

CHAPTER XVIII.

A BRICK TURNS UP.

The snow had been all night falling silently over the long elm avenues of Springdale.

It was one of those soft, moist, dreamy snow-falls, which come down in great loose feathers, resting in magical frost-work on every tree, shrub, and plant, and seeming to bring down with it the purity and peace of upper worlds.

Grace's little cottage on Elm Street was imbosomed, as New-England cottages are apt to be, in a tangle of shrubbery, evergreens, syringas, and lilacs; which, on such occasions, become bowers of enchantment when the morning sun looks through them.

Grace came into her parlor, which was cheery with the dazzling sunshine, and, running to the window, began to examine anxiously the state of her various greeneries, pausing from time to time to look out admiringly at the wonderful snow-landscape, with its many tremulous tints of rose, lilac, and amethyst.

The only thing wanting was some one to speak to about it; and, with a half sigh, she thought of the good old times when John would come to

her chamber-door in the morning, to get her out to look on scenes like this.

"Positively," she said to herself, "I must invite some one to visit me. One wants a friend to help one enjoy solitude." The stock of social life in Springdale, in fact, was running low. The Lennoxes and the Wilcoxes had gone to their Boston homes, and Rose Ferguson was visiting in New York, and Letitia found so much to do to supply her place to her father and mother, that she had less time than usual to share with Grace. Then, again, the Elm-street cottage was a walk of some considerable distance; whereas, when Grace lived at the old homestead, the Fergusons were so near as to seem only one family, and were dropping in at all hours of the day and evening.

"Whom can I send for?" thought Grace to herself; and she ran over mentally, in a moment, the list of available friends and acquaintances. Reader, perhaps you have never really estimated your friends, till you have tried them by the question, which of them you could ask to come and spend a week or fortnight with you, alone in a country-house, in the depth of winter. Such an invitation supposes great faith in your friend, in yourself, or in human nature.

Grace, at the moment, was unable to think of anybody whom she could call from the approaching festivities of holiday life in the cities to share her snow Patmos with her; so she opened a book for company, and turned to where her dainty breakfast-table, with its hot coffee and

crisp rolls, stood invitingly waiting for her before the cheerful open fire.

At this moment, she saw, what she had not noticed before, a letter lying on her breakfast plate. Grace took it up with an exclamation of surprise; which, however, was heard only by her canary birds and her plants.

Years before, when Grace was in the first summer of her womanhood, she had been very intimate with Walter Sydenham, and thoroughly esteemed and liked him; but, as many another good girl has done, about those days she had conceived it her duty not to think of marriage, but to devote herself to making a home for her widowed father and her brother. There was a certain romance of self-abnegation in this disposition of herself which was rather pleasant to Grace, and in which both the gentlemen concerned found great advantage. As long as her father lived, and John was unmarried and devoted to her, she had never regretted it.

Sydenham had gone to seek his fortune in California. He had begged to keep up intercourse by correspondence; but Grace was not one of those women who are willing to drain the heart of the man they refuse to marry, by keeping up with him just that degree of intimacy which prevents his seeking another. Grace had meant her refusal to be final, and had sincerely hoped that he would find happiness with some other woman; and to that intent had rigorously denied herself and him a

correspondence: yet, from time to time, she had heard of him through an occasional letter to John, or by a chance Californian newspaper. Since John's marriage had so altered her course of life, Grace had thought of him more frequently, and with some questionings as to the wisdom of her course.

This letter was from him; and we shall give our readers the benefit of it:--

"DEAR GRACE,--You must pardon me this beginning,--in the old style of other days; for though many years have passed, in which I have been trying to walk in your ways, and keep all your commandments, I have never yet been able to do as you directed, and forget you: and here I am, beginning 'Dear Grace,'--just where I left off on a certain evening long, long ago. I wonder if you remember it as plainly as I do. I am just the same fellow that I was then and there. If you remember, you admitted that, were it not for other duties, you might have considered my humble supplication. I gathered that it would not have been impossible per se, as metaphysicians say, to look with favor on your humble servant.

"Gracie, I have been living, I trust, not unworthily of you. Your photograph has been with me round the world,--in the miner's tent, on shipboard, among scenes where barbarous men do congregate; and everywhere it has been a presence, 'to warn, to comfort, to command;' and if I have come out of many trials firmer, better, more established

in right than before; if I am more believing in religion, and in every way grounded and settled in the way you would have me,--it has been your spiritual presence and your power over me that has done it. Besides that, I may as well tell you, I have never given up the hope that by and by you would see all this, and in some hour give me a different answer.

"When, therefore, I learned of your father's death, and afterwards of John's marriage, I thought it was time for me to return again. I have come to New York, and, if you do not forbid, shall come to Springdale.

"Will you be a little glad to see me, Gracie? Why not? We are both alone now. Let us take hands, and walk the same path together. Shall we?"

"Yours till death, and after,

"WALTER SYDENHAM."

Would she? To say the truth, the question as asked now had a very different air from the question as asked years before, when, full of life and hope and enthusiasm, she had devoted herself to making an ideal home for her father and brother. What other sympathy or communion, she had asked herself then, should she ever need than these friends, so very dear: and, if she needed more, there, in the future, was John's ideal wife, who, somehow, always came before her in the

likeness of Rose Ferguson, and John's ideal children, whom she was sure she should love and pet as if they were her own.

And now here she was, in a house all by herself, coming down to her meals, one after another, without the excitement of a cheerful face opposite to her, and with all possibility of confidential intercourse with her brother entirely cut off. Lillie, in this matter, acted, with much grace and spirit, the part of the dog in the manger; and, while she resolutely refused to enter into any of John's literary or intellectual tastes, seemed to consider her wifely rights infringed upon by any other woman who would. She would absolutely refuse to go up with her husband and spend an evening with Grace, alleging it was "pokey and stupid," and that they always got talking about things that she didn't care any thing about. If, then, John went without her to spend the evening, he was sure to be received, on his return, with a dead and gloomy silence, more fearful, sometimes, than the most violent of objurgations. That look of patient, heart-broken woe, those long-drawn sighs, were a reception that he dreaded, to say the truth, a great deal more than a direct attack, or any fault-finding to which he could have replied; and so, on the whole, John made up his mind that the best thing he could do was to stay at home and rock the cradle of this fretful baby, whose wisdom-teeth were so hard to cut, and so long in coming. It was a pretty baby; and when made the sole and undivided object of attention, when every thing possible was done for it by everybody in the house, condescended often to be very graceful and winning and playful, and had numberless charming little

ways and tricks. The difference between Lillie in good humor and Lillie in bad humor was a thing which John soon learned to appreciate as one of the most powerful forces in his life. If you knew, my dear reader, that by pursuing a certain course you could bring upon yourself a drizzling, dreary, north-east rain-storm, and by taking heed to your ways you could secure sunshine, flowers, and bird-singing, you would be very careful, after a while, to keep about you the right atmospheric temperature; and, if going to see the very best friend you had on earth was sure to bring on a fit of rheumatism or tooth-ache, you would soon learn to be very sparing of your visits. For this reason it was that Grace saw very little of John; that she never now had a sisterly conversation with him; that she preferred arranging all those little business matters, in which it would be convenient to have a masculine appeal, solely and singly by herself. The thing was never referred to in any conversation between them. It was perfectly understood without words. There are friends between whom and us has shut the coffin-lid; and there are others between whom and us stand sacred duties, considerations never to be enough revered, which forbid us to seek their society, or to ask to lean on them either in joy or sorrow: the whole thing as regards them must be postponed until the future life. Such had been Grace's conclusion with regard to her brother. She well knew that any attempt to restore their former intimacy would only diminish and destroy what little chance of happiness yet remained to him; and it may therefore be imagined with what changed eyes she read Walter Sydenham's letter from those of years ago.

There was a sound of stamping feet at the front door; and John came in, all ruddy and snow-powdered, but looking, on the whole, uncommonly cheerful.

"Well, Gracie," he said, "the fact is, I shall have to let Lillie go to New York for a week or two, to see those Follingsbees. Hang them! But what's the matter, Gracie? Have you been crying, or sitting up all night reading, or what?"

The fact was, that Gracie had for once been indulging in a good cry, rather pitying herself for her loneliness, now that the offer of relief had come. She laughed, though; and, handing John her letter, said,--

"Look here, John! here's a letter I have just had from Walter Sydenham."

John broke out into a loud, hilarious laugh.

"The blessed old brick!" said he. "Has he turned up again?"

"Read the letter, John," said Grace. "I don't know exactly how to answer it."

John read the letter, and seemed to grow more and more quiet as he

read it. Then he came and stood by Grace, and stroked her hair gently.

"I wish, Gracie dear," he said, "you had asked my advice about this matter years ago. You loved Walter,--I can see you did; and you sent him off on my account. It is just too bad! Of all the men I ever knew, he was the one I should have been best pleased to have you marry!"

"It was not wholly on your account, John. You know there was our father," said Grace.

"Yes, yes, Gracie; but he would have preferred to see you well married. He would not have been so selfish, nor I either. It is your self-abnegation, you dear over-good women, that makes us men seem selfish. We should be as good as you are, if you would give us the chance. I think, Gracie, though you're not aware of it, there is a spice of Pharisaism in the way in which you good girls allow us men to swallow you up without ever telling us what you are doing. I often wondered about your intimacy with Sydenham, and why it never came to any thing; and I can but half forgive you. How selfish I must have seemed!"

"Oh, no, John! indeed not."

"Come, you needn't put on these meek airs. I insist upon it, you have been feeling self-righteous and abused," said John, laughing; "but 'all's well that ends well.' Sit down, now, and write him a real

sensible letter, like a nice honest woman as you are."

"And say, 'Yes, sir, and thank you too?'" said Grace, laughing.

"Well, something in that way," said John. "You can fence it in with as many make-believes as is proper. And now, Gracie, this is deuced lucky! You see Sydenham will be down here at once; and it wouldn't be exactly the thing for you to receive him at this house, and our only hotel is perfectly impracticable in winter; and that brings me to what I am here about. Lillie is going to New York to spend the holidays; and I wanted you to shut up, and come up and keep house for us. You see you have only one servant, and we have four to be looked after. You can bring your maid along, and then I will invite Walter to our house, where he will have a clear field; and you can settle all your matters between you."

"So Lillie is going to the Follingsbees'?" said Grace.

"Yes: she had a long, desperately sentimental letter from Mrs. Follingsbee, urging, imploring, and entreating, and setting forth all the splendors and glories of New York. Between you and me, it strikes me that that Mrs. Follingsbee is an affected goose; but I couldn't say so to Lillie, 'by no manner of means.' She professes an untold amount of admiration and friendship for Lillie, and sets such brilliant prospects before her, that I should be the most hard-hearted old Turk in existence if I were to raise any objections; and, in fact, Lillie

is quite brilliant in anticipation, and makes herself so delightful that I am almost sorry that I agreed to let her go."

"When shall you want me, John?"

"Well, this evening, say; and, by the way, couldn't you come up and see Lillie a little while this morning? She sent her love to you, and said she was so hurried with packing, and all that, that she wanted you to excuse her not calling."

"Oh, yes! I'll come," said Grace, good-naturedly, "as soon as I have had time to put things in a little order."

"And write your letter," said John, gayly, as he went out. "Don't forget that."

Grace did not forget the letter; but we shall not indulge our readers with any peep over her shoulder, only saying that, though written with an abundance of precaution, it was one with which Walter Sydenham was well satisfied.

Then she made her few arrangements in the house-keeping line, called in her grand vizier and prime minister from the kitchen, and held with her a counsel of ways and means; put on her india-rubbers and Polish boots, and walked up through the deep snow-drifts to the Springdale post-office, where she dropped the fateful letter with a good heart on

the whole; and then she went on to John's, the old home, to offer any parting services to Lillie that might be wanted.

It is rather amusing, in any family circle, to see how some one member, by dint of persistent exactions, comes to receive always, in all the exigencies of life, an amount of attention and devotion which is never rendered back. Lillie never thought of such a thing as offering any services of any sort to Grace. Grace might have packed her trunks to go to the moon, or the Pacific Ocean, quite alone for matter of any help Lillie would ever have thought of. If Grace had headache or tooth-ache or a bad cold, Lillie was always "so sorry;" but it never occurred to her to go and sit with her, to read to her, or offer any of a hundred little sisterly offices. When she was in similar case, John always summoned Grace to sit with Lillie during the hours that his business necessarily took him from her. It really seemed to be John's impression that a tooth-ache or headache of Lillie's was something entirely different from the same thing with Grace, or any other person in the world; and Lillie fully shared the impression.

Grace found the little empress quite bewildered in her multiplicity of preparations, and neglected details, all of which had been deferred to the last day; and Rosa and Anna and Bridget, in fact the whole staff, were all busy in getting her off.

"So good of you to come, Gracie!" and, "If you would do this;" and,

"Won't you see to that?" and, "If you could just do the other!" and Grace both could and would, and did what no other pair of hands could in the same time. John apologized for the lack of any dinner. "The fact is, Gracie, Bridget had to be getting up a lot of her things that were forgotten till the last moment; and I told her not to mind, we could do on a cold lunch." Bridget herself had become so wholly accustomed to the ways of her little mistress, that it now seemed the most natural thing in the world that the whole house should be upset for her.

But, at last, every thing was ready and packed; the trunks and boxes shut and locked, and the keys sorted; and John and Lillie were on their way to the station.

"I shall find out Walter in New York, and bring him back with me," said John, cheerily, as he parted from Grace in the hall. "I leave you to get things all to rights for us."

It would not have been a very agreeable or cheerful piece of work to tidy the disordered house and take command of the domestic forces under any other circumstances; but now Grace found it a very nice diversion to prevent her thoughts from running too curiously on this future meeting. "After all," she thought to herself, "he is just the same venturesome, imprudent creature that he always was, jumping to conclusions, and insisting on seeing every thing in his own way. How could he dare write me such a letter without seeing me? Ten years

make great changes. How could he be sure he would like me?" And she examined herself somewhat critically in the looking-glass.

"Well," she said, "he may thank me for it that we are not engaged, and that he comes only as an old friend, and perfectly free, for all he has said, to be nothing more, unless on seeing each other we are so agreed. I am so sorry the old place is all demolished and be-Frenchified. It won't look natural to him; and I am not the kind of person to harmonize with these cold, polished, glistening, slippery surroundings, that have no home life or association in them."

But Grace had to wake from these reflections to culinary counsels with Bridget, and to arrangements of apartments with Rosa. Her own exacting carefulness followed the careless footsteps of the untrained handmaids, and rearranged every plait and fold; so that by nightfall the next day she was thoroughly tired.

She beguiled the last moments, while waiting for the coming of the cars, in arranging her hair, and putting on one of those wonderful Parisian dresses, which adapt themselves so precisely to the air of the wearer that they seem to be in themselves works of art. Then she stood with a fluttering color to see the carriage drive up to the door, and the two get out of it.

It is almost too bad to spy out such meetings, and certainly one has no business to describe them; but Walter Sydenham carried all before

him, by an old habit which he had of taking all and every thing for granted, as, from the first moment, he did with Grace. He had no idea of hesitations or holdings off, and would have none; and met Gracie as if they had parted only yesterday, and as if her word to him always had been yes, instead of no.

In fact, they had not been together five minutes before the whole life of youth returned to them both,--that indestructible youth which belongs to warm hearts and buoyant spirits.

Such a merry evening as they had of it! When John, as the wood fire burned low on the hearth, with some excuse of letters to write in his library, left them alone together, Walter put on her finger a diamond ring, saying,--

"There, Gracie! now, when shall it be? You see you've kept me waiting so long that I can't spare you much time. I have an engagement to be in Montreal the first of February, and I couldn't think of going alone. They have merry times there in midwinter; and I'm sure it will be ever so much nicer for you than keeping house alone here."

Grace said, of course, that it was impossible; but Walter declared that doing the impossible was precisely in his line, and pushed on his various advantages with such spirit and energy that, when they parted for the night, Grace said she would think of it: which promise, at the breakfast-table next morning, was interpreted by the unblushing

Walter, and reported to John, as a full consent. Before noon that day, Walter had walked up with John and Grace to take a survey of the cottage, and had given John indefinite power to engage workmen and artificers to rearrange and enlarge and beautify it for their return after the wedding journey. For the rest of the visit, all the three were busy with pencil and paper, projecting balconies, bow-windows, pantries, library, and dining-room, till the old cottage so blossomed out in imagination as to leave only a germ of its former self.

Walter's visit brought back to John a deal of the warmth and freedom which he had not known since he married. We often live under an insensible pressure of which we are made aware only by its removal. John had been so much in the habit lately of watching to please Lillie, of measuring and checking his words or actions, that he now bubbled over with a wild, free delight in finding himself alone with Grace and Walter. He laughed, sang, whistled, skipped upstairs two at a time, and scarcely dared to say even to himself why he was so happy. He did not face himself with that question, and went dutifully to the library at stated times to write to Lillie, and made much of her little letters.