

THE WAYS OF LIFE
TWO STORIES

BY
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THE WAYS OF LIFE.

A PREFACE.

ON THE EBB TIDE.

I DO not pretend to say that the two stories included in this volume are conscious or intentional studies of the phase of human experience which I can describe in no other way than by calling it the ebb, in contradistinction to that tide in the affairs of men which we all know is, to those who can identify and seize it, the great turning-point of life, and leads on to fortune. But they were at least produced under the influence of the strange discovery which a man makes when he finds himself carried away by the retiring waters, no longer coming in upon the top of the wave, but going out. This does not necessarily mean the decline of life, the approach of age, or any natural crisis, but something more poignant—the wonderful and overwhelming revelation which one time or other comes to most people, that their career, whatever it may have been, has come to a stop: that such successes as they may have achieved are over, and that henceforward they must accustom themselves to the thought of going out with the tide. It is a very startling discovery to one who has perhaps been going with a tolerably full sail, without any consciousness of weakened energies or failing power; and it usually is as sudden as it is strange, a thing unforeseen by the sufferer himself, though probably other people have already found it out, and traced the steps of its approach. Writers of fiction, and those whose work it is to realise and exhibit, as far as in them lies, the vicissitudes and alterations of life, are more usually employed in illustrating the advance of that tide—in showing how it is caught or lost, and with what an impetus, and what accompaniments it

flings itself higher and higher up upon the beach, with the sunshine triumphant in the whirl of the big wave as it turns over and breaks into foam, and the flood claps its hands with a rejoicing noise. But yet the ebb has its poetry, too; the colours are more sombre, the sentiment is different. The flood which in its rise seemed almost individual, pervaded by something like conscious life of force and pleasure, becomes like an abstract relentless fate when it pours back into the deep gulf of a sea of forgetfulness, with a rush of whitened pebbles dragged from the beach, or a long expanse of uncovered sands left bare, studded with slippery fragments of rock and the bones of shipwrecked boats. These are no more than symbols of the rising and falling again of human feeling, which, in all its phases, is of the highest interest to those who recognise, even in its imaginary developments, a shadow of their own.

The moment when we first perceive that our individual tide has turned is one which few persons will find it possible to forget. We look on with a piteous surprise to see our little triumphs, our not-little hopes, the future we had still believed in, the past in which we thought our name and fame would still be to the good, whatever happened, all floating out to sea to be lost there, out of sight of men. In the morning all might seem as sure to go on for ever—that is, for our time, which means the same thing—as the sky over us, or the earth beneath our feet; but before evening there was a different story, and the tide was in full retreat, carrying with it both convictions of the past and hope in the future, not only our little laurels, all tossed and withered, and our little projects, but also the very heart of exertion, our confidence in ourselves and providence. The discovery comes in many different ways—in the unresponsive silence which greets an orator who once was interrupted by perpetual cheers, in the publishing of a book which

drops and is never heard of more, or, as in the present case, the unsold pictures: and in the changed accent with which the fickle public pronounces a once favoured name.

There are some who salute this discovery with outcries of indignation and refusal to believe. They think, like the French, that they are betrayed, or, like many of us, that an enemy has done this: a malignant critic perhaps, an ill-disposed publisher or dealer: and save their own pride by putting forth explanations, and persuading themselves, if nobody else, that the thing is temporary and an accident, or else that it is due to cruel fate, and the machinations of evil-hearted men. But when, amid the gifts of the artist, be they small or great, he happens to retain the clearer reason, the common-sense of ordinary intelligence, it is more difficult to take refuge in such self-deceptions, merciful expedients of Nature as they may be to blind us to our own misfortunes. The reasonable man has the worst of it in such cases. It is less possible for him to believe in a mysterious fate or in malign influences. He is obliged to allow to himself that the going out of the tide is as natural as its coming in, and that he is no way exempted from the operation of those laws which affect human reputation and comfort as much as the rising and the falling affect the winds and the seas.

These problems of the common life, though they are perhaps less cheerful, are surely as fit subjects for fiction as are the easier difficulties of youth. It is common to say that all the stories have been told and every complication exhausted, so that we can do nothing but repeat the old themes over again, with such variety of treatment as our halting genius can suggest. Romance itself, they say, is gone, which is an assertion strenuously contradicted by the most powerful of our young writers, Mr. Rudyard Kipling, who replies to it in very energetic tones, that, Here is a steam-engine,

which is Romance incarnate, the great poetry of form and purpose, a creation, as distinct as Hamlet or Lear, a big, dutiful, but exigent giant which a touch can turn into a destroyer, but loving guidance into the most useful servant and friend of man. The tramp of its mighty feet across the wastes of the sea, bringing the man home to his wife, the son to his mother, is poetry, is joy to this eager spirit. I am disposed in moderation to accept the belief of the young author who has a most broad and manful perception of life as something more than love-making, and to acknowledge the mysterious monstrous thing which he makes heroic. To show in his masterful way how every consenting part of the big machine as it clanks on with large unwieldy steps, so many beats to a minute, sounds a note in the symphony of life and service, a voice in the great strain of song which rises from earth to heaven, is more worthy than all the unsavoury romances of all the decadents. Would not St. Francis, had he lived to see it, have called to Brother Iron and Brother Steel, strong henchmen of God, and Sister Steam, with her wreaths of snow, though her voice be not sweet, to join the song of the Creatures in honour of the Maker, as he called upon fire and water in his famous hymn? or that older minstrel in the ancient ages, to whom “snow and vapour, wind and storms fulfilling His word,” were already members of the great choir? It must be added, however, when all is said, that it is the grimy engineer behind watching every valve and guiding every stroke who makes the romance of the machine, as interesting in his way as Romeo, who, though he is the perennial hero, and attracts the greatest general interest, is not so much of a man.

I have often felt while sick or sorry, and craving a little rational entertainment and distraction—which, in my opinion, it is one of the highest aims of the novelist to supply—that the everlasting

treatment of the primary problem of youth, as if there was no other in the world, was at once fatiguing to the reader and injudicious on the part of the writer. When we want to be taken out of ourselves by the lively presentment of other people's difficulties and troubles, it is tiresome to be always turned back to the disappointments or the successes of eighteen, or—in deference to the different standard of age held to be interesting by this generation—let us say five-and-twenty. I do not in the least deny the great advantages of that episode in life for treatment in fiction. It is almost the only episode which comes to a distinct, while it may be, at the same time, a cheerful, end; and its popularity is obvious: and it is a subject which women, who form the bulk of readers of fiction, are rarely tired of; all of which points are important. The elder writers made it the chief thread in the web of fancy, but surrounded the young people with plenty of fathers and mothers, neighbours and servants, doctors, clergymen, lawyers, etc., and all the paraphernalia of common life. But I weary of the two by themselves, or almost by themselves, as happens so often; and if the artifices, with which we are so familiar, by which they are brought together, are fatiguing, how much more so are those uglier artifices by which, being linked together, they are torn asunder again, and a fierce duel of what is called passion is set before us against the lurid skies as the chief object of interest in the world? Novelists make a great moan when they are hindered in the working out of such subjects, and cry loudly to heaven and earth against the limited intelligences which object to them, the British matron, the young person, and so forth. It seems to me that they would be more reasonable if they complained of the monotonous demand for a love-story which crushes out of court all the rest of life—so infinite in variety, so full of complication, so humorous, so mysterious, so natural and true.

I have wondered often whether Macaulay and Darwin, and such great men, whom it is the pride of the novel writer to quote as finding their recreation in novels, were not of my opinion; though it is sadly disconcerting to find from his own account that all Mr. Darwin wanted was a story which ended happily—a judgment which is humbling to one's pride in a reader of whom one was so much inclined to boast. So do I like a story which ends happily. And since the public is fond of such small revelations, I may here confess that I have often begun a story with the determination to be high-minded—to treat my young lovers without indulgence, and either kill them or part them in deference to the rules of Art. But my heart has generally failed me, and I have rarely found courage to do them any harm. They will have plenty of trouble in the world, one knows—why should one cross them in the beginning of their career?

These, however, are questions of a lighter mood than the one with which I began, and a manifest digression from that theme. The two stories which follow treat not of the joy and pride of life, but of those so often unforeseen misfortunes and accidents which shape it towards its end. Life appears under a very different aspect to the man who has felt the turn of the tide. Probably the discovery has been quite sudden, startling, and, so far as he knows, private to himself. His friends all the time may go on hailing him as poet, creator—all manner of fine things. If he discloses his discovery to them, he is met by reproaches for his dejection, his distrust and gloomy views; the compliments which he knows so well and believes so little are heaped again upon him; he is out of health, out of spirits, overworked, they say, in want of rest; a few weeks leisure and repose, and he will be himself again—as if it were a mood or a freak of temper, and not a fact staring him in the face.

But usually he is too much stunned to speak. He is not dying, or like to die, though his career has come or is coming to an end. It would be far more appropriate, far more dramatic if he were; but death is illogical, and will seldom come at the moment when it is wanted, when it would most appropriately solve the problem of what is to be done after?—which becomes the most pressing, the most necessary of questions. Why did not Napoleon die at Waterloo? He lived to add a pitiful postscript to his existence, to accumulate all kinds of squalid miseries about his end, instead of the dramatic and clear-cut conclusion which he might have attained by a merciful bullet or the thrust of a bayonet. And how well it would be to end thus when we have discovered that our day is over! But so far from that, the man has to go on, as if nothing had happened, “in a cheerful despair,” as I have read in a notebook—as if to-day were as yesterday, or perhaps more abundant.

“We poets in our youth, begin in gladness,
But after comes in the end despondency and
madness,”

says Wordsworth. “We have wrought no deliverance in the earth,” says with profounder meaning a much older poet. A man in such straits may sometimes save himself as Hamlet would have done, with a bare bodkin, had not the thought of that something after death which might be worse even than present calamity deterred him; but if he is of other mettle and cannot run away, or leave his post save at the lawful summons, the question, What he is to do? is overwhelming. No hope of being carried to any island valley of Avillion by stately queens in that boat which is going out with the tide. And no rebellion against fate will do him the slightest service. He has to hold his footing somehow—but how?

I confess that I have not had the courage to follow this question, in either of the cases treated here, to such depths of human discomfiture as may have been, or may yet be. A greater artist might have done so, and led the defeated man through all the depths of humiliation and dismay; but my hand is not strong or firm enough to trace out to the bounds of the catastrophe the last possibilities of the broken career. What in the jargon of the age is called the psychological moment is that in which the first discovery is made, and the startled victim suddenly perceives what has happened to him, and feels in every plank of his boat the downward drag of the ebb tide, and looks about him wildly to see if there is anything he can lay hold of to arrest it, any deliverance or any escape. This is the case of Mr. Sandford, the hero of the first of the following tales: and of many others who are not favoured by so speedy and so complete an answer to this bewildering problem of life.

The other story is different; for Robert Dalyell, the subject of that, has laid his plans arbitrarily to escape out of it, doing what seems to him the best he can for those who belonged to him. And here again there is much more to say than has been said; for the condition of the man who blots himself out of life without dying, and accepts a kind of moral annihilation while yet all the sources of life are warm within him, might well afford us one of the most tragic chapters of human history. But I have shrunk from those darker colours with a compunction for him whom I have made to suffer, which is quite fantastical and out of reason, but yet true. To have brought him into the world for the mere purpose of exhibiting his torments seems bad enough without searching into the depths of them, and betraying those secrets which he himself accepts with

a robust commonplace of endurance as the natural consequences of the step he has taken.

I may add here that the circumstances of this latter story, which a just but severe writer has upbraided me with taking from real life, are indeed, so far as the central incident goes, facts in a family history, but facts of which I know neither the date nor the personages involved, all of whom are purely imaginary, as are most of the consequences that follow, at least so far as is known to me.

The reader, I hope, will forgive a writer very little given to explanations, or to any personal appearance, for these prefatory words.

M. O. W. O.

MR. SANDFORD.

CHAPTER I.

HE was a man approaching sixty, but in perfect health, and with no painful physical reminders that he had already accomplished the greater part of life's journey. He was a successful man, who had attained at a comparatively early age the heights of his profession, and gained a name for himself. No painter in England was better or more favourably known. He had never been emphatically the fashion, or made one of those great "hits" which are far from being invariably any test of genius; but his pictures had always been looked for with pleasure, and attracted a large and very even share of popular approbation. From year to year, for what was really a very long time, though in his good health and cheerful occupation the progress of time had never forced itself upon him unduly, he had gone on doing very well, getting both praise and pudding—good prices, constant commissions, and a great deal of agreeable applause. A course of gentle uninterrupted success of this description has a curiously tranquillising effect upon the mind. It did not seem to Mr. Sandford, or his wife, or any of his belongings, that it could ever fail. His income was more like an official income, coming in at slightly irregular intervals, and with variations of amount, but wonderfully equal at the year's end, than the precarious revenues of an artist. And this fact lulled him into security in respect to his pecuniary means. He had a very pleasant, ample, agreeable life—a pretty and comfortable house, full of desirable things; a pleasant, gay, not very profitable, but pleasant

family; and the agreeable atmosphere of applause and public interest which gave a touch of perfection to all the other good things. He had the consciousness of being pointed out in every assembly as somebody worth looking at: "That's Sandford, you know, the painter." He did not dislike it himself, and Mrs. Sandford liked it very much. Altogether it would have been difficult to find a more pleasant and delightful career.

His wife had been the truest companion and helpmeet of all his early life. She had made their small means do in the beginning when money was not plentiful. She had managed to do him credit in all the many appearances in society which a rising painter finds to his advantage, while still spending very little on herself or her dress. She had kept all going, and saved him from a thousand anxieties and cares. She had sat to him when models proved expensive so often that it was a common joke to say that some reflection of Mrs. Sandford's face was in all his pictures, from Joan of Arc to Queen Elizabeth. Now that the children were grown up, perhaps the parents were a little less together than of old. She had her daughters to look after, who were asked out a great deal, and very anxious to be fashionable and to keep up with their fine friends. The two grown-up girls were both pretty, animated, and pleasant creatures, full of the chatter of society, yet likewise full of better things. There were also two grown-up sons: one a young barrister, briefless, and fond of society too; the other one of those agreeable do-nothings who are more prevalent nowadays than ever before, a very clever fellow, who had just not succeeded as he ought at the University or elsewhere, but had plenty of brains for anything, and only wanted the opportunity to distinguish himself. They were all full of faculty, both boys and girls, but all took a good deal out of the family stores without bringing anything in.

Ever since these children grew up the family life had been on a very easy, ample scale. There was never any appearance of want of money, nor was the question ever discussed with the young ones, who had really no way of knowing that there was anything precarious in that well-established family income which provided them with everything they could desire. Sometimes, indeed, Mrs. Sandford would shake her head and declare that she “could not afford” some particular luxury. “Oh, nonsense, mamma!” the girls would say, while Harry would add, “That’s mother’s *rôle*, we all know. If she did not say so she would not be acting up to her part.” They took it in this way, with the same, or perhaps even a greater composure than if Mr. Sandford’s revenues had been drawn from the three per cents.

It was only after this position had been attained that any anxieties arose. At first it had seemed quite certain that Jack would speedily distinguish himself at the bar, and become Lord Chancellor in course of time; and that something would turn up for Harry—most likely a Government appointment, which so well known a man as his father had a right to expect. And Mrs. Sandford, with a sigh, had looked forward with certainty to the early marriage of her girls. But some years had now passed since Ada, who was the youngest, had been introduced, and as yet nothing of that kind had happened. Harry was pleasantly about the world, a great help in accompanying his sisters when Mrs. Sandford did not want to go out, but no appointment had fallen in his way; and the briefs which Jack had procured were very few and very trifling. Things went on quite pleasantly all the same. The young people enjoyed themselves very much—they were asked everywhere. Lizzie, who had a beautiful voice, was an acquisition wherever she went, and helped her sister and her brothers, who

could all make themselves agreeable. The life of the household flowed on in the pleasantest way imaginable; everything was bright, delightful, easy. Mrs. Sandford was so good a manager that all domestic arrangements went as on velvet. She was never put out if two or three people appeared unexpectedly to lunch. An impromptu dinner party even, though it might disturb cook, never disturbed mamma. There was no extravagance, but everything delightfully liberal and full. The first vague uneasiness that crept into the atmosphere was about the boys. It was Mrs. Sandford herself who began this. "Did you speak to Lord Okeham about Harry?" she said to her husband one day, when she had been particularly elated by the appearance of that nobleman at her tea-table. He had come to look at a picture, and he was very willing afterwards, it appeared, to come into the drawing-room to tea.

"How could I? I scarcely know him. It is difficult enough to ask a friend—but a man I have only seen twice——"

"Your money or your life," said Harry, with a laugh. He was himself quite tranquil about his appointment, never doubting that some day it would turn up.

"It is easier to ask a stranger than a friend," said Mrs. Sandford. "It is like trading on friendship with a man you know; but this man's nothing but a patron, or an admirer. I should have asked him like—I mean at once."

"Mother was going to say like a shot—she is getting dreadfully slangy, worse than any of us. Let's hope old Okeham will come back; there's not much time lost," said the cheerful youth.

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