The Pittsburgh Gazette.

[From an English Magazine.]

## "AFTER MANY DAYS."

"You'll spend Christmas with us?" John Mellish had said to his cousin; and Brian, remembering how very gloomy last Yule-tide had appeared as viewed from the solitude of his chambers, gladly accepted. Brian's exile, if it may be so called, was entirely voluntary. If he had accepted the invitations that poured in, he might have passed his days hunting, shooting or dining; but being of an ambitious turn, and having from his earliest boyhood heard it assested that he would "do something" and attain some position above the ordinary herd, Brian had laid down a course of hard law-reading, to which he had hitherto stuck honestly. Perhaps there was not much merit due to him yet; the plow and furrow may have been as fascinating as the outer world. He had run the gauntlet, it is true, of many of those temptations which most easily beset a man, but he had never been in love; that trial remained, and we shall see how he met it; of firing he had done his share. Law is, we know, at best, dry work, requiring counter excitement now and then; and Brian, being indolent in his amusements, took that which was at hand. But the woman with whom he flirted said he had no heart.

It is written that there is a tide in the affairs of men. This particular tide had not as yet set in upon the even shore of Brian's lite, but the crisis was not far olf, and, as is generally the way, fate came concealed by the most innocent of disguises; and so it was, that being in a fair way to become a Q. C., if nothing more, Brian, running against his cousin, John Mellish, in the Strand, was summoned to meet his fate at the "The Cedars," where, a week before Christmas, we found our hero, sitting by the Squire's young wife, but looking with all his eyes at the young face of the wife's younger sister Kate, and trying with all his ears to catch the murmur of her low, soft voice.

"I'll marry that girl, or none," Brian said to himself, as he undressed the night after his arrival and so he repeated still more passionately when, on the footman rousing him the next morning, he became conscious that Kate's gray eyes had been shining upon him in his dreams.

"The hounds meet at the kennel, sir," said the servant, "and master says you'd better be down soon, as he and Miss Kerr are going to ride to cover."

"All right," quoth Brian; and having luckily come provided with breeches and tops, it was not long before he descended to the breakfast room, where he found Kate presiding, and the Squire and a couple of strangers from the other side of the country busy in fortifying against the chances of a long day.

"I've ordered the young chestnut for you, Brian," said John. 'I want him shown off, and I am too heavy for the country we'll most likely cross to-day; besides, you handle a horse better than any one I know." Then the conversation turned upon the merits of the horse and the prospect of having a run.

For the first ten minutes after starting Brian had his hands full, and not until the chestnut quieted down had he a fair opportunity of looking at Kate, who, like all pretty women who can really ride, looked better on horseback than anywhere else; and as Brian watched her brightening color, and little figure swaying with every motion of the horse, the remembrance of his chambers came up like a nightmare.

What had green leaves laced with dew-laden gossamers, caroling larks and full-throated robins, to do with dusty folios and blue-lined foolscap? Brian thought it over that night, while the picture was still fresh in his memory, and he thought it over every night, till, as the reader will see, the odds against the Q. C. became longer and longer.

What the riding, dancing and games had left undone, the dressing up of the church and house for Christmas day completed. and by the time the greenery was gathered and hung, Brian knew that "the tide" had set in, and that the full waves were beating down every obstacle in their course.

And yet he had not by word or look betrayed himself to Kate. He was much too deeply in earnest to risk asking too soon. He knew it was life or death, so to speak; and so, though he haunted Kate's steps, people did not see what the truth was, partly because of the mask he wore, and partly because of a very special reason which I shall explain presently.

Christmas was over; some guests left and others came; so that going into the drawing-room one evening, and being rather late, Brian found some ones assembled, enjoying that pleasantest of all times, the gloaming half-hour before dinner. Kate was sitting near the fire, and consequently in the lightest part of the room, and by her side a stranger, not a young man, but old enough to be her father; so Brian stood aside, content to worship his divinity at a distance. Presently she caught his eye, and beckoning him to her, introduced him to General Amberly, who held out his hand, saying:

"I have just been 'telling Kate that your father and I were comrades in early days, and saw some hard times together with the Duke of York. You have heard him speak of Jessy Amberly?" And then, turning to Kate, he went on, "Jessy was my nickname when I joined; I believe in those days I was considered a pretty boy, and, coming fresh from a mother's care, my ways and wants were different from those of public school men. This young gentleman's father joined the same year, and being bigger and stronger at that time stood by me in more than one way."

"His father is dead, General," whispered Kate, her soft eyes filling,

"Yes, my dear, I know; but the memory of a good man never dies. His father was one of the best of them."

So Brian's heart was at rest, and what was left of it went straight to the outspoken old soldier whose old-fashioned courtesy and chivalrous attention to Kate seemed, in poor Brian's eyes, the greatest charm he possessed.

Two days after this, Brian's visit terminated. As bad luck would have it, Kate had a headache; the last day she neither appeared at dinner, nor yet in the evening. Brian, who had made up his mind to speak out, was down an hour before any one else next morning, but Kate only showed herself when breakfast was half over. So, as time waits for no one, he had to take his departure minus the hoped-for interview, and there was nothing for it but to trust his fate to the past. So after reaching London he wrote a manly, straightforward letter, telling Kate the truth and asking her to be his wife.

In two days the reply came, and Brian's fate was sealed.

"I am deeply grieved," wrote Kate, "more deeply than I can possibly tell you. I thought you knew I was engaged to General Amberly. John should have told you, and I cannot understand how it was you never heard; the fact is so universally known amongst my friends, that I never doubted you knew, and that will, I hope, enable you to forgive me if my conduct has helped to pain you. I showed your letter to the General, and he bids me say that he feels as I do, very, very sorry, and that as your father's friend, you must look upon him as a true friend."

Over and over again Brian read this letter, quietly enough, too; but with the quiet that comes of despair. He saw it all; and there was not a shadow of reproach or blame in his heart against Kate; but the light seemed to go out of his life, and for three weeks Brian tried the old trick of driving away his misery by a life of riot. At the end of three weeks nature gave way, and he was raving with brain fever. Dissipation did not suit him, and, luckily, the stop came before he was utterly lost.

"You must leave London," said the doctor; "quiet is necessary—try a sea voyage."

"I must see her first," thought Brian, "and then I don't care where I go; I shall see what I want to know in her face."

So soon as he could move about, Brian took the morning express, and hiring a gig at First Cross Station, drove over to "The Cedars." Mr. Mellish was out; the mistress was with the baby, but would be down directly. So Brian went into the morning room to wait, and presently, coming from the garden, he saw Kate. She walked up to the house rather slowly; and hidden, as he was behind the curtain, Brian could see without being seen, and his heart grew sick, even while a wild triumph seemed to fill his being; for he saw what he had hoped, even while he dreaded, in Kate's face. She stopped opposite the window, and looked at the dog cart, as if uncertain to whom it belonged, or whether to go on; then suddenly a flush came over her, and she turned quickly down the avenue. Brian had come out of his hiding place, and leant against the window; he was desperate just then.

When Kate was out of sight came the remembrance of where he was, and the certainly that he would have to face Mrs. Mellish. If the thought of this interview had seemed difficult when he first sat down in the room, it became still more hard after seeing Kate, and at last grew so intolerable that Brian turned and bolted, and the dog cart was half way to the station before Mrs. Mellish, who had waited for the nurse to come up from her dinner, deposited the baby in that functionary's arms, and having seen that her hair was straight, descended to speak with Brian, found the bird had flown.

"What could he mean?" she said afterwards, to Kate. And Kate, looking very pale, answered:

"He wanted to see John, perhaps; won't John go up and see him?"

And John, who was one of the most good natured men in the world, went up to town next day, taking Mrs. Mellish with him, and they, having done some shopping, proceeded to Brian's chambers, where they heard the fiat pronounced by the doctor, and learned that Brian, having tired of reading law, meant to try a settler's life in Australia.

"You'll come back to us some day, old fellow?", was the squire's farewell.

"Ay, in ten years I'll spend Christmas Day with you."

"Well, that's a bargain; in ten years we'll lay a knife and fork for you."

Brian laughed bitterly, repeating, "In ten years," and Mrs. Mellish, coming up to him, put her hands upon his shoulders and kissed him, whispering "her blessing to Brian; you are a noble fellow."

She followed her husband down stairs, and taking a cab, they drove to Euston Square.

Kate was sitting by the library fire when they reached home, and very wistfully the girl looked at her elder sister, who said, as she took off her shawl:

"We have seen Brian, Kitty; he is much better, and has been ordered a sea voyage, so he is going to try how Australian air will suit him. He has promised to spend Christmas with us ten years hence. How did baby get along without me?"

Spring came; but the General was not well, and the marriage was put off until Christmas, but when autumn came, the old man was prostrate. He lingered so nearly two years, Kate nursing him, and to her he left his property. Once or twice during his illness, he had asked for news of Brian, and by his request, the squire had written to relation and friends, but no tidings could be obtained.

"He might have had the grace to write," said John, when he told the General the result of his inquiries. But the latter shook his head.

"Nay, John, he is right. 'He that putteth his had to the plough and looketh back, is not meet for the kingdom of heaven.' The poor boy has done well; he will come back in ten years, and when he does, tell him I said so."

When the General's warfare was over, and the old soldier had answered his last muster roll, Kate remained altogether at The Cedars; and, calling herself the old maid of the family, was looked up to with much respect by the rising generation of nephews and nieces. Nor was Kate's money idle; many a wrinkled old face in the village grew anxious when gossip gave out that Miss Kate had another wooer, but when the lover mounted and rode away, and Kate was still Miss Kate, the news spread like sunshine, and the smiles came back again; and Christmas after Christmas brought good cheer and full larders to every home in the little village, a softer glow to Kate's check and a brighter smile to Kate's lips.

At last the tenth Christmas was near at hand. The winter was a hard one. Upon the morning of Christmas eve, Kate and the children went forth to gather greenery. Young Ethel, now nearly as tall as Kate herself; Dick upon the sheltie, Tom and Harry armed with knives, big enough to do serious damage to the holly trees.

Amongst them stood Kate; time, in taking away the lightness of girlhood, perfected the maturer beauty of womanhood, and very fair and lovable she looked, as, with her hands full of gleaming holly, she stood in the wintry picture—a picture very much unlike that of a Christmas on the other side of the world, where seasons are turned upside down and Christmas day comes at midsummer. So thought a man who was leaning against the churchyard gate. He had been standing there for some time before the children came down the avenue, and moving a little so as to bring the branches of a tree between him and them, he still stood, until the thud of horses' feet on the snow made him turn, and as the squire trotted up, the men came face to face.

John Mellish reined in his horse, and stared, stooped down in his saddle and grew red as he cried:

"Not Brian!—and yet, by the Lord Harry, it is. Welcome home, old fellow!" As he spoke, the squire had got down from his horse, and was clasping Brian's hands. "Why didn't you write?"

"I'll tell you some day, old friend; let bygones be bygones."

"Right, there; but see, lad, there's something to mark the bygone," and John pointed to the group so busily gathering greenery, but which that instant, catching sight of him, broke up, the boys running forward to meet him, leaving Kate and Ethel alone, up to whom John and his cousin went.

"I have brought the guest of the year, Katie," her brother said, "a a guest come from the other side of the world to keep a tryst made ten years ago; before you were born, Dick; think of that," and taking the sheltie's rein, John ran down the road, calling the other boys to bring his horse.

Katie's eyes had darkened as Brian came towards her, and the holly fell from her hands, so that both were ready to be put in his. Beyond this double shake, the meeting was cold enough to strike Ethel as a very cold way of receiving a friend after being away for ten years; but Ethel, you see, had a great deal to learn yet. They walked up to the house together, and when Brian went to speak to Mrs Mellish, Kate disappeared.

What a dinner that was! Surely some of us have known or shared in the happiness of welcoming one long absent to the home fireside; and, after many days of exile by sea and land, of strange adventures, perils and hairbreadth escapes, have felt the heart grow full, as looking down the table past familiar faces, the old face, changed and yet the same, turns to us, and the eyes throw back their answer of affection and faith. So, at least, felt John Mellish, and so, too, felt one true heart not far from John. But it was not until later in the evening, when they were all standing about in the front room listening to the Carol singers, that Brian found an opportunity of saying, in Kate's ear:

"I never loved a woman but you, Kate, and I've been faithful to my love through all these ten hopeless years. May I ask for my wages?"

Kate had no voice to make an audible reply, but a warm hand stole into Brian's and he knew that after many days he had his reward.


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