

The Second Time of Asking.

THE rays of the afternoon sun, slanting in at the second-floor window of a dull London house, fell with a jaundiced stare on the figure of Janet Reeve seated before her easel, palette, mahl-stick, and brushes in hand, painting away, very hard at work indeed. There were two windows in the room; but from one the light was entirely excluded, while it was only partially admitted at the other, the lower half of the shutters being closed and barred. The day was fading. Dusky shadows were huddling together in the corners of the room; outlines were losing edge and crispness; even the square of light pouring in at the half-window was becoming more and more blurred as to shape. Evening was sponging out the demarcations between light and shade. Upon Janet's head, which met them in full career, the rays fell less and less intensely. Not so clearly to be seen now was the half-halo on the left side of her head, weaving such golden threads into the plaiting of her hair; less distinctly marked now was the brightness on her neck, and the streak of light which, falling on her shoulder, ran down her arm on to the pink-tipped thumb as it came through the hole in the palette. She had been some time painting, to judge by the confusion into which her semicircle of colours was growing.

A faint voice in the adjoining apartment called, "Janet." Instantly she put down her brushes, and moved quickly and lightly to the door leading into the next room. A small fire was glowing in the grate; opposite to the fire a faded, feeble, sickly-looking woman, with many wrappings of dressing-gowns and shawls about her, reclined on a sofa.

"How are you now, mother dear?" asked Janet in her sweet soft voice, and she bent down and kissed the poor woman tenderly.

The invalid did not speak, but her loving glance thanked the inquirer.

"How cold your hands are!" she said presently; and rubbed Janet's taper fingers between her own thin, white, transparent hands. "Are you not tired, Janet?"

"No, not very." But the voice sounded a little wearied, and the look which accompanied it was rather worn and sad.

"You will overwork yourself, my child. Leave off for to-night, dear. Come and sit by the fire, and rest; and presently we'll have candles lighted, and then tea, and a little reading from the new book."

There was all the customary paraphernalia of a sick room: the table with its numerous bottles and glasses; pillows and wrappings and books strewed about here and there with the carelessness of languor and sickness.

"A little longer, mother, and then I'll stop—only a very little; but I have something I want very much to finish, if the light will only hold out. Try and sleep, it will rest you before tea, and then you'll be quite ready for a chat and a read by and by."

With her careful tender hand she smoothed the shawls about the invalid, readjusted her pillow, kissed her again, and then passed into the outer room to resume her work. But the light had dimmed very much since she had quitted her easel. She turned her pale thoughtful face towards the sky with something of a reproachful look,—a silent protest against the desertion of day and the usurpation of night,—and she pressed her hands upon her forehead. Then she resolutely took up her brush, and for a few minutes, in spite of the waning light, continued to paint.

There was a slight tap at the door; not the door of the invalid's room, but another door leading on to the staircase.

"Come in," said Janet.

The door was opened slowly, as though by some one in doubt, and a man entered.

"Come in. What is it?" said Janet, without looking up from her work.

The man approached her slowly, shading his eyes with his hand, as though blinded by the change from the dark staircase to the comparatively high light of the room. He was tall, sunburnt, bearded, rather rough in dress. His eyes wandered round the room, searching for the voice for a second or two before he discovered Janet, half hidden by her easel. Then he moved towards her.

Roused probably by the sound of a footstep different to that she had expected, Janet rose up suddenly. Her glance fell at once upon the man standing full in the yellow light. A look of amazement, of pain, almost of fear, crossed her face; her breath became short, and, aghast, she stretched forth her hand.

"Hugh!" she murmured.

He hurried to her with a nervous anxiety. He took her outstretched hand, and clasped it fondly in his own.

"Dear Janet!" he said.

And for a few moments they remained so. Then, very white, and trembling very much, Janet would have fallen if he had not caught her in his arms and supported her. She did not faint, but she was very weak and greatly agitated.

"I was wrong to come so suddenly," he said. "I have frightened you."

"No, it is nothing. I get so abstracted over my work, that a very little startles and unnerves me."

"Let me unbar the shutter and open the window; the fresh air will revive you."

"No. My mother is asleep; the noise might waken her. Her health is much shaken, and I should be sorry if she were to be disturbed."

"Is she ill—seriously ill?"

"Oh, indeed, I hope not; but she is not strong, and the changes that have come upon us—"

Her voice faltered, and she stopped. Hugh glanced at her pale face,

her frail pliant form, her white fingers twisting and plaiting themselves together with a nervous unconsciousness.

"And you yourself, Janet,—are you well?"

"Oh, quite well."

A pause, and then—

"You little thought to see me, Janet?" he said. "I am sure I must have been quite the last person in your thoughts."

"We have often thought of you," she said,—“often, very often; but I own I did not think to see you *here, now.*"

"You have thought of me often,—and kindly?"

"Oh, yes, Hugh, always kindly."

"God bless you for it, Janet," he said in a low moved voice, and he turned towards the picture on the easel.

"I am but a poor judge; still I think a good thing must strike home to every one, and tell its goodness. This seems to me especially beautiful."

"It is too dark now to see it fairly, Hugh. You must come and look at it by daylight."

But he took the chair and sat down determinedly before the painting. He gave it a long, earnest, admiring examination, with Janet standing by him, now and then nervously pointing out her intentions, or timidly qualifying his strong praise of the work.

It was a sea-coast scene. The cliffs struck with a ghostly whiteness against the swarthy, tumbled sky. The waves rose erect, curved down, and in an angry somersault broke into foam. On the shingle lay a lifeless figure, flung ashore by the tide. It was a sailor-boy, quite dead, with tangled sea-weed gathered about his hair and hands, and the water streaming from his clothes. Over him bent a simple peasant woman, a sick anguish quivering in her face. She had recognised her only son in the washed-up corpse, and the religion of grief was sanctifying her homeliness.

"It is very beautiful;" and he took her hand kindly. "You were always clever with your pencil, Janet."

"It was as well," she answered. "I studied carefully during my father's lifetime, and now, by working hard, I can earn enough to support myself and aid my mother." She said this hesitatingly, as though desirous to inform him of her real circumstances, and yet unwilling to linger on the subject. But she could not continue. She turned to something else.

"When did you arrive, Hugh?"

"Only yesterday. You are the first person I have seen. Why should I not plainly tell you so? We parted sadly enough; but there need be no sadness in our meeting now. There is none, Janet?"

"No, no, dear," she said hurriedly, giving a nervous pressure to his hand, and bending down her head.

How tenderly he gazed upon her; how he watched the trembling of her eyelids as a tear severed itself into a diamond garland upon the lashes!

"You heard of our trouble, and came home to see if you could aid us?"

"No, Janet," he replied mournfully, with a glance at the crape trimming of her dress. "I did not know of it, or I should have come home sooner—long since. I read of your father's death in the newspapers. I burned to write to you a few lines about it, if only to assure you—but I couldn't do it. I did 'not know,'"—he looked round the room,—plain, unfurnished, whitewashed. He hesitated to allude to the only too apparent poverty of the place. The pause and the action were as good as words.

"We are poor," said Janet nervously, "but we are not unhappy, not discontented. I work hard, but then I like work,—it distracts my mind; and work is pleasant if one has an object to gain by it, and it is a real joy to me to assist my mother as much as ever I can. And I am successful too. I have four pupils; my paintings readily find purchasers. I can sell all I finish, although I have not much time for work; I have even had commissions."

"O Janet, is this indeed so,—*you* have to toil for your bread? And your father—"

"He was not himself, Hugh, when he died," Janet broke in warmly and abruptly. "Mind that. Trouble, or rather the expectation of trouble, had turned his brain, or he never would have raised his hand against his own life; never else. Don't think harshly of him; don't wrong him by one unjust suspicion. He was all goodness and kindness. He was a fond, loving father. Pity him that he sunk down before the misfortune he should have risen against and fought through. But ill success followed ill success. Things became hopelessly entangled. His pride was cruelly stricken. His reason gave way, and one fatal night—God forgive him!—he was not himself, and he did not, could not, know what he did!"

She covered her face with her hands. A look of extreme pain crossed Hugh's face, as he brushed the hair from his damp forehead, and strode up and down the room. Suddenly he came to her again, and took her hand.

"Janet, it is five years since I went away. I quitted you upon what seemed a strange impulse,—a sudden outburst of temper. I have come back now, changed in some things, not in all,—bettered, I hope. I have a confession to make, which I have come back purposely to make. All may as well be said now, at our first meeting, as at any other time. Will you hear me?"

She answered only by a timid bow of assent. He paused a moment, as though uncertain how to commence. There was a forced calm about his manner and words, but his voice was low, now and then breaking and failing altogether.

"Our dead fathers long ago planned our union,—it was their pet project. My father died, breathing into the ear of yours a fond hope that still the thing would be. We were brought up together, and soon learned the future projected for us. This moved us little at the time, perhaps;

the present was so happy, and the hereafter seemed so far off. A great affection bound us together; at least it always seemed so to me, though we never stayed to appraise and weigh and count it, but took it all for granted; never soiled it with words, or exposed it to the air, but wrapped it up well in our hearts. A change came, however. Children's gambols cannot last for ever. I was sent abroad to finish my education. My own father dead, yours took his place. I was to travel; to learn life; acquire manners, polish, fashion. I was not a very apt student, and in due time came back home again, not much improved, I take it, by my absence.

"You remember, Janet, the pretty country-house your father occupied five years ago; the flat Hertfordshire country dying out in the distance in a straight blue streak,—the white house, with its trellis-work mask, the wooden porch leading on to the velvet lawn, which not a daisy was allowed to speck, though the seven-sister roses would ever snow their scented leaves over it. You remember how one summer evening I came to you, sitting in the porch; broke in upon your tranquillity, took the book from your hand, and, while the twilight was fainting into night, asked you to carry out our fathers' project. And you—"

"Yes, yes, Hugh! I know. No more—no more!"

"How in a rage I flung myself from you, walked fiercely up the lawn, lashing at the poor flower-beds with my whip. I was an insolent suitor,—negligent, cold, imperious in manner; not paying the homage I should have paid to your beauty, Janet; not appreciating by one half your worth; no, not even doing justice to the true love I had for you, Janet. I asked you to become my wife,—as though in a dull, mechanical way it behoved us to fulfil our fathers' plan; said little of my love,—not a word of your happiness; sought your heart, yet seemed to give you nothing in return."

"Oh, Hugh, it is better to forget all this."

"It is better to remember. I cannot tell you how your rejection wounded me,—not merely in my pride, but in my love. For I *did* love you, Janet, heartily, fervently, though my manner was rude, and my words sounded vain and cold. A great rage possessed me; my disappointment took me out of myself. My heart seemed suddenly changed and hardened against you, every body, every thing. I abandoned myself to a frenzied bitterness. I determined to quit England, vowing I would never, never return. I took a passage for Sydney in a ship sailing from Plymouth, writing merely a brief note to your father, informing him of what I had done. To you I wrote no word,—sent no message,—never said good by, even. It seems now scarcely credible that I could have so parted from you; but I hardly knew what I did. Don't let me tire you. You know already how the ship was wrecked within sight of shore,—it made noise enough at the time, both here and there,—outside the Sydney Heads, close on to the Gap. We had made a rapid run—had been out eighty days only. There is a sort of sailor's pride about making a

quick passage; of being out less time by some few hours than other ships. So we made for shore when we ought to have stood out to sea waiting for daylight, for it was blowing hard, and the night was rainy and pitch dark. By some fearful mistake about the lights, the North End of the Gap was held to be the North Head. There was a sudden cry of 'breakers!' The helm was put hard to starboard, to bring the ship round. We were on a dead lee-shore. Almost immediately the ship struck—was lifted off, and then flung again broadside on the rocks. The screaming passengers hurried on deck from their berths. For a few minutes there was hope that the ship would hold together, and all might yet be well. Then the decks burst up from the pressure of the water; the good ship was torn into a thousand pieces, and all on board, a helpless, huddled, frightened flock, were hurled into the boiling sea. With three others I found myself holding on to a piece of plank. A huge wave broke over us, and washed away two. Another wave came, tore me from the plank, and hurled me on to the rocks, bruised, bleeding, half maddened by the terrors of the scene. I scrambled on to a higher shelving rock above me, before the wave should return and drag me back again to destruction. From this I climbed still higher, and so out of reach of the waters. There I found, also clinging on to the rocks, with the energy of despair, another man, a crazed seaman, a Norwegian, who, from his weak intellect, had been something of a butt among the company during the voyage. Not another soul was saved of all the one hundred and thirty that had sailed from England."

Janet shuddered, but she did not speak. After a short pause Hugh resumed.

"For thirty-six hours we remained upon the rocks, unable to climb up the almost perpendicular cliff above us, or to attract the attention of the one or two ships that passed by far off out at sea. Beneath us the raging waves were still churning up the fragments of the wreck, mangling the bodies of our lost companions. At length some labourers on the cliff perceived us. Ropes were lowered, and we were slowly hauled up to the top, two hundred feet above us. And we were saved: what a wretched fragment of the lost ship's company!—the poor madman, whose feeble mind had now gone for ever, and who never ceased to moan a long tuneless song, and I, who seemed to have so little that could make life worth my having. How full of hope and plan and purpose were many of those who had gone down in that fearful wreck! Yet I was not unconscious of the great mercy that had been extended to me, and fervently I rendered thanks to the Heaven that had saved me.

"Then a new thought came, or rather an old thought returned. Gradually I thawed back into my former self. My rage, my hardness, my bitterness, seemed cast out of me like the evil spirits from the sick men of old. My love, buried deep in my heart, and shrouded and confined in all sorts of wrong feelings, was living yet. And I set myself hard to

work ; gave myself up to labour with a sort of feverish earnestness, beset with the strange notion that I was toiling for you, Janet ; that I was conquering myself and my proud savage nature, and somehow reforming myself for you. Then it came to me how utterly cold and wretched had been my wooing ; what a miserably foolish conceit had moved me when I sought to wear without winning you. O Janet, how bitterly I blamed myself ; how I fed upon the memory of you ! For hours I would sit disinterring old things that had seemed to be for ever forgotten and gone ; tracing you back, from the time of our last parting, as far as I could remember, when you were a tiny child addressing an endless monologue to your doll. I could recall all our old playmate pleasures, all our long fireside gossips, each thing that we had ever done, or that had ever happened to us ; could recollect your look and gesture when you spoke, what you said, nay, each inflexion of your voice. In spite of the distance that severed us, all this stood out freshly and distinctly. Still more evident was the thought of how wretchedly I had flung from me all chance of making you mine. So I brooded until the thing seemed to grow into my mind—that I loved you ever ; that I could love *you* only ; and that through my own folly I had lost you. This took fast hold of me, day and night followed and possessed me, till it became too strong for me—till it subdued and bound me quite. Fever struck me down in the bush. I was positively pleased in my convalescence to learn that even in my worst delirium I had been in a measure true to you ; that your name was ever ringing from my lips ; that even madness had not torn my love from me. I recovered from the fever, but the yearning to come home and seek you out again grew to be insupportable. My love would not be appeased ; my heart would not be quieted. My return home became a necessity, and I took ship for England again, Janet, to see you, and you only,—to make this plain confession ; to do now humbly and reverently what I did so wrongly and rudely five years back ; to tell you, Janet, that I love you with my whole soul, dearly, tenderly. O Janet, it cannot be that this love, so deep and strong and true, has no answer in your heart !”

The blood was tingling in his face ; his eyes sparkled with excitement. With trembling fondness he gazed on Janet, waiting her reply. She had scarcely stirred during his confession. With bowed head, with down-turned intent eyes, with tightly-clutched hands, she had stood ; not listlessly, not coldly, for a flush of red was on her cheek, her heart beat almost audibly, and her breathing was very short and quick. And now he was waiting for her answer, and she *must* speak, she *must* act. But the words would not come. Her hands moved up mechanically to her parched throat ; her lips parted,—but no sound issued. With all her efforts the words she wished to utter were still-born. Hugh suffered torture in her silence. The suspense was more than he could bear.

“O Janet, don’t throw me back again ; don’t tell me it can never be ; don’t drive me to despair. Say I may hope. Say you will be mine ;

you shall not regret it—I swear you never shall. O Janet, all man can do to make you happy I will do.”

With this burst of passion, he flung himself at her feet. It was only so he could see the wonderful, luminous, downturned eyes.

“It is not that.” The words came at last, faint, trembling, broken.

“You love another?”—he started, with a scream almost of pain; a strange look, half rage, half despair, quivering on his white scared face.

“No, no, Hugh dear, not so.”

He was at her feet again directly; the voice was so gentle, so tender, so touching.

“But”—and now the words hurried out in a nervous trembling stream—“things have changed with us. You can hardly appreciate this just now. We do not meet as we parted. Our positions are not the same. *Then*, I was at least your equal in wealth. *Now*, think of me. I am a poor orphan, without one sou I do not earn by my own work, and earn hardly. I am a teacher, a governess; *artist* with me is only a gentler name for the same thing. I know your goodness; I feel it to the full. I know you would do all in your power to aid me. But, O Hugh, be sure it is not love, but charity you offer me.”

He seemed deeply pained, and his eyes were full of the fondest, tenderest reproach.

“Janet, this is cruel; this is not yourself. What difference can money make to *us*? It cannot enhance your worth; it cannot quicken my love. It never would, it never could have come between us of old to sever us. Had I been in need, to whom should I have soonest come for aid but to you? O Janet, such a thought as this never would have parted us in the dear old days; should it do so now?”

She was so agitated, she leant on the chair for support.

“You are more generous than I am, Hugh, nobler, kinder, better in every way. I too have a confession to make. Hear me patiently. I *do* remember that evening in the garden-porch; how, with a wicked, cruel pride, I rejected the love you proffered me. What right had I to weigh your words, and deem them wanting; to judge your manner, and pronounce against you? I knew you loved me. There needed no words to tell me that. Your life had been all kindness, goodness, love to me. But—I was mad. I felt the power I had gained over you. I saw that by one word it was mine to raise or crush. It seemed a grand thing to use that power; to make it known—felt; to use it even against my own happiness, even against you, Hugh dear. I was weak, vain, wicked. I turned from a love I knew—I knew was truth itself. O Hugh, forgive me; for I loved you,—loved you all the while. And when you darted away as from a snake’s bite,—when you paced the lawn angrily, wounded to the soul by my cruelty,—then burst upon me the full sense of what I had done; then I knew to what a fatal weakness I had yielded. And I sunk to the earth in the porch, crushed by my own act. Oh, and I hoped and prayed that you would come back, and speak to me once

again ; that some little chance might yet be given me ; that I might recall my words ; that I might confess my sin, and beg your pardon for the wrong I had done you. But the opportunity never came. My misdeed seemed irretrievable. From that hour till now I have never seen you ; yet I have never ceased to love you. And now, and now,—O Hugh, dear Hugh, pity me and forgive me.”

Another moment, and Hugh’s arms were fondly woven round her, and her hot tears were damping his shoulder. With exquisite fondness he gazed upon her, assured and reassured her of his never-tiring love, and pressed her again and again to his heart. Then he brushed back the hair, and kissed her pure white forehead ; then he smoothed on the hair again, and kissed that.

“My own dear darling little Janie !”

And what a delicious lulled happiness there was for a few minutes ! Suddenly Janet started away with a guilty, self-reproaching look. Quickly she moved towards the invalid’s room, and entered.

“Have you slept, mother dear ?”

The daylight was gone, but by the gleaming of the little fire in the low grate Janet detected a look of quiet, shrewd pleasure in the face of the invalid.

“You had forgotten me, Janet. Hush ! not a word. I have not been to sleep, and I know all.”

And soon Janet, blushing very much indeed, led Hugh in. He knelt down by the side of the couch as the invalid laid her thin hands upon his shoulders, and drew him affectionately towards her.

“Oh, dear Hugh,” she said in a low voice, “treasure her, love her always,—she deserves all happiness,—she is my own good darling daughter.”

Hugh swore he would do so, and his words sounded full of the music of truth and fervour ; and in a loving group the three crouched over the diminutive fire in the darkened room, to them gladsome and radiant enough, for Joy was burning a very steady light among them. It would be hard indeed to say which of those three was the happiest.
