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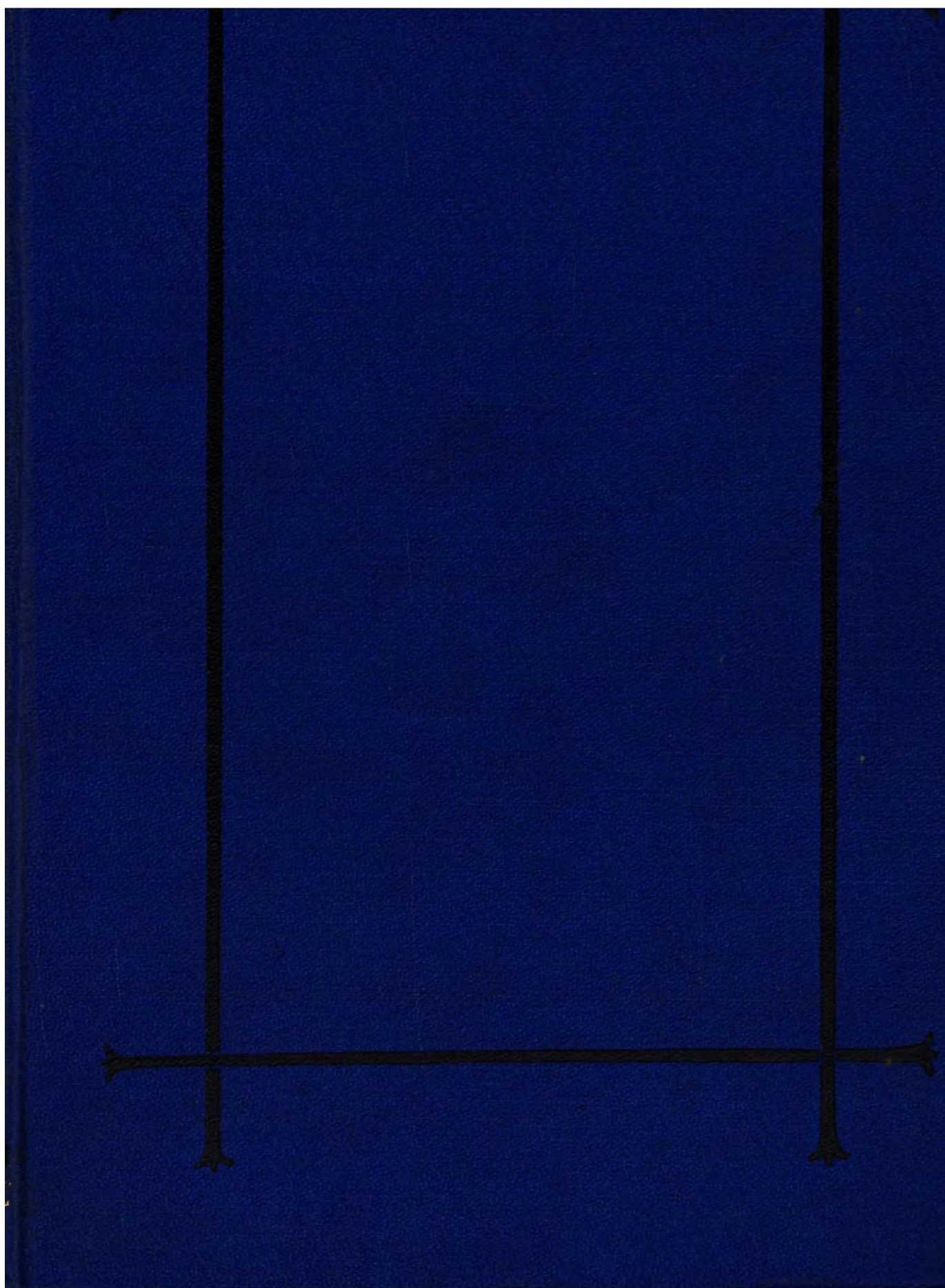
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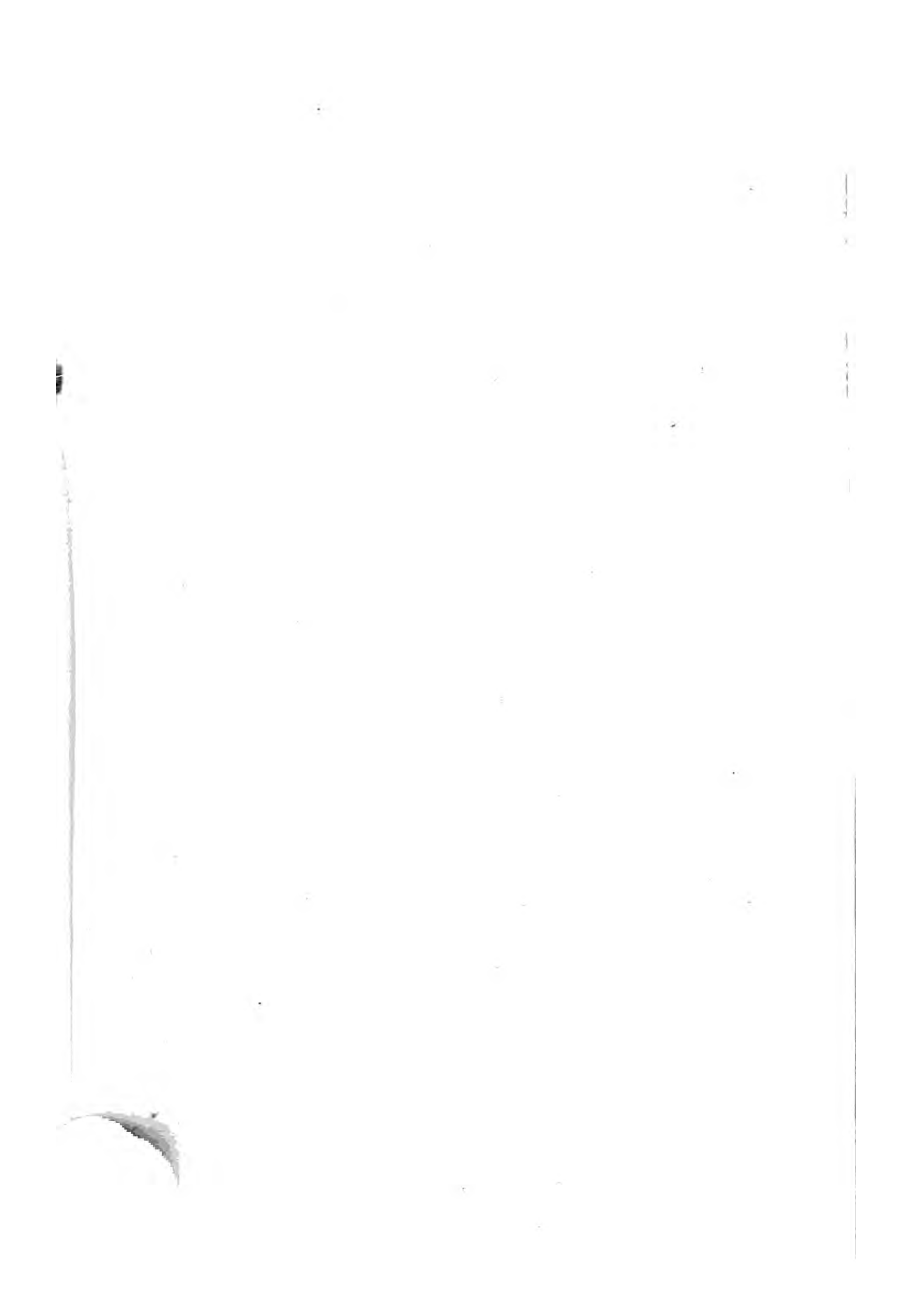


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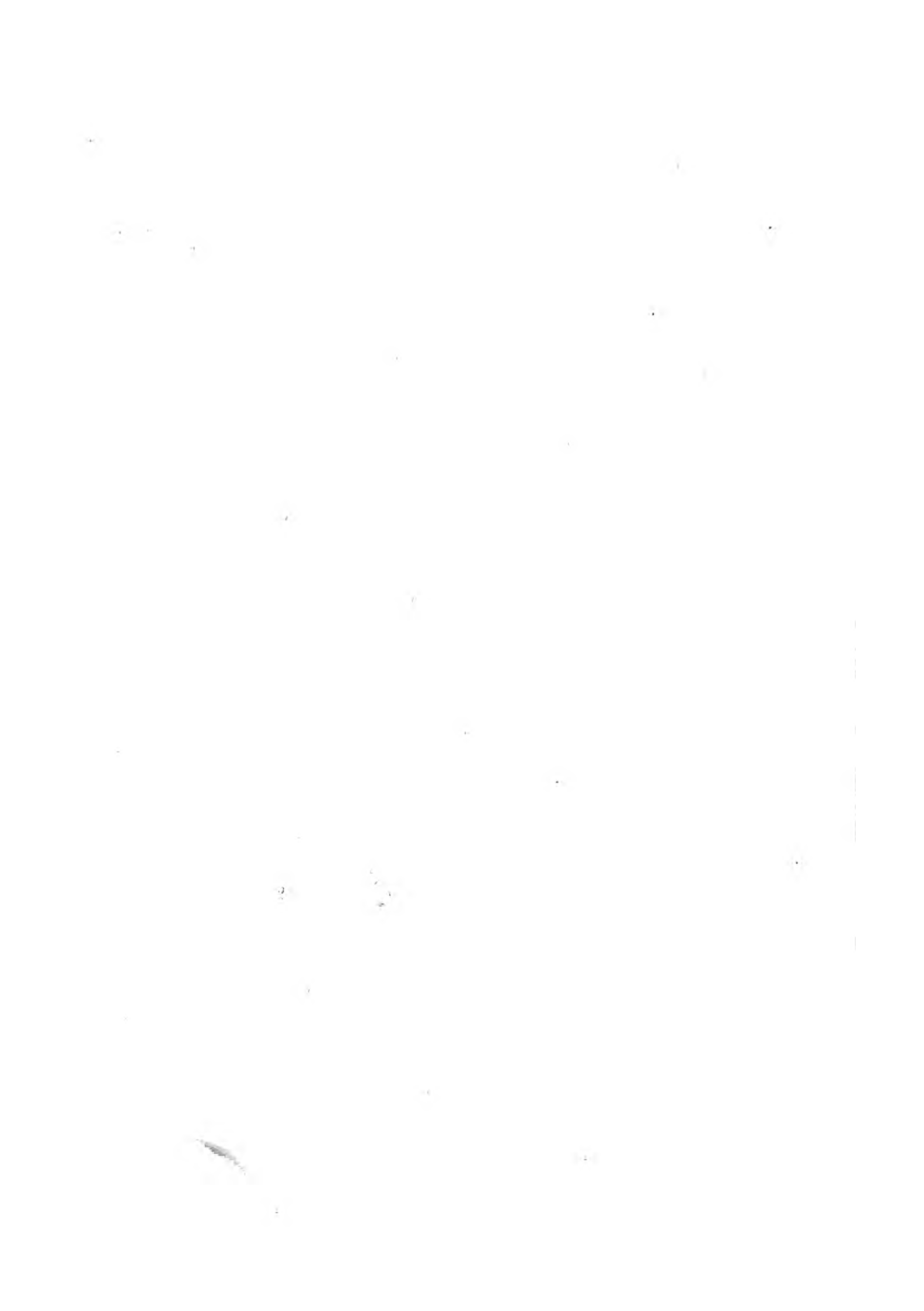








ONCE AND FOR EVER.



ONCE AND FOR EVER,

OR

*PASSAGES IN THE LIFE OF THE
CURATE OF DANBURY.*

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"NO APPEAL." "SAVED BY A WOMAN."

THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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ONCE AND FOR EVER.

CHAPTER I.

SPRING-TIDE.

THE meeting of the trustees took place in due course, and at Danbury itself, but Norton was not called as a witness, or to take any part in the council. All he knew was that it lasted a couple of hours, and that Searl, after it had broken up, drove away in his brougham, without saying a word good, bad, or indifferent ; and looking as he usually did, grim, taciturn, and sulky, when business was done.

From his own study window Norton watched the little pettifogger creep away at the great gates; with the same half-starved wisp of a coachman and the same broken-winded grey horse.

If he had had a spark of good nature in him, thought the Curate, he would have stepped in and told me how matters stood, whether for or against me. But, I believe, as the General told me, that he is a poor, hard, old screw, without a particle of feeling.

At this instant a loud knock at the door put an end to any further soliloquising, and the servant entered with a letter.

"Mr. Searl, sir, left this note for you, when the meeting was over, to be delivered *immediate*, but I was out just then, sir, and cook she didn't like to meddle with it, or you would have had it before, sir."

"Very well, Jane; that will do."

On opening the note he read as follows:—

“ My dear Sir,

“ I thought that you might like to know at once the conclusion at which the committee arrived to-day, and therefore write to say that their decision does not prevent the Curate of Danbury from entering the married state.

“ Faithfully yours,

“ R. SEARL.”

These few words, of course, were very welcome.

“ Not half so bad a fellow as I thought, after all,” said Norton to himself; “ he not only tells me of his own defeat, but tells me at once more than I could have expected from such a stone.”

But fate had in store for him that night a greater and more agreeable surprise than a word from a secretary, for by the last post came a small and dainty notelet from Plymridge, in a handwriting dearer to Norton

than all others that pen and ink could furnish. He could scarcely believe his own eyes, as he read,

“Dearest Harry,

“Mrs. Estcourt has suddenly taken it into her head that she should like to see ‘Danbury,’ the Curate, and the gardens, where it is said are some famous beehives. I, of course, have no care to see either the one or the other, but shall merely come as her companion. We shall pick up Lucy Markham on our way, and if you are good, you shall give us all some lunch.

“Always your own,

“MARY.”

“What a provoking, delicious, good-for-nothing wretch, not to give me a day’s notice. How on earth am I to find lunch for three ladies, at a moment’s notice, with nothing in the house but cold beef?”

Nothing could be done that night. So much was clear; even if Norton had sent for Susan, the cook, at once. She was a good-natured, red-faced, country girl, with just gumption enough to roast a leg of mutton, or boil a cabbage, but the thought of preparing a luncheon for a carriage-full of ladies would have upset her for a week.

Having smoked a solemn pipe over the question, Norton rang the bell, and sent for Joe Simmons, once an A.B. in her Majesty's navy, now gardener, gate-keeper, porter, butler, and general factotum of Danbury. He was an old, shrewd, hard-headed fellow of about sixty, with all his wits about him, and a great favourite of all the pensioners of the College.

"Simmons," said Norton, "I am in a quandary."

"Yes, your honour, as how, sir; no bad news abroad, I hope, sir?"

"Good, Simmons, good, so good that I

don't know how to deal with it ; three ladies coming to lunch, but nothing in the larder but cold beef ! ”

On hearing this Jack gave a long whistle, grinned, turned suddenly grave, and then apologised for his behaviour.

“ Beg pardon, your honour, but if that's all, and we've got a good start to-morrow morning, it's all plain sailing. My missus has got a couple of fowls under orders to be killed, the boy shall run into Dorminster and fetch a fresh lobster ; I know how to make a salad, and there's a bottle of sparkling hock in the locker that Captain Barclay will be proud to send aboard.”

“ Bravo, Simmons ! I never knew you fail ; there is but one thing more, what is to be done with Susan ? If she has not a finger in the pie, there will be a mutiny in the kitchen before to-morrow night.”

“ She shall make an apple-tart, sir, and roast the chickens, and I'll take her advice

about the salad. The other maid shall tell me how to lay the table, and set out the flowers. I'll be Jack-of-all-trades, and pretend only to look on. Only let 'em fancy they are ruling the ship, and you may do what you like with them womenkind, if they're worth their salt. Nothing more, your honour ? ”

“ Nothing, Simmons, except that you deserve a double allowance of grog for the next month.”

“ Very well, your honour, the month shall begin to-morrow.”

The next day was as bright and fair as could be wished. The lunch was laid out and all ready in good time, the guests were punctual, and the host in a high state of excitement received them at Danbury gates, showed them the old-fashioned gardens, the bees, and the sun-dial, the chapel, and the library ; and then they sat down at the little table sparkling with glass and silver, and

crowned with flowers which the gallant old captain had insisted on cutting with his own hands.

“Give my compliments to the chaplain,” he said to Simmons, “and tell him not to spare the hock. It was a present from General Dartlake, and so he will know it is good. And say that I will lunch with him some other day.”

The whole party were in great spirits, the ladies charmed with the neatness and beauty of the impromptu lunch, and the quiet, quaint, beauty of the whole place ; and the host sunning himself in the bright eyes of three young and beautiful women.

In the midst of the feast came a letter from the General, which had to be read aloud amidst shouts of approval, and gave fresh zest to their enjoyment.

Having once dropped a hint as to its contents, and the subject of the last meeting of the trustees, his guests gave him no rest

until he agreed, *in strict confidence*, to read it.

“In strict confidence,” he said, “of course, for in the first place it is purely official business, I see, and in the second—”

“Never mind the second,” interrupted Mrs. Estcourt, “we are all here on official business of the most delicate kind, so the first will amply suffice.”

“Read it, this moment, sir,” said another merry voice, at the sound of which Norton knew that he had only to obey orders.

“My dear Mr. Norton,

“I wish that I had the pen of a ready writer to tell you, as it ought to be told, the history of yesterday’s proceedings, It was a large meeting, and at first threatened to be a stormy one; the numbers, I fancy, being pretty equally divided; and rather a strong section under Searl’s guidance, seeming inclined to come to a foregone con-

clusion; viz., that the Curate of Danbury ought not to be a married man. Three or four of the old Governors were present, and these I allowed to make their usual little hum-drum speeches about what had always been the custom at Danbury; and the danger of doing anything which had not been done before. It had worked well, so said the chairman, to their certain knowledge for fifty years, and he thought they had better let well alone, yes, gentlemen, well alone; I say let well alone. When this profound maxim had been well aired, I thought that my time was come. Mr. Searl, I saw plainly, according to his usual tactics, was watching to find out which way the stronger party seem likely to vote; and I determined to put a bold face on the matter. 'We have talked a good deal,' I said, 'about the founder's will, and the advantage of letting well alone, but it is not quite clear to me as yet what his will says. By all means let

well alone, unless we can do better; and in the meanwhile, instead of the secretary's 'impression as to what the founder meant, or probably intended, or is supposed to ordain,' let us have the charter itself before us, and read and judge for ourselves. Mr. Searl's opinion is no doubt of great value, but it cannot decide this question, which must be decided by the exact words of the document itself.' (Hear, hear.)

"Upon this, the secretary hummed and hawed; and seeing the impression which my words had made, began to back out of several strong assertions which he had made not ten minutes before. Now he came to think again, 'it occurred to him that the meaning which General Dartlake had put on the founder's words might possibly not be incorrect. They might, in fact, be construed in two ways. He was not sure. But that was his impression.'

" 'No, no,' said I, 'don't let us have any

mere impressions ; or the whole question will come up again some day.'

" 'Was it worth while to have up the charter again from the strong room ?' said the secretary ; he had looked at it a month or two ago, and his impression was—

" Then, I saw by the look of his face that there was some reason why he wished the charter *not* to be produced. 'The whole thing,' said I, 'lies in a nut-shell. We must be guided entirely by the founder's words, and to know them, we must have the document before us. He either forbids the curate to be a married man, or he allows it.'

" In five minutes we had the old musty parchment before us ; and I insisted on having the whole paragraph concerning '*the curate*' read aloud by Searl himself. No wonder that the cunning old stager had wanted us to rely on his impressions, or the two ways of construing, for there was not

one single word in the whole document as to the curate's being married or unmarried. No restriction or prohibition whatever, that could be made to allude to the matter in any way !

“ ‘By all means, then,’ said I, ‘let well alone. The founder clearly never meant to insist on celibacy, why should we? The present curate has done his work well for some years (I made the most of it), and is likely to do it all the better now for having a young, clever, active, charming woman to help in the domestic management of the College ; and to keep Joe Simmons in order.’

“ The fogies, of course, had another innings after this ; and the secretary having shuffled his cards once more, and having explained that his impression as to the two readings would really include the view taken by the chairman, as well as that of the members who differed from him, said that if the

trustees acted on the General's view of the case they would be clearly carrying out the founder's wish. After which lucid statement, it was carried *nem. con.* that the present curate be allowed to enter the holy state of matrimony forthwith if he thought proper.

"So, my dear Mr. Norton, wind and tide, fortune and fair weather, are all in your favour. If I knew how, I would here say a great many pretty and poetical things about Cupid's court and reign. But they are not in my line. I can only say God bless you with many happy years at Danbury.

"Pray bring the charming maiden with the nut-brown eyes to see us at Saltram very soon.

"Your old friend,

"R. DARTLAKE."

"P.S.—He was directed to let you know at once the issue of the meeting, and no doubt has done so."

At the close of this letter, to which one of the hearers listened with blushing cheeks, a long and pleasant talk ensued, from which, however, both Norton and Mary Hastings would ere long have gladly escaped, as Miss Markham's tongue grew more and more vivacious, and Mrs. Estcourt more sanguine in discussing the future plans of the young couple. They were topics, indeed, which he would have been charmed to talk over with his lady-love alone, but which he did not so much relish when made public property. The conversation therefore, in spite of all Lucy's efforts, began to flag until she suddenly exclaimed,

"My dear Mrs. Estcourt, the fact is that we are getting sadly *de trop*, and both these good people are wishing us anywhere else here. Do order the carriage, pack Darby and Joan into the rumble outside, where they can say all sorts of sweet things to

each other without being overheard, and let us go back to prosy life at 'The Court.' "

To this arrangement, however, neither of the accused parties would agree, and so they all journeyed homewards together, and a very bright and happy quartet they made ; their tormentor's proposal having at all events served to break the ice and put all parties thoroughly at their ease. How the rest of the evening was spent, and how many delicious opportunities Norton contrived to get for cosy *tête-à-têtes* with his mistress, must be left to the reader's own imagination.

Whatever they were, he managed to make such good use of them as to extract from Mary a promise that the happy day should be early in March, so that he went away in a state of rapturous content.

" My darling," he said, after many happy good-byes, " winter may be very

good for the Curate of Danbury, as you wickedly say, but you have turned it into spring before it comes, and the trustees are trumps. It seems almost too bright and cloudless a prospect."

"Not a grain too bright or too good, dearest," was the happy answer; "if I can be to you only half what you say I am. How long will the sunshine last when I invade your quiet domains at Danbury, and there is no escape for you?"

"How long?" he said, looking into her tender, loving eyes; "for ever! Longer than life itself. But I shall never go if I do not tear myself away; and here comes Lucy Markham, brimming over with mischief, as usual. Once more, good night."

And so, at last, they parted.

"One would think," cried his tormentor, "that you two people had not seen each other for twenty years, and were going to be separated to-night for as many more."

"He *is* going," replied Mary, with a merry laugh.

"Thank goodness for that," exclaimed Lucy. "Good night, Mr. Norton ; it's really growing very late, and I am sure that the poor souls at Danbury must be tired of waiting for you long ago. If Mary faints as you disappear, or anything like hysterics comes on, remember that we have two medical men in the house, papa and me ; and cold water is an infallible remedy. You shall have a telegram in the morning if any alarming symptoms appear. You have wished me good night twice already, Mary ! he is incorrigible. Do send him away."

The months that followed this were bright and swift ; but of unbroken happiness to Norton. Autumn quickly waned into winter. Frost and snow, wind and rain, came in due order ; but spring-tide had fairly set in for him, and the new year dawned with a radiance that infected the

whole College. Simmons grew quite exuberant, and when he dared was almost jocose if Norton ever gave him a chance. He had long ago written fully to Gresley; paid a happy visit to Saltram; and was never weary of planning and arranging at Danbury for its new mistress. Then came a visit from his sisters, who had to be introduced to the bride elect, who won their hearts by her quiet beauty and grace as she seemed to have won all others.

And at last came *the* day itself. The marriage took place at a quiet little country church, not half a mile from the gates of Plymridge, at which hospitable mansion, in spite of Markham's protest, the wedding-breakfast took place. Gresley, of course, was the officiating priest; Lucy Markham and Norton's sisters were bridesmaids. The master of 'The Court' gave away the bride; and nothing was wanting that heartiness, good-will, and bright weather

could give, to make all things go well. Above all, the two actors in the drama which crowns man's life with unalloyed happiness, or hopeless misfortune, loved each other with that deep love that springs from perfect union. There was no gushing emotion on the part of the happy bride, no maudlin affectation of sentimental transports that she did not feel. Proud, happy, tears filled her eyes, as children scattered flowers in her path to the church-gate; but she neither hid them nor paraded her emotion, as friend after friend grasped her hand and whispered their hopes and prayers for her future happiness.

But she was glad at last to escape into the carriage, if only for the brief ride back to Plymridge.

"It is all for you, dearest," she whispered, "all this honour, and respect, and affection, and not for the poor friendless girl Mary Hastings."

“Your own, my darling, only your own; and only so far mine, because you are mine,—my wife now,—a part of myself.”

To describe a wedding-breakfast is to deal with yesterday's champagne. The feast was as thoroughly indigestible, as dainty, as well crowned with generous wine and fair flowers, with smiling bridesmaids, and with festively eloquent speeches, as the joint efforts of Gunter and St. George's, Hanover Square, ever conspired to produce. But, happily for all parties, especially for the speech-makers, it came to an end at last; and the two bewildered people in honour of whom all that curious eloquence had been recklessly expended, once more escaped into the chariot and were whirled swiftly away to be happy for evermore.

“If old shoes could ensure happiness, old fellow,” whispered Gresley, as he wished his friend good-bye in the hall, “yours would be unclouded and without

end. But I hope that no such luck awaits you. You have got a treasure of a wife, a real woman ; simple, wise, gracious, and loving. Take care of her, O Juan."

The trustees had given him a month's leave of absence, and the golden days of honey were spent in exploring that most beautiful of all English coast scenery—the bold, rough, northern coast of Devon. How happy those days were only the two blissful sharers in them may tell.

A brief record of them even yet remains in Norton's journal, clearly meant for no eyes but hers who was now one with him in heart, in hope, and in life. There we leave them. She read the loving words as he wrote them, and treasured them up in her heart for many a long day, when the light had grown dim and shadows began to close in all around her weary path.

CHAPTER II.

SUMMER.

“The time will bring on summer,
When briars shall have leaves as well as thorns.”

Shakspeare.

WORK had now come to Edith Jervis, which she had scarcely put her hand to ere the mainspring of hope started into life, and, as often happens when the workman is really in earnest, it lay, as Norton had said, waiting to be done. Saltram was an outlying hamlet of a wide and scattered parish, and the few children who attended any schools had to tramp through miles of

muddy road to their daily task. Her first business, therefore, was to secure a room in the hamlet. A cottage was soon found, and a young girl, the daughter of a neighbouring farmer, persuaded to undertake the management of a day school for the younger children. This was easy enough, as the General put his hand freely into his pocket, and subscriptions soon dropped in from neighbouring landholders. Then came night schools for young labouring men, whom Edith herself hunted out in the course of her daily visits among the poor, who were chiefly her father's tenants, and whom she undertook to teach herself. This was dreary, uphill, work at first; but step by step and little by little her influence grew, and so the task soon became more easy and more pleasant. The expense was trifling, as the same school-room served both for the children and the men; and as the number never grew beyond eight or ten, two

evenings a week were found to be enough. By-and-by, too, one or two of the more promising of her pupils offered to help in the work of teaching, and thus the work was still further lightened.

Then, fortunately for Edith, a High Churchman was appointed curate of Saltram, and to him the vicar of the mother Church gave the entire charge of the hamlet. Frank Morpeth was a man of no great breadth or power of mind, but had sense enough to see of what infinite value such a woman as Edith Jervis might be to him and to the parish at large. He gave full play, therefore, to all her plans for the good of his people, and was ready on all occasions to help in the work itself. He had come from a large parish in Dorminster, and really knew what the work of a parish priest should be. Under their joint care, therefore, the hamlet of Saltram began to thrive as it never had yet thriven; and

the General saw with great joy that the cloud on his daughter's mind had really lifted, if it were not actually removed, though he was still as ignorant as ever as to what its cause had been.

Having achieved this much, Morpeth's next step was to try to interest his zealous ally in the welfare of his old parish in Dorminster, where he had long wished to found a nursing sisterhood of ladies, who should go into such hapless and hopeless households as had long before almost driven Harry Norton to desperation at St. Jerome's. Here, however, the General interfered. His daughter, he said, might help in drawing up the scheme, and he himself would give it more substantial aid; she might even pay the establishment a visit now and then if it were ever fairly afloat, but she was not to become an inmate of it or take part in its actual working. And with this permission they were obliged to be content.

Many months, in fact, passed away before the scheme was fully in operation, but St. Margaret's Home was at last established, and ere the year had run its course in actual work. Edith's hands, therefore, were full, her mind was steadily employed, and her troubled heart began to be at rest. This was the general aspect of affairs when Harry Norton came back from his wedding trip and quietly settled down at Danbury.

His welcome among his old friends there was a very hearty one. They would be content with nothing less than a feast in honour of the occasion; and the gallant old sailors vied with each other in doing honour to it. Flags were flying at every possible angle of the college, the flagstaff was dressed with gay bunting as if for a royal birthday, all the pensioners were in full uniform, and Joe Simmons himself wore a huge bouquet of yellow daffodils—the only flower he could get in sufficient

numbers—that looked, as he said, like the rising sun. The servants all wore bright ribbons in their caps, and even the ‘Dan-bury dog,’ Neptune, a mighty black Newfoundland, carried a wedding favour round his neck, and barked a noisy welcome as the carriage drove up to the gates.

“I hope that your honour has had a good voyage,” said Joe, touching his cap, “and that your honour’s lady is come to us for many a long year, and Nep says the same. It seems a weary while since your honour left us all, and we be all main glad you’ve come back.”

Here poor Joe fairly stuck fast, this being the longest speech he had been ever known to make.

The feast was laid out in the College-hall, a grand old room, with an open roof of black oak, and at either end a mighty fire on the hearth, now crackling and blazing with blocks of beech-wood in the broad

chimney. Saltram, Plymridge, and 'The Court' had sent in hampers of evergreen and such flowers as could be had to deck the tables, walls, and sideboard. The College plate, of massive silver, set out with Joe Simmons' usual skill, shone in the ruddy firelight; and in the centre of the board stood the founder's huge candelabrum with branches for a score of waxlights.

Side by side at the head of the board were seats of honour for the Curate and his fair young wife; Barclay, the senior captain, presided at the other end of the table in all the splendour of full-dress uniform; and then the feast began. Of the toasts that were duly drunk, the speeches that were made, and the songs that were sung that night, Norton's journal contains a full record. There was a jovial heartiness about them all which delighted the young bride; and when her health was drunk, and the Curate had thanked them all for their loving

and unexpected welcome, the storm of cheers that echoed through the old hall once more brought tears of pleasure into her bright eyes that would have free way, and gave new beauty to their lustre.

Next after this speech came a sea song, from a weather-beaten old tar, touching some gallant fight between 'The saucy Arethusa and Johnny Crapaud,' each verse ending in a terrific chorus, in which all hands joined, of

"Thundering and roaring, thundering and roaring,
Thundering and roaring, *roaring guns!*

Then followed a lull of smooth water, or, as the chairman phrased it, easy sailing; and Norton found time to point out to his wife some of his special favourites among the old sailors, and tell her where they had fought under Benbow, Nelson, and Collingwood. But presently the mirth waxed furious and fast again, and the whole table grew clamorous in demanding from Barclay

a certain special song of his, which they deemed specially suitable to the occasion. As it was sung in the bride's especial honour, and received vociferous applause, our readers shall judge of it for themselves, though they can form no notion of the enthusiasm which greeted every verse.

The title of this gay little ballad was 'Nancy Lake,' though no mention is made of the heroine's name, fickle and false as she appears.

NANCY LAKE.

I loved a lass across the sea,
And she was very dear to me ;
Dear, as I thought, to me alone,
And so I counted her my own.
Her eye was bright, her cheek was fair,
Her voice all love, beyond compare ;
With smile so sweet and eyes so blue,—
Oh, who could doubt my lass was true ?
So I kissed my darling once again,
And sailed away across the main.

But soon there came another ship
Unto the maid of ruddy lip ;

And she that made my heart rejoice
Soon listened to another voice ;
Dear, as he thought, to him alone,
And so he counted her his own.
With smile so sweet, and eyes so blue,
Oh ! who could doubt that she was true ?
So he kissed his darling once again,
And sailed away across the main.

We two, each thought the prize was won,
And, when the next good trip was done,
To make that bonny lass his wife,
His own through all the storms of life.
But when we crossed the sea once more
There was no maiden as before !
No smiles of love, no eyes so blue
That none could doubt their being true ;
For somebody else had crossed the sea,
And carried her off from him and me.

When the applause which followed the appearance of wicked Miss Nancy Lake had died away, Mary, who was worn out with a long day's journey, begged leave to retire, and so the banquet came to an end.

"Madam," said Barclay, shaking hands with her as if she were admiral of the fleet,

“you have done us a great honour and given us much pleasure, which we, old men as we are, cannot hope to live to repay as we could wish. The name of Norton was dear to us before, but now it is dearer than ever, and we must be content to die your debtors.”

After this stately compliment the feast broke up, and the guests settled down to smoke a cosy pipe and talk over the events of the day.

The next day Norton found that a pile of letters had accumulated in his absence, and as they sat at breakfast it was increased by the morning's post. Many were on mere matters of business, and were soon disposed of, but three were from old friends, and at these we must glance for a moment as one by one he hands them to his wife. The first was from his brother, who, away at his rectory in the North of England, had as yet taken little notice of Norton's marriage.

"I thought he was a curate?" said Mary, as she glanced at the heading of the brief note.

"Yes, my dear, he was, but lucky curates sometimes bloom into rectors, and he is one of the lucky ones; but he writes like a princely bachelor. Read what he says."

"My dear Harry,

"By this time, I suppose, you have settled down to the sober realities of life among your own people. Honeymoons, I am told, are expensive, and so, finding that the income of my Rectory turns out to be better than I expected, I enclose a cheque for £50, which your new housekeeper may perhaps find useful when the butcher and baker have to be satisfied. Wishing you all prosperity

"I am your affectionate brother,

"ROBERT NORTON."

“Prince or no prince,” said Mary, “he knows how to be generous ; so you may tell him that your new housekeeper quite appreciates his kindly gift, and will soon find a proper use for it, even if the baker never grows restive. Is your next budget equally satisfactory ? By the look of your face, it ought to be.”

“Better still, my darling ; it is from my old, old, friend Gresley, and the news he sends is even more jolly than the cheque. Listen.

“Most excellent of Curates,

“Having wished you all good things so lately, and exhausted the Plymridge stock of old shoes on that windy day in March which wafted you and a certain dainty little lady into the golden days of honey, what more can I say but ‘*esto perpetua*’ ? Have you come to your senses yet ? If you have, give my love to your wife, and say how

much I envy him, and the gallant old salts at Danbury, the presence of so bright and true a face as that of 'The Nut-brown Maid.' In these weary days of rain, it must be like sunshine to you all. But sweet Will of Avon—who has said everything worth saying—must help my poor wit, and make cold prose sparkle into verse, as he only can.

'The April's in her eyes, it is Love's Spring,
And these the happy showers to bring it on.'

"Not a word must be, or can be, added to *that*.

"So I must leave you two ecstatic beings to yourselves, and give you a scrap of news which will astonish, but, I hope, not displease you. Old Dummer, at St. Jerome's, died a fortnight ago, and Robert of Dorminster, to my utter amazement, has offered the living *to me!* I never even dreamed of such a thing, far less asked for it. I have seen his lordship but three times since I took priest's orders; once to get a wiggling about what he

called 'a facetious but foolish letter' of mine in the 'Dormouth Gazette;' and twice at a confirmation. But he seemed to know all about my work here, and was pleased to say several very polite things to me thereupon; whereof more when we meet. In less than a month, old friend, I shall hope to shake you by the hand. God bless you and yours,

"T. G.,

"Rector !

"P.S.—I have not yet left off my old trick of rhyming, and the other day I scribbled the couplet, herewith enclosed, on an old pupil of mine, a black fellow, named 'Ram Chunder' I verily believe, though he would call himself Adolphus Montgomery. You must remember him, a brute who was always saying nasty things of his father at Masulipatam, and bullying the small boys at school. He has just got his commission, and walks about in a blaze of gold lace and scarlet !

‘Isne potest Patriam,—Patrem qui spernit, amare,
Qui pueros torquet Barbarus? *ὅν μα Δια.*’ ”

“So your paragon, sir,” said the Nutbrown Maid, “is coming to be our neighbour, is he? Well, Harry, I must try and be as sunshiny to him as he fancies I am to dear old Danbury. Why, I seem to have known it for years already, though the windy day in March is only weeks old as yet. But, I *must* say he knows how to pay the most charming compliments.”

“Thank heaven my paragon is no paragon, but something far better; the truest, best, and readiest of friends. His compliments are charming, because he is charming himself; and I shall be horribly disappointed if you do not fall in love with him instanter. As to sunshine, dearest, what else can you be?

“Harry, Harry, I will have no more compliments. You will utterly spoil me. What can I be but sunshine? As long as you are

very good and love me very much, I shall be golden ; but the moment you are naughty, you will find out you have caught a Tartar. But you have another letter there ; more sweet things for your little housekeeper ? ”

For a moment Norton was silent, as he glanced at the letter before him, but a grave look that had crept into his face presently died away, and he said, merrily enough,

“ Supposing, Mary, that I should drop this epistle into the fire, what would my little woman say at not getting a glimpse of it ? ”

“ Say,” she repeated, “ that we should set out for a walk all the sooner this bright, glorious, morning ; and leave all the tiresome letters to answer themselves. Don’t imagine, for a moment, sir, that there is a spark of curiosity in Mrs. Norton.”

“ You are dying to see it at this very moment, ma’am, and as it is from a young and charming woman, and a very old friend of

mine, I will read it to you as I smoke my pipe under the beeches. Come along."

It was a bright April morning, and as they strolled up and down in the chequered shade of the giant trees, he read to her the letter from Edith Jervis, every now and then looking down into her happy face, as she listened, or broke out into words of pretended anger.

Thus ran the letter:—

"My dear Friend,

"Pray do not condemn me for my long silence, and for not having, long ago, congratulated you on what people call 'the happy event.' You know me too well to think that I have forgotten you, or that your happiness has not often found a place in my poor prayers. I can pray for others, if not for Edith Jervis; and some day I may do so even for her; for you have taught me where hope was to be found, and I have set to work here among my own people, as

I trust you will some day come and see for yourself. Enough now to tell you that life no longer is to me the barren waste it once seemed. I have been shipwrecked, but, thanks to you, have at all events reached the land. Life is hard to bear at times, but it is still bearable. Selfish, you see, as ever, I am drifting away into my own trouble when I should be saying all happy things of your happiness. Not a word more then.

“As to your little rosebud of a wife, why should I tell you what everybody knows, and by this time must have told you long ago, that she is simply charming? Everywhere she wins all hearts.”

“Harry,” whispered a soft, loving voice, “you are simply inventing.”

“Word for word, Mary, I solemnly declare; there is no room for invention when they are singing the praises of a certain young lady. If you will be so charm-

ing, what can be said?" Then he went on again.

"She wins all hearts. No wonder that she has won yours. But you deserve your good fortune, and possess a treasure worth guarding and being proud of; one that you can appreciate, and know how to live for; too good for a mere idol or plaything. Treasure it, my dear friend, while the sunshine lasts; and you will find the love of a good woman not fail you, even if the dark days befall you. May they be few and far off.

"E. J."

"She writes sadly and wearily enough for such a woman as you describe," said Mary, "and with a tinge of bitterness as well as wisdom that one would hardly expect. Were you *very* intimate with Edith Jervis?"

"She speaks bitterly," replied Norton, from terrible experience. "I was very inti-

mate with her, my wife; so intimate that I knew the history of her life, and if I could tell it to you, you would not wonder at her sadness."

"And why cannot you tell it?" she said earnestly.

"A priest's lips are sealed, dearest; what she told me was for no other ears but mine."

"But a husband has no secrets from his wife?"

"None, Mary, but what are committed to his honour, and he gives his word not to disclose."

"You must have been very intimate with Mrs. Jervis, Harry?"

"I was. The burden that weighed down her life to the very dust was a heavy one, and she knew me well enough to trust me with it. I never expected her confidence; never sought it. But having been once entrusted with it, my lips are sealed. Is not that enough for my own Mary?"

“More than enough, a thousand times, Harry. And so you are a father confessor, are you?”

“I hate the very name of father confessor,” said Norton, “but if any one comes to me, and of their own free-will tells me of a secret sorrow that I can help to heal, God forbid that I should refuse to hear it.”

“Especially if a young and pretty woman,” archly replied his wife; “but I shall allow no confessions at Danbury, Harry. You belong to me now, sir; and unless any of those jolly old sailors are troubled in mind, there are to be no more secrets; all distressed damsels must carry their sorrows elsewhere. You must take me to Saltram to see this charming lady.”

“As soon as you like, my darling; you will suit each other exactly; and the old General is one of my special favourites, who is only waiting, he says, to know Mrs. Norton, to be as charmed with her as other people.

But Gresley is the man I want you to know, and I must be off now and write to him at once."

And so ended the talk under the beech-trees.

The visit to Saltram was duly paid, and many a happy visit was interchanged during the years that followed. The two young women grew to be great friends ; and Mary, in due time, heard somewhat of that secret which was in her husband's keeping, but concerning which she never questioned him again. She was content to know just what Edith chose to tell ; and even that little was enough to show how her friend's life had been darkened, and why the shadow still remained.

That Harry Norton had once offered to share that darkened life, she never even remotely suspected.

CHAPTER III.

FIVE YEARS AFTER.

“And time comes stealing on by night and day.”

Comedy of Errors.

THE years had sped swiftly away, but all the pleasant auguries that attended Norton's return to Danbury with the wife of his heart, had been long ago more than fulfilled. It had been to him a time of unbroken happiness ; not of mere glaring, unclouded, sunshine, but of happy, contented, work. Sorrow had come to him, for his father had died suddenly ; so suddenly that there was

not even time to summon the son that he loved to his dying bed.

The master of Saltram, too, was no longer the pleasant, genial, host at that pleasant house; having been thrown from his horse and killed on the spot, while out riding with his daughter. Some of the old pensioners, too, had finished their peaceful voyage, and passed to a surer haven.

His sisters had all left their old home at Dormouth, and gone to reside at their bachelor brother's rectory in the north. All these were losses that Norton felt deeply.

But he had made new friends far and wide, and the welcome that waited him was doubly warm when they learned to know her who now bore his name. Through all his trials, she had been to him even more than he had hoped; a patient, loving, happy sharer alike of the sunshine and the shade; a true help to him in his daily toil, a companion, a friend. He had widely extended his literary work

with various editors; but among all his critics there was none whose opinion was more to him than his wife's. She always told him the truth, rarely flattered him; though with infinite tact when she did so; and never applied treacle of any kind. They read together and chatted over books new and old; and, with Gresley for a near neighbour, some new literary topic or scheme was always afloat. Above all, she trusted him in all things; and there were few pleasures to the one in which the other did not share. It was, indeed, as Gresley often reminded Norton, almost too perfect a state of things to last.

“One feast, one house, one happiness.”*

“The fact is, Norton,” he would say, “you have made one of those happy choices that happens about once in a hundred marriages. You have got a wife who is at one

* ‘Two Gentlemen of Verona.’

with you in tone and taste, in mind and in heart. You differ now and then in minor points only to agree more thoroughly in the greater. She worships the ground you walk on, as people say, and yet she never spoils you with sugary praise. But, only let anybody else say a word against the Curate of Danbury, and then see how my little lady will fire up! I consider that you are settling down into a state of connubial clover here, and that a slight occasional effervescence would be of real service to you, if only as a tonic."

"But, my dear friend," replies Norton, "you are a first-rate tonic in yourself; every visit, every letter, I get from you, sets me to rights in some way or other; and, as for Mary, she thinks you so wise, so good, and so admirable, that your word is looked upon as final."

Thus brightly and happily had fortune

smiled upon Harry Norton's married life; even from the first.

For a year or two he had hoped in vain for children, but at last had come the one thing wanting to make his happiness complete—the birth of his little daughter. She was now just three years old; a bright-eyed, loving little creature, the light of the house, the joy of her mother's heart, and the pet of the whole College, from Joe Simmons and Captain Barclay down to Nep the Newfoundland dog who watched over and went with her in her daily rambles, allowed her to ride on his back, pull his tail, or practice upon him any other indignity she thought fit.

Little Fanny was, as Joe Simmons expressed it, "the very daps of her mother." She had the same nut-brown hair, the same soft hazel eyes, the same tender gracious expression (which always exceeds and outlives mere beauty of face) as Mary Hastings

herself, with a touch of the same quiet humour and imagination. Always happy when not teased by over attention, always willing to be amused, she wandered about the old College, or the gardens, singing softly to herself, chattering, and making friends wherever she went. If no one else was at hand, she made confidants of her two dolls, the old ragged one, and Captain Barclay's last gorgeous present from Dorminster; sang to them, talked to them, made dinner parties for them out of a scrap of biscuit, and a bit of apple; and gave them what she called '*tence*' (pretence) tea, '*tence*' coffee, or '*tence*' wine out of her china cups and saucers.

Nominally, one Emma Jackson, a ruddy-faced little girl from the village, was her nurse-maid, whose special business it was to take Fanny to walk, and to see that she got into no mischief. But, in truth, everybody in Danbury was her slave and factotum; and

her day's journey from breakfast to bedtime was a sort of triumphal procession, from the parlour to the nursery,—between the hall and the kitchen, the garden, papa's study, and Neptune's kennel.

Like all precocious children, she had learned to talk clearly and fluently, though her vocabulary included some stray curiously compounded words and phrases which would not have passed muster with Mr. Lindley Murray. She would talk with any one, on any subject, except the very well regulated visitor who hoped that she was going to be good and tell them her name; and talk like a lady. To such as these she was obstinately silent; or, if she vouchsafed any reply, said, "Me lost my tongue; Fanny has."

But the treat of all treats to her was to get some one to tell her a story—a real, genuine child's story—'The Three Bears,' 'The Pig in the China Pot,' or 'The Little Match Girl.' For this purpose, papa was

best, if he could be got; next came her mother, "but she didn't know so many"; or Captain Barclay, who took the little maiden on his knee, and did his best to invent something about Neptune and the Rabbits which he chased in the neighbouring woods, that always amazed and delighted her. The dialogue usually ended with—

"And did he eat 'em all up—six bunnies, Barky?"

"Yes, my dear, all six; but he shan't eat you, shall he, my little queen?"

"Oh! no, Barky; me not good to eat."

This was the state of things, when one morning a messenger came galloping over from Saltram with a note to Norton from Edith Jervis.

"I have rode hard," said the man, "because misses said it were a matter of life and death; and, if you please, sir, you was to ride the horse back if you wouldn't mind coming."

Thus ran the note—

“Dear Mr. Norton,

“For the last week I have been watching by the bedside of a dying girl in the village, and she has now suddenly begged to see the minister. Our curate, Mr. Morpeth, is away from home, so that I am in despair what to do unless you can ride over and help us. Do you remember the cottage down by the river, at Dunton’s Ford? There she has lain dying for many long weary days, and now asks for help that I cannot give.

“E. J.”

“I must go, my dear,” said Norton, handing the scrap of his paper to his wife.

“What will you do with yourself all day?”

“Oh! if you must go,” replied Mary, “and I think you must, I have plenty to do. My little pet is to go for her walk

this morning, to see the pigeons at Danbury Farm ; I have to read the rest of your paper in the B. Review, a pair of socks to finish, and the three new books to cut for you. So you see my hands are full. But get back as early as you can, dearest, that we may have a long evening. Give my love to Mrs. Jervis, and say that she owes me a visit."

"Don't wait dinner for me, my darling, as I may be late," replied Norton. "Give me a book, the first that comes to hand on my study table, and I will be off."

He kissed her, and then hurried down to the hall door, where the horse stood waiting for him, and rode rapidly away. He turned, however, and looked back, as he passed the gates, and waved his hand to her as she stood in the porch, shading the sun from her face with her child's hat that she had caught up in her haste, and watched him with eager eyes until the winding road hid him from her sight.

Then, having hastily put on a garden-hat, she went off in search of her child, who, as usual on a sunny morning, had escaped from the nurse's charge, and rambled off with Nep and Barky into the winter garden.

It was a pretty sight that greeted Mary's eyes when she found the little truant. The old man, with his white hair shining in the morning sun, was sitting on a rough bench by the wall, with the little maiden perched up by his side, and Neptune on the gravel pathway close by, sitting up, begging for morsels of bread, which the child threw to him with shouts of delight.

"All gone, Nep!" she was saying; "no more, no more, no more for Nep; a nulla day, Nep; a nulla day; bekkus (breakfast) all gone now. And oh! Barky, you've forgot your's hat. Pently (presently) me fetch it. Oh! mamma, mamma, take me to walk, and take Barky."

But, at this moment, the sound of car-

riage wheels was heard, and presently a servant came from the house to say that Mrs. Markham had called on her way to Dorminster, and would Mrs. Norton drive into town with her?

Now it so happened that Mary had some special item of shopping to accomplish for her husband, and for some days previously had been on the look out for the chance of a visit to Dorminster, and therefore gladly accepted the offer.

Fanny was inconsolable at first at the loss of the promised walk to the pigeon-house; but a kiss from her mother, and a promise from the captain to tell her a new story, soon brought back sunshine into her laughing eyes. Mamma went off to dress for her ride, and the two old friends and Nep were once more left to themselves.

“Please tell my husband, Captain Barclay, if he should reach home before I do, that Mrs. Markham has carried me off on a

shopping expedition, but that we shall be back in good time for dinner. And take care of my darling." These were Mary's last words.

"I shall consider myself on special duty, Mrs. Norton," said the old man; "and you may trust queenie to me and Nep without fear."

They watched the carriage roll away down the white dusty road, in the full glare of the summer sun, and then went back to the shade under the beech-trees, and their old quarters on the garden-seat, gravely followed by Nep, who watched every movement of the child, and at last laid himself down at her feet.

"Now, Barky," said a little voice, "you tell me story—me and Nep."

"Yes, my queenie, Barky will; and what shall it be about?"

"'Bout everything, Barky,—and me and the water-ships, and you and little girl, and me."

Thus adjured, the old man began—

“ Once upon a time, my dear, there was a big ship sailing along over the sea; and the sun was shining very bright, and the water was smooth; and the soft wind blew, my dear, just the way we wanted to go. And Barky was in the ship and a lot of men, and they hoisted up the great sails; and we went on, and on, ever so far; and there was nothing but sea all round us, as far as you could see.”

“ Yes, Barky, I see. Do go on.”

“ Well, my dear, then there came flying along in the air a beautiful little bird, and she had been flying away over the water for ever so many days and nights, trying to find a place to rest herself. But not a place could she find, and so she was quite tired and ready to drop, and very glad she was to see the ship come sailing along, for she thought she could come aboard.”

“ Come what, Barky ? ”

“Come aboard, my dear.”

“Where is a board, Barky?”

“Come on to the ship and settle up among the ropes, my queen, and shut up her wings and go to sleep. And come she did, and settled down quite soft and quiet-like, and then what does Barky do but he goes up to the little bird and catches her in his hand, and she was all soft and blue and white feathers, and wings like silver, just like the little pigeons, you know. And her name was Dove, that was her name my dear; and we made a little cage for dovey and set a cup of water for her to drink, and plenty of seeds for her supper.”

“And did she sing, Barky?”

“No, my queen, she didn’t sing, not a note.”

“Why not?”

“She couldn’t sing, not a note.”

“But why couldn’t she?”

“Little doves don’t sing, my dear. But

she was very good, and hopped about in her cage, and I carried her home a long way across the sea, and I gave her to another little girl called Fanny, a good little girl she was, like my pet."

"And where is the good little girl gone, Barky, now?"

"She went away, my dear."

"Where did she go to, Barky? Out in the garden?"

"Oh! a deal further than that, my dear. The angels came and took her away to Heaven."

"And won't she come back any more?"

"No, my queen, she is very happy up there, and she doesn't want to come back?"

"But plaps (perhaps) she *will* come back sometimes; a nulla day?"

"No; she won't come back to Barky any more."

"Not never, never, never, sometimes? Not if you goes and fetch her?"

"Shan't you never see her again, Barky?"

"I hope so, my dear, some day."

Then the little voice was silent for a minute; but presently went on again.

"Me and you will go and fetch her sometimes, to-morrow won't we? And Nep too?"

"Oh! yes, my pet, no doubt of that. And here comes nurse for my little woman. So you must say good-bye now, and run away off to bed."

And then they parted; the old man rather thankful for the interruption, as he found it more and more difficult to answer all the questions with which the little maiden incessantly plied him.

"Take her away, nurse," he said, "for she puzzles me more and more every day. I was fairly out of my depth just now, and she *will* have an answer to every question."

And then the captain sat himself down in a shady corner to smoke a pipe and think over—as he often did—the happy days of long ago, when he had a wife and child of his own to care for, both now at rest in the quiet churchyard at Dor-mouth.

“She gets sharper and sharper every day” he thought to himself, “and will soon carry too many guns for old Barky, that’s clear enough. God bless her!”

But the captain’s perplexities were not over yet, even for that day.

Some hours later, as it drew on towards sunset, and he began to look out for Mrs. Norton’s return, the nurse and Fanny had gone down into a meadow close by the College gates with their faithful attendant Nep.

“I want,” said Fanny, “to pick a bunch of ‘cutterbups,’ for dear mamma; pease do take me! pease do!”

Who could resist such pleading as this? Certainly not Emma Jackson, the rosy-faced girl with pudding cheeks, and a large good-natured mouth always on the verge of expanding into laughter. And so away they went. The path ran across the centre of the field, and being just ripe for the harvest, the grass was tall and thick. Into this, to the child's great delight, Nep now and then plunged, though it was in utter defiance of the law; rushing in and out among the thick herbage in pursuit of a fieldmouse or a chirping cricket. Along the edge of this path buttercups grew in abundance, and Fanny soon filled her apron, and then they wandered on to the stile at the further end of the field by which you get into Danbury Lane.

Just as they reached it who should come by but Miss Emma's sweetheart, driving an empty hay-cart back to the field, and, of course, he stopped to have a chat. Equally

of course, certain other consequences followed. His pair of horses grew fidgety and tired of waiting, and so he soon persuaded Miss Emma Jackson to walk a little way down the hill with him, leaving the child under Nep's care safely on the other side of the stile.

"Little missy can't come to no harm there," says Giles, "even if she was a-minded to, and you'll only be gone two minutes, Emma; do'ee cum." And so, in an evil hour, Mr. Giles' seductive tongue prevailed, and away went Emma with blushing cheeks and her heart in her mouth for two minutes' gossip in the lane with her beloved."

"Good dog, Nep," she said, "kip her safe, there's a good dog." And then with a kiss to the child, "You go, there's a dearie, and have a little walk with Nep; I shall be back again in two minutes, my precious." But the two minutes in Giles' bewitching

society soon grew into five, and the five sweetly prolonged swiftly grew into ten, at the end of which time Emma found herself half a mile from Danbury gates, at the end of the lane where it joins the high-road.

“She wouldn’t go a single inch further,” she said, no not even for Mr. Giles, and so she jumped quickly down from the cart and set off as hard as she could back again for the College meadow.

She was a smart, active country girl, and got over the ground at a good pace. The stile therefore was soon reached, and in a trice she was in the meadow. There was the field of waving, sunny, grass; there ran the well-known path, as she had left them; she could see clearly to the end of the field up to the College gates; but neither of the child nor the dog was a single trace to be seen. Her first feeling was one of sheer amazement; her next of terror. She ran

at the very top of her speed to the other end of the meadow, shouting wildly as she went for help, as if in danger of her own life. But all her outcries were in vain. When she got to Danbury the whole place was soon in alarm, and forth came Joe Simmons, forth came the captain, and forth sallied every servant that could be spared, in hot haste.

The meadow-path, the lane, the old saw-pit, were all scoured from end to end, but no trace of the lost child or of the dog was to be found ; no reply in answer to the keenest whistle, or the loudest shout. While the search goes on, we must turn for awhile to see the state of affairs at Saltram.

Norton had ridden over there at full speed in the morning, and found Edith Jervis anxiously waiting his arrival.

“I knew you would come,” she said, “if it were possible, and my messenger found you at home. All well *there*, I hope?”

"Quite well," he replied eagerly, "as well as I could wish."

"We will lose no time then," she said, "but start at once. It is but twenty minutes' brisk walk, so that we shall be back in good time for lunch."

And then they set out for the cottages down in the valley by Dunton's Ford, where they had met and talked on one memorable day so many years before.

At first, the conversation ran on ordinary topics enough, but it soon turned to the more immediate object of their visit, and then quietly fell into an old channel for which Edith Jervis was always inclined.

"She begged so hard to see the minister, that I was obliged to send for you, Mr. Norton, though I—"

"I am too glad," interrupted Norton, "to come if I can be of use; so please not to apologize, but pray forgive my not letting your sentence run to an end; '*though I,*' you said, and there stopped."

"I was not about to say one word of apology," she replied, "you and I are too old friends, I hope, for that; but simply that I was obliged to send for you, though I do not exactly know what you can do for the poor girl."

"Nor do I," said Norton, "until I see her. But in any case, a few words of kindly meaning, a single text from the Book of Life, one short prayer it may be, if looked for and hoped for, may be to her of infinite comfort. This much you *must* believe yourself, or you would hardly have sent for me."

"All this I can believe as readily and as firmly as you yourself do," said his companion. "The real wonder is, to me, that you cannot, or at all events do not, do far *more* in a case of life and death like this."

"I do not quite understand you," replied Norton; "what more would you *have* done?"

"If," she said, "I were a priest of the Church like you, and believed my Master's words, why should I not do more than merely pray with the sick?"

"I believe all my Master's words," answered Norton, "and do my best to obey them."

"Why not then pray *for* the sick, boldly at once, if He says whatsoever ye shall ask in my name that shall ye receive? Either this means something; or it means nothing. If it means nothing, why believe it; if something, why not ask?"

"I believe," said Norton, "that it means a great deal, and that if I had in me such living faith as the Master demands, any prayer of mine would be heard and granted. It is in this point of living faith that men now fail; and that I find myself failing again and again."

"Have such prayers," she replied, "think you, ever been heard and granted?"

“Countless times, I have no doubt; we hear constantly of the failure of prayer, but who takes note—who, indeed, can know of, the numberless cases where it succeeds? He only who hears the prayer of men, can know how many these are, how they spring far and wide over the broad earth from humble, lowly, believing souls. But that such prayers are heard I believe as firmly as I believe in my own existence. I can give you no proof of its being so, but I know it, as surely as I know that God is my Father in Heaven; and that I am dependent on him for life and breath and being.”

“You believe then that if a mother pours out a true prayer for her dying child, she will be heard and answered?”

“I believe,” he replied, “what I have said; not that God hears every such prayer and grants the petition always in the one exact way that man seeks—seeks it may be

in ignorance, in blindness, or in despair,—but He deals with them all as a Father would deal with the children whom He loves. He may not grant precisely what they ask, and yet may give more than they can ask or think. He may give something better than what is asked for, patience, submission, hope, faith; according to His wisdom and love, not according to man's passionate outcries. But we are getting into a depth beyond the reach of such mere chance talk as this.

“And I,” she said interrupting him, “am pressing you unfairly at such a time as this. But do not imagine for a moment that my questions are for mere arguing sake, or from mere idle curiosity. To no one but yourself can I dare to speak on any such things as these, as I have now spoken. I should be looked upon as a scorner and blasphemer, or something worse. You have spoken freely, and kindly, and I may live

to thank you for it yet. It is a subject, as you say, beyond our reach ; yet it is one that constantly allures us on, walking as it were on the edge of things invisible. But here we are at the cottage. I will only tell you that this young girl who now lies hanging between life and death, dying by inches of exhaustion, is the last surviving child of the poor, helpless, woman whom we saw here years ago ; the one thing that she now seems to care or live for. I will not stay with you in the room, for the last few solemn things that can be said to a dying soul are not to be intruded on by any third person. I will wait for you by the river."

She parted with him, therefore, at the door ; and, after a few words to the mother, Norton went alone into the chamber of the dying child, leaving the mother in the desolate kitchen below, walking to and fro, moaning in her grief, like one half crazy.

When Norton rejoined his companion by the river-side, whatever might have been his work or words in that sad abode, he wore a bright, calm, expression of content, as if he had been face to face with eternal realities, and had won his way onwards to peace.

She saw this at once, but it was Norton who spoke first.

“I have prayed with, and prayed for, the poor girl,” said he, “and spoken what words of comfort I could to the wretched, heart-broken, mother; and now I leave them in better Hands than mine. Are you content?”

“More than content,” she answered; and then they walked away quickly up the hill, and their talk soon wandered on to the countless bright things about them in the summer fields and woods.

In the joyousness of his heart Norton told her of his happy life at Danbury; of

the simple and loving ways of his little child,—“the light,” he said, “of the whole place, and the pet of all the old pensioners who spoil and indulge her in every possible way.” He told her how he and his wife had long hoped and prayed for such a child, and how when at last it came to them, the gift was even greater in its joyousness and beauty than their utmost thoughts.

“A perfect nonpareil of beauty and goodness, I suppose,” she said lightly.

“On the contrary,” replied Norton; “not at all beautiful, but childish and loving and natural, as full of tricks as a kitten, but as naughty now and then as a true child always is and ought to be. But no more to me and mine than any little child may be in any household where love is. Dear as life to me, but not dearer or better than the little one at the cottage door there is to its mother.

“And once,” she said very sadly, “once,

such a child might have been mine! But my house and life were doomed from the first, and it is vain to ask why."

"Yes," replied Norton, "I cannot tell you why. Not even my old friend the fisherman here can tell you that. Your trial has indeed been a sharp one; 'its bitterness,' as he says, 'no doubt seems special to you, as every one's sorrow does to the sufferer; and there are thousands of such homes, and in every home sooner or later a sorrow, in every one a memory that comes with the twilight, and grows mighty in the dark, and yet over and above all, above mountain-top and cloud and storm, is the everlasting pity of the Master.'* I wish that you could look at this side of the picture as well as that other gloomy one to which your thoughts turn so often."

"It is easy for you to preach resignation," she said, "in the midst of sunshine and

* W. C. Prime.

peace, with nothing earthly left to desire ; but it is not so easy in the darkness, the weary shadows, and mysteries of which life is full. I know that you have told me and taught me to look for true hope and help in work. I have looked there and found all and more than all you promised ; but every now and then my trust fails me, and then I am very wicked, and say naughty things, even” she added with a smile, “to so old and true a friend as Harry Norton. But I shall be a great deal more gooder, as your little Fanny says, pently, when my gloomy fit is over.”

“Far better,” he said, “to speak out plainly, than to hide what is in the heart. I only wish I had any brighter, better, message for you, than the one I read just now from that little ‘Book on Angling.’ An odd place, wasn’t it, to look for consolation ? ”

“All that the fisherman says,” replied his companion, “and all that his expounder says,

is no doubt true enough, and I dare say that I have heard it all a hundred times before (don't look angry, Mr. Norton), but the difficulty is to make it fit one's own case. But, at all events, you shall not hear one single word more of my miseries to-day."

Edith Jervis was true to her promise ; and during lunch and for the couple of hours that followed she kept her visitor amused and fascinated by her lively wit, grace, and gaiety. The cloud seemed entirely flung off. She talked, played, and sang, as in the old brightest days, and it was in the midst of a sparkling song of Mozart's that Saunders, the ever discreet and most sedate of butlers, came into the room to announce that a poor woman had come up from Dunter's Ford to say, "Her duty to Misses Jervis, and the little girl was ever so much better since the minister seen her this morning ; and she thought Misses Jervis would like to know."

The message took both the listeners so entirely by surprise, that the song was not resumed, nor indeed was there any more singing.

“Then, you *did* pray for that poor girl,” were her first words, as Saunders closed the door.

“Yes,” said Norton, “but that would have been equally true even if the woman had brought word that her child was dead.”

“Now,” replied his companion, “it is you who are tempting me into an argument again, but I won’t be tempted. Anyhow, you asked for life, and life seems to be given. So let it be. If you are determined to walk back to Danbury, I will not keep you longer. Your wife will I am sure be expecting you. Good-bye. She is too good to be kept waiting.”

“Far too good,” said Norton, “far too good, and I have no doubt is watching for

her husband at this very moment, or gravely advising cook about dinner. Good-bye. I have my 'Angler's Book' with me for a companion, and the five miles will soon be past.

It was a golden summer evening, and a quiet sunset of silver grey and rosy yellow light began to fling its soft radiance over every hill, valley, and mead; filling all nature with a flush of happiness and beauty, and touching all hearts with a sense of thankfulness and repose. The walk therefore was to Norton one of uninterrupted pleasure; he enjoyed his book now and then; now and then he gave his own thoughts free course; and then he called to mind with double satisfaction the old words,

"'Tis sweet to know there is an eye will mark
Our coming, and look brighter when we come."

When fairly within sight of Danbury gates, he paused for a moment, in the soft

twilight, to catch a glimpse it might be of some well-known figure, or for the echo of some well-known sound. But all seemed still. He knew that she was watching for him; and went happily on.

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT NEXT ?

“ O that a man might know
The end of this day’s business ere it come.”

Julius Cæsar.

THE first person Norton met was Emma Jackson, who was hurrying across the open space in front of the College without a bonnet, mopping her eyes with her apron, and blubbering loudly. In her haste she ran full tilt against her master, and then burst into a louder fit of weeping than ever.

“ Oh, sir ! oh, good Lord ! ” she cried out, “ please do forgive me. We’re sure to find her ; she can’t be far off ; oh ! she can’t.”

“ What, in the name of wonder, do you mean ? ” he answered. “ *Who* cannot be far off ? ”

“ Oh, sir ! Miss Fanny, sir. She was a-playing along with Nep, and they both went right off, and we can’t find ’em nowhere.”

At this, Norton, now thoroughly amazed, rushed into the house to call his wife ; but after hurrying from room to room, and finding no trace of her, he rang the bell furiously, and before it could be answered, again, still more loudly.

“ Where is your mistress ? ” he cried to the terrified servant, who at last appeared.

“ Misses is not come back yet, sir.”

“ Come back from where ? ”

“ She went to Dorminster this morning, sir, along with Mrs. Markham ; and we’ve

been expecting of her all the evening ; and cook says—”

“ Hang the cook ! ” said her master, now more and more perplexed. “ Tell me what is all this cock-and-bull story about Miss Fanny ? ”

“ They can’t find her nowhere, sir ; she went out along with nurse, and never come back ; and cook says a gipsy woman—”

“ Good heavens ! *never came back !* It is all a mystery to me. Where is that idiot Emma Jackson that I met just now ? ”

But to this query he waited for no answer, but rushed off wildly into the College hall ; and there, to his great delight, he found the captain, who had just come in from the grounds.

“ For God’s sake, Barclay ! ” he said, “ tell me what all this means ? Everybody seems crazy here among the women ; and my wife is away, it seems, at Dorminster.”

Then, in broken words, the old man told

him all the facts of the case as far as he knew them.

“ I know,” he added, “ that she was under the nurse’s care at the time ; but the darling was in my charge, Mr. Norton ; and her mother’s last words to me were, ‘ I leave her in your hands, Captain Barclay.’ I am the guilty person.”

At this, Norton himself was aghast, and knew not what to say or to do next.

“ Have you searched everywhere ? ”

“ Everywhere. I have been through the field, and down the lane, and in every hole and corner of the gardens a dozen times since we missed her, an hour ago.”

“ But she *must* be close by somewhere,” cried Norton. “ The nearest water is a mile off, and the earth cannot have swallowed her up, and Nep with her. And as to being carried off, the dog would have fought for her against all the gipsy women in creation. But here I am wasting time when every moment is precious.”

Seizing his hat and stick, away he hurried once more, scarcely knowing where he was going or what he was doing. His first visit was to the winter-garden near the meadow; and this he searched from end to end, but utterly in vain, and only pausing in his search for one minute when he heard a sudden rustling among the bushes—a rustle that was explained the next moment by ‘Snap,’ his terrier dog, who rushed out in a great state of excitement, and danced round his master in a whirlwind of short barks.

“Good dog, Snap! heigh, forward! good dog!”

In a trice they were in the meadow, quickly traversing the narrow path to the opposite stile, and there, as so many others had done, coming to a full stop. It was clear, at a glance, that the child could never have crossed *that* without help from some other person. Unless, therefore, she had

been carried off—as that crazy cook suggested—his darling must be somewhere in the field of long waving grass.

The sun was now setting, but there was still abundance of light to see over every part of the field ; and the only plan, hopeless as it seemed, was to traverse every foot of it, step by step. And this was a plan of proceeding which exactly suited Snap's idea of the matter. He clearly thought that some stray rabbit was to be hunted out, and set off in an ecstasy of delight, dodging in and out among the waving grass and every clump of tall weed, whining and barking for very joy.

Norton had reached the middle of the field, when all at once, from the hedge close by the stile, came Nep's mighty, well-known bark ; and in another moment the whole mystery was explained.

In a quiet corner of the field, under the shade of a stunted oak-tree, there lay his

darling Fanny, curled up by the side of her faithful attendant, and still fast asleep. She had wandered about by the hedgerow until tired out, and then laid herself down to sleep. There she had been for the last two hours, and there Nep had mounted guard.

In less than ten minutes she was safe and sound in Danbury, prattling to her father of the whole adventure, and not a little puzzled at nurse's smothered sobs and the captain's extraordinary shouts of delight. The whole place was in a fever of joyful excitement; and the supper provided for the two dogs that night by Joe Simmons did not figure in the College books. It was simply cold roast beef and unlimited milk.

As for Norton, he was too happy to say much or to do anything, in fact, after he had seen his child safe in her little cot, but pace up and down the hall and shake Barclay by the hand.

Then another hour was spent in fruitless

conjecture as to the cause of his wife's non-appearance, and what possible accident could have detained them in Dorminster.

Eight o'clock came; the dinner was sent away untouched; and the two men held another council of war as to what was to be done.

But in the midst of this the sound of carriage-wheels was heard, and both hurried off to the hall-door.

There was the well-known pony-carriage and there sat Mrs. Markham and the servant, as usual; but the back seat was empty.

"Take the reins, John," said the lady. "I will go in and speak to Mr. Norton."

The Curate handed her from the carriage, and in silent amazement walked with her into his study.

"I shall be glad," she added, "if Captain Barclay will come with us."

When they were alone, and the door was

shut, she turned to Norton, and said very gravely,

“ Mr. Norton, I have such a strange story to tell you that I scarcely know how to begin it.”

“ Pardon me,” he said, “ for one moment if I first ask, in the name of all that is wonderful, where is my wife ? ”

“ That,” she said, “ is precisely what I cannot tell you. I am amazed and mystified as you are. I have not seen her since noon to-day, and all I can tell you is simply this. I called for her here soon after you had started for Saltram, and drove her into Dorminster on a shopping expedition. I had to order some carpets at Duncan’s; and she had a commission to execute for you, she said, at Burnett’s—the two shops being, as you know, but a few hundred yards apart. Duncan’s people were very slow in getting out what I wanted, and then Mary turned to me and said, ‘ Mrs. Markham, I am

anxious to get back to Danbury as early as possible; I will therefore go on to Burnett's for my husband's books, and come back to you here. That will save time.' In ten minutes my work was done among the carpets, and I began to wonder what had become of my friend. The ten soon grew to twenty minutes, and then I drove round to Burnett's shop. To my amazement, she was not there."

"Good heavens!" said Norton, "there must have been some accident."

"What accident could there have been unknown to Burnett's people? She had been in the shop, they said, but a few minutes. The shopman had offered to send the books for the lady to Mrs. Markham's carriage; but she had replied that the parcel was a light one, and easily carried as far as Duncan's. The shopman had then attended her to the door, and seen her walk away in the direction of the carriage. That was all he could say."

“And have you heard nothing of her since?”

“Nothing whatever; nor could we discover a sign or trace of her beyond the bookseller’s shop. I drove at once to my husband at the foundry, and told him the whole story. He has made every possible inquiry himself in all directions, but can learn nothing but what I have told you. I waited as long as I dared in Dorminster, and then drove on to tell you of the mystery; for mystery I must call it. Mr. Markham is still there, on the chance of having some tidings to tell you on his way home an hour or two later.”

Such was the extraordinary story which the pony-carriage brought to Danbury; and in reply to it, what could Norton say, but that it was an incomprehensible mystery?

Mary, so said her friend, in reply to his questions, had been in her usual good spirits; was dressed as usual; and altogether exactly

what she always was. There was no excitement of manner or speech of the slightest kind ; no indication of anything strange or peculiar having happened, or being likely to happen. She was merely going to Burnett's for some books for her husband, which she got, paid for, and carried away ! That was the whole story.

What then was to be done ?

Mrs. Markham soon left them, anxious to get back to ' The Court ' lest her own unusual absence should excite alarm there.

" I can be of no use to you, Mr. Norton ; I only wish I could," she said cheerfully, " so you are better without me. But my husband will soon be here now, and he no doubt will either bring back the truant, or some tidings concerning her. So good-bye for the present."

Then the two men were left to their own devices ; and to discuss in every possible aspect, as they did, the extraordinary tidings.

About an hour later came Mr. Markham himself; but he, to Norton's infinite disappointment and surprise, brought no addition whatever to his wife's narrative.

He was as much mystified as the rest of the party; but after some little talk he, too, took his departure, and once more the Curate and his friend were left to decide on what should be next done.

"And here the captain's plain common sense was of real service in preventing Norton from at once setting out for Dorchester.

"You cannot possibly get there," he said, "until nearly midnight; the inns will be all shut up, the shops closed, and nobody to be found at the railway station but some sleepy porter who will know nothing, and be too stupid to say so. Turn in, Mr. Norton, turn in at once, and get a good spell of sleep. You have had a long, harassing day of it, and without sleep will be fit for nothing to-

morrow. Wherever Mrs. Norton may be, or whatever accident may have detained her, you can do nothing to-night; and, for all we know, she may be here safe and sound before daylight."

This, though rather against his will, convinced Norton; and he at last went off to his own room, still in a state of startled bewilderment such as he had never before experienced.

Full of anxious thought, for some time he lay tossing from side to side in wretched, dreamy wakefulness, but at last sleep came, and for an hour or two his troubles were forgotten.

It was broad daylight when he awoke, and then with fresh feelings of amazement he once more woke to a sense of his loss, and found no tidings had arrived from Dorchester, or any other quarter. But his plan of action was now plain enough. Breakfast was hurried over; the dog-cart

ordered, and the captain and Norton set out with all speed for the city, there to endeavour to unravel the mystery in person. Of that long, weary, day there is no need here to do more than note the one bare fact, that it bore no fruit whatever. The two men spared no exertion and no expense. But all inquiries at the shops, of the police, at the coach offices, and the railway station, of guards, porters, clerks, and waiters, were alike utterly and entirely useless. No such person as the lady described had been seen; or if seen, she had not been noticed.

After a short visit, therefore, to Gresley who was simply amazed to hear of his friend's misfortune, there was nothing for it but to drive back again to Danbury, and there once more wait for what might happen. All that kindly affection and respect could suggest, was readily and kindly done by the old captain, and by all the inmates of Danbury, to solace, and aid, the Curate at such a

time, but no consolation, no friendly services, could even touch the one hard and inexplicable fact, that his darling had suddenly vanished and his home become desolate.

Not that he could at first realize his loss. On the contrary, for many a long, weary day, and still longer and wearier night, he found himself suddenly starting at the slightest chance noise or sound that suddenly fell on his ear, as if it betokened her sudden arrival. Many and many a time he woke from broken sleep, or some fantastic dream of matters wholly strange to the one thought that always haunted him by day, and fancied for a moment that she was with him as usual, and that her disappearance was altogether itself a mere idle dream. But the days grew to weeks, the weeks to months, the months to years ; and no tidings came to Danbury of Mary Norton.

It was hard to believe, but impossible to doubt. There on her own little table lay

the piece of work at which she was busy on that last fatal morning ; there lay the open Review which contained Norton's article ; close to it were little Fanny's half-finished socks ; the well-known work-basket, the old, battered, paper-knife which she had brought from Tregartha.

All these things for a long time were suffered to remain just as she left them ; but at last Norton grew weary of seeing day by day the same silent mementoes of his loss, and put them all carefully away in utter hopelessness of her return.

The only person in Danbury who yet seemed to cling to a belief of her coming back was little Fanny.

It was not often *now* that she spoke of her mother, but when she did so it was always as if they had but just parted. She had grown to be Norton's constant companion in the house and during many a little ramble in the neighbourhood ; but whether

indoors or out, a source of unfailing comfort to him. That she was now, if possible, dearer to him than ever, was only natural; and every month that passed made her also more engaging. In her mother's promise she still had the most unbroken faith: though utterly at a loss to account for her absence.

"She said, you know papa, that she would come back, when the pony-carriage drove her away with Mrs. Markham's man, and so she will come some day soon, don't you think so?"

"I wish I could think so, Fanny, and try very hard sometimes to believe it, as I used to do two years ago. But now I am afraid she never will come."

"Then, she must be gone somewhere, or somebody must be keeping her, and that's wicked of them. But let me be your little wife? You said I should be ever so long ago, and I'll take care of you till she does come, won't I?"

“Yes, my pet, you shall be my little wifie, and daughter, too, and never go away?”

“Oh! never, papa, never, never, never, of course; me and my dolls, we will always stay at Danbury, and when you go into your study I will be so quiet as a little mouse, and sit in my chair while you write, won’t I till mamma comes?”

And so, as the days went by, there grew up between father and daughter a sort of tender companionship and endearing intimacy, as joyous and true as it was quiet and unpretending. He taught her to read, and in some degree to write, and then found that she was always agog to “be doing lessons.” Her thirst for knowledge on every conceivable topic that chanced to fall in her way was insatiable; her questionings were incessant; and both he and the captain had as much as they could do in furnishing what she considered to be satisfactory answers; Emma Jackson’s powers having

long ago been taxed to the very utmost, and found hopelessly wanting. And for Norton himself nothing could have been more fortunate. The child's constant attendance on him ; her artless, winning talk ; her prattle about her dolls, Nep, the captain's telescope, the flowers, the wind, or the sunshine, and a hundred other such trifles took him completely out of himself, and for a time carried him into a little world of which she was the unfading light, where all was sunshine and pleasure—a true fairy-land.

One other great resource was his friendship with Gresley, a visit or letter from whom was always welcome, and, however brief, always productive of good. One letter that reached Danbury about this time will help to tell this dreary chapter in Norton's life. Thus he wrote :

“ My dear old friend,

“ It seems an age since I last shook

you by the hand, and in these dark days of fog, drizzle, sleet, and rain it seems only too likely that we shall not meet again for the present. Are you disposed to be bored with a long, rambling letter *de omnibus rebus et quibusdam aliis*? At all events I am inclined to write, and shall suppose you not unwilling to be victimized.

“I am just in the humour for idle scribbling after hard work yesterday, the day before, and the one before that, and work, too, that I could not escape. You remember Benbow, our national schoolmaster? Well, in an unlucky hour he tripped over a bit of orange-peel, fell, and broke his leg, without, as I told him, giving me any notice of what he was going to do, or putting off such grave lapses until the Christmas holidays, only a week further on, as he might easily have done. He really thought I was in earnest at first when I told him this, and began to assure me that he really

had not done it intentionally. However, at a moment's notice I could get no substitute, and so my son Willy and I had to set to work ourselves among 80 or 90 young imps who, however overawed for the first hour by their rector's sudden appearance, soon found out that we were not at all up to our work, and laid their plans accordingly. With the reading and writing we got on pretty well, but it was in the cursed science of arithmetic that these villains floored me. They brought me up sums in some diabolic puzzle called "the double rule of three," invented, I believe, by that deluded impostor the Bishop of Zulu, of which I could make neither head nor tail. Fancy being asked this delicious problem: 'If 14 men 5 feet 10 inches high take $3\frac{1}{2}$ days (working 8 hours per diem) to dig a trench 15 feet long $7\frac{1}{4}$ wide and 21 deep, how long will it take 11 men 6 feet high and 4 boys (2 boys = a man) at 7 hours per

diem to dig another trench 17 feet long $8\frac{1}{2}$ wide and 13 in depth ?'

"After working, or pretending to work, at this for half an hour, eight of these crafty rogues came up to me with eight answers, 'worked out,' the villains said, all different from each other, and all utterly unlike the printed answer in the 'Zulu' manual.

" 'Please, teacher, said one young scoundrel, will you do it on the black board ?'

"To their intense delight I declined to expose my ignorance on the proffered board, and as, luckily for me, it was nearly 4 P.M., I broke up school and escaped to my own house, humbled to the dust with a sense of my own profound ignorance. *Now* I understand how it is that so many of the inmates of Bedlam were once schoolmasters. Once involved in the meshes of such detestable problems as that iniquitous rule, what man's reason would be safe for a week ?

“The next day we got on better. Willy kept his division in the safe domain of pot-hooks and hangers, the rector kept to reading aloud, and avenged himself on the eight conspirators by dodging them in the multiplication-table. Up to that point I *am* safe.

“On the following day there was a Confirmation, so that I gave a whole holiday with a safe conscience. Talking of Confirmations reminds me of bishops in general, and of Robert of Dorminster in particular. ‘By Jove!’ as you used to say, Norton, in the hot days of your youth, what a brain that man has! How he captivates, wins, cuts to pieces or annihilates right and left of him, just as he pleases, bowling over an archbishop, or talking soft ‘sawder’ to a rector’s wife! On the Confirmation day, to my utter amazement and my wife’s consternation, what does he but calmly invite himself to my house to dinner. I saw him in the vestry for two minutes before the

service. 'Mr. Gresley,' said a soft voice, 'will you give your bishop a morsel of lunch when the service is over, before he goes on to the consecration at Trebarton?' I had barely time to send a hasty scrap of paper to the rectory; but everything went well, and his lordship ate royally of roasted chicken and celery sauce (which he vowed that he had never before tasted), praised the wine, and went into ecstasies over a certain dainty little pudding made by my wife's own hands.

" 'My dear Mrs. Gresley, this is the most delicious pudding I have eaten for years, the flavour is really exquisite; may I ask what that flavour is? Mrs. Burton (his own wife) will be charmed to have it at the palace if you can spare so choice a receipt.'

" 'My dear Norton, the rare and exquisite flavour was nothing in the world but lemon-peel.

" 'Then his lordship turns to your humble servant as he takes leave with,

“ ‘Mr. Gresley, with such a wife, such books (we dined in the library), and such a cook you are to be envied.’

“The fiery prelate was all silk, urbanity, and gentleness. I only wish that Grits, the Radical greengrocer, had been here to see it. Do you remember Grits? He was one of your parishioners, he tells me, and still lives in Friar’s Lane, and still raves rabidly against the episcopal bench. ‘Sweat down your fat bishops!’ he said to me the other day. ‘What are they doing for their money, except playing at lords and ladies in London, driving about in their grand carriages, and dining with swells? What do you come to me for church-rates for? while he bags his £5000 a year for doing nothing, completely gorged with riches and luxury, while here I am a striving and toiling and wearing my soul out to find bread for my wife and children? What good is a bishop to me? He never comes

nigh Friar's Lane, does he? No, and never will.'

"And then Grits marches triumphantly back into his shop, that little, narrow, dark, dirty den of a place. Do remember the picture of it in *Speculum Episcopi*.

"With its lumps of sleepy pale butter in half-pounds on a cracked dish, inferior tallow dips, next door to inferior lard, inferior raisins and gritty currants, inferior rice, inferior treacle, rancid bacon, and pickled herrings; and over and above all these villainous commodities that 'ancient and fish-like smell,' the essence of fusty staleness that fills the whole shop, and pervades old Grits from his grizzly wig down to his shoe-strings.

"By the bye, the bishop inquired specially for you. He knew the whole story of your loss, and that you write in the B. Review; named several of your articles, especially the last on shipwrecks, and spoke of you as

‘a young and bold thinker, of value to the diocese.’ Think of that, Mr. Reviewer, when you talk of being worn out and your own life shipwrecked. Stick to the helm, man, and you may bring the ship into harbour yet. Heaven knows where Robert of Dorminster gets his information, but he seems to know everything about everybody in his diocese, and clearly has his eye upon you. You may yet live to perform ‘archidiaconal functions,’ and dawn upon me some day in the full splendour of gaiters, an incipient apron, and a shovel hat.

“Meanwhile, old friend, don’t fancy for a moment that I forget the shadow that rests upon your life at Danbury, or that I think lightly of it. I cannot write what are called comforting letters, or you would have had one long ago. I don’t think that we are any the better for having our troubles buttered. You have had a sharp touch of trial. It is a hard thing to

lose such a friend and companion as you have lost, but it is a possession *es ævi* to have such a wife to lose.

“No doubt, as you say, you find it difficult to preach resignation to yourself; who that ever tried it found it easy? It is an audience a parson so seldom gets. Of course, it's easy enough to preach resignation to other people; we know to a T the very texts and exhortations that suit them, but one's own troubles are *sui generis*. People talk of ‘golden weddings;’ yours was golden from the very first day, no wonder that you feel the depth of the shade. But such love as yours for Mary Hastings is Once and for Ever; it is only right, natural, and good for you to feel her loss as you do, but don't forget what is left to you when you talk of desolation. You have all round you still the memory of a bright, pure, unchanging love, in your house and in your heart, and that little treasure of a

maiden to love and to live for, who wins everybody she comes near; live and work for her, my friend. You say that you have tried *this* and tried *that* to escape from your trouble,—idleness, change of scene, and what not? Let it ‘bide,’ as we Cornish folks say; why should you get rid of it? Don’t *try* anything; quack medicines like these are no good; above all, idleness is of no use. Capua will not prepare you for anything like real fighting; and fighting man must have, in some shape or other, if he is ever to be worth his salt. ‘What,’ says dear old Tom Brown, ‘would life be without fighting? Enemies to be knocked on the head, pulled up by the roots, in himself, or out of himself, who won’t let him live his life in peace till he has thrashed them.’

“Talking of pulling up by the roots reminds me of my garden here in the smoke of Babylon. Weeds thrive admirably, and

grow to perfection ; my little flower-bed, under the lee of the wall, where we smoked our pipes, still abides, but I don't understand, and cannot cultivate it. I have bought a spade, and am not ashamed to dig, but I dig to no purpose, except to incommode the worms, who seem to have no objection to being buried alive. My next door neighbour keeps rabbits ; his garden adjoins mine, his rabbits nibble away all my young cabbages, — nothing left but stalks ; last year a vagrant pig broke in and gobbled up all my peas. My landed property is never safe.

“ From all such troubles, most excellent of curates, you are free. Come and see for yourself the scene of their depredations, and of my agricultural labours. Above all, come soon, the spectacle will do you good. Your winsome Fanny shall make love to my five boys, or any one of the five she likes best,—soothe the rector's wife with her

charming prattle into forgetfulness of her household cares, while you and I, old friend, smoke the pipe of peace when the winter days grow dim, or after a cosy supper, when 'the sweets of the night come in.' You shall taste of the pudding that captivated a bishop, and while the fire crackles cheerily, we will talk over old days and doings. God bless you and yours, as well as me and mine.

"T. G."

The visit was duly paid, and thoroughly enjoyed. With no small pleasure Norton found himself once more in the scene of his old labours, and saw more than one face grow bright at his appearance among the workmen from the foundry, at church, and in the schools. It did him good to be taken out of the quiet smoothness of his life at Danbury, and brought face to face once more with the cares, toils, and anxieties of

a great parish, and to see how bravely and cheerfully his old friend the Rector set about meeting them.

“After all,” said Gresley, “if one wants to see life, and know something of its inner working,—its deepest lights and shadows, fiercest pleasures and follies, all that makes the battle worth fighting,—there is no place like a great city. ‘*Hoc est vivere bis.*’ Come, Norton, let us go and call on old Grits; I feel within me a spirit of pugnacity, a desire to mingle in the fray, and to rejoice over mine enemy.”

And so away they went to Friar’s Lane.

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE MESSAGE.

“Death lies on her like an untimely frost,
Upon the sweetest flower of the field.”

Romeo and Juliet.

THE curtains were drawn in Norton's study at Danbury, the fire burned cheerily on the hearth, in front of which lay Neptune, the black Newfoundland, now a greater favourite than ever, and Fanny's constant attendant; close at hand, in her own special chair, sat the little maiden busily arranging a doll's house, and now and then talking in whispers to the dog and the youngest doll.

But at last she turned to her father, who was writing at a side-table,

“Papa dear, shall you have a dinner-party, not ‘tence,’ you know, but real?” Barky says you don’t never have dinner-parties now.”

“Does he, my chick? when shall we have one?”

“Now, to-morrow,—soon.”

“And who shall come, Fanny?”

“Me and you, and dollies and Nep and Barky, and you and me.”

“Anybody else?”

“Mr. Gesley, and Master Gesley, and his little dog.”

“Very well, Fanny, I will ask them all to come, and if you are good, you shall come down to dessert.”

“All that little puss’s own invention,” said the captain, when Norton told him of the conversation the next day. “It’s as good as the ‘Arabian Nights’ to hear her

talk. She's always giving dinner-parties to me and Nep, though he generally gets the lion's share of the biscuit."

"But this time," said Norton, "we will do it in earnest, if you and the Gresleys can come, and it shall be Fanny's first dinner-party."

He wrote at once to the Rector of St. Jerome's,—to his old friends, Edith Jervis, and Lucy Markham, all of whom gladly accepted his invitation.

"My dear," said Gresley to his wife, "Norton is coming out of his shell at last, and going to give a dinner-party of six, he says,—all old friends. Write and say we shall be charmed to come, and bring Tom with us as Fanny's sweetheart."

Joe Simmons having been duly consulted, declared that the intended banquet was not only possible, but the easiest thing in the world, and went off in a state of triumph to the cook. In fact, the whole place woke up at the good news, and Fanny wandered

about from pillar to post prattling of the coming feast, the guests, the dishes, the wine, with endless satisfaction to herself and Nep.

In due time the day arrived, a bright, cold winter's day, with a sharp wind and flying clouds. During the morning there had been a slight fall of fine snow, which lay glittering on the fallen leaves like diamond dust as it melted in the sun ; towards evening the sky cleared, the stars came out in sparkling beauty, a sharp frost set in, and the great fire of beech-wood burned cheerily, as Simmons once more set out the table with shining glass and silver.

It was the very night for a cosy dinner-party. The guests all arrived in good time, and with noble appetites after their drive through the keen air. Nothing could have gone off better ; there was plenty of merry, happy talk,—good wine to crown the feast, six congenial friends to enjoy it, and a

charming little chatterbox of a maiden and her sweetheart, to keep the ball rolling when their elders had reached that state of serene comfort which follows a well-ordered repast.

Chairs were drawn cosily round the fire, fresh logs piled up, the ladies were implored not to withdraw the light of their presence for a while, and Master Tom and his playmate were at high jinks. Norton seemed thoroughly himself, and Gresley, in his best vein, kept the whole circle alive and amused with an endless store of light and witty trifles, which he seemed to have always at command.

Thus happily the evening wore away, and all too swiftly came the time for parting.

After many hearty farewells, all the guests had departed but Gresley and his wife, when Simmons coming in to announce their carriage, brought in a letter for his master, which he said had been just brought by a man on horseback from Dorminster.

“From Dorminster, Simmons?”

“Yes, sir, and the man is waiting for an answer.”

“All right, Simmons, you may go.”

Then, turning to Gresley, he said, “Pardon me for one minute, and I will give you a good cigar when I have read this missive.”

Having read it twice, he handed it to his friend.

“You are good at riddles, Gresley, tell me what in the name of wonder this means. Read it aloud, that we may have the benefit of your wife’s opinion. I know neither the writer nor the place he writes from.”

Thus ran the note in a few hurried lines:—

“*St. Margaret’s, Dorminster.*”

“Dear Sir,

“For some days past one of ‘the Sisters’ has been lying in a state of dangerous exhaustion, arising from fever caught while nursing some sick children, and now

implores me to send for you, having that to say which is for your ear only. As in all probability her time on earth is short, I ask you to come at once, if you accede to Sister Margaret's request.

“FRANK MORPETH.”

“All I know about the matter,” replied Gresley, “is this. St. Margaret's Home is one of the new-fangled sisterhoods who devote themselves to nursing, and Frank Morpeth is the father-confessor. He is rather a pig-headed sort of fellow, and belongs to the ultra school, who scrape off every vestige of hair from their faces, and go in for all the black-letter saints' days, incense, the tonsure, and tunicles; keep their eyes fixed on the pavement as they walk, and talk in a whisper. He got into hot water with Robert of Dorminster the other day, and had to eat humble pie; but when the fever broke out among the Irish

in St. Margaret's parish the Sisters were beyond all praise, going into dens and courts where no paid nurse would put her foot."

"But who is this Frank Morpeth?"

"Edith Jervis should be here to answer you," replied Gresley, "as he is neither more nor less than the perpetual Curate of Saltram; you *must* have heard of him there, surely,—a long, thin, pale-faced fellow, with a face like the edge of a knife, looking as if he fasted more than 'twice in a week,' and—"

"My dear Thomas," said his wife, "how you parsons do hate one another if you happen to differ in matters of practice; I won't have another word said against Frank Morpeth."

"Oh!" said Norton, "I recollect the man now, they call him the Bishop of Salt-ram. But what is to be done with this note from his lordship?"

“Well,” replied Gresley, “waiving the big-wiggy tone of the mandate as a part of the man which he cannot help adopting, I think you must go. The poor woman may really have something to say to you specially, or Mr. Frank Morpeth would have got hold of it by virtue of his office. Possibly, she may be one of your old parishioners. What says Mrs. Gresley?”

“Mrs. Gresley says that the Curate of Danbury can have a seat in our carriage, and a bed at St. Jerome’s.

“Agreed,” replied Norton, “I will but say good-night to Fanny, and a word to the messenger, and then be ready to start.”

“Tell Mr. Morpeth,” he said to the man, “that I will be at St. Margaret’s as soon as a pair of horses can take me.”

In another moment the sharp ringing trot of the horseman was heard along the frosty road; and not far behind it the steady roll of the Rector’s fly, for which he had ordered a pair of horses, “as it looked like snow.”

It was not far from midnight when Norton, having parted from his friends, rang the bell at the gate of St. Margaret's Home.

The father-confessor was waiting to receive him in a small, dingy, room named the oratory, and the cordiality of the meeting was not enhanced by the tone of Morpeth's first words, though accompanied by an oily shake of the hand.

"You have received my note, then?"

"Yes," said Norton, "otherwise I should not be here. I started at once, and hope that I am not too late."

"Sister Margaret has rallied since I wrote, and is anxiously waiting for you. It would have been better perhaps had she confided in me, as the priest of the sisterhood to whom they should naturally have recourse in their last confession, but as she specially named you, I waive the right in this case, at the request of a dying woman."

There was still a tone of coldness and

stiffness in Morpeth's words which jarred on his hearer, and made him answer somewhat brusquely.

"The confidence placed in me, Mr. Morpeth, is none of my seeking ; I know nothing of your usual plans of proceeding here ; nothing of this poor woman who asks for me, or of what she has to say. Nor is there I think any need to talk of rights in the case, as I come at your own request. But as it is now midnight, and her time may be short, had I not better see the sick woman at once?"

"Only a word more, then, and I will show you the way. Whatever Sister Margaret may have to say, you will of course receive as a priest, strictly under the seal of confession."

"I am not in the habit," replied Norton, "of receiving the dying words of any one as other than sacred ; whether these are to be what you call under the seal of confession

must depend upon her own wish. It is she who seeks me, not I her; I must see her alone, and then act for the best."

"Alone?" said Morpeth; "surely there can be no reason why I should not be present?"

"Every reason," replied Norton, "even by your own showing. How am I to take her confession as sacred, if a third person be present? But, again I say, we are wasting time. Either I am wanted here, or I am not. If I am *not* wanted, say so plainly, and I will go; if I am, take me at once to the sick woman. I decline all further discussion whatever."

There was a look of determination about Norton's face as he spoke, which convinced Mr. Morpeth that all further parleying was useless; he therefore led the way at once to the infirmary.

It was a large, lofty, room, scantily furnished, and dimly lighted by a small lamp

which hung from a bracket near the fireplace; and in the furthest corner, away from the light, were two small beds, on one of which lay Sister Margaret.

When Norton entered the room, one of the Sisters who had been waiting on the sick woman, rose from her place and came forward to meet him.

“For the last half hour,” she said, “Sister Margaret has been wandering a little, but she will be herself again presently, and then ask for you no doubt. If I am wanted, be good enough to touch that bell. I am close at hand, and shall hear you. The cordial is in that glass if she needs it.”

In another moment Norton found himself alone with the dying woman.

For a few minutes he walked softly to and fro in front of the fire, waiting for some sign of consciousness from the poor creature who had summoned him. But no such sign came.

Then he stepped stealthily up to the bedside. All he could see was that the patient lay back, as if utterly exhausted and asleep; the face pale and haggard, and pitted with small-pox; the hair cut short, and the hands, beautifully small and white, clenched firmly on the outside of the coverlet.

It was a face of silent, patient, suffering. But, as he looked on it, she suddenly woke up from her trance, as the sick often do under the gaze of the living.

The eyes of the sick woman slowly opened, and a weary, faint, voice, said,

“Is he come?”

“He is,” said Norton, “and waiting and hoping to help you. What can he do for Sister Margaret?”

“Are we alone?” was the faint whisper.

“Quite; your nurse is within call if you want her, but we are alone, and you can speak freely.”

“Give me, then, some of the cordial, already poured out.”

Norton gave it to her, and she lay back on the pillow as if lost in sleep. Then, suddenly, she opened her eyes again, and said in a clear, soft, voice,

“Is it you, Harry?”

“God in Heaven!” cried Norton, in utter amazement, “who are you, what do you mean?”

“My darling,” was all that the voice could utter in reply, as she fell back again exhausted.

But in another moment he had his arm round her, and raising her up towards the light, cried again in further amaze, “Speak again, if but once, that I may be sure that I am not going mad. For God’s sake speak!”

“Harry! Harry!” was all that she could answer.

But this one word, spoken as only one voice on earth could speak it, was enough and more than enough to thrill through his whole being. It was *her* voice, his own

darling wife's, come back as if once more from the dead. And yet he could hardly believe the evidence of his own senses. The auburn hair all ruthlessly gone; the smooth cheeks haggard, pale, and deeply scarred; the sunshine of the loving face blotted out, and the eyes sparkling with fever, like coals of living fire! the voice of music frail, broken, dying.

God Almighty! was nothing to be done? Was it after all a horrible dream? No dream, but a still more horrible reality.

"My own darling," he whispered at last, "Harry Norton is here, his arm is round you, he only lives to serve you, and to bless God for bringing him here to-night. Mary, my own Mary, what can I do for you, only speak, only tell me?"

"Kiss me, my husband, kiss me," she said, "and ask God to spare me long enough to say what I have to say. I have much to tell, my own dearest, and the time is short. But the very sight of you, and the touch of

your lips has brought me new life. He will spare me long enough to tell you all."

"Spare you?" cried Norton, as she kissed him once again, "you *shall* live, and come back to Danbury again. God is too great, too good, to take you away from me."

"Hush," she said, "my own dear husband, hush; tell me but one thing, is my darling Fanny well?"

"Yes, yes," he answered, "well and happy, and would go mad for joy if she but thought of seeing you. Oh! Mary, my wife, my life, my darling, is it, can it be true? Am I here with you in very deed? Tell me what it all means?"

"I can hardly tell," she said, "what it means. It seems too happy, too blessed, to be true. And yet now I feel that I am in my senses, and that it is to you in very deed I am speaking, after all these dreary days of suffering."

"How long have you been here, in the fever?"

“I hardly know,” she answered, “but many, many, long weeks.”

“And why,—God help me, I have so many questions to ask you, I know not which to put first ; but why did you not send for me before ? ”

“I was afraid,” she said, “I dared not, dearest ; and Father Morpeth would not allow me until he knew I was dying ! ”

“Did he dare to separate a wife from her husband ? ”

“Hush, dearest, he has not the faintest suspicion as to who I am. He only knows me by the name I gave, Mary Harris, or as Sister Margaret.”

“It is all,” he said, “a dreadful mystery. Tell me what it means ? ”

“Sit down, then,” she said ; “sit down here by my side, and give me your hand once more, as in the old days ; and while strength is left I will try to tell you my story.”

And this was the story which she slowly and painfully told to her husband that night, in broken fragments, and interrupted by many questions, as it still remains in Norton's journal—the pages blotted with tears as he wrote.

“I must first go back,” she said, “many, many, long years, to the time when we lived at Liverpool. My father was a merchant trading with New York, carrying on a rich and splendid business, living in a great house, with all that wealth could bring us. I was his only child, and supposed to be a great heiress, and therefore had many suitors. But I was a mere girl, and thought nothing of them all, until one came who was young, handsome, and clever, named Ralph Lavington. He was an agent for some New York house, and so became acquainted with my father. He had travelled, was master of several languages, had seen the world, and knew how to win

the heart or the fancy of a girl of seventeen. And this he did unknown to my parents. But at last the secret oozed out, and for a time my father utterly refused his consent. I was too young, and Lavington had no money and no such position as became a suitor for my hand. I declared I would never marry any other man; and after many long months of pining, tears, and entreaties, they at length gave way, and agreed to our engagement. At length the marriage day was fixed, and a wedding breakfast arranged of more than usual splendour, which my father was determined should astonish even the merchant princes of Liverpool. Suddenly, a few days before the marriage, a panic swept over the money-market; and rumours began to spread that touched even the name of Hastings. The house, it said, was tottering, and my father a worthless speculator. In this crisis of affairs Ralph Lavington came secretly to

my father, and—like a villain as he was—begged him earnestly to defer the marriage, urging that when the panic was past, the house of Hastings would recover itself, and brighter days come, when the wedding could take place. But he little knew the man he had to deal with. My father indignantly denied the truth of all the rumours, and insisted on the marriage taking place. Of all this I unhappily knew nothing until years after, or, my darling, I should not now be lying here.

“The marriage accordingly took place, and was celebrated with full splendour. But in the middle of the breakfast the bridegroom was suddenly called from the room by a telegram, he said, from New York, and with many apologies left the company to answer it. An hour later all was confusion and amazement. My husband had gone to his room, changed his dress, and slipped out of the house unobserved. One

of the servants afterwards declared that she had noticed a man in a sailor's dress pass down the passage, but that was all. Not a trace of him could be discovered, nor was he ever seen again in Liverpool. What the telegram was, I know not. But that he had one, there is no doubt.

“ There is no need now to tell of the rest of that dreadful day ; and the horrors of the next day made me forget for the time even my own special misery. The great house of Hastings suspended payment, and fell into utter ruin ; and had it not been for a small jointure of my mother's, we should have been utter beggars. This was more than my father could bear, and in a fit of desperation and shame at the ruin of all his golden dreams, he died by his own hand. My mother's relatives all lived far away in the north of England ; but she determined at once to take refuge in some remote country place where the story of our disgrace and misfortunes was unknown.

“ For some years we led a sadly quiet but happy life at Tregartha ; and then came the bright Gala-day when Mary Hastings first knew what it was to love and to be loved. You won my heart, dearest. I soon found out this, and knew at once that my dream of happiness was but a dream, and that I must either tell you the truth or that we must fly. Then it was that news came in a letter to my mother that some one who knew Lavington had seen him in the street at Pendleton ; and she, in her despair, not knowing what else to do, consulted Rookstone, the lawyer. It was you, dearest, who brought the letter from him on that happy, fatal, evening, when again we met ; and once more I knew that I loved Harry Norton, and that my love was returned. Even then I had almost made up my mind to tell you all, but my courage failed me. From my mother I had no secrets, and once more flight was our only safety. Our next

place of refuge, under an assumed name, was Dorminster ; and our little stock of money barely sufficed even for that. Something of what happened there you know ; and all the sad story of Rookstone's exactions, my mother's illness and death, I need not tell. Then came another mention of Lavington from my mother's old friend, of his being drowned at sea, and again of his being actually seen in Pendleton. In utter dread at this news, of being claimed and carried off as his wife, I was driven to find work as a governess, thus hoping for one more chance of escape."

At this point of the narrative Mary's strength utterly failed her.

" You must go now," she said, " my own dearest, if you would hear the rest of Sister Margaret's confession. The very sight of you has given me courage so far, and I feel that God will spare me for one more day. I shall sleep, and see you once more to-

morrow. Kiss me, darling, and bless me before you go."

"I cannot go," he said; "I cannot leave you, Mary."

But she had but to say once more, "Kiss me, Harry, and bless me before you go," and he saw at once that she must be obeyed.

"Only one word more, dearest," she whispered. "Kiss my darling child for me, and let me see her once more before I die."

"I will not hear you speak so," he answered. "You cannot, shall not die. Fanny shall be here to-morrow. And you have nothing on your mind, darling—nothing that you would tell me before I go?"

"Nothing," she answered. "I have made my peace with my Saviour long since. Now I have seen you, if I can but tell you all, I shall be content. Only one thing; there may have been letters for

me in all this dreary time. If so, the Father has them. Come early, dearest; I shall be awake."

Then he took her into his arms and kissed her; and with a silent blessing, which his heart was too full to utter, he softly left the room.

Late as it was, Morpeth was waiting to see him at the door of the oratory.

"Your patient, Mr. Norton," he said, "has detained you long. I trust that she has made her peace with God."

"I trust that she has," replied Norton, "and many a long day before this."

"But I mean by special confession and absolution at the priest's hands."

"Her confession," said Norton, "is but half completed; but she has revived wonderfully, and I am to see her again when she has rested for a few hours. She has yet, she says, much to tell me; and this I must hear in the morning. By the bye, Mr.

Morpeth, she mentioned the subject of letters, and said that during her long illness some might have come for her ; and I suppose that they are in your hands."

"Naturally," replied Morpeth. "In whose hands should they be but in those of the confessor of the sisterhood?"

"Quite so. I only remind you of the fact at her request, that you may be prepared to give them to me in the morning."

"I am not aware," answered the father, "that you have any right in this matter at all."

"Only the right," said Norton, "of seeing fair play. She has a clear right to her own letters ; and stopping but one on its way to the rightful owner is, as perhaps you know, an offence at which the law looks rather severely. But if you need any further right to-morrow, I may be able, perhaps, to show even that. Meanwhile, good-night, Mr. Morpeth."

This was a style of treatment to which the father-confessor was not at all accustomed, his disciples being wont to regard him as a sort of superior being, exempt from all mortal frailties and follies. *Sins* were of course utterly out of the question in connection with him. And now he found himself overawed and checkmated by a man to whom he had never before spoken in his life. It *was* hard, but it had to be borne. Norton was not in a mood to be trifled with, and that the Father saw at a glance.

As for Norton himself, he walked away at a great pace through the cold, frosty, starlit night ; hardly knowing, even then, whether he was in his real senses or not. But, as he looked up at the blue sky above him, and thought of the events of the last few hours, he felt that it was not a dream, but a living reality.

After some little trouble he made his way

through the dusky streets to St. Jerome's Rectory, and there found that his kind host and hostess had long before given up all hope of his return, and gone to bed. But his room was ready, and thankful he was to lie down, and try to think over the extraordinary events of the day. In the midst of this troubled thought, though utterly unexpected, sleep overtook him; and it was broad daylight before he again awoke, and found Gresley standing at his bedside, to say that breakfast was ready, and the household waiting for the Curate of Danbury.

In a few hurried words, Norton told him the amazing news, which both he and his wife received with joyful but incredible astonishment.

"My dear friend," said the rector, as they shook hands at the gate, "for heaven's sake don't be too sanguine. God forbid that I should throw a word of damp on your happy, happy, tidings, but after six weeks of low

fever, don't forget that the very cause which has produced a sudden flush of seeming strength and life, may, if not guarded, do the very reverse by undue excitement. Fanny shall be there in less than two hours."

Then Norton "went on his way" like the pilgrim of old, "rejoicing." His whole pathway seemed lighted up with bright visions of the future. He saw nothing of the cloud and shadow that shut him in on every side.

CHAPTER VI.

OUT OF THE CLOUDY PAST.

“Eyes look your last ;
Arms, take your last embrace.”

Romeo and Juliet.

WHEN he reached St. Margaret's, Norton was at once admitted to the infirmary. Morpeth, he was told, had gone back to Saltram, but would return in a few hours ; and had left word that sister Margaret might see him as early as she pleased. She had passed a better night, and was then expecting him.

The dim light of a winter's morning was

struggling into the room, as he entered it; and there, ready to greet him, lay the same tender, loving face that he had left but a few hours before, now paler than ever, and yet flushed with a sudden touch of crimson at his coming.

After a few moments of loving talk, he was at her side again as before, and with his hand clasped in hers she once more took up the thread of her story.

“Having once made up my mind to go out as a governess, the difficulty was to find work; days of weary disappointment came, but at last I answered an advertisement, and found a happy home at Plymridge. It was while there that you came to St. Jerome’s, for I heard of you; I even saw you in Dorchester more than once, but took good care that you should not see me. I never dreamed that you had forgotten me; for I measured your love by my own, and knew that it was for ever. How you met Mary

Marshall and found out her love for the Curate of Danbury, our happy meeting at 'the Firs' on that golden summer afternoon, all this, dearest, you know as I know it, bright, sunny, light, among the dark shadows of the past. Once more I resolved to tell you my terrible secret, and I was on the very point of telling it, but my own heart trembled at the thought of losing you, and your tender words of loving refusal made me dare all for your sake. Foolishly, madly, I tried to convince myself that Ralph Lavington was drowned, and that I was safe. Can you ever forgive me, Harry?"

"Forgive you, Mary? Forgive you for bringing me years of priceless happiness—happiness such as I never dared hope for, or dream of? Not one act or word would I now have undone or unsaid. If guilt there be, it is all mine, for refusing to hear what you would have bravely told. My only fear is for our child, Mary, if the marriage was not

real. In the sight of heaven it was true and real; truer than that of the villain who left you, and brought upon us all this hopeless misery. But still, dear wife, tell me how and why I find you here? Why not have told me all in the happy days at Danbury?"

"I could not, I dared not," she said, "break in upon your happy dream. It was so perfect. Your life was so bound up with mine, and mine with yours, that my courage failed me. But I must hasten on. All through those golden days I heard nothing of Lavington, though I wrote more than once to my old friend at Liverpool. And, at last, as I fondly hoped, so I began to believe that the destroyer of our peace was silenced for ever beneath the waves. Then came the luckless day of my visit to Dorminster. Fancy, if you can, my horror as I left the bookseller's shop on suddenly seeing *him*, all but face to face, standing at the door of

the coach office, within a yard of me as I passed ! For an instant I was as one struck with death. My senses failed me. Then, I suddenly awoke out of my terror, and knew that immediate flight was my only chance of escape. I turned down the very first lane, and ran until faint and breathless I found myself close to the railway. A train was starting ; and that night I got to Dormouth. The next morning, having changed my dress, and disguised myself as I best could, I took a ticket for London ; and reached it that night ; a stranger and with but a few pounds in my pocket. After endless trouble, I found a lodging, and set to work in search of employment. Days passed away, but no employment was to be had in that terrible city. My money began to get lower and lower ; but my landlady was a Christian and would not turn me into the streets. She had other lodgers, and I agreed to be her servant till brighter days should come. They never

came; but days of darkness and despair. One of the lodgers was seized with smallpox; and I caught the infection, and but for Sarah Day's kindness I must have died. She nursed me through it all; and would not take a penny from me in recompense. Keep me any longer she could not, I was still unfit, unable, to work. Then, in my despair I fled back to Dorminster, resolved to face all risks of detection, and believing that I should never be recognized. My hair had all been cut off in my delirium, my face was disfigured as you see it; and no one knew me. No sooner was I here, than the thought of St. Margaret's occurred to me, as I passed the gates of the Home. A fever was raging in the parish, so I heard, and they needed help. I saw the mother, and then Father Morpeth, and having told him as much of my story as I dared, was at last admitted on trial. In a month I was a Sister, and in their peculiar dress I knew I was safe even against Laving-

ton, or even keener eyes if I fell in their way. Once, only once, Harry, I saw you for a moment in the street. You were walking with your old friend, and leading my darling Fanny by the hand.

“How I longed but to hear your voice, how I hungered for my child, you only can tell. But it was not to be, and I never saw you again, dearest, till you came to me last night—like an angel, a messenger of mercy from God Himself.

“Many a time when the fever first took me here, I longed to send for you, but dared not; and when in my delirium I called out the word Danbury, as the nurse told me I did, it was only counted as idle raving. And even Father Morpeth declined to send for you.”

“Curse him,” said Norton bitterly, “curse him for a cold-blooded Pharisee! Oh! my darling, my darling, what can I do now—what can I do to save you? You must see the best doctor that can be had for

money. I will telegraph to London. Something can be, must be, done !”

“ Nothing, dearest, can be done ; nothing. I am dying, I know it ; and all the wise men in England could not save me. But, I have seen you, dearest, and I shall see my child once more, and look into her dear eyes and be content. God is very good to me, and I can trust Him.”

Then there was a silence in the room ; so deep, so calm, that Norton could hear the ticking of the nurse’s watch by the fire, and almost the beating of his own heart.

“ Can you not trust Him,” she softly whispered at last ; “ can you not trust Him, Harry, too ? Not trust me to Him ? ”

But to this Norton could make no reply, but was forced to turn away his head from her, to hide the blinding tears that would come. Then there flashed upon his mind the day when, at Dunton Ford, he had prayed for the sick girl ; he had prayed in faith, and

the child had recovered. She was now well, and in service at Saltram as Edith Jervis' own maid.

Could he not pray again as he had prayed then ; and was not the same God able to hear and to save ? Yes, he would pray for his own darling wife, and save her. He would pray, so he thought, as man never yet prayed. He would take Heaven by storm.

It was thus that he turned once more to the bedside, and kneeling down, he took into his own the little, wasted, white hand of his wife ; and for her he lifted up his soul in silent prayer. And as he prayed she watched him in silent, speechless, love ; little knowing what was in his heart.

As he rose from his knees, the nurse came into the room, bringing the doctor to pay his usual morning visit.

"He is very kind, and wise, and good, Harry," she whispered ; "leave me for a moment with him, and go and ask if my Fanny is come."

“ I will see you before you go, Norton,” said Dr. Kendal’s calm, clear voice, “ if you will wait about two minutes for me.”

Then Norton recognized an old and well-known friend, and quietly left the room.

He had scarcely reached the visitors’ room below when Mr. Gresley was announced, and with him came Fanny herself, in her brightest, bonniest, spirits, only knowing as yet that she was to meet her father.

Gresley, of course, had heard most of the story in outline the night before ; but left it for Norton to break the terrible news to his child as he thought best.

Setting the child to look over a volume of prints on the table, the two men went aside for a moment.

“ Thank God,” whispered Norton, “ she has rallied wonderfully, Gresley ; told me all her story, and now only waits till the doctor has gone, to see my darling here.”

As they talked in whispers, Dr. Kendal himself entered the room.

“Norton, my good old friend, how are you? It seems an age since we met. I want to ask you a question about Danbury?” And then suddenly seeing the Curate’s grave, excited face, he added. “But what is the matter with you, not anxious about the patient upstairs, are you?”

“Come with me,” answered Norton into another room, “and I will tell you. My friend will wait for us.”

“I am most thankful to see you here, Kendal, for the life of that patient in the infirmary is more to me than I can tell now, and I know that you will do all that human skill and kindness can do for her. Tell me what you think of her this morning. To me, she seems wonderfully better?”

“All day long yesterday,” answered the doctor,” she was craving to see you—for some strange reason or other—and would tell her trouble to no one else. Then it was that

I persuaded Morpeth to send for you, and your coming has brought on this sudden reaction and flush of life. But the very same cause now brings peril; the excitement is too great for her, and she will die as it were from excess of happiness."

"She must not, shall not, die," cried Norton. "You *must* save her!"

"As far as my poor knowledge goes I have done my very utmost. Even but now she could barely swallow the cordial I gave her. She is beyond my reach, my friend, and if there yet remains any one last word for the priest to say for her peace, no time must be lost I assure you. I saw letters on the little table by her bedside addressed to her. But I should trouble her with no letters now unless by her own special request. The nurse wished to open them. But I said it was your business or Morpeth's. Then as I left her she murmured the name of some child, Fanny, I think. What child is it?"

“Her own, her own, Kendal, and mine. I may tell you without fear what I dare not tell to any other in this house and you will not repeat, the truth—the sick woman is my wife! Oh! my friend, save her, I implore you!”

“Your wife, Norton? but amazing as it is, I see you are telling me the truth. Would to Heaven that I could do aught to help or save her; no hand but the Almighty’s can do that. In His hand you must leave it. If she is to see her child, it must be done at once, done most quietly and gently, for her life hangs by a thread, and I cannot say that it will not snap at the touch of such joy, or the child’s coming may waken up another spring of life as yours did. Go you yourself and fetch your child; I will see and prepare the mother.”

“Fanny,” said Norton, “I am going to take you to a sick lady who is very anxious

to see you. Will you be very quiet and good?"

"Oh! yes, papa; who is she?"

"An old and dear friend, my darling; I will tell you who by-and-bye."

Then the father and his little daughter crept softly upstairs.

The nurse had gone, and Kendal was just leaving the room.

"She has rallied again wonderfully," he whispered, "leave them together; but do not let the child stay more than a few minutes, if you wish the rally to last."

In a few minutes Norton returned. Fanny was kneeling by the bedside of the dying woman and whispering tenderly to her, and tears of joy were in the eyes of both. It was such joy as the angels might have shared in, and Norton dared not break its perfection by a word. One more last kiss and mother and child parted for ever on earth, and then he led her quietly way.

To his amazement, when he returned, Mary was sitting up in the bed with the pillows gathered round her, as she had never before done. Her voice was clearer and stronger, her eyes were filled with more than usual lustre.

“Harry,” she said, “my darling has brought me strength, and I can speak to you once more—once more before I go. Say again I ‘forgive you,’ and my happiness is complete. I have nothing more on earth to wish for.” And as he whispered to her again and again that he had nothing to forgive, nothing but his love and blessing to give her, she once more flung her arms round his neck and kissed him softly and tenderly on the lips; softly and tenderly, yet with such a passionate, lingering, embrace as lifted his very soul to the light which she saw shining at the gate of Heaven, from afar !”

Then she lay back on the pillows, quietly closed her eyes, opened them once again to

meet his with one unspeakably loving gaze, and then closed them for ever.

And Norton knew that he was now alone with the majesty of Death. The desire of his eyes was taken from him; the light grew dim, and darkness closed on all around as he still knelt by the bedside, until at last his old friend Gresley led him slowly away.

* * * * *

In the quiet graveyard at Saltram, where but a few years before children had scattered spring flowers in her path, they carried Mary Norton to her quiet resting-place. A plain slab of granite marked the spot; and there, when the early spring-tide came again, Fanny and her father brought the first violets of the year; and there Edith Jervis laid many a wreath of passion-flower and forget-me-not as the months passed slowly away.

Blinded and bewildered at first by the suddenness of the blow, still Norton bore up

bravely. For the first few weeks he could neither think nor talk but of the one theme ; and in his old friends, the Gresleys, he found patient and kindly listeners. They encouraged him, indeed, to tell of all her last loving words, and were never weary of hearing in what hopeful peace Death had come to her at last, and of talking over the old happy days at Danbury.

To Fanny he as yet shrank from speaking of her mother ; and it was she herself who first showed how full her heart was of the very things which Norton feared to touch on.

They were walking one day in the winter-garden, when she crept up softly to him, and putting her hand in his said,

“ I knew her, papa, directly she kissed me, though she never said she was my own dear mother. Nobody ever kissed me like that ; nobody could, could they, papa ? ”

“No, my child ; she kissed you with her heart. Tell me all she said.”

“She said, Oh ! so softly, that God was very good to her, and that the angels were waiting for her then, to take her away inside the gates of heaven ; that she could see them shining ; and that one day they would come to fetch me away too, if I was good, and that she would wait for me there ; and that meanwhile I was to love you, and take care of you, and make you very happy, and I will. I promised her I would. But though she is gone away, papa, she is always here ; and I often think she is near me, though she never came before. And then I see her in my dreams, and fancy that I hear her voice saying to me, as she did that day, ‘Good-bye, my darling ; love him and take care of him.’”

Childish, simple words, and yet words that brought Norton comfort when all else was barren and dead.

The full story of Mary Norton's life was known only to the three friends Gresley, Edith Jervis, and Dr. Kendal; and the mystery of her sudden reappearance as a Sister of Mercy at Dorminster was to all others a mystery to the end. Mrs. Grundy and her numerous acquaintances wandered to and fro with itching ears, and said many things, some spiteful, many foolish, and all untrue; but they hungered and thirsted and invented to no purpose. Norton himself would make no sign whatever, and let their gossip pass by unheeded. And he knew he could trust his friends.

CHAPTER VII.

WINTER.

“The night has a thousand eyes,
The day but one,
Yet the light of the bright world dies
With the dying sun.

“The mind has a thousand eyes,
And the heart but one,
Yet the light of a whole life dies
When love is done.”

J. W. Bourdillon.

Six months rolled slowly by, and the first intense bitterness of Norton's grief seemed to be over; but as its bitterness passed away, all the more deep was its reality. Now that he had once again seen and spoken to her, all the keener grew his sense

of loss. Every room in the house at Danbury once more brought her vividly before him. Turn where he would, some trifle or other—a book, a flower, or his child's work—reminded him of the gracious presence which yet lingered about its old home. It was at once a pleasure and a pain to him; and he clung to it as many a mourner does, often unconsciously, till it made work tasteless, and idleness seem a necessity.

Again and again, in a spirit of restless regret, he rode over to see the grave at Saltram, and returned as dispirited as he went. Still he continued his visits; and often called at the house for an hour's talk with his old friend Edith Jervis. He found her conversation now more congenial than ever; not that she humoured, or often consoled with him, being as wayward and contradictory as of old. But the inevitable result of her conversation was to take

him out of himself, and this was, so far, for good.

It was on one of these occasions that the talk one day fell into an old and favourite channel. Fisher, the young girl who waited on her, had just left the room, when she suddenly turned to him and said,

“How ungrateful people are, especially in Fisher’s class. She can hardly ever look you in the face without remembering that she owes her life to your visit to Dunton Ford; and yet, I suppose, has never offered you as much as a word of thanks?”

“Never, as far as I can recollect,” replied Norton. “But, indeed, there was no need for her to do so. I don’t know that I deserve any thanks for simply doing my duty, even if what I did was of any benefit.”

“But you prayed for her when life seemed all but gone, and she recovered; and life, I suppose, is worth having, at least to her?”

"No doubt," he answered, "no doubt, that life to her was and still is very dear. It has come to her again; and it now seems, no doubt, like a lasting possession. Years have passed away, and, without at all meaning to be thankless, she has ceased to connect me, perhaps, with the means of her recovery. But you have now opened up a deeper, darker question than that of gratitude,—the question of all questions,—what prayers are heard, and which are not?"

"But in this case," said Edith, "it was like cause and effect? If *that* was not answer to prayer, I am altogether at sea."

"It is a hard matter to decide," replied Norton, "and to me there appears to be but one solution to the whole question. Whatever happens, I take it, must be regarded as an answer to all true prayer, or, more widely, if you like, to all prayer. If it be not so, you will soon get into deeper and

more terrible darkness, and find yourself doubting whether any human petition is ever answered at all. When you sent for me years ago to see the dying girl at Dunton Ford, I little thought what a day of darkness was about to fall upon me ; a day when in the agony of my spirit I prayed, as I never before prayed, for one dearer to me than life itself. For her I would have given every earthly possession that was mine to give. I prayed in faith, for I believed that God only could grant what I asked, and that He would give it. But my petition was utterly denied. I stormed Heaven with my entreaties, but not even for a day was my darling spared to me. In my despair, Edith Jervis, but one thought saved me from utter madness ; it was this,—that the great and awful Being who hears the cry of all his children, and knows their deepest wants, must know even mine, and that He dealt with me, as He

deals with all living souls, not as a tyrant, giving wantonly and denying wantonly or in caprice, but as a Father of infinite wisdom, tenderness, and love. Beyond this I cannot go one single step. The mystery seems impenetrable. The mother at Dunton Ford, who could but moan over the child whom she had treated with idle neglect and indifference, has life for an answer; to me, from the same omniscient hand, come blank denial and death. If you ask me why this is so, I have no answer to give. But, if I could not believe God to be what I have described Him, from that moment my belief in His very existence would perish. There is no halfway-house between this conviction and open atheism, that will stand the tempest for an hour."

"You speak passionately," she replied, "and in terrible earnest."

"I have been through the fire," said Norton, "and barely come out alive. It

may seem to you that mine is but a scanty shred of belief; yet it is better than despair, and better than doubt."

"Infinitely better," answered his companion. "You have at least a morsel of rock to stand upon; while for me there seems nought but sand. If going through the fire is to give one faith mine should be firm enough."

"Some day," he said, "you may see more clearly your way to the light. Yours has been a longer day of clouds; mine, of sharper, more sudden, night, followed by a brighter flash of day. You have forced me to speak of things that I thought must be ever hidden in my own heart; of which no other human being has even a suspicion. It was only fair play, after what Edith Jervis has told me of her own life. Trust begets trust, and we must keep each other's secrets."

And so the friends parted, as they often did, all the firmer friends for entire freedom of speech.

“Give my love,” she said, “to Fanny, and say that I am living in hopes of another long day with her in Saltram woods. If you are too busy, let the captain bring her. I will not worry you with thanks for trusting me with a secret. But you know that I do thank you, and that I can keep it.”

Instead of going back at once to Danbury, the Curate rode sharply across the Downs to Dorminster, though he hardly knew for what exact purpose, and he had no special business to call him there. But half an hour's steady gallop through keen fresh air is a good tonic both for man and beast, and Norton was in better spirits and brighter tone when he reached the city than he had been for many a long day ; and the end of it was that he put up his horse at the ‘Mitre’ and went off in search of the Rector of St. Jerome's.

As luck would have it his old friend was at home, and ready as ever with a hearty welcome.

Dinner over, the two men sat down for a chat as they smoked a quiet pipe by the fire, for though it was now summer time a fire crackled on the hearth.

“In my own sanctum,” Gresley would often say, “I like a fire of wood all the year round. A winter’s day requires it, and a summer’s day deserves it; it’s a compliment to the sunshine. And what golden weather we are having, Norton! I was looking, only yesterday, across that wide stretch of corn fields in Saltram Valley, waving softly in the hazy glow of light, and thought what a grand thing it would be if one could only hear the whole great song of the rustling woods, and the cry of the rivers, and the voice of the fields white to harvest, going up in one shout of praise through the summer air. I agree with Hawthorn, that ‘God would never have made such glorious sunshine over the earth, and hearts to enjoy it, if he were not meant

to be immortal. The light that rises and fades here is but a type of the day that never dies.' And talking of Saltram, old friend, when were you last that way? If report speaks truly, not long ago. And how is the fair widow?"

"Replying to three questions at once," said Norton, "report, for once, speaks the truth. I have just come from Saltram, and from the fair widow as you call her. She is well, as busy as ever in her parish, and as eager as ever to discuss the hard things of life—the sorrows and the miseries; 'man born to trouble, like the sparks that fly upward,' often seems her only text."

"Not at all a good or healthy text for you two croakers to be arguing. Depend on it Solomon had a sharp touch of the gout when he said that."

"Job, Gresley, Job; don't slander the wise son of David!"

"Job then by all means; Job had a fit of

the dismal just then ; his wife had been nagging him, beyond all doubt, and made him say savage things."

"My dear," said a quiet voice from a little work-table in the corner of the room, "I consider that you are getting very profane, not to say unfair, in the matter of Job's relations; you don't know what his wife had to bear."

"Mrs. Gresley, you are quite right in standing up for the fair fame of a much well-abused woman; she, no doubt, had to bear the heavy burden of her own ill-conditioned temper, and the possession of an unquenchable tongue. And now, you see, you have, after the manner of your sex, broken in upon the thread of my discourse, when I was observing that the patriarch, no doubt, had sorrows enough, and trials hard to understand. The land of Uz, as old Saunderson has it, was not a canny place for an easy-going man; but whatever the

mystery of sorrow, I fancy that in unbroken happiness he found a much deeper and more awful trial. However sharp Satan was upon him, he knew that the tempter must give it up at last as a bad job ; however amiable his wife, she couldn't go on for ever ; but when a flood of unbroken happiness befalls a man, it is of the same texture as eternity itself, and in it he may soon learn to forget the Maker of the sunshine altogether. So that, as Hawthorn says, 'spirits still embodied may well tremble at it.' "

" Few men, then," replied Norton, " have much cause for trembling on that account."

" No," said Gresley, " luckily it is not all sunshine for any of us, more than it is always a dead calm at sea, without a wave or a ripple. A pretty state of stagnation the world would be in before the end of the month if everything settled down into unbroken smoothness and quiet, and we all took to lying on our backs and feeding on

honeycomb. No, no; luckily for us comes 'the sharp north-easter o'er the German foam' to bid us wake up from the drone's life, and remember that there are such things as stings in existence. I know that I may speak to you, Norton, as freely as I think, and so I rap out all that comes to hand in my old fashion."

"You wouldn't be Gresley if you gave up speaking out," said Norton, "and I should be a noodle if I did not thank you for doing so."

"Still," quietly interposed the vicar's wife, "scold him well, Mr. Norton, for being profane, even if he will lecture an old friend."

"But the old friend," rejoined her husband, "likes being lectured, and is all the better for it. Rasping agrees with him, and there is nothing that he likes better than having his hair brushed the wrong way."

"*'Sweet are the uses of adversity'* seems to

be a favourite maxim with you, Gresley ; to-day at all events."

"On the whole, my friend," says the rector, "I should read it with an amended text ; for 'sweet,' *lege* 'Sour but wholesome' are the uses of adversity."

"For my taste, however," interposed his wife, "quite sufficient are the less acidulated uses of prosperity."

"And here we are," suddenly exclaimed Gresley, "calmly discussing flavours and tastes when I ought to be hunting through the drawer of my secretary for a memorandum of Barlow's, our churchwarden, about the school-fees. I put it in there for him a few days ago. He is to call for it at eight, and will give me no peace till he has it."

"Give me your keys, my dear, and let me hunt it out for you. You men are so slow at finding anything. Is *that* it," she inquired, after a few minutes'

search, handing to her husband a large envelope carefully sealed and without any address. "Such an amazing collection of 'unconsidered trifles'—corkscrews, pen-holders, bits of string, and old letters—I never before beheld!"

"Where, in the name of wonder, did this come from, Emma?"

Then before she could answer he turned to Norton. "My dear friend, I am glad that you are here to see for yourself how this wretched mishap has come to pass, though only grieved to have to remind you of so sad a time, and such sad things as the day at St. Margaret's; but there is no help for it now. While there I chanced to see three letters, to which no one had any right but yourself. I brought them away, sealed them up at once, and dropped them with some other papers into that drawer (which is *not* the one I intended my wife to open), intending to give them to you the next day.

There they have lain forgotten until a mere accident has brought them to light. Pray forgive my carelessness."

"There is nothing to forgive," said Norton; "I have only to thank your good wife for restoring what you took so much trouble to hide. Nor is it any question of reminding, for, as you may well suppose, that terrible day is never out of my thoughts. But the letters were among the last things she mentioned, and I am thankful to have them. I will but glance at them, and then I must be off to the 'Mitre.'"

All three were addressed to Sister Margaret. The first, in a rough straggling hand on a scrap of dirty paper, was from some poor outcast in a neighbouring street, who had apparently been nursed through a fever by "the blessed sister," and now wrote to thank his benefactress. The second contained a few lines of inquiry from Sarah

Day, East Street, London, asking what had become of her old lodger.

But the third contained a printed paper, and filled the reader with inexpressible surprise.

“My good old friends,” he said at last, have thanked you both many a time for a helping hand, but never before have you done me such a kindness as in giving me this letter. You know enough of my darling’s history to understand it and see what of ray of light it brings. It is dated many months ago, at Pendleton, and the writer is a Grace Richards, an old friend of Mary’s mother, who tried years ago to help them in tracing the whereabouts of that scoundrel Lavington. Listen to the good news.”

“Dear cousin Mary Hastings,

“For though you are no relation of mine, your dear mother and I were such good friends that you always seem like one. I

hardly know whether you ever got my two last letters, anyhow you have never answered them ; but I have got such a bit of news for you this time that I must try pens and ink once more. And I shall send this to Miss Marshall, Plymridge, the same as you begged me when you wrote last, and I put my name and address in full at the bottom ; so that if this falls into anybody else's hands, they may send back the enclosed to me for the real owner, and they won't mind parting with what is of no use to them. And now to make short with a long story. You know that my husband is the captain of one of the Pendleton packets to New York ? Well, the last voyage out I said to him, ' Captain Richards, we've been married these ten years, and I have never yet had a peep at America. This time I mean to go, especially as I have got to find out all about this wandering villain Lavington for my old friend's sake at Dorminster. Twice you

promised to hunt him out for me, and twice you have never done it. Now I must go myself.'

"But, my dear, when I got to New York, I found out what a tremendous big place it was; but as to Lavington, though I had got the name of the people he worked for years ago, I could find out nothing at all about him. They had not seen him for years; and didn't know which side of the water he was. They wished they did. So I gave it up as a bad job. But that very day, as I went back to the hotel, what should I see on the wall outside the Police-station but a reward of £100 for the very man I was in search of. There it was, '*Ralph Lavington,*' plain enough, '*late in the employ of Messrs. Smith and Co., absconded,*' etc. etc. There was a sergeant standing close by. 'Not much chance,' I said, 'I suppose, of finding *him*?' (pointing up to the placard). 'I wish there was, ma'am. He's too sharp a fellow

for us over here, and has got away somehow, though the nest was warm when they came upon it, months ago; and kids and all there, so I heard.'—'How long ago?' said I. 'If you have any more questions to ask,' said the sergeant, 'I can't answer 'em, ma'am; on duty. And you must go in and see the inspector, down that passage, second door to the right.'

"Well, my dear, I thought it was my last chance, so down I went; told all my story to the inspector, and who I was. Uncommon short and rough he cut up. 'I can tell you nothing,' he said, 'but what I dare say you know. That fellow Lavington is a big scamp, and has got clean off to Liverpool; we don't know by what ship; and has left his wife and children for us to take care of. If you are come after *them*, I can give you their address.' I thanked him, and went right off to the address in a cab, just on the chance of what might turn up. I soon

found the place, a small grocery and provision shop, and a middle-aged, pale-faced woman behind the counter, with a pair of black eyes that presently flashed out like fire when I asked if her name was Lavington. 'The name is over the door, ma'am', she said, 'and I am not likely to put somebody else's there. Are you come with another writ for him?' Nothing of the kind, I assured her. 'But,' said I, 'if *he* is your husband, I want to ask a question or two if you will let me.'—'As many as you please, but I don't promise to answer them all.'—'Is his name Ralph?'—'Yes!'—'Did he ever come over to Liverpool as an agent for a New York house?'—'No doubt he did; years ago.'—'Well, then,' said I, 'he is the man I want; where is he now?'—'That's more than I know. Not that I should tell you if I did. All I do know is that he has left us all here to shift for ourselves, next door to starving, as he has done a dozen

times before.’—‘And you are his wife?’—
‘Would to God I could say No to that. But, twenty years’ bondage is more than enough to make me sure that I am Ralph Lavington’s wife.’—‘There are certain good reasons why I should like to see your “marriage lines” I said, ‘and I can afford to pay for the sight. The only doubt I have is whether the man I mean was old enough to marry twenty years ago.’—‘He was a boy of sixteen,’ she said, ‘when I fell in love with his handsome face,’ she answered bitterly, ‘and listened to his false, lying, tongue; a poor silly fool of a girl. Tell me why you want to see the “lines,” and you shall have proof that I am telling the truth.’—‘Because,’ said I, ‘he has since married somebody else in England.’—‘Wait for a minute,’ she said; and presently came back with the paper in her hand, that I send with this letter. ‘There,’ she said, ‘that’s proof enough.’ I read it. ‘More than enough, Mrs. Lavington; and if

a couple of sovereigns will be of any service to you, I am glad to give them for all your trouble. I am a stranger to you, but there is my husband's name and address, he is captain of the *Mermaid*, and goes back to England in three days. If you will let me take that paper back with me, I will make the two into ten, and as I'm a living Cornish woman, I will send it back to you within three months.' She looked at me, for two minutes, with her great black eyes, and never said a word. Then, she got up; and put the paper into my hands. 'He cannot,' she said, 'make it any worse for me or mine than he has done, if he ever dares to show his face in New York again. Ten pounds will put me out of debt. Take the paper, ma'am; and tell the other woman she ought to be thankful to be free from such a villain. I will trust you.'

"I paid her ten pounds, and wished her good-bye. When you are a rich woman, my

dear, you can get out of my debt. And if that day never come, you need not trouble yourself, as it came out of my own savings ; and I would do more than that for your good mother's sake. Show the paper to a lawyer, and he will tell you what to do ; but be sure to let me be as good as my word to the poor woman in New York. At last my story is done, so no more at present from your old friend,

“ GRACE RICHARDS.”

On examination, the certificate was found to be duly signed and sealed and in all respects correct ; proving beyond all doubt that the second marriage between Mary Hastings and Ralph Lavington was false and invalid. All doubt and anxiety, therefore, on his child's account was thus at once removed from Norton's mind ; and his only sorrow now was that the letter had come to light too late to cheer the dying moments of her mother.

“ No wonder,” said Gresley, “ that you were

amazed when you opened this letter, and no wonder you rejoice at the good news it brings. The old Cornish woman's story bears truth upon the face of it ; such trumps do not often turn up, and she deserves her ten pounds ten times over."

"My dear," said his wife, "don't insult Grace Richards by offering her a farthing more than the exact sum. She has done her work like a true woman and wants no reward."

"She shall not be insulted, Mrs. Gresley, depend on it. I will send her a cheque this very night, and—"

"Off at a tangent as usual, Norton," interrupted the rector. "Do *not* be in such a frantic hurry. Have the certificate examined by a lawyer, copied, verified so far as it can be, and the copy attested. Then write as many letters of thanks as you please. Now be off to the 'Mitre,' mount Bucephalus, and ride back to Dan-

bury to sing *Te Deum* with my dear little sweetheart Fanny."

"And if you take an old woman's advice," said his wife, "don't trouble the poor child's head with any such matters. Time enough for that, if ever, when you are forced to tell her what she will never suspect."

"You are right," answered Norton, "quite right. The only difficulty is to keep such good news to oneself. Once more, good night."

In ten minutes he was on his way back to Danbury with a lighter heart than he had known for many a long day.

No trouble could now befall his child in after life, such as he had once bitterly anticipated. This was at all events one bright spot in the midst of clouds which at times still pressed heavily upon him in his work at Danbury. Out in the world and among friends, he for a time flung off the

burden that weighed him down. But when once more in the old familiar rooms, among the books she loved and read, and the many little memorials of her loving presence which still haunted the whole place, then there came down upon him the old feeling of lonely desolation, against which it was hard to fight.

A harder, sterner, and more resolute nature would have accepted the inevitable. But from this Norton seemed as far off as ever.

There was no mention in Grace Richards' letter, that any rumour of Ralph Lavington's marriage with Mary Hastings had ever reached his wife's ears in New York; but the telegram received on the wedding-day no doubt referred to it, and proved that his wife's suspicions were roused. Hence his sudden flight.

CHAPTER VIII.

LOOKING BACK.

“What’s gone, and what’s past help,
Should be past grief.”

Winter’s Tale.

THE great fault of Norton’s character was that he was always looking back instead of forwards. He hugged his grief too closely. Not that he ever grew sentimental, or laid himself out for the pity and condolence of his friends; for from this he even often shrank when it was kindly meant and kindly bestowed. But he thought that he had a right to his grief, and did well to be angry

if any of them seemed to doubt that right. The result was that he slowly grew more silent and reserved than ever, and drew back into his old shell when, as Gresley told him, "he had better have come out of his corner and have been on the look-out for a new one."

But, in spite of himself, the good news contained in Grace Richards' letter was most cheering; and he therefore had lost no time in thanking her most heartily for it, and sending back the marriage certificate and the ten pounds expended in procuring it.

And no sooner had this been done than another piece of good fortune befell him, as great as it was unexpected. There came to him one morning a large official-looking packet, bearing the London post-mark, and addressed in an utterly strange hand, which when opened was, to his entire amazement, found to contain five hundred-pound notes. On the paper in which they were folded was this sentence,

“The Curate of Danbury needs rest and change, and with the help of the enclosed he may easily obtain both for a year.”

Not a word more of any kind, nor any further clue to the name or address of the generous donor.

“I never was in London in my life,” so he wrote to Gresley, “and, strange as it may seem, I have not a single acquaintance in the great city. The handwriting in this mysterious packet I never before set eyes on, and the whole affair is an amazing puzzle. What am I to do?”

“What are you to do?” replied Gresley in one of his characteristic letters. “Firstly, see if the notes are good. Secondly, apply to the trustees for a year’s leave of absence, which you will easily get. Thirdly, pack your portmanteau. Fourthly, be off *at once* to Scotland or Wales, or Timbuctoo if you prefer it. Meanwhile, come over and dine with me to-morrow, and we

will solemnly discuss the *pros* and *cons* of your route. An old college friend of mine who is on the look out for a curacy will gladly take your place at Danbury for the twelvemonth, and you may gladden his heart with one of your goodly notes. Finally, O excellent curate, bless the gods for such good fortune as yours; and although you will find it harder to get away from yourself than from Danbury, for Heaven's sake don't mope. Let the past be past. Forgotten it can never be; but it may be buried. Your business is to live in the present, for the future, This may sound Tupperian, perhaps, but it is true; and I shall not care if the truth makes you angry, if you only act on it. You cannot get rid of trouble by traversing the face of the earth, above all such trouble as yours, but you may learn to bear it bravely. What you have lost can never be replaced; but there is yet a whole chapter in your

life to be lived, and you must live it. Ergo, ring the bell for Simmons, and pack, my friend, mightily. But whenever you come back you will have to face your old sorrow, so meet it heartily now."

In a week from this time Norton was in London on his way to the fair city of Edinburgh, and there for the present we must leave him with abundant leisure, a well-filled purse, and one or two good introductory letters furnished by his friends at 'The Court.'

"He has been gone more than a month," said Gresley one evening to his wife, "and we have had but that one hasty note from Edinburgh, telling us of his arrival and visit to Arthur's Seat. But, on the whole, I prefer his being silent to a series of mournful epistles as to his loneliness and the heartlessness of great cities. I dreaded his quoting Byron when he got to the Frith of Forth,—

‘There is society where none intrudes
By the deep sea, and music in its roar ;’

and then preaching a long sermon as to the truth and beauty of the text.”

“Poor Norton ! you are rather hard on him, my dear.”

“Luckily for him, I was, Emma. But you women were fairly coddling him to death. What with Joe Simmons, Fanny, and all his friends at ‘The Court,’ Mrs. Estcourt, and Edith Jervis, he was continually being trotted out to recount some of his troubles. His wounds were inspected every day, to see if they were healing, and so encouraged to break out afresh. A touch of caustic in such cases is invaluable, and though my fingers now and then got burnt in the operation, he felt I was doing him good.”

“He rode over to Saltram, I hear, before he started for Edinburgh, and I do not think that he went there to be condoled

with. The Markhams say there is something in it."

"In *what*, my dear?" said the rector, lighting his pipe.

"You know, sir, as well as I do; anybody can see it with half an eye."

"Perhaps so, but vision with only one fourth of the proper apparatus is a very curious affair. It acts like a multiplying-glass. But I am getting old, and my eyesight begins to fail me even with two sound orbs. Has Mrs. Grundy begun to talk again?"

"She has been talking for months past, Thomas."

"All the more reason for her tongue getting tired at last. What does she say now?"

"That he went over to Saltram to make her an offer."

"My dear Mrs. Gresley, a month or two ago they said that he was flirting with

Lucy Markham, and the next week that he was engaged to one of the Estcourt girls. He no more made an offer to Edith Jervis than I did."

"Time will show. When he comes back and marries her,—perhaps you will believe me for once."

"When that happens, my dear, you shall put me in the parish stocks as a heretic and an unbeliever; and the bells of St. Jerome's shall ring backwards in honour of the occasion."

"My dear, the bell of St. Jerome's is now ringing, and if you do not start at once, you will be late for the evening service. Do go; and let me finish Tommy's jacket in peace."

"He will never marry her."

"In less than a twelvemonth."

"Never. He will never marry again."

"I wish I could make as sure of a new silk dress."

“You may do so without a shadow of risk to my pocket. They are utterly unlike, and unsuited, and she is not a marrying woman.”

“All the more likely on that account. Mr. Gresley; will you go?”

“I am going, my dear; but your conversation is so captivating that I cannot tear myself away. Where is my hat? He will never marry her.”

“Never, never,” she answered with a hearty laugh.

“I thought I should convince you at last (now, my stick); if there is one excellent trait in your character, my dear, as a parson’s wife, that I admire more than the rest, it is your being so readily open to conviction.”

“The bell will stop in less than five minutes, and it takes you six to get there. Mark my word, if they are not married within the twelvemonth. Please, do, go!”

“Never, never ; now I *am* gone.”

And then the Rector went off to his work ; an evening lecture to the men at the foundry, among whom his keen, good, sense and lively wit were highly relished.

Gresley's friend was duly installed at Danbury, where, under the captain's guidance, work soon got into its proper groove ; and so the months passed slowly away. But no letters came from the absent Curate to either of his special friends at Danbury, 'The Court,' or St. Jerome's. The only person who ever heard from him was his little daughter Fanny, of whom the Markhams had gladly taken charge. Now and then came a short note to her from the wanderer, but even these told little more than that he was charmed with Edinburgh ; that he had seen Loch Katrine and the Trossachs ; Glasgow and Stirling ; had again come back to Edinburgh, and meant on his way home to stay awhile at Lincoln, and at York ; and not to return till his time was fully up.

"I strongly urged him," said Gresley on hearing this, "to see the Minster, and the old grand rocky heights of Lincoln, which with its endless array of painted windows, is still better worthy of a visit, though it will be rather out of his track. The more he can cram his mind with new facts, the better will it be for him, to say nothing of his friends, when he gets home again."

It wanted but a month to the time of Norton's return, when one morning at breakfast there came a note addressed to the Rector of St. Jerome's in a hand that was strange both to him and to his wife. There was a pile of other letters, but this one attracted their special attention. Now the Rector had a peculiar habit of dealing with his morning letters, and, having glanced at the covers, would lay them all aside to be read—with a pipe—after breakfast.

"My dear," said his wife, "it's a lady's handwriting, and on scented paper; it can-

not be a business letter, so you may as well open it at once. An invitation to dinner, most likely—”

“Don’t be in such a dreadful hurry, Mrs. Gresley, it may be nothing but a notice from the tax-gatherer, or the green-grocer’s bill; now that young ladies have turned clerks, and passed the Civil Service Examinations, one is never safe. So that it may well keep until my pipe is lighted.”

“On scented paper, in a triangular envelope, and written with a quill pen! No clerk’s doing, my dear; depend on it.”

“Your fingers are itching, I know,” said the rector, “to open that unhappy little notelet. Solve the mystery at once. Curiosity, after all, is but a thirst for knowledge under difficulties.”

“My dear, if there is a weakness that I am free from, it is that very thirst that you tell of so charmingly; but I see that you want an excuse for breaking through your rule, and you shall be indulged.”

Then she broke the seal, and read as follows:—

“My dear Mr. Gresley,

“Can you spare me ten minutes after the morning service to-morrow at St. Jerome’s? I wish much to consult on a matter of importance, and will come to the vestry at 10.30, on the chance of finding you disengaged.

“Sincerely yours,

“E. JERVIS.”

“Of course she does,” said the lady in triumph. “You remember what I said to you months ago about their engagement? He has made her an offer, and she wants to—”

“My dear, Edith Jervis is the very last woman in the world to consult me or anybody else about an offer of marriage; and Norton the last man to allow her to do so. She is most likely at loggerheads again with some

of her poor people; or perhaps Father Morpeth is riding the high horse."

"Nonsense, sir, nonsense! Remember I am to have a new silk gown."

"And I," said the rector, "am to do penance in the stocks, if they can be got in order."

Exactly at the appointed time Edith Jervis appeared at the vestry; and at once proceeded to state her case.

"I have asked to see you alone, Mr. Gresley," she said, "because the matter on which I want your advice concerns myself only, and I have no friend who will be so likely to give me a plain, unbiassed, opinion as yourself. I will tell my story as briefly as I can, for I know your time is precious. You know that I helped to start the sisterhood at St. Margaret's?"

"I do," said Gresley, "and I know what good service they have done, and are still doing. But why not consult Father Morpeth?"

“Simply because he and I have come to open warfare on a certain point concerning which neither of us will give way. The fact is that I have at last, after much thought, determined to build and endow a Home on a larger scale, and take the management of it myself. The schools at Saltram are now all in good train; and I have more money and time at command than I know what to do with; and have resolved to give both entirely to the scheme of which I speak. But when I consult Father Morpeth, he insists on being the head of it, and enforcing a regular system of confession. Is this right or necessary?”

“Do you wish me to speak out plainly, Mrs. Jervis?”

“That is precisely what I *do* want.”

“Then, *I* say, wrong and unnecessary. By all means have a priest at your head if you like. But let the confession be entirely optional. Have no vows for life; no coal-

scuttle bonnets, no sepulchral robes, no going about with eyes on the ground as if the sisters were ashamed of their good work; in a word, no sackcloth and ashes of any kind. Let them have six months' probation before they become regular sisters, so that you may find out whether they like the work, and whether the work likes them; and then let them set to work as brave young English women, and sound Church women, with a good will and a good heart. And when they have had a good spell of work, or get tired of it, or want a change, let them be as free to go as they were free to come. You will thus get rid of the 'bogey' cry of Popish, and without offence do ten times the amount of good, and escape endless botherations."

"You have described my plan to a T," replied the lady, "but against any such scheme Father Morpeth has set his face like iron."

“Then by all means, my dear madam, set to work without Father Morpeth. There are a dozen parish priests in Dorminster who will thank God for your help, and St. Margaret’s will thrive elsewhere just as well as where it now stands.”

In ten minutes the whole plan, in rough outline, was settled. Gresley himself accepted her offer for St. Jerome’s parish; and Edith Jervis then explained to him that she meant to endow the new Home with a large portion of her income, and commence operations at once.

Thus it came to pass that before the year of Norton’s absence had expired, Saltram House and Estates had been sold by private contract; a large house had been secured near the Rectory, thoroughly fitted for the work, the sisters transferred from the former St. Margaret’s, their number increased, and Edith Jervis installed as the mother. The name, too, was changed to St. Mary’s, and a

crèche added to it, for such little waifs and strays of humanity as fell in the sisters' way during their work in the dark places of the great city.

"My dear Emma," said the rector, as he told his wife the whole story of the scented note, "I shall escape the stocks this time, but you shall have the best new gown that Norrington can supply. Is my little woman content?" A smiling face and a hearty kiss answered the question as happily as a man could desire.

CHAPTER IX.

A STUPENDOUS FACT.

“And every tongue brings in a several tale.”

Richard III.

MRS. GRESLEY was a notable housewife, and great in the art of shopping; and, as she often said to Edith Jervis, now one of her warmest allies, “having six children and a husband to look after, with not too many guineas in his pocket,”—did all her marketing herself, and was not too proud to carry a parcel, or to make the Rector help her when he chanced to fall in her way.

“I advise her,” said the rector, “to have

a perambulator and wheel home her purchases. The police, I am sure, would be merciful in opening a line of march for her on the pavement, and little Frank would escape all risk of having his neck twisted by falling over the back of the machine."

It was after one of these afternoon expeditions that she came back to the Rectory laden as usual with many packages, and suddenly met her husband near the house, as he hurried in the opposite direction.

"Come home with me, my dear Thomas," she said, "I must speak to you at once. I have such news as will amaze even you. No, I cannot tell you in the street."

"What in the name of wonder is the matter?" said Gresley when they were safe in the quiet of his own sanctum. "You are as pale as a ghost, and your eyes brimming with amazement. Has Franky come to grief at last, or has Mrs. Bevington presented her husband with twins?"

“I can hardly believe it,” she answered, as a smile of wonder rippled over her pale face; “I can hardly believe it even now, though I saw it with my own eyes; and you will never believe it when I tell you.”

“Well, my dear, if you have met with Baron Munchausen, and he has sold you a budget, I had better be going, for old Bevington really sent for me an hour ago, and it only wants about forty minutes to dinner time.”

“Mr. Bevington will have to wait then I *must* tell you.”

“Mrs. Gresley, I am all ears—speed, speed !

‘Only unfold the mystery of thy tale

With all becoming speed. I must away.’”

“Well, then, as I came down College Street, just outside the Abbey gates, I came full tilt with all my parcels against whom? Now guess !”

“Robert of Dorminster playing leap-frog with the archdeacon, or his wife selling sprats to the choristers?”

“A hundred times more extraordinary than that; guess again, guess again.”

“Mrs. Gresley, I will guess no more, but *go*.”

“I met,” she cried, in a voice of amazement, “Harry Norton and his wife!”

“Harry Norton and his wife!” repeated the rector in a voice of utter incredulity; “then you *have* met the baron after all. What you tell me is not only incredible, but impossible. You have clearly taken leave of your senses, and the best thing I can do as I pass Dr. Kitson’s private establishment will be to ask if he has room for one more patient. Good-bye, my dear.”

“My dear Thomas,” she replied, “I am *not* joking at all, but in downright earnest. I not only saw them, but was formally introduced to Mrs. Norton; a tall woman, six feet high, with red hair and freckles.”

“Good Heavens! Six feet high and red hair! Then it must be *he* who is ready for Kitson’s. Now I understand why I saw the two magpies yesterday so many times as I walked home from the Markhams. Six feet high and red hair! Old Bevington will have to wait *now*. I am not in a state to talk rationally to any human being. You have taken away my very breath. It is absolutely incredible!”

“And yet,” she said, “absolutely true.”

“But what were they doing in Dorminster; when did they arrive, and where were they going?”

“My dear, all I know is that they had but just arrived; and some of their luggage, having been mislaid at the station, got carried on in the railway omnibus to the ‘Mitre,’ and so they had come in search of it. It was at the door of the inn that I met them.”

“Give me a large glass of sherry,” said

the astounded rector, "and let me go. I must rush forth into the crowded haunts of men and carry my mystery with me. I can make nothing of it here. If I do not appear at dinner-time, send to the stocks for me. I shall be found there hard and fast."

But the stupendous fact which Gresley found it so hard to believe, and so impossible of digestion, in the course of the next week or two spread far and wide through all the various byways of intelligence; and it was soon known to all who cared to know it, that the Curate of Danbury had taken to himself another wife. In due time, or rather as Mrs. Grundy expressed it, "in the strangest fashion ever heard of," wedding-cards were despatched to all Norton's old friends. Visits were interchanged, heavy morsels of indigestible cake were duly eaten; a few solemn dinner-parties were given in honour of the event, and by degrees the most incredulous were at last convinced of the fact.

that the second Mrs. Norton was certainly six feet high, had red hair, and talked loudly and very pleasantly on any subject that chanced to turn up; but with wonderful loquacity as to her own family, their estates, fortunes, and misfortunes, both at home and abroad. There were few people in the whole country-side who did not sooner or later know that her maiden name had been Sarah Mackay, "the Mackays of Rigadoon, Carlisle;" that her grandfather was that famous quartermaster-general on whom his Majesty George III. had conferred the honour of knighthood after the great campaign in the Netherlands. In fact, there was scarcely a branch of the naval, military, or civil services, in which some Mackay or other of Rigadoon had not made himself famous. She seemed never weary of talking of these exemplary relatives, and smiled very graciously on every patient listener. She was very affable and genial in conversing

with the gentlemen at dinner, and equally confidential and communicative in talking to the ladies when they had got to quiet, dull, anchorage in the drawing-room.

As to the marriage itself, it was received in all the various quarters with an infinite variety of verdicts ; but by no one with more unfeigned surprise than Gresley. Some kind friends thought that Sarah of Rigadoon was the very woman to rouse Norton out of his apathetic state, and waken him up to new life. Others went further, and thought that he wanted putting to rights, and being thoroughly brought to book ; and that the lady in question was exactly fitted by Providence to accomplish this desirable end. Some few again were utterly shocked at his choosing a wife so clearly unsuited for him in age, taste, and character ; a dashing woman of fashion as she seemed to be, instead of a quiet, homely, domestic person who might be

a comfort and a blessing to him and his daughter. Meanwhile, to the Rector of St. Jerome's the whole affair was simply as great a puzzle as ever.

"My dear," he would say to his wife, "how came he to marry again at all?"

But to this query she was able to give no satisfactory answer; and Norton himself had on no one occasion, even to his old friend, given a single hint as to the circumstances under which he had brought home a new bride to Danbury. He had grown silent and reserved alike to friends and acquaintances; he smoked many solitary pipes and spent more time than ever among his books.

Otherwise affairs went on much as usual at Danbury, where Mrs. Norton devoted herself with unwearied assiduity to her household, and the care of her husband and little daughter, now a tall, sprightly, merry girl of keen, quick, thought, highly sensitive, and possessed of a tender, loving, heart, which she wore anywhere but on her sleeve.

Her father's marriage had taken her absolutely by surprise, but she loved him far too deeply to show this, or to doubt for a moment that he had done what was best and right. He spoke to her but once on the subject.

"Fanny," he had said to her, "I hope that you will love your new mamma very much ; she is very kind and good and dear to me, as I hope she will be to you."

And there he had suddenly come to a full stop, as her eyes filled with tears, and she answered very tenderly and softly,

"I will do all I can, papa, to love her very much, next to my own dear mamma in Heaven. But I cannot love her until I know her, can I?"

That was all that passed between them, but Norton knew well how much lay hidden in those few words, and was wisely content.

Love is a plant of silent growth in a

child's heart, and in Fanny's case it would soon have put forth both leaves and blossom had time been fairly allowed. But Mrs. Norton was in a hurry to examine the roots, to stir up the germ to more active life, and to have ripe fruit in the spring, long before the time of harvest.

Hence arose many little dialogues between the two that did anything but hasten the happy seed-time, of which one will suffice.

"My dear Fanny, I wish I could see your love to me as a mother a little more actively shown. I am most fondly attached to you, my child, and I like little girls to be affectionate."

"I do try very much," says Fanny.

"Is it so very hard for a little girl to love a dear mamma? I am ready to love you with all a mother's fondest devotion."

"I am sure you are very kind," answers the girl, with a faint flush rising in her cheeks as she goes through the catechism of

affection ; “ and, oh ! there’s papa calling me to go to walk with him. Good-bye, I *must* go.”

And away she runs with happy, sparkling eyes, for a ramble across the old meadow where she and Nep had once gone so cosily to sleep.

Months passed away ; but the affection between mother and daughter grew no stronger ; and though Norton tried now and then in a quiet way to encourage it, there the growth seemed to stop. And this was the first fly in Mrs. Norton’s pot of ointment.

Then there came fly the second. Most of the servants, who had lived there all through Norton’s Danbury life, at first were ready enough to carry out her wishes, to join in the new schemes of household management, and to treat their mistress with respect ; but they suddenly grew afraid of her. Her manner to them was so various, ranging from the intensely familiar to the oddly

abrupt, that they were fairly puzzled; and never knew when to look for squally weather, or to expect sunshine. Their own manner began to show trace of this; and the lady forthwith said that trustworthy servants, such as she had been accustomed to, never behaved in this way. She began to suspect them in trifles, and they, smarting under suspicion, grew very careless.

Norton did what he could to bring about peace, but his interference only made matters worse. Before the year was out some had been discharged, and new servants hired in their place; and for a time the new brooms swept clean.

But a certain squareness and hardness of tone began to grow up insensibly, and by slow degrees, among the inmates of the College, before unknown. The old pensioners, the servants, Joe Simmons, and at last Norton himself, began to be conscious of a sort of restraint. There was a fidgety

unsettled sort of tone in the air of the place, which peeped out only in trifles, and yet was really present.

"It was," so said old Captain Barclay, "as if somebody's eye was upon them ; and they must all mind their P's and Q's."

Joe Simmons was overheard to remark in a much more vehement and improper manner, "He was darned if he knowed how, but *somehow* there was a hitch ; and he thought that the day of judgment must be a-coming."

All these were so many little signs and tokens that the wheels of life at Danbury were not going smoothly ; though nobody seemed to know why or wherefore.

As for Mrs. Norton, she began now and then to show by an occasional word or manner that she in some way regarded herself as an ill-used, or injured, woman, and the rest of the community as engaged in a plot against her happiness and well-being.

With this idea in her head, she seemed to fancy that everybody was on the look out to slight her in some trifling way or other ; and that she did well to be miserable. And it was not long before Norton himself began to be included in the same category, though some years passed away before he to his infinite surprise discovered that such was the case.

The real truth was that he had married a wife whose character he did not at all understand. She was an enigma which he had never properly studied. Her character was, in fact, made up of several contradictory qualities that are rarely found combined in one person, and which often puzzled the owner as much as they did other people. Infirmary of purpose and a strong will ; great unselfishness and a weak fondness for certain things and certain people ; little judgment and strong passions, were all blended into one curious whole. Of her deep affection for her hus-

band there could be no possible doubt. She was proud of him ; praised his talents, his learning, even his good looks, whenever and wherever she could find a listener ; and in a general way seemed to look upon him rather in the light of her own private property, which she was bound to glorify, as made and intended for her peculiar use. But neither jealousy nor suspicion can grow in the same garden with love, and dismal weather followed the very first sign of their appearance at Danbury.

Mrs. Norton suddenly became subject to fits of plaintive melancholy, depression, and lowness of spirits, which now and then showed themselves in words of this kind.

“ My dear,” she would say to her husband, “ I am so sorry to see that, do what I will, I can please nobody. Of course, I cannot be to you and to Fanny all that things were long ago ; I know that, and it is plainly out of the question. I never

dreamed of such a thing ; a poor, stupid person like me ! of course not."

"But who," answered Norton, "ever said you were poor or stupid, or that you could not be this, or could not be that to us?"

"Oh ! I can see it as plainly as if they said it ; they think so if they don't say it."

"How can you possibly tell what they think?" says Norton with a laugh. "You must be more than a conjuror to read people's thoughts. Why will you persist in taking such gloomy fancies into your head? There is Fanny now on the look out for a walk with somebody ; do go out this glorious morning, and get a good run in the fresh air. Such weather is enough to get rid of all the dismals."

"She would much rather," replies the lady, "go with you. I know she would."

"My dear Sarah, have you asked her to go with you?"

"I know that she doesn't care about going with her mother ; and I am not in any dismals that I know of."

"Very well, my dear," replies the Curate, "I can say no more," and goes away discomfited to his library.

Little dialogues of this kind cropped up every now and then, and, though followed by gleams of sunshine, always left behind them a faint air of discomfort which insensibly leavened all the intercourse between man and wife, and lurked behind every trivial act and word of the day.

A few months after this a certain second cousin of Mrs. Norton's, from the north country, wrote to say that business of some kind would shortly bring him to Dorminster, and if agreeable to Mr. and Mrs. Norton he would stay at Danbury for a few days.

"Beg him to come by all means," said Norton.

Mr. John Campbell Mackay belonged to

the Scotch branch of the family, and was a "gallant, braw, John Highlandman." He spoke broad Scotch, wore the full Highland costume, and was a very jovial, canny man of business.

"My dear," said Mrs. Norton to Fanny, "I hope you will be a good little girl when cousin John comes. He is very fond of good little girls; and will be quite distressed if he cannot love you like all his other cousins."

Thus adjured, the little maiden, who was busy over a doll's frock, said, "I hope I shall, mamma. Is he my cousin?"

"Of course he is, Fanny, and has a great many good little girls of his own."

One afternoon, accordingly, about an hour before dinner, cousin John arrived. He had been expected all day, and it so chanced that Norton was out when the dog-cart drove up to the hall-door, and Joe Simmons was in

attendance to take charge of the luggage, and usher him into the drawing-room.

Fanny and her nurse were in the winter-garden, where her mother had just joined them as he rattled by, and hastened in at once to welcome the guest.

"Come along, Fanny," said Mrs. Norton, "there is Mr. Campbell Mackay ; come in and see your cousin."

"Yes, mamma, I will in a minute. I shall bring my doll, too."

"Why, Mary," she whispered to the maid, "he is like the Highlander at Dorminster, isn't he ?"

"Yes, miss ; petticoats and all, I do declare."

And then they went in, and found cousin John rubbing his hands cheerily in front of a large fire.

He spoke broad Scotch in a loud, rapid voice, which to Fanny was wholly unintelligible.

But she looked at him with silent, wondering, eyes, and turning very red, shook hands with him when told; and then crept into a quiet corner with her doll.

Meanwhile the dialogue went on merrily between the two elders; and presently Norton having come in made his guest welcome; and the trio soon after went down to dinner. Mrs. Norton was in the highest possible spirits, and, as her husband thought with pleasure at the time, more like herself than he had seen her for many a long day. He did his best to understand and to reply to Mr. Mackay's broad Scotch, and a bottle of whisky having being hunted out by Simmons, the banquet went on brightly to the end.

To their great surprise, however, at its conclusion the guest suddenly told them that the business which had brought him to Dorminster had fallen through, and that he must start for town by the first train on the following morning.

And to this resolution, in spite of all his host and hostess could say, he steadily adhered.

The next morning, accordingly, Norton drove Mr. Mackay into the station, and after seeing him safely off, and making a short call at St. Jerome's Rectory, rode back to Danbury with a lighter, happier, heart than he had known for many a day.

"A thorough Scot," he had told Gresley, "intent upon turning punds Scotch into pounds sterling; but a jolly, pleasant, fellow, if one only understood what he said."

"Talking of pounds sterling," replied the rector, "did you ever find out who was the generous donor of the hundred-pound notes?"

"Never," said Norton. "But I have a strong suspicion; and so, I imagine, has Edith Jervis' banker. He denied it far too strongly, not to be fully aware of the whole secret."

CHAPTER X.

THE GARDEN ROLLER.

“To one that looks for them, my friend,
As thick as blackberries offences grow.”

Old Play.

NORTON rode back to Danbury in the teeth of a fierce wind and thick rain; but he heeded neither the one nor the other, having within him an element of fair weather that defied all outward discomfort. Joe Simmons, as usual, was on the look out for his master; and having delivered up both steed and vehicle into his hands, Norton went in search of his wife.

But, strange to say, she was not to be found in the house, nor could any one give him any tidings of her. Neither the nurse nor Fanny had seen her for several hours; in fact, not since he had started in the morning.

Having missed his usual morning's pipe, he strolled down to an old summer-house in the garden, with the newspaper that he had brought from Dorminster. But how it came to pass that he neither smoked his pipe nor read the Gazette must be told in his own words to his old friend at St. Jerome's, on the morning of the next day.

He had ridden in to Dorminster at an early hour, so as to be sure to catch the Rector before he set out on his day's round in the parish.

"O son of Danbury," exclaimed his old friend, "what means this second appearance in so brief a space? Here all jubilant yesterday, here again to-day with trouble

in thy looks, and all thy bravery as if it had never been ? ”

“ I cannot tell my troubles,” replied Norton, “ in your poetic fashion, but if you will endure ten minutes’ plain prose, you shall have it in the briefest shape.”

“ You remember that our jolly old Scotch friend left us yesterday ? Well, I rode back to Danbury as usual, and not finding my wife in the house, went off to smoke a quiet pipe in the old summer-house, where you and I have so often spent an hour ; but what was my amazement to see Mrs. Norton calmly seated on the garden-roller on the grass-plot, in the midst of a thick drizzling rain ! ”

“ *On the garden-roller ?* ” inquires Gresley, as if not sure that his ears were to be trusted.

“ On the garden-roller ! ” replied Norton.
“ ‘ My dear Sarah,’ said I, ‘ what on earth is the matter ? ’

“ ‘The matter? Oh! nothing; nothing whatever.’

“ ‘Nothing the matter? Then what can you mean by sitting in such an extraordinary place in the midst of this pouring rain? Why, you are all but wet through now.’

“ ‘Am I? It is not of the least consequence, I assure you. Nothing that I do can be of the least importance to anybody at Danbury. I am nothing here; nothing whatever. Nothing to the servants, nothing to your daughter, nothing to you, while you treat me as you do.’

“ ‘I really don’t know what you mean,’ said I, ‘more than if you were talking Dutch. Is it a joke of any kind?’

“ ‘Do I look as if I were in joke, Harry? I am not talking Dutch, but plain, downright, English, and in downright earnest, as you know very well.’

“ ‘Then, my dear, all I can say is, that I am more puzzled than ever. Who ever

said that you were nothing to Danbury or to anybody in it ?’

“ ‘How can I be anything while you treat me as a cipher, and my relations as you did poor Cousin John yesterday ? How could you ever insult him in such a way ?’

“ ‘I insult Mr. Mackay, Sarah ? You must surely be taking leave of your senses to dream of such a thing.’

“ ‘I am no more dreaming now than I was yesterday,’ she replied. ‘You cannot have forgotten what you said about that splendid national instrument, the bagpipes, of which he is so enthusiastically fond. “I never heard it but once,” said you, “to perfection, and that was when the troops were going off to the Crimea, in conjunction with the railway whistle ; and the two together made the most unearthly duet of screeches—Pan’s pipes and a drum were nothing to it.” And, of course, at this your daughter goes off into fits of laughter. It’s only

your wife's cousin, and fair game to be laughed at before both the servants. And what does Fanny herself do the very moment she saw him pass in the garden, but whisper to nurse, quite loud enough for me to hear, "Why, Mary, he is just like *the Highlander at Dorminster!*" "Yes, miss," says the impudent minx, "so he is, I declare—petticoats and all!" My cousin, John Campbell Mackay, like that vile caricature outside a tobacconist's shop! No wonder that one day at Danbury was enough for him. But it is of no consequence whatever; I am nothing, I tell you, and nobody, and it is no matter at all.'

"Well," said I, now fairly laughing outright in spite of myself, 'if it is all of no matter and of no consequence, do for mercy's sake come in out of the rain. I have had one good soaking to-day already, and don't relish getting another. And as to your Cousin John Campbell, we parted in the

jolliest way possible an hour or two ago ; in fact I quite enjoyed my ride into town with him. I no more dreamed of insulting him than he did of insulting me.'

" 'No doubt, no doubt at all, that you enjoyed your ride with him ; so should I if I had been asked to go with him ; but of course I was left at home to amuse myself alone in this cheerful place, without a soul to speak to, while my husband is taking his pleasure, and calling upon his friends. I hope Mrs. Jervis is quite well ?'

" ' *Mrs. Jervis !* ' I cried, in sheer amazement. ' What has Mrs. Jervis or Mrs. Jervis's health to do with the question ? You tell me that I purposely insulted your cousin, and thus insulted my wife at her own table ! I tell you that such a thought never entered his head or mine ; and as for poor Fanny's chatter to the nurse, it's mere child's play to talk of it. She had never seen a Highland dress but once in her life

before, and that once was on the terrific gentleman with a mull outside the cigar shop. But why drag Mrs. Jervis's name into the matter ?'

" 'I merely hoped that she was well ;—a young and interesting widow that takes such a deep interest in Mr. Norton, and in whom he takes so kind an interest in return ! Why, you know as well as I do, that you never pass through Dorminster without going to see her, unless Mrs. Norton happens to be in the way !'

" 'And why should I not call on Mrs. Jervis ?' said I, 'I have known her nearly all her life, and her father was one of my oldest and best friends ? Is there any reason why I should not call ?'

" 'Oh ! no ; certainly not ; no reason whatever. I hear that she is a most charming and fascinating young person, and if the Curate of Danbury finds her society so very captivating, his wife is the very last

person that ought to complain—the very last. She cannot, of course, be supposed to be of any consequence. But it has been coming on for a long time now. I saw it long months ago.”

“ ‘Saw *what* months ago?’ I exclaimed, now getting thoroughly bewildered. ‘For heaven’s sake leave off talking riddles, and tell me what all this extraordinary outburst means.’

“ ‘Outburst?’ she replies, slowly repeating the word, ‘outburst? I am not aware of any outburst whatever. I am as calm and as collected as I ever was in my life. What I see everybody else can see—that my husband doesn’t care for his wife one straw; if he did, how could he treat me as he does—me, a poor desolate creature, four hundred miles away from my nearest relation?’

“ ‘And how long,’ said I, ‘my dear Sarah, have you been convinced that your

husband does not care for you? Since the last dinner-party at 'The Court,' when I strongly objected to being called '*Ducky*' before a room-full of strange women? That was just a month ago; and I only suggested that the word '*Draky*' was more applicable to the male bird than '*Ducky*.' You were all fondness and affection then; and Carlisle is no further off than it was. Once more, then, what does this extraordinary outburst mean?'

" 'It means now, clearly enough, that you do not care for me. You dislike my society, and get out of my way, and turn my words into ridicule, and hate—'

" And here she broke out into a sudden and violent flood of tears.

" 'Now,' said I, 'my dear Sarah, having arrived at that final and ultimate point of hatred, as we are both of us nearly wet through, I think you had better get off the roller. We can adjourn to the summer-

house, at all events, or, better still, go in and have some lunch.'

"There, my dear Gresley," said Norton, when he got to this point in his narrative, "now you can understand why I rush in upon you in this frantic fashion. I need not tell you how we got through luncheon, and next through dinner, and somehow or other dragged through the day; but the first thing this morning I set off to see you. Now I want two things—some dinner and some advice."

"As to dinner," replied his friend, "*that* I decline to give you, for reasons to be presently declared; and as to advice, upon my life you have asked for a hard thing. An outsider may of course see more of the game than the players can; but when the game is between man and wife, it is a ticklish matter to interfere. The whole thing has so taken me by surprise that it seems more like a joke, and—"

"Anything but *that*," interrupts Norton, "I assure you. The mere mention of such an aspect of affairs was like throwing oil on the fire."

"A joke to the lookers-on, Norton, but death to you. One thing is clear—that it cannot, must not go on, or there is an end to all life and work at Danbury. Only yourself can put an end to it, and you have an awfully difficult card to play. In the first place, Mrs. Norton is always on the look-out for nettles, always shrinking from them, and always getting stung. Further than that, I'll be shot if I can see my way a single inch as yet. But are you inclined to be catechised?"

"To any extent you please."

"Good. How, then, was the weather when you left Danbury?"

"Dull and heavy; not a breath of air stirring; and yet what Simmons calls gathering up."

“She knows you are off to Dorminster, I suppose?”

“I told her, and we parted serenely.”

“Then the first thing is to get home again as soon as possible, or you will be charged with going to lunch at St. Mary’s. The next step must be to show Mrs. Norton that Edith Jervis is nothing to you nor you to her. Don’t avoid the fair widow, but don’t seek her. Please not to interrupt me. I know what you are going to say.”

“That you cannot possibly do, Gresley. I was merely going to say that not only is Edith Jervis nothing to me, but that my wife knows it to be so.”

“That makes your task all the harder, my friend. If a woman persists in saying what she does not really believe, and in hoisting false signals, it is like fighting with an enemy in the dark. All the same, O excellent curate, must you be back in time

for lunch at Danbury. Once there, boldly assume that there is no such thing as a garden roller in existence, and that the screech of the bagpipes is an unknown sound. Take it for granted that the glass is rising, or rather has never fallen, and that things are on as fair a footing as ever."

"But the worst of it is," replied Norton, "that the very moment I imagine I am standing on a firm rock, I find myself up to my eyes in a quicksand."

"Never mind, man; get the sand out of your mouth bravely, and step out boldly for *terra firma*. Whatever you do, don't splutter and don't growl. It always takes two people to make a quarrel; resolve not to be one."

"But 'hate' is an ugly word, Gresley."

"I am coming to that. It is ugly. But does she really mean it?"

"No, certainly not. But she may go

on using it till she does or fancies she does."

"And now," said the rector, "I want to ask one more question—a grave one. May I?"

"Any question you please; I can but shirk it."

"Good again, Norton. Hating is of course all bosh, but do you really love her? Mind, no shirking."

"Certainly I did when I married her; most certainly I do now. But if you ask me if my love for Sarah Mackay and for Mary Hastings are one and the same thing, how can I say what I have found out is impossible? You told me it was impossible long ago, old friend. Now I know the truth of your words. My love for her who sleeps under the old shadows at Saltram is the same living passion it was. How can it be otherwise," he went on, with increasing vehemence, "when every

room in Danbury still recalls her; when every book she once touched whispers her name; every flower in the garden reminds me of her gracious presence; when she looks at me with her child's eyes, and speaks to me when all else is still—in the meadow and by the wood, at every happy sunset; when I take refuge in work, or fall into idleness!”

“And did you know this,” said the rector, in a grave and kindly voice, “when you asked another woman to be your wife?”

“No, no,” replied Norton eagerly; “not so false, not so dishonest as that. I have never told you—I have told no one—how I came to marry again. I saw that it amazed you, as it amazed everybody else but the matchmakers; and with all the pleasant or foolish things that they said I need not bother you. To me it was all mere idle chatter. But this much I may tell you now.

I was full of my trouble when I went away. I found in Sarah Mackay one always ready to listen with kindly sympathy—a loving companion and friend. I learned to love her. I asked her to be my wife, when all the time I was the husband of another. For a time I was unconscious of this. Slowly, little by little, it dawned upon me. But I never meant to be false for a single hour to the new mistress of Danbury, nor do I mean to be false now. The rest of my story you know.”

“There is,” replied the rector, after a pause, “but one way out of the wood, Norton. What you have told me you must tell your wife, in justice to yourself, in justice to her.”

“Do you know what would happen if I did? A scene as big as ten garden-rollers,—ages of weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

“No, no,—not told all at once, man,—not blurted out as a surprise, or excuse, or

in defence, but slowly, cautiously, gradually; a hint here, a seed there, wisely, tenderly dropped, and left to germinate. Banish the garden roller for ever; and, for Heaven's sake! don't let a single nettle be of your planting, not even a dead nettle. Put a grain of honey into all your words; learn to play that infernal instrument, the bagpipes, if need be; cultivate the Gaelic tongue, get all your groceries from Mackay's in Bridge Street, swear that no tea in Great Britain can match his superb 'Three and Six,' be amiable to all Scotchmen,—you've got a McBowell among your old pensioners, practice on him. Above all, O excellent and much-tried man, don't despair; when things are at the worst, they must mend. Go back to Danbury in the chariot of hope, with a huge appetite for lunch, and a mighty desire for peace. There, my friend, I have delivered my soul."

"You have spoken," said Norton, "as

you always speak, like a true, wise, brave friend, and you know that I thank you heartily."

"One word, only one more," said the rector; "don't imagine you are the only person who has a pack on his shoulders. Thank your stars you are not blessed, as I am, with half-a-dozen young, insatiable, boys and girls, six increasing appetites and hungry minds, to be clothed, fed, educated, taken carefully through whooping-cough, measles, scarlatina, mumps, and vaccination, and then sent out into this naughty, wicked world of buying and selling, marrying and giving in marriage."

"I wish to Heaven I were, Gresley."

"You think so, old friend, you think so; but, in this case, six times one is not six. Now begone, and

'Heaven attend thy going.'"

CHAPTER XI.

DUNTON FORD AGAIN.

“Oh! trust me all in all, or not at all.”

Tennyson.

A CHARIOT of hope can be manufactured even out of a dog-cart, and Norton rode home in a royal one that day. When he was some half a mile from Danbury gates, to his great surprise he was met by his wife and daughter, tripping along together most happily, and the elder lady's face all smiles and sunshine.

They had come out before lunch on the

bare chance, she said, of meeting him, for the very purpose of riding home with him, and telling him all the good news.

“What news,” says Norton, as he packed them into the vehicle and drove gaily on, “*what* news have you got to tell?”

“My dear Harry,” replied his wife, “I have had such a letter from Cousin John; he is charmed with Danbury, charmed with Captain Barclay, and poor old Lieutenant McBowell, charmed with his welcome, and thinks the Curate of Danbury — well, I won’t tell you what he says about him, or you will be getting vain. He is coming to Dorminster again in a month’s time, and hopes then to give us a full week.”

“And a great box,” says another glad voice from the back seat; “a great box, papa, has come from Carlisle for me, full of Mackay plaids and scarfs, and a little Highlander in full dress, with a feather in his cap, and a real silver brooch in his tartan. Isn’t it good of him?”

How the dinner went that day at Danbury, there is no need to tell. The whole climate seemed to have changed in a single morning, and the glass to have mounted in one stride from stormy to set fair; still more wonderful to relate, the fair weather lasted. Months passed away without as much as a cloud above the horizon; Cousin John's visit was duly paid, and went off without a hitch. Once more Norton drove him into Dorminster, and once more they parted like old friends at the station.

As they started from Danbury, he had said to his wife, "Will you go with us?"

"Certainly not, my dear; two passengers and all that pile of luggage are more than enough for any one horse, without the addition of a small person like me. Dinner at six, remember; you will lunch, of course, at the Rectory?"

"Not a morsel of lunch shall you have here this day," was the Rector's comment,

when he heard this account of the morning's greeting.

And as the day began, so it ended; for when Norton got back to Danbury, his wife's first words were, to his utter amazement, "You called on Mrs. Jervis, of course; how is she?"

"I had no time," he said, "even to call at St. Mary's, and barely enough to get a glimpse of Gresley."

Could this by any human possibility be the same woman who once sat on the garden roller, and scowled at all things under the sun?

The very same Sarah Norton; as easily elated into sunshine as cast into the shade, by a mere trifle, by a chance letter, or a stray word. And this must be taken as a type of the lights and shadows which befell Norton during the years that followed; he never knew, from one week to another, what weather to expect, and had, therefore, like a

prudent mariner, to be 'always on the lookout for a sudden fall of the mercury. By degrees he learned to acquire this difficult art, and so got used to bursts of sunshine and smooth water when his sails were all reefed, and to sudden gales of wind and a chopping sea when the glass was at 'set fair' and 'likely to continue.' But by degrees, too, as the years went by, he learned to profit by Gresley's advice; and it began at last to dawn on Sarah Norton's mind that, though her husband had given to another what he could never give again,—a heart's first early love,—his affection for her was deep and true; if not always all she craved for, still enough for content,—enough for a quiet, prosperous, voyage to the end of life. For more than this, Norton saw clearly that it was useless to hope; and as life went on, he began more and more to look onward to the future. He looked back with as keen a pleasure as ever on the

golden days of the past, but with less lingering regret. The tie that bound him to the past could never be severed, and he looked on to the time when it should be renewed and purified beyond the border line which separates the things that die from the things eternal.

The sorrows that pierce to the very inmost being may, and often do, seem beyond the reach of earthly cure; but time is a mighty agent, and, though he cannot heal such wounds, deals gently with them, and slowly takes away their intense agony. The scars remain, but they will bear handling and shrink from no kindly touch.

Thus it came about, in after years, that Norton not only talked over the past with his daughter Fanny, but with her and his wife went once and again to the quiet grave at Saltram, wandered together with them through the old familiar woods, gathered flowers where Mary had gathered them long

ago, and watched the sunset from the old clump of Firs at Plymridge. It was as bright and glorious as ever; the grey hills, the purple moor, the fields white to harvest, all carried their glad message of new hope and coming joy to a thousand hearts, telling them of a golden future, as they reminded Norton of a happy past.

About this time, too, a lucky gift from Cousin John helped in no small degree to strengthen the goodwill at Danbury. In her younger days Sarah Mackay had been a famous horsewoman, and in the north country among a host of friendly neighbours had rarely been in want of a mount. Knowing this, John Campbell had purchased for her at one of the Doncaster fairs, a steed stout enough, he said, "to carry a lassie of sixteen stuns;" and this he had ridden down by easy stages to Dorminster. Norton himself was no great equestrian, but nothing pleased him better than a good gallop over the downs;

and now he had a companion even more eager than himself for such exercise whenever he had an hour to spare.

This was the state of things one cold, bright, winter's day when the two set out for a long ride to Dorminster, and then back by way of Saltram Woods and across the Downs. It had been a hard, keen, winter, the snow lying very deep all round Danbury at Christmas-tide, and making the roads almost impassable on foot or horseback. But at last had come a thaw; the white robes that stretched with unbroken purity over hill and dale, and loaded trees and hedgerows with a fringe of dazzling white, all melted away as if by magic. A soft west wind whispered to every patch of green moss and fern, to crimson berries, and tiny scarlet cups, that Spring was not far off, and told the snowdrop to loosen her green sheath and peep out to greet the sunshine. Here and there a thrush caught

the glad infection and broke out into song. Every little brook in the valley, after weeks of stony silence, babbled merrily down to the river, and the whole earth seemed to wake up with a smile of welcome. Every hedgerow was dripping, every muddy road and lane deep with moisture, light fleecy clouds hurried across the blue sky, and though the sunshine as yet had little power, it flashed in pleasant gleams across the open country ; and the two equestrians set out in great spirits for their long ride.

Their business was soon done in Dorchester, a hasty call paid at St. Jerome's Rectory, and they then rode away at a round pace across the Downs, reaching Saltram about noon, and lingering with much pleasant talk among the silent, bare, woodland paths. Another hour brought them to Dunton Ford ; in summer time a broad gleaming shallow of crystal water where the Dor spread itself out into a sheet

of shining silver, and then ran softly whimpering under the shade of willow and hazel clumps, through green meadows down to the Abbey lands of Dorminster. Now, however, all was changed. The quiet sylvan stream was a wide waste of dark, swirling, rushing waters, flecked here and there with patches of angry foam, at some places even flooding the banks and sweeping over harvest-fields.

Here, therefore, the two riders pulled up, and for a few moments were in doubt as to what was to be done. The ford, so easy to be crossed in summer, looked anything but safe or practicable now; and the nearest bridge for horsemen was five miles higher up.

Norton was decidedly for turning back; "their horses were still fresh, and there was plenty of time for getting back to Danbury before dark."

But, strange to say, his wife was for pushing on. She had crossed the ford but a

few weeks before, she said, and was sure that 'Douglas' would carry her safely over now.

"I will go first and show you the way," she added gaily, "and then your sober grey will take courage."

"No, no," said Norton, "if we are to make the attempt it shall be together. After all, it may not be so bad as it looks."

Not very willingly the horses stepped down into the dark yeast of foaming water; but before they got a few yards from the bank had to swim for it, and in spite of all their efforts were borne away down the stream into deeper water. Presently, for a moment, they felt the bottom again, when a sudden squall of wind seized Norton's hat; and at that very moment, in his eagerness to save it, the reins fell from his hands, his horse suddenly stumbled into a deep hole, plunged violently forward, and flung his rider into the raging stream. It was the

work of but a few seconds, and Norton was for an instant swept swiftly away as a mere waif upon the waters. But recovering himself, he struck boldly out obliquely across the river, hoping to gain the bank lower down, where his horse had already made good a landing. Meanwhile his wife, though utterly terrified, never lost her presence of mind for a moment, but, urging on Douglas to his very utmost, soon reached the shore, quickly dismounted, tied her horse to a willow stump, and gathering up her long and dripping dress, hurried down the river-side, crying loudly for help as she went.

Norton in the meantime was battling it out bravely with the waters, and after many a hard struggle slowly won his way towards the shore. But he was still in a deep, swift, current; and the bank, undermined by the winter flood, some two feet above the water, was soft, treacherous, and yielding. Turn where he would he could find no possible

chance of safe landing, and his strength though far from exhausted began slightly to fail. His wife was within a few yards of him, but could give him no help, and no other living creature was in sight. The roar of the river drowned her loudest cries for help; or it must have come from the neighbouring cottages.

“For God’s sake, Harry,” she cried at last in her despair, “make one effort more to get in to this bank a little lower down, where the old stone fence juts out into the river. It is but a few yards further down, and there, I think, I can reach you.”

A few rapid strokes brought him to the very point, where the water was still deep, and eddying round with angry violence over the broken stonework.

“A moment more, dearest,” she said, “and you are safe. I am sure that I can reach you now with the handle of my whip.”

And so near now had the swimmer got to the bank, that it seemed not only possible but easy to reach him.

In another moment he would have grasped the handle of the stout hunting-whip, and been drawn safely to land, when, as she stooped forward on the very verge of the stream, a portion of the rotten bank gave way under her feet, and she fell headlong forward over the rough stonework, and was swept away by the furious current.

Her long riding-habit had become so twisted about her figure as almost to render all exertion impossible; though it also prevented her from sinking at once. In one swift moment Norton saw that she was being hurried away to swift death, and in that one moment his resolve was taken. At all hazard, even at the cost of his own life, she must be saved if it were possible; and to be possible, not a moment must be lost.

Flinging himself, therefore, once more into the full stream, he was soon borne along by the very same current which had swept away his wife; in a few minutes was close to her, and had even with one hand grasped her dress. This was all he could do at first; and so for some twenty or thirty yards more they were carried swiftly down the stream, until it took a sudden turn to the right, and thundered over a waterfall down into a murky pool below, known as 'Dunton Deep.' Once in that rapid, he at once saw that death was inevitable.

But, luckily for him, where the river curved away in mad haste to the right, it also branched off into a small stream on the left, and spread out into a piece of back-water among a huge bed of flags and rushes. If only he could but gain this side current, all might be well. Seizing her dress therefore more firmly, he resolved to make one more desperate effort, and in this he at last

succeeded ; the stream now actually driving them up into a stony shallow where cattle came down to drink.

In a few moments he was safely on *terra firma*, and then with great difficulty drew in the body of his wife over the shallow, and laid her on the grass. It was hard work, for he was all but exhausted himself ; and indeed it was some minutes before he had strength enough for any fresh exertion. Luckily, he had in his pocket a small flask of brandy, and having taken a good pull at this, he knelt down by the lifeless form before him, for lifeless it seemed. Having loosened the dress round her neck and bosom, he watched eagerly but vainly for the slightest sign of animation. Not a breath came from her clenched lips, not a pulse to be felt. Her face was of a ghastly white, and now hideously smeared with blood that flowed freely from a deep wound over the temple. Forcing open her lips, he poured in

by slow degrees nearly the whole of the remaining brandy ; and then endeavoured by every means in his power to rouse her to consciousness. But all seemed in vain.

Then he shouted his very utmost and loudest for help ; but his voice was weak, and his strength feeble ; no answer came ; and the cold and pitiless waters rushed on their way as if in scorn of his outcries. In utter despair what to do next, he hurried back from a little mound on which he had been standing, with the vain hope of making his cry heard at the neighbouring cottages, and once more knelt beside his wife. But in raising the body from the ground again, it slipped from his grasp, and fell back, and it was then to his intense joy that a feeble groan escaped from the lips now growing livid with cold.

To his still greater surprise, he suddenly heard footsteps somewhere near at hand among the long sedgy grass ; and turning

round, saw a lad in a rough smock frock hurrying up to him, having just climbed the hedge of the next field beyond a thick plantation of willows.

“Thought us heerd somebody a holler-ing,” said the boy, “me and father, last time plough come round ; and us hollered agen, but nobody didn’t answer, so gived it up ; when all to wonce I heerd it agen ; and then off I goes, and here I be.”

“Thank God, you are,” cried Norton ; “and now listen to me. If you can get your father to be here in two minutes, there’s a sovereign apiece ready for you. Now, boy, fly ; every minute is worth gold.”

In less than two minutes the boy and his father were by Norton’s side ; a gate was soon off its hinges, and the three were slowly bearing the lifeless body of the drowned woman up the river-side to the little foot bridge, above the ford. The frail wooden structure shook as they crossed it,

and Norton almost shuddered as he looked down on the dark swirling waters below ; but there was no other way of approach to the cottages, and *there* only could further help be had. Their task was at last accomplished, and with the help of the labourer's wife, the sufferer was undressed, and laid in such blankets as could be got from the neighbours. She was alive, and faintly breathing. But that was all. Meanwhile a man on horseback was sent to Danbury with a note to Simmons to fetch a doctor, and come with what necessaries he could, post haste to the ford.

Two long weary hours passed away, and during these Norton kept unbroken watch by the bedside of his wife. She neither spoke nor moved, nor showed any further sign of consciousness than by irregular, fitful, breathing. For a time he had forgotten that his own clothes were drenched with water ; but the intense cold reminded

him of what he had forgotten, and he was driven to accept the offer of the ploughman's Sunday suit while his own was being dried at the kitchen fire.

Once only during this interval the patient opened her eyes, glanced for a moment at her husband, and then closed them again. Whether she failed to recognize him because of his outlandish attire, or was altogether beyond unable to discern ordinary things as they really were, he could not determine. At last, however, came Joe Simmons and the nearest doctor that could be had.

His verdict was prompt and unfavourable. "You have done all you could," he said, "and nothing that you could have done would have stayed the mischief. The sudden shock of bare escape from drowning has brought her down to death's door; and there is severe injury to the brain. She must have struck her head against the stone fence of which you speak, and it is impossible to say

as yet what the result may be. Fever is coming on now, and we must hope for the best. It is too serious a case for me to leave at present."

"You speak plainly," replied Norton, "and I fear without much hope?"

"It is best to speak plainly," said Dr. Vigors, "when life and death are so evenly balanced, and you look like a man who would prefer hearing the truth. She will probably be delirious to-night; meanwhile you can do nothing. Your business, therefore, is at once to take care of yourself; get into some warm blankets, drink a gallon of hot whisky-punch, and eat what you can of a roast fowl, or I shall have two patients on my hands instead of one."

The next day, and for many days and nights that followed, Sarah Norton lay in a half-delirious state, at times partly conscious, at others babbling idly of the past; but showing no symptoms of returning

strength. Day by day Norton watched the doctor's face as he came out of the sick-room ; but he read there not a word of hope. Slowly and by degrees the poor sufferer sank down to a lower and lower ebb of weakness and prostration, until at last it seemed as if life only hung by the tiniest, faintest, thread ; while, to crown all with utter hopelessness, she appeared neither to understand nor recognize any one who came near her.

More than once in her moaning dreams of wild discomfort she had cried out, "*Is he safe ? Is he safe ?*" But when Norton himself, who rarely left her bedside but by the doctor's order, whispered that he was there close at hand, alive and speaking for himself, she answered his words with a vague, unmeaning, babble that was more terrible than absolute silence. He pressed her hand to convince her of his presence, but no answering pressure ever came to his lingering touch, and so the weary days went by.

Gresley, ever ready on every emergency, had sent a friend of his to do the necessary work at Danbury, so that Norton might remain at Dunton to the last, and it soon became apparent that the end was not far off.

All that human skill and careful watching and loving hands could do had been done. Norton, and his daughter Fanny, Edith Jervis, and one of the St. Mary's Sisters, had all been alike unwearied in keeping watch and ward by the quiet patient sufferer. But what they hoped and prayed for was not to be; and Sarah Norton never knew that it was her husband's hand which so often rested in hers, or his daughter's loving care that so often tried to smooth the ruffled pillow. She had learned at last to know and understand, and at last to appreciate her husband's love as it deserved; but no sooner was the gift hers than the summer of enjoyment ended.

With deeper and deeper content, Norton had watched her love for him gradually throw off all its false elements of doubt and suspicion; but no sooner had he become fully convinced of this rise to truer, nobler, life, than death put an end to all future growth. She had eagerly, generously, risked her own life to save his; and now she was passing away without even a word or a token of thanks from him whose life she had saved. It was true that he had done all, even risked his own life to save hers; but all had been useless and in vain, and he even began to reproach himself for ever daring to attempt crossing the ford against his own better judgment.

But regret for the past, which cannot be undone, is worse than idle; and Edith Jervis, and his old friend Gresley, who now and then rode over to see him, soon convinced him of its folly.

And so, with all its follies and mistakes, and errors and sins, the past was all silently swept away once more by the advent of that stern and true teacher against whose icy touch no household is secure. Norton had already learned many things by the sharp uses of adversity ; and, under the shadow of the old yew-trees at Saltram churchyard, he now pondered his lesson with double force.

Twice in his life had he built up his scheme of happiness ; once in the freshness of youth when all seemed eternal ; and once in later manhood when it seemed possible to gather together the shattered hopes of his earlier dreams. But in different ways—ways wholly unseen and unexpected—both schemes had perished. Once more the being who had loved him best on earth was taken from him ; and he was left to build on surer and more lasting foundations for the few years that might still be in store for him.

The old rooms at Danbury for a time seemed more desolate than ever ; and the sense of lost companionship all the sharper. 'Black Douglas' grew to be his favourite steed, and bore him well ; but both horse and rider often missed the bold firm hand, and the strong, hearty, voice that they had learned to know and to love.

And so once more things fell slowly into much of their old track with him. Individual trial, sorrow, and calamity must happen to men ; but human life and human work must go on,

" *Labitur et labetur in omne volubilis ævum,*"

much in the same fashion as the river at Dunton Ford,—in silver, sparkling, beauty of summer-tide, or the fierce, angry storms of winter ; but on ! still on ! by day and night, heedless alike of times and seasons, of joy or sorrow. In the midst of all his regrets, however, as he looked back upon

the cloudy past, Norton awoke to the supreme happiness of having such a daughter and such friends as were still left to him.

With one final glance at them, in one brief chapter, our little chronicle of Danbury must come to an end ; and the editor's work will be done.

CHAPTER XII.

LUX REDIVIVA.

“O matre pulchra filia pulchrior.”

Hor.

ONCE more we go back, and for the last time, to the quiet winter-garden at Danbury. There in the corner, under the drooping ash, is the old rough bench where Barky and his little friend whiled away many a long hour in the summer mornings. There Norton had smoked many a quiet pipe in the golden days of long ago; and there he sits now on this bright evening in May, with his faithful friend, the Rector of

St. Jerome's. Nep, now grown old and grey, and much subject to rheumatism, lies curled up at their feet. Joe Simmons, almost as grey and even more rheumatic, has set out a little table on the grass plot, close at hand, and just uncorked a bottle of famous claret, which the captain insists on opening in honour of Miss Fanny's birthday. She is twenty to-day, and in the little garden-chair by Nep's side, with a bunch of white May in her hair and sunshine in her face, as she now and then joins in the talk, is as dainty and dangerous a little maiden as may be seen for many a mile.

Presently the old white-haired captain joins the party; whereupon up starts Fanny, and up starts her faithful attendant Nep, always on the look-out for a ramble.

"Quite ready, Captain Barclay," she says, "for a good long walk; the moon will be up early to-night, and we will come home by the hay-fields."

“As far as you like, Miss Fanny, and as many hay-fields as you please, if Nep will but behave himself, and not chase the hares as he did last week at Plymridge. It was very nearly a case for the keeper then, so we must be careful to-night.”

“If anything happens to Nep,” cries out the Curate, “I shall hold you answerable. Joe Simmons will never forgive you, nor will I; to say nothing of the trustees. He has taken to poaching in his old days; virtuous, well-conducted a dog as he once was.”

“What can be expected of him,” says Gresley, “when an old sinner like the captain goes off for moonlight rambles with every pretty young girl that falls in his way? Lucy Markham, Sophy Harcourt, or Fanny Norton, it’s all one to him. Barclay, it’s perfectly scandalous! and if I had any young and marriageable daughters—”

“But you have, sir,” interrupts Fanny

with a merry laugh ; “and when they were here on May-day, the captain danced five times with little Louie, didn’t he, papa ?”

And, then, away they went ; with the sole caution from Norton of “Don’t be too late, Barclay. The dew is heavy to-night, and Fanny is as fond of running into the long grass as when she was but three years old.”

“Aye, aye, sir !” replies the captain ; and off they go ; Nep frantic with delight, and scouring to and fro in front of them, as if he fully entered into the full meaning of the whole dialogue.

“She has just her mother’s eyes, Norton,” says the rector ; “the same happy smile, the same trim dainty grace, as the captain says, from stem to stern ; and that bewitching brown hair flying about her laughing face with such artless art ! No wonder that young Osborne’s head is turned. It makes us old fogies young again only to see her.”

“Is young Osborne’s head really turned, Gresley?”

“Only look at her face the next time he comes into the room. See how it lights up when he appears; how shyly and demurely she shakes hands with him; listen how her heart springs out into her words when she sings to him! And as for him, he watches her as a cat watches a mouse; never takes his eyes off her face, if he can help it; and drinks in her voice like nectar. Watch him when he comes in to supper to-night. He has stolen a march upon you, my friend; and you will find it hard to undo the mischief now.”

“But he has only been here a month?” says the Curate.

“My dear Norton, what has time to do with the matter, with such a face as Miss Fanny’s shining upon him all day long? Have you forgotten a certain Gala-day at Tregartha, and how in one swift May

morning, in the old, old, days, a certain young and ardent scholar was pierced to the very inmost heart, and came wounded and bleeding to his friend's lodging, full of the blissful story, and ready to perish of the dismal when the fates seemed cruel? Ages ago."

"Not likely to forget *that*," says Norton, "as long as I remember I am alive. Ages ago, indeed, Gresley; and yet as bright and true as if it all happened yesterday. But this youngster, when does his ship sail? Soon, it is to be hoped."

"Not for six weeks yet, I think; and then he's off for some three or five years. But when you talk about a month, Norton, you must not forget that every time young Osborne came home from sea, for the last year or two, he has been most attentive to his uncle the captain. I hardly remember ever calling at Danbury, and not finding him here sometime or other during the day. Nothing

could exceed his attention to the old man, except his devotion to the young lady."

"I must have been blind," says Norton, "not to have seen it."

"And that is more than you can say of him; for he has picked out the prettiest girl in the whole country-side. And a very smart, wide-awake, young fellow he seems; 'goes out, too, this trip as first lieutenant in the Spitfire ten-gun brig.' I only hope that some such smart youngster may carry off one of my three girls. He may have his choice."

"But I," replied Norton, "do not want mine carried off at all."

"But it's in the nature of things that they should be carried off when Mr. Suitable comes. But don't take my report; ask Miss Fanny herself when she comes back from her moonlight trip; and hear what she says."

In due time the trio appeared; the captain

as grave and happy as he always seemed in the company of Fanny Norton, and the young girl in the wildest, gayest, spirits.

“Fanny, my dear,” said her father, “come into the library ; I want to speak to you.”

“Me, papa ? What in the world is the matter ? ”

“That is exactly what I want to know. What is all this story about young Osborne ? ”

“Story, papa ? I have not heard any story whatever about him.”

“They say, my child, that he is very fond of a certain young lady, who is very fond of him ! ”

“Oh ! papa. You see he knows so many, and is such a favourite. But who says this wonderful story about him ? ”

“Everybody, my dear, it seems. I am the only blind person in the case, who haven’t

seen what is going on for months past. Can't you guess who the young lady is? A very saucy, bewitching, little puss, and just your own age, so I hear.

"He has never told me, papa, and—"

"But if he did, my dear, what should you say to him?"

"That depends," says Fanny, "upon who it is. I may not know her at all."

"But suppose you know her very well, better than anybody else does, what should you say then?"

"Oh! he won't tell me, papa. He must tell the young lady herself, however naughty she is. You must ask her."

"You monkey," replies Norton, "*I am* asking her at this very moment."

Then quickly a tell-tale, happy, blush spread over the young girl's laughing cheeks, and her bright eyes grew brighter with happy tears of joy, as she looked shyly up into her father's face, and said in a whisper, "Oh! papa, are you very angry?"

“Very angry, indeed, but what would you say to him—never mind me—if he said, ‘Fanny Norton, will you be my wife?’ What then?”

“If he did ever say that, papa, I must say, ‘Yes,’ for I do love him so much.”

“Well enough to run away, and leave Danbury, Fanny?”

“Oh! no. I don’t want to leave Danbury, at all.” And now the tears came in real earnest—“and he has never said a word to me, not a word.”

“But you know, you little monkey, that you have turned his head; and that he will ask you some day. And there goes the supper-bell. Run away this minute, and wash away all the tears; and tell Lieutenant Osborne to come here to me, that I may give him a good rowing for trying to steal my little daughter.”

“And you won’t scold him very much, will you, papa?”

In a trice Fanny was off to her own room, and presently came down to the hall, looking more bewitching than ever.

"O Frank," she whispered, "papa wants to see you in the library now, before supper; you must go. And I will keep this place for you, if you are good."

"I said what I could for you," added Gresley, who was close by, and guessed what had happened, as he saw the young sailor turn rather pale as he was leaving the room.

"Mr. Osborne," said Norton, as they shook hands, "when do you join your ship?"

"In about six weeks, sir."

"And you are thinking of getting married before you go?"

"Me, sir?" says the bewildered lieutenant.

"You, sir, so I am told; and the young lady, is she willing to part with her husband so soon?"

“There must be some mistake, sir ; no young lady has agreed to marry me, for I have not asked her ?”

“No mistake whatever,” replied the Curate ; “she has just sent you to speak to me. What have you got to say for yourself ?”

“What can I say,” answered the young sailor, “but that Miss Fanny is miles too good for me ; that the very first day I came to Danbury, I saw that she was the only woman to make me happy ; that I lost my head, and lost my heart, before I knew where I was.”

“And you never told me, her father, that you intended to rob me of my daughter, or her that she had won your heart ?”

“We never knew it, sir, until just now, a day or two ago, when news came that I must join my ship in six weeks. Then, it flashed upon me all at once that I should

never be happy again if Fanny—Miss Norton, would not be my wife. But I never asked her ; I am not half good enough. She ought to have an admiral at least, or a first lord, and not a poor first luff.”

“ Meanwhile,” says Norton, with a hearty laugh, “ as the first lord doesn’t seem likely to appear, you have my free permission to ask her if she can put up with a first lieutenant.”

Of the joyful supper which followed that night, there is no need to tell. The news spread like wild-fire ; and if happy faces and hearty looks could add pleasure to the young people’s joy, their happiness must have been more than complete.

It was hard work for Norton, but he saw that the time was come ; and that the loving daughter who had so long gladdened his quiet home at Danbury, must leave the old place, and carry sunshine into the heart and home of another. And having once made up his

mind to the parting, there was no just reason why the marriage should not take place at once.

So it came to pass that a month before the Spitfire sailed, another quiet wedding took place in the little church at Saltram; and where children once scattered flowers in the happy pathway for Mary Hastings, they once more scattered them for her daughter, a bride as fair, as loving, and as true as she.

The young people settled down into a cottage not far from Danbury gates, and after their brief honeymoon, the good ship Spitfire sailed for her three years' cruise, with good hopes that her gallant first luff would in due time come back with a captain's commission.

As the years rolled by, and old age began to creep upon the Curate of Danbury, it was with no small pleasure that he found the

voices of young children about him once more, whose bright eyes and loving hearts reminded him of the bright and golden days of his own youth.

One by one, his old friends and companions, including his trusty ally the Rector of St. Jerome's, who had cheered and brightened his whole life, were missing from their usual place ; and at last the summons came for him. It found him in the midst of his work at Danbury, and, let us hope, not wholly unprepared to leave it. Loving voices and kindly hands were about him to the last ; and, on the day before his death, in the journal from which this imperfect record of his life is mainly taken, thus stands his final entry.

“ Christmas-tide once more ; the last that I shall see. Deep snow over all the quiet fields, as I look out at the bright winter's sun, and listen to the Christmas bells. Fanny

has just brought me fresh violets from the two quiet graves at Saltram. God bless and keep her ; and have mercy upon me."

THE END.

