

Fact and Fancy for Women.

BY ELLA HIGGINSON.

THE DARKEST HOUR.

The darkest hour is just before the dawn—
Cheer up, dear heart, and fling aside thy care;
Why, there are roses blooming everywhere,
In the humblest spot as on the rich man's lawn.

The clouds are blackest just before the shower,
But after—how the birds go mad for joy!
The sweetest things, lasting too long, will cloy—
And just before the dawn the darkest hour.

See, shuddering in the woods, the dark-eyed fawn,
Crouching until the storm has spent its force;
Then, with new courage, leaping on its course—
So, after the darkest hour, dear heart, the dawn.

Oh, never let hope die till life is gone!
I tell you, sweet, whatever fate befall,
Be true and pure, and you will conquer all—
The darkest hour is just before the dawn.

One can readily understand why Tolstoi lives the simple life of the peasant, following his horses and his plough through the fields. One wearies of all modes of living, but, most of all, does one weary of the world. I never ride out through green, wet woods and come upon a little cabin nestling in a lonely "clearing" but I envy the simple lot of the people who dwell therein. In the cities—even in villages—there are always sin and temptation, many-headed and black of soul; there is always unrest. But out in the woods is only peace—sweet peace. I know a long avenue through massive and silver alder trees that meet above and let only scattering loops of gold slip through and tremble upon your pathway. To pass through is like unto walking with bowed head and reverent tread through the sacred aisles of some dim, old cathedral; your breath comes silently, almost painfully, with the ecstasy of living, and you wish that your horse's feet were shod with velvet; you feel sorry for the threads of grass and the dappled clovers that go down beneath them; you turn aside that the ugliest worm and the slimiest toad may go on their way rejoicing; you do not even shrink from the golden serpents that go sliding away through the quivering rushes and the great satin leaves, where yellow lilies curl their soft petals lazily outward to the scented dusk—for it is always dim and sweet beneath these trees, and there are always blossoms falling, falling, like the noiseless tears of women. The alder trees stand like tall, pale ghosts, with thin, restless arms stretched up to heaven, and the sea winds, wearying a little with their long journey inland, play tear-drenched tunes—like unto songs of lost love and dead hopes—upon their shivering, silver leaves; dewdrops and raindrops lie in linked chains on every fern, save where an innocent-eyed fawn or a gray rabbit has dashed through and shaken them out on the air. There is a long border of pink and blue flowers on either side, with now and then a dandelion flaming among them. And, lo! here is a thicket of dead vines, leafless, gray in tint, but with so many millions of delicate fibres twisting and blending together that it is like one soft, purple haze with rings of quivering gold lying upon it. All is still. But suddenly there is a flutter, and a bird calls, "Tu-wheet!" Instantly, as if in surprised delight, the answer comes, "Tu-wheet! Tu-wheet-wheet!" And, then, the whole forest is alive; and a very shower of long, glad, tremulous, lyrical "tu-wheet, tu-wheet, tu-wheet, tu-wheets" swell, tremble, shake and throb over the leaping, sensitive chords of your soul.

Oh, you who would worship—come away from the costly churches and the velvet pews and the hollow mockeries! Here is a light that sifts through these turning leaves such as never a stained-glass window gave; here is a carpet richer and softer than ever was on the floor of a church; here is a dome whose tender frescoes would make an artist mad of passionate envy, and billowy curtains that are never twice the same in form or color. Here are fountains of living water in the lily urns, and such a choir as never before lifted its voice to a listening heaven; and here it is God Himself who speaks to you in a thousand voices of hope and entreaty and love, and with an infinite mercy and tenderness in his heart—such as never was in the heart of man. Come—with solemn step and reverent mind, and soul uplifted above the world of care and passion and sin—and kneel, kneel, for here is sweet peace.

Young women are not so eager to exchange an independent maidenhood for marriage as they used to be. They are inclined to look, not so much at what a man has, but at what he is. Instead of being asked for an estimate of his worldly goods, his yearly income, his ideas as to what a wife's regular allowance should be, and all those *et ceteras* that used to weigh so heavily with practical parents and marriageable daughters, the young man who goes a-wooing to-day is liable to be taken up short with such questions: "What are your habits?" "What are your morals?" "Where do you pass your leisure hours?" "Do you gamble?" "Do you drink?" "Do you frequent saloons?"—and unless the answers are satisfactory, thank God! our young women are gathering sufficient sense and independence to earn their own living and pass young men of loose morals by, no matter how heavy their pocket books may be, or how many ancestors they may have trailing like ghosts down the dead years behind them, or how many honorables their relatives may have bought and tacked to their names. To be honest and independent! My dear girl, there is nothing in the whole world like it. Gold, honor, fame, beauty—all fade to insignificance beside the woman who stands up proudly before the world, secure in her own convictions as to what is right and what is wrong, and says firmly, but with infinite gentleness, to the man who loves her, and whom, perhaps, she already loves: "No; I will not sink to your level. I will do all in my power to lift you to mine, and, if you rise, you will never regret it, for those who dwell in this high, pure atmosphere have exquisite pleasures that those who grovel upon the earth never know. Think upon it, and take your choice; leave your past life and you may have my love, strong, pure, deathless, as only the love of a woman who does not yield lightly can be; cling to your past life, or to anything which will shrink before my clear eyes, and you may never so much as lay your lips upon the hem of my gown." The edelweiss—that rarest and purest of snow flowers—never looks downward, but always upward; and it is only gathered once in a while by one who climbs to it.

Do not judge too harshly a man's past life. So much depends upon circumstances, influences, companions. But judge him sternly after he once professes to love you. Make no allowance for him then, or the day will come when you will regret it in heartaches and passionate tears. If he does not love you well enough to give up bad habits for your sake, I ask