

CHAPTER III.

"The faint sickness of a weary heart."—BECKFORD.

SEPTEMBER 22.

How quietly I sit here—how still I feel—how cold—how stunned. Is it because my one great grief has swallowed up all sensation? Or what is it which makes me regard so little this new stroke, which made even kind old Mr. Marstone tremble as he told it to me. We are not only alone in this great cold world without our guide—but we are portionless, homeless beggars.

I do not understand it, Walter told me with his dying breath that all was right—and so it must have been. Something has gone wrong since which he knew nothing of. My husband is not to blame for this—it comes from above. "God knows best," perhaps it was needful, we must not murmur. "God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform." I wonder if I needed more chastening. Through much affliction, grievous trials, He draweth us to Him, taking away all our comforts to make us come to Him for rest, overshadowing all our joys, to show us joy in Him, prostrating to the earth all our supports, and making us lean upon Him alone. Oh in all our woes these thoughts comfort us, what could be more restful;

"God's greatness
Flows around our incompleteness—
Round our restlessness His rest."

On account of his public duties my husband had but little time to devote to his personal affairs. He knew his estate was valuable, he lacked nothing that his life required, for his own wants, or the need of a friend, there was abundance always. And all was secured to his children after him.

This much he knew, the minutia of the matter was all transacted by an agent in whom he had unbounded confidence.

This I knew, and never doubted but it was right. But now I think even Walter would say it was not. For by one mis-step and a system of fraud carried on for years, the man he trusted, has squandered our whole fortune, and left us

(18)

beggars. I do not quite understand the matter, save, that by a series of unfortunate speculations each meant to retrieve the other, all that we had in the world is gone.

Walter was blinded to this state of affairs, because he never suffered a moment's inconvenience from it. It was kept from him, and his requirements always anticipated by money raised by mortgage upon mortgage, fastened upon the property.

A few days only before the death of my husband his agent made one desperate venture more, by raising a few thousands upon the furniture, stock, etc. of our home, then while he waited the issue in feverish agony, came first the news of his employer's death, then of the failure of the enterprise in which he had staked his and our all. Then with a letter full of bitter repentance to Mr. Marstone, he ended his misery and his sins, by one more dreadful than all the rest, suicide.

All is gone, all we have known and loved for years. Not one thing left us, not one foot of ground upon which to place our feet and say it is my own. Not one, sweet flower to raise its little head and call itself ours. My own property which to my sorrow was settled unreservedly upon myself still remains, but this and all that I can raise upon my wardrobe and jewelry, must go to pay the debts which yet remain.

Mr. Marstone good old friend seemed frightened by the steadiness and calmness, with which I heard all these details.

He thought at least to see an outbreak of tears,—he has known me always so childish, so dependent, that this new phase of character, which seems to have grown up within me so suddenly, alarms him.

I am changed I know and feel it every moment of my life, this woe has awakened feelings within me, unlike any thing I have ever known before.

Kind friend he must not fear for me, because I cannot weep, this quiet is not the semblance of despair, but the natural numbness of a stunned and torpid heart, lying cold and dumb within me,

"I want a heart to pray,
To pray and never cease;
Never to murmur at thy stay,
Or wish my sufferings less."

Mr. Marstone is bitterly opposed to my giving up my own property to pay what he calls unjust debts. I know it could not be demanded of me, but better poverty and a clear conscience, than comparative wealth with the knowledge of wrong doing.

It shall go every iota of it, for Walter's memory must be free from stain. He who strove so earnestly to live at peace with his fellow-men, must have in his death no unkindly words spoken of him.

If there are troubles or sufferings to be endured, brought about no matter how remotely by his instrumentality, his wife and children must bear them. He would have said so, and so do I, let Mr. Marstone say what he will, God taketh care of His own, He provideth good things for all who love Him. We will trust ourselves to Him.

Henceforth we must go forth and battle with life, and these poor hands so wickedly ignorant of labor, must gain for us all, a daily subsistence. It will be very dreadful I know, I am not rushing blindly into utter poverty, much misery, many and bitter trials, are before us I doubt not. Yet must they be endured, else that glorious house wherein my husband now dwells may be lost to us forever. Oh we must strive to do right even if it be very hard to endure.

God is my Father, he will care for us all, His goodness never fails, His loving hands are always outstretched to sustain his stricken earth-bound children, who in their faithlessness, see not the mercy hid behind the grief.

"Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust him for his grace,
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face."

Please God strengthen me to receive all thy promises with a believing heart, to remember "whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth." There is a great comfort in that, "He loveth," God loveth, even me.

SEPTEMBER 28.

I have had one or two interviews, within the last few days with those who hold claims against the property, all have been most kind to me.

I am only doing my duty in thus giving up everything, and yet the praises I have had lavished upon me, would almost make me think I have done some great and praiseworthy thing in doing right.

Why is it I wonder, is it extraordinary for people to be honest? ought we to receive praise when we are only just?

One of these gentlemen said to me, when I explained how I intend to liquidate the debts which remained:

"My dear lady if you give up all in this manner, what will become of your children? what will they have?"

Oh I was very glad to be able to say as I did quickly and proudly:

"Their father's good name sir, untarnished, pure as he left it. An heritage more priceless than house or lands, and thank God their very own, inalienable forevermore."

Mr. Marstone's stern disapproval of all this has been most hard to endure. I am only doing my duty, plainly and obviously my duty. If it is foolish to pay our debts I cannot see it.

If there is any merit in all this, there is no praise due to me. It is my husband's spirit working in me. Oh I never could do without his aid. It makes me glad to think perhaps, this feeling, this sense of duty and responsibility, which has sprung up thus within me may be his spirit, directing me, my guide even now!

Yes it is noble, it is generous, I doubt not, to thus make myself poor that others may not be defrauded, and I am glad I was firm.

That I did not appreciate all this before, shows how unworthy I am of the spirit which directs me. Walter it is blessed to know that even now thou art with me. Husband do not leave me! I will always trust to thee now! in death, as I ever did in life!

I am grieved to have gone so contrary to Mr. Marstone in everything, especially in the sale of my jewels, but he was thinking more of our comfort and ease, than of Walter's good name, therefore, though it was hard, I withstood him, but I will be very obedient henceforth.

SEPTEMBER 29.

I have put them away, all the bright fair gems, I have loved so well, round which so many fond remembrances linger

Most of them gifts of a precious love, a few the tokens of remembrance from dear friends in distant lands, dearly prized for the pleasant associations I have with those old times.

But almost all are Walter's choice, and have a word of love, a tender blessing or wish clinging to them.

"I love these bright things dearly," he said, "and I will cover my jewel with gems, because like my love they are pure and imperishable, ever her very own."

Oh Walter, Walter, your words were prophecy. They have gone, like your love, they brighten no more my path-way.

I will for old remembrance, keep some little piece a ring, a bracelet, or a brooch out from each set. I could find it in my heart now to portion each of my fair daughters a piece. This lava pin to Marie, because her intense admiration of the "angel face," carved upon it has oftentimes made her father smile.

This ring of diamonds, to Leanore, because papa has often promised when the little lady's eyes danced with delight at the jets of light which shot from the casket where with its accompaniments it lay, that

"My princess shall have just such bright diamonds on her wedding-day, a coronet of gems to deck my Layde Percy's brow."

And my little bright-eyed Coralie, shall have this bracelet of cameos, for when she was born in Florence her father gave them to me.

And pearls and mosaic for the others, but while I write, the thought comes over me, perchance we will need them to buy us bread.

Who knows it may be so, and if it is they will not have been reserved in vain. I have spent a long while talking of these bright things, and a longer still in looking at them. I have worn them so often in gay scenes, amongst the beauty and nobility of other lands never dreaming of to-day with its clouds and darkness,—hopeless on earth but not in heaven,—for there the comfort is if we endure unto the end, through great and sore trials we may hope for crowns of brighter rarer gems, for golden harps, and glad songs, and sunshine and gladness evermore. No clouds, no shadows, no sorrow, no weeping, for "God will wipe all tears from their eyes."

I have told the servants to-day the change which has come upon us, and I receive their offers of service most gratefully.

"We will go with you and work for you without any pay, the rest of our days," said old James the butler.

"That is far better my lady, than living our old age out among strangers," says Lawton as she wipes her eyes, and clasps her basket of keys tightly in her arms.

But of course we need no house-keeper or butler or indeed servant of any kind in the humble home which must receive us. It was hard to make them understand this, but at last I did.

"What your dear pretty hands do all the work? you would die, why you cannot toast a piece of bread without scorching your little fingers," cried the cook.

"Then I must learn to bear the pain, until I learn to be less awkward, good Betty," was all the answer I could give.

I must learn the hard lesson of self dependance, henceforth these hand must be the workers for others, I must labor for my children's bread.

Milly troubles me, my dear old nurse hardly says she is sorry to part with us, but I will not complain, her heart like my own, is in her master's grave, all other griefs are trivial now.

Loisette my poor little French maid weeps incessantly and wearies me with petitions to go with me.

"Ah Madame, que pourrais je faire sans vous.—Madame ma chere madame cela me perce le coeur—je vous en supplie ne m'abandonnez pas."

But of course she cannot go with us. Walter's valet is a good and faithful fellow, I will send her under his charge to their "La Belle France." It is all I can do for her.

The rest of the servants I will endeavor to get places for, among the families whose seats surround us. And with whom I hope my recommendations will have due weight.

I have received scores of offers of service, the largest amount of sympathy, but I only ask of them that they will take my scattered servants into their houses, and be kind to them. Thoughtful of their welfare, keeping a watch over them, remembering they are the children of the self same Father, who being more burdened with the cares and work

of life need the more a gentle restraining hand to direct them.

I have selected out a few books which are very dear to me because of the marks they bear of that dear hand.

Some French and German works are among them, and these the children can use when they are too poor to buy books, but not too poor to learn the little their mother can teach them.

I have also kept a couple of cabinet sized pictures of myself and husband, executed a few years ago, in Italy by Pazi. The large portrait of Walter which hung in the drawing-room, I have sent with a statue of Niobe which he always loved to Mr. Marstone, it was all I dared claim, from this multitude of beautiful things. But a whole heart-full of love and gratitude go with them, this he knows full well.

Also one or two things which were expressly bought for him, I have sent to the house of my husband's beloved guardian, which stands a few miles back of us. And when Mr. Audley returns to his native land, he will find these mementoes of his "dear boy's" love awaiting him. Thus I have striven to do all I ought to do, ere I leave this spot forever.

CHAPTER IV.

SEPTEMBER 30.

I have taken leave of all the friends of my happy married life, and they are many even in this quiet valley home. How thankful I am our homestead lay here instead of in some great city with its turmoil and hurry, its ever changing scenes and faces.

Here in these our ancestral lands we have made us a pleasant home, amidst dim old forests, which by their darkness and gloom make all beside, fairer and more beautiful. The sky seems nearer and of a deeper blue, when we look up into it from this dear spot. The sunshine falls softly here with a balmy tenderness that speaks of heaven. A quiet reigns everywhere. The far off surge of the great

ocean of life is too far away to reach us never so faintly, but the murmuring of the river falls sweetly upon the ear, and the voices of the wind among the forest leaves sing always an answering song. We have lived here so quietly and peacefully, these many years, taking no note of the busy world outside of us, free from all knowledge of its storms and calms.

Now although we leave all behind, we can look back upon our home, and know it for years the same sweet spot unaltered. My home, my dear home, beloved Percy's Cliffe. My home of sorrow too, what bright fond dreams cling round you, every spot within your wide domains has some fond memory clinging to it, some memory of the loved and lost.

Here, with naught but the stars for company, we have, within this rose decked bower, pictured out our future. A bright glad picture.

No storms, no clouds, no darkness, all was beauty and gladness, merry songs and gushing laughter, filled up the picture.

Or if perchance some storm did come, not hard to bear, because with hands closely clasped each in the other, we would meet all ills together.

Foolish hearts never to see the shadow of the grave between, or the weary waiting of one upon the shores of time.

Often at eventide when the soft grey shadows were gathering slowly down over the earth, we have strolled among these flower-girt walks, talking of many things, of how in coming years our children happy in other homes and we grown old, would sit down in the twilight of our lives and watch the shadow of the unknown draw on apace.

A quiet old fashioned couple, with old timed notions but happy hearts, the one with his pipe, the other with her knitting, conning over "old times and the way times had been," waiting patiently until God should reap the full ripe shock, until the golden bowl should be broken—the silver cord loosed—and we depart together. Oh Walter! my own it could not be. We never thought "one would be taken and the other left," could be true in our case.

And yet I say we, when perhaps I alone was deceived, for now I remember, Walter was oftimes grave after these

talks, and when it grieved me to see him thus would kiss me tenderly and putting back my hair with gentle loving hand would bid me :

"Not to mind his cross look if there is any trouble to come upon us, we would wait until it did, before we grieved over it."

And once when we were reading Tennyson's "Miller's daughter," he frightened me by passionately dashing down his book, and clasping me in his arms, saying in a hushed quick tone :

"My darling—my bird," and for an instant held me tightly to him. And then as if speaking to himself, as if it was something he found comfort in :

"God is our Father, I can trust him, he will care for her if"—and he was quiet.

"If what Walter? if what?" I asked; "what is the matter?"

"Not a thing, my pet, which I shall tell you, only a cloud came for an instant between me and my 'sunshine,' making me feel as though I wanted her locked up safely in my arms out of harm's way."

"But what kind of harm?"—I began to ask, but the look in his eye which I never disobeyed silenced me.

Then he began to repeat over again what he had just been reading, in a low musing voice, and his arm went closely round me again and he said as if half ashamed of some feeling :

"Pardon me love, I cannot help it." This was when he read :

"Yet fill my glass, give me one kiss,
My own sweet Alice we must die,
There's something in this world amiss
Must be unravelled bye and bye.
There's somewhat flows to us in life
But more is taken quite away,
Pray Alice, pray my darling wife,
That we may die the self-same day."

He repeated it with touching pathos. And though it spake no knell to my heart of coming ill, it made me weep I knew not wherefore, save that it was beautiful and affected him. Then further on he read again :

"Look through mine eyes with thine true wife,
'Round my true heart thine arms entwine,
My other dearer life in life,
Look through my very soul with thine!
Untouched with any shade of years,
May these kind eyes forever dwell!
They have not shed a many tears,
Dear eyes since first I knew them well."

And turning my face up to his, he looked tenderly into my eyes, saying in a low tone :

"It is so Bertha, my darling, they have not shed a many tears, dear eyes since first I knew them well? I have not neglected to cherish my flower. I have guarded her tenderly from ills, have I not?"

Oh Walter, were you dreaming of this time? were you bearing the dread of this and alone, least I should be pained—it must have been so, tender thoughtful husband.

Oh I was blessed beyond all other women, all these years, and now—thank God their memory is left me.

And now I sit and wonder that I did not understand that the severe and sudden attacks with which my husband was at intervals taken, were premonitions of a fatal disease, which would some day snatch away his noble life, close his dark eyes upon the light,

Beyond all human sorrow, care or fear, above all clouds or stars, he dwells in the very presence of his God. His high intellect, his great all-faithful soul knows no longer the strifes and weariness of this humanity.

The very peace of Our Father rests upon him, and with thankful hearts and eyes ever upon the mountain of hope, we will strive to reach his home in safety, and there find rest.

Walter it is no more hope with thee now, but fullness of joy only for us who remain, is the old watchword needful—still with eyes and hearts raised above we must cry "O Espérance."

CHAPTER V.

OCTOBER 1.

A great mercy has been vouchsafed us, it cometh from the Lord, as do all our mercies. And with hands outstretched to heaven upon my knees I say, "thank God."

Instead of everything which we have loved for years, esteeming them our very own, being sold and scattered by the hammer of the auctioneer, the whole property with all its appurtenances has been bought by one person.

Even my own belongings, my wardrobe, my jewels, over which I have mourned so grievously, have been stayed in their sale, and are to abide here even when we are gone.

Now we can go forth, very poor, it is true, but owing no man aught but love and gratitude.

And Mr. Hartly, a strange, eccentric old man, has become the purchaser. We have always esteemed him a severe, cruel man, and thought that living alone always, his heart was withered and feelingless. But now, with this act before me, I cannot help but think that, down in the depths of his being, there lives a spring, bubbling eternally, which though he wots not of its existence, because of the weeds of evil which choke it, yet makes him sometimes do right noble deeds.

He has sent me word to have the servants all discharged, save old Humphrey and Jessy, both of whom we long ago thought too old to work, but whom he sharply affirms,

"Are the only fools, beside myself, I want upon the place."

Perhaps it is as well, for they are faithful, and will care well for the place, as long as they are permitted to remain upon it.

To night Mr. Hartly came here and told me I need be in no hurry to remove, as he did not mean to move in for a month.

I thanked him, not noticing the cross quick tone in which the words were spoken, but added:

"Everything is prepared for our departure, and we will leave in the morning."

"Pish! nonsense," he replied, "make a fool of yourself; that's the way with the women always." Then he added, "Where are the keys?"

(28)

I called Lawton to bring them, taking them he said:

"Come show me the house will you?"

Involuntarily I drew back and would have sent Lawton with him.

"Oh if you're too dainty to wait upon me, I can go alone," he said harshly, "but keep away that fool of a housekeeper, I won't have her blubbing round me, telling me a pack of lack-a-daisical stories."

Without waiting for more, I went with him. I think if he had known the hard trial it was thus to enter and expose the beautifully arranged apartments of my lost home to a stranger eye, even he would have pitied me.

But it was as well, it broke the charm which hung over me. With a stern face he strode into the centre of each room, then after one glance around it, he would say as he came back to me—

"Lock that door, will you, and hook the key to this ring." Thus it was we traversed every room, and this command at each. When we came to three small apartments, one above another, in the small south tower, which have never been used because of the inconvenience of their construction, he said:

"Give me the keys of these rooms, they are mine hereafter."

"But sir," I returned, "they are very unpleasant and but partly furnished."

"That's why I like them, what do you care whether I am comfortable or not. It is no one's concern if I choose to sleep in the stable."

His harsh words frightened me into silence, and we went on until we reached the nursery where the children were all assembled. Before this door I paused, I could not bear the last thing my innocent darlings saw before they slept, should be the stern face of this fierce old man. His bitter words, and cruel voice, the last sound their ears should hear.

"What are you waiting for, do you think I am a bear, and mean to eat your children?" he said.

His words were unkind, but his tone and look less so than at any time during our interview. Without another word I opened the door.

I felt the scene we stood and looked upon in silence, must seem beautiful and holy even to his stern heart.

3*

We had been very proud of this room, and furnished it with great care. And we had endeavored to gather in it as much of beauty and grace as could be, because here our children's days were for the most part passed. Here with their nurses they always slept, or at least the little ones did. And the older ones had pretty rooms opening in upon it. Now over all there was a soft mild light of roseate hue, shed from a pastil lamp which hung high over head.

Marion with an anxious look upon her sweet face, sang a lullaby to the babe, which she carried up and down the room.

Adèle and Gracie, with their plump arms clasped round each other, were already fast asleep, the very picture of rosy health and beauty.

Howard and Coralie with closed eyes knelt at their sister Leanore's side and said their simple evening prayers.

The old man's heart was touched, I saw it in his face—I have heard it said he is always kind and gentle to children, as long as they remain such.

Marion in her walk came to where we stood, and when she saw us paused. Mr. Hartley stepped up to her quickly, with a gentle look upon his face, such as a moment before I had deemed impossible for it to wear.

"Poor child—poor little Marion"—and he patted her tenderly upon the head, "this must not be, I"—and he paused, then added, "well, well, it is better perhaps now—but after a while, but after a while."

Then turning from her abruptly, without a glance at the others he said as he left the room:

"She is like her father, just what he was once, I was worthy then," I just heard these words muttered, the rest I could not distinguish. After a word of comfort to the children I followed him, to the hall door.

"What's that girl allowed to drag that baby round until this time of night for, I should like to know?" he said with the same stern look and tone, as I came up to him.

"Because sir," I answered quietly, "the servants are gone, and her mother is engaged."

"What! gone! have you kept none of the regiment who have harbored here for the last dozen years?" he asked.

"None sir but the two you engaged to wait upon you."

"A pretty go to be sure, a pack of ungrateful hussies, to go off at the first notice, and leave you alone, that's the world's way, afraid you could not pay them as much as their lazy worthlessness requires, I suppose."

"Not at all sir, they left me very much against their will, and only at my earnest command, I thought it better they should go."

"Why was it best pray? I do not see," he said sharply.

"Because to-morrow your authority begins here, and therefore mine ceases, consequently I desired to have every thing settled to-day so as to have no unnecessary care or hurrying in the morning."

"Humph a good reason, you leave in the morning then, what time pray?"

"I have ordered a carriage at eight sir."

"What carriage, which one?" he said quickly.

"Mr. Marstone's sir, which he kindly offered, else I should have been obliged to beg the favor of one of yours."

"Humph I suppose so. Where is my new servant? What is her name did you say?"

"Jessy sir shall I bid her come to you?"

"Yes, I must give my orders to *my* servants, both of them."

I went in and called them, poor old couple, with their sad hearts pictured upon their faces they came to greet their new master.

"See these keys? take them you Jessy, and let me catch you letting any one in the rooms which are locked, can you keep them clean think you?"

"Ah yes sir," sobbed Jessy, "there'll be no trouble in that for there'll be no body to make them dirty any more, with the childrens all away, alack what shall I do!"

"Hold your tongue" said he testily "and attend to your business. Keep the house fresh and clean, just as it is now, don't dare to move a thing, and now sir for you what is your name?"

"Humphery sir at your service," with a low bow of fear.

"Well you get some men to attend to the gardens and grounds, but not to come into the house remember, you take care of the young ladies' flowers and pets yourself, and mind I tell you, it will be worse for you if any one steps

their foot inside of this door but you two and myself, without a written order from me, after to-morrow that's the law remember."

He passed down the steps making the marble ring with his quick sharp step. I stood watching him an instant as he went down the gravel-walk. When suddenly turning he came up to me again.

"Can they keep the house and the place just as it now is, for several years, think you?" he asked.

"I think they can, if they live so long sir."

"Well give them their orders how they are to do will you? I won't be much trouble to them; if they let me alone, I will not interfere with them, I want every thing to stand just as it is, may be for years, until my heir comes, to take possession."

"I will give them proper instructions. I think you may trust them sir, they are—"

"Trust!" he interrupted, "trust! I trust! know that I trust nobody, no not even myself," and he walked fiercely away.

In a moment he came back to me.

"How many children have you Bertha?"

"Seven sir," I replied.

"Seven! whew! a pretty good family for one woman to support, how old were you when you were married?"

"I was married upon my sixteenth birthday sir."

Oh how the memory of that scene beside my mother's dying bedside came over me as I answered him!

"How long were you married?"

"Seventeen years sir, wanting about two months," I replied with an aching heart, but he went on careless of the pain he inflicted.

"Humph then you are thirty-three, why you don't look twenty-three, how old is Marion? fifteen I suppose."

"In four months she will be fifteen."

"In six years then she will be twenty-one, well we will see." He said this in a musing tone walking up and down the long verandah.

"I have a notion to let her marry my heir if you will give her to me now, to be my own," he said.

Then, as with a shudder, I was about to refuse such a thing:

"Never mind now," he said, "wait until you have had a taste of poverty, then, when you see her sick, for want of the luxuries she has always known, then you can think of my offer. I will wait for my answer until then."

Walking up and down with his eyes fastened upon the marble floor, where the moonlight cast strange weird figures as it crept softly through the trellis-work, he seemed buried in deep thought. Watching from where I stood with the full flood of moonlight over me—over all the scene—lighting all the surroundings with witching beauty, I thought of him who was wont on such a night, to walk up and down this moonlit piazza, master of all.

How like and yet how unlike the pictures; this, has the same fair gleaming towers, white and tall, standing above it in the moonlight, the same dark mountains guarding it, the same waving trees that sing a song of love one to the other.

The rushing of the streams down the mountain's side, and the roar they make when they leap into the river which flows and shines a little way off, are just the same as of old. But the change is in the two who stand with the moonbeams silencing them. This is the master it is true, but with moody brow, he paces up and down alone, and in the doorway with clasped hands and weary eyes a small woman, in robes of night, stands watching him.

In the old time he who walked had his arm wound round that little figure, and her garments were shining white, and her face glowed with a glad happiness, and she was never weary. Alas for the days that are past!

Alas! for the days to come! who can abide them!