

Literature, &c.

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THE TWO HOMES.

A STORY FOR WIVES.

OUR story begins—as most other stories terminate—with a wedding. And yet how often is marriage but the entrance gate of life, when the romantic girl must inevitably merge into the thinking and acting woman, and she who has hitherto lived within herself and to herself, must learn to live for another. She steps from the altar into a new existence, requiring new energies and new feelings; she enters on a path as yet untried, in which there is much to be overcome, and in which she has need of all help from her own heart and from Heaven.

Mr Stratford, the rich banker, gave away at the marriage altar, on the same day, his only daughter and his niece. The fortunate bridegroom who won the former was Sir Francis Lester, a baronet of ancient and honourable family. The husband of the latter was of lower standing in society—plain Henry Wolferstan, Esq., a gentleman whose worldly wealth consisted in that often visionary income, a 'small independence,' added to an office under government which yielded a few hundreds per annum. These were the two who carried away in triumph the beautiful heiress and the graceful but portionless niece of Mr Stratford.

With the usual April tears, the two young brides departed. A stately carriage and four conveyed Sir Francis and Lady Lester to the Hall of a noble relative; while the humbler railway whirled Henry and Eunice Wolferstan to the antique country mansion, where a new mother and sisters awaited the orphan. And thus passed the honeymoon of both cousins, different, and yet the same; for in the lordly abode, and in the comfortable dwelling of the English squire, was alike the sunshine of first, young, happy love.

In a few weeks the two couples came home. How sweet the word sounded 'Our Home.' What a sunny vista of coming years does it open to the view, of joys to be shared together, and cares divided—that seem when thus lightened, no burthen at all. Sir Francis Lester forgot his dignity in his happiness as he lifted his young wife from her downy cushioned equipage, and led her through a train of smiling, bowing, white ribboned domestics, up the noble staircase of his splendid house in—Square. Hand in hand the happy pair wandered through the magnificent rooms, in which taste refined and increased the luxuries of wealth. Emily was never weary of admiring, and her husband only looked in her eyes for his delight and reward. At last, exhausted with her pleasure, Lady Lester threw herself on a Damask couch. 'I can do no more to-day; I am quite wearied.'

'Wearied of home—of me—of what?' said Sir Francis smiling.

'No no,' answered the bride, looking proudly at her husband, and playing with his jeweled fingers, 'only with being so happy.'

'I hope you may always have that excuse, dearest. But now we must not give way to laziness, my mother is coming to-night, you know; and I want my Emily to be brilliant and beautiful. More than usual, if possible.'

'Indeed I do not care: all the mothers in the world would not induce me to rise and have the fatigue of dressing and dining in state to-night.'

Sir Francis looked annoyed; but he had been married too short a time to do more than look. 'As you will Emily,' he said. 'But I wished—'

There was something in his tones that made the wife look up. She saw the expression and repented. 'You wished—and I will do anything you wish, now and always,' whispered her beautiful lips in his ear, and shadow was swept away from between the two—swept away by the touch of love.

Half a mile from the abode of Sir Francis Lester was the home of Mr and Mrs Wolferstan. It was one of those pleasant houses that a generation now past used to erect in the suburbs of London. White, modern-built terraces and formal squares have risen up around, but the old houses still remain here and there, with their barrier of trees, or low privet hedges, against the dusty road; their little gardens and brown walls covered with ivy, or woodbine, or thick-leaved vines. To one of these pretty dwellings Henry Wolferstan brought home his bride.

It was an evening in September, chilly enough to make a fire welcome, when Henry and Eunice sat for the first time by their own hearth together. The ruddy firelight gleamed on the young wife's face as she presided at the tea-table; while her husband, resting at his ease in an arm-chair, watched with his affectionate eyes every movement of the delicate little hand that flitted about in matronly dignity. How happy they were! After all the trials of love whose course had been often ruffled by worldly cares and hindrances, to find themselves at last in a still haven—a happy, wedded home! Eunice looked round the cheerful room: the books, the well chosen prints, silent, beautiful companions, which they both loved so much; and the open pianoforte—all seemed to speak of future happiness. And then she saw beside her the face that had been

for years the sunshine of her life, and knew that he was her husband; that they would never be parted more; that the love between them would be as an ever-living fountain, daily springing up anew to freshen and brighten their united life. All this came upon the full heart of the young wife, and she fairly burst into tears. Happy, blessed tears they were, quickly kissed away, and changed into smiles!

Many and many a time in after-years did the young couple call to mind that first happy evening in their own home—how they looked over their treasures, their household gods! and Eunice touched her new piano, and sang; but her voice trembled; so at last they came and sat by the fireside—like John Anderson and his spouse, as Henry laughingly said—and built castles in the air; the jests always ended in seriousness, for they were too happy to be very mirthful.

Time glides away fast enough with every one; and most of all with those whose life is untroubled. Eunice had been married six months before she began to think how long it was since she had resigned her hand into Henry's loving keeping. Yet short as the time seemed, it was sufficient to make the former life of both appear like a dream. They had already settled down into a calm, sedate married pair. Sometimes people jested with them upon restricted freedom and marriage fetters; but Henry Wolferstan only laughed—he was ever of a merry mood—and asked if any man or woman, single or not, could ever truly say they had their liberty. And in good truth it is well it should be so; for such liberty would be a sore burden sometimes.

Mrs Wolferstan still kept up her intercourse with her cousin, for Emily was of too generous a disposition to make the difference in station a bar to such old friendship. Still there was in the world's eyes a distinction between the wife of a rich baronet and of a gentleman of limited income; and, still more than this, there was the difference of habits, thoughts, feelings, which the position of the two cousins naturally brought about; so that, if the intercourse of the two wives gradually narrowed, it was not very surprising. Eunice never returned from the square, which breathed the very atmosphere of gaiety and splendour, without feeling a sense of relief on entering the quiet precincts of her own home.

One day she came earlier than usual to visit Lady Lester, whom she found still in her dressing-room. Emily lay seemingly half-asleep; but when Eunice drew aside the rose-coloured curtains, and in the warm noon sunshine, she saw the pale face and swollen eyes that were beneath the rich lace cap. Before she had time to speak, Lady Lester observed, 'Well Eunice, my husband and I have had our first quarrel.'

'I am sorry—truly sorry. And Sir Francis—'

'Do not speak of him: he is unkind, proud, obstinate.'

'Hush!' said Eunice, laying her finger on Emily's lips; 'you must not speak thus—not even to your cousin.'

'I must tell you—I will not be contradicted,' answered the young beauty resolutely. And Mrs Wolferstan thought that to listen would perhaps be the wisest course, though she knew the evil of such confidences in general.

'I do not see half enough of my husband,' continued Emily. 'He is always going out—not with me but that disagreeable mother of his, whom I hate too see in my house; yet she makes it like her own, and I am thought nobody,—I, the wife of Sir Francis! I entreated him this morning not to ask her so much, to let her leave us alone together, and that he would stay at home a little more. But he was very angry: not passionate, for that he never is—I often wish he were—it would be better than his cold formal manner when he is displeased.'

'Was that all?' asked Eunice.

'Not quite. I told him he ought not to leave me so much—that I would not suffer it. And he answered in his quiet way, "When Lady Lester makes her society not quite so dull, it will have more charms for her husband. And so he went away. I will make him repent it, though," said Emily, while the hot flush mounted on her brow. Eunice saw at once that it was even no time for gentle reproofs, and besides, Emily was not all in the wrong; there was much to be laid to the charge of her husband also. Scarcely had Mrs Wolferstan succeeded in calming her friend, and just as she was beginning to think how she might best frame salutary but tender advice, the mother-in-law of Lady Lester entered:

The hasty greeting between the wife and mother of Sir Francis showed mutual dislike. Eunice contrasted the tall, harsh-voiced, frigid lady before her with the gentle woman who was Henry's mother, and her own, too, in love, which made the formidable title of mother-in-law but a name for a most sweet bond. Thinking of this, how much she pitied Emily! Had she not heard the confession of her cousin, the one half-hour during which she listened painfully to the abrupt, coldly polite, or sarcastic speeches that passed between the lady and her son's wife, was enough to convince Eunice that she was in a house of strife. She rose to depart; for it was vain to hope for more conversation with Emily. As she bade her cousin adieu in the anteroom, Eunice could just find time to whisper, 'Dearest Emily, when I married, a wise and true friend said to me, "Take care of the first quarrel!" I did so: Henry and I have not had our first quarrel yet. Listen to me. At all risks, end yours; make any sacrifices to be friends, and never, never

have another. God bless and help you! and good-by.'

The wise Solomon says, 'The beginning of strife is like the letting out of water.' Alas! if they who first open the fountain did but know into what a fearful river of wo it soon swells, sweeping away everything in its overwhelming tide. Emily Lester was wise enough to follow her cousin's advice; she did make up the quarrel, as a loving and still beloved wife almost always can, and no other tie has the same influence. But Sir Francis, though gifted with many high qualities, was a difficult temper to bear with and guide. His character and pursuits were fixed before he married; his wife must mould her nature to his, for he would never bend his to hers. He loved Emily fondly, but he regarded her, probably from the difference in their years, more as a plaything than an equal. After the silken fetters of the lover were broken, he would never brook the shadow of control. To give him an idea that he was ruled, was to lose that power for ever. Emily had truly called him obstinate, for the same quality that made him firm in a good purpose, made him resolute in an erring one. To thwart him, was but to strengthen his iron will. Yet he was a man of high principle and feeling; but he required to be lured by smiles to a cheerful home, instead of being driven away by frowns and murmurs.

Let us pass over another year and again visit the two homes. A mother's bliss had come to both: the heir of Sir Francis Lester was received with triumphant joy, and cradled in satin and down; while the first-born of Henry Wolferstan was laid in its mother's bosom with a tearful but not less happy welcome. Life had become very sweet to Henry and Eunice, their cup of joy was running over. Too much bliss is a snare to the wisest; and therefore, perhaps, it was for the best that before many months had passed over the babe whose advent had given much happiness, a shadow gathered on the path of the young parents.

Eunice sat waiting for her husband's daily return from town. Sleep had closed the eyes of her little Lily—the child's name was Lavinia, but they called her Lily, and very like was she to that sweet flower, especially now as she lay asleep, like a lily folded among its leaves. Eunice's fingers were busy in fabricating a christening robe for her darling; and the mother's heart kept pace with their quick movements; travelling over future years, until she smiled at herself to think how earnestly she had been considering the making of the bridal dress of the babe of three months old that lay unconsciously sleeping by her side.

A little later than his accustomed hour—for he was generally very punctual—Henry came in. He looked pale, and his eye was troubled, but he kissed his wife with his usual affection perhaps even more. Still, Eunice saw that all was not right. She waited for him to tell her: he always did; but this night he was silent. A few passing questions Eunice put, but they were answered so shortly, that the wife saw that that plan would never do; so she tried to distract his attention by speaking of Lily and the christening.

'See, Henry, how beautiful she will look in her robe—the darling!' said the mother, unfolding it, and displaying the delicate fabric.

Henry covered his face. 'Take it away!' he said, in tones of deep pain. 'I cannot think of such things. Eunice, I ought to tell you, and yet I dare not.'

'What is it you dare not tell me, my own Henry?' said Eunice, softly putting her arm round his neck. 'Nothing wrong, I am sure; and even if so, you know I will forgive.'

'I have not done wrong, Eunice, it might be foolish, but it was not wrong.'

'What was it, Henry, love?' said a voice so low, that it might have only been that of his own heart urging the confession.

'I will tell you. You know my brother George, how wild he is, and always was? Well, he came to me a year ago: he had a good situation offered him, but they required a surety; and George implored me on his knees to save him, and give him a chance of reforming. I did so. I was bound for him to the extent of our little all—poor Lily's fortune—and he has just fled to America—a thief! defrauding his master, and also me. Eunice, we have now only my salary to live upon. This is the trouble that weighs me down.'

'Is that all?' said the wife. 'Then we will bear it together. It is nothing—nothing,' and she smiled through her tears.

Her husband looked surprised. 'Eunice, do you know that we shall be much poorer than we are now? that we must give up many comforts? and the poor babe growing up too. Oh how foolish I have been!

'Never mind the past now, dear Henry: I have only one thing to complain of—that you did not tell me sooner.'

'You have indeed a right to do so,' said Henry slowly and painfully. 'I know it: I have brought this upon you; I have made my wife poor.'

Eunice looked at her husband with eyes overflowing with love. 'Henry,' she answered, 'since you speak thus, I also must think of myself. I must remember that I brought you no fortune; that I owe all to you—home, food, raiment; that, in making me your wife, the gifts were all on your side, for I had nothing. When I consider this, what right have I to complain of reduced luxuries—nay, even of poverty?'

'You are my own noble minded wife,' cried Henry, folding her in his arms. 'The richest treasure I ever had was the woman's heart you brought me.'

Thus even adverse fortune without could only throw a passing shadow on that blessed, united home.

The birth of their son drew a little nearer the hearts of Sir Francis Lester and his wife, but their life had too long been a troubled current to receive more than a temporary calm. When Sir Francis stooped from his usual dignified reserve to fondle his child, with the pride of a new-made father, these caresses, after the first pleasure was over, gave a jealous pang to poor Emily's heart. She was absolutely jealous of the babe, attributing her husband's more frequent society to his delight to his son and heir. She even doubted the increased fondness of manner that he evinced towards herself; until, repulsed by her coldness and vague hints, he again sought abroad the comfort that was denied him in his splendid but joyless home.

From that home Sir Francis became more and more estranged. His wife rarely saw him in the day, and midnight often found him absent. If she complained or questioned him whether he was going, or where he had been, his sole answer was silence or haughty reserve. In the early days of their marriage, Emily had often won her way, even against her husband's will, by tears or caresses. But the former were useless now; the latter she was too proud to try. Only the shadow of her olden love lingered in the wife's heart, and in its stead had had come distrust, and jealousy, and wounded pride.

One morning daybreak saw Lady Lester returning from a ball alone, for her husband seldom now accompanied her. As she entered, her first enquiry of the heavy-eyed domestic was if his master had returned. He had not; and this was only one of many nights that Sir Francis had outstayed the daylight. Lady Lester compressed her lips in anger, and retired; but she had scarcely gained her room ere Sir Francis entered.

'You are out late?' said Emily. He made no answer. 'Where have you been?' she continued.

'Nowhere of consequence, at least not to you.'

'Sir Francis Lester, you are mistaken,' answered Emily, trying to speak calmly, though she trembled violently. 'I have a right to know where you go and what you do—the right of a wife.'

'Do not annoy yourself and me; I never interfere with your proceedings.'

'Because you know there is no evil in them. I have nothing to hide which you have.'

'How do you know that?'

'Because, if you were not doing wrong, why should you stay out night after night, as now? There must be a cause for this; and shall I tell you what I think—what the world thinks? That you gamble!'

'The world lies!' cried Sir Francis, the words hissing through his white lips; but he became calm in a moment. 'I beg your pardon, Lady Lester; I will say good-night.'

'Answer me, Francis!' said his wife, much agitated. 'Where do you go, and why? Only tell me.'

'I will not,' replied he. 'The curiosity of a wife who doubts her husband is not worth satisfying. Good-night.'

Emily pressed her throbbing forehead against the cushions of a sofa, and wept long in silence and solitude. Ere morning dawned upon her sleepless eyes, she had resolved what to do. 'I will know, muttered the unhappy wife, as she thought over the plan on which she had determined. 'Come what may, I will know where he goes. He shall find I am equal to him yet.'

Two days after, Sir Francis Lester, his wife and mother, were seated at the well-lighted dinner table. There was no other guest—a rare circumstance, for a visitor was ever welcome to break the dull tedium of a family tete-a-tete. Alas for those homes in which such is the case! Silently and formally sat Lady Lester at the head of her husband's table. How cheerless it was in its cold grandeur! with the servants gliding stealthily about, and the three who owned this solemn state exchanging a few words of freezing civility, and then relapsed into silence. When the servants had retired, Sir Francis uttered a few remarks in his usual tone—perhaps a little kinder than ordinary—to his wife; but she made no effort to reply, and he turned to his mother. They talked awhile, and then the elder lady Lester rose to retire.

Emily's pale cheek grew a shade paler as she said, 'before we leave I have a word to say to my husband.'

Sir Francis lifted his eyes, and his mother observed sharply, 'Perhaps I had better retire?'

'As you will,' Lady Lester replied with a sneering emphasis. Oh how different from sweet Emily Stratford of old! But it might be an unpleasant novelty to Sir Francis to hear his wife without his mother's presence!

'What is all this?' coldly said the husband.

'Merely Sir Francis, that what you refused to tell me, I have learned. I know where, and how, you pass the evenings in which your wife is not worthy to share your society. I know also where you spent last night. A noble thing, a very noble thing for Sir Francis Lester to be squandering his own—ay, and his wife's fortune in a gaming house!'

Sir Francis started from the table. 'It's false!' he said, while the blue veins rose like knots on his forehead.

'It is true,' Emily answered. 'I know it.'

'May I ask how?'

'By the evidence of one who saw you enter the house.'