

CHAPTER XXVII.

CHECKMATE.

If ever our readers have observed two chess-players, both ardent, skilful, determined, who have been carrying on noiselessly the moves of a game, they will understand the full significance of this decisive term.

Up to this point, there is hope, there is energy, there is enthusiasm; the pieces are marshalled and managed with good courage. At last, perhaps in an unexpected moment, one, two, three adverse moves follow each other, and the decisive words, check-mate, are uttered.

This is a symbol of what often goes on in the game of life.

Here is a man going on, indefinitely, conscious in his own heart that he is not happy in his domestic relations. There is a want of union between him and his wife. She is not the woman that meets his wants or his desires; and in the intercourse of life they constantly cross and annoy each other. But still he does not allow himself to look the matter fully in the face. He goes on and on, hoping that to-morrow will bring something better than to-day,--hoping that this thing or that thing or the other thing will bring a change, and that in some indefinite future all will round and fashion itself to his desires.

It is very slowly that a man awakens from the illusions of his first love. It is very unwillingly that he ever comes to the final conclusion that he has made there the mistake of a whole lifetime, and that the woman to whom he gave his whole heart not only is not the woman that he supposed her to be, but never in any future time, nor by any change of circumstances, will become that woman; for then the difficulty seems radical and final and hopeless.

In "The Pilgrim's Progress," we read that the poor man, Christian, tried to persuade his wife to go with him on the pilgrimage to the celestial city; but that finally he had to make up his mind to go alone without her. Such is the lot of the man who is brought to the conclusion, positively and definitely, that his wife is always to be a hinderance, and never a help to him, in any upward aspiration; that whatever he does that is needful and right and true must be done, not by her influence, but in spite of it; that, if he has to swim against the hard, upward current of the river of life, he must do so with her hanging on his arm, and holding him back, and that he cannot influence and cannot control her.

Such hours of disclosure to a man are among the terrible hidden tragedies of life,--tragedies such as are never acted on the stage. Such a time of disclosure came to John the year after Grace's marriage; and it came in this way:--

The Spindlewood property had long been critically situated. Sundry

financial changes which were going, on in the country had depreciated its profits, and affected it unfavorably. All now depended upon the permanency of one commercial house. John had been passing through an interval of great anxiety. He could not tell Lillie his trouble. He had been for months past nervously watching all the in-comings and outgoings of his family, arranged on a scale of reckless expenditure, which he felt entirely powerless to control. Lillie's wishes were importunate. She was nervous and hysterical, wholly incapable of listening to reason; and the least attempt to bring her to change any of her arrangements, or to restrict any of her pleasures, brought tears and faintings and distresses and scenes of domestic confusion which he shrank from. He often tried to set before her the possibility that they might be obliged, for a time at least, to live in a different manner; but she always resisted every such supposition as so frightful, so dreadful, that he was utterly discouraged, and put off and off, hoping that the evil day never might arrive.

But it did come at last. One morning, when he received by mail the tidings of the failure of the great house of Clapham & Co., he knew that the time had come when the thing could no longer be staved off. He was an indorser to a large amount on the paper of this house; and the crisis was inevitable.

It was inevitable also that he must acquaint Lillie with the state of his circumstances; for she was going on with large arrangements and calculations for a Newport campaign, and sending the usual orders to

New York, to her milliner and dressmaker, for her summer outfit. It was a cruel thing for him to be obliged to interrupt all this; for she seemed perfectly cheerful and happy in it, as she always was when preparing to go on a pleasure-seeking expedition. But it could not be. All this luxury and indulgence must be cut off at a stroke. He must tell her that she could not go to Newport; that there was no money for new dresses or new finery; that they should probably be obliged to move out of their elegant house, and take a smaller one, and practise for some time a rigid economy.

John came into Lillie's elegant apartments, which glittered like a tulip-bed with many colored sashes and ribbons, with sheeny silks and misty laces, laid out in order to be surveyed before packing.

"Gracious me, John! what on earth is the matter with you to-day? How perfectly awful and solemn you do look!"

"I have had bad news, this morning, Lillie, which I must tell you."

"Oh, dear me, John! what is the matter? Nobody is dead, I hope!"

"No, Lillie; but I am afraid you will have to give up your Newport journey."

"Gracious, goodness, John! what for?"

"To say the truth, Lillie, I cannot afford it."

"Can't afford it? Why not? Why, John, what is the matter?"

"Well, Lillie, just read this letter!"

Lillie took it, and read it with her hands trembling.

"Well, dear me, John! I don't see any thing in this letter. If they have failed, I don't see what that is to you!"

"But, Lillie, I am indorser for them."

"How very silly of you, John! What made you indorse for them? Now that is too bad; it just makes me perfectly miserable to think of such things. I know I should not have done so; but I don't see why you need pay it. It is their business, anyhow."

"But, Lillie, I shall have to pay it. It is a matter of honor and honesty to do it; because I engaged to do it."

"Well, I don't see why that should be! It isn't your debt; it is their debt: and why need you do it? I am sure Dick Follingsbee said that there were ways in which people could put their property out of their hands when they got caught in such scrapes as this. Dick knows just how to manage. He told me of plenty of people that had done that, who

were living splendidly, and who were received everywhere; and people thought just as much of them."

"O Lillie, Lillie! my child," said John; "you don't know any thing of what you are talking about! That would be dishonorable, and wholly out of the question. No, Lillie dear, the fact is," he said, with a great gulp, and a deep sigh,--"the fact is, I have failed; but I am going to fail honestly. If I have nothing else left, I will have my honor and my conscience. But we shall have to give up this house, and move into a smaller one. Every thing will have to be given up to the creditors to settle the business. And then, when all is arranged, we must try to live economically some way; and perhaps we can make it up again. But you see, dear, there can be no more of this kind of expenses at present," he said, pointing to the dresses and jewelry on the bed.

"Well, John, I am sure I had rather die!" said Lillie, gathering herself into a little white heap, and tumbling into the middle of the bed. "I am sure if we have got to rub and scrub and starve so, I had rather die and done with it; and I hope I shall."

John crossed his arms, and looked gloomily out of the window.

"Perhaps you had better," he said. "I am sure I should be glad to."

"Yes, I dare say!" said Lillie; "that is all you care for me. Now there is Dick Follingsbee, he would be taking care of his wife. Why,

he has failed three or four times, and always come out richer than he was before!"

"He is a swindler and a rascal!" said John; "that is what he is."

"I don't care if he is," said Lillie, sobbing. "His wife has good times, and goes into the very first society in New York. People don't care, so long as you are rich, what you do. Well, I am sure I can't do any thing about it. I don't know how to live without money,--that's a fact! and I can't learn. I suppose you would be glad to see me rubbing around in old calico dresses, wouldn't you? and keeping only one girl, and going into the kitchen, like Miss Dotty Peabody? I think I see myself! And all just for one of your Quixotic notions, when you might just as well keep all your money as not. That is what it is to marry a reformer! I never have had any peace of my life on account of your conscience, always something or other turning up that you can't act like anybody else. I should think, at least, you might have contrived to settle this place on me and poor little Lillie, that we might have a house to put our heads in."

"Lillie, Lillie," said John, "this is too much! Don't you think that I suffer at all?"

"I don't see that you do," said Lillie, sobbing. "I dare say you are glad of it; it is just like you. Oh, dear, I wish I had never been married!"

"I certainly do," said John, fervently.

"I suppose so. You see, it is nothing to you men; you don't care any thing about these things. If you can get a musty old corner and your books, you are perfectly satisfied; and you don't know when things are pretty, and when they are not: and so you can talk grand about your honor and your conscience and all that. I suppose the carriages and horses have got to be sold too?"

"Certainly, Lillie," said John, hardening his heart and his tone.

"Well, well," she said, "I wish you would go now and send ma to me. I don't want to talk about it any more. My head aches as if it would split. Poor ma! She little thought when I married you that it was going to come to this."

John walked out of the room gloomily enough. He had received this morning his check-mate. All illusion was at an end. The woman that he had loved and idolized and caressed and petted and indulged, in whom he had been daily and hourly disappointed since he was married, but of whom he still hoped and hoped, he now felt was of a nature not only unlike, but opposed to his own. He felt that he could neither love nor respect her further. And yet she was his wife, and the mother of his daughter, and the only queen of his household; and he had solemnly promised at God's altar that "forsaking all others, he would

keep only unto her, so long as they both should live, for better, for worse," John muttered to himself,--"for better, for worse. This is the worse; and oh, it is dreadful!"

In all John's hours of sorrow and trouble, the instinctive feeling of his heart was to go back to the memory of his mother; and the nearest to his mother was his sister Grace. In this hour of his blind sorrow, he walked directly over to the little cottage on Elm Street, which Grace and her husband had made a perfectly ideal home.

When he came into the parlor, Grace and Rose were sitting together with an open letter lying between them. It was evident that some crisis of tender confidence had passed between them; for the tears were hardly dry on Rose's cheeks. Yet it was not painful, whatever it was; for her face was radiant with smiles, and John thought he had never seen her look so lovely. At this moment the truth of her beautiful and lovely womanhood, her sweetness and nobleness of nature, came over him, in bitter contrast with the scene he had just passed through, and the woman he had left.

"What do you think, John?" said Grace; "we have some congratulations here to give! Rose is engaged to Harry Endicott."

"Indeed!" said John, "I wish her joy."

"But what is the matter, John?" said both women, looking up, and

seeing something unusual in his face.

"Oh, trouble!" said John,--"trouble upon us all. Gracie and Rose, the Spindlewood Mills have failed."

"Is it possible?" was the exclamation of both.

"Yes, indeed!" said John; "you see, the thing has been running very close for the last six months; and the manufacturing business has been looking darker and darker. But still we could have stood it if the house of Clapham & Co. had stood; but they have gone to smash, Gracie. I had a letter this morning, telling me of it."

Both women stood a moment as if aghast; for the Ferguson property was equally involved.

"Poor papa!" said Rose; "this will come hard on him."

"I know it," said John, bitterly. "It is more for others that I feel than for myself,--for all that are involved must suffer with me."

"But, after all, John dear," said Rose, "don't feel so about us at any rate. We shall do very well. People that fail honorably always come right side up at last; and, John, how good it is to think, whatever you lose, you cannot lose your best treasure,--your true noble heart, and your true friends. I feel this minute that we shall all know

each other better, and be more precious to each other for this very trouble."

John looked at her through his tears.

"Dear Rose," he said, "you are an angel; and from my soul I congratulate the man that has got you. He that has you would be rich, if he lost the whole world."

"You are too good to me, all of you," said Rose. "But now, John, about that bad news--let me break it to papa and mamma; I think I can do it best. I know when they feel brightest in the day; and I don't want it to come on them suddenly: but I can put it in the very best way. How fortunate that I am just engaged to Harry! Harry is a perfect prince in generosity. You don't know what a good heart he has; and it happens so fortunately that we have him to lean on just now. Oh, I'm sure we shall find a way out of these troubles, never fear." And Rose took the letter, and left John and Grace together.

"O Gracie, Gracie!" said John, throwing himself down on the old chintz sofa, and burying his face in his hands, "what a woman there is! O Gracie! I wish I was dead! Life is played out with me. I haven't the least desire to live. I can't get a step farther."

"O John, John! don't talk so!" said Grace, stooping over him. "Why, you will recover from this! You are young and strong. It will be

settled; and you can work your way up again."

"It is not the money, Grace; I could let that go. It is that I have nothing to live for,--nobody and nothing. My wife, Gracie! she is worse than nothing,--worse, oh! infinitely worse than nothing! She is a chain and a shackle. She is my obstacle. She tortures me and hinders me every way and everywhere. There will never be a home for me where she is; and, because she is there, no other woman can make a home for me. Oh, I wish she would go away, and stay away! I would not care if I never saw her face again."

There was something shocking and terrible to Grace about this outpouring. It was dreadful to her to be the recipient of such a confidence, to hear these words spoken, and to more than suspect their truth. She was quite silent for a few moments, as he still lay with his face down, buried in the sofa-pillow.

Then she went to her writing-desk, took out a little ivory miniature of their mother, came and sat down by him, and laid her hand on his head.

"John," she said, "look at this."

He raised his head, took it from her hand, and looked at it. Soon she saw the tears dropping over it.

"John," she said, "let me say to you now what I think our mother would have said. The great object of life is not happiness; and, when we have lost our own personal happiness, we have not lost all that life is worth living for. No, John, the very best of life often lies beyond that. When we have learned to let ourselves go, then we may find that there is a better, a nobler, and a truer life for us."

"I have given up," said John in a husky voice. "I have lost all."

"Yes," replied Grace, steadily, "I know perfectly well that there is very little hope of personal and individual happiness for you in your marriage for years to come. Instead of a companion, a friend, and a helper, you have a moral invalid to take care of. But, John, if Lillie had been stricken with blindness, or insanity, or paralysis, you would not have shrunk from your duty to her; and, because the blindness and paralysis are moral, you will not shrink from it, will you? You sacrifice all your property to pay an indorsement for a debt that is not yours; and why do you do it? Because society rests on every man's faithfulness to his engagements. John, if you stand by a business engagement with this faithfulness, how much more should you stand by that great engagement which concerns all other families and the stability of all society. Lillie is your wife. You were free to choose; and you chose her. She is the mother of your child; and, John, what that daughter is to be depends very much on the steadiness with which you fulfil your duties to the mother. I know that Lillie is a most undeveloped and uncongenial person; I know how little you have in

common: but your duties are the same as if she were the best and the most congenial of wives. It is every man's duty to make the best of his marriage."

"But, Gracie," said John, "is there any thing to be made of her?"

"You will never make me believe, John, that there are any human beings absolutely without the capability of good. They may be very dark, and very slow to learn, and very far from it; but steady patience and love and well-doing will at last tell upon any one."

"But, Gracie, if you could have heard how utterly without principle she is: urging me to put my property out of my hands dishonestly, to keep her in luxury!"

"Well, John, you must have patience with her. Consider that she has been unfortunate in her associates. Consider that she has been a petted child all her life, and that you have helped to pet her. Consider how much your sex always do to weaken the moral sense of women, by liking and admiring them for being weak and foolish and inconsequent, so long as it is pretty and does not come in your way. I do not mean you in particular, John; but I mean that the general course of society releases pretty women from any sense of obligation to be constant in duty, or brave in meeting emergencies. You yourself have encouraged Lillie to live very much like a little humming-bird."

"Well, I thought," said John, "that she would in time develop into something better."

"Well, there lies your mistake; you expected too much. The work of years is not to be undone in a moment; and you must take into account that this is Lillie's first adversity. You may as well make up your mind not to expect her to be reasonable. It seems to me that we can make up our minds to bear any thing that we know must come; and you may as well make up yours, that, for a long time, you will have to carry Lillie as a burden. But then, you must think that she is your daughter's mother, and that it is very important for the child that she should respect and honor her mother. You must treat her with respect and honor, even in her weaknesses. We all must. We all must help Lillie as we can to bear this trial, and sympathize with her in it, unreasonable as she may seem; because, after all, John, it is a real trial to her."

"I cannot see, for my part," said John, "that she loves any thing."

"The power of loving may be undeveloped in her, John; but it will come, perhaps, later in life. At all events take this comfort to yourself,--that, when you are doing your duty by your wife, when you are holding her in her place in the family, and teaching her child to respect and honor her, you are putting her in God's school of love. If we contend with and fly from our duties, simply because they gall us and burden us, we go against every thing; but if we take them up

bravely, then every thing goes with us. God and good angels and good men and all good influences are working with us when we are working for the right. And in this way, John, you may come to happiness; or, if you do not come to personal happiness, you may come to something higher and better. You know that you think it nobler to be an honest man than a rich man; and I am sure that you will think it better to be a good man than to be a happy one. Now, dear John, it is not I that say these things, I think; but it seems to me it is what our mother would say, if she should speak to you from where she is. And then, dear brother, it will all be over soon, this life-battle; and the only thing is, to come out victorious."

"Gracie, you are right," said John, rising up: "I see it myself. I will brace up to my duty. Couldn't you try and pacify Lillie a little, poor girl? I suppose I have been rough with her."

"Oh, yes, John, I will go up and talk with Lillie, and condole with her; and perhaps we shall bring her round. And then when my husband comes home next week, we'll have a family palaver, and he will find some ways and means of setting this business straight, that it won't be so bad as it looks now. There may be arrangements made when the creditors come together. My impression is that, whenever people find a man really determined to arrange a matter of this kind honorably, they are all disposed to help him; so don't be cast down about the business. As for Lillie's discontent, treat it as you would the crying of your little daughter for its sugar-plums, and do not expect any

thing more of her just now than there is."

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We have brought our story up to this point. We informed our readers in the beginning that it was not a novel, but a story with a moral; and, as people pick all sorts of strange morals out of stories, we intend to put conspicuously into our story exactly what the moral of it is.

Well, then, it has been very surprising to us to see in these our times that some people, who really at heart have the interest of women upon their minds, have been so short-sighted and reckless as to clamor for an easy dissolution of the marriage-contract, as a means of righting their wrongs. Is it possible that they do not see that this is a liberty which, once granted, would always tell against the weaker sex? If the woman who finds that she has made a mistake, and married a man unkind or uncongenial, may, on the discovery of it, leave him and seek her fortune with another, so also may a man. And what will become of women like Lillie, when the first gilding begins to wear off, if the man who has taken one of them shall be at liberty to cast her off and seek another? Have we not enough now of miserable, broken-winged butterflies, that sink down, down, down into the mud of the street? But are women-reformers going to clamor for having every woman turned out helpless, when the man who has married her, and made her a mother, discovers that she has not the power to interest him, and to help his higher spiritual development? It was because woman is helpless and

weak, and because Christ was her great Protector, that he made the law of marriage irrevocable. "Whosoever putteth away his wife causeth her to commit adultery." If the sacredness of the marriage-contract did not hold, if the Church and all good men and all good women did not uphold it with their might and main, it is easy to see where the career of many women like Lillie would end. Men have the power to reflect before the choice is made; and that is the only proper time for reflection. But, when once marriage is made and consummated, it should be as fixed a fact as the laws of nature. And they who suffer under its stringency should suffer as those who endure for the public good. "He that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not, he shall enter into the tabernacle of the Lord."