

HELD IN TRUST.

CHAPTER VIII.

BELLE STAYS AWAY AGAIN FROM SERVICE.

(Continued.)

Nor was it a mere shadowy foreboding of evil that was robbing her cheek of its bloom and depriving her of flesh. The thing, whatever it might be, was assuming tangible shape and reality. In the daytime she would rattle herself for her cowardice, and would succeed in regarding it as purely imaginary, as altogether baseless and puerile. But at night she had no such relief; she would cower away from it with a real terror and a real belief that made her nights dreadful to her. Then it almost seemed to her as though she must make her sister her confidante. But when the morning came she shrank from the avowal of her weakness; all the more that she saw that in spite of her sister's solicitude she noticed nothing.

But to-night her oppression was such that she could make no pretence of sleeping. Mary had been kind, and had striven to say a word of comfort, looking upon her affliction as one that words might have some power to alleviate, and she had repulsed her with a decision that had somewhat of abruptness in it. But how could Mary know that she was too sore for such words?

Even her interview with her lover had brought her no consolation; it had been brief and unsatisfactory.

Well, Belle, he had said directly they were left alone, and putting his two hands on her shoulders, I shall have to come to you for sympathy. I wonder what you will say to comfort me? And then she looked up at him rather pitifully, and had made no sort of answer. Things have come to a sorry pass with us, he went on. It is all very well for Austin to joke, but I look upon our game as a lost one. Then again that long shiver passed over her frame, thrilling her like ice, but no words of comfort occurred to her.

Austin did not mean to be unsympathetic, she ventured at last.

No I know he did not, nor Mary either, but it is very galling to a man of my position. And then he had gone on to say a few things decidedly bitter about his brother, and Belle had not dared to contradict him; and after that he had spoken a sentence or two as though he had felt himself assured of her sympathy.

I wish I did know how to comfort you, Robert, she said, and her tone had been very soft and pleasant to him; but it seems beyond my power.

Yes, it is beyond your power, Belle; I don't think any one on earth can make my position endurable to me now. Then he had taken down his hands from her shoulders, and had bidden her good-night.

It was this last speech of his that had tormented her; she was revolving it now as she looked out at the sea bound horizon; she had borne a great deal for his sake: the four years of her engagement had not been, on the whole, happy years—she had had her secret burdens, her sorrows, and her regrets; but, had they been doubled, she could never have brought herself to have told him that her position was unendurable, and yet it was owing to her that such was the case with him. It was not that he was unkind, for even then he had said a lover-like word or two that at another time must have given her comfort; but he was proving to her as plainly as words could prove it that she was failing in yielding him happiness. If it were so—if his position were indeed unendurable, and the thralldom of his hopeless engagement were fretting him, might it not be her duty, seeing that she loved him better than herself, to set him at liberty; at least, might she not clearly make him understand that she was so willing?

True, he might be angry with her, and refuse to take her at her word; indeed, she rather suspected that such would be the case. But would it not be as well to brave his anger, so that she did her duty? She did not suppose that he would misunderstand her; undemonstrative and silent as she was, she had given him plain proofs that she loved him, though even he had no idea of the extent of her powers of loving. Already she yielded him loyal obedience in all things that concerned herself and him; for his sake she had renounced a project she had secretly cherished for securing her own independence, and, at his expressed wish, consented reluctantly to be a burthen on her brother-in-law.

Nor was this the only instance in which she had moulded her will to his; and so Robert had no conception of the courage and strength which lay beneath her quiet manners. It was not that he intended to domineer, but he grew so accustomed to her yielding that he forgot at last to question her opinion: had he been able to marry her during the first months of their engagement he would have made her a model husband, but his was a nature that grew harsh with opposition; no wonder, as Mr. Ord said, that he tried her a little.

But, after all, there was nothing abject in Belle's submission—no placing the neck in the dust, after the fashion of some women; it was rather the yielding of a strong proud will to a stronger and a prouder one, and that out of pure love. There were times when Belle could almost have prayed to have loved Robert Ord less, that his troubles should not have so darkened her life to the exclusion of her own, but she never told him so.

Well, it was no good looking back: she would give him this one chance, and risk his anger, though it was the only thing on earth she dreaded; she would tell him, if he would give her the opportunity for such speech, that he had better give up this losing game of his, that she knew that they would never be married—that it would be far wiser for him to teach himself to look upon her as his friend; and at this point she laid her head down on the window-sill in the darkness, and cried till her arms and hair were wet with tears, till from very weariness she could cry no more. But not for that was her resolve shaken.

One thing she deliberated upon long as she dragged herself to her bed, feeling conscious at last of her cramped aching limbs—should she tell him of the haunting fear that had lately beset her and robbed her cup of its small portion of sweetness? She turned this over long in her mind, but at last she resolved that she would not tell him. Unselfish herself, she was keenly alive to the generosity of Robert's real nature; such telling, she thought, would undo at once all the purpose of her words, and so, with the asceticism which was in reality as much a part of hers as of Garton's nature, she replaced her moral hair-shirt. It would be discovered some day, she knew, and then he would thank her for her reticence.

Her first waking thoughts were very sad; she was physically exhausted, too, from her lengthened vigil. For a few minutes she hesitated whether she might abstain from appearing at the family meal, but she had never excused herself yet on plea of illness, disliking all fuss and softness, and she would not spare herself now. Once or twice her strength failed her in the process of dressing, but she made head at last against her weakness, and was in her place by the time the Vicar had returned from service.

She had a little difficulty in eluding Mary's inquiries as to her rest last night, and was very short with Arty when he told her she had black spectacles round her eyes; but after breakfast she went out to her district, and got through her duties in a mechanical sort of way, and came home at dinner-time feeling as though her feet were weighted with lead, and with no voice; but nevertheless she was down at the school all the afternoon. She was always very zealous in performing her duties, and took a great deal of her sister's work on her shoulders; but, in spite of her patience and gentleness with them, the poor people liked Mary's cheerful face best.

But all the time she was looking at the girls' long seams, or setting them their tasks, she was thinking how she could best contrive to see Robert alone; she must stay away from the evening service again, she thought; at such times Robert would often be busy gardening. Mary sometimes stayed away too, to finish her work or mind Arty; she could easily tell her sister that she wanted a word alone with him. Robert always managed these things in an off-hand manner; she had seen him turn all the boys out of the room if he had anything particular to say to her; perhaps she might not find it difficult after all. Robert would probably be busy gardening, and she could go out and speak to him. Anyhow, she was determined that she would not let him go till she had so spoken to him.

As they sat down to tea she did manage to say a word to him, but he noticed that her voice trembled.

You have been tiring yourself at the school again, he said rebukingly; and she had hastened to assume him that such was not the case.

At any rate you are right to stay at home. I think Mary and you have quite enough to do without attending all Austin's services. By which it may be seen that the Vicar's innovations were not altogether pleasing to his brother.

I am thinking of making Belle my assistant organist again, observed Austin, who had overheard the heretical speech; Lambert is going away on sick leave.

I shall be very glad to help you, Austin, returned Belle pleasantly; I managed it very well before.

Yes, but you will not be able to play the truant for two evenings then, remember. And then Belle knew that the Vicar was aware of her little shortcomings.

Mary was still hard at work upon Arty's old suit, and she looked up rather imploringly as Belle went to fetch her hat. Belle noticed the look in a moment.

I am sorry that I cannot stay to help you this evening, Mary; but I am going out with Robert.

With Robert! Why you have been out all day! And Mrs. Ord's tone was slightly aggrieved.

Yes, but only in the district and at the school. I have been working with the girls all the afternoon.

I had ten times rather you had helped me with all this work. I don't see how I am to finish it by Sunday. It is quite dreadful to see how I stay away from church now.

Never mind; Austin will not scold you; he reserves his rebukes for me. I suppose he thinks that it will never do to encourage Robert in his dislike to week day services.

Do I encourage him, Mary?

Of course not. How you take me up Belle! and Mrs. Ord looked for once decidedly ruffled. I think I should have asked you anyhow to have remained at home to-night; but, if you are going out with Robert, of course it does not matter. But Belle, as she went out, looked as though it mattered very much indeed.

She found Robert walking up and down the Vicarage lawn, rather impatient at her delay.

I thought you had changed your mind, and were not coming, he said, when she had got up to him.

Oh, that was not likely.

Nothing would be more likely with some women. What kept you?

Mary; she was in a fuss over the surplines, and wanted me to help her. I am afraid she has a headache coming on; nothing else ever seems to put her out.

I don't think I feel much in the humour for a walk after all, Belle. I was up at five digging with Garton, and I am as stiff as possible this evening.

If you are tired we will certainly not go.

You are sure you do not mind remaining in the garden?

Why should I mind it, Robert?

Then she put her hand on his arm and walked slowly on.

Austin went with me to Thornborough this morning, he began, for Belle had relapsed into silence. It was his day at the Cottage Hospital. We had a long talk together.

Well?

He was very kind.

I am glad of it, Robert.

He reserves all that joking manner of his for the public. I don't think we ever understood each other so well as we did this morning. I am sure I ought to feel very much obliged to him for his kindness.

I told you that he meant to be kind.

Oh by the by, you wanted to talk to me about something, Belle.

Yes, I did want to speak to you; and then for a moment her voice literally failed her.

Well, let me hear it, he replied impatiently. I hate mysteries. I suppose you and Mary have been putting your heads together over all this business, and have come to some impossible result.

Mary has nothing at all to do with it.

Well, that is right. I would rather have your own words and your own ideas than a hundred women's. And in spite of her soreness the little compliment soothed her.

I never care somehow for Mary to talk to me about our difficulties; but I know that both she and Austin look upon our engagement as pretty nearly hopeless.

That is our affair, Belle.

Yes, it is our affair; but it is very hard, nevertheless, to have other people always discussing it. One is never left alone in this world. They say it is well to belong to a large family; but I think it has its trials.

Well, I don't know; few people are so unsocial as you, Belle; and then he smiled at her as though her reticence were a beauty in his eyes. There was something specially soft in his manner to her this evening; no wonder she found it difficult to go on.

One gets to believe what is constantly affirmed, she continued after a pause. Mary and Austin too are continually letting fall some word which shows what they think about it; and, Robert, you said yourself yesterday that the chances were all against us.

Of course they are against us.

Yes, and then you went on to say that your position was unendurable.

I do not think I quite made use of that term, Belle.

Yes, you did: you said that it was quite beyond my power to comfort you; and then you added that no one on earth could make your position endurable.

What makes you remember my words so correctly? he asked; but he had the grace to look a little ashamed of himself.

They were not words that I could well forget, Robert; I know I tried, but they would keep recurring to me. I was awake all night thinking about them—and some other things.

That was very childish of you. No wonder Arty said you had black spectacles on;—a speech which the Vicar had duly reported, as he did most speeches of his youngest-born—you might have known that I was not accountable for my words last night.

I quite understand that Robert.

Then I think it was very childish of you. What were the other things? Come, I mean to hear them all.

Poor Belle! He was certainly making her task a hard one.

I don't think you were particularly consolatory yourself last night: if you are going to reproach me in this way, it is only fair that I should tell you that, he observed, while she was considering

how she could best bring it out; but to this she made no response.

Come, Belle, you are making me believe it is something very important.

And so it is—very, very important, Robert. I think it is of the utmost consequence that you should not waste your life as you are wasting it—that you should not remain any longer in a position that you feel to be unendurable.

Now, Belle, I did not think it was in your nature to nag—

Robert!

Well, is it not nagging to be forever repeating one word over and over again? I would sooner do my penance and have it well over—if you will only let me know what penance I have to perform.

Then she shook her hand from his arm and walked on in silence; but as he was about to replace it he saw that she was very pale, and that her eyes were full of tears.

Why, Belle! what is it? You are not angry with me in earnest? And then, as he saw that she scarcely knew how to support herself, he made her pass through the open window into the mother's room, which was always deserted at this time, and put her in the Vicar's big arm-chair. Belle, he said, taking her hand as he stood before her, I insist on knowing what all this is about! And as she brushed her tears away, I see I must be careful of my words in future; but I never knew you to be fanciful before. I certainly do not wish to rob you of your night's rest again.

Oh, Robert! it was only that.

Well, what was it, then? I was always glad that you were one of the quiet sort, Belle; but I am not so sure just now that it is a virtue.

I did not mean to be so foolish.

Oh, you need not mind about your crying, if that is what you mean. I will not be hard upon you for that; but I wish you would not try my patience.

No, I will not. Robert, you must forgive me; but I am not quite myself to-night. I want you to understand that I love you well enough to give you up, if it be for your happiness.

Then he looked at her, too much astonished to speak.

Indeed I mean it. I have been thinking all night over what I had to say to you, and I have made up my mind that it was my duty to speak. Of course it is very difficult—of course you will misunderstand me; but still I feel bound to tell you that, if you wish it, I will set you free.

But why should you set me free? And his tone was very loud and angry as he asked her the question.

Because, as I said before, you are wasting your life and wearing your heart out with this hopeless engagement. Every one owns it is hopeless—Mary and Austin. Why, you said yourself last night that we should never be married.

Why, Belle, he said putting his arm round her, whatever is the matter with you to-night? You are not a bit like my own Bella. And as he said this he compelled her, as it were, to support herself against him, and indeed she was in sore need of such support by this time.

I do not know myself, she returned, now speaking through her tears. I have been trying all day and all night to force myself to say all this, but I cannot bear your being so angry with me.

Then I will promise not to be so angry again; but you must never speak your offence; and his tone was a little triumphant, as though the sense of his power over her were sweet to him. Of course I shall never give up.

I will never offer it again. But as she said this, and pressed closer to him, feeling how dear he was to her, it suddenly came into her mind that she had not been thoroughly honest with him—that at any rate she had kept a part back. Last night she had worried herself to death, doubting whether she should tell him of her trouble and had come at last to the conclusion that she was weak and nervous and that possibly there was no foundation for her fears. He would only laugh at them, as she did herself sometimes; but now as she thought recurred to her she felt as though she were hardly honest.

I shall never offer it again, she repeated. Your anger has been too dreadful to me. But, all the same, it may come to pass that you may wish you had accepted it.

I shall never wish that, he returned decidedly. I would rather wait ten years for you than six months for another woman. And as he said this, and she felt the strength and vigour of his arm, the shadow of the nameless evil passed from her, and she felt for the time almost happy.

CHAPTER IX.

NETTIE UNDERWOOD

At this time there was a lady dwelling in the parish of Kirkby who went by the name of Nettie Underwood, although if the truth be told, there was a certain entry in the baptismal register of St. Barnabas, the old parish church of black-sear, to the effect that one Eliza Ann Underwood was duly christened on a particular day one November, about a quarter of a century before the date of our present story.

(To be continued)

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