

so weak, if I had strength to get myself a cup of tea—

"Let me get it for you," cried Warburton. "Nothing easier. I noticed the kettle by the kitchen fire."

"Oh, I cannot allow you, Mr Jollyman—you are too kind—I feel so ashamed."

But Will was already in the kitchen, where he beatified himself so effectually that in a few minutes the kettle had begun to sing. Just as he went back to the parlour, to ask where tea could be found, the front door opened, and in walked Bertha.

"Your daughter is here, Mrs Cross," said Will, in an undertone, stepping towards the limp and pallid lady.

"Bertha," she cried. "Bertha, are you there? Oh, come and thank Mr Jollyman! If you knew what has happened whilst you were away!"

At the room door appeared the girl's astonished face. Warburton's eyes fell upon her.

"It's a wonder you find me alive, dear," pursued the mother. "If one of those blows had fallen on my head—"

"Let me explain," interposed Warburton quietly. And in a few words he related the events of the afternoon.

"And Mr Jollyman was just getting me a cup of tea, Bertha," added Mrs Cross. "I do feel ashamed that he should have had such trouble."

"Mr Jollyman has been very kind indeed," said Bertha, with look and tone of grave sincerity. "I'm sure we cannot thank him enough."

Warburton smiled, as he met her glance.

"I feel rather guilty in the matter," he said, "for it was I who suggested the servant. If you will let me I will do my best to atone by trying to find another and a better."

"Run and make the tea, my dear," said Mrs Cross. "Perhaps Mr Jollyman will have a cup with us—"

This invitation was declined. Warburton sought for his hat, and took leave of the ladies, Mrs Cross overwhelming him with gratitude, and Bertha murmuring a few embarrassed words. As soon as he was gone, mother and daughter took hands affectionately, then embraced with more tenderness than for a long, long time.

"I shall never dare to live alone with a servant," sobbed Mrs Cross. "If you love me, I must go into lodgings, dear."

"Hush, hush, mother!" replied the girl, in her gentlest voice. "Of course I shall not leave you."

"Oh, the dreadful things I have been through! It was drink, Bertha; that creature was a drunkard of the most dangerous kind. She did her best to murder me. I wonder I am not at this moment lying dead. Oh, but the kindness of Mr Jollyman! What a good thing I sent for him! And he speaks of finding us another servant; but, Bertha, I shall never try to manage a servant again—never! I shall always be afraid of them. I shall dread to give the simplest order. You, my dear, must be the mistress of the house; indeed you must. I give over everything into your hands. I will never interfere; I won't say a word, whatever fault I may have to find; not a word. Oh, that creature; that horrible woman, will haunt my dreams. Bertha, you don't think she'll hang about the house, and lie in wait for me to be revenged? We must tell the policeman to look out for her. I'm sure I shall never venture to go out alone, and if you leave me in the house with a new servant, even for an hour, I must be in a room with the door locked. My nerves will never recover from this shock. Oh, if you knew how ill I feel! I'll have a cup of tea, and then go straight to bed."

Whilst she was refreshing herself she spoke again of Mr. Jollyman.

"Do you think I ought to have pressed him to stay, dear? I didn't feel sure."

"No, no, you were quite right not to do so," replied Bertha. "He of course understood that it was better for us to be alone."

"I thought he would. Really, for a grocer he is so very gentlemanly."

"That's not surprising, mother."

"No, no; I'm always forgetting that he isn't a grocer by birth. I think, Bertha, it will only be right to ask him to come to tea some day before long."

Bertha reflected, a half-smile about her lips.

"Certainly," she said, "if you would like to."

"I really should. He was so very kind to me. And perhaps—what do you think?—ought we to invite him in his proper name?"

"No, I think not," answered Bertha, after a moment's reflection. "We are not supposed to know anything about that."

"To be sure not. Oh, that dreadful creature, I see her eyes, glaring at me, like a tiger's. Fifty times at least did she chase me round this table. I thought I should have dropped with exhaustion; and if I had, one blow of that poker would have finished me. Never speak to me of servants, Bertha. Engage anyone you like, but do, do be careful to make inquiries about her. I shall never wish even to know her name; I shall never look at her face; I shall never speak a word to her. I leave all the responsibility to you, dear. And now, help me upstairs. I'm sure I could never get up alone. I tremble in every limb—"

CHAPTER XLIII.

Warburton's mother was dead. The first effect upon him of the certainty that she could not recover from the unconsciousness in which he found her when summoned by Jane's telegram was that of an acute remorse; it pierced him to the heart; that she should have abandoned the home of her lifetime, for the strangeness and discomfort of the new abode, and here have fallen, stricken by death—the cause of it, he himself, he so unworthy of the least sacrifice. He had loved her; but what assurance had he been wont to give her of his love? Through many and many a year it was much if he wrote at long intervals a hurried letter. How seldom had he cared to go down to St. Neots, and, when there, how soon had he felt impatience of the little restraints imposed upon him by his mother's ways and prejudices. Yet not a moment had she hesitated, ill and aged, when, at so great a cost to herself, it seemed possible to make life a little easier for him. This reproach was the keenest pain with which nature had yet visited him.

Something of the same was felt by his sister, partly on her own, partly on his account, but as soon as Jane became aware of his self torment, her affection and her good sense soon brought succour to them both. She spoke of the life their mother had led since coming into Suffolk, related a hundred instances to prove how full of interest and contentment it had been, bore witness to the seeming improvement of health, and the even cheerfulness of spirits which had accompanied it. Moreover, there was the medical assurance that life could not in any case have been prolonged; that change of place and habits counted for nothing in the sudden end which some months ago had been foretold. Jane confessed herself surprised at the ease with which so great and sudden a change was borne; the best proof that could have been given of their mother's nobleness of mind. Once only had Mrs Warburton seemed to think regretfully of the old home; it was on coming out of church one morning, when, having stood for a moment to look at the graveyard, she murmured to her daughter that she would wish to be buried at St. Neots. This, of course, was done; it would have been done even had she not spoken. And when, on the day after the funeral, brother and sister parted to go their several ways, the sadness they bore with them had no embitterment of brooding regret. A little graver than usual, Will took his place behind the counter, with no word to Alchin concerning the cause of his absence. He wrote frequently to Jane, and from her received long letters, which did him good, so redolent were they of the garden life, even in mid-winter, and so expressive of a frank, sweet, strong womanhood, like that of her who was no more.

Meanwhile, his business flourished. Not that he much exerted himself, or greatly rejoiced to see his till more heavily laden night after night, by natural accretion custom flowed to the shop in fuller stream; Jollyman's had established a reputation for quality and cheapness, and began seriously to affect the trade of small rivals in the district. As Alchin had foretold, the hapless grocer with the sunken wife sank defeated before the end of the year; one morning his shop did not open, and in a few days the furniture of the house was carried off by some brisk creditor. It made Warburton miserable to think of the man's doom; when Alchin, frank barbarian as he was, loudly exulted, Will turned away in shame and anger. Had the thing been practicable he would have given money out of his own pocket to the ruined struggler. He saw himself as a merciless victor; he seemed

to have his heel on the other man's head, and to crush, crush—

At Christmas he was obliged to engage a second assistant. Alchin did not conceal his dislike of this step, but he ended by admitting it to be necessary. At first, the new state of things did not work quite smoothly; Alchin was inclined to an imperious manner, which the new-comer, by name Goff, now and then plainly resented. But in a day or two they were on fair terms, and ere long they became cordial.

Then befell the incident of Mrs Cross' Martha.

Not without uneasiness had Warburton suggested a servant on the recommendation of Mrs Hopper, but credentials seemed to be fairly good, and when, after a week or two, Mrs Cross declared herself more than satisfied, he blessed his good luck. Long ago he had ceased to look for the reappearance at the shop of Bertha Cross; he thought of the girl now and then, generally reverting in memory to that day when he had followed her and her mother into Kew Gardens—a recollection which had lost all painfulness, and shone idyllically in summer sunlight; but it mattered nothing to him that Bertha showed herself no more. Of course she knew his story from Rosarand, and in all likelihood she felt her self-respect concerned in hold aloof from an acquaintance of his ambiguous standing. It mattered not a jot.

Yet when the tragic-comedy of Martha's outbreak unexpectedly introduced him to the house at Walham Green, he experienced a sudden revival of the emotions of a year ago. After his brief meeting with Bertha, he did not go straight back to the shop, but wandered a little quiet by ways thinking hard and smiling. Nothing more grotesque than the picture of Mrs Cross amid her shattered crockery, Mrs Cross pointing to the prostrate Martha, Mrs Cross putting forth the chronicle of her woes; but Mrs Cross' daughter was not involved in this scene of pantomime; she walked across the stage, but independently, with a simple dignity proof against pity or ludicrous circumstance. If anyone could see the laughable side of such domestic squalor, assuredly it was Bertha herself, of that, Will felt assured. Did he not remember her smile when she had to discuss prices and qualities in the shop? Not many girls smile with so much implication of humorous comment.

He had promised to look out for another servant, but hardly knew how to go to work. First of all, Mrs Hopper was summoned to an interview in the parlour behind the shop, and Martha's case was fully discussed. With much protesting and circumlocution, Mrs Hopper brought herself at length to take that Martha had been known to "take too much," but that was so long ago, and the girl had solemnly declared, etc., etc. However, as luck would have it, she did know of another girl, a really good general servant, who had only just

been thrown out of a place by the death of her mistress, and who was living at home in Kentish Town. Thither sped Warburton; he saw the girl and her mother, and, on returning, sent a note to Mrs Cross, in which he detailed all he had learnt concerning the new applicant. At the close he wrote: "You are aware, I think, that the name under which I do business is not my own. Permit me, in writing to you on a private matter, to use my own signature"—which accordingly followed. Moreover, he dated the letter from his lodgings, not from the shop.

The next day brought him a reply; he found it on his breakfast table, and broke the envelope with amused curiosity. Mrs Cross wrote that "Sarah Walker" had been to see her, and if inquiries proved satisfactory would be engaged. "We are very greatly obliged for the trouble you have taken. Many thanks for your kind inquiries as to my health. I am glad to say that the worst of the shock has passed away, though I fear that I shall long continue to feel its effects." A few remarks followed on the terrible difficulties of the servant question; then "Should you be disengaged on Sunday next, we shall be glad if you will take a cup of tea with us."

Over his coffee and egg, Will pondered this invitation. It pleased him, undeniably, but caused him no undue excitement. He would have liked to know in what degree Mrs Cross' daughter was a consenting party to the step. Perhaps she felt that, after the services he had rendered, the least one could do was to invite him to tea. Why should he refuse? Before going to business he wrote a brief acceptance. During the day a doubt now and then troubled him as to whether he had behaved discreetly, but on the whole he looked forward to Sunday with pleasant expectation.

How should he equip himself? Should he go dressed as he would have gone to the Pomfret's, in his easy walking attire, jacket, and soft felt? Or did the circumstances dictate climber-put and frock-coat? He scoffed at himself for flitting over the point; yet perhaps it had a certain importance. After deciding for the informal costume, at the last moment he altered his mind, and went arrayed as society demands. With the result that, on entering the little parlour—that name suited it much better than drawing-room—he felt over-dressed, pompous, generally absurd. His cylinder seemed to be about three feet high; his gloves stared their newness; the tails of his coat felt as though they wrapped several times round his legs, and still left enough to trail upon the floor as he sat on a chair too low for him. Never since the most awkward stages of boyhood had he felt so little at ease "in company." And he had a conviction that Bertha Cross was laughing at him. Her smile was too persistent; it could only be explained as a compromise threatening merriment.

(To be Continued.)

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