AFTERWARD

By Sarah Guernsey Bradley

Drawing by F. Graham Cootes

THE little clock on the long, low writing table ticked away busily and merrily, as all proper and well bred little clocks have a way of doing, no matter what fateful thing, life or death, or heaven or hell, may hang upon the next second. This particular one seemed to the restless, nervous listener fairly to revel in its utter irresponsibility; it was insistently carefree, exasperatingly so.

Twenty minutes of four! If he was coming, he would be here now in less than a quarter of an hour; for punctuality had ever been one of his cardinal virtues.

What a tragic medley life was, anyway! The woman covered her face for a moment with her tiny, black bordered handkerchief and sighed deeply. Why had it all happened? Then came the answering thought, the bitterest thought of all,—she alone was responsible, she had brought it all on herself! And for what? A little money, a little ease, a little position, and—infinite misery!

She raised her head and looked searchingly at the wonderful picture of Senator Hamilton that hung above the mantelpiece, at the piercing, cynical eyes, with their curious, half unpleasant smile. She thought of him in his last sickness, when disease had withered cynicism, and pain had silenced sneering, and she had come nearer to caring for him than in any of the years that had gone before. For her unsatisfied maternal instinct had filled her with great tenderness toward the sick and suffering,—her forgiveness knew no bounds in the presence of bodily ill and physical pain.

WITH a start her thoughts came back to the present. Ten minutes of four! She started toward the window. Crossing the room, she caught a glimpse of herself in a tremulous mirror, and so infinitely pleasing was the reflection of her chic little black robed self that the Eternal Feminine in her breathed a fervent, if unspoken, thanksgiving for widow's weeds in general, and for her own in particular.

The next moment she tried to be ashamed of the feeling; but the thought of the living Philip was so potent that her heart thumped joyously as she realized that he would find her quite as fair and vastly more attractive than when they had parted—an age ago it seemed to her, though it was really only seven dull, monotonous, horrid years.

Perhaps she had done wrong in sending for him. She had obeyed an impulse, and she had lived long enough to know that impulses are sometimes treacherous things.

However, she had taken the step, and she was glad that she had taken it. Coming suddenly upon that tiny item in yesterday's paper, announcing Philip Bishop's return, she had made up her mind on the spur of the moment. Seven years since she had seen him! People might undergo the most tremendous change in seven years. She hoped, she prayed, that he would be unlike her memory of him. She hoped that she had grown away from his point of view, that she had outgrown him mentally; that the manners she had thought perfection would seem formal and boorish now; that he had grown careless of his personal appearance; that his shoes, and his hands, and his ties would not be up to her present standard of excellence; and, finally, that he had grown fat and coarse, for men being her special detestation; in short, that he might be anything and everything except the Philip Bishop whom she remembered and for whom she had eaten her heart out during the years she had been Senator Hamilton's wife. Those lines from an old poem flashed across her mind:

> True to a vision, steadfast to a dream,
> Indelibly marred to remembrance—

Ah, if remembrance might only prove all! If she could prove to her own satisfaction that the man whose memory had been the haunting specter of her married life, whose unforgettable personality had been his own best revenge, if she could prove that this man was entirely a creature of her own imagination, if she could truthfully admit to her own soul that she had been grossly mistaken, that she had deified a man most commonplace and ordinary, that the real Philip was as far inferior to the Dream Philip as a bit of paste to a crown jewel,—then she could to a vague extent justify to herself her marriage to Senator Hamilton, she could partially regain her self respect, she could begin life afresh, free from carking remembrances. And if he should prove the Philip of old, the Philip of her dreams and memories, then—at the thought her heart beat riotously, her breath came in queer little gasps—then—well, then, though self justification and self respect might not be hers, there was something greater and better and bigger than those put together, greater than all things in the world. And she was young!—her mirror, even at its most unflattering moments, told her there was nothing of the hag in her appearance. And—she smoothed out the folds of her black gown almost lovingly—she was rich!

The calm, impersonal little note she had sent him had given no hint or inkling of the turmoil in her soul. She opened a drawer in her writing table (yesterday, in her nervousness, she had had to write two notes, the first being a mass of blots and blurs and palsied letters) and glanced at the inky duplicate of her note:

> MY DEAR PHILIP,—I have just read of your return, and I should so like to see you after all these years. If you have nothing better to do to-morrow afternoon, say about four o'clock, will you not drop in to see
>
> Your old friend, ELIZABETH HAMILTON?

"I Love You and I Glory in It!"

She shut the drawer again and glanced impatiently at the insolent little clock. Half after four! Could it be possible that he had not received her note? Yet she had mailed it herself, early yesterday morning. Suppose he had received it, and—she flushed angrily at the thought—meant to punish her by utter silence and absence. And yet he had said to her seven years ago, said it in the face of all her heartlessness, "Betty, no matter what, I love you, I forgive you. If I can ever help you in any way, send for me, and, no matter where I am, no matter what I am, I will go to you." Every syllable had burned into her soul. Through the darkest, blackest hours when, in the vast deeps of bitterness and despair, she would gladly have sacrificed everything for the touch of his hand or the sound of his voice, those words had been to her a very tower of strength. And yet the little clock insisted that it was quite half after four, and the man of the comfortable words was half an hour late.

AND then—so absorbed had she been in her reverie that the sound of the tiny electric bell had fallen on unheeding ears—she suddenly heard an unforgotten voice say, "I think Mrs. Hamilton expected me," and Philip Bishop stood before her,—not the Philip who was to justify her marriage and restore her self respect, but the Philip of old, the Philip of her dreams and memories, only more to be honored, more to be loved, more to be desired, than ever.

The room seemed to grow dark for an instant. She caught hold of a chair to steady her trembling body; then, with face as white as marble, she went forward to meet him, and, putting out a cold little hand, said brokenly, "Philip, it was good of you to come!"

"It was good of you to ask me, Betty," he answered, pressing her hand warmly. "I—I have sometimes felt as if Fate had put us at the opposite corners of the world for good and all," his perfectly self possessed tone and unembarrassed smile had a stimulating effect on Betty. Her color came back, her refractory heart began to beat normally, and her soul thrilled with the thought that he was Philip, and she was Betty, that they were together, and that the gods were good.

"Let us sit in front of the fire just as we used to, shall we, Philip? And then you must tell me everything you have been and done and thought. I'll be your confessor."

"Nothing much to confess, Betty,—lots of work, some play, a little success." Philip sank back in the comfortable chair and glanced appreciatively round the room. "What an attractive room this is! Just the sort of place I have often pictured you in."

Betty thought it rather tiresome of him to admire the setting before glancing at the gem; but at his next remark she smoothed her ruffled plumage.

"You don't look a day older, Betty! By Jove! you're even prettier than you used to be, and I shouldn't have believed that possible!" His eyes rested admiringly on the bright brown eyes, the wavy brown hair with its tantalizing dash of gold, and the clear pink and white skin, where, abashed by its beauty, Time, that injudicious

Continued on page 15