



FROST

QUIETLY the snow fell, in large soft flakes which floated in the still air. Janet stood at her window and looked helplessly at the stealthy narrowing of the familiar horizon. The oppressive stillness of the clouds had waked her early; and, as she dressed, she watched the drifting flakes. Now they fell faster, thicker. The grey veil gradually drew its folds over hill and valley till the girl's outlook was narrowed to the garden wall with its irregular line of trees. The desolation of the scene sank deeply into her mind, and intensified her despondency. The grey outer world with its obscure horizon, its immediate limitations, seemed to symbolise her own life, to echo her present mood. Janet turned and surveyed the sombre comfort of her room wherein she had lived so much of her twenty-two years. Familiarity had dulled her perception of her usual surroundings; but, to-day, the unloveliness of her room, of the whole house, jarred on her nerves acutely. Greyness, she realised with a shiver, was the prevailing tone in her life, despite her many resolutions, her fitful efforts to colour it afresh, to make it fuller and more vital. No prince, alas! had kissed her sleep into throbbing wakefulness. Yesterday's lurid sunset had aroused afresh her flagging determination to control the tenour of her life, and no longer to be the slave of her environment. This morning, the remorse-

less snowflakes wove a pall over her starved hopes, and froze them into inanition.

'Janet,' a gentle old voice cried from the staircase, 'your breakfast will be cold if you do not come!' and the girl, quitting her window with a sigh, entered upon the day's routine.

It was in an old manse, in a quiet northern strath, that Janet lived with her grand-parents. Her grandfather had ministered to the scattered souls of his parish for over fifty years, in his life illustrating the love of God, and preaching of the wrath to come from his pulpit. The children born in the old manse settled elsewhere, and Janet's parents had sent her from India to her grandmother's fostering care when she was five years old.

As a child she ran wild about the garden, in fields and woods, and by the rocks on the river. But as she grew out of childhood, the requirements of social decorum were laid upon her by an instructress who strictly debarred her from the companionship of her cotter playmates. Conventional restrictions sowed seeds of dreariness early in her young life, whose imposed boundaries narrowed in proportion as she grew old enough to understand the increasing needs of her nature. Her home, once her kingdom, became her prison; and she hailed with joy the day that saw her conveyed to a boarding-school in the nearest town. Here, at least, she gained companionship; at least she saw an aspect of life different from that in the familiar strath. Here, too, was new ground whereon to raise castles in the air; here were new materials, in part furnished by her companions, wherewith to build. The future surely held enchanting possibilities and adventures in keeping for her. India, at all events, was a promised land of vaguely remembered brightness to which she should return.

But with the ending of her schooldays came the first crumbling of Janet's dreams. An epidemic of cholera robbed her of both her parents and of her sojourn in that ardently longed-for land of sunshine and of love.

The grey old manse in the north-east of Scotland was henceforth to be her home, varied only by visits to schoolfellows in

Edinburgh, or to an aunt in the bewildering city of London. Her dream, too, of being a painter was shattered by her grandfather's unconquerable prejudice against the preparatory student life away from home control. 'Paint by all means, child, if it amuses you; but paint here. I have heard dreadful tales of student life in London and Paris, and dare not take so great a responsibility on my conscience, or allow you to run such terrible risks.'

So the weeks passed in an ever-growing monotony; and the young life began to falter for lack of vital nourishment. The prevailing silence, broken only by the sound of a cart-wheel or the lowing of a cow, or rendered more audible by the sudden cawing of the rooks, weighed on Janet's spirits. The lack of young companionship depressed her; the inadequacy of her daily duties rendered them distasteful to her; the lack of mental outlook and stimulus starved her intellectually.

Springtide brought fresh hope, fresh vigour; the summer, with its flowering beauty of field and hill, fresh joy. With autumn came the sportsmen, and for a short season the countryside was gay. Janet utilised the warm bright days in trying to find a way of putting upon canvas her impressions of green summer and ruddy autumn, for a solace throughout the long winter and a promise of the spring to be. But with the fall of the year her ardour waned, her courage dissipated. The dull quiet, the chill greyness of winter with its steely sunshine, ate into her life and robbed her of all impulse. Against the winter lethargy she fought fitfully but unavailingly.

Janet's breakfast greeting on this snowy January morning was of a kind she little expected.

'Well, dearie, here's news for you—for granny and I have quite made up our minds about the matter. You have been ailing all winter, and now an unlooked-for chance has come to make you well again.'

The girl's heart leapt, and the colour rushed into her pale face. Any change would be an unspeakable relief to her.

'Your aunt has written to tell me that she and your cousin are

going to Rome for three months, and she is quite pleased that you should go with them. Three months in Italy ought to make a strong girl of you ; and you will come back to us in April with the spring flowers.'

Every incident of the journey was an excitement. Dreamland, hope, desire, lay before her. The morrow was no longer a barren waste bounded by a narrow horizon. Her way lay now through the unknown, whose sign-posts she could discern faintly in the flooding sunshine. The minor discomforts of travel Janet welcomed, for they suggested a practical aspect of dreamland to which she had never given a thought.

Genoa was the first halting-place. Genoa, the great amphitheatre of Ligurian prosperity, with its tier above tier of Oriental-looking houses flanking the tree-clad hills, and separated from the crescent bay by its white marble quay.

The great cool palaces ; the luxuriant foliage dotted with pendent oranges and warm-red roses, and pierced by feather fronds of palm-trees or the spiky growth of cactus and of aloe ; the great harbour with its shipping, the blue-green waters alive in the sunlight ;—these things awoke in Janet's brain forgotten memories and mental pictures of an Oriental city girt by its great harbour, rich, too, in colour, and full of strange forms and features that long ago, in early childhood, had been familiar to her if then unnoted.

Rome was reached in the early morning, and the girl's first vision of the great city was from the terrace roof of her room high above the Spagna steps. There she stood motionless, breathless almost, as she watched the delicate dawn-mist float away and reveal countless domes and spires, and beyond these the Alban and Sabine hills, as the sun rose above the Apennines and turned the quiet twilight into the radiance of morning.

Day by day the beauty and effluence of the southern winter awoke a deep and eager response in Janet's nature. She became conscious of new needs, new desires. Already the

cramping influence of familiar parochial life was melting in the cosmopolitan breath of the eternal city. Janet scarcely recognised herself as the old landmarks vanished; she felt happy in this sun-swept, but, to her, pathless land. Her ignorance appalled her; her insular and Puritan prejudices were perpetual stumblingblocks which met her with fatiguing monotony. The artistic side of her nature, however, expanded joyously in the congenial environment. So keen was her pleasure, she did not realise how the outward tenour of her sojourn resembled that of every ninety-and-nine tourists to whom Bædeker is an infallible guide. To Janet, Rome was a newly discovered country, and she found herself full of unrecognised possibilities. Ruins, galleries, churches, were visited in due course. Much as these interested her, she loved best of all to escape alone to the Pincio and gaze over its ilex-shaded parapet at the city below; to watch the endless coming and going of smart carriages, or the strings of collegiates, in their distinctive soutanes and hats, wind along the pathways; or to saunter towards the Porta del Popolo and feast her eyes on the moist greensward and the fresh foliage of the exotic trees which make a summer of the Roman winter. And how beautiful, too, in the early mornings was the Piazza di Spagna, abloom with sprays of early blossoming shrubs—wattle, with its perfumed golden balls; eucalyptus, with its thin, scimitar-shaped leaves; roses and violets and narcissi, till the fountain in the centre seemed to spring and sparkle from the heart of a flower-garden.

The churches with their wealth of mosaics and paintings, their coloured trappings, their strange, picturesque ceremonies, attracted yet repelled Janet. Her sensuous impulses rebelled desperately against her religious convictions, trained as she had been in the severe Calvinistic atmosphere. The harsh unloveliness of the little strath kirk had always been distasteful, though she loved the austere purity of her grandfather's teaching. Here, in Rome, the æsthetic attractions of the great churches affected her profoundly by their subtle

suggestiveness, by their repose ; but their religious appeal left her unmoved, or frankly hostile.

In the hotel she made few friends. The girl's natural shyness, increased by the remoteness of her home, was a constant barrier to social intercourse. At table her position between her sociable aunt and cousin relieved her, she felt, of the necessity of continuous talking, and leisure to watch and listen unheeded. The three months at length drew to a close, the longest and most eventful of her life. As Janet stood on the terrace roof for the last time, and watched the sun set in flaming crimson and orange, against which the dome of St. Peter's stood outlined in sombre purple, she sighed farewell to the mysterious Campagna beyond, to the ancient city at her feet. She knew that her regret would grow into an ever-deepening longing as time drifted her further away from this flowering oasis she had chanced upon in the colourless desert of her life.

The elation that Janet had brought back with her from Italy lasted throughout the ensuing summertime. The beauty of the summer, the rich fruition of tree and flower, the mantling green, gold, and purple of hill and vale, Janet saw through eyes wherein lingered the glamour of the southern land she had left. Nevertheless, it was a shock, on her return to the old sleepy manse, to find neither stick nor stone out of its accustomed place, to see nothing altered in any one or anything that answered to the wonderful change she felt in herself. Nothing differed : the same voices, the same routine, the same daily remarks, just as she remembered them ever since her childhood. Yet not quite the same. A curious shrinkage seemed to have taken place. The greater world outside this familiar daily life made the smaller world grow smaller still, showed it by comparison to be antiquated, asleep, left behind by the great wave of extension and expansion.

Losing sight of the warm human hearts that beat in the little strath, of the equality of suffering it shared with the rest of the world, Janet felt herself chilled to the heart by its parochialism,—

in other words, by the absence of any definite outlet for her unsatisfied and untried possibilities. The even tenour of her life had been abruptly confused by her visit to Rome. An angel had stepped into the quiet pool and had troubled it; but alas! the waters were gradually settling once more into stagnation. Would no lasting good remain?

One by one the autumn sportsmen and their visitors left the neighbouring hills, and the strath resumed its normal uneventfulness. Was there no escape? Should she not go back to Rome, or even to London, and learn to paint? She was of age, should she not choose her own course of life? But whenever this suggestion created an alluring picture in her mind, it was immediately effaced by another—that of two wrinkled, pathetic faces, of two frail old bodies awaiting the close of their tired lives. This picture seemed to Janet to leave her no alternative. Clearly she realised her present duty, and accepted it; but the blight of bitter regret and futile longing withered the delicate tentatives of her heart.

Autumn faded into barrenness; the leaves lay brown and sodden in the strath. Here and there a straggling bunch of mountain-ash berries gleamed scarlet among the skeleton branches; ruddy haws presaged a severe winter. Early frosts turned the low grey clouds into falling rain, and the enshrouding mists hung above the river, and were shredded against the pine-trees on the banks.

The uneventful days crawled on, and, as the year waned, Janet felt herself paralysed by an inertia that robbed her of all power of adapting her environment to her own ends. Since she could not shape her destiny, she had to suffer; since she could not attune herself to her surroundings, she had to endure.

One December afternoon, after a windless, brooding morning, Janet stood at the parlour window disconsolately watching the little eddies of wind which whirled the dust into spirals, and here and there shook down a ragged, tenacious leaf that circled reluctantly to the ground. Suddenly a large, loose snowflake drifted past the pine branches, and this all at once was

followed by a cloud of other flakes, which melted as they fell.

'Ah! winter has come!' she said, with sharp indrawing of her breath. She stood spellbound while the snow fell faster, finer, till at last the ground was hidden by the soft white covering.

'Winter has come,' she sighed again. Then, turning abruptly, she pushed her easel aside impatiently, thrust her paint tubes and brushes into the old oak chest, and took the household workbasket from the chimney corner. Drawing a chair before the fire, she began with nervous fingers to darn some fine napery. 'Yes,' she repeated wearily, 'winter has come indeed.'

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