

HENRY WOOD

IT MAY BE

TRUE, VOL. 3

(OF 3)

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Mrs. Henry Wood

It May Be True, Vol. 3 (of 3)

CHAPTER I. IS THERE A FATE IN IT?

*"The grief of slighted love, suppress'd,
Scarce dull'd her eye, scarce heav'd her breast;
Or if a tear, she strove to check,
A truant tear stole down her neck,
It seem'd a drop that, from his bill,
The linnets casts, beside a rill,
Flirting his sweet and tiny shower
Upon a milk-white April flower:—
Or if a sigh, breathed soft and low,
Escaped her fragrant lips; e'en so
The zephyr will, in heat of day,
Between two rose leaves fan its way."*

Colman.

Amy had been some three weeks at home, and as yet there had been no improvement in Mrs. Neville's health to justify her daughter's return to Brampton. There was the same lassitude, the same weariness. She would lie on the sofa day after day, with no bodily ailment save that of weakness, and an utter inability to get better, and apparently with no wish to do so. She never complained, but was ever grateful and content. It was as if life were waning away imperceptibly, and her spirits, which had always bravely struggled through all her trials and sorrows, had at last sunk never to rise again.

Amy seldom left her, but generally sat by her side, on a low footstool, reading or working. Sometimes Mrs. Neville would lay her hand gently on the fair masses of hair, and Amy, whose heart was very sorrowful, would hold her head lower still so that her tears might fall unseen.

There was something peculiarly tender and very pitying in the way the hand was placed on her head; at least Amy thought so, and strove more than ever to be cheerful, lest her mother, who lay so silently watching her, should guess at the secret grief in her heart which she was striving so hard, and she trusted successfully, to overcome; while, as yet, no word of it had passed between them. If Mrs. Neville thought her daughter's spirits less joyous, or her manner more quiet, while her eyes no longer flashed with their old bright expression, but at times drooped sadly under their long lashes, she said nothing; and Amy, while obliged sometimes to talk of her life at Brampton, never mentioned Charles's name; yet in the solitude of her own room she sometimes thought of him, and how as she had sat at one of the cross-stations, on her road from Standale, awaiting the arrival of the train that was to take her on to Ashleigh, she had seen Charles amongst the crowd hurrying into the one bound for Brampton; while she, soon afterwards, was speeding along over a part of the very way he had so recently travelled. Both had been waiting some twenty minutes at the same station, and yet neither had been near enough to speak, but had been as effectually separated as though miles had divided them, instead of so many yards. Strange fatality! which might have altered the future lives of both.

Yes, he had gone to Brampton the very morning she had left it: one half hour later on her part, and they would have met. She was glad she had not missed the train, and that they had not met. Glad

that she was absent from the park, and not obliged to see him day after day, or hear the children talk, as they sometimes did, of their uncle.

Julia often wrote to Amy all the chit-chat of the park. How Charles Linchmore had returned, and was often at Frances' side; and how the latter's airs had become more intolerable in consequence. How Anne snubbed Mr. Hall as much as ever; but was, in Julia's opinion, more pleased with him, and more contented to put up with his grave reproofs than she used to be; and how Julia thought it would be a match in the end, and wondered what kind of a clergyman's wife she would make. And lastly, that Mr. Vavasour had left the park.

Anne also wrote, but only once, and her letter was short; yet Amy read it over and over again, until she knew the last few lines by heart, and wondered what they meant; or whether they were hastily written, and had no point or hidden meaning, but were simply penned and then forgotten, as many things often were, that were said by Anne Bennet, in her quick impulsiveness. "Come back, Miss Neville," she wrote, "we all want you sadly. As for Charles, he is not himself, and will be lost!"

These were the words that troubled Amy, were ever at her heart all day, and chased away sleep from her pillow, until her tired overwrought brain relieved itself in silent, secret tears—tears far more painful than passionate sobs. Those are at the surface, and soon over, they cure grief by their very bitterness, and by the self-abandonment of the sufferer; the others lie deeper and break the heart.

These words of Anne's, whether incautiously written or not, determined Amy on not returning to Brampton, until Charles Linchmore's leave had expired; and that, she knew, must be in another week or so. If Miss Bennet meant he was fast losing his heart to Frances, and that Amy must go back to wean him away, how little she knew of the pride of her woman's nature. What! seek, or throw herself in the way of a man's love? Scarcely wooed, be won? Amy shrank at the very idea. No, if her love was worth having it was worth winning; and that,—not with the sternness of man's nature, not by the force of his strong will, not by exciting her jealousy with another, but by gentleness and kindness; and then her heart reverted to Robert Vavasour, and she wished she could love him, for had he not ever been kind to her? and gentle, very, even when she had pained him most.

He had been very kind to her, there was no doubt about that, not only to her, but for her sake to those most dear to her. At one time came some beautiful hot-house grapes, at another some delicate game. Little Sarah called them the gifts of the "good unknown."

The rail was open all the way to quiet Ashleigh now, and although the place did not boast of a railway van or even porter, still the station master always found some willing lad ready to take the basket to the cottage, and great was the excitement it caused to Sarah and even quiet old Hannah, but then the latter always knew her darling Miss Amy would marry an Earl at the very least.

Mrs. Neville never questioned, but looked more searchingly in Amy's face, laid her hand more caressingly those days on her head, and spoke more softly and lovingly, while Amy never said a word.

Once, when Sarah came dancing into the room, in her wild spirits, with another beautiful bunch of grapes, Mrs. Neville laid her thin, wasted hand on Amy's, and said gently,—

"Is it all right, Amy?"

"All," was the reply, and Mrs. Neville leant back again, apparently satisfied.

But things could not go on thus for ever. Robert Vavasour, in his lonely home, thought more and more of Amy, and the days he was idly wasting away from her, when he ought to be striving for her love. At length, his solitude became unbearable, he could stand it no longer; whether wise or no, he must leave Somerton, the place was growing unbearable to him, and go to Ashleigh. But could he go without an intimation of some kind to her he loved? Yes, he must; for how send a note to Amy? Would she not look upon his letter as an impertinence, seeing she had given him no permission to write? So he made up his mind to go to Ashleigh without warning, for come what might, he must go.

Robert Vavasour was not of an impulsive character, apt like Charles to be led away on the sudden spur of the moment, but he felt that remaining at Somerton would never advance his interest

with her in whom all his dearest hopes of life were centred; he should simply lose the kindly feeling he had already gained in her heart, or what was worse still, be forgotten altogether.

The craving wish to see her, grew stronger and stronger within him each day, until he could no longer refuse to gratify it, and ere another week passed over his head, he was speeding along the road to Ashleigh, arriving there by the one o'clock train.

It was a stormy day, heavy showers of rain, with occasional sunshine, but Robert Vavasour, who saw everything *couleur de rose*, was charmed with the lovely scenery and quaintness of the cottages; in one of which,—perhaps the prettiest in the place,—he secured some, pleasant rooms for the time of his stay and then walked out in the hope of meeting her he loved. Vain hope! as Mrs. Neville seemed so much weaker, Amy did not leave her side. Hannah and little Sarah passed him on their way down the lane, and on their return, gave rather a high-flown account of the tall, handsome gentleman they had seen. Amy never guessed, or even thought of Robert Vavasour, but her heart fluttered strangely as it quickly passed through her mind that it might be Charles Linchmore. But alas! she failed in recognising the description so eagerly given and descanted on by Sarah.

The morning of the next day was hopelessly wet, and Robert Vavasour's courage rose—with his anxiety to see Amy,—to fever heat; and, determined to see her at all hazards, he bent his steps towards the cottage.

Sarah, tired of the dulness within doors, was gazing idly from the window, little thinking that her curiosity concerning the stranger she had seen only the day before was so soon to be gratified. But there he was coming along the road, and very eagerly the little girl watched him.

"Oh! sister Amy," cried she, "here's the gentleman I saw yesterday, do come and look at him before he goes out of sight; he'll turn down the elm tree walk in another moment."

But before Amy could have reached the window, had she been so inclined, he had opened the little gate, and was coming up the gravel walk.

Sarah shrank away from the window, and clapped her hands with delight. "Why he's coming here, only think of that, Mamma. Oh! I guess it must be the 'good unknown' himself."

In another moment all doubt was at an end, and Robert Vavasour in the little sitting-room, welcomed and thanked by Mrs. Neville at least, and Sarah also, if he might judge by her glistening eyes, although she was too shy to say a word, while Amy, if she did not say she was glad to see him, did not rebuke him for coming, nor appear to look on his visit as an intrusion; and soon he was quite at home with them all, and when Amy, who had been out to Hannah, to try and make some addition to their homely dinner, returned, she was surprised to see on what friendly terms he was.

"I am afraid, dear mamma," she said, "you are exerting yourself too much. You are so unaccustomed to see a stranger."

"Scarcely a stranger, Amy. Mr. Vavasour claims our friendship for his kindness; and besides, he tells me he has known you for some time."

"Some two months, is it not?" replied Amy.

"Hardly so long, I think, Miss Neville. It seems but yesterday since I first saw you."

"Are you only here for the day?" asked Amy.

"I am here for a week," he replied; "some good lady in the village has allowed me to take up my abode with her for that time, or it may be longer, as any one would be tempted to remain in the clean pretty room she showed me."

"It must be Mrs. Turner, Mamma; her cottage is so very nice."

"If it is," replied Mrs. Neville, "you will have no cause to complain, Mr. Vavasour; we stayed with her for a day or two on our first arrival, and were much pleased with her attention, and the cleanliness of the house."

"Is this place often visited by strangers? It must in summer be a lovely spot. It is prettier than Brampton, Miss Neville."

"Prettier, but not so grand; and the views are not so extensive."

"You prefer Brampton?"

"Oh, no! Ashleigh is my home, and then I like it for its very quietness."

"It will no longer be quiet," replied Mrs. Neville. "Stray visitors have often reached it since I have been here; and now the easy access to it by rail will, of necessity, bring more, and Ashleigh will, perhaps, become immortalized by the lovers of pic-nics. But here is Hannah to announce dinner. You must excuse my joining you, Mr. Vavasour, as I am unable to leave the sofa."

After dinner the weather changed; the heavy clouds cleared away, and a faint gleam of sunshine shone out.

Amy proposed a walk, as she thought her mother would be glad of a little rest and quiet after her exertion, so with her sister she went with Robert Vavasour down into the village.

So dreary as the lane looked now, with its tall leafless trees! But their visitor was charmed with everything, and would not allow its desolation. They inspected his new abode, which turned out to be Mrs. Turner's; then through the village, and home by road, and found Mrs. Elrington had come to spend the evening—and what a pleasant one it was! Even Amy allowed that, although she did not feel quite at rest within herself, or satisfied at Robert Vavasour's having come to Ashleigh; still she found herself later on in the evening laughing and chatting, in something of the old spirit, at seeing her mother take an interest in the conversation, and not nearly so weary and tired as she usually was.

"You are so very good," said Amy, as she went out to open the cottage door for Robert, as he went away.

"Good! Miss Neville. How? In what way?"

"In being content with our dull life here."

"It is anything but dull to me. My life lately has been a simply existing one—the slow passing of each day, or counting the hours for the night to arrive, and bring a short respite from the monotony of a dreary life. Being here is—is heaven to me! in comparison to my late existence at Somerton Park."

There was no mistaking the impassioned tone in which this was said. Amy hastened to change the subject.

"I am sure your visit has given Mamma pleasure."

"Mrs. Neville seems a great invalid, I do not wonder at your anxiety for her while absent." As a stranger he had remarked the exhaustion and weariness, although to Amy her mother had seemed so much better.

"Do you think she looks so very ill?" she asked, anxiously.

"I think there is great weakness," he replied, evading a direct answer. "Have you a clever medical attendant here?"

"Yes, I think so. Dr. Sellon, is at least, very kind and attentive, no one could be more so; he says Mamma merely wants rousing, and we must not allow this apathy and weariness to increase, but strive to divert her mind, even as it was this evening, and all through your kindness."

"Ashleigh is a lovely spot, but rather too quiet for an invalid whose mind requires rousing, and whose vital energies seem so prostrated. I should suggest a total change of scene. A new and novel life, in fact, in a place perfectly strange to her, would, I should think, conduce more towards her recovery than all the doctors and medicine in the world."

"Dr. Sellon has never said so; never even hinted at such a thing," replied Amy, thoughtfully. Alas! how could it be managed, even with the sacrifice of all her salary.

"Have you had any further advice?" he asked.

"No. I wrote the other day to Dr. Ashley, our old doctor, who attended us all for so many years. I thought perhaps he might be coming this way and would call; but, although he wrote me a very kind reply, he does not even hint at such a stray chance happening."

"Does he offer any opinion or advice on Mrs. Neville's case?"

"Yes. You can read it if you like," and she took it from her pocket and gave it to him; "only do not mention anything about it to Mamma, she might not like my having written; or it might make her

nervous in supposing herself worse than she is. It is not exactly a secret," she added, blushing slightly, "as Mrs. Elrington knows of it, and approved of my letter."

"Do not wrong me by supposing I should think so, Miss Neville. I will take it home, and read it at my leisure, if you will allow me. Good night."

The door closed, and he was gone before Amy could reply; but as she turned to re-enter the sitting-room, she sighed and murmured,

"There is a fate in some things. Is there in my life?"

CHAPTER II. FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE

*"My life went darkling like the earth, nor knew it shone
a star,
To that dear Heaven on which it hung in worship from
afar.
O, many bared their beauty, like brave flowers to the
bee;
He might have ranged through sunny fields, but nestled
down to me;
And daintier dames would proudly have smiled him to
their side,
But with a lowly majesty he sought me for his Bride;
And grandly gave his love to me, the dearest thing on
Earth,
Like one who gives a jewel, unweeting of its worth."*

Massey.

A fortnight passed away, and still Robert Vavasour lingered at Ashleigh, although he seemed no nearer winning Amy's love than when he first came; yet he could not tear himself away. Sometimes he was gloomy and desponding; and on these days he never came near the cottage. At others his hopes rose when only a smile or glance kinder than usual came from her he loved, and then he was the life of the little party. But when he fancied Amy was beginning to care for him a little more, she would suddenly shrink within herself again, and become as cold and reserved as ever, but then he never thought that it was his almost tender manner that chilled and frightened her, lest he should think she was encouraging his suit. Still he hoped on, would not despair. What lover ever does? and *he* loved her so dearly.

One morning, finding Mrs. Neville alone, he told her of his love for Amy, of the compact between them, and of his hopes. The widow did not discourage them, she liked Mr. Vavasour, and would have rejoiced at seeing Amy his wife; still she would not influence Amy in any way, but leave her free to choose for herself; but since she loved no other,—and Mrs. Neville half sighed as if she almost doubted it,—she thought in time the young girl's heart might be won.

And with this Robert Vavasour was obliged to be content. Content? he was anything but that; he was impatient, and fretted at the delay and slow progress he was making, he would have been more than human if he had not; but with Amy he was ever kind and gentle; she knew nothing, saw nothing of his anxious heart and sometimes despairing hopes.

And so the days flew on, Mrs. Neville neither better nor worse; some days more languid, at others less so and able to sit up; but with no certainty about it, so as to lead those most anxious to believe she was in anyway advancing towards recovery.

One morning they were surprised by a visit from Dr. Ashley. He had taken a holiday, he said, and thought he could not do better than run down to see his old friends, and was putting up, strange to say, at Mrs. Turner's, whose cottage had been pointed out to him as the prettiest in the village; and had certainly stretched like india rubber for the occasion, but then the gentleman already lodging there had kindly consented to share the parlour with him; and they were to dine together during his stay.

If Amy suspected Robert Vavasour of being concerned in this sudden move, she said nothing; but then she had grown very silent of late; perhaps she pondered these things more deeply in her heart;

certain it was she ceased to be so distant and reserved to Robert, and he in consequence became more gentle and loving. Perhaps if Amy's thoughts could have shaped themselves into words, they would have been, "*He* does not love me or he would be here; and I? what can I do?"

But Charles Linchmore's staying away was no proof that he did not love Amy, believing as he did that her heart was another's; had he not thought so, not even his sister-in-law's frowns and sarcasms would have kept him from her side. As it was, he knew not even of Robert Vavasour's presence at Ashleigh, as Amy, when she wrote to Julia and Anne, never mentioned it, feeling sure of a bantering letter in return; as of course they would guess of his love for her, and imagine it was going to be a match, whether she denied it or no; certainly they would never think of the true reason that had brought him—namely, her refusal.

It was the second and last day of Dr. Ashley's stay; one of Mrs. Neville's worst days, and she had not as yet made her appearance downstairs when Mrs. Elrington entered the room where the two sisters sat.

"Mamma has not come down yet," said Amy, "she was very wakeful all night, and I persuaded her to rest a little longer this morning, although she was very loath to do so, on Dr. Ashley's account."

"Has he been to see her yet?"

"No, but I am expecting him every moment. Mamma was so much better yesterday that perhaps she is now suffering from the over-excitement of seeing him."

"Very possibly. Old times must have come before her so forcibly, and they are but sad ones for your mother to look back to. It is perhaps just as well Dr. Ashley should see her at her worst. What is his opinion of Mrs. Neville?"

"I did not ask him, and he never volunteered to tell me; but I must ascertain to-day. Do you not think I ought to?"

"Certainly I do, Amy; you would be wrong if you did not. I think if I were you I would ask his *true*," and Mrs. Elrington laid a stress on the word, "opinion on your mother's case."

"Do you think her very ill?" asked Amy.

"Yes, Amy, I do," replied Mrs. Elrington, gently. "That is to say, I think her very weak, weaker than she was when I wrote to you after her recovery from the severe illness she had."

Amy sighed. "I sometimes fancy," she said, "that Ashleigh, lovely as it is, does not suit Mamma; you know her quiet life here is so very different from what she has been accustomed to; but I do not see how a change is to be effected."

"It would be a great expense, certainly."

"It would, and the means to effect it with will be smaller; as I fear, Mrs. Elrington, I shall have to resign my situation at Brampton; I cannot leave Mamma so lonely, neither can I be happy away from her while she is so ill."

"I have been thinking the same thing, Amy; your mother certainly does require all your care and attention. It would not be right to leave her."

"Do you think Mrs. Linchmore will be annoyed at my leaving in the middle of my quarter without any hint or warning whatever?"

"Not under the circumstances, Amy. You were happy there?"

"Yes, as happy as I shall ever be away from home; I was very fond of my pupils, of Edith especially."

"Was she the youngest?"

"No, the eldest. An orphan niece of Mr. Linchmore's, and adopted by him at her mother's and his sister's death. I shall regret leaving Brampton. I think change must be one of the worst trials of a governess's life."

"It is a sad one, no doubt, when, as in your case, a governess happens to be attached to those she is leaving. Perhaps," continued Mrs. Elrington, as she rose, "I had better not wait to see your

mother now. As soon as you have made up your mind, Amy, I would advise your writing at once to Mrs. Linchmore without delay."

Amy leant back in her chair very sorrowfully after Mrs. Elrington had gone. If she had had any doubt about the propriety of leaving Brampton, her mother's old friend—she, whose advice she so valued—had cleared it away; it was evident the step must be taken, however slow her heart might be to break asunder the one tie that yet seemed to bind her to Charles Linchmore.

"What are you thinking of, Amy?" asked Sarah, who had been watching her sister for some time. "You look so sad."

"Do I? I was thinking of Mamma, and whether we could do anything to make her better; and about my leaving Brampton, Sarah."

"But that will be so nice to have you always here; you can't be sorry about that, sister."

"But then I shall lose a great deal of money; and Mamma will have to go without a great many things she really wants. Port wine cannot be bought for nothing, Sarah."

"Ah! what a pity it is we are not rich, then we might take her back to our dear old home. I am sure she would get well there. Don't you think so?"

"She might, Sarah. But I think if change is to do her good, she will require a greater change than that."

"Further off still?" asked the child. "Where to, Amy?"

"I cannot tell; but Dr. Ashley can."

"But can't you guess at all? Not even the name?" persisted her sister.

"No. But I think somewhere abroad; a long way off. And that would cost money. Yes, more money than we have, a great deal," sighed Amy.

"Ah!" said the child, "when I'm grown up I'll marry a man with lots of money, just like Mr. Vavasour. Hannah says he's awfully rich; and then he should take us away to a lovely place by the sea-side where Mamma and all of us could live like princesses. I am sure she would get well then."

This innocent remark of Sarah's was a home-thrust to Amy; a death blow to her hopes, and roused her at once. Should she sit so quietly and passively when her mother's life was at stake? Nurse and hoard up a love in her heart that she was ashamed had ever entered there from its very hopelessness and selfishness? There was Dr. Ashley coming up the walk, she would first ask his opinion as to the necessity of a change; and if he thought it necessary? Then—then. Once again Amy sighed, and said, "It is my fate; it must be so," and then went out into the other room, and quietly awaited the doctor's coming.

Some ten minutes elapsed, during which Amy was restless and anxious; still she would not pause to think now, lest her heart should give way; so she walked about even as Frances Strickland often did in her impatient moods, took up the books one by one off the table and looked at their titles—read them she could not—and then the doctor's heavy tread sounded on the staircase, and she went out and met him.

"Will you come in here, Dr. Ashley?" she said. "I want to thank you for so kindly coming to see Mamma. It is so very kind of you." Amy knew nothing of the ten pound note so carefully stowed away in his waistcoat pocket for the expenses of his homeward journey.

"Pray say no more, my dear Miss Neville," he said. "It pains me."

And Amy did not. Perhaps she thought it was painful to be thanked for what in her innermost heart she half suspected he was paid for.

"How did you find Mamma, Dr. Ashley?" she asked.

"Well, not quite so bright as yesterday, but still no material change for the worse. Dr Sellon tells me she often has these ups and downs."

"Any unusual excitement appears to weaken her for the time. Dr. Sellon does not attend regularly. I only call him in when I think Mamma really requires it."

"Quite right. Your mother's case is one requiring care and—and everything good and strengthening you can give her."

"Do you think Mamma very ill?" Amy could not bring herself to ask if he thought she would recover, although that thought had been at her heart for days, and she had driven it away and would not give it utterance.

"There is weakness,—great weakness," he replied. "I cannot see that Mrs. Neville has any other disease."

"But—but I fear you are evading my question, Dr. Ashley. I wish to know exactly what your opinion is of Mamma."

"My dear young lady," he said, kindly, "the opinion I have given is a true one, though perhaps not all the truth, and—well, she requires great care. There is a prostration of the vital powers—great want of energy. She wants rousing. Every means should be tried to accomplish that; otherwise, I need not say, this weakness and debility will increase, and of necessity do mischief."

"Every means," replied Amy, "but what means? what must I do?"

"Whatever lies in your power: whatever the patient, which I know she is in both senses of the word, expresses a wish for. She should be humoured in everything, but I need not tell you that, Miss Neville."

"And can nothing else be done?—no change of air tried?"

"Decidedly, if possible. It is the *one* remedy needful; the only remedy, in fact, and I should have named it at first, only I deemed it impracticable of accomplishment."

"You think Mamma might recover if she went away?" asked Amy.

"With God's help, I do; but the step should be taken at once. If delayed it might be too late. And now, keep up your spirits and hope for the best. Remember there is nothing so bad as a tearful face and aching heart for your mother to see."

"Too late!" Those words rang in Amy's ears all day. It should not be too late. And yet how nearly had her mother been sacrificed to her blind infatuation for one who she now felt had never loved her, but only carelessly flirted to trifle away the hours that perhaps hung heavy on his hands. Alas! what would Mr. Linchmore say, did he know that the very fate he had warned her would be hers if she allowed her heart to become enslaved by Mr. Vavasour, had even overtaken her at the hand of his brother.

Not many days after Dr. Ashley had gone, a letter arrived from Anne Bennet. It ran thus:—

*"Brampton Park,
February 25th.*

"My dear Miss Neville,

"I have almost made up my mind to torment you with a letter every day, this place being so dull and dreary that the mere fact of writing is quite a delightful episode in my long day. I should be happy enough if Frances were away; but you know how I always disliked that girl. Just imagine my disgust, then, at her remaining here, for, of course, Julia has told you she herself and every one else is gone, excepting Frances and Charles; the latter, I suppose, remains in the hope of soon seeing you. Why don't you come back? I declare it is shameful of you to remain away so long, when you must know how wretched you are making him, and how devotedly he loves you. I should not tell you this, only Frances drives me to it, and I am just at the root of a grand secret. Julia behaved shamefully—would not help me in the least, as she would persist in declaring it was curiosity—how I hate the word!—so I had nothing for it but to take Mr. Hall into my confidence, the result of which has been that I have promised, some long time hence, to become Mrs. Hall; and for the time being, we are turned into a pair of turtle-doves, only instead of billing

and cooing, we are snapping and snarling all day. Adieu. Answer every word of this letter, especially that relating to Charles, who is, I am certain, as devotedly yours as
*"Your loving friend,
"Anne Bennet."*

This letter, with its mention of Charles Linchmore, pained Amy, and roused her slumbering pride. She would answer it at once, every word of it, and for ever put an end to Anne's mention of his name. She should see that Amy was as proud in some things as the haughty Mrs. Linchmore herself, or the defiant Frances. No woman should think she would stoop one iota for any man's love; while as for Charles, Anne was deceived in her belief of his love for her, even as she had been; but it was not well her heart should be reminded of the one image still slumbering there. Was she not as much bound to Robert Vavasour as if she were already engaged to him? or did she ever prevent his coming to the cottage by being ungracious?

No; Amy had made up her mind to love him, and was ever ready to listen to his words, or walk with him. No fits of dread despair assailed him now. His whole life seemed a bright sunshine; even the dull, desolate walk up from the village was pleasant, because every step brought him nearer to the cottage.

That evening—the evening of the day that brought Anne's letter—Amy, while old Hannah cleared away the tea things, went to her room and answered it. The doing so cost her many bitter thoughts, and perhaps a few tears were hastily dashed away. When it was done, her head ached sadly. She went to the window and threw it open. It was a lovely moonlight night. She crept softly downstairs and out into the garden, and leant over the little green gate at the end.

Some ten minutes passed sadly away, and then a step sounded on the crisp gravel. Amy knew well it was Robert Vavasour's, still she did not move or turn her head. Was he going home without saying good night to her? or had he missed her and guessed where she was?

"It is a cold night, Miss Neville," he said as he drew near. "Is it wise for you to be out without a shawl or wrap of any kind?"

"The lovely night tempted me," she replied, "I thought it might cool my head, for it aches sadly."

He did not reply. Amy too was silent; perhaps she guessed what he would say next.

Presently he laid his hand on hers as it rested on the woodwork of the gate. She did not withdraw it, and then he boldly took the small fair hand in his.

"Amy," he said, softly, while she trembled exceedingly, "do you remember I said I would ask you once again? The time has come. Amy, will you be my wife? I love you more dearly than when I first asked you in the old library at Brampton."

She did not shrink from him or his encircling arm as she replied, "I think I love you now; I am sure I like you better, and will try to love you with all my heart. If this will satisfy you, then I will be your wife."

And it did satisfy him, and he pressed his lips on her clear high, forehead, as, like a weary child, she laid her head on his shoulder as he gently drew her towards him.

"I am very timid," she said, "and you must be patient, and not expect too much from me at first."

These words, spoken so entreatingly and dependently, claiming, as they seemed to him, all his care and kindness, calmed him at once; he must be patient, and not frighten away by his too tender words the love only just dawning for him.

"My darling," he whispered, "you will never find me other than kind and gentle with you. You have made me very happy, Amy."

"Have I ever caused you unhappiness?" she asked, seeing he waited for a reply.

"Only twice, Amy. Once when you tried to shut out all hope from my heart, and again when I fancied you cared for Charley Linchmore."

That name! How it jarred through the chords of Amy's heart! Only a few moments ago she had determined on tearing it out, and never allowing another thought of him to enter there again. Was he

dear to her still; now that she was the affianced bride of another? and that other, ought he not to know of her foolishness and folly? ought not every thought of her heart to be open to *him* now? Yes, now; from this time, this hour; but not the past; that could only bring sorrow to him, shame to her. No! no! She could not lower herself in the eyes of Robert Vavasour, he who loved her so dearly, and whom she had just promised to try in time to love with all her heart. All her heart! Was this trembling at the mere mention of another's name the beginning of her promise? Would she ever forget Charles Linchmore? Ever love another as she could have loved him?

Amy shivered slightly; but Robert Vavasour, who loved her more than his life, felt it.

"You are cold, little one," he said, "and must go in. You know, Amy, I have the right to protect you from all ill now," and he led her back gently towards the cottage.

CHAPTER III. LISTENING AT THE DOOR

*If thou hast crushed a flower,
The root may not be blighted;
If thou hast quenched a lamp,
Once more it may be lighted;
But on thy harp or on thy lute,
The string which thou hast broken
Shall never in sweet sound again
Give to thy touch a token!*

*If thou hast bruised a vine,
The summer's breath is healing,
And its clusters yet may glow
Thro' the leaves, their bloom revealing;
But if thou hast a cup o'erthrown
With a bright draught filled—oh! never
Shall earth give back the lavished wealth
To cool thy parched lips' fever.*

*Thy heart is like that cup,
If thou waste the love it bore thee;
And like that jewel gone,
Which the deep will not restore thee;
And like that string of heart or lute
Whence the sweet sound is scattered,—
Gently, oh! gently touch the chords,
So soon for ever shattered!*

Mrs. Hemans.

Anne had scarcely exaggerated when she told Amy that Brampton Park had become dull and stupid. It certainly had subsided into its old dullness, while the days themselves were even more dreary-looking than the house. Spring had commenced, the trees were beginning to put forth their blossoms, and the cold frosty weather had passed away; still the days were misty, and sometimes even foggy, with drizzling rain. Riding parties were scarcely ever attempted, and a walk was almost out of the question; while dancing and music were things unknown—the first impracticable, the latter no one seemed to have the spirits for. Mrs. Hopkins no longer walked about the corridors in stately importance; even Mason's crinoline seemed to have shrunk somewhat, as she flaunted less saucily about than when certain of meeting some one to whom to show off her last new cap.

The two young girls still staying at Brampton did not get on very well together, although there was little show of outward unfriendliness on either part. Frances had long since found out that Anne Bennet disliked and suspected, even watched her; but no fear had she of being detected—her plans, so she flattered herself, had been too secretly and deeply laid for Anne's simple mind to fathom them; such a worm in her path she could tread upon whenever she liked, and utterly crush when it pleased her. So secure was she that often Anne was attacked with one of her sarcastic speeches. But Anne was too wary to be betrayed into an open quarrel, which would, most likely, have resulted in her being obliged to leave Brampton; so she contented herself by either treating her words with silent contempt

or retorting in the same style, with the secret determination of some day having her revenge, much to poor Mr. Hall's dismay, as he was, of course, *faut de mieux*, as Anne said, taken into her confidence.

Some twenty minutes Anne had been standing at one of the windows of the morning-room, which being just above the library, commanded a pretty good view down a part of the long avenue, through the branches of the still almost leafless trees.

It was about a month since the eventful evening on which Amy had penned her reply to Anne.

Charles, who had been reading, suddenly rose, and threw his book, with a gesture of weariness, on the table.

"Are you going out?" asked Frances, laying her embroidery in her lap, as he rose.

"Yes; it's close upon half-past four, and I shall just get a stroll before dinner; the book has made me stupid."

"So has my embroidery. I think I will go with you, if you will let me."

"You!" exclaimed Anne, from her distant post, ever ready to knock on the head any chance that drew the two together; "why your feet in their dainty boots would get soaked through and through, and you catch your death of cold. Do not encourage such self-immolation, Charles."

"Yes," laughed Charles, "your town-made boots, Frances, were never made or intended for country wear. Anne's are, at least, an inch thick, and wade through any amount of mud or dirt: so if either of you come, it must be Anne."

"I should say Anne would be a lively companion," retorted Frances, savagely. "I suppose by this time she could tell us how many drops of rain fall in a minute, and how many rooks have perched on the trees during the last half-hour."

"I wish one of the rooks would fly and bring me the letter from Miss Neville that I have been expecting, and have been looking out for all the afternoon."

This reply, with its allusion to the governess, Anne knew was the severest thing she could say; so, with a self-satisfied look at Frances' flushed face, she went away to put on her things.

But her water-proof cloak could not be found—was nowhere. Anne was a great deal too independent to summon servants to her aid, so she must needs go down stairs to look for it, remembering, as she went, that she had hung it on the stand in the hall to dry. She was returning upstairs with it on her arm, when Charles's voice sounded in the morning-room. Anne hesitated a moment; but Frances's low mysterious tone was too great a temptation to be resisted, and with a half-frightened guilty look, she drew near the door and listened, thinking, perhaps, the end to be attained justified the means she was employing in attaining it.

"My heart misgives me sometimes as to whether I did right in leaving her so precipitately, without a word," Charles was saying.

"What would have been the use of speaking?" was the rejoinder, "when she so evidently cared, or rather showed her love for Mr. Vavasour."

Anne could not hear the reply, and again Frances spoke.

"I thought I never should recover her from that death-like faint."

"If any woman deceived me, she did. I could have sworn she cared for me, on that very evening. How she trembled when I took her hand," said Charles.

Again Anne was at fault with the answer; but whatever it was Charles's reply rang loud and clear—

"I hate that fellow Vavasour!" he said.

"Hush! hush!" said Frances; and Anne could imagine she was entreating him to talk lower; then the rustle of her dress was heard, and swift as thought Anne flew lightly and softly up the thickly-carpeted stairs. As she paused at the top, breathless and panting, she heard the door below gently closed.

"Too late!" said she, with a smile of pleasure; and then went with something of a triumphant march to her room; where, shutting the door, she gave vent to one of her ringing laughs, which quickly

subsided into a repentant, regretful look. "How shameful of me to laugh at such wickedness," said she, aloud; and then, settling herself in an old arm-chair, began to think over what she had heard, and draw her own conclusions therefrom.

This to Anne's quick mind was not very difficult; she guessed it all, or almost all, at once, and never for a moment doubted they were talking of Miss Neville. Had she not given them the clue when she mentioned her name, before going up to dress?

So Miss Neville had fainted. But where, and when? and how had Frances managed to persuade or convince Charles that the faint was caused by love for Mr. Vavasour? Charles had said, "That very evening." What evening? Was it the night before he went off so suddenly from Brampton? the night Mr. Vavasour had been brought home wounded and insensible? Was it possible Amy had fainted at seeing him? Yes, she might have done so; it was most probable she had; and yet that, as far as Anne could see, was no proof of her love for him. The sight might have grieved and shocked her, as it might have done any woman so timid as she was, and nervous and weak from the effects of recent illness.

Anne had indeed arrived at the root of the mystery, and that in a manner she had little dreamed of. What a deep-laid plot it seemed, and how artfully and successfully concealed from her! She felt half inclined to rush boldly down, confront Frances, and tax her with her falsehood and injustice to Miss Neville; but on second thoughts she restrained herself and determined for once on assuming a new character. She would take a leaf out of Frances' book, and act as secretly and silently.

As Anne sat ruminating a knock sounded at her door. What if it should be Frances? She sprung from her chair and busied herself in putting away her things ere she answered, "Come in;" but it was only a servant with letters, and at last Miss Neville's reply that she had been expecting for so many weeks.

"Tell Mr. Charles," said Anne, "that it looks so very wet I have changed my mind and shall not go out. He need not wait for me."

"Let Frances go out with him, if she likes," thought Anne; "hers will be but a short-lived pleasure. I will defeat her to-morrow," and then she once more sat down, and opened Amy's letter.

"Saturday.

"My dear Miss Bennet,

"I feel much pleasure in congratulating you on your engagement to Mr. Hall, and trust the day is not so far distant as you seem to imagine when you will settle down into a pattern clergyman's wife. I fear there is little chance of our meeting again as you so kindly wish, as the very delicate state of my mother's health precludes all possibility of my leaving home at present. It is therefore imperative I should resign my situation with Mrs. Linchmore, much as I shall regret leaving her and my pupils. Your allusion to Mr. Charles Linchmore pains me. May I ask you to be silent on that subject for the future; as, even in joke, I do not like any man being thought to be desperately in love with me, and in this instance Mr. Charles Linchmore barely treated me as a friend at parting. With every wish for your future happiness in the new path which you have chosen,

"I am,

"Yours very sincerely,

"Amy Neville."

This was the letter Amy had written, and which ought to have reached Anne a month ago, but Amy had entrusted the posting of it to a boy named Joe, who always came up every Sunday afternoon after church to have his dinner at the cottage. Unfortunately Joe forgot all about the letter, and before the next Sunday came round he was laid up with a fever, then prevalent at Ashleigh; and when able to get about again the letter never occurred to him until the first Sunday of his going to church; when again he donned his best suit, and on kneeling down, the letter rustled in his pocket. Joe's conscience

smote him at once, and as soon as service was ended away he flew to the village post-office, spelling out as he went the address on the envelope; which, when he found was no sweetheart, but only a young lady, he concluded could be a letter of no consequence, and determined on saying nothing about its lying so long neglected in his pocket of his Sunday's best. Joe was not wise enough to know that trifles sometimes make or mar a life's happiness.

Before Anne left her room she made up her mind how to act; not a word would she say that night to Charles, because nothing could be done, but on the morrow she would open his eyes, show him the snare into which he had fallen; the folly he had been guilty of through the cunning and duplicity of Frances.

Anne sang all the way downstairs to the drawing-room as she went to dinner. The idea of having detected the proud Frances had perhaps more to do with this exuberance of spirits, than pleasure at Miss Neville's being done justice to, and Charles made happy; as for Mrs. Linchmore's frowns, Anne never gave them a thought.

Charles spirits were, if anything, more forced than usual; Frances more reserved and silent, so that Anne's vivacity and evident good humour showed in their brightest colours.

"What spirits you are in, Anne," remarked Mrs. Linchmore.

"Perhaps friend Hall is on the wing," laughed Charles.

"Or perhaps," replied Anne slowly, "my rooks have given me a lesson in—in—"

"Cawing," suggested Frances, impertinently.

"Why not in keeping a silent tongue?" Anne replied, with a scarcely perceptible touch of temper in the tone of her voice. "There is more wisdom in that, or perhaps my birds are wise birds, and have given me a hint where to find the golden link to my chain that has been missing so long."

"When did you lose it, Anne?" asked Mrs. Linchmore, "this is the first I have heard about it."

"Some two months ago, the morning after that poaching business," and Anne looked steadily at Frances; "but it is of no consequence now. I find my chain can be joined again without it."

Frances quailed before that steady, searching look; then rose and crossed the room, passing close by Anne as she went. "Miss Bennet," said she, with one of her coldest and most sarcastic smiles, "Miss Bennet has recourse to enigmas at times,—enigmas not very difficult of solution, although I for one cannot see the point they aim at," and she passed on.

Anne watched her opportunity all the evening, but to no purpose. Frances' suspicions were roused; it was impossible to get speech of Charles, and Anne was obliged to go up to bed with the rest, without having given one sign, or being able to say one word to him.

But Anne was not to be thus foiled; as soon as she gained her room she sat down and penned a note to Charles. She had something of great importance to tell him; would he meet her in the library before breakfast, at eight o'clock? and then away she flew in fear and trepidation down the long, dark corridors, and knocked at Charles's door.

"It is I, Anne Bennet," she said. "Open the door, quick! Make haste, I am frightened to death!"

In another moment the door opened.

"What is it?" said he, with a look of surprise.

She thrust the note into his hand, and was hurrying away.

"Stay, let me light you," he said.

"Oh! no, not for worlds!" she replied, then fled hastily, and gained her room without being seen.

Anne was too restless to sleep much that night, and was up and away downstairs the next morning before the hour she had named, and grew quite impatient at the slow movement of the minute hand of the clock on the chimney-piece, as she walked up and down awaiting Charles's coming.

Suppose he should not come? But, no, he must think it was something important to drag her out of bed at that unearthly hour, full two hours before her usual time. But there was a step coming along the hall now; then the door opened and Charles entered.

"You are sure Frances did not see you?" asked Anne.

"Yes," replied he, in some amazement, "but her maid did."

"Then I have not a moment to lose," said Annie, "come here and listen to me. Do you remember meeting me on the stairs, the morning you left Brampton so hurriedly? and your refusal to tell me why you had determined on doing so? or rather that you left because you had heard that Miss Neville no longer loved you?"

"No, Anne, no, you are wrong," replied Charles, decidedly, "I told you I had found out that Miss Neville had never cared for me, that her heart was entirely another's."

"It is all one and the same thing. I told you then that I did not believe it, and asked you to tell me how you had found it out, did I not?"

"You did. But why rake up old feelings which only tend to wound and bruise the heart afresh?"

"I am glad they do; if they did not I would not say one word in Miss Neville's defence."

"Defence! You talk strangely, Anne. Don't whisper hope to my heart, which can only end in misery and despair. I dare not hope."

"You will hope when you have heard all."

"What have you to tell?" he asked, almost sternly.

"Only this: that you left Brampton because Miss Neville had fainted on seeing Mr. Vavasour brought home wounded."

"What surer proof could I have of her love for him?" he asked, sadly.

"Proof! Do you call this proof?" said Anne, angrily, "do you forget how ill Miss Neville had been? how nervous and weak she yet was when this occurred? Was it a wonder she fainted? or a wonder that Frances, who hated and disliked her, should seize upon that accident to betray you both? And why? Only because had you told Miss Neville of your love, or divulged what you had seen to me, you would never have fallen into this snare so artfully laid for you, so cunningly worked out by Frances."

"Who told you it was Frances?"

"She herself," replied Anne, boldly facing the danger. "I have never left a stone unturned since that morning I met you on the stairs almost heart-broken. I was determined to find out why it was so. I suspected Frances, and have watched her all these long weeks, but she was too deep for me, too artful; and I never should have detected her, had I not over-heard her conversation with you yesterday. Then I found it all out; and I tell you Charles she has deceived you."

"Go on," he said, "convince me it is so, and I will thank you from my heart, Anne; and—no, I am a fool to hope!" and he strode away towards the window.

"You are a fool to despair! I tell you Charles, if any woman ever loved you, Miss Neville did. Were not the tears ready to start from her eyes when I gave her your message, and told her you were gone? You allowed her to think for weeks that you loved her, and then, for a mere trifle, left her without explanation or word of any kind. You behaved shamefully; while she never gave you an unkind word. The severest thing she ever said of you, was said in a letter I received from her yesterday. I told her you loved her, because I knew she was miserable thinking you did not; and read what she says."

He took the letter from her hand, his face flushing while he read it. "If Frances has deceived me? If she has dared to do it?" he said. "By Heaven! she shall rue it deeply!"

"And she has done so," pursued Anne, "and you are more to blame than she in allowing yourself to be deceived. How could you doubt Miss Neville? How believe that she, of all women in the world, would give away her heart unsought. You have condemned her unheard, and without the slightest foundation, and have behaved cruelly to her, and deserve to lose her."

"Not if she loves me," he cried, starting up, "not if any words of mine have power to move her. God knows whether I shall be successful or no; but she shall hear how madly I love her."

"Are you going to see her? and when?"

"Now, this instant! your words have roused me to action!"

He was gone. Anne went into the drawing-room and stood by the window. Some minutes slipped by, and then Frances entered.

"Come here!" said Anne. "Come and look at Charles."

Frances advanced and looked eagerly around.

"I do not see him," she said.

"Hark!" said Anne, "What is that?"

It was the hasty canter of a horse's feet. In another moment Charles dashed past.

Anne remembered the last time he had gone away. How she and Frances had stood together at the same window, even as they did now; only with this difference, that then, Frances' face was the triumphant one. Now they had changed places.

Anne could not—did not pity her, as she drew near and took hold of her arm.

"He has gone to tell Miss Neville he loves her," said she cruelly, as Frances looked enquiringly in her face.

Frances paled to an almost death-like whiteness as she grasped, "God forgive you if he has. I never will!"

CHAPTER IV. TOO LATE

*"So mournfully she gaz'd on him,
As if her heart would break;
Her silence more upbraided him,
Than all her tongue might speak!
She could do nought but gaze on him,
For answer she had none,
But tears that could not be repress'd,
Fell slowly, one by one.
Alas! that life should be so short—
So short and yet so sad;
Alas! that we so late are taught
To prize the time we had!*

Charles Swain.

It was the evening after Amy had pledged herself to Robert Vavasour. The sun had slowly faded away, and twilight threw but a faint light into the room where she sat close to her mother's feet.

Amy had been reading to Mrs. Neville and the book still open; lay in her lap, but it was too dark to read now, too dark for her mother to see her face, so Amy drew closer still ere she broached the subject nearest her heart. There was no shrinking or timidity, as there might have been had her love been wholly his, whose wife she had promised to become.

"Mamma, did Mr. Vavasour ever speak to you of his love for me?" The words were spoken firmly, though almost in a whisper.

"He did, Amy; and he also said you had refused his love."

"I knew so little of him then, that when he named his love it seemed like a dream, so sudden and unexpected. I had never given it a thought, or believed such a thing possible. I know him better now; he is so good, so kind."

She paused, perhaps hoping her mother would speak, but Mrs. Neville said not a word, and Amy went on somewhat falteringly, although she tried hard to speak steadily.

"Mamma, I promised last evening I would be his wife—"

"Have you done wisely, Amy? Are you sure you love him as his promised wife should?"

"Yes," replied Amy, dreamily. "I like him, I am sure I like him very much indeed,—and—and then he is so gentle and loving with me; surely no one could help liking him."

Mrs. Neville half raised herself on the sofa. "Amy! Amy! liking will not do. Do you love him, child?"

"Yes, Mamma. Yes, I think so."

"Only *think*, child? Nay you must be sure of it. Ask your heart if the time passes slowly when he is absent from the cottage. Do you watch and wait, and listen for his returning footsteps? Do you feel that without him life is not worth having, the world a blank? Is your whole heart with him when he is at your side? Do you tremble when his hand touches yours; and your voice grow softer as you speak to him? Do you feel that you dare not look up lest he should see the deep love in your eyes? if so Amy, then gladly will I consent to give you to him. But if not, I would rather, far rather see you in your grave than wedded to him."

Amy was silent; not from any wish to draw back from her word or plighted troth; no, she had made up her mind to be Robert Vavasour's wife, her mother's thin wasted hand as it rested on hers

only strengthened that resolution; the very feebleness with which she raised herself on the couch showed Amy how very weak and ill she was, and this one act might restore her to health. She did not hesitate, she would not draw back; had Charles loved her, it might have been different, but convinced of his falseness and trifling, no regret for him, now struggled at her heart, only shame that she could ever have allowed it to be drawn towards him, unsought.

"You hesitate. You do not answer, Amy?" said Mrs. Neville, sadly, "and have deceived yourself and him."

"No, Mamma, you are wrong. Although I do not love Mr. Vavasour like that; still I do love him, and in time, when I am his wife, I shall very dearly."

Mrs. Neville sighed. "In this one important step of your life, Amy, when your whole future well-being depends upon it, there should be no secrets between us, recollect this one act may entail much misery; you cannot tell how much. Think of being bound for life to a man you do not love, think of the remorse you will feel at not being able to give him the love of your whole heart in return for his. Amy, my child, his very presence would be painful to you, his very love and kindness your greatest punishment and sorrow."

"Yes Mamma, if I did not love him; but it will not be so. I shall love him."

"And yet Amy, your very words almost forbid it, and fill my heart with fear and trembling," and again Mrs. Neville clasped her daughter's hand, while Amy, fairly overcome, bent down and laying her forehead on the soft pitying hand, burst into tears.

"Hush, Amy! hush! You have done foolishly, but there is yet time; better give him sorrow and pain now than later."

"No, Mamma, no; there is no need to give him pain," said Amy, presently.

"Alas!" replied Mrs. Neville, "then why these tears?"

"I weep," answered Amy, flinging—dashing back the tears as they crowded into her eyes, "I weep to think I have allowed my heart to think of another; one, too all unworthy of a woman's love; one who flirted and pretended to care for me; I weep for very shame, mother, to think how foolish I was, and how unworthy I am to be Robert Vavasour's wife."

"You have been unhappy, my child, so unhappy; but I almost guessed it when I looked in your face months ago."

"Yes, but not unhappy now, Mamma. I was very miserable, for I thought he loved me until he left me—went away without a word. Oh! mother, *that* was a bitter trial to me, and instead of trying to rouse myself and cast his image out of my heart, knowing I had done wrong in ever loving him, and doubly so now I had found out his cruel unworthiness, I nursed my love; bemoaned my fate; and steadily shut my heart against Mr. Vavasour. But it could not be; he was too noble hearted, so patient under my waywardness; sorrowful, but never reproachful; and—and so Mamma I have promised to become his wife; and am happy, not grieved or sad, at the idea; no, I will be his faithful, loving wife, and in his true heart forget this early foolish love that caused me so much unhappiness, and nearly lost me the heart of him who is now to be my husband."

"You are right, Amy, to forget *him*, right to tear *his* image from your heart; a man to treat you so is unworthy of any woman's love; and yet—yet I am scarcely satisfied. I fear this engagement. Is it not hasty, too hasty? Do not rush into a marriage hoping to escape from a love, however unworthy, still struggling at your heart; such a mistake might make the one regret of your whole life."

"I do not. I will not," replied Amy firmly, as she rose, and stooping over her mother, kissed her fondly; "If this is the only reason you have, dear Mamma, for fear, then rest content: my engagement with Mr. Vavasour is for my—all our happiness; will you try and think so? I should feel very unhappy indeed if you refused your consent; or that my marriage grieved you."

"It does not grieve me, Amy. Only," sighed Mrs. Neville, "I wish he had been your first love."

"Nay, that is foolish, Mamma. Now often have I heard you say that few girls marry their first love."

Again Mrs. Neville was silent. "Have you told Mr. Vavasour of this old love, Amy?" asked she presently.

"Oh! no, no, Mamma. What good could it do? It would only grieve him; I,—I told him this much, that I—I hoped to love him better in time."

"And he was satisfied?"

"Quite," answered Amy, "and will you not say you are too, dearest Mamma?" and she laid her head lovingly on her mother's shoulder, and looked entreatingly in her face.

"God bless and protect you, my child," said Mrs. Neville fervently, drawing her closer still, and kissing her fondly. "May He guide and strengthen us both, for indeed I am very sorrowful, and scarcely know whether this marriage is for my child's happiness or no; but I pray it may be with all my heart. You have your mother's best, holiest wishes, Amy."

So Amy Neville became, with her mother's sanction, Robert Vavasour's affianced wife.

Yet for days after that Mrs. Neville's heart seemed troubled and ill at ease, and she lay on the sofa watching, noting Amy's every look or action, until, by degrees, the troubled anxious look wore away; Amy seemed so contented and happy that her mother, who, in her secret heart, wished the marriage might be, gradually lost her fears, and each hour gained renewed confidence and hope. She grew better and stronger, and this alone in itself was sufficient to bring back the smiles into Amy's face, while each day disclosed some fresh trait of Robert Vavasour's goodness and kindness of heart. It was his voice read of an evening to her mother and never seemed to weary. It was his hand raised the invalid, or lifted her, as her strength increased, from the sofa to the easy chair.

Amy rejoiced in the change, and while she never allowed her thoughts to wander to the past, with all its cruel hopes and fears, so she never halted or looked onward to the future; her life was of to-day, neither more nor less. Her mother was better; it was her act, her will, that had done it all. She was contented that it should be so, and fancied herself happy; perhaps was at this time really so, and might have been for ever, had she never seen Charles Linchmore again, never known how he, not she, had been deceived, but that was to be the one thorn in her onward path.

In less than a month Amy was to be married. Mrs. Neville's objections as to haste were overruled, even old Mrs. Elrington had sided with the rest; but then Mrs. Neville knew nothing of Dr. Ashley's opinion, or that Amy had confided to her old friend the necessity there was for an immediate change.

They were to go to Italy. Amy, her husband, and mother, with little Sarah, and even old Hannah accompanying them. What a pleasant party it would be! Already Amy began to picture to herself the delight she would experience in watching her mother's restoration to health and strength in that warm sunny clime, and how happy she would be by-and-by in bringing her back when quite well, to live in her own and Vavasour's home, that home he had so often talked to her of, and where, in a few weeks, she would be roaming about at will as its mistress.

The days crept on steadily and surely slowly to all but Mrs. Neville, and with her the time seemed to fly; she was anxious and restless, while her doubts and fears only shaped themselves in words in old Hannah's presence; to the rest, even to Amy, she was passive and quiet, apparently resigned, only at heart sad.

But old Hannah was a remorseless tyrant, who, feeling deeply and sorrowfully her darling's departure from home, sighing and even dropping a tear or two in secret, yet she never allowed Mrs. Neville to bewail it, but, on the contrary, seemed to look upon her doing so as a weakness and sin, requiring a steady though somewhat underhand reproof. Perhaps the very strength of mind Hannah displayed encouraged and strengthened her mistress.

"We are to lose Miss Amy to-morrow, Hannah," said Mrs. Neville, in a sad tone of voice. "I wish the wedding had not been so sudden."

"There, Ma'am, I don't call it sudden at all in the light wind," then silently and steadily went upstairs to change her bridal attire for a travelling dress.

It would be quite half-an-hour before Vavasour could return; so she sat quietly awaiting him in the little sitting-room, perhaps for the first time that day feeling sad, just realising her position as a wife, and looking onwards into the future.

She sat lost in a dreamy reverie, and heard not the swift opening and shutting of the little garden gate, or the sound of the still swifter step across the gravel walk, until it sounded quick and strong in the passage; then she started and arose quickly. Her husband had returned! and sooner than she expected. With a smile she turned to greet him, but it was Charles Linchmore who stood in the doorway, flushed and heated with the haste and impatience of his hurried ride from the station, and still more hasty journey.

Amy's heart stood still. Why had he come? Then, woman-like, almost guessed before he spoke what he had come to say. But ere she could recover from the sudden shock of his presence he, with all the old impetuosity of his nature, was at her feet, pouring forth his long pent-up love, with all its wild jealousy and anguish. How he had been deceived by Frances, and driven well-nigh distracted. How through Anne's agency he had found out her deceit, and had started at once to explain all and be forgiven; how he believed now she had loved him, and still loved, or would love him again; all—all he told, while his words came fast and strong. Amy never attempted to stay them, neither could she, if she would. So he went on to the end; then looked up into her face, that white, wan, pale face, bending so sadly over him, with an agonised stony look spread over each feature, striking dismay into his heart and soul.

"Speak to me!" he cried passionately. "Only say you forgive me my hasty belief in your falseness, only say that you love me still, and that I am not too late to make amends. Amy! my own Amy, speak to me!" and again he looked up beseechingly, with all his deep, earnest love written on his face, and speaking in his eyes.

But she was silent and still, very still.

Then the hand he held so tightly drew away from his hot, burning ones, and turning slowly, showed the wife's symbol, the plain gold band encircling the one small finger, while the pale, sad lips parted, and words came mournfully at last, but slowly and distinctly, settling like ice about his heart.

"It is too late—I am married."

Again that hasty, hurried step sounded, ringing out fiercely in the passage and along the quiet gravel walk. Once again the gate swung harshly and roughly on its frail hinges; then the sudden rush of a horse's quick hoofs rung out startlingly in the still, soft air, and in another moment died away in the far-off distance.

"Where is your mistress? is she ready?" asked Vavasour of Amy's new maid, as ten minutes later he hastily entered the cottage.

"My mistress is not ready, Sir," was the reply, with a pert toss of the head, while a peculiar expression played round the corners of her lips. "She is in the parlour, Sir. Mrs. Elrington thinks it's the heat of the day and the worry that has caused her to faint away."

Yes; Amy lay on the sofa, quiet and motionless with scarcely any sign of life on her pale, sad face, while onward, onward, faster and faster still, rode Charles Linchmore.

Would they ever meet again; and how?

CHAPTER V. DEFEAT

*"Art thou then desolate
Of friends, of hopes forsaken? Come to me!
I am thine own. Have trusted hearts proved false?"*

*Why didst thou ever leave me? Know'st thou all
I would have borne, and called it joy to bear,
For thy sake? Know'st thou that thy voice hath power
To shake me with a thrill of happiness
By one kind tone?—to fill mine eyes with tears
Of yearning love? And thou—Oh! thou didst throw
That crushed affection back upon my heart.
Yet come to me!"*

"'Tis he—what doth he here!"

Lara.

The great bell rang out at the lodge gate, and Charles Linchmore dashed up to the Hall almost as hastily as he had left it, and with scarce a word of greeting to the old butler, whom he passed on his way to the drawing-room, and never staying to change his dress, he strode on, all flushed and heated as he was, with his hurried journey and desperate thoughts, until he stood face to face with Mrs. Linchmore.

"Why Charles!" exclaimed she, "what on earth has happened? What is the matter?"

"Nothing," he replied. "Where's Frances?"

"Nothing," she rejoined, indignantly, "to come into the room in such a plight as this! Look at the splashed state of your boots; and then your face. No one can look at that and not suspect something dreadful having happened. *I* never saw anything so changed and altered as it is."

"I dare say. I don't much care."

"Are you mad? Where have you been?"

"Nowhere. Where's Frances?" he asked again.

"I do not know. But I advise you to make yourself a little more presentable before you seek her. These freaks—*mad* freaks of riding half over the country, no one knows where, are not agreeable to those you come in contact with afterwards," and Mrs. Linchmore pushed her chair further away from him, and smoothed the rich folds of her dress, as though the act of doing that would soothe her ruffled temper.

"It *was* a mad freak," replied he, and without waiting for another word, or tendering an apology for his disordered dress, he strode away again, with the full determination of finding Frances.

Every room below stairs he searched, but in vain; she was nowhere, and driven reckless by the agony of his thoughts he went straight up to her own room, and opened the door.

She was lying on the sofa, her eyes red and swollen with weeping, passionate, hopeless tears at the thought that long before now he and Amy had met, and he consequently lost to herself for ever.

"Charles!" she exclaimed, springing off the sofa, her cheeks flushing hotly with surprise and pleasure.

But another glance at his face, and her heart sank within her, for its expression almost terrified her.

He closed the door and came and stood opposite to where she was, looking as though he would have struck her.

She quailed visibly before his menacing glance. Then resolutely regained the mastery over herself, and drawing up her figure proudly, she said,

"Do you know this is my room? I wonder how you dare come here."

"Your room? Well, what if it is, I care not," he replied. "I am reckless of everything."

"But I am not; and—and," she hesitated, and tried again to steady her beating heart, "what—what has happened, Charles, that you look so strangely?"

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