

"COME LIVE WITH ME, AND BE MY LOVE."

AN ENGLISH PASTORAL.

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CHAPTER IX.

A THUNDERBOLT.

We were two sisters of one race . . .

She was the fairest in the face.—*Tennyson.*

The dance in the big barn was a huge success, the fun boisterous, the refreshment copious, and everybody full of natural merriment. From Jabez the herd to Dutton the doctor, from Jasper the shepherd to Mr. Marsh the tax-collector, from Amandy the dairy-maid to Catherine and Bridget, there was nothing but fun, freedom, and equality. The Gaffer was there with his son, both looking a little anxious; but when George led out Catherine for the country dance the old man seemed relieved.

The evening was well-nigh spent, but the merriment was still at its height, when Catherine slipped from the crowded barn and stole away far from the sound of music and merriment to the quiet solemn beauty of the moonlit fields.

She wished to be alone—to think—to ask herself if her cup of happiness was indeed full, or if the bitter had already begun to mingle with the sweet of love.

That morning, all that day in fact, she had counted herself the happiest woman in the world. But human happiness is never supreme; be one's joy ever so great it never seems more than an earnest of a greater joy to follow, and though Catherine had spent the day in the realisation of the one great joy of her life, yet she had looked forward to the evening as a time when her happiness would reach its very height. Love had brought her gladness; how, then, could that gladness be complete without the presence of the one being whom she loved better than her life?

In the evening, she thought, George would come; he would take her hand, he would whisper in her ear that he loved her; he would kiss her, perhaps; and with those words ringing in her ear, that kiss fresh upon her lips, she felt that she could die. But, now that she was alone, Catherine was fain to confess that her joy had received a check. True, George had come—he had taken her hand—he had danced with her—he had looked into her eyes—he had called her Catherine—"dear Catherine!" He had congratulated her before them all—he had rejoiced in her good fortune, because he said her happiness was as dear to him as his own. And yet there was something in his manner which she could not understand—something which seemed to check her ardour, and which kept her tongue tied when she was burning to whisper in his ear "George, I love you!"

Wondering and dreaming, she wandered she knew not whither. At last she sat down upon a grassy bank and held her hand to her head. Something cold touched her forehead: she looked at her hand. It was George's ring! His ring! Yes, there it was, shining upon her finger—the little golden circlet which he had sent her as a pledge of his love.

"It is all real," she murmured. "I am selfish in my happiness. I want too much; it should be enough for me to know that he loves me as I love him."

She kissed the ring again and again and again; then, propping her chin in her hand, she sat gazing dreamily at the dimly moonlit meadows. She sat for some time lost in thought. Suddenly the sound of voices struck on her ear. She listened. She was not the only wanderer that night? The sound came nearer; two figures were approaching the spot where she sat.

Instinctively, she never knew why, she leant farther back into the shadow of the hedge. Nearer came the sound.

Suddenly Catherine's heart gave a great throb; she had recognised the voices: one belonged to Bridget, the other to George Kingley.

She sat still, scarcely breathing. The sound of the voices ceased, but the figures came on. They paused close to the spot where Catherine was waiting. Their backs were towards her—by stretching out her hand she could almost have touched the hem of Bridget's dress.

They stood close together; Bridget was clinging to George's arm. He was looking down at her—she was looking up at him.

Presently he spoke.

"It doesn't seem real," he said. "But it is true, Bridget; you love me!"

"Well, yes, I do love you, of course."

"Of course," he said, and he kissed her. Bridget laughed softly.

Catherine's cheek, but she did not stir. The silence all around her was broken by one sound which dinned incessantly in her ears—

"I love you! I love you!"

Presently she rose and stood at her full height. As she did so, her limbs began to tremble: she clutched at the air as if for support.

"My God! what is it?" she thought, "what is this coming over me!—it feels like death! He loves her—they love each other! Ah, no, it can't be true. I won't believe it—it is too horrible; and yet I might have known it. I was too happy—it could not last. And she, my own sister, has come between us—she who was dearer to me than all the world. As she looked into his eyes, as his kisses fell upon her face, all my love was turned to hate: I could have killed her where she stood. No, no!" she cried aloud. "Not that! don't turn my heart against her! the little one for whom I would have given my life!"

Slowly, languidly, she walked back towards the barn; when she got near to it she paused again. How could she enter it?—how could she face the lights, the merriment, the people? How could she meet Bridget and George? She felt she could not; she must creep away, as some wounded creature creeps away to die.

The fiddles were still playing merrily; she heard shouts of laughter. All her friends were rejoicing over her good fortune. What a mockery it all seemed!

Shivering as if with cold, she turned away, and made for the house.

All the farm-servants were up at the barn. The kitchen was empty, save for a big black retriever which slumbered near the window. As Catherine came in the creature rose and licked her hand. She sat down by the table and buried her face in her hands. The dog sat beside her, and rested his head on her knee.

Presently the tears trickled through her half-closed fingers; she gave a great sob. She rose, paced restlessly about, then sought her own room. She seemed to be waiting for something—what that something was she could not tell.

Hours passed. It seemed an eternity to Catherine; suddenly she heard someone stirring in the kitchen. She tried to move, but could not.

She sat before the empty grate, her hands crossed on her knees, her eyes staring vacantly before her. The door of her room opened, and a voice murmured—

"Catherine!"

It was Bridget who spoke. Catherine did not stir or speak, she seemed turned to stone. Bridget came forward and looked at her sister in alarm.

"What is the matter, Catherine?" she said. "You are not well."

She made a movement as if to approach her, but Catherine put up her hand to keep her back.

"I am not ill," she said.

"There is something the matter!" said Bridget. "Tell me what it is. Tell me why you left the dance and came here all alone."

But Catherine did not answer; she put her hand to her head like one in pain, and gave a low heart-broken moan. Still wondering and terrified, Bridget again approached her and was again waved back.

"You are in trouble, Catherine, and you must tell me what it is that I may help you!"

"You help me!" said Catherine, bitterly. "You!"

"Yes, dear—who has a better right? Do not turn away from me, Catherine. I want you to be tender to me to-night, for I—ah, it seems wicked to say it when you are so sad—I am so happy. Listen, Catherine, I wish to tell you about George. He loves me—he has told me that he loves me!"

Catherine turned her white face towards her sister.

"Why do you tell me what I know already?" she said bitterly.

"You know it?" cried Bridget, "and you are glad! Oh, Catherine, tell me that you are glad."

"Glad?" she answered, still in the same hard, bitter tone.

"Yes, very glad."

Bridget gave a sob.

"Catherine, Catherine," she cried, "you are angry with



"What is the matter, Catherine?" she said.

"You must get your father to consent," she said.

"Well, I will try—but he is stubborn."

"Like his son."

"And having once got into his head that I ought to marry the heiress he'll be a long time coming round."

"What a strange idea," said Bridget, "to think of your marrying Catherine!"

"It was strange! You see, what weighed with the old man was the money and the land."

"And I have neither."

"You have what I prize far more—your own dear little self."

Bridget laughed again, and again he bent down and kissed her. She put up her hand to turn his face away.

"You must be more respectful," she said. "Come, let us return to the barn."

"There is plenty of time."

"No; we must return, or we shall be missed."

They moved on again—their voices sank to a murmur—then they died, and all was still. The moonbeams still trembled on the meadow, the cool night breeze kissed