

LITERATURE, &c.

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HOME HAPPINESS.

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THE long summer day was drawing to a close, yet the sun still shed a brilliant glow along the beautiful valley of the Medway, gilding the broad and tranquil river, and glancing on the swelling hills, covered to their very summits with extensive orchards, graceful hop gardens, and luxuriant corn fields. Situated on a rising ground on the right bank of the river, looking forth on the fair scene of hill and valley, stood a large cottage like dwelling, with walls mantled with vines and clematis, and roses clustering round the open casements; but the surrounding outbuildings spoke of more than a cotter's wealth. It was in truth a small farmstead in the occupation of its proprietor, honest Peter Hilton, who dwelt there with his wife and only child, a son of five or six and twenty.

But there was yet another who found a home within those walls, on which the sun shone with such gladdening brightness. It was the phantom of ideal misfortune which thus had found an abiding place within the precincts of that cottage home, dimming with the dark shadows of his wing the sunlight of happiness which might otherwise have dwelt there; by his chilling presence rendered them not only unthankful for the many blessings they possessed, but almost unconscious that there were any such honey drops mingled with the bitters which they unaffectionately believed filled almost to overflowing their cup of life, and firm in the conviction that there were no human beings in the world so unfortunate as themselves.

But this evening as the aged pair sat within their trellised perch, while the sweet south wind, scented with the odours of the clematis and the eglantine, sunk in soothing whispers on their ears, their hearts were more than usually discontent, and their lips eloquent with complaints. For their son had at length wrung from them a reluctant consent to seek the hand of a lowly cottage maiden. It was nothing to them that Miriam Heathcote was the loveliest girl for many a mile around, nor that she was good and industrious as she was beautiful. It mattered not to them that her father had once possessed a station nearly equal to their own, as the tenant of a large adjoining farm. But the shadow of real misfortune had fallen on the home of the Heathcotes, and those days had long fled by. Farmer Heathcote had years before laid down the burden of life; and two by land and one at sea, all his sons had followed him, leaving a widow and two helpless girls to wage unaided the warfare of the world. The odds were against the grief-stricken widow; and she sunk daily in health and circumstances; and now some five or six years after, we find her the tenant of a little cottage by the river's brink, worn out and prematurely aged through constant suffering, with little remaining support save the industry of her younger daughter, Miriam, for the elder had long since married, and departed to a more prosperous home. But low as it lay beneath the Hilton's, there was yet more cloudless sunshine in that humble dwelling than in theirs. For from the lips of Mrs. Heathcote were rarely heard the accents of repining—from those of Miriam, never. They were grateful for the blessings still left to them, and meekly resigned to the loss of those withheld, or more painful still, removed. But thus it often is; it is not from those who have been most sorely tried, that we most commonly hear the language of murmuring and complaint, but from the lips of those whose greatest sorrows have been light and brief as the summer's showers, but are magnified by the fretful spirit into storm-clouds which threaten devastation along their onward path.

Not long had the well-meaning though discontented old couple sat in the ruddy light of the departing sun, heedless of the fertile fields which lay before their eyes, forgetful of the unclouded prosperity those acres of golden corn might have called to remembrance as a theme of gratitude, but repining bitterly that their son should have chosen so humble a bride, when many a well-dowered maiden would not have cast the eyes of scorn on the heir of Beechill Farm, and earnestly proclaiming to each other that so severe a trial would never have befallen any save such very unfortunate people as themselves; when they espied their son returning up the hill from the cottage of the Heathcotes, whose ivy shadowed roof was just perceptible from the porch.

When Richard Hilton had left his home that day, armed with the long-withheld consent, how light and elastic had been his step; hope had filled his heart, and joy danced in his eyes; and, as he swiftly passed along the intervening meadows, he had whistled and sung for very gladness. But now his pace was slow and heavy, as that of one who had borne a weight; and the lately erect head was bent forward on his chest, and his mother noted, as he passed them silently, that his face was pale and agitated.

"What ails ye, my dear boy?" she enquired kindly, as her son cast himself on a chair, and, throwing aside his hat, pushed back the hair from his heated brow, "what ails ye?"

"Mother, I am the most unfortunate man in the world!"

"You would not be your father's son if you were not," muttered the old man.

"Ay, we always were unfortunate, my dear; but what is it now?"

It was some time ere they could wring from him what it really was that had occasioned this repetition of an assertion that was but too frequently heard at Beechill Farm. And when at length they discovered that the poor and humble Miriam Heathcote had decidedly rejected the addresses of their beloved son, backed though they were by the knowledge of the house, fields, and cows, that would eventually be his, the indignation of his parents knew no bounds; and forgetting the reluctance they had so lately evinced to receive Miriam as a daughter, they now were loud in their murmurings, over the ill-fortune that perpetually followed them, and of which this event was a new evidence. But Richard joined not in their lamentations; it was his first trial—the first time he had ever felt brief—the first *real* misfortune that had ever overtaken him, and he bore it almost in silence.

But Beechill farm was not the only dwelling in Kent that night wherein was heard the voice of sorrow. There was weeping beneath the ivy-clad roof where Miriam laboured so unceasingly for the support of her almost helpless parent; and the slender fingers that were wont to ply the needle so rapidly, trembled till they scarce could hold the tiny implement. For the undreamed of event of that day had aroused to yet more vivid recollection thoughts and remembrances which rarely slumbered, and given rise to words that cost Miriam a world of bitter tears. Yet strong in her integrity, she wavered not from what she deemed the right course, and she listened patiently to her mother's gently expressed hopes that the decision of that day might never be regretted, and that she might not find that she had cast away the substance for the shadow, but that he for whom so great a sacrifice had been made might yet return to reward her for it, though the mother owned the hope he would do so had almost departed out of her heart. And it had almost died out of Miriam's also. Like a flower reared in darkness, it had waxed paler and more fragile with every fleeting day, until it appeared as if a single chilling breath might wither it altogether; and this evening it seemed as though, that breath had come; for a chill as of death gathered round the heart that loved so truly; yet she answered steadily:

"Mother, it may be that Edward Forrest has forgotten me: I had no right to believe he would long remember one poor and lowly as I. Yet, though it should be so, while I can earn ever so humble a sufficiency we will not talk of marriage."

From that day forward the name of Richard Hilton was not mentioned in the ivied cottage; nor was that of Edward Forrest, though in the heart of Miriam his remembrance was still treasured by that affection which, unwavering and unflinching, outlived even hope itself. Years had passed away since Edward Forrest had left Kent to wander in other lands, at the command of his proud and wealthy father, who would not bear of his only son wedding the daughter of his former tenant, now even reduced to the condition of a cottage maiden. But ere he went, the youth had bade her not forget him, promising that, though it might not be in his father's lifetime, yet she should be his bride. But now the old squire had been dead for many months, yet of his successor she had heard no tidings, and a heart sickness crept over her with the conviction that she was indeed forgotten. Yet Miriam bore the trial as many another girl has done—silently and uncomplainingly; while not a duty was unperformed, or an hour mispent, because her heart was sorrowful.

Months passed on: the bright summer had passed away, and the wintry winds were ruffling the darkened waters, and moaning over the desolate fields; and still they heard nought of Edward Forrest; yet the steps of Richard Hilton were often turned towards the cottage, where he always received a kind welcome from the gentle widow, and a friendly greeting that was scarce a welcome from the fair girl he loved too well to relinquish. But there were yet sadder days in store for Miriam Heathcote; for ere the end of the winter, her invalided mother was stricken with rheumatic fever, which rendered her completely helpless, and left her without hope of ultimate recovery. It had formerly required the utmost exertions of Miriam to earn a subsistence; and now that her mother needed almost constant attendance, she was unequal to the task of providing for their necessities; and the horrors of want began to close round them, and at a moment when her parent was least able to bear privation. How distressing is illness, even beneath the roof of luxury, when wealth is ready to gratify the sufferer's slightest wish. What then must it be when poverty renders mere comforts unobtainable? Miriam wept tears of agonised grief over her inability to support them even humbly as of old.

"Never would I allow my mother to suffer want, when I could save her from it by only marrying a man who loved me," said Miriam's married sister.

"Peace Annie!" said her mother; "Miriam has always been a good and a kind daughter; she has laboured unceasingly for me for years, and now she shall not be called on for further sacrifice."

The entrance of Richard Hilton stopped the reply that was rising to Annie's lips. But that evening he left the cottage the betrothed husband of Miriam Heathcote. The following week a small bridal train passed into the old church of St. Margaret, and foremost among them walked the still beautiful Miriam; for though care and wasting sorrow had pale her cheek and dimmed the brightness of her eye, they had but changed the character of her loveliness, and gave in added interest more than they stole away in brilliancy. And now it was done and she became the wife of one she loved not; but a high and generous motive sustained her through the trial, for Richard had, with his parents' consent, promised that her mother should be to him even as his own; and, filled with gratitude for the kindness shown to one she was herself unequal to support, Miriam went to the altar with the firm resolve of sparing no effort to endeavour to recompense both him and them.

But the single ray which had brightened the dark lot of the unloving bride was soon to be withdrawn, for within another week the parent for whom the life-long sacrifice was made breathed her last; and Miriam, when the first tide of her grief was over, was left to the reflection, that had she struggled with adversity but a little longer she have still been free, and the new bond pressed hard at the thought. Yet the conduct of Richard Hilton stood forth in strong and favourable contrast to that of him to whom her young heart's affection had for years been given; for he had left her alone and unsupported to meet the trials and sorrows of life, while the unloved one had been willing for her sake, to bear the burden of her helpless parent; and so poor Miriam felt; and, in the earnestness of her desire to fulfil the duties she had taken upon her, she strove to make gratitude take the place of affection, and to banish her fickle lover from her remembrance.

The early summer was beginning to unfold itself, the snow-white cherry blossoms were gleaming on the trees, and the air was fragrant with the perfume of the lilac and the hawthorn, when one evening Miriam left the dwelling where idle and frivolous complaint made it doubly difficult to regain a peaceful and contented frame of mind, and sauntered down towards the cottage, in which so many of her early days, both of sorrow and of happiness, had been passed, and from which at last she had been driven almost by despair. She entered the narrow garden and gazed around on the little wilderness of flowers her mother had been wont to tend so carefully. But few of them were yet in blossom, save the essence-breathing wall-flowers, the white and purple rockets, and the graceful grape hyacinth, blue as the cloudless skies, beneath which it enjoyed a brief but beautiful existence. But after a time the home scene exerted its magic, and the present was forgotten in the past. Suddenly her reverie was broken in upon by the sound of passing footsteps, which made her heart beat, though she knew not why; then a hasty hand was laid upon the gate, and the intruder entered—and Miriam Hilton and Edward Forrest stood face to face.

Miriam moved not, spoke not; it seemed as if her very heart had turned to ice at the sight; but Edward sprang forward eagerly with a cry of joy as he beheld her.

"Miriam, my own dear Miriam!" he exclaimed, as he caught both her hands in his.

She essayed to speak, but the words died away unheard, and she could only look up in his face with an expression of such unutterable anguish as alarmed him.

"Miriam, my own love! why do you not speak? What has—what can have happened?" he added anxiously. But at that moment his glance fell on the golden circlet surrounding the fourth finger of the hand she was endeavouring to extricate from him. Had the lightning's wrath smitten to the ground the shrinking girl before him, he could scarcely have been more appalled; his hands fell by his sides, and he stood rigid as a stone, unable to utter more than the single word "married!" while Miriam fled from him, and rushed up the hill with the speed of a startled antelope.

Edward Forrest had not been the faithless lover Miriam had deemed him. But many months had elapsed ere the tidings of his father's death had reached him, for he was then a traveller on the desert; a long and severe illness, from the effects of exposure, had followed; and then he had hastened home to lay his newly acquired liberty at the feet of his early love. But she was wedded, and the tale of how and why soon reached his ears, and then he pitied more than he blamed her for the step which had wrecked his happiness, as he then believed, for ever. Before many days were passed, Edward Forrest had once more set forth to wander beneath other skies, and years had fled by ere he was again seen in the place of his birth.

But Miriam, whose cup of sorrow had seemed almost full, how bore she this new trial? There was indeed bitterness and agony in the thought, that it was her own hand which had raised the barrier between them; and it would have seemed almost happiness to have lain down and died, and ended at once her sorrow and her life. It would have been an inexpressible relief, if she could have given way to her anguish even for a time. But it must not be: the path of duty lay straight before her, and she must tread it unflinchingly, however it might be filled with thorns and brambles. There must be no repining over the past, nor regretful musings over what might have been the future. She must endure not only without murmuring, the future that was in store for her, but she must bear her lot cheerfully, and seek diligently to root the old affection out of her heart, or her duty was but half done. But it was done and that fully and entirely, and that in the home where the accents of lamentation for petty annoyances fell often on her ear, and seemed to add the bitterness of mockery to her own severe but silent struggles. But though the noble and discerning soul of Miriam relaxed not in its efforts till the victory was gained, yet her youth and beauty disappeared in the conflict, though it was only for a season; for in the deep tranquillity of mind which ensued,

her youth appeared restored, and her beauty revived beneath the influence of the peace and contentment which were shed abroad in her heart. Who could deem, while gazing on those clear blue eyes, and that placid brow, how fearful a storm had passed over that tender head; still less would they suspect the moral heroism that had preserved her through its dangers.

It was the fourth autumn since the marriage of Miriam and Richard Hilton, when the latter, who had been engaged all day in seeing their harvest carefully secured, was returning home as the dimness of evening was beginning to obscure the surrounding hills, and as he approached, the sweet tones of a female voice singing some cheerful strain fell on his ear. He paused a moment in wonder as to who the singer might be, then passed on quickly, and found Miriam sitting in the rose-covered porch singing to her child. She looked up on his entrance with a smile.

"Why Miriam, how is it that long as we have been married, I have never heard you sing before," he observed smilingly.

Miriam's eyes filled with tears, and her husband placing the infant in the arms of a servant, who chanced to pass, led forth his wife into the meadow. Nearly an hour elapsed ere their return; and then the eyes of Miriam bore traces of tears—but they were bright, and the colour was flushing on her cheek, for she was happier now than she had been since her marriage; for she had now no secret from her husband. He now knew all the sorrows and trials of her past life; and he knew also that no regrets for vanished hopes, no repinings that the present was other than once she dreamed it might be, were lingering in the heart which now was all his own. For blessed above all was Miriam in the conviction, which had of late stolen over her, that not even in the lot she once had chosen, and wedded to the lover of her youth, could she have known such unalloyed felicity as now was hers, as the wife of one whose worth had gained her love, with wealth enough to satisfy every desire she ever felt, and to afford her the pleasure of lightening the hardships of those who suffered as she had in former days; and with no haughty relations to sneer at her lowly birth, or high-born husband to reproach her, perhaps in after years, with her humble though unblemished patronage. As the younger Hiltons returned home, happy and confiding in each other's affection, the tones of loudly expressed discontent met them on the threshold.

"What is the matter mother?" inquired Richard, as he entered.

"The matter! oh, unlucky as usual!" replied Mrs. Hilton, pettishly. "There's the speckled cow has kicked over the new milk-pail, and not only spilled the milk, but broke the pail. Really I am worn out with trouble. Nobody has so many trials and misfortunes as we have."

"I begin to think, my dear mother," replied her son, as he glanced affectionately towards his wife, "that, except Miriam, we none of us know what real trials are."

It was about the second hour past midnight, and Miriam was wrapped in the quiet sleep of the tranquil-hearted, when she was aroused by a loud sound of cracking, while a light colder than the rays of the rising sun, was gleaming through the vine branches, that shaded her casement. In a moment she had undone its fastenings, and was gazing anxiously from it. But what a scene met her view! The stacks and granaries which had been her husband's care on the preceding day, were now so many blazing piles, and the aspiring flames were darting forward their forked tongues, in threatening demonstration towards the dwelling house. With a wild shriek of fire! Miriam sprang towards her infant, and in a few minutes the whole household had assembled in the meadow; and not a moment too soon; for on the side which Miriam could not see, the devastating element had already attacked the house, which, in a short space, became its prey entirely.

And now the houseless ones stood gazing on the fearful and appalling beauty of the foe that had worked their ruin. There was no need to ask how it had arisen, as at that time such scenes were of almost high occurrence; for the ruthless incendiary Swing was at that time stalking through the county of Kent, and the smoking homestead and blazing stack were ever traces of his passage. Long they stood gazing in silence; at length, "This is indeed a misfortune!" broke from the old man's lips.

"Ah, my dear," replied the aged partner, with an accent of self-reproach; "we seemed to covet misfortune, and now it hath been sent to us."

"But there is no misfortune that may not be overcome if we bring to the task an earnest and uncomplaining spirit," said Miriam, as she passed her arm round the neck of her husband's sorrowing parent.

"Listen to Miriam, mother," added her son, "for she speaks truly, and from experience."

The morning's sun found Farmer Hilton with scarce a remnant of his worldly prosperity save the ground on which stood the crumbling and blackened ruins of his former home. And years must elapse ere he could hope to find himself in circumstances such as he had been when last that sun had set. But at length those years were passed—years of labour, economy, yet cheerfulness—and the old man stood again within a home as prosperous and comfortable as he had owned of old—but far more blissful. For the phantom of discontent that had marred their former happiness, had perished in the smouldering ruins, and the lamentations which had bewailed their fancied misfortunes, were unheard since the dark cloud of real misfortune had burst above their heads.