

THE SHERIDAN GIRLS.

CHAPTER I.—A FAMILY QUARREL.

It was a bright September Sunday morning in the sweet little Hampshire village of Lithercote. The deepening autumn had already turned the heavy branches of virginia creeper that hung over the parsonage wall into a glorious wealth of bronze and coppery hues, and every little gust of the fitful wind that played with the leaves of the great beeches in the church avenue scattered some of the foliage hither and thither up and down the walks and in and out the grave-enclosures. Church was just over, and the small aristocracy of Lithercote, promenading homewards, gossipped and eyed each others' dresses, and with mental criticisms, wreathed their faces into conventional Sunday smiles, while they exchanged the dull, insincere compliments and items of small talk, which so largely constitute modern conventional conversation.

"I always think," remarked Mrs. Sheridan, "how hideous those Cholluper girls look in apple green. Wherever can their mother's taste be? But there," added Mrs. Sheridan, whose husband, by the way, was proprietor of the village general store, "who can put taste into these common folks' heads? Nothing, absolutely nothing," she observed, "can take the place of true breeding. Never forget, my dear girls"—this with a long sigh—"that your maternal grandfather served his country in the household of his Sovereign."

"No, mamma," replied the Sheridan girls together, pensively staying to regard their notable ancestor's tombstone, whereon the hollowness of life was represented by two puffy young cherubs chasing a grasshopper, "no, we shall not forget it." Not that their promises were exactly needed, for that worthy grandfather was the staple of Mrs. Sheridan's conversation. He had been, in fact, a farrier in the stables at Carlton House, in the pious days of George IV. of revered memory, and rumour said occasionally opened the back door for his Sovereign at suitable moments. A grateful country had pensioned him for these valuable services to the State.

"There is," said Mrs. Sheridan, folding her arms, and slowly shaking her tall black bonnet till the long glistening beads clattered, "nothing so comforting as the thought of public duty fulfilled!" Millicent thought of the sanded sugar and drew on her gloves with a sigh, whilst Hilda smothered a rising snicker as they walked along the village street to the double-fronted shop, where the bold sign, "Sheridan, General Dealer," minus a few of its china letters that had fallen off, marked the ancestral home of the Sheridans.

Inside the parlour, Sheridan, senior, a rubicund and very stout old gentleman, smoking a churchwarden pipe, and as usual, the worse for drink, leaned back in an arm-chair, and alternately drank, blasphemed and read the betting news in the latest moral and progressive newspaper.

"Well," cried the amiable Sheridan, "home at last, eh? A pretty pass we've come to! A poor, bloomin' honest tradesman can't get his Sunday dinner to time now. Bin to church, eh? Don't they teach ye to respect the Sabbath? Well, an' what's the Sabbath for, if it ain't to have a good dinner for once in a week and a sleep arterwards? We don't want to go back to heathen customs, do we? Eh? A nice pass things gets to nowadays, when a man as pays rates and taxes and tithes 'as to take his roast pork all done to death, and the stuffin' as hard as a brick. Think of your poor old mother, too," cried Sheridan, reproachfully, pointing to the aged Mrs. Poulson, a very deaf, half blind old lady, with a scrubby bit of beard, who, under the apprehension that a jovial conversation was proceeding, was nodding and smiling most energetically.

Mrs. Sheridan deprecatingly shrugged her shoulders and glanced wearily at the girls, who hurriedly busied themselves in spreading the table-cloth for dinner.

"Twenty-four year ago, to-day," gurgled old Mrs. Poulson, prodding the bibulous Sheridan with her crutch and grinning tremendously.

"Eh!" cried Sheridan, shouting and nearly breaking a blood vessel, "what's the matter now?"

"Yes," replied the old lady. "Yes, so I think myself, ha, ha! You were a lucky young dog," and she prodded him again, until, relaxing into a chuckle, he cried out jovially, "Well, bless me, so it is! Twenty-four year ago sin' we got married! Here, Millicent, Millicent, bring up a bottle of the old crusted port, and let's all keep up the day proper. Give the old lady a glass for reminding us, and we'll make a jolly day of it, Sunday or no Sunday, if Millie will only look a bit cheerful."

The Sheridans sat down to dinner, and the head of the house imbibed so freely that, especially after his morning's carouse, he was soon more than half drunk. Millicent, a bright, intelligent and dressy girl, whose impulsive temper was continually leading to fiery scenes with her father, blushed at his vile language, bit her lips, and cried, "Father, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"Don't mind him," whispered her mother, "he'll be better tempered, p'raps, as he gets drunk."

The amiable Sheridan had, however, caught her words. A long course of drinking and riotousness had so inflamed his naturally peevish temper that when aroused it was useless to contradict or rebel against him. A fierce expression of malignity

gleamed from his coarse, brutal face, as, with an oath, he sprang up to strike Millicent with the wine bottle. She stood up and glanced back defiantly.

"No, John, no," cried Mrs. Sheridan. "Your daughter, your own daughter! For God's sake be calm and consider."

Sheridan was now beside himself, and all but speechless with rage,

"What!" he bellowed, seizing his wife by the throat, "Whaat! Who's—hic—mas'r in this—hic—house, I'd liker know?"

Millicent ran between them, and, as Sheridan struck at his wife, received the blow on her face, fell heavily to the floor, and lay there fainting and helpless.

Her father, half-sobered and frightened at the sight, cried, with a sneer, "Come, get up; none of your shamming here, we don't want it."

"For shame!" cried Hilda; "let her alone. I declare it's like living in hell to stop in this house; let me get her upstairs. Here, mother, do lift her up and find some vinegar."

Between them they carried the poor girl upstairs and laid her moaning on her bed.

"I'll bathe her forehead, mother," said Hilda, "the poor child is nearly out of her mind, and I can tell you this plainly, that stay in this house I will not, if I have to work myself to death. I'll leave to-morrow. Why on earth do you put up with it, mother?"

"Well," said Mrs. Sheridan feebly, "what am I to do? It takes us all our time to live decently nowadays, and we should find it hard to get along if your father wasn't with us, after all."

"Well, then, be it understood, I'm leaving here to-morrow. I've a standing invitation to go to old Mrs. Lavender, the milliner's, and go there I shall. But what about Millicent?"

"I don't know," replied Mrs. Sheridan, whimpering and wiping her eyes on her apron, "I really don't know. Oh, deary me, to think that the granddaughter of a man who served his Sov——"

"Oh, bother the Sovereign," cried Hilda, "I'm sick of hearing of him; and sick and tired of the whole hollow farce of such hypocritical, sand-the-sugar, go-to-meeting lives; let's be honest and profess nothing, if we have nothing!"

"Goodness gracious," cried Mrs. Sheridan, "to think my own daughter should talk to me so. Oh, deary me, what shall I do?"

"Do!" echoed Hilda, mopping her sister's face with vinegar. "What should you do, but do right and not swindle people? I've learned that much of the Salvation Army. There, I've been and put the vinegar in her mouth, I declare. Never mind, Millie, you're coming round nicely now, my dear."

"Oh, Hilda, Hilda," cried Millie, sobbing convulsively, "don't leave me; you're the only friend I have on earth! don't leave me, will you, dear?"

"No, darling!" cried Hilda, leaning over her sister and weeping with her. "No, darling, I never will!"

(To be continued.)

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CHAPTER II.—WORKLESS WOMEN.

"Look here, Millie," said Hilda, "as they were breakfasting in the little shop-parlour next morning, "I can stand it no longer. I really don't see that we are called upon to put up with insults and brutality from our father more than from anybody else."

"The only difficulty is, where to go," suggested Millicent.

"Exactly! There's old Mrs. Jenkins at Lithercote Glen. Of course, we could go there but we couldn't stay long, for the poor old soul is not over well off since the building society crash. Stay, I've an idea! What about Aunt Mary, in London? Would she have us, I wonder?"

Millicent opened her eyes and stared at her sister's enterprising idea. "Aunt Mary!" she cried; "why, she wouldn't know us. Besides, after being strangers all our lives it would look so queer to turn up in London and say, 'Please aunt, we're your two nieces run away to you.' Can't we get some work, Hilda and earn our living? What can girls work at?"

"Work," cried Hilda; "bless you! work for woman is still a revolutionary idea, at any rate, in village life. Most girls of our standing think it 'low' to work. It's reckoned ladylike to do nothing. If we had been a little better off we should not have needed to work, and if we had been a little poorer we should have gone to service as a matter of course."

"And slaved fourteen hours a day for £12 a year," laughed Millicent. "I'm afraid that wouldn't work. Could we start a laundry now? or a soap factory, or a ——"

"How much capital have you?" asked Hilda.

Millie emptied her purse on the table and Hilda did the same. They totalled the combined amounts, £2 12s., a French pen, two watch-keys "and a private letter of yours, that I won't read," said Hilda, counting up. "If I were you I should put that letter away somewhere, Is it from ——?"

Millie blushed furiously and nodded, "Yes," she said, "it was the last one. You remember father said I was to have no more to do with him. That's two years ago now," she sighed. "Poor Jack, I wonder where he——but I mustn't think about that. There's the shop bell ringing; just think what's the best thing to do while I run and serve."

Hilda quietly thought out the situation.

"I can only see two ways, one to get situations

through a newspaper—but that takes time—and the other to go to Aunt Mary's, which we can do at once."

Just then Mrs. Sheridan came down to breakfast; with a mournful look, but a good appetite, she helped herself to ham and eggs. Now and again she held a handkerchief to her eyes and rocked herself to and fro.

"It's a sad world," she cried, at length. "Millicent, pass the toast and make some more tea, will you? Yes, a vale of tears," she added. "Put two spoonfuls in, and make sure the kettle boils."

Poor Mrs. Sheridan, she had good intentions, but was one of those morally backboneless creatures who perpetually admire the highest resolution, and say so, whilst actually grovelling in the most miserable of compromises between right and wrong. Although horror-struck at the peccadilloes of her drunken husband, she did not possess sufficient grit to withstand him. Accordingly, when Hilda announced the fact that Millicent and herself proposed to leave home that very day, she rose up from her breakfast and excitedly cried,

"And quite right, too; but who's to serve in the shop? I can't do it all; no, I really can't."

"Well, mother," said Hilda, "it's only for your sake we've put up with father for so long. But we both feel it would be far better for us to go. We somehow only seem to make father worse and worse. P'raps when we've gone he will improve. I hope so, at any rate, and you can engage a man to help in the shop."

"Well," said Mrs. Sheridan, querulously, "I hope so. Is that tea made, Millie? Do make haste, my nerves are that bad. I must take your father's breakfast up to him as well. He's very badly, indeed, this morning. Such a purple sort of look about him. I did think," said the good lady, buttering the toast almost complacently, "I did think it was apoplexy at first."

"Well, Millie," said Hilda, "we'll just run round the village and say 'Good-bye' and send a wire to Aunt Mary."

The two sisters went arm-in-arm down the village to bid farewell to their especial friends. There was the old dovecote, with the birds peering out. Then came the peacock in the squive's garden, and the little plank bridge across the brook, where the forget-me-nots grew.

"I—I feel like crying, Hilda, do you?"

"N—no—yes, I do; there's little lame Jackie at the widow's door playing at fishing in a wooden bowl with that box of tin fishes you gave him. Poor little Jackie! Good-bye, we're going away, Jack."

"No," cried the child, whose little arm and leg were bound up in irons; "no, never going away! Don't say that."

His play was spoiled for the day, that was evident, for a shadow fell upon his face and the tears fell fast.

"Hilda," said Millie, "I don't think we'll say 'Good-bye' to any others, it's more than I can stand."

"But the folks will think we've treated them badly, won't they? There's old Susan, who always sends the mulberries in season, and the Swinston babies, and blind Mary, and—ah, don't cry, we'll go straight home."

(To be continued.)

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(Continued from last week.)

"Good-bye, mother," said Hilda, "good-bye! We've only ten minutes before the train starts!"

Mrs. Sheridan groaned loud and long.

"Oh, dear; oh, dear!" she cried, "my own children are leaving me! How different things are since I was a girl! Then, nobody ever thought of objecting to a thrashing from their parents. Oh, deary me, to think I should be left in my old days alone in the world, to sell coffee and sugar! Who is to fill the flour-bags?"

"I thought you agreed we were taking the right course, mother?"

"So I do!" replied Mrs. Sheridan, weeping copiously, "but it's a sad thing to part, all the same!"

"Where's father?"

"Drunk, my dear, very drunk; he's sitting up in bed at this moment, drinking brandy and abusing The Salvation Army. I wouldn't go up, if I were you. He'll only swear at you. Here, take some biscuits with sweets on them, Millie likes those, and some chocolate; and here's the sandwiches, and, whatever you do, don't forget that telegram, for Aunt Mary is a most particular soul, and for you to arrive at her house without sending word, would nearly kill her. She don't take after me at all, being very easily upset, poor dear. Now, surely you're not going to disgrace us by going away in a donkey-cart of all things in the world? Have you no thought for your family? Remember your maternal grandfather!"

"It's only Joe Lewis' cart, mother!" said Millie. "He heard we were going away, and begged us to let him fetch our boxes down, because we nursed his little girl through the bronchitis last winter—at least, Hilda did, you know, and we said, yes, he should, and if he got his big cart, we would go as well."

Mrs. Sheridan's spirit died within her. She would never hear the last of it. Those Chollupers would spread it all round the country, and Reginald Cholluper, the little monkey, would shout "Hee-haw!" in the shop.

But there, time was up. "Good-bye, good-bye!" she cried; "here, take the little Bible; I've strove to bring you up aright, and now we have to part. 'Remember your mother's prayers,' as the Rev. Mathias Chingsniper said on Sunday, and—be careful not to offend your Aunt Mary, for she has lots of money, dear soul, lots of money!"

CHAPTER III.—THE LADY FRIEND.

The Sheridan girls, comfortably settled themselves in a compartment in the express, and shook hands with the various old chapel friends who, having learned of their departure, came to see the girls off; for though neither Hilda nor Millicent could be called religious in the thoroughgoing, Scriptural, Salvation Army sense of being converted, yet they had from childhood had their minds so saturated with the combination of secularism and social good nature which passes for religion nowadays, that they were generally regarded by the poor as saints. They were, indeed, both kind-hearted, of a sympathetic and open nature; if anybody in the village were ill, especially amongst the poor, they were sure of a visit and help from the Sheridan girls; so, as news spreads so rapidly in a small village, the departure was something of a triumphant send-off, and the gaunt station-master, assuming his gold-banded cap, looked quite important in having to control a crowd of at least thirty or forty people.

"Good-bye, Miss Hilda!" cried old Jane, of the Almshouses. "I've heard ye be goin to Lunnon, and they do say trade's werry bad there, so I've brought ye a bit pie, case ye shud get hungry." Here the old dame handed in a pork pie, big enough to make a Dominie Sampson cry, "Prodigious!" There was no saying "No!" so the pie was packed away somewhere, to the grim amusement of a stylish-looking lady in the carriage. "Good-bye!" shouted one and another; "good-bye!" as the train began to move slowly out of the station. Just then, a young woman in Salvation Army uniform darted up to the carriage, and walked rapidly along, as the train's motion increased.

"Oh, Captain!" cried the Sheridan girls together. "Good-bye! So many thanks for your talks to us," said Hilda.

The Captain nodded, and threw an envelope into the carriage. "Good-bye," she cried; "put that paper in your purse, and remember it if ever you're in a difficulty!"

The train rapidly whirled along towards the Metropolis, and the two girls, after carefully stowing away the various presents that had been showered on them, glanced at their lady travelling-companion. She was a tall, handsome woman, though with an indefinable something about her manner that made one doubtful of her. The lady smiled amiably, however, and displayed thereby a liberal supply of false teeth.

"You have many friends, evidently," she remarked; "you must be quite notable people at—Lithercote, was the name of the station?"

"I don't know about that," said Hilda, speaking a little sharply, in answer, though the lady had spoken to Millicent; "we've done our best

for the people in some little ways, but we're not perfect, you know."

The lady arched her eyebrows, which, by the way, were not altogether free of the suspicion of black pencillings.

"Ah!" she remarked; "you are quite able to speak both for your sister and yourself. So fortunate for her, certainly; but I like to see a girl with a mind of her own. Most girls just let their existence slide away in a fool's paradise. They 'frivol' away their best years of life in thin gossip and childish time-killing, and wake up to the duties of womanhood to find themselves—forty!"

The lady sighed, whether at the depth of her moralisation or the prospect of old age, was not clear, but she drew a silver travelling-flask from her reticule and helped herself to some port.

"Have a little, my dear," she said; "it will cheer you!"

"We have a drunken father at home, thank you!" said Hilda.

The lady coloured, and bit her lips.

"Really!" Millie whispered; "you are brutally frank! Couldn't you put it a little milder? The woman may be all right, for all we know; she seems to mean well enough; do make friends with her."

"Shall I offer her old Jane's pork pie?" whispered Hilda, smilingly.

Millie only replied with a nudge of the elbow, and Hilda, turning to the lady, said,

"You will excuse me, I'm sure, if my answer seemed at all rude, but the fact is, we have both suffered very much from our father's partiality for alcoholic liquors, and you will understand my horror of them."

The lady smiled sweetly, and bowed.

It was only, she said, on account of heart trouble that she herself ever took anything, and then nothing else but a glass of port.

Hilda smiled back, but bethought herself of various people, male and female, in Lithercote who excused themselves on similar lines. "Never a drop, except a thimbleful of pure French brandy!" the squire's wife would say; and, "not on any account spirits; nothing but claret, just a glass at bedtime!" and the like were familiar pleas to Hilda, who had always had a sort of leaning to total abstinence agitation.

The three travellers were now fairly good friends and exchanged confidences. The lady was, she said, the wife of an American clergyman, and was going now to join her husband in London, preparatory to sailing for New York, the following week. She would be glad, she added, to see the Sheridan girls before she left London, and gave them her card, "Mrs. Geoffrey Stevens, Grand Hotel."

(To be Continued.)

(Continued from last week.)

Shortly after, the train steamed into the terminus, and, amidst the bustle attendant on the arrival of an express, the two girls found some difficulty in getting their belongings together. Mrs. Geoffrey Stevens was, however, most amiably anxious to assist them.

"I've only this brown portmanteau," she said, "and as you are new in London, I should like to see you safely off. I'm sure your mother would like someone to do so. There, get your things on to this cab; don't trouble about porters, they're more trouble than they're worth. That's your big carpet bag, portmanteau, two wraps, umbrellas and waterproofs, there's your tin box, and now your two boxes!"

"There's one more box, somewhere!" said Hilda.

"Very likely at the rear of the train!" said Mrs. Stevens; "the porters do provokingly put them there sometimes. Shall I stand by the cab whilst you two fetch it?"

"Oh, thank you, so much!" said Hilda, running off along the platform with Millicent.

Presently, the two came back, hauling the missing box. Strangely enough, Mrs. Stevens was not to be seen. They looked about, but in vain, and at length asked the next cabman if he had seen her.

"Oh, yes!" he replied; "she's drove off in the cab, luggage and all."

The two girls looked at each other in amazement.

"Whatever shall we do?" cried Millie; "she must surely have been a thief?"

Hurriedly, they explained to one of the company's police, who, with a shrug of the shoulders, said,

"It's Loo Johnson, no doubt, in another disguise. I only wish we could catch her, she's one of the cleverest luggage-lifters on the road. We'll have a good try; the gate-man will likely have the cab number."

The girls, with heavy hearts, hailed another cab, and, with their one box of luggage, drove off to Aunt Mary's.

CHAPTER IV.—AN AWKWARD FIX.

"Knock again!" cried Hilda. "What a provoking cabman; why do they have deaf men to drive cabs?"

"So that they sha'n't hear what's said to them, I expect!" said Millicent, simply.

"Quite right, my dear," replied Hilda; "you're improving mentally. I'm sure it must be convenient to a cabman to be deaf, sometimes, though decidedly awkward, just now. Number five, cabman! I shall break a blood-vessel soon, *do* you hear, it's number five? No; I did *not* say forty-seven, but five!"

A gleam of satisfaction shot over the countenance of the mild and pacific Jehu. He nodded amiably. "Just what I thought you said at first; this 'ere's it; house all dark, three parler winders broke by boys, a dead cat in the front airey, and a bill up, 'These desirable premises to let on lease.' 'Ave you took the 'ouse, ladies?"

Poor Millicent nearly fainted, and Hilda, pale and trembling, alighted and had a good look at the place. Yes! the cabman had spoken the truth, the place had evidently been tenantless for some time.

"Whatever shall we do?" she murmured. "I know nobody else in London, and nearly all our money was in one of the stolen boxes!"

The cabman looked dubiously at the girls whistled a bar or two of a street song, and remarked,

"Two shillin's to this spot is a dirt cheap fare. Shall y' get hout 'ere? P'raps the folks next door knows ware your friends is gone?" he added. "Knock 'em up, eh? Y' can but harsk."

Hilda, adopting the suggestion, quickly knocked, and a stalwart dame, in a long black robe and white cap, opened the door.

No, she knew nobody next door, and had no desire to. Then, noting Hilda's refined appearance, she relaxed. There was an old lady living there some time back, who kept, she believed—this with an expressive sniff—five or six cats.

"One on 'em's layin' there now!" interjected the cabman. "A black un, with green hise!"

The lady sniffed again, and, without noticing the interruption, proceeded, "But she's left a fortnight now, and I don't know where she's gone!"

Hilda turned away, sorrowfully. "We can't go on riding about in this cab. I've scarcely any money left; wherever shall we go, Millie?"

"I am awfully weary, aren't you?" was the scarcely-encouraging reply of that young lady. "How I should like a cup of tea and something to eat; ask the cabman if he knows a decent coffee shop."

Hilda nodded, and interrogated the worthy driver, who shook his head vaguely. Tea, it seemed, was not his usual drink. "But," he sagely remarked, "there's these 'ere Lockhart places; there's one hopposite!"

"Stay here, while we go inside," said Hilda.

"Thankee," replied the cabman, touching his hat; "I don't mind if I do; this 'ere boy 'I mind the horse, while I step round to the 'Blue Pig.'"

Hilda sighed, gave him sixpence and gave him up in despair, at the same time, as a bad job, and adjourned to Lockhart's. A little tea refreshed them, bodily and mentally, and Hilda suddenly thought of the paper given her by the Lithercote Captain.

"What was it she said, when she threw it into the carriage? Something about reading it when we wanted a friend, I think. Well, here it is! I never thought we should want a friend so soon, but——"

"My dear Miss Sheridan,—I would have liked to have seen you before you left—h'm—an undertaking for two young women to start life in London without God——"

Hilda stopped, and the two girls looked at each other.

"She's quite right," said Hilda, with a sigh; "do you remember that last time she spoke to us in the barracks, Millie?"

"If you ever get into any difficulties, do call on Captain Mary Fenton, 4, Piper Place, Little Green Street, near where your Aunt Mary lives. We were in training together, and she will do anything for you if you show her this note. Praying that God will bless you and lead you both to Himself, Yours affectionately,

"Annie Brunton."

"Well," said Hilda, "shall we go there?"

"Certainly," said Millie; "I feel tired out, and quite ill. We must go somewhere, and it's past eight o'clock now!"

Accordingly, they rejoined the cabman, who having imbibed somewhat heavily, was busy retailing the night's adventures, in choice language, to an admiring but semi-sarcastic crowd.

Eventually Hilda and Millicent succeeded in entering the cab, and they drove off amid the cheers and cabbage stalks of the mob.

"What a dreadful scene?" cried Millie, sinking back into a corner, and beginning to weep. "Do you think he'll take us right? What would they say at Lithercote?"

"Cheer up, old darling!" replied Hilda; "we shall get through it somehow, but that Captain's quite right, we ought to be converted! What do you say, Millie? But, there, it's an awkward moment for theology, when you've a drunken cabman, no lodgings and very little cash."

(To be continued.)

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(Continued from last week.)

CHAPTER IV.—AN AWKWARD FIX—(Contd.)

MILLIE was, by this time, sobbing. She replied, "It's the right time for religion, if not for theology."

"Here y'are, ladies," cried the cabman, jumping down, and with alacrity opening the cab door; "here y'are, this is it!"

"You're getting quite rapid," said Hilda. "Can't you be equally quick when sober?" she was going to add, but thought it might sound personal. "Knock at the door, whilst I help my sister out."

A thundering rat-tat sounded at the door, and brought to their windows a great proportion of the neighbours. Cabs were all but unknown in Little Piper Street, and the Sheridan girls' advent caused considerable excitement. A shrill-voiced lady shouted across the road,

"There's nobody at home; they're gorn out!"

The cabman, struck by a sudden thought, seized Hilda by the arm.

"Look here, my gal," he said, "it won't do, you're a 'bilker'!"

"A what?" cried Hilda.

"A 'bilker'!" reiterated the cabman.

"Let my sister alone," cried Millie; "you sha'n't touch her."

At the prospect of a disturbance, there was a general rush to the spot.

"Pay my fare!" shouted the cabman. "Four-and-nine I wants!"

"Hear, hear!" cried one or two roughs; "pay the man his fare!"

"I'll pay you," said Hilda; "here's the money, just put the box down on the doorstep, and go!"

"Who knows if the Salvation Army Captain lives here?" There was a general laugh, and a good deal of blasphemy.

The two girls, unused to the style of language, drew back in disgust, when a shabbily-dressed little girl pulled Hilda's dress and said,

"They're gone to the barracks, sister!"

"Where is that?" asked Millie.

"Just round the corner," replied the little maid. "I'm a Junior, I am," she added, in a confidential way; "come along o' me. I'll help you with the box."

"Never!" replied Hilda; "you're not strong enough!"

"Bless you!" replied the child; "I goes out charing at eighteenpence a day; I'm strong, though little for my age, you know; give me hold of the handle, round this corner, here's the barracks; there's been a Musical Festival, and—ah, this is the Captain!"

CHAPTER V.—A SALVATION ARMY CAPTAIN.

Captain Piper, the new comer, was, in many respects, both a remarkable woman and a model officer. Hers was the "pure religion and undefiled," i.e., of the practical Samaritan spirit. Her conviction was that the manifestation of Christ's ideas and power, in everyday life, was the remedy for social ills. Nor was she narrow-minded in applying her theory. To wash a dirty baby, scrub a floor, or help a drunken woman home, was as religious to her as delivering an address on sanctification. Her weak point was perhaps a scant patience with sermonising and high falutin addresses. The average, or above the average spouter, was abhorrent to her. "Talk, talk, talk!" she would cry, "I am sick of it, take away your penny-farthing parrotisms about the 'blessing,' and your tinsel-worded anecdotes that you trot out to tickle the ears of the half-religious people who give you a half-crown, and call you a wonderful evangelist! Cast it all away, for if you are not in touch with the sorrows and miseries of the poor, with the

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and matchmaker, with the wail of starving children and the sob of broken hearts, and the ruin of human lives, if these things do not eat their way into your innermost soul, and electrify your heart with the grandeur of a God-given opportunity, of what good are you?"

She had just come straight from the barracks with her Lieutenant, a bright, country girl, fresh from a farmyard by the Norfolk Broads.

"Somehow, I never feel quite happy in musical festivals," remarked the Captain. "All the time they were singing, I was thinking of the little Jones's, and where I can get a few clothes for them; and that poor Elsie Fletcher, that we just got off the streets, and where we can obtain a place for her. I called on one gentleman yesterday, but he was so busy writing an essay on the Home Rule Bill, that he had no time to see me. Poor man! He's worth a million at least; how little he appreciates its value, except as a fame, or rather, notoriety-making fact!"

"I don't think you want to find fault with the musical festival, though," said the Lieutenant. "I thought it was just lovely to hear that converted costermonger and all his family sing

together. Besides, you surely don't want to hand over all life and spirit to the devil; I reckon, as Wesley said of secular tunes, that the devil stole them. Then we had four good cases of conversion, remember, and—"the joy of the Lord is your strength!"

"Oh, yes, yes!" replied Capt. Piper, "you're quite right, I don't want converting on that score; but then with all this dense crowd of workless, half-starved or starving, helpless or sick and mostly wicked people, all round me, I am nearly beside myself. But I won't worry, no, that I won't! I——"

"Are you Captain Piper, please?" interrupted Hilda Sheridan.

"Yes, my dear," was the Captain's reply, as she rapidly surveyed the two sisters. "Yes, I'm that strange individual; what can I do for you?"

Her voice softened as she was concluding her sentence. Seeing Hilda was at a loss where to begin, she added, "You are in a difficulty, I see! Suppose you come round to the quarters, where we can talk, shall we? Here, Lieutenant and I will carry that box for you; little Minnie Jackson has helped you, has she? Good little Minnie, she's a proper Junior!"

Carrying the box and guiding the sisters back to the quarters' door, Captain Piper soon made the girls feel at home, and the bustling Lieutenant quickly made the kettle boil.

"What is there to eat in the house, Lieutenant?" asked the Captain.

"Canned salmon," replied she of Norfolk.

"Ah!" moralised the Captain, "I'm afraid we Salvationists eat too much of it; but you see, my dears"—this to the Sheridan girls—"it's easily prepared, and time is everything almost to a Salvationist in the slums. But there, I won't talk so much. I've been moralising to the Lieutenant, to-night, that we want more practical work, and less "discussion gabble," as I call it. Stead irreverently says his spook talks a great deal of nonsense, and I'm afraid some human spooks—but there, tell me all you were going to say, when I met you in the street."

In reply, Hilda stammered out a short account of their position, and producing Captain Brunton's letter, said,

"I'm afraid you think it's rather impudent of us to come down on you in this fashion, but you see——" and poor Hilda began to feel like crying.

"All right, my dear," said the Captain, "I'll invite you to stay with me a few days. Our Divisional officer will agree; he's a decent sort. It will be a good experience for you both to see a little of the neighbourhood, and get to understand what London life really is. To tell you the truth, I'm honestly glad you are here, and your sister, too, who seems down-hearted, she says so little. Cheer up, Millie, there's a dear, it's better on before!"

Millie vainly tried to smile, she was thoroughly exhausted with the excitement of the day's unwonted events, and with a faint moan, she sank back and fainted.

(To be continued.)

THE SHERIDAN GIRLS.

CHAPTER VI.—A SLUM ADVENTURE.

The sisters had been two days in London, and Millie was growing worse. At the same time, her naturally irritable temper had, it seemed, been thoroughly quelled by the strangeness of their new life with the Army officers. Indeed, the devotion, the incessant toil, in spite of many rebuffs and heart-aches and disappointments, was a revelation to the Sheridan girls. Captain Piper had received a letter from the Lithercote officer, explaining the position, spiritual and social, of Hilda and her sister, and was determined, by Divine help, to secure them as workers for the Kingdom.

"I don't know how ever you work so," remarked Hilda, after Millie had retired and was fast asleep.

"Simple enough, my dear," replied the Captain ;

"it's for God, you see, which makes all the difference. Surely you have had enough experience of the fact that an objectless life is a miserable one? What should I be living for? Think you I would be happier even in a Belgravia drawing-room, amongst a horde of Society ladies? No, no! If you want a life of pure enjoyment, in the highest sense, consecrate it to God."

"And yet," replied Hilda, "there are surely very few women who think as you Army folks do!"

"More shame for them," replied the Captain, "for sin came into the world through a woman, and the least a woman can do is to help drive it out again. Indeed, I maintain that a woman ought to be to the fore-front of all noble and righteous causes!"

This was rank heresy to Hilda. Brought up in a quiet, country town, with no ideal in life but that of being as fashionable a girl as her limited income would allow, she regarded the audacious Captain with feelings somewhat between admiring interest and amused horror.

"I knew that women worked in the Army as officers, of course," she remarked at length; "but it never occurred to me that you took such lofty views of the position."

"Lofty views!" echoed Captain Piper. "Who says they are lofty? The Salvationist women of a hundred years hence will probably think us half-hearted, and slow of understanding for not going further; but there, we are getting out of our grave-clothes at last, though plenty of the lords of creation would soon relegate us back, if they could, to our natural sphere of, say, Berlin wool or fancy work."

"Didn't you feel strange when you first launched out on—on this kind of life?" asked Hilda timidly.

"Bless you, my dear! I shivered like an African hunter at the North Pole. But I broke loose at last from the great goddesses' court."

"From where?" murmured Hilda.

"The goddess of fashion, my dear," laughed Captain Piper. "That strange, mighty, wonderful power which says to a woman, 'dress like a betting man, or Diana of Ephesus,' and she does so. 'Spend your time in novel-reading, or cigarette smoking,' and she does so. 'Pronounce your native tongue through your teeth until it sounds like double-Dutch or Caribbee,' and she does it. Why? Because it's 'the thing' to do so, the fashion, the fashion! Only to think that women with minds can consent to waste their lives in the conventionalities of tea-drinking gossip and trashy three-volume tales, and vacuous discussions of trumpery milliners, whilst God Almighty meant them to be handmaids of purity and heaven! But there, if I say much more, you'll put me down—with a sigh—as an exaggerating enthusiast, something between Boadicea and Madame Blavatsky, eh?"

Hilda looked up with a troubled air. The occasional bombardments of the Lithercote officers were milk and water, she thought, compared with this fiery daughter of the people; and though excellent in their way, had tended more in the direction of meek, personal entreaty than of invitation to the stern battlefield of life. Her conversations with Captain Piper inspired her certainly, with new ambitions, and greatly enlarged her views of the value of life, and the personal responsibilities of the individual. The life of a Salvation Army officer was to her no longer that of a feminine tract distributor, or temperance evangelist. No longer was an Army Captain simply a desirable person to ask to tea, and have one or two pretty talks with; not this, but a being possessed of glorious opportunities and far-reaching scopes of work in the highest interests of humanity.

"I certainly should like to do something good, myself," she stammered out.

"What would you do?" cried the energetic Captain, returning to the charge, "and why would you do it? Believe me, it takes something more than a philanthropic idea to make a Salvationist. True, the more good ideas you have, the better; but, you must begin with Christ and the Cross!"

Hilda shuddered just the least little bit. She was not used to the name of Christ being used in such a sense of personal application. She was, in fact, slowly groping towards the light of spiritual truth.

"A life of downright, earnest toil for God is not all chocolate-cream and candy," continued the Captain. "Even for your own personal upholding, you are useless without a Divine support; but above all, to think you are going to benefit humanity without restoring it to the favour of God, is the most unreasonable of ideas. It is in the Cross that victory lies, and through that Cross alone can heaven-on-earth become possible. That is God's way, and we must stick to it through both good and evil report. The whole history of religious life goes to show how man has been, and is now, continually seeking an easier way into paradise lost; instinctively trying to find a path that leads him back to purity; but shirking the thorn-strewn path, wincing at the ignominy of the Cross, and crying, 'There is a lion in the way.'"

(To be continued.)

THE SHERIDAN GIRLS.

(Continued.)

ALWAYS sympathise with what's good," mildly urged Hilda.

"Possibly. So, to an extent, do a good many heathen! But are you going to launch on eternity's sea in no better lifeboat than that? Indeed, what are you, my dear, but a heathen? Wherein

lies the essential difference between Miss Quashee of Lake Tanganyika and Miss Sheridan of Lithercote? What have you that she has not, beyond a measure of what we call civilisation? And you won't say that salvation and civilisation are synonymous terms?"

"If it is not," replied Hilda, "there are precious few Christians about. Fancy the Athelstan-Snipes and the Jenkinses and Lady Clothesbasket, who are the pillars of religion in Lithercote, being told they are heathen; such devoted people, you know!"

"What is devotion?" cried Captain Piper. "Is it energy in making print aprons for a bazaar, or regularity in distributing whitey-brown tracts, or selling 'War Crys'? If these things constitute our religion, it's a temporary thing enough, surely! and 'as the early dew, it goeth away.' No, no! A *life* devoted to the service of God, by the constraining influence of the Holy Ghost in a converted soul, is your only true devotion. Get that elementary principle settled, get to be a Christian in genuine reality, and then your print aprons and your 'War Crys' may come in. But to take yourself, as a heathen, and label yourself 'Christian,' on the strength of an attendance at church, or a solemn countenance on Sunday, or a naturally generous disposition, when your aims in life are utterly at variance with the Cross, is one of the most absurd, as it is one of the most common, errors of Victorian days."

"I'm afraid," replied Hilda, laughing, "you'll coerce me into being a Salvationist. Please be merciful with me, there's a dear girl. I *will* be good, I will indeed; just according to your own most extreme *ex-cathedra*, cast-iron rules."

"Don't misinterpret simplicity as narrowness," said the Captain solemnly; "but instead of upbraiding the truth with being cast-iron, thank God that it is unwrenchable, for there is little enough consistency in this Christ-caricaturing age!"

"Are we so much worse than our ancestors, then?" cried Hilda, in a fit of self-defence. "See what an age of liberty it is, how greatly the national morals are improved!"

Captain Piper smiled sarcastically. "You're in a bad state of mind," she said, "when you have to defend heathenism on the strength of the peculiar venter it happens to be covered with at the moment. You'd best give in and get converted. Besides, it's pretty evident that what you call national improvement is simply the form that selfishness takes in the nineteenth century. True, there is liberty, but what to do? Ask the toiling millions, crushed beneath the juggernaut wheels of sweating and competition; ask the shivering children, crying for hunger in the East End, and for the matter of that, West End hovels; ask the weary mother who, with a broken heart, hears the cry of her children for a morsel of bread. Ask these, and they will tell you, 'liberty to starve.' As for morals, 'see Piccadilly.' But there, what's the use of arguing, for you will, after all, either devote your life to Christ in reality, or waste it in a combination of sham service and watery excuses for not doing better. Take my advice, my dear," cried the Captain, "let me influence you as one who really loves you, obey the inward monitor, which says, 'Seek ye first the kingdom of heaven.'"

"Yes," said Hilda, simply, "yes, I—I feel you're quite right; my life is an utter blank, but I can see that even unselfish work for others would be, to an extent, empty and irksome, without genuine, personal, heart satisfaction, and—

"Hark! Whatever can that noise be?"

Hilda and the officers stood perfectly still and listened.

"It sounds like somebody on the stairs, breathing very hard," whispered Hilda.

The Captain nodded and softly replied, "Whoever it is, has no business on our stairs at this time of night, it's going on for eleven o'clock!"

The noise increased and resolved itself clearly into footsteps. Hilda's heart beat furiously, and she clutched the Captain by the arm, and glanced at the poker. Very slowly the footsteps came nearer, and right up to the threshold. The handle was turned, and the door opened.

Both the girls stood waiting for somebody to enter, but no one came, though the hard breathing could be clearly heard.

"Come in," cried Captain Piper; "come in, whoever you are!"

Hilda clung to a chair, and backed towards the bedroom door, with a vague idea of defending the sleeping Millicent, when her fright was changed into pity, as, sidling into the room and with a pitiful expression, came little Minnie, the Junior, her little body throbbing with emotion, as she endeavoured to choke her sobs. She advanced a few steps and, then rushing towards the Captain, burst into tears and cried, "Oh, I can't go home, I can't go home, what shall I do?"

"Why," cried the Captain, "whatever's the matter, Minnie? There, don't cry, my dear. Sit down by the fire, you'll soon get better, poor child!"

Gradually the sobs ceased, and the child grew calmer. Then she rose, and, clutching hold of the Captain, cried, "Oh, don't send me away; do let me stop here a little while!"

The Captain made no reply, but, taking the child in her arms, gently stroked her forehead and bathed it. Minnie was utterly tired out, and after a few minutes' soothing, dropped off to sleep. Captain Piper laid her down on her own bed, and, waking the Lieutenant, explained the situation. Then, turning to Hilda, she said, "I shall step round to Minnie's home and ascertain what is wrong. Will you come, too? It's late, but a characteristic sight of the 'national morality' will be a good, helpful experience, I'm sure. Let's put these shawls round us, it isn't far to go, only to the model dwellings round the corner."

Hilda acquiesced, and the two girls were soon threading their way through the dark alleys of the slums.

"Keep close to me, Hilda," said the agile Captain; "I know the way well."

Hilda drew the shawl close around her, and pressed forward. Presently Captain Piper stopped before a huge prison-like block of buildings that stood out in bold relief from the squalid and low-built streets by which they were surrounded. Passing between a couple of massive gates, and past a surly porter, who followed their course with a scowling look, and quickly ascending a dingy staircase, they soon reached the second storey of the dwellings.

"I only wish I were sure of the room," murmured the Captain. "One door is so exactly like another, and it's too dark to see the numbers."

"What a fearful stench," said Hilda. "Is it always like this?"

"Nearly always," replied the Captain. "This is one of the 'model' blocks that philanthropists—at seven per cent.—are so fond of erecting for the benefit of the poor. Suppose we try the next floor."

(To be continued.)

THE SHERIDAN GIRLS.

(Continued.)

After ascending the next flight of stairs, the Captain stopped before one of the doors, saying, "This is it; just listen a moment."

Hilda did so. All was silent, save for an occasional moan, as of someone in pain, and Capt. Piper knocking gently at the door, turned the handle and entered. The interior presented a sickening sight. Almost entirely destitute of furniture, and with a dirty-looking mattress lying on the floor to do duty for a bed, it was a model dwelling—of what to avoid. On the single chair of the room, sat a man with his right arm in a sling, whilst stretched on the floor lay a poor, ill-dressed woman, with blood flowing from her forehead.

Rising unsteadily from the chair, the man staggered forward, and, seizing the mantel-shelf, to keep from falling, stared at the two girls, with blood-shot eyes and a terrible expression. Hilda instinctively shuddered, the whole scene was so ghastly and repulsive, the bare, grimy room, the darkness, relieved only by the flickering of the fire's dying embers, the silence of the night, broken by the sighing of the wind, and the moaning of the woman, who lay bleeding and helpless on the floor.

"Do men and women, indeed, live in this dreadful fashion?" was her first thought, and then came the inevitable reflection that burned into her heart. "What are *you* doing to better the world, and erase from its fair brow such sickening blots as these?"

Capt. Piper stepped forward and faced the man taking him by the arm, and lifting a warning forefinger, bade him sit down.

"It's little good talking to you now, Stebbings; you're too drunk, and another thing, you thoroughly deserve to spend the night in the police-station, for striking your wife again."

The miserable drunkard had, however, reached the maudlin stage, and with a whining voice he poured forth a volume of excuses, mingled with many tears.

"It's the—hic—accursed—drink, Cap'n. I shall vote for V-veto Bill, I shall," and this with a tragic stamp, and fine assumption of lofty morality, "Shweep it away!"

Hilda had secured a candle from the next room, and as both the girls turned their attention to the suffering woman the wretched Stebbings sunk down into a corner and fell fast asleep.

"Cheer up, Mrs. Stebbings," cried the Captain. "Don't tell us anything about it; just sit still while we light the fire; or, better still, if you could walk as far, we'll take you round to the quarters for the night."

"I'll come," she replied, hoarsely. "I'll come, thankfully, anywhere away from here; it's hell on earth here!" cried the poor creature in a frenzy of despair.

"Ten long years have I borne this fearful life—this living death. Oh, God, to think I should marry a drunkard, but it's been a long, long repentance."

With difficulty they helped her down the long flights of steps, through the darkness to the quarters, where a bright fire, some warm water to wash her wounds, and a little bovril and toast soon cheered the sufferer and brought tears of thankfulness to her eyes. A temporary bed was quickly made up for her on the sofa, and the inmates of the little quarters were soon fast asleep.

CHAPTER VII.—OVER THE GROCER'S SHOP.

Mrs. Sheridan sat in her favourite arm-chair in the shop-parlour at Lithercote; swaying herself to and fro, and covering her head in her apron as she wept bitterly. By the fireside sat several neighbours, whose solemn countenances and excellent appetites revealed the fact that they were partially bent on condolence and partly on a good breakfast.

"Ah! poor dear," said Mrs. Cholluper, "it's a sad visitation; is an athletic stroke, but we must always be ready for the worst, musn't we, Miss Grimmett?"

The lady addressed, a spinster and dressmaker, nodded her head. Speech was at the moment inconvenient. Miss Grimmett was doing well with coffee and cold tongue, and hastened to assume the needed expression of prim rigidity required by the occasion.

"The character of our lives," she remarked, "is borne out by the inner consciousness of our second nature. From thence to the beyond is—what? A dream! a transition of essence, an absorbence of refulgence!"

Miss Grimmett, it may be remarked, occasionally electrified local audiences at the village institute with lectures on all kinds of wonderful subjects, and this was her little way of talking. Mrs. Sheridan, however, was not comforted, after all.

"After all, with all his faults, he's my husband, and who knows but what he'll get better and alter? Poor Jack! poor Jack! he was a good fellow once; such a good-hearted man."

Just then old Mrs. Jenkins came downstairs. Mrs. Jenkins was the nurse, a jolly kind-hearted old neighbour, who, directly Mr. Sheridan's attack of apoplexy seized him, had proffered her services to the disconsolate wife.

"You had better come upstairs, Mrs. Sheridan," whispered Mrs. Jenkins.

"Come this way, my dear; never mind, the other folks," this by way of a hint to the rest, "can stay where they are."

Mrs. Sheridan went upstairs to the bedroom, a little old-fashioned apartment overlooking the back garden, and with a view thence into the meadows

and across the river, overflowing with rain and dashing the green fields with streaks of silver. On the old oaken bed, sheltered by its faded purple hangings from the keen rays of the sun, lay the heavy form of Mr. Sheridan, who, breathing with a hoarse, snoring sound, and staring vacantly at the ceiling, was evidently in the very throes of death. His red, bloated face was distorted, his mouth askew, and his whole appearance ghastly.

"He's very near the end, I'm afraid," whispered Mrs. Jenkins; "'tis time Doctor Willis called again."

Mrs. Sheridan approached the bed and knelt by its side. Her heart throbbed violently, and a whole lifetime seemed crammed into a minute, as the early days of her married life, the wedding ceremony at the village church and the long, weary, listless days since, flashed through her memory.

The poor dying creature who lay helpless before her had, indeed, proved to be but a poor husband; his ungovernable temper and low passion for the society peculiar to the stable, the public-house and the billiard-room had made him an undesirable companion at the best. No ambition after the noble in life, no desires for the bettering of men had ever stirred that ignoble mind; no lofty ideal ever seemed to speak of a higher nature than that of the wolfish to that sensual heart. Torpid and laggard himself, his life of pure selfishness had extinguished the faint sparks of high feeling in his wife which might otherwise have kindled into intensity. Yet he was her husband still. The long years of neglect and sorrow faded from her mind, and in the prone figure, blotched and disfigured, which lay before her on the bed, and contrasted so weirdly with the whiteness of the pillows and the neatness of the patchwork counterpane, she saw only the dashing young Jack Sheridan, who was wont to come striding across the foot-bridge by the forget-me-not beds in the brook, smacking his whip, and cheerily shouting to the old folks in the almshouses.

A groan escaped his lips, and a faint movement of his body seemed to indicate a desire to rise. Mrs. Sheridan quickly touched his hand, and whispered, "John, do you know me?"

The staring eyes gazed steadfastly at the ceiling, and, beyond a slight quiver of the lips, there seemed no response.

Touching his forehead, and speaking a little louder, as the tears ran down her cheeks, she said, "John, if you are able, speak to me; it's Fanny."

There was a flicker of the eyelids; he looked round, still fixedly, at his wife, as if endeavouring, through a mental cloud, to understand where he was. His wife hung over the bed eagerly waiting for him to speak, as, at last, a flash of intelligence passed over his features, and he fiercely struggled to express himself. At last he clasped his wife's hand, and she bent nearer to his lips.

"Fanny—I've—been—a—wicked—man—very. Will—will—God—forgive—me?"

There was a wistful look in his eyes, which filled with tears, and he went on.

"Bad—husband—Fanny—forgive—me. Mind—the—girls—and—God—forgive—me."

As he spoke an awful blight came, and his face distorted as the dreadful apoplexy returned upon him, and his cold form lay stark and stiff upon the bed. The sun's rays had crept round, and now fell upon the figure of the weeping wife as she fell upon her knees.

"Oh, God!" she cried. "Oh, God, be merciful to my poor husband!"

(To be continued.)

THE SHERIDAN GIRLS.

(Continued.)

A faint sigh escaped Sheridan's lips, and his soul passed into eternity.

Mrs. Sheridan rose and bent over him, and slowly realised the bitterness of a last parting. She stood there—to her it seemed for hours—stricken with a dreadful sense of utter loneliness. Her husband dead, her children fled from home in disgust, and herself a complete stranger to the consolations of practical Christianity. The clouds of adversity were black and heavy, and her heart bowed beneath its load of woe. The kind-hearted Mrs. Jenkins gently took Mrs. Sheridan by the arm, led her downstairs into the parlour, and comfortably established her in the easy chair by the fire.

The talkative ladies were silent at once; the sobs of the widow told them what had happened.

"Miss Grimmett," whispered Mrs. Jenkins, "just slip down to the telegraph-office with this telegram to Hilda and Millie. I've got their address from a letter that came this morning. Their mother is in a sad way, and if they don't come quickly, I shouldn't be surprised if she took to her bed and never rose again!"

Miss Grimmett, a kind-hearted soul, if somewhat too ethereal for this practical world, hastily bustled, hatless, down the street with her long ringlets waving in the wind, to the great astonishment of Lithercote, which soon divined that something unusual had occurred. The shutters were quickly put up at the shop, the neighbours withdrew, and poor Mrs. Sheridan, relieved at their departure, sobbed herself off into a quiet sleep.

CHAPTER VIII.—AFTER THE FUNERAL.

Few things in village life are so curiously full of the old-fashioned simplicity of English agricultural life as a funeral. If the deceased was of a leading local family, the villagers turn out in all the strange costumes in which they or their fathers have attended at funerals for, perhaps, the last half-century. Then are produced, from the sacred recesses of oaken chests, the long, white neckcloth, the extensive black cloth coat of ancient cut and with astonishing tails, the ponderous bonnet with many crape bows, black ostrich feathers and wondrous beadings in the true style of those old photographs of injured Caroline of Brunswick which are to be found over so many old-fashioned mantels. Business—such long-pondered and serious transactions as represent business in a village, at least—is suspended, blinds are drawn everywhere, and honest Giles and good wife Margery go about with pursed lips, and a woeful expression of deep, sunken melancholy on their faces. Rumours are rife as to the funeral arrangements—where the hearse is coming from; who is to drive; the latest details of "the corpse's relations," and "what uncle this, and aunt that" said, the precise nature of the medical certificate, and what not, and as the solemn procession, with the majority of the mourners following on foot, two and two, slowly passes along the village, everybody who can, presses on to the churchyard to show, by their presence, the last tribute of respect they are able to offer to the dead.

Old Mr. Sheridan had been, in his way, quite a character, and the churchyard at Lithercote was a general rendezvous on the day of the funeral. Mrs. Sheridan, partly recovered from the shock, and the central attraction of that well-meaning circle of busybodies who, at such times, hamper the bereaved with petty arrows of sympathy that open the wounds afresh, stayed in the parlour, alternately comforted and flattered, whilst Hilda and Millicent, with the indefatigable Captain Piper, who had accompanied them from London, attended the funeral.

After the service, the three walked back home by the meadow footpath. As the mists were rising from the river, and the bright November sun was quickly setting in a bank of a golden haze, the thin waves of cloud stood out in deeper grey as the western sky deepened into mauves and browns. They stood at the stile by the big aspens, silently gazing at the beauty of the scene, and listening to the weird quiverings of the few leaves that still clung to the black branches or fluttered downwards as the rising breeze whisked them hither and thither.

"The world would be all right," muttered Hilda, "if——"

"If all our little worlds were," said the Captain, softly, completing the sentence. "The point is for us each to do our own personal 'bit.' It's useless to sentimentalise, and get into a sort of languishing, poetic, dreamy life, that admires goodness in the abstract, and yet fails to grip the sword and devote its energies with courage and zeal to driving out wrong. I've been down that street myself, and know where it leads to—to a sickly, forcible-feeble, holiness-convention-to-night-and-lay-in-bed-to-morrow sort of life. Understandest?"

"Oh, yes, you're quite right," replied Hilda, as they passed along into the Lithercote street; "but I've little danger that way myself after that slum experience in London. I'll have a practical life, by the help of God!"

They had now reached home, and passing through into the parlour, cheered Mrs. Sheridan until supper-time, with an adroit attack upon her spiritual condition.

Certainly, a remarkable change had taken place in Hilda's nature. The affected manner which, in common with the great ideas inculcated at middle-class ladies' schools, she had adopted, as a reproduction, whilst really it was a pure burlesque, of aristocratic "style," had vanished completely, and she was as free and unshackled by the conventionalities of mock fine-ladyism as the redoubtable Captain Piper herself. The secret of the matter lay, as Hilda had said, in the revolution accomplished in her soul in that awful slum room where the miserable drunkard lived, and where she had inwardly resolved that, come what may, she would, at least, throw the efforts of one more whole-hearted woman into the scales on behalf of righteousness.

"What are *you* going to do, Millie?" asked Hilda.

"Well," replied that young lady, slowly, "I hardly know; I used to be the terror of the family, didn't I? But really our London experiences, and the wretched health I've had lately, and father's death, have made me rather——"

"Quieter, shall we say?" said Hilda.

"Put it that way, if you like; but for one thing, I'm rather slower than you, and haven't practically grasped what I feel as strongly as you, to be absolutely necessary—a real change of heart."

The subject dropped until Mrs. Sheridan had retired for the night, and then, as the three girls sat round the fire, they returned to the subject, as the one most important theme of their lives.

"I was wondering, Millie," said Captain Piper suddenly, "who that young man was, who looked at you so intently at the graveside. He stood right behind the crowd, but his tall figure and white face rendered him conspicuous. I thought he seemed to know you."

Millie sat silent, and the tears sprang to her eyes. The two girls exchanged glances.

"Yes," said Millie, "you've touched the sore spot."

"Jack Danvers?" queried Hilda.

Millie did not answer for a few minutes, but fixed her eyes steadfastly upon the fire, and remained pondering. Then, hastily pressing her handkerchief to her eyes, she darted from the room.

(*To be continued.*)

THE SHERIDAN GIRLS.

(Continued.)

CHAPTER IX.—MILLICENT'S FLIGHT.

"WHAT to make of Millie, I don't quite know; she seems so bent on having that Danvers," said Hilda, in parting from Captain Piper, who was returning to her corps.

"I believe," replied the Captain, "she must choose between God and man; between the path He wants her to tread, and this same Danvers. What a number of women are foolish enough to give way to man's persuasion, and settle down into married life when they have scarcely emerged from girlhood, only to repent all the rest of their lives because they've disobeyed God, and reaped the bitter consequences in a lifetime of disappointment. Their promised paradise proves but a quagmire of misery after all."

"Of course, one *may* marry sometimes," said Hilda, thinking aloud.

"I didn't say otherwise, my dear," replied the Captain. "I carefully confined myself to the safe assertion that disobedience brings, too late, repentance in its train; a sound assertion, I imagine, which applies equally to matrimony as to other matters. But who is this Danvers?"

"One of those self-satisfied creatures, who think it everybody's duty to wait on them, hand and foot. If you gave him the wealth of the Rothschilds, and installed him as Czar of all the Russias, he'd only give a supercilious smile, and puff his cigar, without any surprise at his superior merits being recognised. Moreover, he'd squander the lot in a month or two by horse-racing and gambling, in company with young Lord Blotchy Plantagenet, Sir Victor Vulture, and the other lights of county Society, whose god is that noble animal, the horse, or, in plain English, chiselling one another on the race-course."

"Whatever can she see in the fellow?" asked the Captain. "He's such a low-looking creature."

"Perhaps she thinks he's a kind of swell. I know Millie thinks a lot of anybody who reckons to be aristocratic. If we could only get her through, and into the Army, she would be all right. I shall have a try to-night."

"And yourself?" said the Captain.

"Ah, my dear," echoed Hilda, "my poor self! At present, I see nothing for it, but to stay with mother; at any rate, for a time, until things are settled. I shall be a soldier here, of course. Don't have any fear about me; I shall be a cross-bearer, by God's help."

Hilda was true to her convictions. That very night saw her in the open-air ring, testifying and selling Army periodicals, whilst genteel Lithercote looked on aghast.

"I never did think that Miss Sheridan would come to much good," observed old Miss Onion, passing along to the Town Hall lecture on "The Roman Tile Fragments, Recently Unearthed at Little Pugwash." "She has no taste for the lofty."

"You are *quite* right," said Lady Rag-bag, icily. "I tolerate these people, as George says they have some political influence, not so much on account of numbers, as of perseverance; but the fact is, they make religion too common a matter. So far as I can see about—er—er—God, and such things, they are to be reserved for the holy calm of a Sabbath, when, after dinner, one has time to settle down by the fire and give time to such things, when necessary, after glancing through the 'Court Journal,' and the births, marriages and deaths in the 'Times.' But religion on a Thursday night!—whoever heard of such a thing?"

Miss Onion murmured something, in confirmation, about the Continental Sunday, but not being quite sure of her ground, relapsed into silence, and the consideration of Roman tiles.

In spite, however, of any amount of criticism of this kind, which, after all, was only of the stamp which is the usual lot of those who will take a definite stand against worldliness, Hilda stuck to her guns. She quickly became the leading spirit of the Lithercote Corps, as well as the manageress of her mother's grocery emporium, from whence adulterated sugar, and watered vinegar went forth no longer. The main difficulty was Millie, who, inclining in her heart to a selfish life, and to Jack Danvers, was entirely at variance with Hilda's ideas, and soon developed from occasionally dropping a sarcastic remark or two, into a spirit of intense opposition to religion in every shape and form. Henceforth, the little home was continually a scene of recriminations and bitter attacks on Millie's part, which Hilda bore patiently. Poor Mrs. Sheridan, however, took the interruption of home peace sorely to heart.

"I did think," she whimpered from her accustomed easy chair by the fire. "I did think that, after your poor, dear father went to heaven, we should have a little peace. Little did I suppose," she cried, sinking her voice into a solemn resonance, and waving her arm in a dignified way; "little did I suppose the home was going to be upset in this way, and why? Aren't there enough religions in the world, Hilda, without you going and bringing a fresh one down from London?" So saying the old lady paused and glared at Hilda, as though the latter were a

sort of Mahomet or Prophet Smith, about to coerce the world into a new form of frantic religious error. "Although," continued Mrs. Sheridan, relaxing, "your queer bonnet suits you very well, I must say."

At last, Millie, finding her repeated attacks on Hilda produced no effect in the way of renouncing the peculiar paths of aggressive Christianity, brought matters to a climax. One morning she was missing from the breakfast-table, and Mrs. Sheridan came running downstairs in a wild pitch of excitement, waving a letter in her hand, and screaming,

"She's gone—gone!"

Hilda, trembling with grief and excitement, hastily took the note, which was in Millie's handwriting, and had evidently been scribbled the previous night, bearing, as it did, yesterday's date.

"Read it!" screamed Mrs. Sheridan. "Read it, I say; you've driven her from home, with your Salvation nonsense; do you want me to go, too?"

"Now, do sit down, mother, and be calm; you know quite well that ——"

"Oh, yes! Oh, yes!" cried Mrs. Sheridan. "I know quite well; of course I do; that's just the way with these Salvation people. 'You know,' they say, when they mean all the time, 'I know!' But there's one thing I know, I will have no more 'Salvation' in my house; for it's mine, do you hear? Your sainted parent," here Mrs. Sheridan glanced dramatically at the ceiling, "willed it to me unconditionally, and mine it shall be; and I'll have an alteration, and engage young Mr. Slang, the butcher-boy, as assistant, I mean manager, and you can go to your Salvation people, so come now. I've got some spirit in me, though I *am* getting on in years, and I'll have my own way in my own house yet. To think I should ever live to be told by my own child that no whisky—the best Scotch, too, from a most religious nation—should enter my house. But there—read the letter; read it, I say!"

Hilda took up the half sheet of paper, and, noticing that it was headed with the green-stamped address, "The Briars"—Jack Danvers' home—read,

"Dear Mother,—I can stand this treatment of Hilda's no longer; her conduct is simply abominable, and most unchristian. I cannot put up with such a vulgar parody—parody underlined—of religion, so I am leaving home early in the morning, and shall be married to Mr. Danvers by special licence in the afternoon, some distance away. You need not trouble to write to me as my home is henceforth in a higher—higher underlined—grade of Society.—Millicent."

The tears filled Hilda's eyes as she re-read the mournful epistle, and, turning to her mother, said quietly,

"Well, if you wish it, mother, I'll get my things packed and go to-morrow."

(To be concluded.)

THE SHERIDAN GIRLS.

(Concluded.)

CHAPTER X.

*"Of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these, 'It might have been!'"*

"I've found her!" cried Hilda, rushing into Captain Piper's quarters. "She had removed to North Kensington, so as to be near the museum, she says, having a love for the artistic."

"Found her! Oh, you mean your aunt," replied the Captain. "Well, what does she say?"

"Oh," answered Hilda, "she was as nice as could be, and so awfully sorry that we missed her, the first time we came to London. Of course, she's a bit faddy, and did not let us know her address, from a suspicion that father was anxious to keep up an acquaintance with her simply for her money's sake. But, what do you think?"

"Well," said the Captain smilingly; "what wonder comes next?"

"She wants me to go to Madeira with her, as her secretary, for the winter, and I'm doubtful whether to go or not. On the one hand, I am anxious to get into the Army Work, but feel doubtful as to the wisdom of applying just now, and missing this opportunity of having a good rest in a warm climate through the winter, and coming back to work in the spring. I've been very poorly lately, and rather think it would be best to go. You see, I've no home apart from aunt's, and to go into the Army as I am would, I fear, mean a certain breakdown, resulting in a question as to my physical fitness."

* * *

It was night on the Bay of Biscay. The steamship "Oleander" was bravely toiling through the great sea of waters that came sweeping up in huge columns, and dashing with a thunderous reverberation against the vessel's side, each thud of the attacking water being followed by a cloud of spray, which gathered into a thousand little runnels, and drove even the most venturesome passengers to cover. In one saloon, entirely oblivious to the wind or rain outside, a choice party of commercial adventurers, bound for the Cape, sat gambling and drinking.

"Diamondth," said little Moses Levy, "diamondth ith the great forthe of the modern world! Talk about your ruby mineth, and your gold reefth, give me diamondth! Hullo, ith it nap? Jackth heckth play."

"Come, Moses," cried Jack Danvers, "do stow that eternal talk about diamonds, we haven't all made such good deals as you, and when we do, we sha'n't be everlastingly chattering about them. We'll have diamonds enough before we get to Johannesburg! Pass the brandy, and call out to the steward for some more soda!"

"Beg pard'n, Mr. Danvers," whispered the steward, as he produced the bottles, "there's a lady wants to speak to you just outside the cabin door."

A black shadow passed over Danver's face, and with a muttered curse, he said,

"I suppose it's——"

"Wife, sir?" said the steward. "Yes, sir, and if I may be so bold, sir, though an uncommon nice lady, she ain't one of the strongest, and from what she were sayin' to me to-day, when I fetched the doctor along to her——"

"Speaking to you!—fetched the doctor!—what do you mean, you scoundrel?" whispered Danvers hoarsely, rising and making for the door. "Excuse me a moment, gentlemen, I will be back almost immediately."

"Oh, dear, Jack! can't your charming young wife thpare you?" cried the diamond merchant, "muthn't you play with thothe wicked cardth, eh? Oh, you naughty man," continued Levy, in a falsetto, mock-feminine voice, "how could you neglect the beautiful Mitheth Danverth; come, now, have you been the'mokin' thegarth, eh?"

Danvers made for the door, and found, as he expected, his wife waiting for him. She turned with an appealing look to him, and cried,

"Jack, for God's sake, leave those wicked men with their gambling and drunkenness!"

Danvers waited to hear no more, but livid with rage, seized her by the arm, as the vessel lurched heavily in the storm, and with difficulty pushed her before him into their cabin.

"What!" he cried, thrusting her violently in. "shall I be dictated to by——?"

There was a piercing scream overhead, a sound as of breaking glass and rushing water. The vessel gave a fearful lurch half out of the water, and then sank down with such a velocity and force that it seemed as if the huge framework of the boat must be smashed to matchwood. The storm was increasing in violence, and vivid flashes of lightning added to the horror of the sight, as great masses of woodwork were swept away by the crashes of the mountain-waves. Danvers, a coward at heart, as most cruel people are, awed by the magnitude of the storm, alarmed at the screaming, and fearing the ship was likely to capsize, rushed up, followed by his wife, towards the deck.

"All right," cried the doctor, the centre of a small group of officers and men who stood round

the slender form of a woman, "all right, she'll come round! She ventured out to get some medicine for her sick aunt, and a wave threw her against the skylight. She'll be better presently. Here, two of you carry her down to her cabin, and see the matron attends to her. That's a nasty wound on her forehead."

"Downstairs, please, sir," said one of the officers to Danvers, "the deck is dangerous," and Jack turned away with an oath to rejoin his gambling companions below.

Millicent, however, stood riveted to the spot, and then as the men carried the injured woman below, pointed after them, and speaking to the doctor cried, with a voice shaking with emotion,

"Let me follow them; it's my sister!"

"Surely you're dreaming, Mrs. Danvers," said the doctor. "I was not aware you had a sister on board!"

"Nor I, until now," replied Millie: "but it's true, nevertheless."

* * *

As the night passed, the force of the storm grew stronger and stronger, and the mighty seas played with the great liner as a cat with a mouse. At the height of the tempest, too, the machinery broke down, and the vessel drifted helplessly at the mercy of the waves. Gradually she became a wreck, and had not a Portuguese steamer come within hail, as the morning broke, and towed her into Bilbao, every soul on board must surely have been lost. As it was, Danvers was never again seen alive. That he made his way on deck in a drunken state, and was washed overboard, was the most reasonable conjecture that could be made. Certainly his boon companions could give no explanation; they could, it seemed, remember nothing but that Danvers went to his cabin for a fresh supply of playing cards, and never returned.

Hilda lay in Bilbao a fortnight, hovering in the borderland of life and death. The wound on her forehead slowly healed; but the shock to her system, and getting soaked through with rain and sea water, proved too much for her, and, though carefully nursed by her aunt and sister, she gradually sank and died. Nor did Millicent long survive. She crossed to England with her aunt, who was determined that Hilda's body should be laid to rest in Lithercote churchyard, and stayed for a few months with her mother, who, having disposed of the grocery business, now lived in a comfortable cottage, just outside the village. There Millicent's child was born, only to live a few days, and then both mother and child were laid to rest in the grave next to Hilda's, by the tall aspens.

* * *

Two grey tombstones, cross-shaped, mark the spots where "Millicent Danvers, of this parish, Hilda Danvers, infant daughter of the above, and Hilda Sheridan, of this parish" lie buried, and many a villager turns aside from the beaten path through the churchyard, to glance at the spot where lies all that is mortal of the Sheridan girls.

[THE END.]

Notice.—Next week will be commenced a new serial story, by the author of "The Sheridan Girls."