THE FOURTH VOLUME.

A TALK ABOUT A GOOD WIFE.

By AGATHA HART.

"That like a jewel has hung twenty years
About his neck, and never lost her lustre.
That loves him with that excellence
That angels love good men with."
SHAKESPEARE (*Henry VIII.*).

"She will do him good, and not evil, all the days of her life."—*Proverbs* xxxiii.

"I needs must disobey him for his good:
How should I dare obey him to his harm?
Needs must I speak out, though he kill me for it."
TENNYSON (*Enid and Geraint*).

THIS is essentially an age of crazes, and perhaps at the present moment the most universal craze of all is that of novel writing. Be we titled ladies or briefless barristers, Girton girls, Broad Church clergymen, or esoteric Buddhists, one and all we have discovered that we can write something in the form of a story; therefore we will and do—some to creep languidly through one-third of our first edition, thence to oblivion; some to be in large demand at Mudie's, and to blossom forth gloriously on Mr. W. H. Smith's bookstalls down all the lines. As a natural consequence, there are a great many "heroines" (for so we call every insignificant miss who happens to form the centre of a story), who one after another come forward and claim the attention of the novel-reading public.

There are many species of the genus heroine; we have the philanthropic girl, who by living six months in Whitechapel, and the rest of her life in Park-lane, effects the long-postponed union of East and West; the American girl, who is so marvellously beautiful, and talks such execrable English, and is a living advertisement for M. Wörth; the mesmeric and theosophical girl, whose extraordinary knowledge of the wisdom of the Egyptians and of Indian and Assyrian lore is only surpassed by her horrible uncanniness; the religious girl, who converts the Agnostic and marries the curate; and a host of other girls, perhaps summed up best under the head "Eccentric."

Now, whatsoever these young ladies achieve or whatsoever they suffer in the first and second volumes, I often feel when I close the third volume, losing my heroine in a mist of white satin and odours of orange blossom, a certain dissatisfaction. It is all very well, and I hope—indeed, I sometimes believe—that Dorothy and Ethel, and all the rest of the dear creatures, were really good girls, and would make capital wives. Nevertheless, I cannot help wondering about their after life, and what they felt like when Hubert and Arthur began to grow bald and look portly, and to take naps after dinner. Seriously, though, I want to know, have they been put to a thorough test? Have they gone through the real trials of a woman's life, and come out truly ripened into heroines? And to this question I am too often reluctantly compelled to say "No." The burdens they have had to carry through three volumes were laid on strong young shoulders; the sorrows came upon hearts that were too irresistibly young and hopeful to be permanently injured; the glamour of their own youth and beauty sweetened all their life for them, even though they did not recognise it. They have done well as far as they have gone, but, after all, have we not only followed them to the great doorway of woman's experience, and there bidden them adieu? Over this threshold the majority of our novelists persistently refuse to lead us, and have thereby done some mischief; for with the thoughtless and unobservant many, who look on life from the three-volume-novel standpoint, married life and middle age have come to mean at best a humdrum, "unromantic" affair, and most usually a gradual disillusioning and a settling down to "make the best of it."

This silence of our novelists betrays to my mind a certain cowardice in themselves and unreality in their writings; they are afraid of the seeming unattractiveness of middle age and the quiet of old age, not having sufficiently studied the human beings around them to learn that the truest tests, the possibilities of purest heroism, of deepest tragedy—surely good materials for romance!—are contained, not so much in the third as in the fourth volume of life.

With this fact in view, I am going to put before my readers a little pen-and-ink sketch of a character that I know and love well—the character of an old wife.

She and her husband have had what most people call "a hard struggle" all their married life—a harder struggle for her than for him, for she was not going to let him know how difficult it often was to dress the children warmly enough, to give them meat often enough, and to keep any fire in the grate after coals had "risen." Many is the time that she has left him in his study in a blissful unconsciousness of the true state of the household funds, to rack her brains and contrive all the morning how to make those two vexatious ends meet—and how to avoid debt, which to her upright soul means disgrace.

It is true that they have had brighter times, but they have been but opportunities for them to help others less fortunate than themselves—much poorer relations, and in two instances their own children (one who had heavy business losses, and the other an unfortunate marriage)—who have drained their resources heavily, and have never been able to repay.

He (the husband) is a poet, with in some degree the virtues and vices of a poet. He is sensitive, generous, with a certain noble way of looking on men that has made him free of all uncharity. He cannot believe that anyone will ever swindle him until he has been thoroughly "sold," and even then he can forgive and forget much sooner than that good wife of his. Yet he has a poet's selfishness added to that of the man. He has often done a rashly generous deed, for which his wife and family have suffered afterwards, probably more than he; but she has never complained. His is a dependent nature, partly because his study has been all his world to him, and outside of it he is like a bewildered child, partly because her strong, protective, responsible love has made him so. Yet is he sometimes obstinately independent, when to lean on her were the better way. He has led a good life, thanks partly to his gift, that has kept him dreaming very purely in the midst of a too wideawake world, partly to the sturdy uprightness and purity of his wife, and partly to his own innate refinement.

But this is not all. This man is a disappointed man. His art, to which, God knows, he has been as faithful as his wife has been to him, has, it is true, been acknowledged to be of a high order; there was a great run on his earlier work; but things have been going badly for some time past, and though some of his most recent work is probably his best, he has had to recognise the fact that he is fading out of notice. "They are burying me before I am dead," he has said, sadly enough. His exquisite music, his fine restraint in feeling and in form, are losing all hold on a public whose literary palate is vitiated with the startling and striking productions of the writers of *vers de société*.

It is hard for an artist to always realise that true art will exist long after the silly novelty-seeking generation that now ignores it has gone to its own place, and, possibly, to judgment, for its stupid sins. At all events, this man cannot always realise it, and his mild nature has become changed by disappointment, like sweet milk soured under wrong conditions.

Herein lies the difficulty of the wife. This is just the time when if all that had been owing were paid, if things went still well in the book way, they would have been able to take that dear little cottage in the country, and to buy that charming little pony chaise of which she has secretly dreamed so long a time. It would have been so sweet to settle down with him to a quiet country life; to sit and knit in that bright, old-fashioned garden, while he smoked his pipe in the little rose-mantled porch or wandered dreamily about the common beyond; to be free of the terror of tradesmen's books; to be able to devote every instant of her time to tending him, instead of in planning and worrying how to pay the servants' wages and keep up a little appearance; to have a pony trap to rest the limbs that are getting undoubtedly rheumatic, however fiercely the brave heart may try to deny it. It is just the time when to have these things would be very, very delightful; but, as she says, God has willed otherwise, and, instead, she finds this is the very time when she must buckle to for the last and hardest struggle—a double struggle, with want and with a moral failure in her husband. She sees with terror in her heart that he is seeking a false comfort, that he is striving to forget his present disappointment by building up for himself a future despair.

Now must she put herself—not for the first time, certainly, but firmer than ever before—in exact opposition to him. What pain it is to her, who would fain run smoothly with him to the end, is past description. It is true that the rebuke of love is a weapon whose handle hurts more than the blade. She knows only too well that it will make a breach between them; but she is determined, because she has an old-fashioned faith in God that He will show her dear one why she did it in the day when He wipes away all tears. It is difficult, though; for his treatment of her was indifferent enough before, though she has scarcely owned it to herself. She has so often seen him courteous and affectionate with friends when he has been careless in his manner to her. He is accustomed to her; there is such an ordinariness about their relations. When things go wrong in the study, he visits it upon her. He shows her every passing cloud of depression, but is not so particular about sharing his sunshiny moments with her. The tender graciousness of the old love-time seems dead within him, except she be ill and broken down. Then there seems to open a long-closed chamber in his heart full of memories—her light-hearted youth before he married her, that look in her eyes when he awoke from his

long illness and found her bending over him, her patience in her own suffering—all these things float before his mind like the odour of faded roseleaves, and he wanders about the house like a disconsolate child with tears in his eyes and a sickness at heart. Yes, he needs her terribly, he loves her deeply; but when she is well again he is as ordinary, nay, as indifferent, as ever.

People are always saying of this old white-haired poet: "How wonderfully young-hearted he is, how fresh his art, how exquisite is the romantic atmosphere of his books!" And she who sees daily only too much of his prose-life, rejoices in their praise, and stores it away in her heart. These same people sometimes wonder among themselves, however he came to marry such a good, prosaic, unromantic little body as she! Prosaic? Why, her love for him is part of the great poetry of the world—a great spirit that has become incarnate from time to time to save the world from becoming a howling wilderness, and that will never leave it. You know it and love it in Penelope, in that patient Griselda, in that dear Nuttebrowne Mayde, in sweet Enid; and her it is fully as deserving of your attention and love, in this quiet nineteenth century housewife. Unromantic? I tell you she looks on him with the eyes of a girl, his white hair to her has all the glory of a halo, his face is still to her the type of all that is purest and dearest and goodliest in manhood, and one word of ordinary love from his lips is to her dearer than precious stones. Her love will be a clear steady flame when his books are ashes.

Perhaps he does not know it, but it is a fact, that he could if he liked make her life a far lighter and brighter one. A little compliment, a little expression of regret if she be obliged to leave him for a day—these set her heart singing for days. If he had only eyes to see he would note the quick flush on the worn face, the tears that spring to her eyes at the unaccustomed tenderness; but either he cannot or will not see it: and so this old woman, whose large and loving heart is as hungry as a young girl's for an answering love, goes mutely and patiently on starvation rations.

Sometimes, alas! it is worse then this; because he is rather ashamed, he grows angry when she is standing between him and his temptation, like a guardian angel with face of flint and a heart weeping tears of blood, and he will say a cruel and a bitter thing. I once saw a daisy that had thrust its bright little face through the earth, yearning towards the sun, and glad to add another beauty to the world; and then some careless passer-by pushed a stone from the path upon its face, and I found the patient thing underneath, with its stem broken, and all the hope stricken out of it—it seemed to me a type of the strangest ingratitude.

She cannot often in word betray her great and full love for him; he is not demonstrative, so she fears to worry him; though, if he but knew it, her arms are always round him, everything that meets his eyes is the result of her careful study of his wants, and her secret service thereof. But, if he be ailing or unhappy, she has the right to open all the floodgates of her great love; she waits upon him day and night; she takes his head upon her breast, and watches him with the divine look of a mother looking on her child; she soothes, and comforts, and binds up, and leaves him only to weep with joy and gratitude that trouble has driven him back to her heart again, and to pray for greater wisdom in guiding and helping him.

Her greatest happiness is to see him happy; her greatest fear is lest the stress and strain of life should wear her out, and she should have to go and leave him behind—despite her strong faith in God, her passionate belief in her hero, an awful question looms ever before her: What would then become of him?

It is a strange, a difficult position that she has to maintain: this man she loves has failings; if she had not loved him as angels love, they would probably have been sins; if she had not loved him at all, they might have been crimes. He has been a good man always, but the finer restraint of manhood is fast slipping into the querulous, self-indulgent weakness of disappointed old age, so she must place herself between this man—whom she has loved and honoured, whom she ever will love and honour, who has been her hero, her type of good manhood, and who must and shall be her hero to the last—between this man and his faults, and must bear, too, the consequent unjust reproach, and the anger, and the misunderstanding.

She can but see the greater cause for loving him in all this, and strangles the suggestion of disappointment at the moment of its birth as if it were a poisonous viper, and clings like the obstinate creature she is to her old ideal. She is praying, imploring, her idol not to come down from his pedestal, which he is only too willing to do; and then with an innocent deceit, that almost deceives herself, she turns round triumphantly to her children and to the world, and bids them see how firm he stands.

Well, I have given you a slight sketch of the life of an old wife. I have made no story of it, related no one particular incident, and yet I cannot help hoping that I have in some way succeeded in showing you what matter of intense interest—the truest heroism, the completest self-sacrifice—is contained in the unpublished fourth volume of life.

I have not touched on the subject of the influence of good husbands on wives, not because there are few of the former, for there are thousands and thousands of wives who would do well to daily go "down on their knees and thank Heaven fasting for a good man's love;" but because I am writing chiefly for girls, to whom it is always well to hold up types of good womanhood, for one thing; and because, if this should meet the eyes of any man who may be growing a little indifferent, if only in manner, to the wife whom he really loves and needs, I would wish to put before him the case of one of the many wives who, with a little more love and recognition of their services, might, in the words of the quaint ballad, be made more "comfortable." That,

"Here may he see that women be
In love meek, kynde, and stable;
Let never men reprove them, then,
Or call them variable:
But rather pray God that they may
To them be comfortable."

Such a man as I have alluded to will not learn much of the truth from his novel-reading, for, as Chaucer says, "clerkes preisen women but a lite." This is quite true in one way: these "clerkes" write fairly and chivalrously enough about a girl in her teens, but they forget her or do not "preisen" her much in her married life. She is only then introduced into their books as a background mamma of the heroine. or in the very undesirable character of the ill-used or the fast wife who falls in love with her husband's friend.

These facts, I think, furnish sufficient reason why I should have called attention to the good wife rather than to the good husband.

One word more before I lay down my pen. Let not my readers imagine, from the way in which I have spoken of this wife, that I do not recognise that other side of the love of a woman for a man. I know only too well about it, but I feel little need for dwelling on it, seeing that it gives the keynote to a large percentage of the novels of to-day. There is far more truth and good to be learned from the brighter side of the question. Women have certainly made men brutes and devils, but they have also made—thank God, they are always making—bad men good men, good men heroes, and heroes saints.

And this is the secret of their power. Through trouble and loss, advancing age and all the prosaic trials of life that are turning the glowing heart of a man into ashes, the wife holds with one hand so passionately firm him she loves best in all the world, and with the other clings with such a grand persistence to her young undimmed ideal that, in spite of himself, the man is constrained to rise at least halfway into the measure of its stature.

VARIETIES.

THE VALUE OF LABOUR.—Cast iron of the value of £1 sterling is worth, converted into ordinary machinery, £4; in larger ornamental work, £45; in buckles and similar kinds of fancy work, £600; in neck chains, £1,300. Bar iron of the value of £1 sterling is worth in the form of knives, £36; needles, £70; penknife blades, £950; polished buttons and buckles, £890; balance springs of watches, £5,000.

THE COOK'S LESSON.

Dean Swift had a shoulder of mutton brought up for his dinner too much done; he sent for the cook and told her to take the mutton down and do it less.

"Please your honour, I can't do it less."

"But," says the Dean, "if it had not been done enough you could have done it more, could you not?"

"Oh, yes, very easily."

"Well, then," said the Dean, "for the future, when you commit a fault, let it be such a one as can be mended."

THE MARRIAGES OF FAMOUS MEN.

Shakespeare was 18 years old when he married; Bulwer, Dante, and Franklin, 24; Burke, Mozart, and Sir Walter Scott, 26; Lord Byron, Napoleon I., and Washington, 27; Rossini, 30, and a second time at 54; Schiller, and C. M. von Weber, 31; Chaucer, Hogarth, and Wieland, 32; Aristophanes, 36; Wellington, 37; Talma, 39; Martin Luther, 42; Addison, 44; Swift, 49; Buffon, 55; Goethe 57.

WINGED TIME.

"Tell me," said Laura, "what may be
The difference 'twixt a clock and me."

"Laura," I cried, "Love prompts my powers
To do the task you've set them:
A clock reminds us of the hours,
You cause us to forget them."

A WELL-MATCHED COUPLE.

A headstrong wife, who oft came in for blame,
When charged with scant obedience would reply—
"Why snarls my spouse? Our wishes are the same.
He would the ruler be, and so would I."