

The Independent.

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, APRIL 8, 1886.

ALMOST.

BY GRACE DENIO LITCHFIELD.

"Look here, Dan. Have you spoken to Kelly yet about the Vienna business?"

"No. I'm not sure he is quite the one to send over."

"Well; leave him alone. I'll go."

"You?"

"Yes, I. What is there so surprising in that? Who should be a better man to go than your junior partner?"

"My dear fellow, there's no question about that. But I thought nothing short of a dynamite explosion would take you out of the city just now."

"On the contrary, I desire nothing better than to leave it."

The elder brother turned abruptly, and looked the younger one squarely in the face. "She has given you the mitten?"

"No; and for the best reason in the world. I haven't given her the chance."

"What's wrong, then?"

"It's only that she would throw me over if I gave her the chance. That's all. And, seeing the way the wind lies, it's as well to shift my sails in time; isn't it?"

"But, I thought"—

The younger brother interrupted him with an impatient gesture. "Oh! yes, of course. You thought and I thought. But no amount of thinking will alter a fact; and the fact in this particular case is that she doesn't care for me.

"You are sure of it?"

"Much surer than I find pleasant. It isn't a fact one enjoys having made plainer than necessary. She knew what I meant well enough."

"How could she know till you came to the point? You said"—

"Oh! bother what I said. This is the way it stands. I called there to-night, you know."

"I presumed so. I take it for granted you are at the Blake's when I don't know where you are."

"Well they were all out—had gone to the theater; all except Ruby, as luck would have it. And we had a little fuss together at first. Oh! the merest trifle. We've had lots of breezes before over nothing at all.

She's a spicy little piece; and, for my part, I rather enjoy them. They never amount to anything serious; and she's so pretty when she's vexed; and then she is always so penitent and gentle afterward, and her eyes get big and soft and dark like a child's. She's adorable when she's sorry. And she never was so sweet as she was to-night when we made it up. I couldn't help it, Dan. I said something or other—I don't doubt it sounded soft enough—but it wasn't exactly an offer. She couldn't exactly refuse me."

"What did she do?"

"She gave me to understand that there wouldn't ever be any use in my offering myself. Don't you see? Women have such neat ways of saying things without saying them. She insisted that we were to be 'always friends.' You know that bosh. As if a man were to content himself with a crumb when he wouldn't have any too much with the whole loaf. Of course I had to say 'Oh! yes,' and so on. One can't exactly fling away the crumb because one wants more. And then she glanced up at me in that pretty way she has—a little flushed and embarrassed, you know—(Oh! I keep forgetting you don't know her), and gave me both hands in good-by, as if to make amends for everything by a show of extra friendliness at the end. That's the way a woman reconciles it to her conscience when she is giving a man a mortal hurt. And that's all. I suppose she'll expect me back in a few days on quite the old footing again. Girls never have any sense of what such a mortification is to the man; and they like to keep their victims on show. But— Well, I prefer to leave for Vienna, and as soon as you like."

And so the business was satisfactorily settled between them on the spot. 'Tis an ill wind that blows nobody any good, and the firm of D. E. Morton & Bro. profited very sensibly by the new arrangement.

In the meantime little Ruby Blake, with soft, bright eyes and warm cheeks, standing alone in the parlor when Morris left her, raised one of her hands to her lips and held it there shyly, glancing timidly toward the door, lest he should come back suddenly and surprise her in the foolish act. An

instant longer she stood hesitating, the rich color in her cheeks coming and going with her quick breath; then she fled swiftly out of the room and up the stairs. Not all of the family were at the theater. One of her sisters—her favorite—was an invalid, and therefore always at home; and it was to her that Ruby ran now instinctively, and, throwing herself down by the lounge, with a little inarticulate cry, held up her glowing face for a kiss, like a child too happy to speak.

"Well, my little one?" Mary said, lovingly, laying her thin white hand against the other's velvet cheek. "Has Morris gone so soon? And what do these shining eyes mean? Surely you have something to tell me to-night. Are you very, very happy, dear?"

"Yes," whispered Ruby, and laid her face down on her sister's dress, out of sight. Mary played a moment caressingly with the thick, dark hair before she spoke.

"Tell me, childie, what is it? Is it all settled between you?"

"Yes," Ruby murmured back. "That is—almost. He does love me, Mary; he does."

"Did any one ever doubt it?" said the older sister, smilingly. "Does he ever make a pretense of doing anything else?"

"Sometimes he does," Ruby answered quickly, with a childish frown creasing her forehead's smoothness. "He teases me dreadfully sometimes. And we did have such a quarrel to-night! He didn't lose his temper, of course; he never does; but I quite lost mine—as usual; and all the time, O Mary, I felt so sore and sorry in my heart! For I thought surely he wouldn't tease me so if he really cared for me, and I did want him to care for me, because—O Mary dear, how could I help caring for him?"

"Did any one ever doubt that either, dear?" returned her sister, gently.

"But I hardly knew it myself," Ruby protested, with a lovely little smile curling her red lips. "Not till to-night. But, you see, we made friends at last, and I felt as happy again as if I had been forgiven some great sin. And then he said"—her voice sank very low—"he said that some day—he would tell me—how much he cared for me. Oh! I can't tell you how I felt when he said it. I was so glad! After that silly quarrel, that had hurt me so, it seemed heavenly to know that now, come what might, we could never quarrel any more—not ever. I could scarcely look at him; but I did just manage to say that then we would be always friends—wouldn't we—

always? He didn't answer right away. I dare say he couldn't say much, any more than I. It is hard to speak when one's heart is so full. But he got up and came nearer to me, and I stood up, too; and he said: 'Yes, Miss Ruby, I will be your friend always, till I die.' He said it so gravely it hardly sounded like his voice at all; and I am sure there were tears in his eyes. You don't know how solemn it made me feel. It seemed as if we were betrothing ourselves to each other then, before he said anything more; and—it wasn't too forward of me; was it?—but I held out both hands to him. Afterward I was afraid it was wrong, because he—the pretty dark head drooped lower than ever, and Mary had to bend quite over to make out the words—"he lifted one of my hands and kissed it. But somehow it didn't seem wrong when I loved him so. And I never said anything. I couldn't. I didn't dare even look at him again. And so he went away; and don't you think he will come to-morrow, Mary? Don't you think he must come soon, very soon, to tell me what he said he would tell me some time? And, Mary darling, how shall I do not to look too happy when he comes next time?"

Alas for poor little bright-eyed Ruby! Vainly she waited and watched and wearied. Vainly she counted the hours away, with a heart that beat quicker each day, as the evening closed in and the time drew near that might bring him.

"Now, now," she said to herself, as the slow clock journeyed toward eight o'clock. "Now I may begin to expect him. Now I may listen for the bell. Now, surely, it is his step upon the street." And while she listened, with straining ear, the feet went by, and the clock struck the quarter past. Then she laughed at her own impatience. Sometimes he had come so early; but not often. It was more often half-past when he came. How foolish of her to be disappointed so soon! And when the hour struck she chid herself for forgetting that the clock was fast, and that it would not be really half-past eight o'clock for full five minutes more. And while she was assuring herself that the five minutes were not yet over, the three-quarters sounded, and a little chill misgiving shot through her heart. But he might still come. He was often late, perhaps oftener than not. She would not give him up till nine. Once he had called somewhere else first, and it had struck nine as she came into the parlor to meet him; and why might he not be as late again? Besides, nine o'clock was not late; it was almost foolish to look for him much

before. Yet the color faded out of her cheeks as she listened, bending her head low over her book, with every nerve strained to catch the slightest sound, and holding her breath lest she should lose him by not hearing when he came. The nine strokes of the old hall clock were as so many fatal blows upon her poor little faithful heart; but not yet would it yield.

"It was five minutes fast by St. Andrew's this morning," she thought, "and it may have gained since. It might easily be ten minutes fast now. I will not give him up for ten minutes yet."

And even when the neighboring church bell struck, its deep, solemn tone, seeming to set the seal of absolute truth on the hour that it announced, even then she doubted still, and still sat listening. Five minutes grace she would give him—five more, and five more; why might he not be really late just once? And so the quarter hour and then the half hour again would find her, her head bent closer over the unturned page, and the last ray of color gone from her round young cheek. "It is late," she would say then aloud, "and I am very tired. I think I will go to bed." And as she kissed Mary good-night, she would whisper in tones that grew fainter and more hopeless each time: "Mary, don't you think he must come to-morrow?"

At last she ceased saying even this, though her eyes said it still; and Mary's heart ached with pity and with a growing anger against the lover who so strangely kept away.

So the days wore by, till, one afternoon, Ruby came with lagging step and weary face, and knelt silently down at her sister's side.

"Mary," she said, after awhile, with a little break in her voice. "I have just heard. He sailed for Europe four days after he was last here."

"What? Without so much as a word or a line even of good-by to you?"

"Yes."

"When will he be back?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows."

There was utter silence for a space. Then Ruby raised her head.

"O, Mary! Don't look so, dear!" She cried, at sight of her sister's face. "Don't look so angry—so hurt—so— Perhaps he was too busy to come before he left. He may have written and the letter have miscarried. Or perhaps he will write still. For it can't be I shall never hear anything more from him, Mary. It can't be, after what he said!"

Mary did not reply. She only clasped her little sister close and kissed her; and

Ruby smiled at her bravely, and then suddenly broke from her and fled. And though each knew that the other did not forget, by tacit consent the secret that had seemed so sweet in the telling was never once spoken of between them again until the weeks had grown into months and the months had well nigh made up a year. Then, one night, Ruby stooped over Mary's couch, and laid her soft olive cheek upon her sister's head.

"Mary, darling, what do you suppose was the reason? Why has he never come again, and sent no word?"

Mary put up her hands and drew the sweet face nearer. "God only knows, my poor little one," she said. "But he never could have been worthy so lovely a love as yours. Try to forget him, Ruby."

Two great tears stood in Ruby's eyes—big shining drops that held each a whole heart's history. But she brushed them away sturdily.

"I will forget," she said. "It would be shame to remember longer."

Whether or not she forgot, who could tell? There are many chords in every heart whose vibrations never cease, even when oversounded by louder music. But from that day Ruby gave no sign of remembrance.

Many changes followed. The family moved to another city, two of the sisters were married, and Ruby reigned as belle in an entirely new circle of friends. Then came a flying trip to Europe, and then—but something happened then, when they were in London, on their way home. It was not much. It was only that, one day when Ruby had returned from a drive, and was standing at the window, toying with her bonnet strings, and looking idly down at the passers, she caught sight of a face in the street below which set her heart beating with great, suffocating throbs, as if some old memory were suddenly pushing aside its winding sheet, and claiming its right to live. Was it Morris or his shadow? Was it only a chance resemblance, or could it really be he?

An irresistible impulse came over the girl to fly down and out into the street. Who could suspect anything if she chose to go for a walk just then? The sidewalk was common property. Why should she not stroll past that corner where he stood, and so make sure if it were Morris or not? Only to make sure who it was—where could be the harm?

With a bound she was at the door. An instant more, and she would have been down the stairs. Another instant, and she

would have been Morton, where he
the street corner.
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would have been face to face with Morris Morton, where he lingered, irresolute, at the street corner.

"Well?" asked his companion. "Aren't you coming? Why have you changed your mind?"

"I don't know that I have changed it," Morris answered. "It's merely that I fancied I saw a face I know—or used to know—at a window as we came by, and I half thought I would run in at the hotel and ask if any one of the name were there. If she were, I've a notion I would call on her."

"Oh! It's a she? Good-by then."

"No. Stop a moment. Upon the whole I'll keep along with you. It isn't likely it's anybody I know. She was in America the last I heard. It's probably only some one who wears her hair the same way. Shall it be Doér's or the Grosvenor?"

At the same moment Ruby drew back from the door, untied her hat and flung it impulsively down on the sofa.

"What utter folly!" she exclaimed, in angry self rebuke. "I won't be so nonsensical! If Morris is abroad, he is in Vienna of course; not in London."

She allowed herself one more peep from the window, nevertheless; but the two men on the corner had passed out of sight, and she scolded herself well because she dreamed of Morris that night, and kept fancying she saw him in every fair-haired man she passed for the next ten days. And then she tried her best to forget him altogether. But the forgetfulness that requires a conscious effort is in reality only a wisp to memory, and does not usually end in oblivion.

So another year went by; and Ruby gradually grew quiet and still, as people do who, through all the turmoil and stir of life, are always unconsciously keeping watch beside their dead. It is said that one feels loneliest when in a crowd; and certainly it is when one is loneliest that memories press nighest. So perhaps this was why Ruby's thoughts were so full of Morris one sunny afternoon as she sat on the great piazza of one of the mammoth hotels at Manhattan Beach, with her parasol held closely down over her head to shut her out from the crowd about her, and leave her alone with the music of the band and the more distant music of her dreams. Her party had scattered themselves far and wide, and for the moment she was quite alone in the center of a group of empty chairs, that stood about her like melancholy reminders of her friends' desertion. A few of the seats, however, were soon taken by another party that formed themselves into a circle directly behind her,

while on the other side of her was another circle, and still beyond another, and another, stretching as far as eye could reach. Indeed, as one looked down the length of the piazza, it seemed to represent a sort of social Milky-Way, made up of countless sets of systems, each with its separate sun and its attendant moons, and its erratic and distinctive orbits; no two alike and no two connected, and yet all linked together by some half-understood law that resolved the many into one great, harmonious whole.

The group directly behind Ruby consisted of two or three ladies and as many gentlemen. She was not listening to them; yet their voices mingled familiarly in her dreams, as if they belonged there. Why was it she could not be rid of a haunting consciousness of their presence, while at the same time able to think of nobody and nothing but Morris? A sudden, aggrieved sense of loneliness and desertion took possession of her, as if she had been all at once unjustly thrust out into the cold, away from everybody.

"It's the music," said she to herself, defiantly. "It always makes me blue; and then I imagine I'm thinking of Morris, as if I hadn't forgotten him ages ago!"

And, compressing her lips in a determined little way she had, Ruby pushed back her chair and rose to go, closing her parasol, and glancing, as she did so, toward the party who had so irritatingly intruded the recognition of their neighborhood upon her. It was a group of entire strangers, and she felt more rebuffed than ever, as if she had half expected to find them friends. One of them, the gentleman who sat nearest her, stooped to pick up a fallen glove at the instant she turned, so that her glance passed over him unobservant. The others of the party looked back at her as she stood up, creating by her movement that subtle sense of change which unconsciously provokes notice.

"Well?" inquired the glove-seeker *sotto voce*, remarking his friend's glances. "Is she pretty?"

"Oh! according to taste," replied one of the gentlemen, carelessly. "Prefer blondes myself. A neat foot, though."

So slight a thing makes or mars a chance! Morris Morton was seated directly behind Ruby, as unaware of her presence as she of his. And as she passed his chair on her way into the hotel, at the one single moment when, looking up, he might have seen her face, he looked down at the bepraised foot instead, and she went by unrecognized; and neither one ever knew how near the

other had been on that sunny summer afternoon that would never return again. Ah! all through life, how many a priceless opportunity is missed, of which the loser himself is the one least conscious of the loss!

Thus time went by. Did Ruby really forget at last? It is true that the blight of Time's chill touch falls on many of earth's choicest treasures; but the memories buried in our hearts lie the farthest of all things from his reach; and those he leaves us to the end, be it for our weal or for our woe. No; Ruby had not forgotten yet, though so many years had come and gone, and though she fancied herself heart-whole and could even afford a little smile of pity now to that childish sorrow of the past. She had had many lovers since. Did ever any woman have only one? But—There was always an excellent But that stood in the way of each, proving him unanswerably not the one. "I shall never marry," Ruby said, positively. "It is written in the books that I shall be an old, old maid." It is strange how often women make this assertion. Do they do it in a bravado spirit, as if to cheat the oncoming fate into belief that it is theirs by choice, or from a purely feminine desire to be able to say to themselves afterward, "I told you so"? It is wonderful the comfort that lies in these words—to the speaker.

But Ruby did not belong to the file of old maids yet; and certainly she looked young enough and fair enough to be very attractive still, as she stood, late one afternoon, on the broad veranda of a hotel in one of the dearest little summer resorts that ever Nature and art combined to render altogether irresistible. Every one but herself had gone to the other side of the house to watch for the arrival of the stage; she was having the sunset all to herself; and it flooded her with a wealth of light and splendor, in the center of which, with her white dress and quiet face and rapt expression, she stood transformed into a little mediæval saint, from whom all the glory seemed to emanate. She heard the rattle of heavy wheels and the sound of far-off welcoming voices and merry, causeless laughter, and she smiled to herself that she should so have outgrown even the universal excitement of watching for the stage to come in! So entirely had she outlived this youthful folly of curiosity that she did not even glance around when some of the new guests were conducted past her on the way to their rooms. Besides, she was to leave the place the following day herself; so what could

it matter to her now who went or came? The silence seemed doubly grateful when all had passed, and the sunset became again entirely her own. It was too beautiful to share with any one. It was, like love, something that by divine right belonged exclusively to the soul to which it had first revealed itself. And then she suddenly became aware that all the new comers had not passed, that some one was watching the sunset with her, and at once the moment was robbed of half its charm. An unreasoning impatience sprang up in her heart against the unknown intruder, who was putting forth this silent claim to her property; and she drew her brows together in petulant protest, as if she had a right to it all by being first on the ground. The sun was disappearing fast, seeming to dissolve into the heavens as it sank, till the sky was filled overfull with liquid waves of throbbing, burning yellow. It was very, very beautiful; but Ruby's pleasurable sense of ownership in it was gone now, and, with a vexed sigh, she turned to leave. It is odd how often one would rather have nothing than half. But as she turned, the stranger turned also, and then, with an ejaculation of surprise, came impetuously up to her, and caught her hand. It was Morris Morton.

"Ruby! Is it possible!" he exclaimed.

And Ruby, in her astonishment, said nothing at all. She only looked at him; but as she looked, the years seemed to roll back like so many drifting clouds, till time stood again where it had stood when they two parted.

There is many a sorry secret that remains unguessed forever; many a bright, sweet story that fate forbears to finish; many a long, sad mystery whose clew is never found. But fortune is not unkind to all alike; and for Ruby at least the tangles came straight at last. Who can tell how it came about, or just what were the words that were spoken? That first unguarded moment of surprise had been one of mutual self-betrayal; and what blindest fate can keep two hearts estranged that have once learned to know each other?

"Only one day later, and I should not have been here when you came; we should not have met even now; we should neither of us ever have known," Ruby murmured that evening, as again they stood alone together. "O, Morris, why need there have been all these years between? Why were you so quick to misunderstand?"

"Have I not paid dearly enough for my

mistake?" Morris answered, drawing her closer to him. "Think how near I came to spoiling all my life's happiness."

"Yes," she whispered back, with her bright face hidden on his breast. "And mine too, Morris—Almost."

LONDON, ENGLAND.

The Independent.

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, MAY 20, 1886.

DAY-DREAMS.

BY GRACE DENIO LITCHFIELD.

OH! sweet are the dreams that Darkness brings,
The fragrant roses that slumber flings
Into the garden of Night!
But sweeter far are the dreams that day
Drops all along life's weary way,
Like dew-drops on the buds of May,
To bless our waking sight.

O, beautiful, beautiful dreams that fall
Like tender moonlight over all
The dreary wastes of life!
As if an angel went before
And gilded all the landscape o'er
With the shadow of Heaven, where of yore
Was only pain and strife.
O, beautiful dreams, that spring like flowers
Out of the seeds of life's dark hours,
Watered with tears of pain!
Flowers that bloom mid desert sands,
Too frail to transplant to brighter lands,
Too fair to be gathered by mortal hands,
Too sweet to lose again.

O, beautiful, beautiful waking dreams,
That flow like forest-hidden streams
By the foot-worn road of day!
Streams that go singing for love's own sake,
Streams that their sweetest music make
Out of the very stones that break
The smoothness of their way.

O, exquisite dreams, that softly show
Through the gray-spun veil of earthly woe!
Like a star in twilight skies,
Too far to make our own, so near
It tempts our grasp, that pure and clear
On night's dark cheek lies like a tear
Wept from an angel's eyes.
O, dreams that rest on the life of youth
Like bubbles that rise in the well of truth
From the somber depths below!
Bubbles that catch each ray of the sun,
And mirror them upwards one by one,
Till all the well, so cold, so dun,
Gleams with a borrowed glow.
O, stars that vanish; O, flowers that fade,
O, streams that are lost in the woodland shade;
O, bubbles that break with a kiss;
O, dreams that from the buried roots
Of secret sorrows, like green shoots,
Grow toward the light, yet bear no fruits,
Are ye less fair for this?
What though ye are but dreams, but dreams?
Ah! brighter our lives e'en for transient gleams
Of hopes that ne'er may be ours.
Then pray for a dreamless sleep if ye will,
For a slumber no visions have power to thrill;
But, oh! thank God that he gives us still
The dreams of our waking hours!

SAN REMO, FRANCE.