

BAB, OR LIVES THAT TOUCHED.

PART III.

"THREE years this day since Chester was called home. Does it seem so long to you, Maxie?" The speaker—a woman "handsome in old age"—looked across the breakfast table at her son, while the unbidden tears coursed slowly down her faded cheeks and fell upon the dainty lace cap strings on her heaving bosom.

"No, mother, it seems but yesterday. Oh, it was to our finite minds a terrible thing, but God knew best. We wanted him here, He wanted him above. It seemed to us that his usefulness was just beginning, and perhaps it was. What we know not now we shall know hereafter."

"Yes, dear, and it is a great comfort to know that he was in God's hands, wholly consecrated to His service, whether that service be here, in the uttermost parts of the earth, or in heaven. I can not murmur; I gave you both to Him in infancy, and fairly has He divided with me. Blessed be His name."

"True, mother, and we know that He knows best; but I oftentimes find myself wondering why Chet was taken and I left. He was so much better and nobler, so much better fitted to hold out the bread and water of life to a thirsty, famishing people."

"Humility is becoming to us all, my son, but to me there was no difference in my boys, though wholly unlike in many respects. And perhaps you could not do the work the Lord has for him in heaven, even as he might have failed in the work you are doing here."

"It may be; I never thought of it just in that way. Has it not been an unusual time since we heard from Nellie?"

"Yes, nearly two months; I do hope we may hear soon. When she comes back we ought to have her here with us. Maxie, you need some young person in the house. Mason and I are very poor cheer for a boy."

The broad-shouldered, athletic young divine laughed a merry, contagious laugh. "Why, mother, a fellow don't need any better company than yourself. You are worth a house full of dudes and butterflies."

"But Nellie is not a butterfly."

"Oh, no, no; I assure you I did not refer to her. She is the dearest, best sister ever a fellow had. What a fine, happy couple she and Chet made, and how bravely she bore his death."

"Yes, she could be little dearer to me if she were my own child; but Maxie—" here she hesitated, and finally rising, went around to his side and laid her hand tenderly on his shoulder—"Maxie, you ought

to find such a woman as Nellie and bring her here to be mistress of the manse. You know I am no longer what I once was, and can not do the honors of your house as I did of your father's. Besides, I'd like to see you settled ere I go hence."

"Mother—" his voice was full of pain, and rising, he led her to a seat by the window, and dropped on an ottoman at her feet. "Mother, it hurts me to hear you speak thus of leaving me. Surely God will not take all my friends from me so soon. Do you not feel well?"

"I am feeling very well, foolish boy, and had no thought of alarming you. I only meant I wish you could find some one you could care for as your brother did for Nellie."

"Perhaps I may," he answered, absently, his glance following the flight of a snow bird outside.

The persons here introduced are the mother and brother of Chester Dwight, the man of whom Nellie Swinton so often spoke to Bab Leslie and her mother. Max's father had been pastor here before him; but when he, too, was taken away, the call came to the younger, and the handsome, genial young dominie was the pride of his church. It was the Sabbath of Bab's first appearance at church in the village that Rev. Max, as he was familiarly called, stopping to exchange greetings with Madame LaRue, asked—

"And who is that with Miss Winwood, a new student?"

"Yes, let me introduce you, she will be pleased to know you."

A moment later, Mrs. Dwight, chancing to glance that way, saw her clerical son bowing to a most bewitching toilet—the face she could not see. At dinner she asked him who it was.

"A new student at the villa, a Miss Leslie, and altogether the handsomest girl I ever met. She is a mere child, natural and sweet as a pansy, at least something in face or toilet suggested my favorite flower."

That was the beginning, and soon Maxwell Dwight became a frequent caller at the Villa LaRue. Soon he asked Madame's permission to address Bab personally. It was just after the conversation noted above with his mother, and Max was sanguine in this his first real love affair. He and Madame had a long talk, in which she told him all she knew of the girl's history; but what he heard only seemed to intensify his regard.

"If her friend is willing, I shall try and find her mother's people, when the vacation gives me more time," Madame said. She had not mentioned Harold's name, as both he and Bab had requested her to not do so.