa, heaped with cushions, and all the dainty devices of ornamentation which had become familiar to her eyes. It would be terrible to go and live somewhere in stuffy lodgings or in a cheap little house; terrible to miss all the graces and refinements which made life so charming in Park Lane.

And yet, if she consented to go to Lincoln's Inn, she knew that she should make the sacrifice. She knew, too, that other women had made just such sacrifices, and had never

regretted them; but she dared not say to herself that she should never regret.

She had been sitting in her favourite easy-chair with her hands clasped wearily about her knee. She unclasped them sharply when some one knocked at the door, and said "come in" in an impatient voice.

The maid entered, bringing another note. It was not a note from Mayne this time, and Nelly's hand trembled as she took it from the salver. The door closed on the servant, and as she tore off the cover her heart throbbed painfully. Half afraid to read the letter, she glanced up for an instant at an oval mirror which was among the ornaments on the opposite wall. It reflected her own graceful figure in a cambric *negligée* bordered with lace, and showed her a face pale with perplexity and pain.

"I shall be harassed into an illness," she thought, unfolding the note. It was the first that she had ever received from Lord Wyburn, and ran as follows:

“MY DARLING,

“ I refuse to believe that you can ever belong to any one else. I hate you when you tell me that another man claims you, and it is impossible to live in this state of torture and suspense. Write me a line to-night. I will send a messenger for your reply.

“ Nelly, you must be all or nothing to me. Be my wife, or never see me again.”

The lines seemed to swim before her eyes, only the signature, clear and plain, stood out sharply from the mist that blurred the page. The fate that she had dreamed of was come to her; all her brilliant fancies might be realized if——

To the last day of her life she would remember these silent minutes, spent alone in her room, with that letter lying on her lap. The clock ticked on the mantelpiece; there was a cheery chirping of London birds outside the windows;

for other people life was going on in the old way. But for Nelly? She had come to the place where two ways met, and she had to halt in the path and choose between them.

“Behold I set before you this day a blessing and a curse.”

When and where had she heard those words? They seemed to be an echo from the old chapel of Lincoln's Inn, and brought with them a vision of Sundays past. “A blessing and a curse;” are there not curses disguised in flowers, and blessings hidden among thorns?

She put her hand upon her breast, and something rose beneath it which gave her suffocating pain. Then suddenly she stood up, pressing both hands hard upon the soft bosom that ached under the delicate cambric, and felt that the suffering was becoming too great for endurance. Presently she fell upon her knees, her arms flung out across the seat of her chair.

“Why do I struggle?” she cried, between

her sobs. "I never was meant for him; I was not good enough. If I let him take me I should only disappoint him. My fate is coming upon me; I feel it near. But I suffer—oh, how I suffer!"

A few minutes later Lady Brookstone entered without knocking, and found her sitting at her desk. She had just finished writing a note.

"Well, mamma," she said, in a shaking voice, "I have made my choice. Lord Wyburn insists on an answer to-night, and I have promised to marry him."

She rose from her seat and stood up trembling, with two large tears falling upon her cheeks.

"It will be the best thing that can happen to Mayne," she went on hurriedly. "He has an ideal for everything, especially for women. He was always telling himself that I was perfectly good and loving and faithful, and trying to believe that this was true of me. But it

was not. And after all, what right had he to expect so much from me? It was too great a strain."

"You must not think about it any more," Lady Brookstone said soothingly.

"There won't be any time for thinking, after to-night. Mamma, if we had gone on I could almost have persuaded myself that I was all he thought me. I knew it was only a fancy, but if I had kept on fancying do you think I might have grown to be good?"

The words cost her such an effort that her voice broke.

"My child, you are not quite yourself," said Lady Brookstone, taking Nelly in her arms. "You are over-excited, and ready to accuse yourself of all sorts of sins. There is no harm done really. Mr. Comberford was a prig, and a prig never has a heart. Depend upon it, he will console himself very soon."

The gentle matter-of-fact manner had a quiet-

ing influence. After a moment Nelly withdrew from her adopted mother's embrace and looked at her with wistful eyes.

"I suppose you are right," she sighed. "Perhaps I am over-excited. I know I am tired, and I don't want any dinner."

"Nonsense, dearest. Nothing makes a girl so ugly as going without dinner. You have just half-an-hour. Let me dress you—Mason will only irritate you if she comes. I know she is bursting with curiosity."

And Lady Brookstone prevailed, as she always did.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE END OF THE DREAM.

The hope I dreamed of was a dream,
Was but a dream; and now I wake
Exceeding comfortless, and worn, and old,
For a dream's sake.

C. ROSSETTI.

“It was a sudden thought,” said Lady Brookstone.

“It was a capital idea,” Lord Wyburn replied.

They were spending their Sunday afternoon in a shady garden by the side of the river. Carriages, servants, provisions, had been pressed into their service early in the morning, and then they had all gone down to this cottage by the Thames, which belonged to Lord REXBURY and was very seldom visited by any member of his family. The old housekeeper, who took charge of the place, had got over her surprise

at their arrival as best she could; and the excursion had turned out, fortunately, to be a complete success.

The plan had been laid over-night, and had had its origin in "the dark ladye's" fertile brain.

Sunday afternoon would, as she knew too well, bring Mayne Comberford to Park Lane, determined to see his betrothed. He was quite capable, she thought, in his fiery mood, of forcing his way in, and making a scene. Let him come to the house if he liked, but he should not find Nelly there. A letter would be given him, and he would be politely informed that the family were out of town.

All the sweets of early summer seemed to be crowded into this old river-garden; the blossoms were running over into the field that shelved down to the waterside, so that you came across unexpected flowers in the long grass outside the fence. Nelly drew in deep breaths of hawthorn-scented air; white butterflies

looked like a shower of loose petals fluttering in the sunshine; in the field there were heads of purple clover nodding to the soft breath that swept over them. Life here was like a sweet monotonous song; the birds, the bees, and the tinkle of a fountain made a drowsy music that began at sunrise, and went on all through the long, long day.

Nelly, with the summer blooms thick around her, was herself the richest flower of all. Her face was coloured with those mellow tints that belong to a garden; the breeze stirred the soft hair which had the brown gloss of last year's leaves; in her eyes there was the look of dreams and slumber which Lord Wyburn had loved from their first meeting. She was languid to-day, but never cold; she listened to all his impassioned utterances with her slow smile, and seemed to have forgotten Mayne's existence. They did not speak of the past; they accepted the present without question or scruple; it was the wisest thing to do.

While they dreamed away the afternoon among flowers and trickling waters, Mayne was going down to the very depths of that dark valley which awaits all those who "love, not wisely, but too well."

He had gone to Park Lane, and had come away with Nelly's little letter in his hand. Only a little letter; he had read it from beginning to end in a second or two; but there was something in those few words which crushed out the faintest spark of hope.

He walked on, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, although the London world was at its gayest, and Society had turned out of doors to enjoy the sunshine. "She never loved me," was the despairing cry of the man's heart. He had been a fool—a poor self-absorbed, blinded fool.

"She never loved me;" the carriage-wheels took up the dismal strain; everything that could make sound repeated the words with maddening persistence. The warm scent of the

mignonette seemed to stifle him as he passed the windows gay with flowers; all at once he began to pine in a wild way for a breath of the sea. He thought of a seaport town; of wharfs with their tarred sides decked with seaweed and splashed with white foam; of rough voices hailing him as he stepped upon the deck of a good ship outward bound. Who has not, at some moment of his life, longed to put miles of salt water between himself and all that he has ever loved? To the disappointed and unhappy there is a note of invitation in the everlasting voice of the waves.

He wandered on, not knowing whither he was going, not recognizing familiar thoroughfares and buildings, never seeing any of the faces he met. He had no recollection of getting into Holborn; yet somehow he found himself there—found himself turning into a narrow passage which led to Lincoln's Inn Fields—saw the stately trees waving in the Square, and

stopped suddenly with a groan that could not be repressed.

“Mayne, old man, is anything the matter?”

He looked with dull eyes into Seabert Laurice’s face, and felt a friendly hand grasp his arm.

“Yes,” he answered stupidly; “I’ve had a blow, that’s all.”

“Ah!”

Some instinct seemed to tell Laurice what the blow was. Perhaps he had known that it would fall, sooner or later; perhaps he had been watching, half unconsciously, for this moment to come.

“Come back with me, Mayne,” he said, gently tightening his grasp. “I was merely going out for a stroll. We’ll talk the matter over together.”

Still dull with pain, Mayne suffered himself to be led to the gateway, and they went through it into the enclosure which was haunted

with memories of Nelly. The calm of Sunday reigned over the place; a wave of organ-music came faintly from the chapel; the plane-trees whispered in the sunshine. Seabert's quaint dwelling, brave with summer greenery, looked just the same as when Mayne had first entered the narrow door.

He sat down in Seabert's chair by the open window; and for some moments there was silence. His face had changed visibly; it was sharpened and wasted with anguish; but the chief alteration was in the expression of the eyes. The hopeless look in them was sad to see.

"I don't know why I came here," he said at last. "There isn't much to tell. I went to Park Lane, and found no one there; but Nelly had left a letter."

Laurice stood leaning against the chimney-piece. He knew what he had to hear.

"She has thrown me over," Mayne continued, in a hard, level voice. "We had a quarrel a

few days ago. She says that we should be always quarrelling if we came together, and it is best for us both to be parted."

"It is best," Laurice said gravely. "You will know, later on, that it is best."

"I know it even now." For a second his sunken eyes met his friend's gaze. "But that does not make me less miserable. She has left me nothing—nothing but the memory of the sweetest face God ever made. Everything else was of my own giving, and I was lavish enough, heaven knows! She had beauty; and I must needs supply her with a heart and soul taken out of my own. The absurdity of the whole business strikes one, doesn't it?"

Laurice was about to speak, but something rose in his throat and stopped utterance.

"Even now," Mayne went on, "it is the loss of the idealized Nelly that pains me—not the loss of the real. You see I am able to explain my own feelings very clearly. Nevertheless, the

wound is too deep to heal. I shall carry it with me to the grave."

Seabert did not contradict him. He had seen men suffer before, and had heard similar assertions before; but there was something in Mayne's anguish which set him apart from other men. It was not that "the lamp was shattered"; it was the light that had gone out, leaving a black void which would darken his whole life.

"Try to remember," Laurice said at last, "that there are those in the world who love you—those who have a right to expect you to love them. Your mother and sisters——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Mayne, rising slowly from the chair. "They shall lose nothing because I have lost everything. I will give them more than they have ever had before. Don't be afraid for them or for me."

"No," Laurice replied, "I am not afraid. And you have not lost everything. The power

to idealize is yours still; but you will use it in another way."

"You are a good fellow, Seabert," Mayne said, grasping his hand. "I won't disappoint you if I can help it. Now I am going back to Mr. Cottrell."

"I will go with you and tell him everything," decided Laurice, seeing how haggard and worn was the face which Mayne turned towards him. All the weariness, the anxious pain, the doubts that had harassed him were telling on him now; he could endure no more; he had borne the strain too long.

Mr. Cottrell was sitting alone in his sunny room when the two men entered together. He lifted his grey head slowly, and looked at them before he spoke; it was evident that he had been plunged in deep thought.

"You have come to tell me something," he said, with a peculiar quietness in his voice. "Sit down, Laurice; come and sit here."

There was a chair near the little table on which his tea-cup was standing, and the barrister went at once to his side. Mayne glanced at them silently for a moment, and then withdrew to his own room.

"Mayne's dream is ended," Mr. Cottrell said. "I can read the ending in his face. And I knew it would come."

"It seems to have come suddenly," Seabert answered. "I have not told him what I think of that girl, but——"

"Don't tell him what you think of her, Laurice; it will do no good. One could see the end from the beginning. He found a woman's face, and manufactured a soul for it. The face was real; the soul was an imaginary thing."

"He has admitted as much," said Seabert. "And he will not be caught in her snare again; I have no fear of that. What I fear is the effect of the blow."

"The effect of the blow will be an illness,"

Mr. Cottrell replied. "We must pull him through it as well as we can. His mother will come, and that sensible sister of his."

"Susie," Laurice said involuntarily.

"Susie," repeated the old man with a shrewd glance. "She is the sort of girl who is never taken by surprise. A most valuable girl, in my opinion."

"And in mine also," said the barrister frankly. "Yes, Mayne is going to be ill. I felt sure of it when I met him an hour ago. He had just come from Park Lane with Nelly's letter."

"He did not see her? There was no parting scene?"

"No; she was too wise to have a scene. He was told that the family had gone out of town, and the letter was given him."

"Ah," said Mr. Cottrell, "she has been true to her real self, that's all."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SICK-ROOM.

“I would forget her; but a fever she
Reigns in my blood, and will remembered be.”

LOVE'S LABOUR LOST.

ONE night Mayne Comberford thought that he was standing in the chapel at Lincoln's Inn, and waiting for Nelly. It was not night there, but broad daylight; the painted windows were richer and brighter than he had ever seen them before. Suddenly he saw a bridal procession coming up the aisle. The bride was clothed in soft white robes, draped round her in the fashion of the East; but her sweet face was unveiled. She looked at him as she passed; her cheeks were pale, and there were tears in her dark eyes. It was Nelly; he read a fare-

well in that sad glance, and knew that she was not meant for him.

There was a sound of timbrels, followed by the music of a stringed instrument; and then a voice, deep and melancholy, chanted words that he knew.

“Thy love to me was wonderful,” it sang, “passing the love of women.” He looked up, and saw that the form of King David in the painted window had come to life; it was no longer the stiff figure which had always met his gaze, but a bearded warrior, stern and strong. “Passing the love of women,” repeated the deep voice, and the keen eyes flashed him a look of pitying scorn. He had been right, after all—that kingly poet of Israel—and the hearts of women in all ages and all climes had ever been the same.

Then the whole scene changed in a moment, and he was travelling through the darkness of a stormy night—climbing hills, plunging into

ravines, hearing the roar of waters, and the roll of thunder. What a wild journey it was, and how long it lasted! When and where would it come to an end?

In other words, Mayne was in a fever, and delirious. He remained in this state for more than a week.

Still another week, and he had found his way out of the land of phantoms, and was safely back in the everyday world again.

In those first days of restored consciousness it seemed a very pleasant and tranquil world. He was far too weak for passionate regrets; a calm had stolen over him; the heart's tumult was at rest. The first face that greeted him on his recovery, was the face of his mother beside his pillow, and he felt as if he had gone back to his childhood once more.

There was nothing now to come between that dear heart and his. She was all that she had been to him in his early days; all, and

more. Happy are those men and women to whom God has revealed Himself through a mother's love, for it is of all loves the most human and the most divine.

To poor Mrs. Comberford, this time of her son's slow recovery was a period of quiet bliss. He was entirely her own boy again. His eyes followed her, as she moved about the room, with that look of love which she had missed so long. If she absented herself, even for a few minutes, he would ask for her; and when she returned she could read her welcome in his wasted face. And thus there was granted to this anxious soul,

“For all her sorrows, all her tears
An over-payment of delight.”

When her husband came up to town, full of concern for his wife as well as for his son, he found that she had renewed her youth.

She seemed to thrive in the atmosphere of the sick-room, and to be lifted above weariness and weakness. Mr. Comberford regarded her with astonishment; she was an inexplicable riddle to him.

"I thought that Mayne's illness would have almost killed your mother," he said to Susie.

"It was his engagement which almost killed her," replied Susie quietly.

Mr. Comberford ran his fingers through his hair, and walked up and down Mr. Cottrell's dining-room with long strides. The old gentleman was enjoying his daily allowance of sunshine in Lincoln's Inn Fields; he had behaved with quiet kindness to the Comberfords in their trouble, and had comforted them with his predictions of Mayne's recovery.

"Well, well, well," muttered Mr. Comberford, without pausing in his walk. "I never could understand why your mother disliked Nelly; but she was right. The girl had no more

heart than a doll. And if what Laurice has heard is true——”

“It is quite true,” Susie answered. “I have been expecting it.”

“Wyburn admired her very much when she was staying with us. I noticed it myself. There was that business with the bull, you know. That brought them together, you see.”

“They would have come together without the bull,” said Susie, in her tranquil voice. “Nelly was conscious of her power; she was ambitious, and Lady Brookstone has smoothed her path. Father, I have seen it all coming on; and Mayne saw it, but he fought against his fate. Poor dear Mayne!”

“He will get over it, Susie.”

“He will get over the illness, father.”

“But the disappointment—he’ll get over that, too. You don’t mean to say that he’ll go through life regretting the loss of that girl? Pooh, I know men better than you do!”

“Yes, father; I don't know many men. But I know Mayne, and he is not quite like others, I believe.”

“Nonsense; there's nothing uncommon in the lad. Your mother thinks him a remarkable genius, and you see him with her eyes.”

“A genius,” Susie repeated musingly. “I am not sure that I know what a genius is. But I think there is something uncommon in Mayne. He has always been in love with a spirit-friend, and he thought that he had found her in bodily form. He has never found her, and never will.”

“He'll find her one of these days,” Mr. Comberford said, with easy assurance. “And he is getting on fast. I looked in upon him a minute ago and he was asleep. Your mother was dozing in the arm-chair by his side, and you ought to be out of doors. What a glorious day it is!”

“Yes,” Susie answered, buttoning her gloves.

“You’ll be glad enough to get back to Hartside,” said her father, patting her cheek affectionately. “Glad to get back to Phyllis and the roses.”

“Yes,” responded Susie again. And then a deeper tinge of pink crept over the fair cheek that his hand had touched. Was this second „yes” quite genuine? There were no roses in Lincoln’s Inn; and the geraniums, planted in stiff rows, made a brave struggle for existence and were guarded with jealous care. But another flower, which has less need of culture, had begun to flourish in these old gardens, and was already a rich bud, full of promises. It was this which sweetened the dull precinct, sacred to the law, and turned the whole place into an Eden.

It is just possible that Seabert Laurice knew the hour of Susie’s release from the sick-room. Anyhow, he joined her before she had walked many paces, and she was not in the least surprised to see him.

"How is Mayne to-day?" was his first question.

"Still making progress," she replied.

"And you?"

A smile stole slowly over the girl's noble face.

"I am very well," she said. "It is so good to see mother and her boy together; there is nothing between them now."

"A sick-room is sometimes a place of reunion," Laurice remarked. "Have you heard anything more from Miss Stanley?"

Susie's mouth grew stern in a moment.

"A little packet arrived," she answered. "It was addressed to Mayne in her hand-writing, and we guessed the contents. We talked it over together, and mother decided that it was best for her to open it."

"I think she was right," said Seabert.

"Mayne was still very ill, you know. We feared any agitation for him, and we thought there might be something that required an acknow-

ledgment. We opened the packet, and found that ruby ring which the poor dear fellow had given her.”

She was unable to go on; her lips were pressed closely together, as if she had resolved to keep in the bitter words that were trying to escape.

“I can understand,” said Laurice gently, “how painful it must have been to see it. Did she write anything?”

“Only two or three words. They were——‘It is better that I should not keep your gift; but try to think as kindly of me as you can.’”

Seabert muttered something under his breath, and then they walked for a little way in silence.

“I wrote to her.” Susie broke the pause suddenly. “It was not so hard for me as it would have been for mother. But it was——not easy.”

“Easy?” he repeated. “It must have cost you a great effort to be decently civil!”

“It did,” she said. “And I had to think a good deal before I could do it. I had to remember that we had never loved her heartily at the beginning. I had to remind myself of poor dear mother’s dislike, and of all the unkind little things that we had said about her obscure birth. I did not venture to write until I had recalled much that I would rather forget.”

Seabert looked at her with a grave, tender gaze.

“Will you tell me what you wrote?” he asked.

“Not many words. I think they were these:—‘I will try to forgive you, Nelly; and when Mayne gets well I will give him back your ring. He has been dangerously ill, and his recovery is slow. Good-bye.’ And then I signed my name; that was all.”

There was something simple, and yet lofty about Susie Comberford which made it difficult to forget her. That calm, quiet face of hers was so steadfast in its truthfulness that weaker

faces looked mean beside it. It was her repose which impressed itself upon Laurice, more than anything else; but it was the repose of strength, not-of indifference.

“Perhaps you scarcely realize that we disappointed Nelly,” she said, after a brief silence. “But we did; I am sure of it.”

“I thought you were all very kind,” he replied.

“We were as kind as we could be; but that wasn’t *very* kind. It was exasperating to see Mayne lavishing his entire devotion upon her; and our coldness must have depressed her. We did not mean to be cold; yet I know she found our atmosphere chilly.”

“I see that you are trying to excuse her a little. It is generous in you,” he said.

“Not generous, only just. I love my brother so much that it is very hard to be just. And after all, he expected more than she was able to bestow.”

"I wonder," Seabert said, "whether *every* love-affair is a disappointment?"

She turned her head and looked at him. Her quiet glance seemed to ask if he were in earnest before she spoke.

"Perhaps," she answered, with the shadow of a smile, "it is safest to conclude that it must be."

"I don't see why we should come to such a disheartening conclusion," he exclaimed. "Because we have a particularly miserable love-affair before our eyes, are we to give up believing in the sweetness of love? No."

Susie looked at him again, and her smile deepened. Then she suddenly became grave.

"I almost dread Mayne's return to health," she remarked. "He will find life very uninteresting at first. Nelly has taken everything; she has swept his heart bare. It is very sad—oh, very sad!"

Mr. Cottrell was sitting on a bench under

the trees when he saw the serious young couple coming towards him. The shadow of Mayne's sorrow was resting on them both; but it was a shadow which let glimpses of sunlight through the gloom.

They came to his bench, and sat down with him under the leaves; and then all three began to talk of the future that waited for Mayne. Their hearts were full of him; the matters which concerned themselves could be let alone for a while; all their thoughts, all their sympathies were with him that day.

CHAPTER XXVII.

PARTED WAYS.

“Peace, peace, such a small lamp illumines, on this highway,
So dimly, so few steps in front of my feet,—
Yet shows me that her way is parted from my way,—
Out of sight, beyond light, at what goal may we meet?”

D. G. ROSSETTI.

NELLY'S marriage was to be one of the last great events of the season.

She had done battle with herself, and was composed enough now to relieve Lady Brookstone's mind of all anxiety. Young as she was, this girl had fought almost as hard to subdue her good impulses, as a saint who is struggling against evil. She had conquered; and she could take the deepest interest in all the beautiful costumes which were coming home, and try the effect of the jewels which were so lavishly bestowed on her by her new lover.

“This is the best of all, mamma,” she said. “Anyhow it suits me best.”

“You are so fond of rich colours,” replied Lady Brookstone, looking at her admiringly. “So am I. If Leonard had not educated my taste I might have broken out into a gaudy style, and shocked everybody. I think the love of intense hues is an instinct of our race.”

Nelly stood before the glass, gazing with childish pleasure at the last costly bauble which had come from Lord Wyburn. It was a band of dead gold, thickly set with large rubies which burned and glittered as if each gem contained a fount of fire. She had clasped it round her slender neck, and as the precious stones glowed and shone, they added to her dress and aspect the one appropriate charm, which nothing else in the world could have supplied.

“There are bracelets too,” said her adopted mother, still watching her with proud satisfaction.

Nelly put them on, and then fell to gazing at herself again, as if she had fallen in love with her own image. Going nearer to the mirror she bent forward till her face almost touched its reflection; the gems seemed to overflow with deeply-coloured radiance; they were wonderful in size and hue. Suddenly, she drew back with a faint sigh, and shivered slightly, as if a breath of cold air had passed over her.

“What is the matter, my child?” Lady Brookstone asked, with a quick pang of apprehension.

“Nothing, mamma,” she answered hastily. “Nothing at all—only just a remembrance.”

“Do not harbour it for a moment,” entreated Lady Brookstone in an anxious tone. “It has driven the colour out of your cheeks!”

There had come to Nelly the thought of the first ruby she had ever possessed; the ruby set in her betrothal ring. She had sent back the gift to Mayne when his hands were too

teeble to grasp it. Susie's brief letter had told her that it would be restored to him when he had strength enough to bear the sight of it, and that was all. Nelly had dispatched a hasty note full of regret and remorse; but the sister had not written again.

Where was Mayne now? July was coming to an end, and her new life would soon begin. All sharpness of emotion had been exhausted after she had fought her fight, and she felt that she had grown utterly worthless in her own eyes. But at this moment there came to her a sickening consciousness of the ruin she had wrought, and there was a swift fear of retribution. It was a foolish fear, she thought—a mere passing cloud. Hundreds of girls had acted as she had done, and no harm had come of it. And yet she was silly and unreasonable enough to wish, that the ring she had returned to the giver had been anything but a ruby ring.

She spoke her thoughts aloud, looking at Lady Brookstone with half-frightened eyes.

“Mamma,” she said, “you don’t think I shall be punished for my conduct to Mayne, do you? When I remember my old ring, I am almost afraid to wear these rubies.”

“Don’t be afraid of anything,” “the dark ladye” answered. “Fear invites the thing feared. It is an invocation. Nelly, you have done nothing that deserves punishment. It is Mayne who is punished for his temper and tyranny. He courted his fate.”

Nelly sighed again, but she kissed Lady Brookstone and took comfort from her lips. Her first love was over; it had died with the May butterflies. There were the jewel-box and the trousseau to occupy her mind, and there was a little indecision about the way of wearing her bridal veil. Lady Brookstone said it ought to be thrown back from a face which was too beautiful to be hidden. The rich white dress

came home and was tried on, and was found to fit perfectly.

The days fled swiftly; looking back upon them later, Nelly seemed to see them through a mist of tulle. When she shut her eyes she saw nothing but ,heaps of white silk, pearls, orange-blossom, and stephanotis. Mayne's face never appeared at all; it was buried under all the bridal finery, and never visited her dreams.

She would have kept vigil on the eve of her wedding-day if "the dark ladye" had not watched her with more than a mother's care. Lady Brookstone sent away Mason, and undressed her adopted daughter with her own hands.

"If I leave you, Nelly, you will sit up and get sentimental," she said. "I shall stay here, and soothe you to sleep."

Nelly yielded to the spell without resistance. Her brown head sank peacefully into the deep pillow, and her sleep was long and sweet.

The wedding-day dawned rainy and dim, an omen which made the bride's heart sink within her. She had a passionate love of sunshine, and sighed for the flower-sweet hours which had gone by without a cloud. But no one listened when she deplored the rain-fall; they were all too busy in dressing her, to look at the weather.

“There never was anybody so lovely, my lady,” said Mason, when she had arranged the last fold of the rich white gown. “No, there never was; and there never will be again!”

Lady Brookstone heard the ring of truth in the flattering words. Her heart throbbed with gratified pride as she looked at her darling, robed like a princess, radiant with such beauty as is seldom seen in the fashionable world of to-day. To see Nelly was to think of temples and palms and the strange richness of Oriental flowers; and some one who saw her that day

remarked that she was not so much a woman as a dream.

She spoke and moved with only a vague consciousness of her surroundings. There was not the slightest flutter of nervousness in her demeanour; she was almost languid in her queenly calm. But once, as she stood before the altar, did a sharp flash of remembrance cross her mind. Somewhere or other she had beheld this scene before; but where and when?

Mr. Cottrell's dim study in Lincoln's Inn Fields; the ancient mirror hanging on the wall; the quaint cabinet with its open drawers; the two men looking earnestly at the girl who sat holding a ball of crystal in her hand. She saw all this as in a picture, and recalled that momentary vision, clear and bright, which had risen out of those crystal depths to meet her gaze.

It would scarcely have surprised her to wake,

as from a trance, and find herself sitting in the dim study again with the crystal in her grasp. She would hardly have wondered if she had looked up to meet Mayne's eyes, and feel the touch of his hand. It seemed to her now that she was only a phantom bride—a shadow surrounded by shadows,—and that her own true life was waiting for her outside this realm of dreams.

She saw, in a vague way, that the church was full of people, and knew that outside there was a great crowd assembled to catch a glimpse of the bride. The ring was on her finger; her husband was by her side.

And still with that calm face and those dreaming eyes she swept down the aisle to the west door, unmoved by the gaze of the throng.

The rain was falling still; only the faintest gleams of silvery light were breaking over wood and field and winding stream, as the train sped

on its way. Nelly, in her corner, looked out upon the shifting landscape, and tried to realize that she was a dignified married woman. The bridegroom, who had dropped his paper to look at *her*, suddenly caught both her little hands in his.

“Wake up, dear,” he cried, giving the hands a pressure. “You have been in a dream all the morning. There is a lovely look of slumber in those brown eyes of yours, but I want to see them shine on me. I’m getting quite poetical in my talk since I’ve known you. I wonder if I shall ever go back again to prose? Not for a long time to come.”

She smiled at him, and the lips that met his were as cool and velvety as the rose that she wore in her dress. There was none of love’s sweet trouble in her face; she was very calm still.

“What should I have done if I hadn’t won you?” he said passionately. “Life would have

been as tame as an old song. How I have thirsted for you, Nelly—how I have raged for a touch of your sweet face! The other women I have known are failures; I wouldn't leave you for all the houris in Mahomet's paradise!"

The train rushed on. Over far hills the silver lights gleamed fitfully, and the country was still but dimly seen through the veil of rain. It was a long journey, Nelly thought. One of Lord Rexbury's kinsmen had lent them his place in Devonshire, for the honeymoon; and it must be confessed that the bride was longing for a familiar face to greet her on her arrival there.

Her husband was still a stranger; all these passionate protestations of devotion brought them no nearer together in spirit. Already she was beginning to find his raptures rather wearisome. She was tired of being all alone with him in a first-class carriage, and felt a great desire to

jump out, and wander aimlessly through sodden fields, until the pathways were lost in mist.

As for him, he had got his coveted toy, and feasted his eyes on its loveliness without a thought of that curious mechanism which was shut up inside it. He was in the first ecstasy of gratification; it was for him that the red lips smiled so sweetly, for him that the brown eyes shed sudden gleams of sunlight. Every twist and ripple of the rich hair belonged to him; every blush that came and went on the satin-smooth cheek was his very own.

Eric Warrenne, Lord Wyburn, was by no means an uncommon man. He was not a fool; he had just enough artistic perception to give zest to his pleasures; but he had been so luckless as to grow up into manhood without having known an ungratified desire. His mother had always regarded him with a sort of fear, which she kept carefully hidden from all eyes. He was a wild boy; his outbursts of

lawless rage had often terrified her into an illness. The only way to soothe him was to give him all he wanted and let him alone.

When he had announced his intention of marrying Nelly, there had been less opposition than might have been reasonably expected. The Earl had shrugged his shoulders, saying that he had never looked forward very hopefully to his son's marriage. Eric, he said, was sure to do something queer; something that no one could possibly expect or wish him to do. Lady Rexbury, submissive as usual, had shut herself up with her husband to talk over the matter in privacy. "After all, it might have been worse," was the final conclusion of the pair; and the Brookstones smoothed Nelly's path into the favour of the family.

All the wedding preparations had been hurried on, to shorten the time of waiting. "Eric must never be thwarted," his mother had said for the thousandth time. "Nothing is so bad

for him as delay. It is sure to throw him into one of his ungovernable moods, and then——”

The blank was never filled up. It never had been filled up; everybody accepted the mother's decree; it was understood, in a vague way, that Lord Wyburn's peculiar constitution rendered it impossible to deny him anything. You might say “wait” to any other impatient young man in love; but the objectionable word must never be mentioned to him.

The railway journey came to an end at last; but then there was a five-mile drive through the dim, wet country. Nelly, sitting by her husband's side in the carriage, which rolled so easily through the ferny lanes, thought of the drive to Hartside with Mayne. She recalled the rose lights of the summer sunset, and the look in her lover's eyes. Then, waking with a start from that dream of old yesterdays, she returned to the duties of to-day.

The chief duty was to look beautiful and

seem pleased with everything, bored or not bored. This was not difficult for Lady Wyburn, who could not take an attitude which did not become her, and who was naturally sweet of temper. Eric had not left off admiring her for a moment; but he was tired of travelling and wanted his dinner.

They reached their destination at last, a stately modern mansion, standing in the midst of extensive grounds; but to Nelly it lacked the dreamy charm that lingered about Rose-down, far away in Sussex. It was a relief, however, to have done with train and carriage, and to wash all travel stains away; and it refreshed her to be dressed for dinner by the ever-attentive Mason. She had not liked the woman particularly in Park Lane; but here, in this strange house, Mason's face seemed almost like that of a friend.

That first evening was a little slow. Lady Wyburn dared not admit to her own heart

that she found Eric's companionship uninteresting. She caught herself vaguely wondering how long he would want to stay in Devonshire? It was delightful to look forward to the shooting season, and the houseful of people at Abbeyside. Unawares, too, her heart was beginning to ache for the sound of "the dark ladye's" tender voice, and for the loving touch of her hand.

Her dress was perfect, she knew. But she was weary, and it had been a long, trying day.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FETTERED.

Still wear, as best thou canst, the chain
Thine own hands forged about thy fate,
Who couldst not wait.

OWEN MEREDITH.

"It is time to go down to Sussex," quoth Lord Wyburn. "Next Saturday will be the first of September."

“It is time to begin afresh,” mused Nelly, in silence. To begin a new existence; to bar out that sweet old past which was always haunting her present; to live among people, and talk, and be admired;—this was what she desired earnestly. It had been a rainy August in Devonshire; she was tired of watching the dim days gliding by—tired of the restraint which it was necessary to put upon her roving thoughts. Eric required a great deal of humouring and amusing. It had been easier to manage Robby the Roarer in his most unruly mood. The little governess in Russell Square had gone to bed less weary at night than the beautiful Lady Wyburn.

“This is Wednesday,” she said aloud. “We have three more days to spend here.”

“Are you tired of the place?” he asked quickly, with a curious glitter in his small, restless eyes.

“No, dear. I never can be tired of any

place when I am with you," was her prompt reply.

She owned to herself: "That was a fib; but, then, he is so very exacting that it is impossible always to tell him the truth."

Alas! she had felt the same in the old days, when Mayne had teased her with inconvenient questions. Nelly had always found it very difficult to be true; insincerity was so much pleasanter and easier than truthfulness.

After many wet mornings there was now the full glory of a cloudless day. She had gone to the open window, and was looking out across the gardens to the golden edge of a field of corn, cutting sharply against the blue. All at once she remembered the dusky old wood behind the manor house at Hartside; Mayne's voice sounded in her ears again; his lips pressed hers in the fragrant shadows there. "Oh, to live it all over once more;" she thought.

"We can go on Friday," said Lord Wyburn, getting up from his seat and coming to the window. She turned towards him instantly, an embodiment of sweetness, her lovely face dimpling with smiles.

"That pleases you, eh?" he added, with a kiss. "Well, it's a bit slow here; the rain has been no end of a nuisance. I'll send a telegram to Abbey-side. While I'm writing it, Nell, you can go and get your hat; and we'll have a stroll."

They had been dawdling over breakfast, and Nelly was glad to go out into the sunshine. As she went upstairs in her pretty dress of soft heliotrope muslin, decked with ribbons and lace, a light wind blew in some rose-petals and scattered them over her; a bird burst out into a sudden gush of song.

Mechanically, she put on the hat that Eric liked—a hat with a shady brim, laden with heliotrope flowers that matched the gown. "I

want my girlhood again," she murmured, with filling eyes. "I want to be a governess again, and feel Robby's hand in mine. I want to hear the pigeons cooing under the trees of Lincoln's Inn, and to be lectured by Mayne!"

Was she sick or mad? Her bosom was heaving convulsively; her lips were trembling. In a moment she had recovered her self-possession, and had gone to the glass to inspect her face.

Lord Wyburn was waiting for her in the hall, standing between two great china jars, filled with plants in bloom. The light streamed in upon him through the open door, as he stood there in his suit of grey tweed and straw hat. What an unromantic face he had! How insignificant he was!

These were strange thoughts for a bride on her honeymoon; but they had come to Nelly more than once. He looked up as she descended the stairs, and she went towards him, smiling, and buttoning her gloves.

“You look as if you had been made out of a garden,” he said. “There is an extraordinary floweriness about you.”

“Perhaps I shall turn into flowers some day, and be ‘made one with Nature’,” she answered, recalling Mayne’s favourite poem. “Do you remember ‘Adonais’, Eric?”

“It’s poetry, isn’t it? I don’t care about poetry, Nell,” he replied. “You’re not half comfortable in your way of talking. Dead people turn into flowers, and who wants to think about them?”

Nelly smiled and was silent. She knew that there was a great dissimilarity between herself and the man with whom she had linked her fate. Once or twice he had given her a sour look when he had caught her reading in the library.

Her life in Russell Square had developed her taste for books; Lady Florence was a woman who read and thought, and talked over

her thoughts with the governess. And Mayne Comberford was continually drawing from his pocket or his memory some scrap of song or story to delight his beloved. Although she had never risen to his level, she had intellect enough to like being lifted and led. But she had not realized how necessary this lifting and leading had become; and how desolate she should feel without him.

The husband and wife went out together into the rich Devonshire lanes, and Nelly cudgelled her brain to find an amusing topic of conversation. She did not care to talk that morning; in this soft and luxurious country, Nature invited her to be still and dream; and she came of a race which has always been in sympathy with Nature. The song of the wind in the leaves was a music of which she never wearied; but Eric would not let her listen in peace.

“Stupid here, isn’t it?” he said, pausing at

a break in the ferny bank, and looking away languidly over the glorious land, steeped in summer light, revelling in its golden wealth of harvest fields, and rejoicing in the freshness of its silver rills.

“It is enervating,” Nelly answered, dutifully resolved to agree with him in everything. “It makes one lazy, and sleepy, and good-for-nothing.”

“We want waking up,” said Lord Wyburn, putting his hat on the back of his head, and yawning at the landscape. “They’ll rouse us at the Abbey, and there will be a good deal to be done at Rosedown; they will leave the finishing touches to us.”

He was not looking his best just then, with his mouth open, and the straw brim making a sort of aureola round his bullet head. When she remembered that she was destined to spend a great part of her future life at Rosedown with this man, who was her wedded husband,

she was conscious of a sudden heart-sinking.

The knot was tied, and tied securely. They must always keep closely to each other, so long as they both should live. The cord that bound them together was gilded and studded with jewels; but there were times in their lives when its friction would be felt. Nancy, tied up to Bill with plain rope, knew just what its strands were made of; there was no gilding to hide it from her eyes. But Lady Wyburn was only now beginning to get glimpses of the unadorned truth, and realize that it is the same cord which binds Nancy to Bill, and my lady to my lord.

“It will be lovely at Rosedown,” she said, idly gathering a bit of fern. “I’ve only seen the place once, you know; and then I was half dead with fright.”

“So you were, by Jove! You never moved when I carried you in and laid you on the sofa. I was awfully in love with you then, I

remember. I felt that I should murder somebody if I didn't get you."

"Well, you have got me, and we won't talk about murders," she said with a shudder. "Really, I am longing to see Rosedown again; I have a dim impression of statues and fountains wreathed with flowers. It was like an enchanted palace in a fairy tale."

"You are making too much of it, Nell," he remarked, tilting his hat over his nose again. "It's a nice little place enough, but it isn't wonderful. The statues are good; there's a Psyche there which is said to be very fine. I don't care very much about those things myself, but it's good taste to admire them, and I dare say they will please you."

"Of course they will please me, dear," she answered. "There's a mosaic pavement in the hall, isn't there? The urns on the terrace were brimming over with large pink roses; I caught a glimpse of them as you carried me into the house."

“Then you saw more than I thought you did,” he said, laughing. “You weren’t shamming, were you?”

“No, I wasn’t shamming. I saw things as if I were in a dream.”

“You didn’t see Comberford in a dream, when he came? What a beastly temper he was in! I believe you were afraid of him, Nell.”

“Perhaps I was—a little,” she admitted, feeling that he expected an answer.

“You were very glad to throw him over, weren’t you?” he went on. “He was a surly beggar. I say, Nell, I think you were rather sweet on me from the first. You gave me plenty of encouragement, you know.”

“Did I? It was very wicked of me, Eric. Poetic justice demands that I shall be punished for my sins.”

“Hang poetic justice!” he exclaimed. “You saw that I was fond of you, and you met me

half-way, like a sensible girl. And you never did anything that the world could blame, you know."

"Oh, no. Only some of the worst things ever done are just those which the world does not blame in the least."

He gave her one of his quick, suspicious glances.

"I don't understand you when you say those puzzling things," he said. "It seems as if you were trying, indirectly, to tell me that you have been a monster of iniquity."

She laughed, and tossed her bit of fern away.

"An open confession is best, isn't it?" she asked, going a little closer to him, and looking into his face with eyes brimful of sunshine. "Well, Eric, I'll own that I tried to charm you. The very first time that you noticed me I thrilled with gratified vanity."

He was satisfied, and laughed too.

“Have you ever heard what became of Comberford?” he inquired, after they had sauntered on for a few paces. “Did he remain in England? He was the kind of fellow who would go out to the bush, and cut society.”

“I don’t know where he is,” she replied, in an indifferent tone. “Of course I hear nothing from his family.”

The bees were droning all round them in the rich stillness; the scent of woods was in the air. When her husband suggested that they should go back to the house, the wife suppressed a sigh of relief.

Mason thought that Lady Wyburn looked pale as she toiled wearily upstairs. And in truth there was a yearning which pressed on Nelly’s heart, making her almost faint under its heavy weight. The warm flower-scents sickened her; the luxurious house felt like a prison; she sank down in a chair, and closed her eyes, thankful to spend a few minutes alone.

But it was nearly time for luncheon; Eric hated waiting, and disliked solitude. She had to bestir herself, and go down to him with a freshened face, and new flowers nestling among her lace and heliotrope ribbons. He observed trifles, and was exacting in small matters.

He did not release her when the mid-day meal was over. It was sultry, even in the shadowy room to which they had repaired, and the heat made him restless and irritable. All through that long afternoon he wearied his young wife with the fretfulness of a much-indulged man, and at last began to quarrel with her for losing her colour.

“You are moody, Nell,” he said. “I suppose you have been sitting over books. A woman should never be a book-worm. You’re always pale when you have been reading hard, and paleness isn’t becoming to you.”

Her face reddened in an instant. “I have not touched a book to-day,” she answered curtly.

“Then you have been dreaming over something you read yesterday. Now you are flushed, Nell; you have a temper, I see.”

She controlled herself, took up a painted hand-screen, and began to fan him softly as he lay on the couch. “Isn’t that nice?” she asked in a caressing voice. “I wish there was a punkah here. It would be good if you could get a nap.”

“Yes,” he said drowsily. “Play me a tune, and soothe me into forty winks before dinner.”

She acquiesced at once, and ran her fingers gently over the piano till he was fast asleep.

CHAPTER XXIX.

COMING BACK.

“True, but there were sundry jottings,
Stray leaves, fragments, blurrs and blottings.
Certain first steps were achieved
Already which (is that your meaning?)
Had well borne out whoe'er believed
In more to come.”

BROWNING.

ONE morning Mayne Comberford woke out of a refreshing sleep, and found himself in a familiar room again. The Venetian blinds were closed, and the room was dim, but he could distinguish those oaken shelves on which his books had been arranged by careful hands. There was the table where he had sat to write his letters in days gone by; and just above it hung a group of home faces in little frames.

One face, which had been in the centre of the group, was missing now; and he knew that it had been taken away by a kind hand.

It was a Sunday morning, and presently the bell of Lincoln's Inn would ring for service. But Mayne no longer shrank from the memories which haunted the place. The fever of his heart was allayed. He was at rest from pain and passionate longing, and had come back to his old room with a sense of peace.

Whence came this long-desired tranquillity? He could not have told when he had first been conscious of a great calm. We do not always know where we have found our Pool of Bethesda, nor can we recall the blessed moment when the angel stirred its waters. In the lives of many of us there are sudden healings which seem almost miraculous; at once, as if touched by some Divine hand, the wound ceases to smart; the long anguish is ended. The change may seem instantaneous; but the causes that

produced it have long been at work within us; and it was so with Mayne.

As soon as he was well enough, his godfather had taken him away from England; and they pursued their way along the Rhine to the South of Germany. As to Mr. Cottrell, he already knew the storied river by heart—its rocks and ruins, its echoes and legends were all familiar things to him. But to Mayne these scenes were new; and as his strength returned, he drank in their beauty until his heart grew still.

He remembered how others had suffered and risen above their sorrows; and then there came an hour when he took courage. He resolved that he would no longer waste his life in vain regrets, nor spend his strength as a dreamer of dreams. He would find out the work that he was fit for, and do it with all his might.

He came back to London with the words of one of London's Sages written on his heart. "There is in man a higher than Happiness; he

can do without Happiness, and instead thereof find Blessedness." After all, it was not happiness which he had found in Nelly; it was

--"That unrest which men miscall delight."

But she had left him, as Susie had foreseen, with an empty heart, and a life that was literally stripped of all adornment.

It was near the end of October now, and when Mayne drew up the blind his glance rested on the trees in Lincoln's Inn Fields. When he had last seen them they had worn the glory of early summer; this morning the melancholy gold and russet of their scanty foliage proclaimed that the year was dying. He thought of the autumn of the preceding year, and found that he could distinctly recall the look of bloom and slumber on Nelly's face when they had walked together under the falling leaves.

And then suddenly he remembered the beautiful ruin of Stolzenfels on the Rhine, and the

scholar who had wasted his years within those walls in seeking after the Elixir of life. It was an old story, repeated every day in the lives of men and women. And Mayne knew that he, too, had been vainly feeling after that which is never found—melting in the crucible of passion that gold of the mind and heart which might have been spent for the world's good.

“It is not too late,” he said to himself. “I am young still, and now I will begin to live in earnest.”

There was something home-like in the aspect of Mr. Cottrell's breakfast-table, and the old man was glad to see Mayne's look of quiet content. This return was not as painful to his godson as he had feared it would be. And yet he understood Mayne better than Mr. Comberford did, and knew that the young man's heart was none the less empty because his manner was calm.

“My boy,” he said, suddenly breaking a pause, “I should like to know what you have

done with that thick note-book of yours. You must have filled it with your fancies while you were away."

Mayne looked at him wonderingly.

"I have the book still," he answered. "But of course I am going to burn it by-and-by."

"Don't," Mr. Cottrell entreated. "Use its contents for the padding of your novel. There has been a novel in your head for a long time."

"Only a wizard could have known that," Mayne said with a smile.

"You could not write it, Mayne, until it had first been written by Experience on the fleshly tables of your own heart. You were thinking about the story, but your hour had not come. We can only give to others that which is given to us."

The young man stared gravely at his empty coffee-cup for a moment.

"Yes," he admitted, "there has been a story in my head for years; but the men and women

in-it had no vitality. They were only outward shows, like the turnips which were turned into court ladies and gentlemen by the Genius of the Hartz mountains."

"But they will be real enough now," said his godfather. "And people will feel that they can be touched and handled, laughed with and wept with. Make haste, and give them to the world."

"I have not even thought of a title yet."

"A title is often the last thing to be thought of. But I will give you one. Call it 'A Romance of Lincoln's Inn.'"

"That's worth consideration," said Mayne.

He got up from the table; and presently both men walked slowly across Lincoln's Inn Fields to the old chapel.

Seabert Laurice was coming out of his door in New Square. All the brave show of greenery had faded away from the front of his house leaving only a few shrivelled leaves and trailers;

but Seabert, quietly alert as usual, seemed wholly untouched by the melancholy of autumn.

“How well you are looking!” he said to Mayne, when the first greetings had passed. “Browner, aren’t you? Didn’t expect to see you out this morning after the journey yesterday.”

“Oh, I’m none the worse for the journey,” Mayne replied.

Certainly there was nothing sentimental in the meeting of these two friends; and yet they had thought of each other every day while they were apart. Mayne’s absence had been an anxious time to his mother and sisters; they had worried themselves with fears for his health, and Seabert had felt himself to be the right person to reassure them. He had actually been kind enough to run down to Hartside with a cheery letter he had received from the traveller. Everybody was as grateful to him as if he had been a millionaire instead of a briefless barrister. The Comberfords were an unworldly family.

Nothing was changed in the old chapel. King David, with his grim brown face, looked down from the painted window, and reminded Mayne of the dream of his delirium. Then, when everyone stood up, he caught sight of Robby the Roarer standing beside his new governess. Louie, grown tall and prim, recognized him at once, and discreetly fixed her gaze on her book; but Robby gave him a frank smile across the top of the pew.

He waited, after service, to give the children a greeting. The governess, a Quakerish little person, stood by demurely, while Robby poured out questions with an occasional stutter. Louie was friendly; but there was a touch of condescension in her manner which amused him.

"Our new mother ain't much good to us," remarked Robby, who was always ungrammatical in moments of excitement. "She l—l—lives upon the sofa; but she makes us jolly presents sometimes, and Aunt Flo takes care of us,

just the same as ever. Old Aunt Camden didn't bother us these holidays; she said she couldn't stand any more of my drefffulness. If she'd been with us I meant to be much dreadfuller than I was last year."

"You couldn't," said Louie. "And you mustn't speak disrespectfully of Aunt Camden. Mr. Comberford will be quite shocked."

"Oh, no, he won't," Robby cried confidently. "He's awful glad to see me again; aren't you, old f—f—fellow?" Here the governess murmured a word of reproof, and Mayne and Robby parted with a mutual promise of meeting again very soon. Louie was patronizing to the last.

"I dare say my aunt will be happy to see you, Mr. Comberford," she said, with an affable little smile. "You will find us in the old house, you know."

Mayne acknowledged her graciousness with stately courtesy, and she moved off with the conviction that she had done very well, and had

left a deep impression. She was perpetually rehearsing "company manners," and was quite sure that she could play the *grande dame* to perfection if she only had the opportunity. One of these days that opportunity, she felt, would certainly come. If a poor little nameless governess had married a lord, what a glorious destiny must surely be in store for such a distinguished person as Miss Louie Camden!

Mr. Cottrell laughed softly to himself as they walked home through the gardens; he understood Louie and her dreams, and regarded her with that half-pitying amusement which he generally accorded to girls of her stamp.

"If she succeeds in realizing her expectations she'll be pleasant enough," he remarked. "But heaven defend me from the commonplace woman who fails! Disappointed genius finds its consolation in itself, and is seldom as utterly miserable as people suppose. But thwarted mediocrity (especially feminine mediocrity) is apt to console

itself by damaging its neighbours' reputations. I have seen a good deal of mischief done by soured women with small brains."

"Poor Louie!—let us hope that fate may be kind to her," said Mayne. "That boy is a fine little man, isn't he? He'll grow up a grand fellow, I believe."

As he spoke his thoughts had wandered back to his first meeting with Nelly, and he saw again the girl who had sat under the trees and talked of the dead school-fellow who had loved her so well. He remembered Robby, coming up to him, flushed and indignant at the sight of his governess's tears. Would the day ever come when Lady Wyburn, too, would remember her sturdy little champion, and long to call him back to her side?

"He'll do well," Mr. Cottrell answered. "It is the Robbies who keep up this old country of ours, God bless them. They are the knights

of the Round Table, and while their race lasts, England may hold her laurels."

He talked on, unwilling that Mayne should sink into silence and brood over the irreclaimable past. His godson was getting through this first Sunday better than he had dared to hope. The meeting with the Camden children had passed off without any bad results; Mayne had accepted his lot, and had resolved to face his future with quiet courage. Yet Mr. Cottrell knew that even the bravest heart has its moments of weakness; and knew, too, that in such moments the cold hand of Despair is ready to seize its prey.

Seabert Laurice came to dine with them in the evening, and Mayne was drawn into a chat about his novel. Seabert, who had the gift of suggestion, gave his friend an idea or two, and found them well received.

"You'll do something," he said, "to justify their belief in you at Hartside. It was delight-

ful to hear your father laugh at Mrs. Comberford's faith in her boy, knowing all the time that his faith was as strong as hers. 'I believe the mother is right', he would say confidentially to me, 'but it won't do to let her raise her hopes too high.'

Mayne smiled. "They think too well of me," he replied. "All but Susie. She has her doubts, I fancy."

"Then fancy has misled you." Seabert spoke in a decided tone. "There is no flaw in Susie's trust. Of all people, she understands you best."

Mayne lifted his eyes to his friend's honest face, and gave him a long, full look.

CHAPTER XXX.

NELLY'S MISGIVINGS.

Then there was showing thee the house,
So many rooms and doors;
Thinking the while how thou wouldst start
If once I flung the doors apart
Of one dull chamber in my heart.

D. G. ROSSETTI.

CHRISTMAS was drawing very near, and Lord and Lady Brookstone had come to Rosedown for a few days. "The dark ladye" and her adopted daughter had only met once since the wedding-day. And now that they were alone together in the quiet house, it was to be expected that they should open their hearts to each other.

But that process of opening the heart does not always take place when one looks for it. All kinds of unexpected difficulties arise; the bolts that were once so freely withdrawn may

have grown stiff after a few weeks of disuse. There are a thousand excuses to be made for reserve; and yet how it disappoints an expectant friend! "Is not all the same as ever between us?" he asks anxiously; and if we say "yes" we are conscious of a falsehood. Nothing is the same; everything is utterly changed; the old frank intercourse is at an end for evermore, although our love for each other is still untouched by all the sundry and manifold changes of the world.

If Lady Brookstone found Nelly constrained she was too wise to ask questions. There was in her nature the subtlety of her race; if she knew how to guard secrets she was equally clever in finding them out. But she would be patient; everything might be lost by seeking to force a confession. To whom could Nelly speak if not to her? She felt that the girl loved and trusted her, as the mother whom she believed herself to be.

They sat together in the drawing-room—the very room into which Nelly had been carried when she had entered Rosedown for the first time. All the furniture had been changed to suit the wishes of the young bride; its luxuries were evidently the outcome of the fancies of the woman who lounged, or read, or talked here, and every trifle seemed to bear the impress of some charming whim. Looking at the flowers, the pictures, the knick-knacks, you saw that all the details spoke of a cultured, yet sumptuous taste. And Lady Wyburn, wearing a wonderful tea-gown of dull-gold plush, was nestling in a heap of cushions in the corner of a low couch, and looking the embodiment of lazy loveliness.

Twilight was creeping on, and all the world seemed fast asleep. Not a sound broke the stillness of the house; the only restless thing was a little flame that darted, snake-like, round a half-burnt log in the fire-place. Nelly, looking

through half-closed lids, watched it dreamily; and "the dark ladye," reclining in an easy-chair, watched *her*.

Between them stood a small tea-table, with its burden of delicate china and silver; but the tea had not loosened their tongues. Lady Brookstone seemed to respect her daughter's inclination for silence. Later on, at dinner, Nelly would rouse herself, and entertain her guests; she never failed in her duties as a hostess, and always performed her part admirably when her husband was looking on. But here, alone with Lady Brookstone, she made no effort to simulate a gaiety which she did not feel.

Quite suddenly she glanced at her companion's face, met the fixed gaze of the deep, dark eyes, and read, perhaps, a half-concealed anxiety in their expression.

"I am very uninteresting, mamma, am I not?" she asked, with a slight smile.

“You are very quiet,” was the answer, given in a tranquil voice. “But, no, you are never uninteresting, Nelly.”

“Ah, that is because you love me so much,” the girl said, with a sigh.

“Of course I love my own child. Any shadow that falls on her path must needs darken mine.”

“Do you suspect that there is a shadow, mamma? Or a thorn among the roses? It must be very difficult to detect a thorn when one is smothered in flowers!”

“A mother’s love has keen instincts. Nelly, why are we fencing with each other? If you want to tell me anything, speak now. We may not have so good an opportunity again.”

Lady Wyburn felt that the moment for breaking silence had come. It might do no good to speak, yet speak she must.

She had been half reclining against her pile of cushions on the sofa; but now she sat upright,

looking away from Lady Brookstone across the room, and the little hands trembled on her lap.

“I am very fortunate,” she said. “Oh yes; I am more than fortunate. I dare say no other life would suit me so well as the one I lead. I congratulate myself every day upon my wonderful luck.”

“You were not without ambition,” Lady Brookstone remarked thoughtfully. “You would have been thoroughly unhappy if you had remained in obscurity.”

“Exactly,” Nelly answered. “I have reason for being charmed with my lot. And people envy me;—you should see Christina Payton’s face when I go to church! I never could endure that woman, and I like to make her wild.”

“I have merely a vague remembrance of her,” Lady Brookstone said carelessly. “Do the Comberford girls see you on Sundays?”

“No; they go to another church now.

Mamma, do you think I am as pretty as I used to be?"

There was a faintly-anxious look in her beautiful brown eyes. Lady Brookstone noticed the look, and answered the question readily.

"You are lovelier than ever, child. Does not your glass tell you so?"

"Sometimes I weary myself with searching for wrinkles." She broke into a little laugh. "But I'm really wearing very well, am I not? I manage to hide the ravages of time and anguish. If you do not detect them, mamma, I am sure that they are invisible to everyone else."

The warm blood showed itself under Lady Brookstone's dark skin; she was half provoked and half alarmed.

"What is the meaning of all this reckless talk?" she demanded. "Am I to brace myself for a shock? What is coming?"

Nelly gave another nervous little laugh. "Mamma, you are almost angry; I never saw

you so before. Well, I will tell you my secret, and then you shall scold me to your heart's content."

"Go on," said Lady Brookstone quickly.

"Perhaps I am getting unstrung; I have had a good deal of excitement, you know; and I have—fancies."

"What fancies? Nelly, speak plainly."

"Oh, it is not easy to speak plainly! Don't you see how hard I am trying to do it? Mamma, I am getting frightened of—some one."

"Of whom!"

There was a moment's pause. Nelly looked at "the dark ladye" with a gleam of desperation in her eyes.

"Of—Eric. I had to say it, and it is said. He is dreadful sometimes—so dreadful that I want to run away."

"This is perfectly absurd," said Lady Brookstone, in an unemotional voice. "Your nerves are out of order, my child. After

Christmas you must run up to town and see a doctor."

"I knew you would take it in that way," murmured Nelly, sinking back on her pile of rich cushions. "It is useless to speak. Let us talk of something else;—of next season, and the dress I'm to wear at Court. That will interest you, won't it?"

She patted one of the satin pillows, and laid her cheek upon it with a half-sigh of weariness. That softly-tinted cheek was a little paler than usual; but the light was dim, and Lady Brookstone tried to believe that her darling was really as bright as she had been in days gone by. Yet in trying, she failed.

A thousand vague fears came crowding suddenly into her mind. She had striven passionately to secure this girl's happiness, and even the suspicion of failure was too terrible to be endured. She had driven away the man whose exacting temper seemed to threaten Nelly

with misery, and had given her rank and wealth and an adoring husband. What more could she have done? It had never even occurred to her, that the most cruel thing we can do to those we love is to meddle with their hearts.

Her soft voice faltered a little when she spoke again.

“Nelly, you mustn't think me unsympathetic. You are young, and your wifhood is new to you. Men have their moods as we have; Eric has been spoiled from his youth up, and I dare say he has a temper and a will. Why should you be afraid of him?”

“I'm not afraid of his temper or of his will,” Nelly answered with gentle coldness. “Let us drop the subject. I can't make you understand, mamma. Perhaps, after all, I have a sort of mild illness which I shall soon get the better of. Never mind.”

“Oh, Nelly, I *do* mind!”

With all her old tenderness “the dark ladye”

rose and went to the still figure on the couch. She drew Nelly away from the cushions, and clasped her close to her breast.

“You shall tell me everything, darling,” she went on. “Trust me with all your thoughts—all your fancies. Surely I can do something to calm and help you?”

“No, mamma, you can do nothing to help me now. A woman who is married cannot be helped, you see. She is like that unlucky man who put his foot through an iron ring that was fastened to a rock. His friends could not break the ring and set him free, so they had to stand by and watch the tide creeping over him. This is a grim illustration,” she added, with a bitter little laugh.

“If your nerves were strong you wouldn't recall these horrible stories,” said Lady Brookstone, kissing her. “As to those people on the sea-shore I have always thought them fools; there must have been a way of helping the

man, but they were too stupid to think of it. Do you suppose I would stand by and let the waves roll over you?"

"You cannot help it," Nelly repeated.

"Nonsense, my sweet. I *will* help it. What has Eric said or done?"

"Nothing." Nelly's tone was hopeless. "Nothing that I can describe. It is his look that frightens me; a curious glitter that comes into his eyes; a strange expression about his mouth. There are moments when I don't like to be alone with him."

Lady Brookstone was silent for a moment, but there was a little tightening of her grasp.

"Does he ever get drunk?" she asked at length.

"No; but he drinks a good deal. More than is good for him."

"Have you ever said anything about him to his mother?"

"Never."

“Has she not given you any hints concerning him?”

Nelly reflected.

“She has only said, several times, that he could not bear contradiction,” she replied musingly. “She has insisted that it was bad for him to be thwarted, even in trifles—bad for his nerves, she declared.”

“My boys are often thwarted,” said Lady Brookstone. “Leonard doesn’t believe in over-indulgence. Their nerves don’t seem any the worse for a little contradiction.”

“No, mamma; but Eric is not like them. Lady Rexbury, herself, seems to fear him. She speaks to him quite timidly at times, as if she were afraid of rousing up something within him.”

“The dark ladye” was lost in thought. Her hand stroked Nelly’s brown hair with the old caressing motion which had always soothed the girl in her troubled moments.

“People say that the first year of married life is always uncomfortable,” she said at last. “Mind, I don’t speak from my own experience, Nelly; but mine was a peculiar case. In marrying me, Leonard committed a glorious folly, and the glory did not fade. Fate is sometimes kinder to the fools than to the wise. But isn’t it possible that your imagination magnifies Eric’s little eccentricities? You have not grown used to him yet, you know. Until the strangeness wears off you can hardly hope to be quite at rest.”

“It may be that you are right,” the girl responded sadly.

“And then, too, one could not expect him to keep up his violent, overwhelming devotion. It made him quite a nuisance, poor fellow! during your short courtship. But he is very fond of you still.”

“Oh yes; he is very fond of me still, in his own fashion.”

"Every man has a fashion of his own, Nelly."

"Yes." Nelly gently drew herself from the clasping arms and sat upright. Then, with a little impatient gesture, she pushed the rich ruffled hair away from her face.

"I told you that you could not help me," she said. "No one can. I have taken him 'for better for worse,' and it is going to be for worse."

The hopeless ring was in her voice again, and there was a look of almost childish terror in her lovely eyes.

"Nelly, darling, it shall not be for worse. You shall come back to me if you are unhappy. Do you think I care for what the world would say, if I took you home again?"

"No, mamma, but I should care. I should hate to be sneered at by the world. We will go on as we are; we will go on as long as we can. If I get frightened very badly I must run away, I suppose."

“If I felt sure that there was real danger—” Lady Brookstone began. But Nelly stopped her, lifting a warning finger.

“Hush,” she said. “I think I hear him. How dark the room is, mamma! And it is growing colder,” she added, with a shiver.

“The fire is low,” Lady Brookstone replied. “You had better go and dress for dinner, my child. It is not good for you to sit here and get chilled.”

She, too, had heard Lord Wyburn's step, and did not wish to encounter him just then. She wanted to secure a few minutes to herself, and to think over her talk with Nelly.

When Nelly came downstairs again there was no sign of depression about her. The light in her eyes and the roses on her cheeks were very bright. There was a combination of rich, soft red shades in her dress, and she wore the ruby collar clasped round her white throat.

Lord Brookstone looked at her with undisguised admiration, and said that she reminded him of some brilliant tropical flower.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THORNS UNDER ROSES.

I had tired
Of simple loving, doubtless, as I tired
Of splendour and being loved.

LEWIS MORRIS.

“I DIDN'T know much about him till he fell in love with Nelly. I never was in his set, you see,” said Lord Brookstone in a drowsy tone. “He's not an interesting man, but there's nothing particularly queer in him, is there?”

He finished his sentence with a yawn. After a long ride in the sharp December air, followed by an excellent dinner, he was as sleepy as a healthy man ought to be. His wife, with a

troubled look in her face, was standing at the open door of his dressing-room, waiting eagerly for an answer to her question.

“I thought,” she said, “that you might have heard something about his eccentricity. Nelly finds him rather trying sometimes, I fancy.”

Lord Brookstone gave a lazy laugh.

“Of course she does,” he answered. “Most married women find men rather trying sometimes.”

“The dark ladye” sighed, and her husband glanced at her in surprise.

“Are you worrying yourself, Ursula?” he asked. “I thought Nelly looked wonderfully pretty to-night. All’s smooth enough, isn’t it?”

“Eric is restless,” she replied. “There is a suppressed excitement about him. I wish——”

She paused, and stood leaning against the doorpost, clasping and unclasping her hands.

“Look here, Ursula,” said Lord Brookstone, going up to her and patting her soft, dark

cheek. "Nelly's married and done for; and in my opinion, she's very well off indeed. It seems to me that she's not unlike that young fool who married the Miller's Daughter, and made songs,

" 'Half angered with his happy lot.'

"People get into that condition when fortune has been too kind to them.

" 'Love is hurt with jar and fret,
Love is made a vague regret.'

"I don't think much of his songs; but they express the sentiments of a pampered heart. And I can understand that my Lady Nelly is beginning to amuse herself with this 'vague regret.'"

There was a gleam of sudden laughter in the dark eyes lifted to meet his.

"I have no objection to her amusing herself," he continued. "But I mildly protest against your taking your share of the 'vague regret.' I want my wife to enjoy her life, and live for

her husband and her sons, as well as for this lovely daughter whose triumph is so complete."

"The dark ladye's" arms were round his neck in a moment.

"Leonard," she said, "I have never ceased to live for you. You are a part of my own life; our love has never known the breath of decay. But it is not with Nelly and Eric as it is with you and me."

"I did not suppose that it was," he responded drily. "The little beauty's heart isn't half as big as yours, my dear. As to Wyburn—well, I wouldn't have taken him if I'd been a woman!"

"Why not?" she asked, with quick anxiety.

"Why not? Oh, well, he's rather an ugly fellow, to begin with. And it's not that picturesque ugliness which would look well under the casque of a knight. Lancelot, you know, was 'seamed with an ancient sword-cut on the cheek, and bruised and bronzed.' And yet it's easy to

realize that *his* ugliness made men and women worship him."

"Nelly did not object to Eric's appearance," Lady Brookstone replied. "Yours are the eyes of an artist, you see. But do you dislike him merely because he is plain?"

"I haven't said that I dislike him. I only said that I wouldn't have taken him if I'd been a woman."

"But you dislike him, Leonard. I'm sure of it!"

"If you are sure, my dear, why do you insist upon my confession?"

Lady Brookstone's heart got heavy as lead. Her lips began to quiver visibly. Her husband looked at her a little wonderingly, and then at the fire, as if he were considering a problem.

"Ursula," he said at last, "you must make up your mind to be content with Nelly's lot. She may not, perhaps, be as happy with this man as you fondly expected her to be; but

would she have been happier with the lover she discarded? I think not. I also think that Comberford has escaped a great misery. Don't fancy that I'm hard upon the dear little girl—I'm one of her warmest admirers, you know—but there's a restless soul shut up in that perfect body of hers, and it will give her many an uncomfortable hour before it is set free."

"The dark ladye's " deep eyes had filled with tears. He saw them, and his face grew graver.

"You must not darken all our lives for Nelly's sake, dear," he said, with a tenderness which had a touch of sternness in it. "She is not worth the sacrifice of our happiness. In my love for you, and my compassion for your great loss, I suffered you to pick up this stray bird and warm it in our own nest. I was content for you even to believe that it was your own lost nestling, mysteriously given back. But——"

"Oh, Leonard," she interrupted in a low, sad

tone, "I thought that you too were convinced that she was ours indeed!"

He smiled gravely, and looked into the beautiful, distressed face with pitying kindness.

"It takes a great deal to convince a man," he said. "It may be, however, that you are right. I have always admitted that the resemblance to you is extraordinary; but that is not proof positive, you know."

"I do not need any stronger proof," she answered.

"No. I will not seek to shake your faith in your belief, dear. But—even if Nelly verily belongs to us—is she to monopolize all your hopes and fears? When I see you fretting, Ursula, I am inclined to wish she had never been restored! She has filled the vacant place in your heart, it is true; but she has filled it with pain."

"The pain is better than the vacancy," Ursula said passionately.

He regarded her thoughtfully.

“I do not know,” he said. “I wonder how it would be with most mourners if their dead were given back? They would have to be taken with all their faults, with all their powers of inflicting suffering, with all their human infirmities. We, who had wept bitterly at their departure, might be moved to weep still more bitterly at their return.”

“That is a cruel thing to say, Leonard, is it not?” his wife asked, with a sigh.

“I do not know,” he repeated. “They could not come back without taking up their old burdens—those very burdens which we helped them to bear. We should feel the old weight pressing on our shoulders again. We should have the old cry for aid ringing in our ears once more. We should be stung by those old reproaches which even our dearest do not spare us. It is possible that we should be driven to long for the blank and the silence,

and feel that it was a wise Hand which kept the gates of Death closed fast."

He stood still, looking down on the floor with folded arms. She went towards him and laid her hand lovingly on his shoulder.

"I will not trouble you any more with my fears for Nelly," she said meekly. "Unless any unexpected danger arises, I will be silent."

"My dear Ursula, why do you dream of danger?" he asked kindly.

"I am afraid Nelly dreams of it, Leonard. She says there is something strange in Eric; but——"

She stopped abruptly remembering that she was breaking the promise she had just made. He gave a good-natured laugh of scorn.

"Nelly will have a new dream every week," he said gaily. "And a new whim every hour. Time will hang heavily on her hands at Rose-down, and she will develop nerves and palpitations and tremblings. Then she will send for

the Queen's favourite physician, and set up for being an interesting invalid. She'll be very interesting; whatever she does will be gracefully and charmingly done."

He was so determined to regard Lady Wyburn as a born trifler that his wife began to think that she had really been over-anxious. Had not Nelly herself complained that Mayne Comberford had idealized her? Ursula did not want to admit that her darling was frivolous and selfish; but she could not change Nelly's nature by refusing to see her imperfections.

She had watched Lord Wyburn very closely during dinner, and had failed to discover anything strange in him. Nelly had been perfectly self-possessed, and brilliant, and entertaining; there was nothing of the school-girl left in her, —nothing of the little governess. One might have thought that she had been trained from childhood for the position that she filled. Her manner was so gracious and inspiring that she

had bewitched all her guests, and won the hearts of the very people who had sneered at Lord Wyburn's folly in choosing her.

"Come, Ursula," said Brookstone, breaking the silence that followed his last words. "I'm as deadly sleepy as it's possible for a man to be; and I think we've discussed Nelly enough for the present. You may be sure she won't keep awake to discuss us; she wouldn't lose five minutes of her beauty-sleep on any account. Do take your rest, my dear, and forget her till to-morrow morning."

They had only one more day to spend at Rosedown; and it was not till the eve of their departure that "the dark ladye" was alone with her daughter again.

"You will try to banish your fancies, Nelly," she said tenderly. "I believe you will succeed if you try."

"Oh, yes; I will try," assented Lady Wyburn wearily.

“And you will be happy, dear. You ought to be very happy, you know.”

“Of course I ought. I’m always saying so to the person who has taken the place of my old self. Mamma, I sometimes wonder where the old Nelly is. I have a notion that she’s hiding from me somewhere—perhaps at Lincoln’s Inn. Do you think I should find her if I went there to look for her?”

“Don’t go there, for heaven’s sake,” cried Lady Brookstone with sudden uneasiness. Nelly laughed bitterly.

“You need not be alarmed, mamma,” she said. “I only go there in my dreams. There’s always an enchantment lingering about forbidden ground. But I have no doubt I should have wearied you with my complaints if I had married Mayne. Love is enough for some women; but it would not have been enough for me.”

“No,” Lady Brookstone answered thought-

fully, "no; it would not have been enough for you."

"Give my love to the boys." Nelly dismissed the subject of herself and her whims altogether. "Send them here to me when you can spare them, mamma. Eric and I will devote ourselves to their amusement. I suppose nobody ever sees Robby the Roarer nowadays; he was rather a bonny little man, you know."

CHAPTER XXXII.

MAYNE'S ROMANCE.

And this is an old fairy-tale of the heart.
It is told in all lands, in a different tongue;
Told with tears by the old, heard with smiles by the young.
And the tale to each heart unto which it is known
Has a different sense. It has puzzled my own.

"LUCILE."

"I WONDER," said Susie, with the brightest look that Seabert Laurice had ever seen on her face, "I wonder if a novel ever made so

many people happy before? But oh, what should we have done if it had not been a success?"

"It isn't a *very* big success," said Mayne.

"You wicked boy, do you mean to run it down?" Susie demanded. "Of course it is not the kind of book which everybody reads," she added thoughtfully.

"Mayne has called it a Romance," remarked Seabert Laurice. "It doesn't pretend to be one of the realistic novels which seem to take the public by storm. It is just a fairy-tale of life and the heart."

"Fortunately," said the new author complacently, "there will always be a few people who like fairy-tales. Such tales are never new; they are as old as nursery rhymes; and sometimes people like them, as children like nursery rhymes, without knowing what they mean. And sometimes they put a meaning into the rhyme of which the rhymer did not dream."

“Do you, yourself, know the meaning of your own story?” Seabert asked.

“I know what I meant in writing it, but I don't know what meaning others will find in it.

“‘In the garden grows
More than the gardener sows.’

“In the book there are suggestions, warnings, promises, which the author does not write; yet they are gathered by the mind of the reader. He may find the very thoughts he wanted there, and yet they may not be the writer's thoughts.”

“You are getting mystical,” said Susie.

“Too mystical,” Mr. Cottrell struck in. “A clever book is not unlike that crystal of mine; it reflects the innermost mind of the reader, and shows him more of himself than he ever saw before. All that was hidden within him suddenly assumes a shape and expression. This is the secret of magic; I take it.”

“And Mayne is our successful magician,” said Laurice, patting him affectionately on the shoulder.

An August day was closing over Hartside, and a happy group on the lawn at the manor were sitting in the sunset light. There was no change in the aspect of the old house; its drapery of foliage grew a little thicker, perhaps, with every summer; the purple clematis spread its royal mantle wider; the ivy had climbed higher over the gables; and a few sprays stood out darkly against the dusky gold and pearl tints of the evening sky.

Mrs. Comberford, a supremely happy woman, sat between her husband and her son. As she looked at Mayne's face, now warm with the hues of health, she almost wondered at her former anxiety. There were changes in that face, she had studied it too long not to know every detail; but they were changes that added greatly to that nobility and refinement which had always belonged to it.

Mayne and Susie grew more alike as they grew older. In both there was the same loftiness of expression; the same depth of thought in the eyes; the same sweet firmness in the chiselling of mouth and chin. Of all the home circle it was this sister who understood Mayne best, and most enjoyed his triumph.

“Do you remember Mr. Burne Jones’s picture of the Golden Stair?” she asked, after a silence. “Maiden shapes and gentle faces going up and up—to what? Each gazer interprets the picture in his own way. It is an old story, some will say, told in a new fashion. To some it has an earthly meaning; to others a heavenly. Meanwhile the artist himself is dumb; he does not choose to tell us what he meant. Well, I think Mayne’s Romance is like the Golden Stair.”

“I think it is,” assented Mayne, meeting her sympathetic glance. “After all, what better thing can we do for men than show them the

Golden Stair? They will people it with mental images, and, perhaps, climb it for themselves, just to see what it leads to."

"I believe, dear," his mother whispered, "that it has led my boy to heaven."

"If it has," he answered, "it is because his mother first brought him to the foot of the stair."

"Oh, that is all a mother can do!" she said.

They lingered a little longer in the happy stillness; then some one rose, and broke the spell.

"Don't go in yet," Seabert said to Susie, in a low voice. "What a day this has been! It has seemed as if the sweetness and light of a whole summer has been given to us in one glorious day!"

They let the others pass them, and go into the house; and then they stood together for a few minutes in the fragrant twilight.

"Susie," he said, "we shall go up the Golden Stair together."

“Yes;” she answered softly. “But Mayne— poor Mayne!—must climb alone.”

“He will have a great following, and there’s something fine in a loneliness like his. He will not find his mate here, I think. But I have found mine, and I mean to hold her close and fast.”

The friendly old cedar sheltered them as her head rested on his shoulder, and his arms folded her to his heart. Susie would have her fill of that sweet human bliss which Nelly, with all her charms, had missed.

Phyllis, who was bidden to call them in to a late dinner, loitered over her errand with sisterly good-nature, and won an approving smile from Mr. Cottrell.

“Oh, it’s good to think of them philandering out there in the dusk,” she said to the old man. “I’d begun to fear that there wouldn’t be any more love-making in our family.”

“There’s a good deal more of it to come,”

he replied, with an air of sagacity which impressed her deeply.

“I wonder whether Nelly has read Mayne's book?” she said to him a little later, when she found herself again by his side.

“I think she has,” he answered. “By the way, do you ever catch a glimpse of her ladyship in these parts?”

“Never,” returned Phyllis with an emphatic shake of the head. “Never; she does not walk or drive in this direction. You know, I suppose, that we gave up going to our parish church after her marriage? It was best, you see, to guard against the possibility of an encounter, and so we betook ourselves to the little church on the down yonder. Mr. Payton was vexed with us at first; but on second thoughts he decided that we were right. It has made it easier for Mayne to spend a Sunday with us.”

“Much easier,” said Mr. Cottrell. “And he

has not seen her since they parted," he added, speaking half to himself. "I wonder if they'll ever meet again? The world is such a small place that they can hardly hope to escape each other. It's a hard matter for friends to meet; but if you have any special reason for wishing to avoid a fellow-creature you are almost sure to run up against him."

"Fate is proverbially unkind to lovers," Phyllis remarked. "I have heard it said that it puts asunder those who long to come together, and brings together those who desire to be kept asunder. I hope Lady Wyburn will not cross Mayne's path. We are all so happy now, that one is afraid of any disturbing influence."

The day, which had been so beautiful at Hartside, had gone by in weary loneliness to the lady of Rosedown. After all the gaieties of the season the doctors had advised a spell of quietness. She had overtaxed her nerves, they said; but rest and country air would soon restore her strength.

The place was as still as some enchanted palace of fairy times. The very shadows of the leaves were motionless; no living creature moved through the golden lights and cool glooms of the silent grounds. No child's laugh broke the monotonous ripple and splash of the fountains; no little dimpled hands seized merrily upon the blossoms, purple and flame-coloured, which clung in gorgeous wreaths about the pedestals, creeping up to the cold white feet of Psyche; twining a bold tendril round the limbs of Artemis. The warm flower-scents made every breath sweet; no one, save Nelly, seemed to crave anything; the world had fallen into a deep trance of summer content.

"I am half-dead with loneliness," she said to herself. "And yet how tired I was, a little while ago, of all the crowds about me! What is it that I want? What is it that I miss?"

There was danger in these moods of self-questioning; and she knew it, as she sat with

listless hands folded in her lap. Mayne's book was lying on the little table by her side.

In her luxurious solitude the past and present had suddenly confronted each other. There was a suppressed fire of longing in those slumberous brown eyes of hers; an unspoken plaint sighed from her sad, red lips. The book had spoken to her from Mayne; she could hear his voice as she read its pages, and found therein old thoughts that he had once put into words for her sake.

"He has taken the story of our two lives," she mused, "and turned it into a fairy-tale. That is a strange gift which can throw a glamour over what is commonplace, and make it interesting. When I read his book I seem to be looking at all the old scenes through a sunlit haze."

She sank back on the cushions of her low chair, gazing away into the green garden-aisles, catching the white gleam of a statue here, and

the sparkle of a fountain there. Her cheeks glowed with a deep flush, and she suddenly pressed her hands upon her face.

“Oh,” she murmured passionately, “is it possible that I am forgotten? Have I lost all magnetism for him? Once I could draw him to my side by a thought.”

The fire in her eyes was burning brightly. She rose from her seat abruptly, and went out to pace up and down the terrace; but there was no balm for her in the dull sweet air, laden with the heavy scent of flowers. Up and down the long terrace she went, a graceful shape, clad in a soft cream-coloured gown, trimmed with a profusion of rich lace and some knots of golden ribbon; and there was no one near to delight in her loveliness.

Lord Wyburn was yachting; for him the doctors had recommended salt water and change of scene. Nelly did not like the sea, and had been easily persuaded to stay at Rosedown and wait for his return.

But the empty house filled her with depression. She had love in her heart which no one came to seek; dark terrors, which no one strove to brighten; beauty, which was wasted in solitude. At first her husband's absence had been a great relief; that strange, unreasoning fear of him had come upon her many times since she had confessed it to "the dark ladye."

It was not Eric's return that she longed for. It was a wild desire for the companionship of old days that had taken possession of her now. If she could but see Mayne once—just once—to tell him that she had read his book!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE LAST STRUGGLE.

Shall I not one day remember thy bower,
One day when all days are one day to me?—
Thinking, "I stirred not, and yet had the power!"—
D. G. ROSSETTI.

MAYNE had strolled out of the house, and into the long lane that went winding up towards the hills. There was a gate at which he had always liked to stand, looking out across the fields to a place where the heights softly parted, showing the opening of a sweet valley, with plains and woods and streams fading off into long misty lines of shade and light.

All the dear people, whom he had made so happy, were in the house just then. Mr. Cottrell was dozing away the warm afternoon in the library; the father and mother and girls were

all busy in their own way, and Seabert Laurice was by Susie's side.

The thoughts of the rising author were busy with a new novel. This time he would write a thrilling story, he said to himself. And then he smiled, remembering that Seabert—his friend and critic—was sceptical as regarded his power in the sensational line. "You can't do it, my boy," Laurice had declared. "You haven't got it in you to write a thriller or a shocker. Do be content to travel on in your own groove."

Mayne felt that he should like to astonish Seabert by revealing an unexpected force. But when he came to his favourite gate, and leant his arms on the top rail in his old posture of comfortable contemplation, he began slowly to acknowledge that his friend was right.

He remembered the days when he had stood in this very spot, and vaguely dreamed of the very thing which he had now accomplished.

His old thoughts were lingering on the soft slopes of those far-folding hills. His old aspirations had risen from the peaceful pathways of that valley, and had lost themselves in a mist of glory.

How bitterly he had suffered since those early days! The wounds were healed, it is true; but they had changed his character, leaving him with the stamp of a life-long sadness. And yet, it was not until after he had passed through that ordeal of anguish that he found out the purpose of his life, and realized his boyhood's dream.

There is always a sacred influence in the scenes where we dreamt those first dreams. Mayne, resting in this familiar spot, recalled promises that had never yet been fulfilled, and felt within him the desire of more perfect achievement. The hills lent him their strength; the valley gave him its calm. "It is good to be here," he thought.

A voice behind him gently pronounced his name.

He turned with a quick movement and a great heart-throb.

Nelly was standing there; her face flushed like a lovely tropic blossom; her eyes shining with a tender light. Under a large hat the brown hair curled in the silky little rings and ripples which he had loved so well. She came a step nearer, and the rich scent of the Cape jessamine, fastened into the lace at her bosom, filled the air around.

“Oh Mayne,” she said, in a tone that was soft and tremulous, “this is a surprise! I seldom walk so far, and I did not know you were at Hartside.”

Her eyes were pleading with him as she held out her little hand. As he touched her, he drew a deep breath for the old love's sake.

“I am glad to see you looking so well,” he said, with grave politeness.

“But I have not been well; the doctors sent me here for quietness and rest. Lord Wyburn is yachting, and I am at Rosedown alone.”

“You are fortunate in having such a lovely place of retreat,” he said coldly.

“It is a pretty place, although there’s something melancholy in its atmosphere,” she answered. “But I have found companionship in your book; it has made me forget my sickness and solitude.”

He bent his head in silent acknowledgment of the gracious words. His coldness would have maddened her if she had not seen how pale he had grown.

“In the spirit I have been sitting under the old trees of Lincoln’s Inn,” she went on. “I could almost hear the coo of the pigeons. Your voice seemed to speak the words I read, and they went straight to my heart. But the world has given you its praise, and you will not care for mine.”

“All praise is welcome,” he said, without thawing in the least.

“They must be proud of you at the manor. I hear no news of them now. Are they all well?”

“Thank you, they are all well.”

“And Mr. Cottrell—the wizard, as I used to call him—do you live with him still?”

“I do.”

“In those dim old chambers in Lincoln's Inn Fields? You were lying ill there when I heard of you last. I was so sorry—oh, so sorry, Mayne!”

The lustrous eyes were raised to his with an imploring look; she had grown paler, and her breath came quickly as she tried to keep down a sob.

“I dare not ask you to forgive me, Mayne. And yet I have often longed to tell you how miserable I have been; how I would have given the world to hear you say one kind

word! They hurried me into the marriage; if it had not been for that haste I might have been a happier woman now."

"You have got all the things you coveted most," he said sternly.

"And have found them apples of Sodom. Ah, Mayne, you men withhold your pity from the women who need it most sadly! But I do not deserve your compassion; you feel that it is right for me to suffer; you cannot give me even a merciful thought."

"God knows, Nelly, that I have given you many merciful thoughts."

He was looking at her with a depth of sorrow in his steadfast eyes.

"Oh," she pleaded, "you were good to me once. Be kind to me once more. The past was so sweet; I did not mean then to live my life badly; I meant to be honest and true. There must have been a little good in me then that made you care for me so much. But I

could not rise to your level; you thought me vain and frivolous, and I thought you bitter and unjust. It is too late for regret—too late——”

“But it is not too late to make the best of your life,” he said.

What she saw in him at that instant arrested her power to speak. All the anguish, all the bitterness that she had made him suffer seemed to be written legibly on his face; and yet he had never looked so noble and strong as now. In learning all he had endured, she learnt all that she had lost.

“Yes, Mayne,” she said humbly, “it is too late. Yours is the soul of a hero; I have nothing heroic, and unless I am led and lifted I cannot rise. There is enough good in me to make me sigh for the heights I shall never reach. You will live always on the mountain; but your voice will come down to me—a poor dweller in the dismal plain—and I shall be grateful from my heart.”

This was not the Nelly he had seen in fancy—gay, pampered, exulting in her rank and beauty. It was a humble, heart-stricken woman, who stood before him with the touching meekness of a penitent child.

As he looked at her the fast fading fire of his resentment utterly died out. The sweetness of her sad face and drooping mouth softened him unawares. She was so young and tender; there was so much to pity in her—so much that appealed to the chivalrous side of the man's nature that he could not leave her just then.

“Nelly,” he said kindly, “you must have more confidence in yourself. You can be good and do good if you try.”

He found himself speaking as if she were really the child she looked. And she answered with tears gathering in her eyes.

“What you wish me to be I will try to be. Already you have helped me.”

For a few seconds there was silence. The heat of the day was over, and the first cool breath of evening came stealing down from the green hills. It was the hour when the heart opens itself to holy influences and tender recollections; and in the stillness these two were both conscious of its charm.

“How happy I might have been—how good I might have been if you could have always guided me!” she said softly. “Even now your words will teach me to shape my life anew. I think my good angel must have led me to this spot.”

Mayne looked at her with a new tenderness stirring within him; his heart was full of indefinite longings mingled with vague regrets. Perhaps, after all, there had been more truth and love in Nelly than he had ever known. Theirs had been a hasty parting; a little more time, a little more patience on both sides, and they might verily have entered that earthly paradise which

he had seen in his earlier days. Her eyes met his with an intensity of supplication in their brown light.

“I am very lonely at Rosedown,” the sweet voice went on. “Can you not come and talk over old times? Will it not be good for us both?”

His heart throbbed fiercely as she drew half a step nearer, and the scent of the rich flower came floating up to him again. “Thou art man, and not God; thou art flesh, and not an angel,” said Thomas à Kempis in his day; and Mayne trembled to find himself so feeble. He knew now for the first time how weak he was, and how strong his passion for this girl had been. He had lingered here until her charm had almost deprived him of the power to depart.

“No,” he said, making a supreme effort, and breaking the spell. “No; we have done with the past, and I have stayed too long. Good-bye.”

He vaulted over the gate, and was gone ere she had time to speak. She tried to delay him by an entreating gesture of her hand, but he never looked back. There was a path across the field which led into a copse at the back of the old manor house; and as he plunged into the deep shade of the thicket he was haunted by the light of Nelly's eyes, and the perfume of the rich white flower in her dress.

"Fool," he groaned aloud in the woodland silence. "Poor, vain, contemptible fool that I am! Another moment, and I might have been entangled in worse than the old snare."

As he drew near home he paused, exhausted with the strong excitement, tired in body, humbled in mind. But he had drunk the last drop of the bitter cup; and knew that life could never offer him another draught so full of gall as this.

Nelly stood still for a moment, gazing after

his retreating figure; and then she, too, began to turn her steps towards home. Alone in the lane, with tall foxgloves and blue bell-flowers on each side, she suddenly burst out sobbing, and wrung her little hands like a passionate child.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN DEADLY PERIL.

“Is my lord well, that he doth speak so wide?”

Much Ado About Nothing.

THE summer had died in a wild splendour of colour and storm. Lady Wyburn stood at her window and saw the last flower-wreaths loosened from their hold, and tossed by rainy gusts. Here and there the clouds parted, and sunlights fell in broken gleams on the leaf-strewn alleys and wet grass. She shivered, and went back to her tea-table and her favourite low chair by the fire.

It was the day after her husband's return. He had come back with a tanned face, declaring that he had never felt better in his life; but she caught an uneasy glitter in his eyes, and knew that he watched her stealthily when she was not looking at him. He was somewhere in the grounds now, finding fault with the out-door servants, and proposing impossible improvements, till everybody wished him away at sea again.

Nelly was still sitting in the low chair when he entered the room. The afternoon light was fast fading away, but the glow of the fire enfolded the quiet figure, and intensified the touches of scarlet which brightened her soft grey gown. Her old vivid gaiety was missing, but she was as beautiful as ever in these hours of stillness and repose. When he came in, she turned and glanced at him with her sweet smile.

“What a wild day it is!” she said.

As she spoke she poured out a cup of tea,

and handed it to him. It was not until their faces were near to each other that their eyes met. It did credit to her nerve that, in spite of something terrible in his look, she put down the cup with a fairly steady hand. But though her self-possession was momentarily able to bear this sudden strain on it, it collapsed before the continuance of his gaze, and she began to tremble violently.

“What is it?” she faltered. “Oh, Eric, what is it?”

His expression seemed to grow more threatening every instant; but he did not speak at once.

“How long had he been there?” He pointed to the vacant space behind her; but his eyes questioned hers fiercely.

She understood it all at once, and knew that the thing she had greatly feared had come upon her at last. In trying to answer him calmly, her tongue almost failed her. “I don’t know—it must be a mistake,” she said.

He laughed harshly.

“A mistake!” he muttered. “She dares to tell me that it was a mistake when I saw the scoundrel standing at the back of her chair. Who is he, I say—who is he?”

“Eric,” she stammered, “there was no one there. I was alone when you came in. Don't vex yourself with fancies, dear.”

“Fancies!” he shouted, his face working fearfully. “Do you suppose that I've come home blind? I tell you that I saw the fellow as plainly as I see you now. Who is he? How did he get away?”

There was a pause. She seemed to have lost her voice in a spasm of terror; but the wind filled up the silence with a long wail, and a ragged tendril of Virginia creeper beat against the window.

“Let me ring for the lamps,” she gasped at last. “You were deceived by the shadows and the firelight. There has been no one here, on my honour.”

“On your honour!” he echoed, with bitter emphasis. “I’ve never yet met a woman who knew the meaning of the word. You’re all alike—a pack of smooth-tongued deceivers. It was your face that made me mad with the want of you; but I always knew that the truth was not in you, any more than in the rest.”

“What has changed you so terribly, Eric?” she said, ringing the bell with a hand that shook like a leaf. “You have never been so unkind before.”

“I’ve never seen him in this room before,” he cried, with a stamp of fury. “You’re getting too bold, my lady; much too bold for your own safety!”

Hearing footsteps he became quiet in a moment; and the butler, who opened the door, did not guess that he had broken in upon a stormy scene. Nelly’s face was in the shade, but she asked for lamps in a controlled voice.

“Eric,” she said, when the man was gone,

“you are not yourself this evening. To-morrow your father and mother will be here, and you can tell them anything that is on your mind.”

“Do you think they will make excuses for you?” he asked, glowering at her in the firelight.

“I have done nothing that needs excusing,” she answered with dignity.

Her composure was not without its effect upon him. He stood leaning against the mantelpiece, scowling heavily and biting his nails; but he suffered her to rise and leave the room without another word.

Her trembling limbs seemed scarcely able to carry her upstairs to her dressing-room. A bright fire was burning there; the toilet candles were lighted, and Mason was shaking out the folds of a ruby velvet gown. Nelly breathed a sigh of relief; the room looked so familiar and comfortable that she could almost have persuaded herself that the past half-hour was a bad dream.

“If I can only get through this one night,” she thought, “I shall have help to-morrow. I will tell Lord Rexbury plainly that I will not be left alone with Eric again.”

She sank down, shivering, in the corner of a couch, and Mason gave her an inquiring glance.

“Are you not well, my lady?” the woman asked.

“I have taken cold,” Nelly replied. “The weather has changed suddenly, and this dress is too thin. When I put on the velvet I shall be warmer.”

To the last day of her life Mason would remember every detail of that evening. Lady Wyburn sat before the glass, watching her maid's fingers as they arranged the mass of silky hair, rough with natural curliness, in the usual simple fashion. Her face was as colourless as a tea-rose; the look in the dark eyes was infinitely sad.

What would not Nelly have given then for

a friend! Not for soft words, and assurances of sympathy; but for a strong arm—a resolute heart to cope with all these dangers and perplexities, which were crowding upon her thick and fast. Her nerves were sadly shaken. She was feeling at once a feverish impatience for action, and the indecision of great terror.

Sitting there, with eyes that followed Mason's fingers without seeing them, the past rose up before her, illumined with supernatural light. Little things, that she had forgotten, presented themselves with strange clearness to her mind. She saw again the old room which she had shared with Angela in her school-days; the water-colour drawings on the walls; the engraving of the "Light of the World" which hung above the fire-place. She recalled the girlish talks; the splendid hopes; the promises that were to be fulfilled when they had both grown to womanhood.

As she sat lost in that past, a musical time-

piece chimed half past six. Mason had put the last touch to her hair, and she rose from her seat, and let the woman robe her in the velvet dress. It was an antique-looking gown, high over the shoulders, but cut down squarely in front. Mason took up the band of rubies, and asked if she would wear it. Nelly glanced at herself, hesitated for a moment, and then answered "yes."

The maid clasped the glittering collar round the beautiful throat, and felt that her work was done. Nelly told her that she might go.

Left alone, Lady Wyburn sat down before the fire, bending forward, with her hands folded on her knee, and gazing wearily into the blaze. She was resolved that she would not spend the long evening with Eric in the drawing-room; her nerves were not equal to the strain of his company. She meant to go straight from the dining-room to her own chamber, and summon Mason to sleep on the sofa at the foot of her

bed. "It will be enough," she thought, "to tell him that I have taken a severe cold. And I look so deathly pale that he cannot help believing me."

Behind her, as she sat, was the door of her bedroom; facing her was another door which communicated with Lord Wyburn's apartments. She was just rising from her seat to bolt this door of communication, when it was thrown open, and her husband stood there, looking at her with sullen eyes.

"What do you want, Eric?" she demanded, trying to speak as coolly as possible.

"He was going before me as I came upstairs," he answered. "I lost sight of him on the landing. Did he come in here?"

"Eric," she said, "who is it? Is this man some one you have ever seen before, or is he a stranger?"

"To me he is a stranger. He worries me; I won't have strange men hanging about my

house. But I believe you know him, Nelly, you little hypocrite!”

“I do not know him, Eric. If I tell you that he is a mere phantom, you will fly into a rage.”

“Do you mean to say that this house is haunted, or any nonsense of that kind?” he cried, furiously.

“It may be haunted—I don’t know,” Nelly said in a weary voice. She was beginning to feel that her brain would give way.

He gave a strange, short laugh—a sound that made her spring instinctively towards the bell-rope. But it was too late. Before she could reach the cord he was upon her; his hand was at her throat, and something, cold as an icicle, touched her above the edge of the ruby collar. With a wild courage, born of utter desperation, she struck at her husband, calling out at the same moment: “Look, look—he is there—behind you!”

He turned, and the thing that he was holding dropped from his grasp to the floor. With one bound, Nelly reached the door of her bedroom, found it ajar, and was inside the room in the twinkling of an eye. Then her fingers felt for the bolt and fastened it, just as Eric's hands pressed hard against the panels.

"Come out," he said, in a tone of concentrated rage, speaking through the key-hole. "Come out, or I'll——"

She did not hear the end of the sentence. On the other side of the room there was another door, which opened on the corridor. This she bolted with all speed, and then sank down in a chair by the bed, feeling that for a little while she was safe.

But only for a little while. To fly from the house, that was the only thing to be done. Everything swirled before her eyes; she must escape while the power to move and act remained. She might have pulled the bell; but Mason would

have answered the summons, and Lord Wyburn would have made short work with Mason. She dared not open the door to anyone; he would be near at hand, watching his opportunity to make his spring.

She must fly, and that quickly. One idea dominated her confused brain—the idea of getting free from this horrible place and never seeing it again. Suddenly she caught the sound of a stealthy footstep stealing along the corridor; he had come to try the handle of the second door. And finding that this, too, was made fast, he muttered curses which set her quaking anew.

She rose up, wringing her hands, and looking wildly round her. There were three windows in the room, and the middle window opened upon the flat roof of the heavy portico, which, in winter and summer, was always green with plants or gay with flowers. To unclosethe casement, and step out on the roof of the

porch was the work of a moment; but how could she reach the terrace below?

There was but one way. Hastily gathering up her velvet skirt she advanced to the edge of the roof. It was supported, as she knew, by massive pillars of Purbeck marble, and these were hidden by the clasping branches of the creepers which had taken years to grow. She might achieve the descent by trusting to these strong parasites; but would they bear her weight? She must try; it was her only hope of escape.

Like one in a dream she began to make the attempt. Her hands, buried in a dense mass of foliage, clutched desperately at anything firm enough to hold. Thorns tore her tender flesh; boughs snapped; showers of wet leaves covered her head and face; but she got safely down on the terrace, and then sped away, wild with terror, to a narrow path that wound through the shrubberies. There was a gate at the end of this path—a little wicket, which was the

only barrier between herself and the high road.

She climbed the gate, and ran on under the wild sky. The wind was blowing, rain fell now and then; but better wind and rain than the horror of those terrible rooms at home. Better the lashing of the gale than her husband's threats and curses; better the fast-gathering darkness than the awful glare of his eyes.

Her strength was beginning to fail. The excitement which had sustained her up to this point was fast dying out, leaving a deadly sense of cold and exhaustion. Flight had been in her heart, and extreme terror had lent her wings; but now her limbs were stiff; her hair was heavy with rain; her delicate little shoes and silk stockings were sodden and torn. Yet the wild wet road was a welcome sight; the whistle of the wind was sweet to her ears; and she halted at last under the protection of an old oak, which grew by the side of a dry ditch, close to a gate-post. The wind was

behind her now, and she rested so well here that a sort of stupor crept over her.

When she started there had been a vague idea in her mind of seeking shelter at the Red Farm. She had seen the place in her walks and drives, and knew that it could not be much more than a mile from Rosedown. The mistress of the farm was a pleasant woman with a smiling face; and Nelly had never passed her without a kindly greeting. She felt sure that Mrs. Budd would take her in, and keep her safe till morning. But now that her strength had given out, and this strange drowsiness was weighing down her eyelids, she could go no farther. For a time, at least, she must stay and rest.

A long way off something seemed to be moving towards her, coming from the direction of Rosedown, and showing two lights which shone like yellow stars out of the surrounding gloom. For a moment Nelly's heart began to beat with a new fear;—was she pursued? But,

no; the stout grey pony, trotting fast through the rain-puddles, never came from Lord Wyburn's stables; and instinctively she stepped out of her shelter to ask for help.

The driver pulled up his horse at once, and peered at her doubtfully. A lull in the wind and a pause in the rain came as if to favour her at that moment. Her white face was wanly visible in the light of the chaise lamps, and a cry of astonishment broke from the man's lips. "Lady Wyburn," he said. "What has happened? How came you here? Don't you know me? My name is Comberford—Mayne Comberford's father!"

"Take care of me—pray take care of me," pleaded the poor creature, coming closer to his side. "My husband is mad; he has tried to kill me, and I have run away. If they will shelter me at Red Farm for this one night, I will go to the Abbey to-morrow."

The sound of a familiar voice had helped to

collect her scattered senses. Mr. Comberford did not, for a moment, disbelieve her tale; rumours of Lord Wyburn's fitful temper had been freely circulated in Hartside during the last twelve months, but the master of the manor had not mentioned them to his family. He wished them to forget Nelly, and all that concerned her. She had wounded their hearts so painfully that the remembrance of her could be nothing but a grief.

“I will take care of you, my poor girl,” he said warmly. “Indeed, you have great need of a friend. Get into the chaise, and we shall be at Red Farm in a few minutes. I know that Mrs. Budd will make you welcome.”

Nelly did not lose consciousness until she was safely within the walls of the hospitable house. Mrs. Budd bent over her, full of pity, rubbing her chilled hands, and looking at her with tender kindness when her dark eyes opened wonderingly. A startled expression came over

her face when Mr. Comberford drew near. But presently she remembered everything and thanked him with a faint smile.

Through that long night she lay in the guest-chamber of the farm. It was a low room with latticed casements which rattled in the stormy wind, and she listened nervously to the creaking of the trees and the splash of rain outside the panes. So the hours wore on, from deep blackness to the soft grey of early dawn; and then came the pale yellow streaks of morning. The cocks began to crow; the heavy gate swung open; there was a sound of footsteps on the gravel path leading to the hall door. Mr. Comberford was on his way to the Abbey, but he had come to know how she had passed the night.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE END OF THE STORY.

The high that proved too high, the heroic for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to love itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and by the bard,
Enough that he heard it once; we shall hear it by-and-bye.

BROWNING.

NELLY was ill. She scarcely remembered what followed the night spent at Red Farm. It seemed as if a long time had gone by since she fled away from Rosedown in the wind and the rain. But in reality the fever had only lasted a few days; and one morning, feeling very weary, and yet able to take a languid interest in things, she began to harass Mason with questions.

She was lying in a luxurious room at the Abbey; the sunshine was coming in freely

through the mullioned windows, and falling on a rich old china bowl, full of Gloire de Dijon roses, which stood on a little table near the bed. Mason's work-basket was beside the bowl, and she was busy with her needle.

"Put down your work, Mason," commanded the invalid. "I want to talk to you."

"But you are not allowed to talk much, my lady."

"I didn't say I wanted to talk *much*," said Nelly, pettishly. "There are a few things I wish to know, that's all. How long have I been here?"

"This is the tenth day, my lady."

The maid had laid her needle aside, and the corners of her mouth twitched with anxiety as she waited for the next question. It came, and it was just what she had expected. Nelly asked for her husband. Was he better? Had he been to inquire for her?

"No, my lady, he has not been here."

Lady Wyburn sank back upon her pillows and meditated deeply. She had been terribly frightened; but she was the worldly-wise Nelly again, and understood the importance of retaining the good opinion of society. She remembered everything, and knew that Eric had been mad, and had nearly succeeded in taking her life. But would the world believe that she had been justified in running away? Perhaps he had completely recovered, and was expecting her to apologize for her hasty flight, and come back to him again.

She shuddered, and closed her eyes. No; she could not go back; she should always be afraid that his madness would break out again. She did not love him well enough to run the risk of being murdered. Let the world say what it would, she must throw herself upon Lady Brookstone's kindness. And yet, how bitter it would be to do this! A woman separated from her husband is a trouble to herself,

and a thorn in the flesh of all connected with her. Nelly sighed heavily, and moved uneasily on her soft pillows.

“Don’t you feel comfortable, my lady?” asked Mason, rising, and patting the bed-clothes anxiously.

“Yes; but I shall be glad to sit up,” Nelly answered. “I’m tired of lying here, and seeing only you.”

“All in good time,” responded Mason blandly.

Nelly gave her a suspicious glance. She fancied that there was something Jesuitical in Mason’s manner. Something was hidden from her. “With patience I shall learn what it is,” she thought.

In the afternoon the doctor came to her bedside, felt her pulse, said a few words of satisfaction, and walked away, followed by Mason. As soon as she was alone, Nelly crawled out of bed; and found, to her surprise, that she could not stand at first. But by degrees, and by

the aid of tables and chairs, she managed to creep near the door of the dressing-room which was ajar. Trembling with weakness, and clinging to the end of a couch for support, she looked and listened eagerly.

Mason's back was towards her, but she could see the doctor's face full of grave anxiety.

"She must soon know," he said. "But you had better put off telling her as long as you can. She is gaining strength faster than I expected; but of course it will be a terrible shock to her."

Nelly sickened, and nearly fell; only a desperate courage kept her up. She would not remain in ignorance any longer.

"Must I tell her that he killed himself?" asked Mason, in a half-whisper.

"By no means," the doctor replied. "Let her think that it was a sudden attack of illness."

There was no need to listen longer. Nelly knew now that there would be nothing more to fear from the husband whom she had dreaded

to see again. The walls seemed to be whirling round her; but her will was still strong, and with shaking hands and stumbling feet, she tottered back to bed. She scarcely knew how she got into her old place among the pillows; but Mason found her lying there with closed eyes, and thought that she had fallen into an uneasy slumber. After straightening the disarranged bed-clothes the maid sat down to sew, and let Nelly rest in peace.

She lay in a sort of lethargy for days; and they all wondered at her patience and silence. No one knew what thoughts came crowding into her brain. Even Lady Brookstone, when she arrived, found her adopted daughter strangely still and reserved, and guessed at last that she had caught some hint of the dreadful truth.

“Nelly,” she asked one day, “do you know? Have you found it out?”

And Nelly answered, “Yes.”

* * * * *

The winter came and went; spring and summer passed away; and then a beautiful October, calm and still, made a golden crown for the departing year.

“It is just a twelvemonth ago since that unlucky fellow shot himself at Rosedown,” said Mr. Cottrell to his godson.

“Is it?” Mayne spoke with an abstracted air, turning over the pile of letters which lay beside his plate at breakfast.

“Have you forgotten the circumstance?” asked the old man, with a penetrating look. “Does it never occur to you that poor Wyburn has left a rich and lovely widow?”

“It has occurred to me often,” replied Mayne frankly. “Poor little girl!—I hope she may be happier in her second marriage than in her first.”

“Is she already thinking of a second marriage?” Mr. Cottrell inquired.

“I don't know. Very likely she is. I've

never seen her since he died, nor have I heard anything about her.”

“Something tells me,” said his godfather quietly, “that you will hear of her very soon.”

Mayne had just come to the last letter in the pile. It was small, dainty, faintly-tinted with grey, and edged with black. He stared at the letter for an instant; then raised his eyes to Mr. Cottrell’s face, and slowly shook his head at him.

“My dear sir, have you been at your witchcraft again?” he demanded, with mock gravity. “Do you know what this is?”

He lifted the delicate envelope with the tips of his fingers.

“From her ladyship,” he said. “There’s no mistake; this is Nelly’s handwriting.”

“Witchcraft!” repeated Mr. Cottrell scornfully. “Does it need witchcraft to foretell what is sure to come? Isn’t there a homely saying that ‘old broth is sooner warmed than new broth

made'? She always liked you, my boy; and she is rich enough now to indulge her fancy."

Mayne deliberately tore off the cover of his note, and read its contents before he spoke again.

"Very few words," he said composedly. "She asks me to meet her at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon in our old haunt, under the trees at Lincoln's Inn."

"Sunday afternoon—a good, quiet time;" Mr. Cottrell remarked. "She thinks, very naturally, that the old place in your heart is waiting to receive her again. It would be a pretty ending to a sad story, Mayne."

"An ending which would please the confirmed novel-reader," laughed Mayne. "But what I have written, I have written. The Romance of Lincoln's Inn is finished, you know."

"May there not be a sequel?"

"In my opinion a sequel is a poor thing. It is only the 'first crush of the grape' that is worth much. Tell your story, and then let it

alone; don't try to squeeze any more out of a used-up subject," Mayne replied.

Whatever his thoughts and intentions might have been, he was the first to arrive at the old trysting-place. All around him was the burnished gold of autumn; so quiet was the atmosphere that the yellow leaves clung to the boughs, and took the glory of the tranquil sunshine; a thin mist hung over the grass, and every tint of green and grey and brown was touched with a mellow radiance. The pigeons flocked upon the broad gravel walk; the choir-boys were going towards the chapel; and presently the harsh bell ceased its clamorous call.

He looked up from the few leaves lying at his feet, and saw Nelly coming towards him. Her black gown, made of soft, dead silk, rustled faintly as she moved; her face, framed in the nun-like bonnet, was very sweet in its expression of perfect gentleness. She looked

as if she remembered everything; and he saw that she yielded herself to her memories without reluctance, and was happy in them.

“Ah,” she said, in her soft voice, “I thought you would come! This dear old spot—how unchanged it is!”

He had risen and met her with grave courtesy. His first glance had shown him that she had not lost a single charm.

“I hope it will be a long while before Lincoln's Inn changes,” he answered, as they sat down on their old seat. “I come here very often; it is a restful place.”

“Yes,” she said, absently, glancing away across the grass. “I—I have been here in spirit when I lived miles off. At this moment I feel as if I were in the middle of a pleasant dream. I am half afraid of waking up, and finding myself a miserable woman again.”

“You don't show any traces of misery,” he remarked.

“It is my misfortune not to grow wrinkled and grey as other wretched women do,” she answered. “Wrinkles and grey hairs win sympathy at once. As a matter of fact, men don’t believe you have suffered unless you have got ugly.”

“It is not suffering that makes people ugly,” he replied. “On the contrary it often makes them beautiful in a peculiar way, and always interesting.”

She glanced at him—a sleepy glance through her dark eyelashes—and came silently to the conclusion that his own sorrows had not had a disfiguring effect. He looked older; his features were sharpened; there were traces of work and thought; but he had acquired the dignity which comes of bearing trouble bravely, and the restfulness which is only gained by hard work well done.

“I wonder,” she said, after a pause, “that I am not more changed. I wonder my hair did not turn white in a single night!”

He turned and looked at her with a pitying, kindly gaze. There was no need to put his compassion into words. It was very sweet; but she wanted more than this.

“Oh,” she cried, with a little movement of her hands, “you will never know how terrible it was! I was so helpless,—so utterly alone.”

“Poor child,” he said in a low voice. “You were indeed alone.”

“And my life might have been so different. Instead of being trampled on I might have been lifted up. Instead of a barren and dry land, I might have had green pastures and still waters. Oh, Mayne, if only I could begin at the end of my Romance, and work my way back to the first chapter!”

She was leaning towards him, a beautiful light in her eyes, a soft flush on her velvet cheeks. Again he looked at her; but the pity in his gaze did not change into anything deeper. He read all the entreaty and expectation in that

lovely face, and read it with the calm regret of one who had nothing to give.

“Nelly,” he said gently, “remember that a great deal is possible to youth. Your first Romance is ended. It was the Romance of Lincoln’s Inn, and that inexorable word ‘Finis’ is written on the last page. Begin a new story; live in a simple, natural way, and keep your heart open to the sun. Then a new love will flow in unawares, and life will be fresh and sweet again—sweeter, perhaps, than it ever was before.”

“No,” she murmured, “not sweeter. Ah, Mayne, how well you loved me once. If——”

He interrupted her with a quiet gesture.

“I loved my Ideal,” he said, in an unimpassioned tone. “I love her still; but she no longer looks at me through your eyes, nor speaks to me with your voice. Yet she has never quite deserted me, and while I work and strive I follow her beckoning hand. What I

once thought I had found in a woman's beauty, has come to me since in many ways—in old thoughts and new thinkers,—in dead tongues and in the burning words of living men. My work absorbs me; every one must write his life either in actions or with pen and ink; in some way, sooner or later, all that we have to tell must be told.”

A silence fell upon them both. If he had spoken less calmly and dispassionately she would have tried the effect of womanly arts; but instinct taught her that such wiles would be useless now. There was a look of rest on his face—a look that could never have come there till his passion for her had completely died.

“I see,” she said at last, “that if I am ever to be happy again I must begin a new story. But I shall always feel that the old was better.”

“I do not think you will always feel so,” he answered in his quiet voice.

“I shall not come here any more,” she said, as she rose from her seat. “This place was the scene of my Romance; it began here, and here it has ended.”

He met her eyes with a grave kindness which set her heart aching. The shady walk was dreamy and still; the autumn leaves rustled languidly overhead; a wave of organ music swept towards them as they drew near the chapel.

“It is the last time,” Nelly thought, “the last time!”

They parted there; and she went her way into a world which was filled with new faces, new hopes, and new associations. But Mayne turned back to the old seat under the plane-trees, and sat there to muse a little longer in the peaceful sunshine.

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