

**THE THREE
BROTHERS.**

VOL. III.

BY
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THE THREE BROTHERS.

CHAPTER I.

ALICE'S FATE.

ALICE SEVERN was very innocent and very young,—just over sixteen,—a child to all intents and purposes,—as everybody thought around her. Old Welby, who had taken to meddling in the padrona's affairs, with that regard which the friends of a woman who is alone feel themselves entitled to display for her interests, had been pressing very earnestly upon Mrs. Severn's attention the necessity of preparing her child, who had an evident and remarkable talent, to exercise it in public.

'Few people, indeed, have their way so clear before them,' he had said repeatedly. 'It is the finest thing in the world to have a girl or boy with a decided turn. If you could but see the parents who come to me with sons who don't know what they would be at; and the idiots think they may be made painters because they care for nothing in earth or heaven. But here is this child with a talent. Of course, if it were a talent for our own art, we might know better how to manage it; but such as it is, it is a gift. Never undervalue a gift, my dear madam. Providence itself points out the way for you. You have only got to train her for her work.'

'But, Mr. Welby,' pleaded the padrona, 'she is such a child. How could I send my little maid out into the world to appear in public! I could not do it! It would drive me out of my senses. My child! You forget what kind of a creature she is.'

'I don't in the least forget,' said the R.A. 'She is very pretty, too, which is a pity; but you should be above foolish notions in that respect,—you who are so well known to the public yourself.'

‘Not so very well known,’ said the padrona, with a half smile; ‘and then it is only my name, not me. And even if it were my very self, why it would only be me still, not her. I am old, and what does it matter? But my lily, my darling! Mr. Welby, you are very kind, but you do not take the circumstances into consideration;— you do not realise to the full extent what the consequences would be.’

‘I don’t know what you mean by the full extent,’ said Mr. Welby; ‘but this I see as clear as daylight, that some time or other the child will probably have her bread to earn. I say probably. She may marry, of course, but the papers tell us people have given up marrying now-a-days. You can’t live for ever, ma’am; and still more certainly you can’t work for ever. And the child has actually something in her fingers by which she could earn money, and provide for herself with the greatest ease. Besides, a musician is not like a singer, or a dancer, or anything of that sort. She comes on and sits down before her piano, and never pays any attention to her audience. She need not even look at them unless she likes. She has only a little curtsey to make, and so is off again. It is positively nothing. She may marry, of course, but that would be no protection against poverty. And what’s the alternative? A lingering, idle sort of life at home; saving scraps, and making her own gowns and bonnets; or, perhaps, giving music-lessons to tiresome children whom she would hate. You should not, my dear Mrs. Severn, do such injustice to your child.’

‘Indeed, I am the last person to do her injustice,’ said the padrona, half angered, half saddened, with tears in her eyes. It was a very trenchant style of argument. ‘If I were to die, or if I were to fail in my work!’ Mrs. Severn said to herself, with one of those awful throbs of dread which come upon a woman who is the sole

protector and bread-winner of her children. Such a thought was not unfamiliar to her mind. It came sometimes at chance hours, stealing upon her suddenly like an evil spirit, and wringing her heart. It set her now, for the hundredth time, to count up the little scraps of resource they would have in such a terrible contingency, the friends who would or might be kind to them. 'If I might but live till Edie is twenty!' was the silent prayer that followed. It did not seem possible that so long as she did live she would be unable to work. This frenzy of dread was but momentary. Had it lasted, so sharp and poignant was it, the life which was so important might have been put in jeopardy; but fortunately Mrs. Severn's mind was as elastic as mind could be, and rose again like a flower after the heavy foot had pressed it down. Yet, Alice,—could she be doing injustice to Alice? These arguments had without doubt made a certain impression upon her. Let but this summer be over, she said to herself. It would be time enough certainly when the child was seventeen,—one more year of sweet childhood and leisure, and undisturbed girlish peace. And then the grateful thought came back upon the mother of Mr. Rich's commission which she was working at, and her year's work which was secure. Could there be comfort greater than that thought? And the morrow would care for the things of itself.

While such discussions went on,—for they were frequent,—Alice moved about the house, a soft, domestic spirit, with light steps and a face like a flower. Every day it became more like a flower. The sweetness expanded, the husks of the lovely blossom opened, the woman came gliding noiselessly, so that nobody around perceived it, out of the silken bud of the girl. She was clever at her needle, as her mother had boasted, and made and mended with the homely natural satisfaction of a worker who is

conscious of working well; and she was housekeeper, and managed the accounts, and ordered the dinners, proud of her importance and the duties of her office; and she saw the children put to bed, and heard them say their prayers. The homeliest, most limited life,—and yet what could the world give that was better? Not Nelly Rich's leisure, and gaiety, and luxury; not Mary Westbury's tedious comforts and occupations. Alice for her part had everything,—and the piano, and the talk of nights added to all. And yet her mind was not undisturbed, as her mother fondly thought. A little secret, no bigger than a pin's point, had sprung into being in the virgin heart;—not worth calling a secret,—not a thing at all, in short,—only a murmur of soft, musing recollections,—dreams that were not half tangible enough to be called hopes. As, for instance, what was it he meant when their eyes met that afternoon as she played to him? how was it that he remembered so well every time he had seen her,—even her dress?—questions which she asked and then retreated from, and eluded, and played with, and returned to them again. And would he go to India? Would he come back to Fitzroy Square? So misty was the sphere in which all this passed that the one question seemed to Alice as important as the other. What if he might come again some afternoon, flushing all the fading sky with new tints? What if he should go away and never be heard of more? All this was in the child's mind when her mother resolved that this summer at least Alice should be left in undisturbed peace. The old story repeated itself, as everything does in this world,—the everlasting tale of individual identity, of isolation and separation of nature between those who are dearest and nearest to each other. The mother would have given her life cheerfully for her child, but could no more see into that child's soul than if she had been entirely indifferent to her. And Alice, the most loving and dutiful of children, went sweetly on her way,

shaping out her own individual life, and never suspecting in that any treason to her earliest loves, or any possible break in her existence. It all turned on the point whether a young Guardsman, who,—with all kindness towards Frank Renton be it said,—was not equal to either Alice or her mother, should call, or should not call, next time he might be in town. Certainly a very trifling matter, and almost concluded against Alice beforehand, as may have been perceived.

I cannot take it upon me to say if he had never come that Alice would have broken her heart. Her heart was too young, too fresh, too visionary, to be tragically moved. She could have gone on looking for him, wondering if he would come, quite as capable of expecting that he would suddenly appear out of the depths of India as that he would come from Royalborough. She had so much time to spare yet before beginning life for herself that the fanciful delight of wondering what he meant by a look or a word, was actually more sweet to her than anything tangible could have been; but yet if he had never come again, a pathetic chord would have sounded among the fresh harmonies of her being,—perhaps a deeper note than any which had yet been awakened in her, at least a sadder one. She would have looked for him and grown weary, and a certain languor and melancholy would have come into her life. Already she had more pleasure in thinking than she had ever been known to have,—or at least she called it thinking,—and would sit silent for hours wrapped in soft dreams, forgetting to talk, to the great disgust of little Edith, and wonder of Miss Hadley, who was the sharpest observer in the household, and guessed what it all meant. But still Alice could have no reason to complain had Frank Renton never more made his appearance in the Square. She would never have dreamt of complaining, poor child; she would have

sighed, and a ray of light would have gone out of her life, and that would have been all;—and she had so many rays of light that there might well be one to spare!

It was not thus, however, that things turned out. Not much more than a week had elapsed when Frank again made his appearance in the Square. He had not said much to himself about it. He pretended to himself, indeed, that it was a sudden thought, as he had some time to spare. ‘One might as well go and bid them good-bye,’ he said aloud, the better to persuade himself that it was purely accidental. He had seen Montague, and had all but concluded with him about the exchange, though he had still been quite doubtful on the subject when he came up to town. Yet the sight of the other side, and the reality given to the matter by the actual discussion of it as a thing to be done, had an effect upon him which nothing else had yet had. It was made at once into a matter of fact by the first half-dozen words he exchanged with Montague of the 200th. And now it was all but settled, whatever other conclusions might follow. The suddenness with which this very serious piece of business had been concluded, or all but concluded, had filled Frank with a certain excitement. He did not know how he should announce it at home,—how he should tell it to his friends. But he had done it. No doubt his mother would weep, and other eyes would look on him reproachfully. Not that any eyes had a right,—an absolute right,—to reproach him; but still——! Frank’s mind had been very much agitated and beaten about for some days past. That interview with Nelly had been hard upon him. He had not said all, nor nearly all, that he had been expected to say; but still he had said something which had drawn the indefinite bond between them a little closer. He would owe to her, he felt, after what had passed, some sort of embarrassing explanation of

the reasons which had induced him all at once to make up his mind and choose India and work, instead of what was vaguely called his good prospects at home. These good prospects he knew, and everybody knew, herself included, were,—Nelly and her fifty thousand pounds; and it would be as much as saying, ‘I have given up all thoughts of you,’ when he told her of his sudden determination. He had said nothing about going to India in that last interview. On the contrary, he had been rather eloquent on the subject of staying at home. And now he would have to explain to her that India and freedom had more charms for him than she had, even when backed by all her advantages. It was not a pleasant intimation to make; neither was the thought pleasant of telling his mother, who would have still more occasion to reproach him. ‘Go to India, when you might have fifty thousand for the asking, and heaven knows how much more!’ Mrs. Renton would say; and would feel herself deeply aggrieved by her son’s backsliding. He had been beguiled into all this by the talk of Montague of the 200th, and his own errant, foolish inclinations. It had seemed to him like an escape from himself, and he had taken advantage of the chance;—but it was terrible to contemplate the immediate results. And he had an hour or two to spare, and a little music had always so good an effect upon him! Besides, it would not be civil to go away without taking farewell of Laurie’s friends. The 200th were to go in three months. There would be little further time for anything but the business of his outfit. Frank turned his steps towards the Square with the resolution, declared,—to himself,—that this should be the last time. He would see them once more, as civility required, and then all would be over. He would put all such nonsense from his mind, the folly of thinking of either;—for was it not folly to entertain such an idea at his age?—and go away and enjoy his freedom. He would be twenty-one before the regiment

set sail, which was no doubt a serious age, and the beginning of mature manhood; but still few men without money married so early. And Frank did not want a wife, though he had thus got himself into such difficulties with two girls at once. The clear course was evidently to set himself free from such premature entanglements, and take refuge in distance and novelty, and rejoice in his escape.

By what strange chance it was that the padrona should have gone out that special afternoon, taking Miss Hadley with her, is what I never could explain. Things do occur so sometimes in this curious world, where everything happens that ought not to happen. Alice was alone, all by herself in that shadowy, silent drawing-room. It was a thing which did not occur thrice in a year. And lo! Frank Renton's visit to say good-bye must happen on one of these rare occasions! Alice was not playing when he was ushered in. She was sitting at work close to the piano, though that too was not usual to her. She had gone in with the intention of practising, but the charm of thinking had been too strong for her. Even her work had fallen on her knee in the soft, profound stillness and loneliness which of late had come to be so sweet to her. She was thinking of him, asking herself once more those sweet, vague, fanciful questions. It was so pleasant, in her new mood, to feel herself all alone, free to think as she pleased, and lose herself in dreams for a whole, long, enchanted afternoon. And just at that moment, as good or evil fortune decided, Frank Renton was shown into the room. He himself was struck dumb by the chance, as well as Alice. She looked up at him, poor child, with absolute consternation. 'Oh, I am so sorry mamma is out!' she said; and notwithstanding the stir and flutter of her heart at the sight of him, she was quite in earnest when she said so. Mamma being out, however, made all the

difference between conscious safety and calm and the uneasy dread which she could not explain. What was she afraid of? Alice could not answer the question. Not of him, certainly, of whom she believed every good under heaven. Of herself, then? But she only repeated her little outcry of regret, and could give no reason for her shy shrinking and fears.

‘Is she?’ said Frank; ‘but I must not go away, must I?—though your tone seems somehow to imply it. Let me stay and wait for her. I have come to say good-bye.’

‘Good-bye?’ said Alice, faltering. The child grew cold all over in a moment, as if a chill had blown upon her. ‘Are you really, really going to India, after all?’

‘After all? after what?’ said Frank, turning upon her so quickly that she had no time to think.

‘Oh, I meant after——. I thought——. People said——. But, no, indeed; I am sure I never believed it, Mr. Renton; it is such stupid talk; only I was a little surprised,’ said Alice, recovering herself. ‘I mean, are you really going to India,—after all?’

Frank laughed. He was at no loss now as he had been with Nelly Rich. ‘I see that is what you mean,’ he said, looking at her with softened, shining eyes, and that delicious indulgence for her youth and simplicity which made him feel himself twice a man; ‘and you may say after all. There are some things I shall be glad to escape from, and there are other things,’ said Frank, rising and going close to her, ‘there are other things——’

He did not mean it,—certainly he did not mean it,—any more than he had meant going to India, when he came up that morning

to town to talk the matter over in a vague, general way; but, somehow, as he stood in front of her, leaning over the high-backed chair on which she had placed her work, gazing into the sweet face lifted to him, which changed colour every moment, and was as full of light and shade as any summer sky, a sudden sense of necessity came over him. Leave her?—Was there anybody in the world but the two of them looking thus at each other? Did anything else matter in comparison? ‘What is the use of making any pretences?’ cried Frank; ‘if you will but come with me, Alice, going to India will be like going to heaven!’

She sat and gazed at him with consternation and wonder and dismay; growing pale to the very lips; straining her wistful eyes to make out what he meant. Was he mad? What was he thinking of? ‘Go with, you?’ she faltered, under her breath, incapable of any expression but that of amaze. Her wondering eye sank under his look, and her heart began to beat, and her brow to throb. The suggestion shook her whole being, though she had not quite fathomed what it meant. And then the crimson colour rose like a sudden flame, and flew over all her face. The change, the trouble, the surprise, were like so many variations in the sky, and they combined to take from the young lover what little wits he had left.

‘Would it be so dreadful?’ he said, bending down over her. ‘Alice, just you and I. What would it matter where we were so long as we were together? I know it would matter nothing to me. I would take such care of you. I should be as happy as the day was long. I want nothing but to have you by me, to look at you, and listen to you. I do not care if there were not another creature in the world’, cried the youth; ‘just you and I!’

‘Oh, don’t speak so!’ cried Alice, trembling in her agitation and astonishment. ‘Don’t, oh, don’t! You must not! How could I ever, ever leave mamma?’

‘Then it is not me you object to?’ cried the lover, in triumph, taking her hands, taking herself to him in a tender delirium.

This was how it came about. With no more preparation on either side, with everything against it,—friends, prudence, fortune, Nelly,—every influence you could conceive. And yet they did it without any intention of doing it,—on the mere argument of being left for half-an-hour alone together. True, it took more than half-an-hour to calm down the bewilderment of the girl’s mind, thus launched suddenly at a stroke into the wide waters of life. She looked back trembling upon her little haven, the harbour where she had lain so quietly a few minutes before. But we can never go back those few minutes. The thing was done, and nobody in the world could be more surprised at it than the two young, rash, happy creatures themselves, holding each other’s hands, and looking into each other’s faces, and asking themselves,—Could it be true?

CHAPTER II.

A STRUGGLE.

THERE are moments in life which are so sweet as to light up whole weeks of gloom; and there are moments so dreadful as to make the unfortunate actors in them tremble at the recollection to the end of their lives. Such a moment in the life of Frank Renton was that in which he suddenly heard the padrona's knock at her own door. He had been as happy as a young man could be. He had felt himself willing, and over again willing, to give up everything without a regret, for the sake of the love he had won, and which was, he said to himself, of everything in earth and heaven the most sweet. This he had said to himself a hundred times over as he hung over Alice in the first ecstasy of their betrothal. He could not imagine how he ever could have doubted. Going to India would, as he had said, be going to heaven. Where he went, she would be with him. He should have her all to himself, free from any interference. They would be free to go forth together, hand in hand, like Adam and Eve. What was any advantage the world could give in comparison to such blessedness? He was in the full flush of his delight when that awful knock was heard at the door.

At the sound of it Alice started too. She clung to him first, and then she shrank from him. 'Oh, it is mamma!' she cried, with sudden dismay. Then there was a pause. Frank let go the hand he had been holding. Nature and the world stood still in deference to the extraordinary crisis. He turned his face, which had suddenly grown pale, to the door. And they heard her talking as she came up the stairs, unconcerned, laughing as if nothing had happened! 'It will be a surprise to Alice,' she said audibly, pausing in the

passage, at the dining-room door. And Alice shuddered as she listened. A surprise! If the padrona could but know what a terrible surprise had been prepared for herself!

And then she came in upon them, smiling and blooming, her soft colour heightened by a little fresh breeze that was blowing, bright from the pleasant unusual intercourse with the outside world. 'I am sorry you did not come with us, Alice,' she said. 'It is not so hot as we thought it was. Ah, Mr. Renton!' and she held out her hand to him. Upon what tiny issues does life hang. If Alice had not thought it too hot to go out, all this might never have happened. And the mother to speak of it so lightly, thinking of nothing more important than the walk, ignorant what advantage had been taken of her absence! To the two guilty creatures who knew, every word was an additional stab.

'I came up again to-day about the same business,' said Frank, faltering.

Alice bent trembling over her work, and said nothing. She did not go, as was her wont, with soft, tender hands, to untie the bonnet and take off the shawl, taking pride in her office as 'mamma's maid.' She put on an aspect of double diligence over her work, though her hands trembled so that she could scarcely hold her needle.

Even Mrs. Severn's unsuspecting nature was startled. She turned to Miss Hadley, who had come in behind her, and said, half in dumb-show, with a certain impatience, 'What does he mean by coming so often?'

'No good,' answered Miss Hadley, solemnly, under her breath; which laconic utterance amused the padrona so much, that her

momentary uneasiness flew away. She sat down smiling, turning her kind face upon the trembling pair. 'Poor Laurie's brother!' she said to herself. That was argument enough for tolerating him and showing him all kindness.

'Alice, how is it you are so busy?' she said. 'I think you might order some tea. Though it is not so very hot, it is pleasant to get into the shade. I hope your business has made progress, Mr. Renton,' she added, politely. As the padrona looked at them it became slowly apparent to her that something was wrong. Alice had not liked the task of entertaining a stranger all by herself; or—
—! But of course it must be that. It was ill-bred of him, even though he was Laurie's brother, to insist on coming in when there was nobody but the child to receive him. Mrs. Severn began to feel uncharitably towards the young man. Alice flushed one moment, and the next was quite pale. She was reluctant to raise her eyes, and neglected all her usual *petits soins*. When she had to get up to obey her mother, it was with a shy avoidance of her look, which went to the padrona's heart. What could be the matter? Was she ill? Had he been rude to her? But that was impossible. 'Is there anything wrong, my darling?' she said, half rising from her seat.

'Oh, no, mamma!' said Alice, breathlessly, in a fainting voice.

The padrona gave Miss Hadley a look which meant,—Go and see what is the matter; and then with a very pre-occupied mind turned towards Frank to play politeness and do her social duties. 'I hope your business has made progress,' she repeated, vaguely; and then it became apparent that he was agitated too.

'Yes,' he said; and then he came forward to her quite pale and with an air of mingled supplication and alarm which filled her with

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