

Two Studies

By Mrs. Murray Hickson

I—At the Cross Roads

“For to no man is it given to understand a woman, nor to any woman to understand a man.”

THE boat from Dieppe had just arrived, and the passengers were pushing from the decks on to the quay. A tall woman, wrapped in a handsome mantle trimmed with sables, waited for her turn to cross the gangway. Her eyes, wandering restlessly over the little crowd of spectators that had assembled to watch for the arrival of the boat, met those of a man who pressed into the throng towards her. She started, and a sudden flush, beautiful but transitory, touched her face into a youthfulness which it did not otherwise possess. The man took off his hat in salute, and, holding it above his head, thrust forward to the foot of the gangway. He kept his eyes fastened upon her face; and the expression of his own, in spite of the smile on his lips, was doubtful and anxious. She returned his look gravely, yet with a certain tenderness in her glance. Beckoning to the maid who followed her, she slipped adroitly before a party of staggering sea-sick tourists, and made her way on to the quay.

Their

Their hands met in a pressure, which, on his part, was both close and lingering.

"I could not help it," he said. "You will forgive me for coming?"

She smiled a little. "But I meant to stay all night at the hotel. I am tired. My maid is always ill on the crossing, so I wrote from Paris, and ordered rooms and dinner to be ready for us."

"Yes, so they told me at the hotel. I must go up to town this evening, but I could not wait until to-morrow to see you." He said the last words under his breath. The maid had gone to pass the luggage through the custom-house. Her mistress sat down on a bench inside the waiting-room. She looked up at the man beside her, and sighed a little.

"I am glad that you came," she said gently.

"You got my letter?"

"Yes."

The colour had faded from her face, the light from her eyes. She rose and turned towards the door.

"It is hardly necessary for us to wait here," she said. "Let us go on to the hotel. Mary can follow with the luggage."

They walked together side by side; he, trying to shelter her from the driving rain, she, heedless of the present, shrinking from what was to come with an unavailing dread.

The dull October afternoon was closing in; already the gas was lit in the sitting-room into which they were shown. She reached up to it and turned down the glaring flame till it burned low and dim. The room was cheerless and dreary: on one side a long black horsehair-covered sofa; on the other a chiffonier, with coloured bead mats and models of flowers in wax upon it. A square table, covered with a red cloth, stood in the middle of the room,

room, and on it was a large battered tea-tray. A waiter brought in a teapot and some hot water, stirred the fire into a blaze, and retired, shutting the door carefully behind him.

The woman threw off her cloak, and sat down beside the table. She took up the heavy metal teapot and poised it in her slender hand.

"Will you have some tea?" she said to her companion.

He was standing beside her, and she looked at him as she spoke. Something in the strained expression of his face shook her hardly-held composure beyond the power of control. Her hands trembled, and setting the teapot down again unsteadily, she rose to her feet and confronted him. Her own face was as pale as his; their eyes looked into each other's, his seeking, hers evading, a solution to the problem which confronted them.

"For God's sake," said the man, "don't let us meet like this. Anything is better than aloofness between us two. If you cannot forgive me, say so; I deserve it." He stretched out his hands to her as he spoke; but she, shivering a little, drew back from his touch.

"If it were only that," she said, "the matter would be simple enough. Forgive you! I don't feel—at least the soul of me doesn't—that I have much to forgive. When one demands an impossibility, one should not complain of failure."

He looked bewildered. "I don't think I understand," he said gently. "Sit down here and explain what you mean, and I will try to see the matter through your eyes. It looks black enough now through mine—I can imagine it to be unpardonable in yours," he added bitterly. She sat down obediently upon the sofa. He was going to take his place beside her, but hesitated and finally drew a chair opposite.

She looked at him despairingly. "I shall never make you understand,"

understand," she said. "I don't understand myself. You will have to give me time."

"Perhaps, after keeping silence so long, I ought never to have told you. Such vulgar infidelities are better left unrevealed."

She was silent. Her hands, which she held clenched in her lap, were very cold, and presently she fell to rubbing them softly one over the other. The man set his lips closer together; he had often so chafed her hands for her, and he longed to do so now. It seemed monstrous that, when at last their love was free and admissible, they two should feel apart the one from the other. Yet he recognised, with dreary assent, that such was the case. He regretted the sense of honour which had goaded him, ere he and she should begin their new life together, into an absolute frankness about the past. And yet did he regret it? He doubted his power to possess his soul in secret, away from hers, and, if that were so, better a confession now than later, when their union would be irrevocable. He looked once more at the little hands, motionless again in her lap, and longed to take them in his own. But his heart failed him. It was the old trouble, the old difficulty; the difference of outlook between the sexes. A pity, he thought, that this modern woman whom he loved, had so imbued him with her modern views that he had been unable to keep his own counsel. And yet, even if her gospel of equality separated them, he felt it to be, after all, a true one. He would not have forgiven her such a fault as he had confessed, and for which, manlike, he expected absolution. But there the difference of sex came in, while, when absolute confidence only was demanded, he felt that she had an equal right to it with himself. After all, she expected, and he had given, only what was her due. If it ruined both their lives so much the worse for them. He wondered—would it?

"I shall

"I shall never make you understand," she repeated, breaking a silence which both felt unendurable. "But try to be patient with me. It is not that I do not love you; at least I think not. It is not that I do not forgive you. It seems to me that I need your forgiveness more than you need mine. But I feel that we have both failed, and that the failure has soiled and spoilt our love." She looked at him piteously.

"Yes?" he said. "Go on."

"All these years that we have loved one another and hidden it from the world, I thought our love was a beautiful thing, good for us both. Though I could not be your wife, I imagined that I was everything else you needed: your friend, your comrade, your very heart and life. As your love raised and made me a better woman, so I believed that my love made you a better man."

He was leaning forward in his chair; a puzzled frown upon his forehead.

"It did," he said; "it does. Go on."

"Then, when I heard at last that he was dead, and that we were free—you and I, to love and to marry—it seemed as if the joy would kill me. I wrote to you—you know what I wrote. And then your letter. . . . Perhaps I was over-sensitive; perhaps it came at the wrong moment——"

She stopped, and he rose to his feet.

"Never mind," he said. "Don't say any more; it hurts you. You can't get over it, and no wonder. I despise myself, and I am going."

She put out her hands to stop him.

"Wait," she said. "Indeed—indeed, you do not understand." She rose also, and stood before him. "Oh!" she went on, with shaking lips, "but you must understand, you *must*. I see—I suppose that I expected too much. All that hopeless waiting—
all

all those long years—and then the constant strain and restlessness of it all. Don't think I blame you—much. I think I comprehend. It is not that, though that hurts me too; but I see now that the whole thing has been a horrible mistake from the first. It was insane pride that made me so sure your welfare lay in my hands. I was dragging you down, not, as I imagined, helping you to be what I believed you were. I was selfish; I thought more of myself than I did of you——”

“If that is your opinion of yourself,” he interrupted bitterly, “what must you think of me? I—who took all you could give to me, and then had not the manhood to keep out of vulgar dissipation, nor the pluck to hold my tongue about it and save you the pain and humiliation of the knowledge.”

Suddenly she stretched out her hands to him.

“Oh, no! not that!” she said, with a sob; “don't say that. You were right to tell me.”

He took her hands in his, and, almost timidly, drew her towards him.

“I expected more than a man is capable of; it is my fault. I dragged you down,” she repeated, insistently.

“That is not true, and you know it,” he answered. “The fault was mine, but——”

He drew her closer. “Can't you forgive it?” he whispered. “You were not my wife—I had no hope of ever winning you—yet I could give my love to no one else. My heart has never been disloyal to you for a moment, and——” he hesitated. “There are so few who would have done otherwise,” he added, hurriedly.

She still held herself braced away from his gentle compulsion. “I—I suppose so,” she said, under her breath.

“And now—now, when at last you will be my own, surely
you

you could not doubt me? It would be horrible, impossible." His voice dropped again into a murmur.

"Can't you forgive me—and forget?"

There was a pause. His eyes devoured her face.

"Give me time," she said. "I don't think we see it in the same light; and if you do not understand I cannot explain myself. But give me time, I beg of you."

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An hour afterwards the maid came in, and found her mistress sitting over the dying fire. The girl turned up the gas and, in the sudden glare, the dreary hotel sitting-room looked more tawdry and commonplace than ever. The tablecover was pulled awry; the curtains, dragged across the window, were ragged and dirty; under the maid's feet, as she crossed the floor, some bits of scattered coal crunched uncomfortably. She knelt on the hearth-rug and raked the ashes together, trying to rekindle a blaze. Her mistress looked on apathetically.

"That is how I feel," she said to herself. "It is all dead now; he will never understand it; but that is how I feel. If it had been before his love for me—but now I know I was no help to him, only a hindrance, and all the best of me seems cold and numb."

The maid rose from her knees; a tiny flame was flickering in the grate. She went out again, and left her mistress sitting there before the reviving fire.

II—A Vigil

WHEN ten o'clock struck she moved uneasily in her chair. The dainty Dresden china timepiece on the overmantel had been a wedding present, and, as the soft notes of the hour
broke

broke upon the silence, her thoughts turned swiftly into memories. The years had been few and short, yet the changes they had brought, though subtle, were unmistakable. There was nothing tangible, nothing of which she could complain, and yet, for the last few months, she had known, in a vague, puzzled way, that trouble was closing in upon her. The nature of that trouble she had not faced or analysed ; she put all definition away for as long as might be possible.

To-night she had not felt any special uneasiness. He might have stayed at the club, or been detained in the City—such delays had happened frequently of late, and had not seemed to her of much moment. She had grown accustomed to the lack of consideration which made him neglect to send her a telegram, but now the chiming of the clock caught her attention, and, of a sudden, her mind awoke, expanding to receive the impression of impending disturbance. There was no particular reason for this impression, only a certainty of misfortune which she felt advancing towards her in the coming hours.

She rose and crossed the hall into the dining-room. She had waited for him until half-past eight, and then had dined alone, after which the table was relaid in readiness for his return. That morning, when he left the house, he had kissed her with almost his old tenderness, and she wanted to express her gratitude for that kiss. She wandered round the table, rearranging the silver with solicitous fingers. It was still just possible that he had not dined in town ; his wife hoped not. He would be sure to catch the 10.15 down train—never since their marriage had he been later—his supper should be a cosy meal. There were oysters in the house, and she went into the kitchen to see that they were opened.

The kitchen was warm and comfortable. She stood for a few minutes,

minutes, her foot upon the fender, chatting to the servants ; they had been with her since her marriage, and they loved and cared for her.

“Your master won’t be home till past eleven,” she said ; “when you have laid the supper you can go to bed. I will wait upon him myself.” She turned to leave the kitchen, but lingered for a moment in the red glow of the fire. Her own part of the house was so still and lonely ; here, at any rate, was companionship and a refuge from haunting fancies. Her maid dragged forward a chair, but she shook her head, smiling.

“I have so much to do, and my book is interesting,” she said, as she opened the door. It swung behind her, and the cook, knife in hand, paused to lift her eyes and meet those of her fellow-servant. Neither of the women said a word. They heard the drawing-room door shut softly. The maid sat down again beside the hearth, and the cook went on with her work.

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At a quarter to eleven the servants fastened the doors and went upstairs to bed. The silence settled down again. Now and then she heard the regular beat of hoofs upon the road as a carriage passed the windows ; a wind got up and flicked the frozen snow against the panes ; the fire burned clear and bright, with a regular throb of flame or the occasional splutter and crackle of a log.

At eleven o’clock she laid her open book upon the table, and went out into the hall. It was very cold, and she shivered a little as she opened the door and looked out upon the night. The air was keen and frosty, a frail moon, its edges veiled by intermittent cloud, rode in the sky, and the stars snapped as though the sharpened atmosphere struck sparks from their steady shining. The road lay white and deserted, here and there a light shone from the neighbouring houses, but for the most part the village had

had already gone to sleep. Presently, as she stood there, the distant sound of a train sweeping through the country caught her listening ears. It paused, then broke again upon the silence. She smiled a little and went back into the house, shutting the door behind her. The train was late, but it had come at last; in ten minutes he would be here. There was no use in sitting down again during those ten short minutes; she wanted to be ready, when his step rang on the hard road, to open the door immediately. Meantime she trod softly about the drawing-room, shifting the ornaments upon the overmantel a shade to right or left, and examining the pretty things upon her silver table with abstracted, unremarking eyes.

For many weeks the rift between her and her husband had been widening. To-day, by his unaccustomed tenderness, he had re-awakened hers, and she longed for him as she had longed for him in the dead days which seemed so far away. But the minutes slipped into half an hour, and still he did not come. Then fear crept into her heart, and her imagination—always vivid—left now alone in the solitude of the night, played havoc with her reason. As the quarters struck slowly from the church clock in the village, and her own little timepiece chimed in musical response, terror and foreboding shook her spirit in their grip. She sat down again before the fire, and tried to reason out some plausible excuse for this unusual delay. No business that she was able to think of could thus detain her husband, nor had she ever known him to remain away a whole night without due notice given. He was often late for dinner—that signified nothing. Once or twice lately he had come down by this last train; but even then he had prepared her for his absence. Something very grave, very unusual, must have happened.

She lifted her head, and bent forward to rearrange the logs upon
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the hearth. In so doing she dropped the poker, which fell with a clash into the fender, and the loud noise startled the echoes of the sleeping house, awaking in her mind a fresh train of thought. She imagined him ill—hurt—in some danger. And it was impossible at this hour to go to him or to be of any use. Besides, where could she find him, how penetrate the mystery and terror of this long uncertainty?

She went back into the hall and consulted a time-table. At four o'clock a train reached Wensbury; if he came by that and walked (he must walk, since no cab would be available), he might get home about five o'clock. If he was unhurt she would know—she would feel—— If he did not come she must herself start early in the morning and go up to town to make inquiries. Perhaps he had been run over in the streets, and she would find him in one of the hospitals. He might not be seriously hurt, and yet, again, if not seriously hurt why had no message come to her? Perhaps he was dead, and she—and she a widow. Her fingers closed convulsively over the time-table in her hand, and she walked back to her seat before the fire, leaving the door into the hall open behind her. It was one o'clock now: hours must pass, even if he came to Wensbury, before this weight of suspense could be lifted from her heart. And what if he never came? What if she never saw him again alive? She considered that, if an accident only had detained him—an accident from which he should recover—she could be glad and thankful. Perhaps the pain, and her care, might bring them once more together. And if not, better even death than another explanation which had flashed across the background of her brain, to be dismissed with horror and self-loathing. If only there had been a reason for their slipping away from one another she could have borne it better. The very vagueness and unreality of the gulf between them frightened her, and rendered her

her more inarticulate. She had suffered and been still ; now, her faculties sharpened by suspense, she endured all the accumulated pain of the last two years fused and mingled with the fancies, fear, and loneliness of the moment.

Sometimes she paced the room ; sometimes, at the sound of a chance footstep or the rising of the wind, she opened the hall door and stared out into the night. Once she went upstairs to wake the servants, but, recollecting herself, came back and dropped once more into the big chair by the fire.

With the self-torture of a high-strung brain she could formulate no explanations save the worst, until, as the hours wore on, mental torment brought with it the consequent relief of numbness.

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When he came into the drawing-room the following evening she rose from her seat and welcomed him as usual. Her face was drawn and white, but her voice did not falter, and her eyes met his unflinchingly.

He stood upon the hearth-rug before the fire, talking for a few moments carelessly, till a strained silence fell between them. He took out his watch and glanced at it, then, turning restlessly, pushed the blazing logs together with his foot.

"You got my letter? I was sorry not to be home last night. I'm afraid, little woman, that you waited dinner for me, but it was too late to send you a telegram."

"Yes, your letter came this morning," she said, apathetically. The reaction from last night's tension had brought with it a strange indifference. She felt that his presence meant nothing to her now, that his absence would have meant even less. Her heart was frozen. Active pain would have been better than this paralysis, and she longed to feel, but could not do so. He faced her once more ; his glance met hers uneasily.

"You

"You understand how it was? I was unable to help it," he said, his voice stumbling a little as he spoke. She lifted her head.

"Yes," she said, "I understand."

He looked at her in silence, then picking up a paper, unfolded it and began to read. She shivered a little, and leant nearer to the fire. Her thoughts wandered vaguely. She knew that he had lied to her, but she did not care. The stealthy sorrow of her married life, after stalking her spirit for a couple of years, had sprung upon her in the space of time which it took her to read his letter. Instinct guided her to the truth, and there it left her. The rest was a tangle, and, for the moment, she cared only for the physical comfort of apathy and quiescence.

She stretched out her cold hands to the blaze, while her husband watched her furtively from behind his newspaper.

The deep tones of the village clock, striking the half-hour, broke upon the silence ; and a moment later the timepiece on the mantelshelf chimed an echoing response.