

OUR TALKS WITH UNCLE JOHN.

TALK NUMBER ONE.

WE were happy children, Alice and I, when, on Alice's sixteenth birthday, we persuaded our father, the most indulgent parent in Cincinnati, that there was no need of our going to school any longer; not that our education was finished,—we did not even put up such a preposterous plea as that,—but because Mrs. C. did not intend to send Laura, and we did not believe any of our set of girls would go back after the holidays.

There is no being so facile as an American father, especially where his daughters are concerned; and our dear father was no exception to the general rule. So our school education was finished. For the rest, for the real education of our minds and hearts, we took care of ourselves.

How could it be otherwise? Our father, a leading merchant in Cincinnati, spent his days in his counting-room, and his evenings buried in his newspapers or in his business calculations, on the absorbing nature of which we had learned to build with such certainty, that, when his consent was necessary to some scheme of pleasure, we preferred our requests with such a nice adjustment of time, that the answer generally was, "January 3d, —two thousand bales,—yes, my dear,—and twelve are sixteen,—yes, Alice, don't bother me, child!" and, armed with that unconscious assent, we sought our mother.

"Papa says that we may go. Do you think, mamma, that Miss D. can have our dresses in time?"

Our dear mother, most faithful and indefatigable in her care for our bodily wants, what time had she for aught else? With feeble health, with poor servants, with a large house crowded with fine furniture, and with the claims of a numerous calling and party-giving acquaintance,—claims which both my father and

herself imagined his business and her social position made imperative,—what could she do more than to see that our innumerable white skirts were properly tucked, embroidered, washed, and starched, that our party dresses were equal to those which Mrs. C. and Mrs. D. provided for their girls, and that our bonnets were fashionable enough for Fourth Street? Could she find time for anything more? Yes,—on our bodily ailments she always found time to bestow motherly care, watchfulness, and sympathy; of our mental ills she knew nothing.

So we cared for ourselves, Alice and I, through those merry, thoughtless two years that followed,—merry (not happy) in our Fourth-Street promenades, our Saturday-afternoon assignations at the dancing-school rooms, our parties and picnics; and merry still, but thoughtless always, in our eager search for excitement in the novels, whose perusal was our only literary enjoyment.

Somehow we woke up,—somehow we groped our way out of our frivolity. First came weariness, then impatience, and last a passing-away of all things old and a putting-on of things new.

I remember well the day when Alice first spoke out her unrest. My pretty Alice! I see her now, as she flung herself across the foot of the bed, and, her chin on her hand, watched me combing and parting my hair. I see again those soft, dark brown eyes, so deep in their liquid beauty that you lost yourself gazing down into them; again I see falling around her that wealth of auburn hair of the true Titian color, the smooth, low forehead, and the ripe, red lips, whose mobility lent such varying expression to her face.

At that moment the eyes drooped and the lips trembled with weariness.

"Must we go to that tiresome party, Kate? We have been to three this week; they are all alike."

I looked at her. "Are you in earnest? will you stay at home? I know I shall be tired to death; but what will Laura C. say? what will all the girls think?"

Alice raised herself on her elbow. "Kate, I don't believe it is any matter what they think. Do we really care for any of them, except to wish them well? and we can wish them well without being with them all the time. Do you know, Kate, I have been tired to death of all this for these three months? It was very well at first, when we first left school; parties were pleasant enough then, but now"—and Alice sprang from the bed and seated herself in a low chair at my feet, as, glowing and eager, she went on, her face lighting with her rapid speech,—“Kate, I have thought it over and over again, this tiresome, useless life; it wears me out, and I mean to change it. You know we may do just as we please; neither papa nor mamma will care. I shall stay at home.”

"But what will people say?" I put in, feebly.

Alice's eyes flashed. "You know, Kate, I don't care for 'people,' as you call them. I only know that I am utterly weary of this petty visiting and gossiping, this round of parties, concerts, and lectures, where we meet the same faces. There is no harm in it that I know of, but it is simply so stupid. If we met new people, it would be something; but the same girls, the same beaux."

"And George W. and Henry B., what will they do for partners to-night? what will become of them?"

Alice put up her lip. "They will console themselves with Laura C. and those Kentucky girls from Louisville. For my part, I shall put on my walking-dress, and go over the river to spend the evening with Uncle John, and, what is more, I shall ask mamma to let me stay two or three days." And, suiting the action to the word, she began to dress hurriedly.

"You will surely never go without me, Alice?"

"You will never stay behind, if I do go, Kate," said she, looking back at me laughingly. "But make haste, I shall gain mamma over in five minutes; and we must be quick, if we are to reach Uncle John's before tea-time."

Uncle John,—even now that long years have passed, so long that it seems to me as if I had gone into another state of existence, as if I were not the same person as in those times,—even now the thought of him makes my heart beat quick and the blood thrill more rapidly through my veins. He was the delight of my childhood; far better, he was the comfort and support of my after years. Even as a child, I knew, knew by some intuitive perception, that Uncle John was not happy. How soon I learned that he was a disappointed man I cannot tell; but long before I grew up into womanhood I was conscious that he had made some mistake in life, that some cloud hung over him. I never asked, I never talked on the subject, even to Alice; there was always an understanding between us that we should be silent about that which each of us felt with all the certainty of knowledge.

But if Uncle John was unhappy himself, who was there that he did not make happy? No one who came near him,—from his nieces whom he petted and spoiled, down to the little negroes who rolled, unrebuked, over the grass before his window in summer, or woke him on a Christmas morning with their shrill "Christmas gift, Massa John!" Not that Uncle John was a busybody, troubling himself about many things, and seeking out occasions for obtruding his kindnesses. He lived so secluded a life in the old family-house on the outskirts of Newport, (we were a Kentucky family,) as to raise the gossiping curiosity of all new residents, and to call forth the explanatory remark from the old settlers, that the Delanos were all queer people, but John Delano was the queerest of them all.

So Uncle John spent his time between his library and his garden, while Old Aunt Molly took upon herself the cares

of the household, and kept the pantry always in a condition to welcome the guests, to whom, with Kentucky hospitality, Uncle John's house was always open. Courteous he was as the finest gentleman of olden times, and sincerely glad to see his friends, but I have thought sometimes that he was equally glad to have them go away. While they were with him he gave them the truest welcome, leaving garden and books to devote himself to their entertainment; but I have detected a look of relief on his face as he shut the gate upon them and sought the shelter of his own little study, that sanctum which even we children were not allowed to enter except on special occasions, on a quiet winter evening, or, perhaps, on as quiet a summer morning.

Uncle John had not always lived in the old house. We knew, that, after Grandpapa's death, it had been shut up, —for my father's business engagements would not allow my mother to reside in it, and Uncle John had been for years among the Indians in the far Northwest. We had heard of him sometimes, but we had never seen him, we hardly realized that he was a living person, till one day he suddenly appeared among us, rough-looking and uncouth in his hunter's dress, with his heavy beard and his long hair, bringing with him his multifarious assortment, so charming to our eyes, of buffalo-ropes and elk-horns, wolf-skins and Indian moccasins.

He staid with us that winter, and very merry and happy he seemed to us at first;—looking back upon it now, I should call it, not happiness, but excitement;—but as the winter passed on, even we children saw that all was not right with him. He gradually withdrew himself from the constant whirl of society in our house, and, by the spring, had settled himself in the old home at Newport, adding to his old furniture only his books, which he had been all winter collecting, and the primitive inconveniences of his own room, which his rough Western life had rendered indispensable to him. His study

presented a singular mixture of civilization and barbarism, and its very peculiarities made it a delight to Alice and me. There were a few rare engravings on the walls, hung between enormous antlers which supported rough-looking rifles and uncouth hunting-shirts,—cases of elegantly bound and valuable books, half hidden by heavy buffalo-ropes marked all over with strange-looking hieroglyphics which told the Indian *coups*,—study-chairs of the most elaborate manufacture, with levers and screws to incline them to any, the idlest, inclination, over the backs of which hung white wolf-skins, mounted, claws and all, with brilliant red cloth,—and in the corner, on the pretty Brussels carpet, the prettiest that mamma could find at Shellito's, lay the bag of Indian weed (Uncle John scorned tobacco) with which he filled his pipe every evening, and the moccasins which he always wore when at home.

In vain did Alice and I spend our eyesight in embroidering slippers for him; our Christmas gifts were received with a kiss or a stroke of the head, and then put into Aunt Molly's hands to be taken care of, while he still wore the rough moccasins, made far up among the Blackfoot Indians, which he laughingly declared were warmer, cooler, softer, and stronger than any slippers or boots that civilized shoemaker ever turned off his last.

Quiet as it was at the old house, it had always been a source of happiness to us to be allowed to make a visit to Uncle John. There, if that were possible, we did more as we pleased than even at home; there were not even the conventionalities of society to restrain us; we were in the country, comparatively. And who like Uncle John knew what real country pleasures were? who like him could provide for every contingency? who was so full of expedients in those happy gyp-sying expeditions which we would entice him into, and which sometimes lasted for days, nay, weeks? He would mount Alice and myself on two of his sure-footed little Indian ponies, with which his trader friends always kept him supplied;

and throwing a pair of saddle-bags, filled with what he called our woman's traps, over his own, he would start with us for a trip across the country for miles, stopping at the farm-houses at night, laughing us out of our conventional notions about the conveniences of lodging, and so forth,—and camping out during the day, making what we called a continuous picnic. And then the stories he would tell us of his adventures among the Blackfeet,—of his trading expeditions,—his being taken prisoner by the Sioux,—his life in the forts,—till Alice would creep nearer to him in her nervous excitement, as if to be sure that he was really with her, and then beg him to go on and tell us something more. Once I asked him how he happened to go out among the Indians. His face darkened,—“My little Kate, you must not ask questions,”—and as I turned to Alice, her eyes were full of tears. She had been looking at him while I spoke, and she told me afterwards that something about Uncle John's lips made her cry, they quivered so, and were set afterwards so tight. We never asked him that question again.

But the ferry-boat, “*The Belle of Newport*,” has neared the landing while I have been introducing Uncle John, and the soft summer twilight saw us wending our way through the town towards the Kentucky hills, whose rounded outlines were still bright with the evening red. Just on the rise of the nearest was the *Old House*,—for it went with us by no other name,—and at the garden-gate stood Uncle John, his face brightening as he saw us, while behind him a row of eager faces showed their wide-stretched mouths and white teeth.

“Come to spend two or three days, Alice?” said Uncle John, that evening, as we sat with shaded lamp in the study, his moccasined feet resting on the window-seat, while he sank into the depths of his leather-covered Spanish chair. “Why, what has become of the parties that Aunt Molly heard about in your kitchen on her way to market yesterday? Where are all our handsome young stu-

dents that were coming home for the holidays? Remember, I'll have none of them following you over here, and disarranging my books by way of showing off their knowledge.”

Alice laughed. “Not a soul knows where we are, Uncle John, except mamma, and she promised not to tell. Laura C. has a party to-night, and she will be provoked enough at our running away; but the truth is,—well, Uncle John, I am tired of parties; indeed, I am tired of our way of living, and—and Kate and I thought we would come and ask you what we ought to do about it.”

Uncle John puckered up his face with a comical expression, and then, looking out of the window, whistled the Indian buffalo-call.

Alice sprung up. “Don't whistle that provoking thing, Uncle John! Indeed, I am thoroughly in earnest,—parties are so tiresome,—all exactly alike; we always see the same people, or the same sort of people. There is nothing about them worth having, except the dancing; and even that is not as good as a scamper over the hills with you and the ponies. You know we have been going to parties for these two years; we have seen so much of society, no wonder we are tired of it.”

“Sit down, Alice,” said Uncle John; “you do look really in earnest, so I suppose you must not be whistled at. And you have come all the way over here this evening to get me to solve *Life's* problem for you? My dear, I cannot work it out for myself. You are ‘tired of society’? Why, little one, you have not seen society yet. Suppose I could put you down to-night in the midst of some European court,—could show you men whose courage, wit, or learning had made them world-famous,—women whose beauty, grace, and cultivation brought those world-famous men to their side, and who held them there by the fascination that high-breeding knows how to use. Should you talk of sameness then?”

Alice's eyes sparkled for a moment, then she said,—

"Yes, I should tire even of that, after a while, glorious as it would be at first."

"Have you reached such sublime heights of philosophy already? Then, perhaps, I shall not seem to be talking nonsense, when I tell you that there is nothing in the world of which you would not tire after the first joy of possession was over, no position which would not seem monotonous. You do not believe me? Of course not. We all buy our own experience in life; on one of two rocks we split: either we do not want a thing after we have got it, or we do not get it till we no longer want it. Some of us suffer shipwreck both ways. But, Alice, you must find that out for yourself."

"Can we not profit by each other's mistakes, Uncle?"

"No, child. To what purpose should I show you the breakers where my vessel struck? Do you suppose you will steer exactly in my path? But what soberness is this? you are not among breakers yet; you are simply 'tired of living';" and Uncle John's smile was too genial to be called satirical.

"Tired of not living, I think," replied Alice,—"*tired of doing nothing, of having nothing to do. The girls, Laura and the rest of them, find so much excitement in what seems to me so stupid!*"

"You are not exactly like 'Laura and the rest of them,' I fancy, my dear, and what suits them is rather too tame for you. But what do you propose to do with yourself now that you are beginning to live?"

"Now you are laughing at me, Uncle, and you will laugh more when I tell you that I mean to study and to make Kate study with me."

"Poor Kate! — if you should fancy swimming, shooting, or any other unheard-of pursuit, Kate would be obliged to swim and shoot with you. But I will not laugh any more. Study, if you will, Alice; you will learn fast enough, and, in this age of fast-advancing civilization, when the chances of eligible matrimony for young ladies in your station are yearly becoming less and less,—oh, you need

not put up your lip and peep into my bachelor's shaving-glass!—let me tell you that a literary taste is a recourse not to be despised. Of course you will study now to astonish me, or to surprise your young friends, or for some other equally wise reason; but the time may come when literature will be its own exceeding great reward."

"Uncle, answer me one thing,—are you as happy here in your quiet study as you were in your exciting life among the Indians? Do you not tire of this everyday sameness?"

"Close questioning, Alice, but I will answer you truly. Other things being equal, I confess to you that the Indian life was the more monotonous of the two. I look back now on my twenty years of savage life and see nothing to vary its dreary sameness; the dangers were always alike, the excitements always the same, and the rest was a dead blank. The whole twenty years might be comprised in four words,—we fought, we hunted, we eat, we slept. No, there is no monotony like that,—no life so stupid as that of the savage, with his low wants and his narrow hopes and fears. My life here among my books, which seems to you so tame, is excitement itself compared with that. Your stupidest party is full of life, intelligence, wit, when put beside an Indian powwow. There is but one charm in that wandering life, Alice,—the free intercourse with Nature; *that* never tires; but then you must remember that to enjoy it you must be cultivated up to it. There needs all the teaching of civilization, nay, the education of life, to enjoy Nature truly. These quiet hills, those beech forests, are more to me now than Niagara was at eighteen; and Niagara itself, which raises the poet above the earth, falls tame on the mind of the savage. Believe one who knows,—the man of civilization who goes back to the savage state throws away his life; his very mind becomes, like the dyer's hand, 'subdued to what it works in.'

"But I am going out of your depth again, girls," continued he, looking at our

wondering, half-puzzled faces. "Let it go, Alice; Life is a problem too hard for you to solve as yet; perhaps it will solve itself. Meantime, we will brighten ourselves up to-morrow by a good scamper over the hills, and, the next day, if your fancy for study still holds, we will plan out some hard work, and I will show you what real study is. Now go to bed; but see first that Aunt Molly has her sandwiches and gingerbread ready for the morning."

TALK NUMBER TWO.

UNCLE JOHN was well qualified to show us what real study was, for in his early youth he had read hard and long to fit himself for a literary life. What had changed his course and driven him to the far West we did not know, but since his return he had brought the perseverance and judgment of middle life to the studies of his youth, and in his last ten years of leisure had made himself that rarest of things among Americans, a scholar, one worthy of the name.

Under his guidance our studies took life, and Alice threw herself into them with all the energy of her nature. In vain papa pished and pshawed, and mamma grieved, and begged John not to spoil the girls by making bookworms of them; in vain "Laura C. and the rest of them" entreated us to join this picnic or show ourselves at that party; in vain the young men professed themselves afraid of us, and the girls tossed their heads and called us blue-stockings. Alice's answer to all was, "I like studying; it is a great deal more entertaining than going to parties; Uncle John's study is pleasanter than Mrs. C.'s parlor, and a ride on his little Winnebago better fun than dancing." And so the years went on. We were not out of society,—that could not be in our house,—but our associates changed; young men of a higher standing frequented the house; we knew intimately the cultivated women, to whom, before, we had simply bowed at parties; and mamma and papa grew quite satisfied.

Not so Alice; the spirit of unrest was on her again, but this time it was not because of the weariness of life, but that she was oppressed by the fulness of her own happiness. She had waked up to life in waking up to love, and had poured out on Herbert B. the whole wealth of her heart. There was everything in her engagement to satisfy her friends, everything to gratify papa and mamma; and if I sometimes thought Herbert's too feeble a nature to guide hers, or if Uncle John sometimes talked with or listened to him as if he were measuring his depth and then went away with an anxious expression of face, who shall say how much of selfishness influenced us both? for was he not to take from us the pet and pride of our lives?

They were to be married in a few weeks, on Alice's twentieth birthday, and then leave for New York, where Herbert was connected in business with his father.

It was on a gloomy December afternoon that Alice came running up to our room, where I was reading my Italian lesson, and exclaimed,—

"Quick, Kate! put away those stupid books, and let us go over to Uncle John's for the night."

"Where is Herbert?"

"Herbert? Nonsense! I have sent him off with orders not to look for me again till to-morrow, and to-night I mean to pretend that there is no Herbert in the world. Perhaps this will be my last talk with Uncle John."

We walked quickly through the streets, shrouded in the dark winter-afternoon atmosphere heavy with coal-smoke, the houses on each side dripping with the fog-drops and looking dirty and cheerless with the black streaks running from the corners of each window, like tears down the face of some chimney-sweep or coal-boy, till, reaching the foot of Ludlow Street, we stood ankle-deep in mud, waiting for the little steamer, which still ploughed its way through the dark, sullen-looking water thick with the red mud which the late rise had brought down,

and with here and there heavy pieces of ice floating by.

"Uncle John will never expect us to-night, Alice."

"I cannot help it,—I must go; for I shall never be satisfied without one good talk with him before I leave, and Herbert will never spare me another evening. Besides, Uncle John will be only too glad to see us in this suicidal weather, as he will call it." And she sprang upon the boat, laughing at my woebegone face.

"You are glad to see us here, Uncle John,—glad we came in spite of the fog, and sleet, and ice, and Kate's long face. How anybody can have a long face because of the weather, I cannot understand,—or, indeed, why there should be long faces at all in the world, when everything is so gloriously full of life."

"How many years is it, Alice,—three, I think,—since you were tired of living, found life so wearisome?"

"Yes, just about three years since Kate and I ran away from Laura C.'s party and came over here to ask you to help us out of our stupidity. I remember it all,—how you puzzled me by telling me that every position in life had its sameness. Ah, Uncle John, you forgot one thing when you told me that nothing satisfied us in this world." And Alice looked up from her little stool, where she sat before the fire at Uncle John's feet, with the flush of deep feeling coloring her cheeks and the dewy light of happiness in her eyes.

"And that one thing, Alice?"

"You are lying in wait for my answer, to give it that smile that I hate,—it is so unbelieving and so sad; I will not have you wear it on your face to-night, Uncle John. You cannot, if I speak my whole heart out. And why should I not, before you and Kate,—Kate, who is like my other self, and you, dear Uncle John, who, ever since the time we were talking about, have been so much to me? Do you know, I never told anybody before? but all you said that night never left me. I thought of it so much! Was it true

that life was so dissatisfying? You who had tried so thoroughly, who had gone through such a life of adventure, had seemed to me really to live, was all as flat and unprofitable to you as one of our tiresome parties or morning calls? And something in my own heart told me it was true, something that haunted me all through my greatest enjoyments, through my studies that I took up then, and which have been to me, oh, Uncle John, so much more than ever I expected they would be! Yes, through all that I believed you, believed you till now, believed you till I knew Herbert."

"And has Herbert told you better?"

"Uncle John, you do not know how the whole of life is glorified for me,—glorified by his love. I do not deserve it; all I can do is to return it ten-fold; but this I know, that, while I keep it, there can be nothing tame or dull,—life, everything, is gilded by my own happiness."

"And if you lose it?"

The flush on her face fell. "I should be miserable!—I should not—no, I could not live any longer!"

"Alice," said Uncle John, his face losing its half-mocking smile with which he had been watching her eager countenance, "Alice, did you know that I had been married?"

We started. "Married? No. How was it, and when?"

"It is no matter now, my girls. Some time I may tell you about it. I should not have spoken of it now, but that I know my little Alice would not believe a word I am going to tell her, if she thought she was listening to an old bachelor's croakings. Now I can speak with authority. You think you could not live without Herbert's love? My dear, we can live without a great many things that we fancy indispensable. Nor is it so very easy to die. There comes many a time in life when it would seem quite according to the fitness of things, just the proper ending to the romance, to lie down and die; but, unfortunately, or rather fortunately, dying is a thing that we cannot do, so just in the nick of time; and in-

deed"—and Uncle John's face assumed its strange smile, which seemed to take you, as it were, suddenly behind the scenes, to show you the wrong side of the tapestry,—“and indeed,” he continued, “when I look back on the times in my life that I should have died, when it was fitting and proper to die, when I felt that dying would be such a trump card to play, if only I could manage it, I must say that I am glad now that it was beyond my power to arrange things according to the melodramatic rules. As it is, I am alive now. I shake my fist at all the ghosts of my departed tragedies and say, ‘I am worth two of you. I am alive. I have all the chances of the future in my favor.’”

Here he caught sight of Alice's wide-opened eyes, and his smile changed into his own genial laugh, as he kissed her forehead and went on.

“That was a little aside, Alice, made to my other self, my metaphysical man,—not meant at all for my audience. I was meditating a lecture on the causes of conjugal happiness, but I seem to have stumbled upon a knot in the very first unwinding of the thread of my discourse.”

“I'll listen to the lecture, Uncle, though I see but one simple and all-sufficient cause for my happiness.”

“That Herbert loves you, ha? Know, my pretty neophyte, that happiness, married happiness especially, does not come from being loved, but from loving. What says our Coleridge?

‘For still the source, not fountain, gives
The daily food on which Love lives.’

And he is right, although you shake your curls. In most marriages, in all that are not matters of convenience, one party has a stronger heart, will, character, than the other. And that one loves the most from the very necessity of his nature, and, loving most, is the happier. The other falls, after a while, into a passive state, becomes the mere recipient of love, and finds his or her happiness in something else, or perhaps does not find it at all.”

“Neither side would satisfy me, Uncle

John; I hardly know which fate would be the more terrible. Do you think I would accept such a compromise in exchange for all I am living and feeling now? I would rather be miserable at once than so half-happy.”

“But, my darling, Colin and Chloe cannot spend their whole lives singing madrigals and stringing daisies. It is not in human nature to support, for any length of time, such superhuman bliss. The time will come when Colin will find no more rhymes to ‘dove,’ and when Chloe will tire of hearing the same one. It is possible that Herbert will some time tire of reading Shelley to you,—nay, it is even possible that the time may come when you will tire of hearing him; it is of that time I would talk. The present is as perfectly satisfactory to me as to you and Herbert, though not exactly in the same degree.”

“Well, Uncle, what is your advice to Chloe disillusioned,—if you insist that such a thing must be?”

“Simply this, my own dear little child,” answered Uncle John, and his voice took almost a solemn tone in its deep tenderness,—“when that time comes, as come it must, do not worry your husband with idle regrets for the past; remember that the husband is not the lover; remember that your sex love through your imagination, and look always for that clothing and refining of passion with sentiment, which, with us, belong only to the poetry and chivalry of youthful ardor. We may love you as well afterward,—nay, we may love you a great deal better,—but we cannot take the trouble of telling you so every day; we expect you to believe it once for all; and you,—you like to hear it over and over again, and, not hearing it, you begin to fancy it no longer true, and fall to trying experiments on your happiness. A fatal error this, Alice. There is nothing that men so often enjoy as the simply being let alone; but not one woman in a hundred can be made to believe in such a strange enjoyment. Then the wife becomes *exigente* and impatient, and the husband, after fruit-

less attempts to find out what he has done, never suspecting that the real trouble is what he has left undone, finds her unreasonable, and begins to harden himself to griefs which he classes, like Miss Edgeworth, under the head of 'Sorrows of my Lord Plumcake.'

"Miserable fate of the nobler sex, Uncle,—disturbed, even in the sublime heights of philosophical self-possession, by the follies and unreasonableness of the weaker vessel! I suppose you allow men to live out their natures unrebuked, while women must live down theirs?"

"Not I, Alice,—but I am by nature a special pleader, and, just now, I am engaged on Herbert's side of the case. Fee me well, my darling, by a kiss or a merry look, and bring Herbert up to judgment, and I will tell him home truths too."

"Let me hear your argument for the other side, most subtle of reasoners, and I may, perhaps, be able to repeat them at second-hand, when occasion calls for them."

"Don't think of it, my dear! Second-hand arguments are like second-hand coffee,—the aroma and the strength have disappeared, never to be brought back again. But if the husband were really here, and the wife had paid well for properly-administered advice, I should say to him, 'Do not fancy that you have done everything for your wife when you have given her house, servants, and clothes; she really wants a little attention now and then. Try to turn your thoughts away from your more important affairs long enough to notice the pretty morning-wrapper or the well-fitting evening-dress which has cost her some thought for your sake; do not let a change in the furniture or a new ornament in the parlor go unnoticed till the bill comes in. And while, of course, you claim from her the most ready sympathy in all your interests and enthusiasms, give her, once in a great while, say every year or so, a little genuine interest in the housekeeping trials or dressmaker grievances that meet her at every turn.

"Moreover, I would recommend to you, should your wife happen to have some literary or artistic tastes, not to ignore them entirely because they do not pay so well as your counting-room accounts do, and are not so entertaining to you as billiards. I would even indulge her by sacrificing a whole evening to her, once in a while, even to the detriment of your own business or pleasure. Depend upon it, it will pay in the end."

"Now, Uncle, like Rosalind, you have simply misused your whole sex in your special pleadings, both for and against. If Herbert were here, I would appeal to him to know if the time can ever come when what I do can be uninteresting to him. But I know, for myself, that such a thing cannot be. You are not talking from your own experience, Uncle?" added she, suddenly looking up in his face.

"My dear Alice, were it possible, should it ever seem likely, that my experience might benefit you, how readily I would lay it open before you! But those who have lived their lives are like the prophets of old,—their words are believed only when they are fulfilled. The meaning of life is never understood till it is past. Like Moses on the rock, our faces are covered when the Lord passes by, and we see only his back. But look behind you, my darling!"

Alice turned suddenly and her face lighted up into the full beauty of happiness as she saw Herbert standing in the doorway.

"I hope you have room for me, Mr. Delano," said he, advancing, "for here I am, weather-bound, as well as Miss Alice and Kate. There is a drizzling rain falling out-of-doors, and your Kentucky roads are fast growing impassable for walkers."

Uncle John put into words the question that Alice's eyes had been asking so eagerly.

"Where did you stumble from, my dear fellow,—and at this time of night, too?"

"Why, I could not find any one at home on Fourth Street, so I took the last ferry-boat and came over, on a venture, to try the Kentucky hospitality, of which we New-Yorkers hear so much; and my stumbling walk through the mud made me so unpresentable, that I found the way round the house to Aunt Molly's premises, and left the tracks of my muddy boots all over her white kitchen, till she, in despair, provided me with a pair of your moccasins, and, shod in these shoes of silence, I came quietly in upon you. I do hope you are all glad to see me," he added, sitting down on the low seat that Alice had left, and looking up in her face as she stood by her uncle.

Alice shook her head with a pretty assumption of displeasure, as she said, "I told you I did not want to see you till to-morrow." But hardly half an hour had elapsed before she and Herbert had wandered off into the parlor, and Uncle John and I were left to watch them through the open door.

"If he were not so impulsive," said Uncle John, abruptly,—*"if he were not so full of fancies! Kate, you are a wise and discreet little lady, and we understand each other. Did I say too much?"*

Just then Alice looked back.

"Chloe is the one who sings madrigals to-night, Uncle; she is going to read Colin a lesson"; and, sitting down at the piano, she let her hands run over the keys and burst out joyously into that variation of Raleigh's pretty pastoral song,—

"Shepherd, what's Love? I prithee tell."

"It is a fountain and a well,

Where pleasure and repentance dwell;

And this is Love, as I've heard tell:

Repentance, repentance, repentance!"

TALK NUMBER THREE.

FIVE years have passed since Alice sat at Uncle John's feet and listened to his words that gave lessons of wisdom while they seemed only to amuse; and now she sits again on the low stool, looking up in his face, while I stand behind

him and look down on her, marking the changes that those years have wrought. She has come back to us, our own Alice still,—but how different from the impetuous, impulsive girl who left us five years ago! Her face has lost its early freshness, though it seems to me lovelier than before, in its matured, womanly expression; but her eyes, which used to be lifted so eagerly, to glance so rapidly in their varying expression, are now hidden by their lashes even when she is talking earnestly; her lips have lost their mobility, and have even something stern in their fixedness; whilst her hair, brought down smoothly over her forehead and twisted firmly in the low knot behind, and her close-fitting widow's dress add to the sobriety and almost matronliness of her appearance.

For Alice is a widow now, and has come back to us in her bereavement. We have known but little of her real self for some years, so guarded have been her letters; and not until the whole terrible truth burst upon us, did we do more than suspect that her married life had not brought the happiness she anticipated. She is talking freely now she is at home again among her own people.

"I have sometimes thought, Uncle John, that all you said to me, the last night I spent here, had some meaning deeper than met the ear. Had you second sight? Did you foresee the future? Or was there that in the present which foreshadowed it to you?"

"I am no prophet, Alice. I spoke only from what I knew of life, and from my knowledge of your character and Herbert's. But I am yet to know how my words have been fulfilled."

"It makes no difference now," said she, slowly, and with a touching weariness. "And yet," she added, rousing herself, "it would make all the difference in the world to me, if I could see clearly where it was that I was to blame. Certainly I must have done wrong; such wretchedness could not have come otherwise."

Uncle John drew her hand within his,

while he answered calmly,—“It is very probable you have done wrong, my darling; who of us are wise and prudent, loving and forbearing, as we should be?”

“You think so? How glad I am to hear you say so! Yes, I can see it now; I can see how I did that very thing against which you warned me. First came the time when Herbert forgot to admire everything which I did and said, and I—I tried little pouting ways, that I did not feel. Then they were so successful, that I carried them too far, and Herbert did not pet me out of them. Then I grew anxious and began to guess at that truth which was only too clear to me at last, that he did not love me as I loved him. Next,—oh, Uncle John, how much I was to blame!—I watched every word and look, gave meanings to things that had none, asked explanations where Herbert had none to give, and fairly put him under such restraint that he could neither look nor act himself. He fretted under it,—who would not?—and then began the thousand excuses for being away from home, business engagements, club-meetings, some country-customers of the firm, who must be taken to the theatre, and, at last, no excuse at all but want of time. I knew then that his love for me had never been more than a passing fancy, and, woman-like, I grew proud, shut my heart up from him, buried myself in my books. I never studied before as I did then, Uncle John, for I studied to get away from myself, and, looking back, I wonder even now at what I accomplished. Yes, you were right, books are fast friends,—and mine would have brought me their own exceeding great reward, had not my spirit been so bitter.

“It was then that mamma was so sick and I came home. Did you think me wonderfully calm, Kate? I think somebody said I showed astonishing self-control; but, in truth, I was frightened at myself,—I had no feeling about anything. Mamma’s sickness seemed something entirely removed from me, something which

concerned me not in the least. I was calm because I felt nothing. I wondered then and wonder now that you did not find me out, for I knew how unlike I was to my former self. Then mamma got well, and I was not glad; I went back to New York, and felt no sorrow at parting with you all.

“But when I got back, oh, Uncle John, I was too late!—too late to do right, even had I wished it! I don’t know,—I made good resolutions on my way back: Heaven knows if I should have had strength to put them in practice. But it was all over; not only had I lost Herbert, but he had lost himself. The first time I saw him he was not himself,—I might as well say it,—he was drunk.

“There is no need of going through the rest, Uncle,—you will not ask it. I think I did everything I could;—I threw away my books; I devoted myself to making his home pleasant to him; never, no, never, in my girlish days, did I take half the pains to please him that I did now to win him from himself. I read to him, I sang to him, I filled the house with people that I knew were to his taste, I dressed for him, I let myself be admired by others that he might feel proud of me, might think me more worthy of admiration,—but all to no purpose. Sometimes I hoped, but more often I despaired; his fall seemed to me fearfully rapid, though now the three years seem to have been interminable. At last I had no hope but that of concealing the truth from you all. You thought me churlish, Kate, in my answer to your proposal to spend last winter with me? My darling, I dared not have you in my house. But it is over now. I knew how that last horrible attack would end when I sent for papa. He had gone through two before that, and the doctor told me the third would be fatal. Poor Herbert!—Uncle John, can I ever forgive myself?”

Alice looked up with dry and burning eyes into Uncle John’s face, over which the tears were streaming.

“My child, it is right that you should blame yourself. What sorrow do we

meet in life that we do not in part bring upon ourselves? Who is there of us who is not wise after time? which of us has not made some fatal mistake?"

I felt half indignant that Uncle John did not tell her how much more to blame, how weak, how reckless Herbert had been; but the calmer expression which came over Alice's countenance showed me that he was right, that he best knew her heart. She could not now be just to herself; she was happier in being unjust.

We were still and silent for a long time. The light wood-fire on the hearth crackled and burned to ashes, but it had done its office in tempering the chill of the autumn evening, and through the half-open door stole the 'sweet decaying smell' of the fallen leaves, while the hush of an Indian-summer night seemed to calm our very hearts with its stillness.

Uncle John spoke at last. His voice was very gentle and subdued as he said:

"I told you once, Alice, that my life should be opened to you, if ever its errors could be either warning or consolation to you. But who am I, to judge what beacon-lights we may hold out to each other? There is as much egotism, sometimes, in silence as in the free speech which asks for sympathy. Perhaps I have been too proud to lay open my follies before you and my little Kate."

Alice looked up, with a touch of her old eagerness, as Uncle John went on.

"It was long before you were born, my dear, that, for some college peccadilloes,—it is so long ago that I have almost forgotten now what they were,—I was suspended (rusticated we called it) for a term, and advised by the grave and dignified president to spend my time in repenting and in keeping up with my class. I had no mind to come home; I had no wish, by my presence, to keep the memory of my misdemeanors before my father's mind for six months; so I asked and gained leave to spend the summer in a little town in Western Massachusetts, where, as I said, I should have nothing to tempt me from my studies. I had heard from a classmate what famous

shooting and fishing were to be found there, and I knew something of the beauty of Berkshire scenery; but I honorably intended to study well and faithfully, taking only the moderate amount of recreation necessary for my health.

"I went, and soon established myself in a quiet farm-house with my books, gun, and fishing-rod, and had passed there a whole month with an approving conscience and tolerable success both in studies and sport, when the farmer announced one morning, that, as he had one boarder, he might as well take another, and that a New York lady had been inquiring of his neighbor Johnson, when he was in the city last week, for some farm-house where they would be willing to take her cheap for the summer. She could have the best room, and he didn't suppose she'd be in anybody's way, so he had told Johnson that she might come, if she would put up with their country fare.

"She came the next week. She was a widow, some thirty years old, ten years older than I was. I did not think her pretty,—perhaps *piquante*, but that was all. In my first fastidiousness, I thought her hardly lady-like, and laughed at her evident attempts to attract my notice,—at her little vanities and affectations. But I do not know; we were always together; I saw no other woman but the farmer's wife. There were the mountain walks, the trees, the flowers, the moonlight; she talked so well upon them all! In short, you do not know, no young girl can know, the influence which a woman in middle life, if she has anything in her, has over a young man; and she,—she had shrewdness and a certain talent, and, I think now, knew what she was doing,—at any rate, I fell madly in love. I knew my father would never consent to my marrying then; I knew I was ruining my prospects by doing so; but that very knowledge only made me more eager to secure her.

"She was entirely independent of control, being left a widow with some little property, and threw no obstacles in my

way. We were married there, in that little village, and for a few weeks I lived in a fool's paradise.

"I could not tell you—indeed, I would not tell you, if I could—how by degrees I found out what I had done,—that I had flung away my heart on a woman who married me simply to secure herself the position in society which her own imprudence had lost; how, when she found I had nothing to offer her but a home in my father's house, entirely dependent upon him, she accused me of having deceived her for the sake of her own miserable pittance; how she made herself the common talk of Newport by her dissipation, her extravagance, her affectations; how her love of excitement led her into such undisguised flirtations, under the name of friendships, with almost every man she met, that her imprudences, to call them by no harsher name, made my father insist, that, for my mother's sake, I should seek another home.

"I did so, but it was only to go through a repetition of similar scenes, of daring follies on her part, and reproaches on mine. At last, desperate, I induced my father to settle on her what would have been my share of his property on condition that she should return to New York, —while I, crushed down, mortified, and ashamed to look my friends in the face, and sick of the wrongs and follies of civilized life, grasped eagerly at an opportunity to join a fur-trading party, and buried myself alive in the wilds of the Northwest.

"I had no object in going there but to escape from my wife and from myself; but, once there, the charm of that free life took possession of me; adventure followed adventure; opportunities opened to me, and I grew to be an influential person, and made myself a home among the Indians. It is a wild life that the Indian traders live up in that far-away country, and many a reckless deed is done there which public opinion would frown upon here. I am afraid I was no better than my companions; I lived my life and drew from it whatever enjoy-

ment it would bring; but, at least, I did not brutalize myself as some of them did; for that I may thank the refining influence of my early education. Meantime, I was almost lost to my family, and, indeed, I hardly regretted it, for nothing would have brought me back while my wife lived, and, if I were not to be with my friends, why eat my heart out with longings for them? So, for nearly twenty years, I lived the life of adventure, danger, and privation, that draws its only charm from its independence.

"At last came a letter from your mother. It found its way to me from fort to fort, brought up part of the way with the letters to the troops stationed at our upper forts, then carried by the Indian runners to the trading-posts of the fur-companies till it reached me in the depths of the Rocky Mountains. My wife was dead,—she had died suddenly; my property, all that she had not squandered, (and it was so tied up by my father's forethought that she could only throw away a part of it,) was my own again; my sister longed to see me, and promised me a welcome to her house and heart. I grew restless from that moment, and, converting into money the not inconsiderable wealth with which I had surrounded myself in the shape of furs, horses, buffalo-robos, and so forth, I came down to the States again to begin life anew, a man of forty-five, my head whitened, and my features marked before their time from the life of exposure which I had led. Alice, I, too, was too late. I had dropped out of the tide of life and progress in my twenty years' seclusion, and, struggle as I might, I could not retrieve the time lost. The present age knew not of me,—I had lost my place in it; the thoughts, feelings, habits, of all around were strange to me; I had been pushed out of the line of march, and never could I fall into step again. In society, in business, in domestic life, it was all the same. Trial after trial taught me, at last, the truth; and when I had learned not only to believe it, but to accept it, I came home to my father's house, now mine, and made

myself friends of my books,—those faithful ones who were as true to me as if I had never deserted them. They have brought me content, if not happiness; and you, Alice, you and Kate, you have filled fully an old man's heart."

Alice's tears were dropping fast on Uncle John's hand as she said,—

"I will be more to you henceforward than ever before. I have nothing else to live for now. Kate is the home child;

but I—I will stay with you, and you shall teach me, too, to be contented,—to find my happiness, as you do, in making the happiness of all around."

Uncle John passed his other hand over her hair,—

"You shall stay with me for the present, my darling,—perhaps as long as I live. But life is not over for you, Alice. You have youth,—you have years in store. For you it is not *too late*."

AN EVENING MELODY.

Oh that yon pines which crown the steep
 Their fires might ne'er surrender!
 Oh that yon fervid knoll might keep,
 While lasts the world, its splendor!

Pale poplars on the wind that lean,
 And in the sunset shiver,
 Oh that your golden stems might screen
 For aye yon glassy river!

That yon white bird on homeward wing
 Soft-sliding without motion,
 And now in blue air vanishing
 Like snow-flake lost in ocean,

Beyond our sight might never flee,
 Yet onward still be flying;
 And all the dying day might be
 Immortal in its dying!

Pellucid thus in golden trance,
 Thus mute in expectation,
 What waits the Earth? Deliverance?
 Ah, no! Transfiguration!

She dreams of that New Earth divine,
 Conceived of seed immortal:
 She sings, "Not mine the holier shrine,
 But mine the cloudy portal!"