

## "MACKENZIE'S WIFE."

BY FANNIE HODGSON BURNETT.

"Ah," said Benedict, "what you would call a misalliance, I suppose."

"What I should call a low marriage of the most miserable description," answered his hostess. "The facts are these. The boy is a millionaire, and his family is one of the best in Scotland. His mother, who is a widow, is also a foolish, unsophisticated woman, with rigid, Scotch notions. She allowed him no companion, and, very naturally, he went among the tenantry to find his friends. The girl's father kept a small shop in the village, and she used to stand behind the counter, I believe. She is one of those amazing cases of almost wonderful physical beauty. She is a dull, handsome, ignorant creature, and poor, young Mackenzie fell madly in love with her. As soon as he came of age, he married her; and now, you see, we have her on our hands."

"We?" said Benedict.

Mrs. Benham shrugged her shoulders.

"We are fond of the young man himself, and we do not like to estrange him completely. And, of course, we must invite the wife, too."

"And her husband is attached to her still?"

"My dear sir, he is that kind of young man who would be fond of any woman he saw often; and he has married this woman because, as I tell you, she is really a handsome creature. One cannot deny that, though it is natural to protest against it inwardly."

It was Benedict's turn to shrug his shoulders.

"Poor child!" he said.

He could not help repeating the exclamation to himself, when a few minutes later his companion was called away. He did not feel inclined to return to the parlor at once, so he remained where he was. He was fatigued mentally and physically, and the silence and perfume of that little conservatory suited his mood better than the confusion of the outer rooms. Accordingly he settled himself again in his seat, and gave himself up to fancies, which, naturally enough, were fancies concerning this unfortunate young couple. He had that morning met the husband—a fair-faced, fair-haired young Scotchman—who had called at his studio to ask him to paint his wife's portrait, and whose buoyant spirits and perfect frankness had somewhat amused, even while they pleased the older man.

"It is an idea of my own, you see," he had said. "I want a picture of her as I saw her first, in her old blue gown, and with a lot of mountain-ash in her hair. It is not every woman who would be painted in an old gown to please her husband. Women-folk like to be braw, but Rob doesn't care, though she is the handsomest woman in London to-day, I'd lay a heavy bet."

This was what had prompted the artist to make inquiry of his hostess; and his question had drawn forth the whole story.

"Poor lad!" he murmured. "And poor girl!"

The next moment he turned in his chair, attracted by a sound behind him, the rustle of a woman's dress on the other side of the bushes, against which his seat was placed. It was the rustle of a dress, he was sure; so sure, that he got up to make surer, and so was just in time to find himself confronting the woman who wore it.

He could not help uttering an exclamation. She was scarcely more than a girl—a girl with a deep-eyed, beautiful young face, and with heavy, ruddy brown hair twisted round her head.

"Let me pass," she said.

She was deadly pale, but for a spot of dull red burning on either cheek; her eyes were full of hard defiance; and his next glance showed him that her costly toy of a fan was nothing more than a handful of crushed lace and slender-snapped strips of tortoise-shell.

"Madam," he began.

She stopped him; a kind of stubborn daring in her speech.

"I'm Rob Mackenzie," she said. "I've been in there all the time. I couldn't get out without her seeing me. I've heard every word you've said. Will you let me pass?"

He was a man of kindly and chivalrous nature, this Philip Benedict. His enemies even called him sentimental and transcendental, in their worst moods; and the sight of this girl's bitter pretence at indifference touched him to the quick.

"Forgive me," he said. "I cannot let you go until I have explained my sorrow for what has happened."

She stopped him again.

"What does it matter?" she answered. "What's said is said. I don't care. Why should I?"

"But I care," he pleaded. "And there is

reason enough why I should. I feel this deeply. I deplore it with all my heart."

She hesitated a moment, but as if she scarcely believed in his earnestness.

"I'm used to it," she said. "And you said nothing yourself. Most men would have said more. There's no reason why I should blame you."

"I blame myself," he protested.

She gave him an obstinate look.

"You needn't," she returned. "It's all true, every word of it. It's a low marriage. He's a gentleman, and I am just what she said. I'm a dull, handsome, ignorant creature; a kind of fine animal. That's it," with a short laugh, and a little, scornful nod. "Will you let me pass now?"

He stepped aside, with a bow.

She passed him, and then stopped.

"Shall you tell that woman?" she demanded, abruptly.

"You may rest assured," he replied, "that I shall not."

"Then I'll say I forgive you, though there's no need," she answered. And, without further ceremony, she left him to his thoughts.

They were not very pleasant ones. He felt as remorseful and disturbed as if he had really done her an actual injury. If he had said nothing, he had at least listened; and he condemned himself for doing so, without asking himself how it would have been possible to check his hostess in her comments.

"I wonder how she will meet me to-morrow," he murmured, as he returned to the parlor. "It is an awkward business, and a painful one."

But he found that there was no cause for uneasiness. When the time for the meeting arrived, she met him with a coolness which almost staggered him. Certainly, Mackenzie himself had no reason to imagine that the two had met before. She was ready, dressed in the coarse, dark-blue serge, and with the cluster of scarlet berries in her hair; and she had been a far less striking figure the night before than she was at this moment, as she stood in the long, richly-fitted room, almost seeming, in her rustic costume, to set its luxury at defiance.

"He wanted me to wear it," she said. "I suppose he told you?"

There was always in her manner, Benedict remarked, a proudly silent submission to her husband. It was as if she was continually influenced by her determination to submit to him, even in the merest trifle.

"You must never tell him," she said, abruptly, during the morning; and though the words were

indefinite enough, the artist understood them at once.

"No, no!" he answered.

"He's very fond of me," she went on; "and he's very kind to me. I've always kept it from him, and I always will as long as I can."

But, fond as he was of her, Mackenzie did not see what Benedict saw, when he learned to know her better. To Alan it only seemed that she was prone to silence, and averse to mingling with strangers; and finding himself unable to conquer her disinclination for society, he gave it up good-naturedly, leaving the matter to time. It was because everything was new to her, he told himself. She would get over it in a year or so, and, in the interval, she should feel herself entirely unconstrained, and free to follow her own inclinations. But Benedict, who had half a score of years more of experience, saw deeper. The grandeur and ceremony surrounding the girl lay heavy upon her. In the midst of it she was lost and lonely. She was morbidly sensitive, and her whole life was a bitter, secret protest against her position. She had cultivated a kind of proud stolidity, and often steeled herself even against people who might have befriended her.

"There'll be more than Alan that will like to see that," she said once, pointing to the picture.

Benedict looked up inquiringly, and saw upon her lips a queer, significant smile.

"They'll like to see me in that dress," she said. "They'll say, among themselves, that it suits me better than velvet and lace. And so it does."

This last abruptly, and she stood before the easel, with her hands hanging clasped before her.

"So it does," she repeated. "Silk and satin is not for me, by right. My fine feathers haven't made me a fine bird. I thought I was going to be grand and happy, but I'd better have stayed at home, where the eagles would not peck at me because I was naught but a hedge-sparrow."

"Rob seems to get on wonderfully well with you, Benedict," Alan said several times. "I wish she got on as well with other people. She is not shy with you, or even the least backward."

And this was true enough. Perhaps the peculiar nature of their first meeting had paved the way for unceremonious frankness. At all events, their intercourse became an unconstrained and almost confidential one, before the picture was completed; and, after its completion, Benedict's position in the household was established.

Generously prone to hero-worship; indeed, generously prone to all good-natured, youthful

impulses, Alan was delighted to find the artist falling, by easy gradations, into the place of family friend. Long before their first meeting, he had admired his pictures with all the lavish amiability of an amiable youngster, who knew nothing of art but what people told him, and on these days he admired the man wholesale, also; admired his good looks, his kindly grace of manner, his knowledge of the world, and his ready wit.

“The oftener you can spare us an evening, the better,” he would say. “The better for me, and the better for Rob. She likes to talk to you, and what she wants is some one who will draw her out. People who cannot draw her out, never know her. She is not easy to get at. Sometimes, do you know, I am not sure that I quite understand her myself.”

The claims this world had upon him often left the girl to her own resources. He was popular, and fond of society, and she herself never went out when it was possible to remain at home.

“He is better without me than with me,” she said to Benedict, “though he does not think so. Wait until I am more used to it, and then I will go—to please him.”

So, Benedict, who was a hard worker, and, consequently, often too tired for actual gayety, frequently found himself spending an evening at the house when chance called Alan away. Other things than her great beauty touched and interested him. Her youth, her solitariness in the midst of the whirl of fashionable life; her constant effort to keep her unhappiness a secret from the light-hearted boy who loved her. All these filled him with pity and tenderness for her. And these feelings prompted him, at length, to speak to her openly of a certain plan he had formed, mentally.

“You are not very old, Mrs. Mackenzie?” he said, smiling gently, as he shook hands with her one night.

“I’m nineteen,” she answered. “I was eighteen when Alan married me.”

“One may learn a great deal after nineteen,” he said.

She regarded him questioningly, for a few seconds, and then caught at his meaning.

“Could I learn?” she asked. “A dull, handsome creature like me? Only dull and handsome—nothing else.”

“You are not dull, at least,” he returned. “Forget that speech as soon as possible. If you would try, you might learn anything you chose.”

“Might I?” she said. “Might I?”

In the little pause that followed, he saw a slow flush creep up on her face, and then she clenched her hand in a sudden gesture.

“No,” she cried. “It was a lie. I am not dull. And why shouldn’t I learn? I will learn. I’ll work with all my strength, and I’ll be a lady yet.”

“Make the best of your life, and that will be enough,” he said, kindly. “It is easy for a good woman to be a lady.”

Her face hardened itself a little.

“I’m not a good woman,” she said; “but I am going to try to learn.”

Then she went to a table, and brought out a piece of paper, and pen and ink.

“Write me down a list of books to buy,” she said, “and I’ll get them to-morrow.”

She was plainly so much in earnest, that he sat down and complied with her request, to the best of his ability.

She took the paper, and thanked him.

“Don’t tell Alan,” she said. “When I’m sure I can do it, perhaps I’ll tell him myself.”

Some men might have fancied it a caprice, which, in all probability, would prove short-lived; but Benedict understood her better than to make such a mistake. There was steadfast determination in her very brevity of speech.

When he came again, he found she had very practical results. She had bought the books, and engaged a teacher; a quiet, unknown man; who was to come only during the hours when her husband would be absent.

“He will give me work to do when he is away, and I shall do it,” she said to Benedict. “He is very quiet, but he knows a great deal. He has taught people like me often enough,” he says.

There was a suggestion of fierceness in the manner in which she applied herself to her work. In Alan’s absence, she labored incessantly, her eagerness seeming to grow with what it fed on. She was never tired, always ready to begin new tasks. The quiet teacher confidentially informed Benedict that he was amazed.

“It is not uncommon to meet with considerable distaste and reluctance,” he said, in mild mystification, “but here there is actual feverishness, as one might express it.”

Unless Alan himself was at home, Benedict never entered the house without finding the girl poring over her books; and often enough he discovered her crouched upon the hearth, reading by the fire, too much absorbed to think of ringing for other light.

“It is something for me to do,” she said. “It fills up my time, and makes the days seem less dreary.”

"It makes you happier," Benedict remarked, once.

"Yes," she answered. "I think I'm happier, as much happier as I can be."

It was quite natural that, through such familiar companionship, the two should learn much of each other, and be drawn near together. When they met in society, as they always did upon the rare occasions when the girl went out, she always turned to Benedict for support, as it were. He helped and sustained her, standing between her and coldness or disdain.

"I don't care, when you are with me," she said, one night, when he had given her his arm, to lead her across a crowded room. "They know that Alan does not see, but you——"

But there she stopped, with a flushing cheek, checking herself suddenly.

It was a little dangerous that he should always find it so; that it should seem that he was almost necessary to her; that he could help her as her husband could not. "It is, because I am the older man. He will learn in time," he would say to himself. But the time came at last when even this sober thought did not prevent his pulse beating somewhat more quickly when the handsome girl-face turned toward him, in eager expectation, as the little hand clung closely to his arm. It was a dangerous thing, but his very chivalrous truth itself prevented his seeing his danger. But there were others who were ready enough to see the hazard of it, even in the earliest stages of the friendship, and who were quick enough to exchange glances when they entered a room together, or when Alan spoke in his generous fashion of his admiration for his friend.

"It shows what a splendid fellow he is," he often said. "The mere fact of his caring so much for young nobodies, like Rob and myself, when he might be such a lion, if he would. I tell you he is a tremendous fellow!"

And so the intimacy continued until the winter, and then, one evening, Benedict called, and found Alan in the dining-room, flushed and joyous, holding his wife in his arms, in a high state of excitement.

"Benedict!" he cried out, as the artist advanced, "I am the happiest fellow in the world." And he held out his hand.

Benedict looked at Rob. No tender yielding to the loving young arm expressed itself in her figure. She simply stood still, and allowed it to clasp her waist. Her eyes were downcast, and Benedict saw that her calmness cost her a struggle.

"He has found out what I have been doing,"

she said, without lifting her eyes. "And I have told him how you have helped me."

"Yes," exclaimed Mackenzie, his fair, boyish face glowing. "I have found out what she has been doing, for my sake, Benedict—for my sake. I found the books and dear little exercises, and they touched my heart as nothing ever touched it before. I am a happy fellow, Rob, my dear, God bless you."

But Rob said nothing, even when he turned and kissed her. She had not raised her eyes yet, and Benedict saw her tremble. Alan saw it, too, and made her sit down. He fancied she was excited, as he was himself. His heart was so full that he could not be silent. If she had been dear to him before, how much dearer was she now—his handsome Rob! His bonny Rob!

What woman in the land could have done a more gracious thing than she had done, for his sake? He was not worthy of it. He was not a clever fellow, like Benedict; he was not clever, like she was herself; he could only be grateful to her, and love her more tenderly than ever. He was too full of delight to notice how silent both were. As he spoke, a chill had gradually crept upon Benedict. Rob's pale face had a painful fascination for him. He scarcely knew what he was thinking of at first, and then the chill became a pang. He could not bear to hear the joyous, excited young voice; it angered him to see Alan hold his wife's passive hand; it angered him to see him kiss her cold lips. His miserable unrest was a revelation to him; until this moment he had not known how far he had gone, how treacherous the ground was upon which his feet stood.

He left the house as soon as he could excuse himself, and when he got into the street a little groan broke from him.

"I builded worse than I knew," he said, grimly. "I must go away. I did not think that I was so nearly a villain. I must go away. I will bid her good-by to-morrow."

He was not the man to tamper with dishonor. His was the simple creed of right and wrong. There was enough passionate misery in his heart, as he said these few words. He could only go away. He would not pretend to give up, and still linger within the pale of temptation. Where this woman's life was lived, there lay temptation for him, and he had courage enough to fear it. He sat up all night, smoking his pipe among his pictures, and making plans. He had long intended to travel, and had put it off from year to year. Now he would go. Once, in the outset of his career, he had spent a long-to-be-remembered winter in Rome, working well,



and gaining much. When his wanderings were over, he would go there again, for a year, at least. Rob started at the sight of his haggardness, when he presented himself the next evening. She looked colorless and worn herself, and her eyes were heavy.

"Something has gone wrong," she exclaimed. "I can see it in your face. What is it?"

He did not release her hand after he had taken it; he fancied its light touch would give him courage; so he retained it.

"I am going to make a journey," he said, "a long one, and I have come to bid you good-by."

She staggered back apace, and stared at him. "To bid me good-by?" she said. "Good-by?"

"Yes," he answered her; and then he added, "Do not make it harder for me to say. It is hard enough, as it is."

She looked at him as if she was stunned.

"It is very sudden!" she said, in a dull, blind fashion. "It is very sudden!" And then she drew her hand away, and went and sat down.

Then it was, just at this instant, as her uplifted eyes met his, that he saw his danger was even greater than he had fancied, when he thought he faced it at its worst. The blow which had struck him to the heart had struck her also; he was in that worst of danger, the danger of being conquered by another's anguish. There was little need for words. Each met the glance of the other, and then Rob uttered a low cry, and covered her face with her hands.

He went to her, and stood close to her side, speaking in a hurried, shaken voice.

"I am going away," he said, "because I am not as honest a man as I thought I was. I have been blind for a long time, but last night my eyes were opened, and I found myself standing upon the brink of an abyss. Do you not see, now, why I came to say good-by?"

She uncovered her face, and cried out, breathlessly, as if she had no pity on herself,

"I am a bad woman," she said. "I am a bad woman! Let me speak to you, and confess how bad and false I have been. Perhaps I will make it easier for you to turn your back on me."

"Nothing will do that," he answered.

But she would speak.

"If you have been blind, I have been worse. I sold myself for money and grand things. I wanted to be happy, and wanted to be made much of; and he was so fond of me. I never cared for him at all. I did not deserve his love, and I knew it when I promised to marry him. I have been bad from first to last. It was not for Alan's sake I worked; first, it was for my own, and then—and then, for yours. I wanted

to be like the women you know, and admire. I have cared for you as I could never care for Alan, if I lived with him a thousand years, and saw his goodness every day. When he kissed me last night, and kept saying I had worked for his sake, I almost hated him, because he was so blind, because he was too generous and good."

There was such sharp suffering in her voice, that Benedict almost forgot his own pain. He tried to comfort her, though he could scarcely trust himself to speak. Words were unsafe for him in his present mood, and did little good. So, at last, he relapsed into sad and heavy silence.

"I shall wait for Alan," he had said. "I must say good-by to him, too."

Contrary to their expectations, he had not long to wait. He had not been in the house half an hour when Alan came in.

They heard him enter, and then they heard him coming up the stair-case rather slowly. When he opened the door, and stood upon the threshold, each turned toward him in wonder. He was quite pale, and his arm was bandaged, and placed in a sling. He even seemed somewhat weak, but he advanced toward them with a brave smile.

"Don't be frightened, Rob, my dear," he said, and he put his uninjured arm round her shoulder. "Don't be frightened, my dear;" and bent down, touching her forehead with his lips, in a manner which Benedict fancied held a meaning.

"I have been punishing a gossiping coward," he said; "and I have received a slight injury; only a slight one, you see. I am a little weak, from loss of blood, perhaps. It is a pistol wound, and I am going up stairs as soon as possible, to get a good night's rest. But I thought I would stop here on my way to my room, to say a few words to you. I want you to promise me, my dear Rob, and Benedict, that whatever you may chance to hear from any of the evil sources from which all scandalous suggestions spring, you will not lose faith in me; in my love for both of you, and in my perfect trust in your love for me. I would rather risk my life a thousand times, my dear Rob, and Benedict, than allow any scoundrel, who uttered a breath of wrong against you, to go unpunished. Bear witness to Benedict, my dear Rob, that I honor and love him with my whole heart; and bear witness to Rob, my dear Benedict, that I love and revere her beyond all the power of my poor words to express.

He would have touched Rob's forehead again with his lips, but she shrank from him, shaking all over; and before he could stop her, she had slipped down upon the floor, her face upon his feet, sobbing out wild, incoherent words.

"Rob!" he cried, bending over her. "My poor, loving girl, it is nothing!"

"It will kill me!" she panted. "I cannot bear it! It will break my heart!"

But he raised her to her feet, pretending to jest at her emotion, and yet holding her shrinking form close to his heart.

"Why," he said, "I shall not dare to leave you to entertain Benedict. I shall be obliged to stay with him myself."

She clung to him, hiding her face.

"I have no right to your love," she cried, wildly. "I don't deserve it! I bring nothing but shame and pain to you. Send me away."

"My handsome, foolish Rob!" he answered her, soothingly. "What tender cowards you women are! You do not know what you are saying."

When, at last, he went up stairs, he let her go with him, though he still treated his injury lightly, and professed not to feel it.

"It was done two or three hours ago, and since then I have been sitting, comfortably enough, with Brandt. I was a trifle excited, of course, and I wanted to cool off. Wait here, Benedict. She shall come down again, and tell you how serenely I have gone to sleep."

When she did come down again, which was about a quarter of an hour after, the sight of her altered face was a shock to Benedict. He took her hands, terribly shaken himself. He had only a few words more to say, and he must say them quickly, and go.

"Make the best of your life, Rob," he said. "Make the best of it; and it cannot fail to be a noble life, that Heaven will bless."

"Yes, I will," she answered. "Yes, I will. I'll try to be a better woman. I'll go on trying to learn. I'll try to be worthy of him, as well as of you."

"Not of me," he said, sadly. "Not of me! God knows, he is the better man of the two, ten thousand times. Let us both try to be worthy of his generous faith."

"I will try to make him happy," she said; "and I will bear everything for his sake. I will do my best for his sake."

There was one moment in which Benedict could not speak. Then he wrung her hands hard, and kissed them.

"God be good to you," he whispered; "and good-by!"

"Good-by!" she answered; and then her faltering voice broke, and he went away, leaving her looking after him with strained and anguished eyes.

Five years later, Benedict met in Padua a fellow-artist, who was young enough to be interested in good-natured gossip, and who, having recently left England, had plenty of it on hand.

"You will find many changes when you return," he said. "When do you think of going?"

"In the spring," answered Benedict. "In time to see the world awaken."

"A good time," was the reply; "and, as I say, you will see many a change. By-the-by, did you ever see young Mackenzie's wife?"

"Yes," quietly, as he bent over his brushes.

"A handsome woman, isn't she? How people did protest against that marriage, to be sure! And yet see how it has turned out! Popular opinion is obliged to concede that Mackenzie is a lucky man. They have two of the loveliest children in London, and their mother is a sort of Cordelia. And Mackenzie is honestly in love with her yet. It is quite a romantic affair. They say she spent years in educating herself, merely through her love for him. It was not easy for her at first, though. The elect were so much against her. There was even a legend that Mackenzie once fought a duel with a fellow who had hinted at some scandal concerning her. I never heard who the other man was. Mackenzie was so fearless and determined about it, that people were afraid to speak, and at last nobody believed. He is a courageous fellow, that Mackenzie, and a generous fellow, too. Everybody likes him."

"Yes," said Benedict. "He is a generous fellow; generous beyond most men's comprehension. He deserves his happiness, God knows."

## COME BACK!

BY HOWARD MELVILLE.

Come back! the day is dark and cold;  
The rain is falling sad and slow;  
And o'er the barren fields and hills  
The lost wind wanders to and fro.  
Like some pale spirit of the dead,  
That comes back moaning from the shades,  
The blasted pines wail o'er the storm,  
And fast the waning daylight fades.

Another night is drawing on,  
Yet thou art far away, and I  
Press close my face against the pane,  
And gaze upon the storm, and sigh.  
And still the heart you doubted then,  
Bowed down in grief, waits on for thee;  
The love has never died that bloomed—  
My soul still sighs, come back to me!