

“AFTER MANY DAYS.”

“STIR the fire, Tabitha,” commanded the old woman. “Stir it as if there was some life in your limbs. Listen how the wind soughs across the moors.”

Tabitha came to the grate and did as she was bidden, with her usual meek obedience, but her head drooped a trifle more than usual to-night, and her listless movements roused her mother's anger. She snatched the poker from the silent little woman's hands, and with a single stroke broke the huge “cob” of coal which had been smouldering and flickering all the afternoon, and which now, falling to pieces, flashed up bright tongues of darting flame, and flung a light in every shadowy corner of the long, dark room.

“Are you wandering?” she said, in her sharp, strong voice. “You might be. I have no patience with your weak ways. You are no Yorkshire woman, Tabitha; you are your father all over.”

It was a fact worthy of note, because significant in itself, that Tabitha made no reply. She was used to such speeches; she had borne them all her life; she had seen her father bear them day by day until he died. His finer nature withered, she had sometimes dared to fancy, under their chill influence. There was scarcely a country boor in the scattered moorland hamlet, or even in the few wide-apart cottages on the blue moors themselves, who did not know the mistress of the solitary farm-house as “a hard un,” and who had not known her as such from the time she came among them as the young wife of the gentle South Country man whose name she bore. Roger Dunn was mild even to the verge of weakness, and was beloved in a rough, almost pitying way by all the strong, warm-hearted Yorkshire men who knew him. His wife had not a tender impulse in her nature, and was disliked with all the uncouth openness of a passionate, uncouth people. She had stood out against all advances from the first; she had defied public opinion and set at naught advice; and so it was that at last the inhabitants of the old stone farm-house had been cut off from the world and lived their uneventful lives alone.

It was not a kindly school for a solitary girl to be brought up in; but the one daughter of the family had been brought up in it, and had never left it for more than a few hours from the day of her birth. There were no friends for her; she had no share even in the rough country rejoicings or equally rough sorrowings. She had never been a pretty girl, or even an attractive one; she had scarcely one redeeming feature, perhaps, and was, in fact, in her freshest youth, nothing more than a silent, homely little body, with a quiet, plain face, whose odd,

shrinking expression had a pathos of its own. But the days of her youth were over now, and she was a woman nearly thirty years of age, and there were shadowy lines on her face, and her small figure had set into a certain staidness, and her eyes were meek and sad, but withal held far back in their depths a wistfulness which might have grown out of long waiting and watching.

And it was out of long waiting and watching that it had grown. The commonplace, uninteresting little woman had lived through her small romance, after all, unpromising and ordinary a one as it had been. In her father's day, by some strange chance, there had come a lover, who found in Tabitha what he fancied he had not found in other women. He was a young man, a hale young Yorkshire farmer, with a rough bit of sentiment in his hardy nature, and somehow this little woman, who had lived all her days in a solitary farm-house on the moorlands, found the way to his heart and touched it. So he set about the task of winning her. It was a great wonder to her at first, a great marvel, and it was a long time before she quite comprehended the truth; but after the slow wakening to it she was stirred through every fibre of her ignorant, inexperienced heart; her whole being was permeated with a light and warmth of which she had never dreamed. She had never even read of such things as other women had, so it was new to her from beginning to end, and she loved in it in an intense way not even this honest lover ever understood. She had not learned enough to be demonstrative, so he never knew how wondrous a bliss he had brought to her—indeed, it is to be questioned whether she knew enough about the matter to call it bliss herself—but at least he could see that he had not failed.

After this there was a hard battle to be fought. The gentle, broken-spirited father gave his consent with a readiness which was almost eager. Perhaps he longed to save the girl from years of such a life as his own. But the mother held out against them with causeless bitterness. She had taken one of her sudden, unaccountable dislikes to poor Lem Burt, and she showed it in this exercise of her power against him.

“Girls are better at home,” she said: “let Tabitha stay where she is.”

She was as unyielding as rock for months—so unyielding, in fact, that only rash, hot-headed Lem dared to defy her; and then in the end she gave way with as little reason and as much rigid sternness as she had displayed in crossing them.

“Let her go,” she said, grimly; “she will find it out.”

And so Tabitha was married, and at her father's request the young husband and wife took up their abode at the farm-house instead of finding a home for themselves. It

was a terrible mistake, as might have been expected. The strong, hot-headed young Yorkshireman had a will of his own, as well as "the mistress," and not many months had passed before the two were sworn enemies, between whom was carried on a deadly feud. Roger and Tabitha bent before the blast of the daily storms, but Lem never gave way an inch. He would have carried Tabitha elsewhere, but the poor tender creature clung steadfastly, though perhaps with mistaken lovingness, to her father.

"Let us wait a while, Lem," she would say; "think of poor father. He is not long for the world. Better for us to stay and bear with him a while, than go for our own sakes, and leave him to bear all alone."

And though at first Lem's warm heart was touched by the appeal, the time came again and again when he made up his mind to go in spite of it. In the end the constant wear and strife made him a trifle hard and rough too, and then came Tabitha's burden—a burden she bore long in the uncomplaining humility of love. He was fond enough of her yet, and kindly by fits and starts, but he was not as kindly as he had been. Just now and then a passionate word fell to her share when she was trying to keep peace, but though it might cut her to the heart, she never retorted. Before the first year was out there were nights when she lay awake, hearing the harsh-voiced clock upon the stairs strike hour after hour, while she listened with a heavy heart for the sound of certain unsteady footsteps on the gravel outside.

"But he is not to blame, poor fellow," she would say to herself, with feverish sadness. "If he had the chance he would be right enough. He is all I have, too—all but father—and I could never love him less. I have heard women say men wearied them out of their love. Lem could never weary me. It seems somehow as if I could bide whatever he did." And then it might be that out of her faithfulness would grow a certain peace, and Lem, coming home at midnight, would find her asleep, with a curious quiet on her face, almost like a shadow from another world; and even while he did not understand it, he would be stirred at heart, and would awaken her in his rough, loving fashion, by bending over the clumsy old bed and lifting her on his arm.

Still it was very natural, where two unconquerable natures were set against each other, that bad should run to worse, and that Tabitha's burden should become heavier than aught but woman-love could have borne. And one terrible night, when a winter storm was raging outside upon the barren moorland, a fiercer storm raged within the old farm-house. When it ended Tabitha lay upon the tiled floor of the kitchen, struck down by a brutal, blind stroke from poor

mad Lem's hand; and her mother stood upon the threshold, facing wind and storm, as she flung something like a malediction after the poor desperate fellow, who from that wretched hour was lost to them, as it seemed, forever.

From that night Roger Dunn never rallied. He had been feeble for months, and under this last blow he sank. When he carried Tabitha's senseless form over the threshold of the kitchen he crossed it for the last time. He never went into it again, and a month afterward he turned his face to the wall at the close of one dreary day, and died without a word, which might have brought him nearer in this solemn last hour to the woman with whom he had spent so many wretched years of bitter life.

"Let Tabitha wait on me," he had said, early in the day; and they were the last words he said to her.

This was eight years ago, and these eight years Tabitha had lived through in the farmhouse with no other companion than the old woman, who never seemed to yield in her stern hatred of the man her child loved with so simple and entire a trust. Poor Tabitha! her ignorant faith in her recreant husband knew no faltering, even at the worst. She was so sure that he would come back again some day a wiser (she never said "a better") man. It was only a question of time to her unsophisticated mind. He would be sure to come; and so she waited day after day, hoping against hope. Women of greater spirit might have died—beaten their hearts out against the walls of their dull prison; women of loftier mind might have learned a lofty scorn of the man who could so desert and outrage a faithful love; but Tabitha's life had not encouraged spirit.

It had been a weary day for her, this one, which had drawn to its close with southing winds and beating rain. It was a dreary season of the year, and, apart from this, Tabitha had remembered what she fancied her mother did not, that this night eight years ago poor Lem had dashed out into the storm in the height of his tempestuous wrath—the wrath in which he had aimed the mad blow which had fallen upon his wife instead of her mother. She had awakened to the memory of it early in the gray morning, and her heart had failed her heavily every hour of the day, so that it was no wonder that she was pale and silent when the night closed in about them.

She stood by the fire a minute after her mother had spoken to her, and she half forgot herself in gazing at the leaping blaze and the bright bed of hot red coal beneath. But her reverie did not last long. She woke with a little start, and finding her mother's eyes fixed on her, colored with just the least faint sad ghost of color.

"I—I will go and hurry Hannah with the

tea," she said. "I dare say you are ready for it, mother."

The old woman's eyes followed her as she left the room. There might have been a secret something savoring of pity in them, but it was only a momentary wavering, if it was one at all. When the door closed upon the small, staid, yet almost pathetic figure, her expression was as cold as ever, and she drew her chair nearer to the fire, shutting her lips as if to hold some flickering feeling within bounds.

When their one serving-woman entered with the tea-tray and its homely appurtenances, she did not look round, nor was Tabitha sure that she had noticed them until she herself carried the old blue china cup full of hot tea to her side, and spoke to her.

"Here's your tea, mother," she said, quite submissive to either notice or neglect; "I made it extra good to-night, it is so cold and bleak outside."

She took it from her hands without thanks; and after seeing that it was to her liking, Tabitha went back to the little black japanned tea-tray and took her seat behind it, as was her custom. She could not eat much, however; somehow or other, she felt restless. Her appetite was gone, and she even found herself starting now and then quite nervously at the sounds in the kitchen—Hannah moving to and fro, and an occasional rattling of some domestic utensil.

It was a great start she gave when the door behind her really opened and Hannah spoke to her in her usual abrupt manner. "There's a man in the back-kitchen, Tabitha," she said; "a sort of tramp. He wants to get a place to sleep in. He says he can pay for it."

Tabitha looked at the tall figure in the high-backed chair in some nervous trepidation. She had borne the household burdens for years, but she had never held the reins of government in her hands.

"Mother," she said, "would you mind it? It's a dreadful night, and he must be tired, poor fellow, if he has walked far. Has he walked far, Hannah?"

"From Stonecrough."

"He could sleep in one of the up-stairs rooms," hesitated Tabitha, meekly.

"Tell him he can stay," announced the mistress, "and give him his supper."

Hannah left the room without further query, and after one other glance at her mother, Tabitha turned, a trifle nervously, to her tea. Experience had taught her that comment was unnecessary.

But accustomed as she was to her mother's moods, it seemed to her, as the night passed on, that her present one was even more unaccountable than usual. As she cast timid, furtive glances at her, she fancied she felt the influence of some new element in her manner, though she scarcely uttered a word

through all the long evening. Was it possible that the silence was less stern than it often was; that as she sat gazing into the red glow of fire in the grate, old memories passed through her mind, half softening the hard, unconquered heart—unconquered after threescore years and ten of battling against a world?

Feeling some new influence, and being troubled by it quite vaguely—untranslatable, however—after taking her candle Tabitha lingered a little, and at last ventured near the high-backed chair.

"Good-night, mother," she said, wistfully. She was suddenly seized with a desperate longing for some show of sympathy this night of all nights—this night which was so sad an anniversary. If she had had a child of her own, if there had even been in the house a child who was nothing to her, she would have clung to its simple presence with eagerness; if there had only been a dog for her to speak to and touch, only a dog, with an honest brute love for her, she would have been grateful and glad.

So when in answer to her words her mother started as if from a reverie, and after looking at her and giving her a cold reply, turned away again, the poor sad little woman, only feeling heavier-hearted, left the room with a slower step. But when she set the candle down upon the table up stairs her sight was blurred a little, so that there was a yellow mist about the flare of light.

"He did not know," she said, patiently. "Men's lives are not like ours. It wasn't that he was selfish: Lem never was selfish, and—and I'm glad he doesn't know, poor fellow. I'd never tell him."

It was always an understood thing between the two that Tabitha must retire first and leave her mother to sit alone, and it was often far into the night when the anxious little woman, being wakeful, heard "the mistress" leave her chair and cross the room to where her candle stood waiting on the stand.

But this night Tabitha, lying in the little chamber at the head of the staircase, waited for the customary sounds in vain. She did not hear them even at their usual time, but it would have been a daring member of the household who would have ventured to disturb the mistress, and in her consciousness of this fact, Tabitha felt it wiser to lie still and wait.

But the silence continued so long that, after much fearful demurring, the small white figure found its way at last out of the bed and out of the darkness to where the light glimmered upward upon the stairs.

"Mother!"

The unmodulated voice answered her at once,

"What is it?"

Then, overcome by her own temerity, Tabitha faltered greatly in spirit.

"I was afraid—I mean I was wondering why you did not come up stairs. Are you well?"

"If I had not been, I should have called you," was the answer that came to her. "Go back to bed, Tabitha." And Tabitha crept back silently, and entering her little room again, closed the door softly behind her.

One—two.

It was the harsh-voiced clock upon the stairs. All at once Tabitha was wide awake, sitting up in bed, listening—listening in just the strained, anxious way in which she had listened until she fell asleep. All of them must be asleep now—the wandering, unknown guest, Hannah, her mother, all of them—for the house was quite quiet now, silent with the strange, solemn, death-like silence of slumber. And then remembering the novel fancy her mother's words had brought to her mind that night, and remembering also her unexpected breaking of before unaltered rules, she grew restless and anxious again. She could not make up her mind to lie down, so she sat up for a few minutes, listening again. It seemed to her that she had done nothing but listen ever since twilight, and it would not be long before the dawning of another day.

And then (she never could make sure how it came about, for certainly she heard no sound that startled her; there was no sound, indeed, but that slow, heavy ticking of the clock) she found herself standing on the floor in the middle of the room, and in a few seconds more she was at the stair head—going down the stairs with a wildly beating heart—at the threshold of the old oak-wainscoted room. The door was opening to her fearful hand, and she was in the room itself, peering through the gloom to where the last solemn glow from the low bed of embers cast a warmth rather than an actual light upon the high-backed chair in which the rigid figure sat strangely motionless, the hard knotted hands grasping the leathern arms, the stern face turned toward the fire.

"Mother!" she cried out. "Mother! mother!"

And yet, though she spoke as if to rouse her, even before the words had left her lips she knew full well that no earthly voice could ever call forth an answering echo in the dull closed ears again. She knew her cry had roused the household, for in a moment more she heard the sound of opening doors and hurrying feet; but it seemed as if she had no care for their coming—no care for aught else on earth but the rigid figure before which she knelt, and about which she flung her clinging arms with no thought of awe or fear, but with such a wail of pain and pity as no sufferings of her own had wrung from her from first to last.

"All alone!" she cried. "All alone, and

I sleeping so near her! Why did you send me away, mother? I would have been content to sit outside night after night if you would have let me. Nay, I can not bear this, somehow, as I have borne the rest!"

She wept and kissed the cold face and hands as if she had lost the truest heart that ever beat in warm mother-breast. It was, perhaps, the result of her life as well as of her simple nature that she should cling so to a mere semblance. She had lived nearer her dead father, but there was not antagonism enough in her whole being to rouse within her one bitter thought against this mother who had held her at arms-length. It had been love she had cherished for her stern task-mistress, though love so mixed with awe; and now the awe of life was gone, death had no power to chill her, and she could kneel and weep her tender, tried heart's fill. It was worse than useless to endeavor to rekindle the spark of life again—the most ignorant of them knew that, even before the hurriedly summoned physician dropped the stiff hand and gave his verdict.

"She has been dead some time," he said. "She must have been seized while she was reading the letter in her hand."

Tabitha looked at the table then. She had only noticed before that the icy, knotted fingers of one hand were closed tightly upon a piece of paper as they grasped the chair's arm; but when she took up the package that lay near upon the table her heart cried out aloud. At the last hour some incomprehensible memory of the past—perhaps a softened one, perhaps merely a cold memory—must have moved the unyielding soul of even this woman, for the letters tied together with a black ribbon were those Roger Dunn had written to her years before, when to him she seemed the one fair and true woman upon earth.

It would not have been natural that there should be much mourning in the household. She had only been a hard task-mistress to most of them, and their world would go on even more smoothly for her absence. But Tabitha's world!—Tabitha's world was emptier, with a sad heavy emptiness, and it had been empty enough before. She was full of self-reproach and weariness; she had lost something to which her loving nature had clung, even as ivy clings to a hard, cold, unsightly pillar of stone.

So this sad night, when the dead woman was laid in her chamber, Tabitha passed to and fro shedding gentle tears and lavishing pathetic caresses on the dumb lips, and with a quiet uprising of long-crushed, quite unconscious poetry, she brought the package of letters up stairs and laid it almost timidly upon the motionless breast.

"She looks quite like herself, Hannah," she said to the woman at her side, as she stepped back from the bed. "And yet I

don't know, but I think there's something quiet about her face. I wonder if death always does that for people?"

But Hannah did not answer. She had just come into the room, and was looking at her with a singular interested expression.

"Tabitha," she said at last, "the man down stairs?—is he to go? He says if there is any thing more he can do he will do it. He went for the doctor."

Tabitha had quite forgotten him before, and now the remembrance of his presence touched her heart afresh.

"No," she said; "I'll go and speak to him; I should like to thank him. We little thought last night, when she said he might stay, that before morning he would do her such a service as that."

She left the bedside and the still chamber, and made her way slowly down stairs to the great kitchen. It was quite dark yet, but the man had built a fire in the huge deep fire-place, and so the room was flooded with ruddy, dancing light, and when she stepped across the threshold this light revealed to her the wanderer, his heavy head lying across his folded arms upon the round oak table. One hesitant moment as she stood in the shadow, and then he stirred, with a low sound that was half a hushed, struggled-against sob of anguish.

No need to falter then, no need to wait, no need to stand in the darkness longer with that wildly fluttering heart. Other women might have doubted—other women with happier lives, women to whom God's best gifts had been most freely given—but not this one; not this little woman, through whose dark sky the single rift of heaven's sunshine had only struggled to die out in drearier darkness. Could she have loved and trusted and waited through these eight years, and then have forgotten—forgotten after the weary days, forgotten after the lonely nights, forgotten after the simple, faithful prayers to which, for many days, there had been given no answer? Nay, not she: she would have known if it had been a hundred years, and she had lived them all alone.

"Lem!—husband!" she called to him; and though she trembled from head to foot, her tone rang out in the still old place like a cry of rejoicing.

And the man, raising his head, looked round and saw her. But he did not go to her: how could he, after all these years of shameful slight heaped on her loving soul? He got up slowly from his chair, shaking from head to foot also, but in a passion of remorse and despair. Man-like, he could not grasp what this sad little woman's love had been, was, and would be forever. He opened his dry lips to speak, but no sound came from them; he had no words to utter. He stood before her for a moment as he might have stood before a judge, and then his lips began to tremble too, and he flung himself down upon the chair once more, his folded arms upon the oaken table, his face upon them, sobbing aloud.

But she went to him across the kitchen with her arms stretched out, and folded his strong, shaken body in her weak, woman's clasp, and clung to him—not forgetting, because she had never remembered; not forgiving, because the sublime simplicity of her faith had recognized no wrong to forgive—pouring out the long pent-up love of her trustful soul upon his breast, thanking God and welcoming the wanderer home.

And after he had told her how in the hope of seeing her once more he had dared form the desperate plan of coming to the house that night in a sort of disguise, she took him up to the close, darkened chamber, and they stood together by the bedside, looking down in awed silence at the dead woman's face; and at last, when they had gazed long and sadly, hand in hand, the little woman broke the silence in her timid, hushed voice.

"Those are father's letters," she said. "And she was reading them when she died; so I put them there. I—I don't quite understand how to say it, Lem, but I've been thinking that though perhaps God gives different feelings to different people, different failings and different sins, He gives us all one thing alike—the breath of life, His breath, you know; and it seems to me somehow, Lem, as if the breath of God must give a—a kind of softness sometimes to the very hardest. And—and maybe, with Him being so high above us and seeing things so clear, He takes many things into account that we know nothing about, and never think of."

IMPROVISATIONS.—IV.

WHAT if I couch in the grass, or listlessly rock on the waters?
 If in the market I stroll, sit by the beakers of wine?
 Witched by the fold of a cloud, the flush of a meadow in blossom
 Soothed by the amorous airs, touched by the lips of the dew?
 First must be color and odor, the simple, unmingled sensation,
 Then, at the end of the year, apples and honey and grain.
 You, reversing the order, your barren and withering branches
 Vainly will shake in the winds, mine hanging heavy with gold!

BAYARD TAYLOR.