

THE END OF AN ANIMOSITY.

BY L. CLARKSON.

CHAPTER I.

*"I had no time to hate, because
The grave would hinder me,
And life was not so ample I
Could finish enmity."*

—EMILY DICKINSON.

"WELL, mother, if you'd rather, of course we won't get married yet awhile. We can wait, me and Christie Ann. She don't seem to be much set on gettin' married just now. She always was sort of patient like. I misdoubt she don't think too much of herself anyhow; and if you want we should, we'll put it off another year."

The old woman looked keenly into her son's face, torn between her sympathy for him and her desire to frustrate a catastrophe from herself. Her face worked into a hundred curious wrinkles which suggested grimaces. She passionately loved him, and she was a religious woman whose life was one of self-denial and struggle against the flesh. But there was one thing stronger than her love, stronger even than her religion. It was her hatred for Christie Ann Ford.

The people about her did not take into account this powerful will. They never realized that they were ruled. How could they, when the virtue and wisdom and tender solicitude for the good of all, which were also in her heart, spoke daily and hourly, while that desire for mastery spoke no word?

Her son realized it least of all. He believed that she so loved him as to give herself for him. And so she would have done—her body, but not her will.

"If you want we should, we'll put it off another year. As you say, father's been gone but a short while."

"'Lias," said the old woman, humbly, "you're very good to me. Sometimes I think mothers oughtn't to live so long that they're a hindrance, with their dread of new ways and new people. Seems like they ought to give place to the younger woman that's to come."

"Christie Ann isn't like any one new, mother. We've known her all her life. We pretty nigh helped bring up Christie Ann."

"So we did, 'Lias; and it does seem's though I hadn't ought to have this dread upon me. It don't appear reasonable.

But it's change of any sort that old people are afeard of. Their own great change has got to come so soon—so sudden, maybe. The Bible teaches the young people to wait a bit on the old, and not hurry the change, don't it?"

"You sha'n't be hurried, mother. I couldn't seem to understand before just how you would take it. It wouldn't be a change to me, but like a finishing touch to all that's gone before."

"Of course it would, my son. That's natural. Only, don't you see, I was 'most old before you was born. I was well on to forty when I married your father, and that seems 'bout the only change I could live out and live down. Life's very solemn, 'Lias."

"I reckon I don't quite understand," said the young man, speaking slowly. He looked off into the soft mists where the mountains lay outlined against the sky. "It seems to me as if loving and getting and keeping and cherishing were life."

"Losing is life too, 'Lias; and forgetting and being forgotten," she said, solemnly.

He moved his hands—brown, work-soiled hands—softly, one over the other.

"I reckon marryin' or not marryin' to-day or to-morrow don't really alter life, mother. I reckon ourselves are the same right along. But we'll wait—another year." He turned to go, but she caught his arm.

"Don't think your mother selfish, 'Lias. If it was to seem to you that I'm selfish, I'd liefer you'd be married to-morrow."

"I don't think you're selfish. How could I, when I know how you've worked and slaved for me, and for everybody? Ain't you always doing for those worse off than yourself? Don't you nurse every poor body in the village, and help the babies into the world and the corpses out of it? What would Zonetown do, mother, if you was selfish?"

He stooped and kissed her, then was gone before she had quite swallowed a curious lump in her throat. Suppose 'Lias were to find out about that stealthy animosity which no one knew but God? A singular familiarity had grown between her soul and her Maker over this secret thing.

"The Lord knows my heart," she would say. "That's the trouble. He knows me as he knew Judas, long enough before Judas betrayed Him. He warned His disciples—'One of you is a devil.' That meant Judas. He told them plainly, 'One of you is a child of perdition.' That was Judas. 'One of you shall betray me'—Judas! But they didn't know. They never suspected—any mor'n old Deacon Frost or Ebenezer Hack suspect me."

The comfort she had always taken in the good opinion of people was turned to gall and wormwood. Whenever she felt the eye of her small world upon her, at meeting or in more private assemblies, where she was used to lifting up her voice in prayer and exhortation, a sore self-condemnation began gnawing at her heart. She could not get rid of the thought of Judas. It was always with her, nagging at her conscience.

"Oh yes," she said, bitterly, "He knew Judas through and through. It didn't need that kiss to betray Judas to his Master. And that's like me. I betray myself to *my* Master—as a traitor—every time I kiss Christie Ann Ford. He knows I hate her. He knows I would kill her if bad wishes killed. Oh me! oh me! The world thinks I'm a disciple, but the Lord—He knows I'm a Judas."

At times it seemed to her as though the Lord himself spoke to her soul.

"Art thou not afraid," said the sorrowful Voice, "to face all these, My people, with a lie on thy lips? Art thou not preaching to them love and forgiveness whilst thou art cherishing hatred in thy heart?"

And some demon within her would cry out: "Let me alone! What have I to do with Thee, thou Son of David? Know that if Christie Ann Ford marries my son Elias, I will never forgive her in this world or the next."

She shuddered at the contemplation of her spiritual condition, but she could not give up. If Christie Ann was going to marry her son, her only son, she must hate her. Yet all the while she wore the placid look, the guileless smile, which shone out beneath the close-fitting cap of her order. People had said Aunt Hannah was a saint for so long that they had ceased to look for her motives, and only judged her by the smooth order of her actions.

"After all," she said to herself, in moments of attempted self-justification, "conduct is everything; it's principle and character that tell in the long-run. Mine ain't altered. I know what's right. Don't the Bible say we shall be judged by our fruits? There's nothing wrong with my conduct."

This sophistry, however, being exactly opposite to the teaching of her sect, gave little consolation. It was simply lying to herself as she lied to the world. She grew thin, and had a worn, anxious look.

"You don't seem well, mother," Elias said, tenderly. "I reckon you've too much to do about the farm. Now if Christie Ann—"

She interrupted him hurriedly: "Don't you fret about me, 'Lias. I'll do first rate if only the sheep turn out better this year, and the apples ain't specked like they was last fall."

CHAPTER II.

*"Presentiment is that long shadow on the lawn
Indicative that suns go down;
The notice to the startled grass
That darkness is about to pass."*

—EMILY DICKINSON.

THE little village of Zonetown seems an unlikely place to find a silent and unrelenting antagonism, being peopled chiefly by that pious and unworldly sect called Dunkards.

Hannah Bland's ancestors had been God-fearing men and women, whose integrity had won for them the right to be leaders in their sect. No one had prized this inheritance of leadership more than she. In religious bodies who do not formulate a creed or abide by a form of worship it is usually the women who lead and the men who follow. Joshua Bland had followed dutifully all their married life. His distant kinship had caused him to be chosen as life partner by Hannah, who could not bear to relinquish the much-respected family name. In religious meetings, where Hannah led the prayers, in social gatherings, where she did the talking, Joshua listened. In their domestic life, where Hannah's influence was paramount, Joshua's path was marked out for him, but it was marked by love. He was not so much required as privileged to say yea to her yea and nay to her nay. With a great seeming of paying tribute to her husband as head of the household, and a remarkable capacity for making the

doctrine of charity pervade her actions, the wise Dunkard woman covered her iron rule with the softest phrases of affection. And Joshua Bland, echoing her yea or nay without a thought of self or self-assertion, believed himself to be master of his own. Elias felt no sense of restraint or coercion while he lived according to his mother's ordering, even in the matter which touched him deepest, and about which he had said, simply, "If you'd rather, mother, we'll wait." He adored her with a blind fidelity, as wonderful as it was unreasoning. It is doubtful if he ever saw through the conciliatory speeches which governed him. Certainly he never saw through that serene surface of love into the hatred of her heart. There was only one human being in the world who saw beyond that soft exterior and caught a glimpse of the other Hannah Bland, the Hannah Bland that God knew and that sometimes knew herself. Beneath that smiling look Christie Ann sometimes saw a fiery gleam in the bright eyes which caused a nameless apprehension. Not for worlds would she have hinted that such an unlovely light could be possible. At times the poor girl feebly doubted the evidence of her own perception.

Elias's courtship had prospered. Christie Ann was a farmer's daughter, and not given to great demands in the matter of indulgence. There is not much romance in the life of a hard-working Pennsylvania farmer, nor does that overflow of sentiment which we call sentimentality find any place there. But there was something strong and sweet and tender in Elias Bland's nature which craved those sweet and tender responses that love gives to love and asks of love. His passion for Christie Ann Ford was very pure and full of young enthusiasm.

She worshipped him with the devotion of first love. He wore in her eyes a guise of perfection which none of the commonplace surroundings of his work-a-day existence could mar. That light in his face not all the roughness and monotony of farm life could dim.

Hannah Bland's manner towards her son's affianced wife was most cordial. She even made much of her, saying to the chance new-comer who happened now and then upon the mountain village: "This is my daughter as will be. This is 'Lias's Christie Ann."

But in her heart she said, "She will

never be a daughter to me, nor a wife to 'Lias."

She prayed just as lustily that God would let her light be a help to those who were yet in darkness, but her face grew more worn, her voice less steady. The secret was telling on her. Everything grew blurred, chaotic, in her hitherto well-ordered soul. She still prayed in meeting, but there were times when she shrank before God and her fellow-creatures, and trembled at the reproaches of her own conscience. She began to have long spells of moody silence, and if she was aroused, to assume for a few moments her old cheerful manner, she would again relapse. A conflict began to torment her brain after this fashion:

"Christie Ann Ford stands in the way of my peace of mind. She's a sort of stumbling-block to the welfare of my spiritual life. Unless she is removed she will be a barrier between my soul and the Almighty. God ought to remove her. He ought. I've been a good Christian these sixty years, and it don't seem 's though it should all go for nothing, after all, just because of Christie Ann Ford. God oughtn't to let her destroy my soul. But if 'Lias marries her, and she comes here to live, and takes everything out of my hands because I'm old and she's young, I'll hate her worse than now. And it'll destroy my soul. Forever."

By-and-by this theorizing took a more definite form. "Something's got to happen," she said to herself, feverishly. "Something's got to happen. I hate her worse every day. I'm that set against her I can't live in the same world with her any longer. She's got to go. God'll fix it somehow. Mebbe it'll be a mortal sickness as'll carry her off. Mebbe it'll be fire. Seems as though 'twere going to be fire. Christie Ann's that hearty I can't think of any sickness as is likely to come to her. But a fire—that could come to anybody! And the Fords are none too God-fearing. Mebbe it'll be a fire."

She would rouse from her fitful and nervous sleep at a sudden sound in the dead of night, and start up in bed, muttering, excitedly: "I heard a noise. S'pose it was—the fire. S'pose—"

But the fire never came, and as the months went by there were times when the passion of her enmity burnt so low that it seemed to have been smothered out of the tormented soul.

The vision of the burning house never quite left her. Her brain had become so benumbed by the continuous pressure of one painful thought that it had lost all power of throwing off the idea or changing the hallucination.

And still she prayed before men, lifting up her quavering voice in the accustomed places—even in the accustomed phrases—beloved, respected, revered as of old. No one had found her out. But she knew herself as God knew her. It was the crushing consciousness uppermost in her dazed brain. She fought daily with Apollyon, and daily Apollyon vanquished her. "You've got to give up this wicked thing, or it'll slay you," reiterated tortured Conscience. And it was as though the demon within her gnashed upon Conscience, while she replied: "I can't give it up. Let it slay me!—let it!"

CHAPTER III.

*"The brain within its groove
Runs evenly and true;
But let a splinter swerve,
'Twere easier for you
To put the water back
When floods have slit the hills
And scooped a turnpike for themselves,
And blotted out the mills."*

—EMILY DICKINSON.

It was one of those perfect evenings which come only to mountain places, when the glory of the hills is as the glory of the sky.

The old woman sat in the doorway of her home, feeling for the moment almost at peace with the world and herself—and Christie Ann. Christie Ann had been bidden to supper. It was a Saturday afternoon, and Elias had planned the little surprise. They had been so happy over their early meal, Hannah's silence was scarcely noticed. She was fighting the old battle, saying to herself, "He that dippeth with me in the dish, he it is that shall betray me!" That was Judas!"

Then the young girl's gayety overcame her bitterness; and when Christie Ann wanted to clear off the table and wash up the dishes, she let her do it. Elias watched her quick, deft movements, with the beautiful light shining in his eyes.

"How handy she is, mother," he whispered; "and what pretty ways she has!"

Hannah Bland nodded. "It's youth," she said. "Youth's always handy and pretty."

Peace came to her heart as she sat in the doorway, and when the girl came, shyly, to sit beside her—she was always shy of 'Lias's mother—the old woman almost felt the kindness which she expressed as she thanked her for her little service. How gladly Christie Ann would have washed those dishes every day, and three times every day!

Elias had stopped off early from his work, and the two young people were going to indulge themselves in the unusual pleasure of an evening saunter to a mountain lake not far off, which reflected the glory of the hills and the glory of the heavens.

"If only you'd come with us, mother," said 'Lias. "It ain't far, and the change'd brighten you up a bit. Seem's though you don't look as bright these days as you ought."

"Won't you come, Aunt Hannah?" pleaded Christie Ann. "It ain't half far by the short-cut through the laurels. I'm 'most sure it wouldn't tire you."

She shook her head. She had grown very old in the last year, and the soft bloom had gone from her cheeks. Her eyes were restless and uneasy. The alteration in her appearance had come so gradually that even Elias did not observe it. Perhaps, after all, he thought more about Christie Ann than about his mother. That is fate. It is for that we bear sons and daughters.

"Do come," pleaded Christie Ann, timidly.

Hannah Bland shook her head again; the bitterness was coming back.

"I don't seem to care to move about much these days. I reckon I'm older than I was. Sixty years ain't much. My mother lived to be eighty, and she wasn't never averse to movin' about as I be now. Mebbe folks get their second joints like they get their second sight. Leastways, I don't reckon on bein' always stiff like this. You go on—you two. Don't mind me, 'Lias. I'll do very well. I want to see you happy, that's all."

Christie Ann sighed. "She wants to see him happy every way but one," she said, softly. "And perhaps—perhaps she'll live to be eighty, like her mother."

There was no hatred in Christie Ann's heart; only a great longing to be 'Lias's very own.

"But I think," she added, smiling to herself, "that she likes me better and bet-

ter. I didn't see that look in her eyes once this evening—not once."

They walked through the golden glow of that exquisite evening light into the very heart of the crimson sunset. Nature had never before been so beautiful; love had never before been so sweet; they had never before been so near each other.

"It won't be long now, Christie Ann. Mother don't seem to feel quite as she did about our getting married. I reckon in a couple of months—oh, Christie, Christie!" He clasped her in his arms. Her bright head lay upon his breast. Their eyes were full of happy tears.

"It won't seem long when it's over, 'Lias—the waiting, I mean," sobbed Christie Ann. "I think we'll love each other better for it, always."

After a while it occurred to Elias that it might be pleasant to get into a rude boat that was fastened near the shore, and soon they were paddling about in a clumsy fashion on the lake—a most unusual thing for people of their unsentimental sort, who look upon a row-boat only as a means of livelihood or of locomotion. No one ever knew how it happened. But quite suddenly the rough craft was upset, and Elias Bland was struggling in the deep water, trying frantically to seize upon the water-logged garments of poor Christie Ann, who was destitute of any ability to save herself.

That was how the something happened for which Hannah Bland had prayed.

She was still sitting by the door. The sunset's last gleam had not quite died out of the sky, although the near hills were bathed in the pearly mists of coming night. Far off, the mountains still wore wonderful halos about their summits. It was scarcely two hours since Christie Ann had looked back, saying, in her soft girlish voice, "Good-night, Aunt Hannah."

But the bitterness had all come back, and the old woman's soul was torn by jealous rage. "How could I let her do it?" she muttered. "To come here and eat at my table and drink from my cup, and then to carry him out of my sight like that! But wait—wait. The Lord's goin' to hear me yet—"

Some one came hastily up the village street; others were hurrying towards her in the distance. She could not see their faces for the gloaming. Instinctively, as though she felt from afar the coming of

the catastrophe which she awaited, Hannah Bland jumped from her chair. A wild look that might almost have been mistaken for joy gleamed from her eyes. She did not utter a sound. She could not. God was going to answer her prayer; but as yet she dared not rejoice.

"Hannah Bland! Hannah Bland!" cried Deacon Frost, a gray-haired Dunkard preacher, whose knees tottered as he ran. He too seemed stricken dumb. His lips framed only the syllables of her name.

"Go on," she gasped, shaking as in a palsy.

"It's too awful," cried the old Dunkard, turning to the others. "Tell her, Ebenezer Hack; I can't."

Ebenezer put his hands before his face and burst into sobs. Hannah Bland's lips moved once more. She wagged her head. Her eyes shot fire.

"Oh, Aunt Hannah," cried a young girl, weeping wildly, "it's a drowning! Christie Ann—she—"

Suddenly the old woman's long-pent-up mania burst through all bounds. She threw up her arms over her head, shrieking: "I know it! It's the dispensation of Providence! It's come at last!" and ran away from them like a creature gone stark mad.

There was a great corn-field a quarter of a mile back of the house; acres upon acres of tall yellow corn ready for the harvesting. She ran on, forgetful of her years, her stiffening joints ran like one demented. No one moved to follow her at first. When they did she had disappeared into the corn-field—lost herself in the countless rows of tall swaying stalks. They searched for a while, but faint-heartedly, dreading to come upon that strange wild face.

"Best let her be," said the old Dunkard preacher. "She knows where to go for comfort. She's best left to herself and her grief. We'll go see to the dead. We can only pray for Hannah. When she gets the Lord by the hand, she'll come to. He ain't going to desert her now, after all the years she's been faithful to Him."

So the dazed woman wandered all night among the rows of corn-stalks. She was like one in an ecstasy, who yet feared the amazing consummation of her own desire.

"It's awful sudden like," she said, hoarsely. "I can't seem to take it in. Drowned—Christie Ann drowned! And I thought it would have been fire. I nev-

er once thought of the lake. If it had been fire"—she stopped with a choking sensation in her throat—"I *might* have felt as though I'd murdered her—it did seem so certain it was to have been fire. But water!" She shivered. "As God Almighty sees and knows my wrong and wicked and deceitful heart, I solemnly swear I never once thought of drowning. Did I, Lord? Wasn't it all Thy doing? I never put it into Thy head with a thought. Lord, Lord, I thank Thee, but I didn't do it—I didn't indeed!" She fell upon her knees in convulsions of ecstatic weeping and protestations, which gradually wore themselves out in suffocating sobs that seemed to crack the heart of her.

Hours went by. The night was grand with stars. The tall corn waved about her, rustling its long sibilant leaves, and closed over her head like a canopy. She grew more self-controlled, and by-and-by the thought of her son and of his grief broke in upon her unholy joy.

"I reckon he's broken-hearted—is 'Lias. He's grievin' for her, while I, his mother, have been hiding away here lest human eyes should see and mark my triumph. I must go back and comfort 'Lias—and no one will ever know—thank God!—thank God!"

She made her tortuous way through the corn, losing herself a dozen times in the dull gray of the creeping dawn. A quarter of a mile beyond the corn-field she saw the lights of her own house still twinkling faintly, dimly.

She hastened her steps. The savage joy, the cruel triumph, were gone from her eyes. The face of Hannah Bland beneath its Dunkard's cap was the calm, serene face that her neighbors knew—not the distorted countenance that had gazed up at the stars. It was the face of sympathy ready to meet her son's grief with befitting sorrow.

The exhaustion of the night's vigil was beginning to overcome her, and she felt faint and unnerved as she drew near the door. A group of neighbors came to meet her silently.

"Is—she there?" Hannah gasped, in a choked voice.

"Yes, poor Christie Ann's there," one of the women answered, making room for her to pass in.

"And where's—'Lias?"

The woman pointed with a tragic gesture. Hannah Bland stumbled blindly

into the room. The gray of the dawn made everything indistinct for a moment, in spite of the ineffectual glimmer of the dim lamp.

They left her to go in alone.

What she saw—her eyes wilder now with anguish than they had been with joy—was her son—her only son—stretched stark before her, and Christie Ann cowering on the floor, clasping his dead hand to her bosom, to her lips, kissing it passionately.

A shriek like that which tore from Hannah Bland's throat no mortal there had ever heard before. She gave one bound forward to tear her dead from the caresses of the woman he had loved; but her strength was gone, and she fell a senseless heap upon the floor, stricken with paralysis.

When her brain recovered sufficiently to know those about her, she seemed scarcely to recognize any one, and to have lost nearly all her faculties.

She only spoke one or two phrases, going over and over them with the painful monotony of semi-imbecility.

"It wasn't murder," she said. "I didn't kill Christie Ann. What I looked for was fire—that's what Satan put in my heart—fire. It was never water."

They were very patient, and bore with her in the dull, uncomplaining fashion of hard-working folk who are not used to making much of their burdens. "Seems odd she's got 'Lias and Christie Ann all mixed up," they said. "And what's all that queer talk about murder and fire?"

"Don't you know," said another, "when folks' heads is turned they always say and do exactly the opposite of what they'd say and do if their heads was all right? She's lost her wits, that's all."

Only once did her conscious eyes rest upon Christie Ann after that awful dawn when she had stumbled all unprepared into the presence of her dead.

Poor Christie Ann had resolved to devote herself to the stricken mother of her lost lover. But at sight of her the same frightful shriek tore its way from the half-paralyzed throat, and it brought on a second stroke, from which they thought she could not rally. She did partially recover, and lived on, bedridden, torpid, for several years, not speaking an articulate word for weeks, and when she did speak it was only to reiterate: "The Lord knows—it wasn't murder. It was water—not fire—killed Christie Ann."