

AFTER TWELVE YEARS.

WHEN the maid left her to seek the person for whom she had inquired, she took a long, curious look around the plain, stiffly furnished room. The parlor it evidently was, and that the parlor of a boarding house. She found herself wishing that she could rearrange the chairs, which were set around the walls as if for a funeral. Then she smiled to herself—half nervously, half humorously—as if she were some one else and there were something ludicrous in her present call.

The room was dark and cold, and she walked over to the fireplace and held out one small, daintily gloved hand toward the blaze. She was a dainty little person altogether; rather below the medium height, with a slender but perfect figure, and carrying her head haughtily, as if to make up in dignity what she lacked in stature. Her hair and eyes were a brilliant brown; the eyes proud and a trifle hard in their expression, though just now the red lips—a little too thin for beauty, perhaps—are quivering with suppressed nervousness. Her dress is plain and simple, as is also the cloth cape she has loosened at the throat, thus revealing a pretty silken waist with faint touches of red in it. There is a suggestion of red at one side of the small, dark hat. The hand holding her muff has dropped to her side, but she raises it as though to shield her face from the fire when she hears the door open. A man came forward, part way to the fire, but as her face was in shadow he did not recognize her.

"A woman wished to speak with me," he said with polite surprise; then, as she turned toward him, "My God! Anne!"

The woman looked at him calmly, seeing almost at a glance that the clustering dark curls were tinged with gray, that there were deep lines around the firm mouth and piercing gray eyes. After a moment she said quietly,

"You are surprised to see me here. I did not send up a card. I was afraid, if you knew, you might not come down."

He did not answer her; he gazed at her with a sort of dazed astonishment, while she looked out of the window. The blustering March afternoon was drawing to a close; the few straggling pedestrians

seemed to move in the midst of a thin, gray mist. The woman turned her head slowly and held her hand out to the fire again, saying,

"It is bitterly cold."

"How beautiful you are still, Anne!" the man replied. "Not a gray hair, and you are almost forty."

The woman's eyes softened in their expression, but only for a moment. Still, she had enjoyed the compliment.

"I see you have grown gray, Albert," she said calmly. "Twelve years make changes in most people. Eleanor is nineteen now."

"Eleanor!" repeated the man.

"Yes, Eleanor; my daughter and yours. Have you forgotten her? It is twelve years since you have seen her." The woman spoke slowly, his evident confusion keeping her calm. "Time does not stand still with children; and Eleanor has grown quite pretty. I think"—with a quick glance at him—"I think she resembles you."

The man gave himself a little shake, and came nearer the fire. He seemed to shake off his astonishment at the same time, for he said with a cynical smile which came so easily that it must have been habitual,

"May I ask to what I am indebted for the honor of this visit?"

The woman's cheek flushed painfully, but her voice was as hard as the expression in her eyes when she replied,

"I should not be here if it were not that I would do anything for Eleanor. She is your child too, you know; she has some claim on you still, even if you have given me up."

"Then why not send Eleanor, since you are so loath to come? To be sure, I should not know her." He spoke carelessly, indifferently.

"I think you would; as I said, Eleanor is very like you."

"Ah, she is!"

The woman wondered whether it was merely an exclamation or a question. Suppose it were the latter? Well, she would answer it.

"Like you, Eleanor is tall and dark, with beautiful gray eyes; they are softer in expression, though she has also your disposition—and temper."

"Ah, she has!"

This time it was only an exclamation, and as such she let it pass unanswered. At length he spoke again.

"How unpleasant for you that she did not inherit yours," he said ironically.

The woman moved her muff uneasily.

"I am glad she did not. Still, it has been hard. It was bad enough to have been—but to have a——"

She stopped abruptly, and walked over to the window. He noticed that she moved quietly, without the usual accompaniment of silken rustle. He liked that; the silken rustle had always jarred upon him. As he stood looking at her, silhouetted against the gray light of the window, it took no great stretch of his imagination to fancy her young again. The day he asked her to marry him she had worn some such little hat. How well he remembered it! They had been out walking, and the crisp autumn winds had brought the bright color to her cheeks, and the confession of his love to his lips, even before they had returned to the cozy little parlor of her home. What a fool he had made of himself! And the last time he had seen her—twelve years before—he had noticed the usual hat with its scarlet wing, though he saw it through a mist of heart broken anger. Now she turned her head a little, and he saw that her cheek was no longer rounded softly; it had grown thin. Yet she did not look faded to his eyes; he saw the reflection of her youth.

She walked back from the window, and stood leaning upon her muff on the table.

"Eleanor is going to be married," she said slowly.

"Yes?" he said absently. He seemed not to be interested; he was thinking not of the girl, but of the girl's mother.

"He is a very nice young man, and will, I think, make her a good husband—as husbands go."

"You were unfortunate in the choice of yours," he suggested.

"I like the young man," the woman continued, ignoring his remark. "We have seen a good deal of him; and he has fancied Eleanor from the first. She—she loves him."

"That last is, of course, necessary," said the girl's father with a light laugh.

"It is," said the woman firmly. "My daughter would not marry without it. And I hope she may never suffer as I have suffered." She spoke bitterly, and as if to herself. The man looked at her earnestly, and said more gently than before,

"Has your life been so hard, then?"

"A divorced woman does not lead a particularly pleasant life. You have been quite generous"—she looked at him gratefully—"but you could not make some things any better, you know. I don't wish to complain; I did not come for that. We agreed to it long ago, and it is better so; you have done your share, and I should not ask for more."

She paused. The man raised his eyebrows interrogatively.

"Does Eleanor complain?" he asked.

"Why should she? I try not to give her a chance. But for her sake——"

"Yes?"

"For her sake I have come here. I do not wish, if anything should happen to me—if I should die—you must know that Eleanor is married." She hesitated, and then went on hurriedly. "I wish you to know that Eleanor is married, and to know before, so that you can never blame me. I will give you the young man's name; and if there is anything you know or hear about him you do not approve—well, Eleanor is your child, too, you know."

"This is very generous, Anne," the man said gently. "And you are willing to abide by my decision even if it be contrary to your wishes—yours and the girl's?"

"It is nothing," said the woman, forcing herself to speak quietly. "There was no one I could come to but you—but her father. A man has so much more chance to find out things about other men, and a young man shows only the good side of his life to the girl he loves."

"Was this the only reason for your coming, Anne?" What did the note of pleading in his voice expect for an answer?

"Certainly," she said brusquely. "You, as Eleanor's father, had to be told; and I could not send her."

"No, I suppose not," he said, ironically again. "It would not be proper for a child to come to see her father; and in this case it would be especially embarrassing, as we might not recognize each other."

The woman did not reply, but she drew her cape up around her shoulders, as though she were cold.

"I suppose you have given the girl a pretty lively impression of my character," he continued.

The mother shivered slightly.

"I have not talked about you," she said coldly.

"No? Well, what else could I expect?"

He did not look at her, so she did not feel it necessary to answer him. They stood in silence for some minutes. When a piece of coal dropped with a slight noise in the

grate, they both started, and the man said abruptly,

"Have you had enough for your needs? I am richer now, you know."

"I have heard of it," she said. "We have had enough, but—" She hesitated, and turned slowly, painfully red. He looked at her inquiringly, but his masculine mind failed to grasp the situation.

"Eleanor is going to be married," she added lamely.

"Yes; you said so before."

Then, for the first time during their interview, she smiled.

"But," she said bravely, "a hundred dollars a month will not provide a very elaborate trousseau; and Eleanor is your only daughter."

The man smiled too.

"Ah! I see. A financial difficulty! Eleanor must have clothes."

"Yes. The girl is fond of pretty things, and has not had many of them in her life. I would like to have them for her now." She spoke impulsively, looking at him with frank, appealing eyes.

"Yes?" He looked slowly, thoughtfully, over the daintily clad figure before him. "Do you wish me to give her the wherewithal for them?" he asked.

The girl's mother drew back.

"I have no wish in the matter," she said, without a trace of her momentary impetuosity.

"Then why did you come to me?" he asked, almost angrily.

"Because I think it your duty to provide for your daughter. I believe I told you I would do anything for Eleanor—even coming to you."

There was a hint of petulance in her tones, and he looked at her intently for a moment before he asked,

"How would a thousand dollars do?"

"If you can spare it." She paused, then added, "It will please Eleanor."

By the soft light in the woman's eyes he saw that she was pleased too; but he asked in pretended surprise,

"Would she be pleased with anything coming from me, a hated father?"

"She does not hate you," the woman said gently. "I have not talked to her about you at all in the past twelve years. She probably has a natural fondness for you deep down in her heart."

"I hope so," said the girl's father huskily, as he turned away half regretfully. "Will you take a check for the thousand dollars?"

"Now?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Very well."

"May I trouble you to wait here for it?"

He moved toward the door.

"It will not trouble me." The woman made her answer quietly, but she felt oddly oppressed, as if she had found something lacking in the interview, aside from its being painful. With his hand on the door knob, the man turned to say lightly,

"Of course I may expect an invitation to the wedding?"

The woman gave a little start, and dropped her muff. He came and handed it to her.

"You will come?" she asked.

"I should like to see her again; besides, a man generally likes to be present at his daughter's wedding. I am sorry—" he paused—"I am sorry she does not resemble you more."

The woman raised her head, looking at him with a strange earnestness. Something compelled her to say,

"She does not resemble me at all. She loves this young man."

The man came nearer her.

"Did you never love me, Anne?" he asked softly.

A shadow lingered across her face, and her voice trembled as she said,

"I never did. You know I married you for your position."

"I know it," he said bitterly. "And because you did not love me, you had no patience with my faults. I have overcome some of them, Anne."

"I was too ready to find fault, I am afraid," she said. "I have grown wiser, too, Albert."

"Anne," he said abruptly, fiercely—"Anne, despite it all, I love you—I have always loved you." She leaned heavily against the table. "I shall always love you, Anne," he continued more quietly, "though we have been separated twelve years, and may live so to the end."

"You love me still?" she asked, looking at him with wide open eyes. "After all these years?"

"Yes, Anne," he replied bitterly. He was not looking at her now. "You may think me a fool, but I do."

"After all I did?" she continued contritely. "Listen"—as he looked at her in surprise—"I knew—after our divorce—I knew then that I loved you; I must have loved you all the time. My wretched pride kept me from telling you then; besides, I had Eleanor to live for, while you—you had nothing." She stopped with a little catch like a sob in her voice.

"You loved me, Anne?" he asked, scarcely believing what he heard.

"I have loved you for twelve years, at least," she went on softly; "and shall, I think, forever."

He took her hand quickly, firmly.

"Do you mean it, or are you trifling with me?" he demanded, almost fiercely. She looked up into his troubled face, and he saw something new and very tender in her moist eyes. Then he took her in his arms and kissed her.

Presently she drew herself gently away from her husband.

"It is growing late. Eleanor will be expecting me," she said.

"Had you not better have some tea before you go?" he asked.

She looked around the dreary parlor.

"Wouldn't you rather," she asked with a tender smile—"wouldn't you rather come home?"

When he put on his greatcoat, and they stood equipped for the windy night, he said, looking down with a little laugh,

"I did not bring the check I promised you; I can pay Eleanor's bills so much better as they are sent in."

Louise Wellington.

