

The TREMULOUS TIME

by E. F. BENSON.

The Story of a Battle Between a Young and an Older Sister for the Affections of a Man—All the More Deadly Because It Is Unconscious, and Because Fate Is the Umpire.

MRS. FENTON belonged to that most oppressive class of domestic tyrants which, while it rules with a rod of spoked iron, adopts the injured pose of being tyrannized over. Her tyrant, according to her own attitude about the matter, was her older daughter, Janet, who for the last 15 years, since Mrs. Fenton had decided to be an invalid, had devoted herself untiringly, though often tired, to her mother's selfish comfort, and had lived with her and for her in perpetual and thankless self-sacrifice, the butt of querulous complaints and unfounded reproaches. But at the outset it must be premised that Janet had not, for this reason, been unhappy; indeed, the absolute contrary was nearer the truth, since she was one of those women, rare perhaps but blessedly existent, who find in service to another their own completion.

Partly by ill luck, partly because her mother had never given her any of the opportunities which usually fall to the lot of girls, Janet had remained unmarried, and no man had come to fulfill for her the wifely and motherly destiny for which she seemed so clearly marked out. Handsome and capable, her large heart had lavished its eager tenderness on her mother, and since she was far too busy to spend herself on day dreams, it is probable that she had not missed with any poignant sense of loss the tremendous time which is a girl's due, since there never had been anybody to be tremulous about, and what we may call imaginative tremulousness was not in the least in Janet's line.

This morning, as she sat, mallet in hand, on the edge of the croquet lawn, while her sister Daisy, 15 years her junior, went pitilessly through hoop after hoop with diabolical precision—if any one so pretty as Daisy could have anything in common with diabolism—the secret train of her thought, now familiar to her, sang through her head.

It was three months ago that Harry Grayton had come to occupy the lawned and shrubberied house next to Mrs. Fenton's and from the first had shown himself an assiduously sociable neighbor. Like most of the inhabitants of Heathmoor, that comfortable suburb, he spent his day in the city, but the evenings were few on which there was not some intercourse between the two houses. Sometimes he dropped in to tea, and sometimes Janet and her mother dined with him, for Mrs. Fenton was of that class of invalids whose debility does not debar them from doing anything that they think will amuse them; and oftener yet he came in from his bachelor establishment for an hour after dinner, and read to them or had wonderful inspirations for Mrs. Fenton's perennial game of Patience, while on Sunday it had become a settled thing, not needing ratification, that he should lunch with them.

Then, a month ago, Daisy had come back home from a long tour abroad with an uncle, and had entered with all her gaiety and charm into this delightful companionship. It was as if Harry Grayton had become a long lost brother, and yet, as Janet's heart told her, it was not as a brother that she looked on him, since for brothers the heart does not flower in the manner she knew her own was blossoming. And sometimes she thought—this was a thought that from her long habit of suppression she instinctively covered up again—that it was not as a sister only that he looked on her. She covered the thought up, but she covered it with rose leaves.

Janet, as she saw this plateau of middle age on which she had set foot in flower around her, had suffered her eye to wander from the long window of the drawing room, and was startled to hear her mother's thin, querulous voice at her elbow.

"Perhaps you don't feel disposed to drive with me this morning, Janet," she said. "I will go alone, then. I quite understand; you must find it very dull driving with an invalid like me."

Janet jumped up. "But I had no idea you were ready, mother dear," she said. "I was waiting for you. I was but playing croquet till you came. Let us start at once." Mrs. Fenton gave a sour little sigh. "Perhaps it is hardly worth while going now," she said; "I have been waiting so long. I think I had better go in again and tell Clements I shall not drive today."

Janet put down her mallet. "The carriage only came round five minutes ago," she said. "Of course, we will start

at once. Daisy, we'll finish after lunch, unless you finish before."

Mrs. Fenton slowly drifted towards the house. She had, of course, every intention of taking her drive. "I am sorry you are so late this morning," she said, "as I had thought it would be so pleasant to go round by the river. But it is of no consequence. It does not matter if I am disappointed."

"But indeed it does," said Janet briskly, "and you are not going to be disappointed. There is plenty of time. Now, your cape and a rug."

"Just as you wish, dear," said Mrs. Fenton, getting in, "but I shall be stifled with a cape on this warm morning."

"Very well, then, you shan't have your cape. All right, Clements. The road by the river."

The two fat horses broke into a slow, ponderous trot, and Mrs. Fenton considered what she could complain about next. This morning she wanted to harass Janet first, as by artillery fire, before delivering a more hand-to-hand assault later. An opportunity occurred immediately, for on emerging from the sheltered drive they encountered a cool breeze, and Mrs. Fenton gave a prolonged shiver.

"I should have brought my cape with

me," she said faintly, "but you were in such a hurry to have everything your own way. I could have laid it on the seat opposite, and put it on when we met the wind. I am afraid I have already caught another cold and shall make myself a burden to you again."

Janet instantly took off her jacket and spread it over her mother's shoulders. "Now you'll be comfortable," she said, encouragingly.

Mrs. Fenton regarded the braid-trimmed edge that lay on her arm. "I feel that your beautiful jacket is far too smart for me, dear," she said. "Every one will wonder where I got such pretty clothes. And will you move

a little more to your side of the carriage? My left arm pains me very much this morning, and you keep nudging it. Thank you, dear. And now you have disarranged the rug. There is a great deal of dust, is there not? We should have been wiser not to come round by the river."

"But you wanted to," said Janet. "No, dear, I said we had better not go round by the river. I remember deliberately saying that, as we were so late in starting. I do not know what time we shall get lunch. It is unfortunate, for I did not feel inclined for my breakfast this morning."

Mrs. Fenton cast a sideways glance at her daughter, and saw on her face that expression which meant that Janet was feeling the effect of this battering. It was time to begin the serious subject.

"There is something," she said, "which I feel it my duty to speak of to you, dear. It is difficult; I had hoped I should never be obliged to say anything to you on such a subject, but I find I must. It concerns our pleasant neighbor, Mr. Grayton. There is no doubt that he is very much attracted

toward Daisy, and though I find it hard to believe that you have not noticed that, I am willing to think you have not."

She gave a pained sigh and again looked sideways at Janet, who she saw was sitting very still and upright, gazing fixedly at Clements' broad back.

"I hardly got a wink of sleep last night," she continued, "with thinking of the painful things I must say to you. It is a very unsisterly attitude you are adopting, Janet, for I have noticed that you are always with them, and never give him a chance to be alone with Daisy. I am afraid it must be that because you never married yourself you wish your only sister to remain single. It is clear what his intentions are towards Daisy."

"Daisy," exclaimed Janet involuntarily. "Yes, Daisy," said her mother, sharply. "What is more likely than that he should be attracted by Daisy? What else could account for his coming here as often as he does? It is not to be supposed, I imagine, that he finds much to attract him in you or me."

Janet, to her intense annoyance, knew that her color was mounting. She felt that she would almost rather have parted with every drop of blood in her body than be betrayed by it like this. She felt, too, that her mother's chilly eye was on her.

"Janet, you don't mean to tell me that you thought it was you—" began Mrs. Fenton.

Janet faced round to her mother. "Ah, you have no right to say or suppose that," she said. "You tell me that Mr. Grayton is attracted by Daisy, that you feel sure of it. Let me tell you that such a thing has never, never occurred to me. You shall see if I get in his way! Now, let us talk about something else. I quite understand. There! We have come down to the river and the road is dusty no longer."

Mrs. Fenton (it was one of her more amiable characteristics) did not, so to speak, mutilate the dead when she was sure they were slain. She had made up her mind that she could not get on without Janet, and had now taken steps to secure her. But, to do her justice, she had never quite thought that Mr. Grayton had any real intention of asking Janet to leave her, and consequently when she saw what excellent friends he had become with Daisy (whom her mother could easily spare) she had persuaded herself that it was Daisy he desired. Daisy, also, was remarkably fond of her own way, and did not make her mother nearly so comfortable as Janet did. Besides, Janet at 35 was quite clearly marked out for perpetual spinsterhood, and though her mother—and she faintly knew it—was the probably direct cause of her having remained single, she rather despised Janet for not having a home of her own. And with a sense of duty done, she called to Clements to put the horses to a rather brisker speed.

From that morning forward Janet gently and systematically disengaged herself from Daisy and Harry Grayton, and did it with a skill that made the result seem both to him and her sister fortuitous and natural. From her habit of attention to her mother and her anticipation of the thousand little wants of that sturdy, tyrannous invalid, she had acquired a great sense of detail, and now minutely and undetected she drifted away from them. She abated not one jot of her cordiality to them, but with a baffling ingenuity found a natural reason for doing something else when any proposal was made that should throw the three together. If croquet was suggested, she would recollect an important business letter that must be written; she would disentangle herself from conversation, leaving the two tote-a-tete beneath the red flowering hawthorn, and if from the window of her room that looked out on to the lawn she could not prevent herself, as she sat with a book with leaves long returned on her knees, from stealing a

glance every now and then at the two figures there, none but she knew. Thus to efface herself was comparatively easy—she had but to walk away and the thing was done. What was far more difficult was to preserve the eager cordiality of her manner when she was with them, and infinitely more difficult of all was to keep the friend-

liness which her manner represented bright and unburnished in her heart. She had thought, before her mother spoke to her, that all she had missed in youth was coming to her, that before the dew fell from her flowers the dew was going to touch and renew them. Now she had to school herself to see them drop, to let her late awakening love turn and fall asleep again, not with tears and bitterness, but with a smile on its lips. That was the hardest of all, that she should not grudge or envy Daisy, who had youth and gaiety and prettiness as her allies, but Janet had to be her ally also, to turn over to her all that in her inmost heart she had believed was going to be her own, and, as if Daisy had not got enough already, to give her him, about whom she had begun, humbly and passionately, to weave her day dreams. "The stuff that dreams are made of..." she was realizing that there is no material in the world one-half so precious.

It speaks volumes for the success with which Janet accomplished these heart-rending maneuvers that Harry Grayton did not for many days observe that any maneuvers were in progress. Often as the evenings lengthened he paid the women next door a visit when he got back from his work in the city, and there was nothing to marvel at if one day Janet was driving with her mother, or on another that she had gone into the town to post some letters. But no man in his senses could find cause for complaint when Daisy was so charmingly willing to amuse him till Janet's return, and if, when she got back, their game of croquet was in a critical state, it was the most natural thing in the world that she should urge them to finish it, and that when it was done there was no time to think of beginning another before dinner. But by degrees it dawned on him that Janet had, so to speak, interposed a glass partition between herself and her mother, so that, though her smiling, welcoming face was visible, he was cut off from her, and no personal communication passed.

It was about a month after this changed state of affairs began that, finding business in the city slack, he caught an earlier train home and arrived a couple of hours sooner than was usual. There had been a plan if the afternoon was fine they should take a picnic tea by the river, starting at 5 or thereabouts, but now, in obedience to some sudden motive of which he knew the analysis, he went straight from the station to Mrs. Fenton's house. Should he find her there, he could easily account for his presence by the suggestion that they should start on their little expedition sooner than they had intended, but he knew that this was not his reason. His reason was the desire to see Janet, and see her, if possible, alone. Perhaps at the root of his motive there was something stronger than that, but that was all he allowed to himself, the perception of how much he missed those hours' talk with her, before her charmingly pretty sister had appeared on the scene.

He was told at the house that she was in the garden, and with footsteps noiseless on the grass he went to the Summer house beneath the chestnut at the bottom of the lawn. He saw her before he was seen, saw, too, that she held a shut book on her knees. Next moment she turned her head toward him, an instinctively before she could suppress it, all her heart sprang in welcome of him to her eyes.

Then suddenly the glass partition shut down again, though all her usual cordiality was there.

"Ah, how early you are!" she said. "And what a lovely evening we shall have for our picnic. Daisy is out, I'm afraid. She will be back presently, and you can settle the vexed question as to which of you really is the better player. I shall back Daisy, I think. Or shall we start earlier for our picnic? I will see, shall I, if mother would like to do that?"

Janet knew that she was speaking nervously. She had been so surprised to see him. She wished he had not surprised her like that.

He did not answer for a moment, and his own motive in coming revealed itself to him.

"I haven't seen you for so long," he said. "At least, if I have seen you, it hasn't been really you. What has been the matter? What is it about?"

She made a gallant effort and laughed. She heard herself laugh and wondered if that sounded real.

"But what do you mean?" she said. "There's nothing the matter, is there?"

"Yes."

Janet suddenly felt her hand that held the unread book trembling.

"How mysterious!" she said. "What—what is it?"

He took one step toward her. "Janet, I've come for you," he said.

So the tremendous time dawned for her.

Shuffling the Pack

THE origin of playing cards is lost in obscurity. They are generally assigned to the Orient, but they are now almost universal in currency and popularity. The backs of the old English cards were generally plain, and thus it was that when paper was scarce or expensive old cards were too useful to be destroyed. They were, on the contrary, used for various purposes.

Thus they are often found in the bindings of old books, where they were preserved. The old cards were also sometimes cut up for paper dolls. They were also used as cards of invitation and as visiting cards. Thackeray refers to this in "Henry Esmond."

The earliest examples of wood cuts were intended for playing cards. They antedated the famous St. Christopher wood cut that is sometimes credited with being the earliest.

In the olden days playing cards, instead of knitting, were used by spectators in playhouses as an amusement while waiting for the performance to begin.

Such widely differing materials as silver, leather, paper, wood, parchment, cardboard, deer skin, and even buffalo hide have all been used in making playing cards.

Soldier's Message to His Wife.

London Times. Some of the best stories of the war come from the base hospitals, and are bestowed on the doctors in the same spirit that grateful patients bestow gifts on their medical attendants in civil life. One told recently by a soldier from the farther outposts in Mesopotamia. A Turkish officer, captured in the Mesopotamian campaign, asked and received permission to telegraph to his wife when he was about to be sent to Basra. His message read: "Safely captured."

