

DOCTOR WELD

OR, THE WEB OF LIFE.

BY M. M. BELL.



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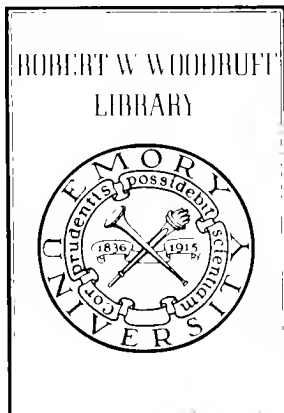
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DOCTOR WELD;

OR,

THE WEB OF LIFE.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF "DEEDS, NOT WORDS,"

ETC.

"The woof of life is dark, but it is shot with a warp of gold."

F. W. ROBERTSON.

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P R E F A C E.

THE story of "Doctor Weld" was written three years ago. It has therefore no connection whatever with a late criminal trial; nor has the manuscript been in the hands of the Author since that trial took place.

London, January 1, 1866.

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DOCTOR WELD.

CHAPTER I

PRELIMINARY.

“LINA, are you there?” And Sir Robert Hepburn roused himself from his afternoon nap, and looked round the library in which he sat.

“Yes, I am here.” And a tall, slight girl glided noiselessly from the window-seat where she had been reading, and knelt down by her grandfather’s elbow-chair. “You have slept more calmly to-day, grandpapa?” she said. Her accent was slightly foreign, but her voice so soft and low that the peculiar intonation was rather agreeable than otherwise.

“Yes, Lina. It soothes me to think that the Whim is likely soon to be inhabited.”

“You did not tell me how it came about that you heard of a tenant.”

“Why, the fellow M’Donald, M’Dougal—pshaw! what is his name?—was staying at “The George,” saw the house shut up, fancied the situation, and learning from Allen that it was to be let, wrote to me to inquire the terms.”

“Ah, that is good! You wish so much to have that house lived in once again?”

“I do, indeed, Lina. It was to the Whim I carried your grandmother when I married. It was there my eldest son was born, and your Aunt Upton also.”

“And papa?” Lina timidly asked; but Sir Robert either did not hear the question, or did not choose to answer it, for he went on, unheeding her interruption.

“And therefore I cannot bear to see it going to wrack and ruin simply from the absurd idea in the

country that Sir Cosmo 'walks'! Ah, Lina, it was another place in my young days from what it is now. The Whim and Kinburn were full of life and jayaunce then, very different from the monotonous life you lead here, my poor child, shut up in this dull, desolate, old house, with only your cross grandfather as company."

"Not cross, grandpapa!" she exclaimed, eagerly—"never cross to me! And if you but knew what a miserable life you took me from, you would believe me when I say that this quiet, homely—*home-like*," she added hastily, correcting her foreign phraseology—"home-like old Kinburn has been a very paradise to me for these two years past."

"Poor dear little girl! poor Lina!" the old man answered, a little fretfully, but stroking, as he spoke, her upturned face. "It was a pity I did not know you sooner, but it can't be helped now, so let us say no more about it. Bygones must be bygones, my dear."

"I know," she answered, conquering her emotion, though with difficulty; "but sometimes I cannot quite keep back all my gratitude to you."

"Tut, tut, child! Nonsense to talk to me of gratitude. You are my natural heiress, though I wish you had been a boy instead of a girl. Confound it! why should my only male grandchild be an Upton, and my only female one a Hepburn, I wonder? But," with a long-drawn sigh, "as poor James the Fifth said, 'The land cam' with a lass and will go with a lass.'"

Lina was silent anxious yet doubtful how to turn the conversation from, so dangerous a channel. Till suddenly remembering the point from which it had diverged, she asked, naively: "This Mr. M'Lean, M'Dougal—this tenant to be of grandpapa's—is he a man of family?"

Sir Robert caught eagerly at the inquiry. "Why, my dear, I really don't know. Allen says he looks like a gentleman, and his name has a good ring in it, though, after all, I do not think it is either M'Lean or M'Dougal."

Lina laughed a clear, ringing laugh at this answer. "Ah, forgive me that I am still so foreign in my speech. I meant to ask, *has* he a family—a wife, daughters, sons?"

Sir Robert laughed also. "So, Miss Lina," he said

mockingly, "this paradise of a Kinburn lacks an Adam, does it?"

Lina blushed painfully, as she answered, with unlooked-for acerbity, "Not at all. Only a woman may be curious about some things."

Her grandfather seemed diverted by her irritation and by the sudden gleam that shot from her usually sleepy eyes, and he pinched her cheek as he said: "Yes, my dear, she may. And it is natural enough, Lina, that you should sigh for more amusing companions than I; but I fear that the new-comer is a man of *no* family, in your sense of the word." And again the old man laughed at his innocent *double entendre*. "Here is his note. You may read it for yourself," he added, taking it from his pocket and presenting it to her; then, suddenly drawing it back, he said: "But first, I must see what hour he fixed for calling to-day. Three o'clock! It must be nearly that now. I shall go to my study to receive him."

"Can you not receive him here?"

Sir Robert looked at the young girl with a quizzical smile. "Ah, you ingenuous young lady, you wish to see the gentlemanly tenant yourself, that you may judge his pretensions as to family."

Lina reddened, but this time answered gently: "Not so. I should have left the room had you wished to receive him here. I know that girls are thought an intrusion when the talk is of business. Only I wished to spare you going down-stairs, without it had been necessary."

"Considerate Lina!" And there was a touch of satire in his tone and words. "But I am not altogether chair-ridden even now. I can still hobble about the house, up-stairs and down-stairs, and in my lady's chamber. So I am not altogether incapable of descending one or two flights of stairs to receive this Mr. ——— Confound it! I have forgotten his name again!" And the irascible old gentleman peered into the note with his purblind eyes.

Lina did not dare to offer her assistance, but when, after rising with difficulty, he tottered across the room to the window to have more light thrown on the writing, she

followed him with his gold-headed cane, and patiently waited till he should require it.

"Maxwell!" Sir Robert exclaimed at length. "Francis S. Maxwell! A good-sounding name enough. I was sure it had either a Highland or a Border twang. Well! it does not matter to me what he is, as he is not a man of family." And taking his cane from his granddaughter's hand, he maliciously twitched her golden ringlets to give point to his remark, and quitted the library as the clock struck three.

Lina stood for some moments where he had left her, utterly motionless, save that an indefinable smile was on her face—a smile not of amusement exactly, nor yet of contempt, though it partook slightly of both; for, strange to say, the principal ingredient in that curious smile was *experience*—an experience of life and character seldom possessed by one so young. She had evidently studied her grandfather, had acquired a complete comprehension of his character, had weighed his foibles and prejudices, and was now balancing in her mind what line of conduct towards him was most judicious for her to follow. Had her thoughts found voice, they might have run thus:

"True, I am his natural heir. My uncle is dead, my father is dead: I am the last of the name of Hepburn, yet I fear this Lionel Upton. Were he to play his cards well, even yet he might be master of Kinburn. Were I in his place, I should be so. I would not scruple to secure the inheritance of my ancestors by the relinquishing of an empty name. He, however, thinks otherwise, and I am the gainer by his obstinacy. But"—and she hesitated—"am I likely to retain the favour he has lost? Can I control myself to the end? Who can tell? Yet I must try; it would be worse than ever now to be the poor solitary being I have been."

She stooped for the book she had been reading when interrupted by her grandfather half an hour previously, and resumed her seat in the window. Suddenly she started up with a faint cry, while the book fell from her tremulous fingers. A sound had caught her ear—that of a quick, firm tread on the terrace beneath.

"Am I dreaming?" she exclaimed, in an accent of

intense surprise, "or is that really Max's footstep. And, shrouding herself in the drapery of the window-curtain, she peered eagerly, but furtively, through the window. In vain! The overhanging balcony prevented any view of the terrace beneath, though she heard the sonorous ring of the door-bell as he pulled it, and could even distinguish the slightly impatient tap-tap of his riding-switch against his boot as he waited for admittance.

Lina sighed unconsciously, and her dark blue eyes assumed the rapt, dreamy look of one whose thoughts had gone far back into the past, striving to recall a happiness that could never come again. Her pre-occupation, however, was not of long continuance, and a pettish exclamation escaped her lips as she stooped a second time to pick up her book. In doing so her hand came in contact with the crumpled note which her grandfather had flung carelessly down after reading it.

"Ah!" she said, as she took it up, "here is the proof I want. This will show me that I am so very a fool as to have allowed my imagination to play me a scurvy trick. Surely one man's footstep may resemble another's, and not be that other's; at least, may resemble it more than *his* name does the barbarous one of Sir Robert Hepburn's correspondent. Maxwell! Is that a good-sounding name in this country?" she added, with a slight sneer. "No 'von,' no 'de,'—a simple surname!" And yet, contemptuous as were her tones, her slender fingers shook as she endeavoured to smoothe the note so as to render its contents legible.

It was done at length, and she hurriedly turned to the signature. What was there in it to make her eyes dilate, her ever pale cheek grow paler still? The signature was his!

No one but he could write in that fashion, so clear, so upright, and so unmistakably foreign; no other pen could form the inimitable "*parafé*" beneath the signature. It alone was proof sufficient of his identity.

"It is true, then," she murmured. "It was my heart that spoke, and not my fancy—not my eager, eager longing! And yet what brings him to this remote place? Alone, too! What has become of her? Alas! alas! why should

we meet again now that it is too late? Why does he now seek her whom once he so disdained? Perhaps he has heard that I am heiress of Kinburn, and cares, therefore, to renew our acquaintance!" But she quickly checked so unworthy a thought. Mercenary as he had proved himself, he was superior to that. "Besides, what advantage could it now bring to either?" And covering her face with her hands, her slender frame shook with the violence of her emotions.

"It cannot be," she at last ejaculated. "I must be mistaken. ;Francis Maxwell! Absurd!" And snatching up the crumpled note, she re-perused it with keen avidity. But a closer examination only confirmed her conviction that the writing was that of Max, and of Max only, and yet the signature, which to her who knew it so well, could only be read in one way, had the christian and surnames so curiously blended into one, that she began to confess that her grandfather's misconception of it was not so extraordinary as she at first believed. The name Maxwell, besides, was one much more familiar to Sir Robert than the real one.

Long did she sit with her eyes fixed on that scrap of paper, while her busy brain pictured a thousand scenes of the past, and conjured up as many of the future. The closing of a door startled her into the present. She sprang to her feet, and listened eagerly. Perhaps her grandfather might bring him to the library? It was improbable, certainly, but she would not give up the faint hope till a second door, the outer one, closed also, and again she heard the quick characteristic step on the terrace. When that sound smote her ear, she bowed her head on her breast, and one or two tears trickled slowly down her cheeks.

Lina Hepburn had, however, served a long apprenticeship to disappointment, and in the school of adversity had learned that there are times when sorrow, however poignant, must be controlled; passions, however violent, must be concealed, if they cannot be conquered; and she knew that before Sir Robert re-entered the library it was necessary for her to hide all outward signs of emotion.

Already she heard the quick, sharp rap of his staff on each step of the flights of stairs ascending and descending from

the study to the library. In another minute he would enter the room. But before that minute was elapsed, the only traces left of the struggle she had gone through were, that her cheek was a few shades paler than its usual delicate fairness, and her long eyelashes drooped more heavily over her soft, almond-shaped blue eyes. Sir Robert, moreover, was at all times too little observant of his granddaughter's countenance to detect such slight signs of agitation; and, indeed, it would have required a more sharp-sighted man than he, shrewd as he was in some things, to have remarked any hidden grief under the assumption of indifference with which she questioned him as to his interview with his tenant-elect.

"Is his name really Maxwell?" she asked; and added, with a little laugh, "Has he no family?"

"Yes, his name is Maxwell, and he has no family whatever. I asked him particularly, and his answer was 'I am alone—entirely alone.'"

Little did Sir Robert suspect the tumult those five words created in Lina's heart. Its pulses beat like sledge-hammers, and she could with difficulty control the exclamation that rose to her lips as he uttered them.

"He hinted, indeed, that, having lately suffered some great loss, he had begun to feel misanthropical, and was glad to find a spot in Britain so solitary as this, where 'the world forgetting,' he might be 'by the world forgot.' (He is a poetical Adam, you see, Lina.) So far, however, he is right. There are few places in our island left unpolluted by those abominable railways, and I liked the fellow from the acrimony with which he condemned them. He seems, however, more favourably inclined to steamers, for it was the Fairholm steamer, it seems, that landed my gentleman at St. Ringans, and he spoke of the 'delightful sail,' as if he had been aboard a pleasure-yacht. No one is perfect in this world, you see! Well, finding St. Ringans a quiet little place, he determined to stay there for a time and follow his profession, which, as far as I can make out, is that of an artist. His first ramble led him accidentally to the Whim, and the business was settled."

"That means," Lina said, with a forced laugh, "that you liked the stranger's appearance, grandpapa, and accepted him as your tenant?"

"Hm! yes, for a couple of months or so, on trial," Sir Robert answered, a little hesitatingly.

"And on what terms?" She asked the question with the least little touch of malice, for she shrewdly suspected that the bargain was not likely to be profitable to her grandfather.

"Ah, you little witch!" he said, with a grimace, "you guess he found the soft bit in my heart and took advantage of it? You are right enough. He is to have it for two months, rent-free, on condition that he opens all the windows, and persuades the world of St. Ringans that Sir Cosmo lies quiet in his grave."

Lina asked no more. Already she had sufficient food for conjecture. He was alone. He had suffered a recent loss. He was for two months to dwell in her close vicinity. Was a new sun about to shine on her world? Was the shadow that had fallen on her girlhood about to pass away? The heiress of Kinburn was very different from the penniless orphan of the Pensionnat Bertin at Verville, and while she shrunk from attributing mercenary motives to one so beloved, she had sufficient knowledge of the world to perceive that riches are only valueless to the very young or very foolish. It seemed, besides, quite impossible that chance *alone* should have led Max to this secluded part of Scotland. He must have had some motive besides that he had assumed. He must have discovered her residence at Kinburn, and have arranged it all with the intention of being once more thrown into her society. Ah, yes! there was a bond between them which would draw them together from the uttermost parts of the earth!

Such were the vague thoughts which floated through Lina's brain as she listened with seeming indifference to Sir Robert's prosy details of the interview between himself and Maxwell.

Look at the graceful girl kneeling by the old man's chair! Listen to the lovely chit-chat with which she strives to lull his weary hours of lassitude and pain! Hark to the silvery laugh which answers so readily to his oft-repeated jests, and you might suppose that Lina Hepburn was a careless, light-hearted child! But lift the veil from her heart, and what would you behold? Passionate yet vague aspirations after

a happiness which she dare not put in words even to herself, because its attainment implied the death of the one woman who had ever shown her sympathy and kindness—the one girl-friend whom she had dearly loved till she became her rival. Yes, under Lina's childish exterior quick pulses were beating, wild hopes were surging up, to be thrust down with giant might; fears of some dread mystery still to be disclosed haunted her, and intensified the agonies of her passion-tossed heart, hoping against hope, and dreaming wild dreams which were to end—who knew how?

A week passed. Lina was told that the new tenant had taken possession of the Whim. But that was all; and the very desire she had to learn more prevented her from making further inquiries.

Another week followed. Not an atom of intelligence regarding the new-comer reached her, and the idea that her presence at Kinburn had been the lode-star to draw him to the neighbourhood waxed fainter and fainter.

A month rolled by. Sir Robert made frequent visits to the Whim, and gradually became eloquent on the improvements effected there by the new tenant at his suggestion. And the old man would rub his hands and chuckle at his own cleverness in getting so much work out of a clever artist for nothing. But as to any information beyond his own individual interests in Maxwell's labours, not a word was said.

The second month was waning fast when the new-comer was invited to dine at Kinburn. Lina's heart beat quick as she rose to receive him, and her hungry eyes rested for an instant on the once-loved face. But no recognition met her glance; a cold, ceremonious bow alone responded to her greeting. What could it mean? A passing doubt assailed her that, after all, the stranger was not Max; and, with an overwhelming sensation of disappointment and mortification, she resumed her seat in the shadow of the bow-window. He spoke, and the doubt vanished! No voice but his could so thrill her heart, no eyes but his dark, expressive ones could give such a glance as he gave Sir Robert. It was Max, most certainly—older, graver than of old, but still Max, and Max only.

Yet why did he treat her as a stranger? Why did no

trace of recognition light up his face? Had she really no part in bringing him to St. Ringans? Did he not know that Kinburn was now her home? Lost in these speculations, Lina forgot everything till her grandfather said, in his old-fashioned way, "My dear, Mr. Maxwell waits to carry you to the dining-room." Then she rose, and passing from the embrasure of the window, stood in the full light of the summer afternoon. As it fell on her face, she felt that the long looked-for recognition had come at last. She saw it slowly dawn upon him, and waited with throbbing pulses for some word, some look, such as her thirsty heart had craved so long; but it never came.

With a conventional smile, he said, quite easily, "Miss Hepburn! I did not recognize you before! How strange it is we should meet again, and here of all places!"

She felt as if she could have stabbed him as these light words smote her ear, especially when he added, with laughing indifference, "I cannot think how it happened that we have been so long in the same neighbourhood without even an accidental meeting. I have often heard the country people talk of Sir Robert Hepburn's granddaughter, but it never occurred to me that Miss Lina Hepburn was the same person whom I had known at Verville as Mademoiselle Alexandrine Hébourne."

Lina tried to echo his laugh, but the effort was a failure, the more so that the speaker's words had made her grandfather's brows meet in an ominous frown. He looked from one to the other in silence, but in the countenance of neither did he see any expression of satisfaction at the unexpected rencounter. Mr. Maxwell's face wore a look of stolid sullenness, while poor Lina contrived, under a veil of haughty reserve, to conceal the bitterness of her mortification.

"Ycs," she said, with a haughty inclination of her head, "I was at school at Verville. It is possible I may have met Mr. Maxwell there, though I confess the name is not familiar to me."

A very faint smile curled the corners of the young man's mouth at this rejoinder, but to Sir Robert it was a cause of unmingled satisfaction. "She has put him down!" he thought, rubbing his hands. "She spoke like a true Hepburn there." And he resumed the topic he had been

discussing with his tenant before dinner, as if the slight acknowledgment of previous acquaintance between the others was of no moment.

And, indeed, it seemed so on either side; for, with the exception of the necessary courtesies of the table, not a syllable was exchanged between Miss Hepburn and Mr. Maxwell.

What their secret thoughts were, however, is a very different matter. That Miss Hepburn's were not at ease was evident to the dark eyes which furtively watched each turn of her countenance, even while apparently engrossed by Sir Robert's conversation.

Lina, however, was unconscious of their espial. The tumult of her own feelings made her almost unconscious of what went on that night. Her proud spirit was chafed by the downfall of her hopes, and mortified by Maxwell's long-delayed recognition. Even when it did come, his indifference was hard to bear—an indifference which even her haughty rejoinder had failed to overcome. He could not forget the past. That was impossible; yet what motive had he for acting thus? Was it to mislead her grandfather with the idea that their acquaintance was of the slightest? She might have believed this had he not accepted the wrong name Sir Robert had given him before he knew of his relationship to herself. In short, turn it as she would, she could make nothing of the mystery in which she found herself involved. One thing only was clear, that whatever his object might be, her own course was plain enough. She must retain her appearance of indifference until he proffered her an ample explanation and apology for his strange behaviour towards her.

Thus they parted as they had met, as mere casual acquaintance; and such, as far as the world knew, they continued thenceforward. Once or twice the artist-tenant of the Whim was invited to Kinburn, once or twice Lina accompanied her grandfather to see the improvements Mr. Maxwell had made in the old house, but the young people seemed to make no progress in intimacy; the manner of both became more repellent each time they met.

The old gentleman laughed at Lina's haughty airs, assured her that Maxwell, though an artist, was a gentle-

manly fellow enough, and was a most agreeable companion with men. He had an immense fund of information on other subjects than painting, and conversed with wonderful fluency and raciness. Lina listened in silence to these remarks, and Sir Robert, inwardly delighted by her pride and reserve, quizzed her a little notwithstanding on her indifference to men of "no family," and then hurried off to the Whim to spend half the day in watching the skilful restoration of the fantastic decorations of the old house, and especially those of the garden octagon, which, under Maxwell's auspices, was gradually resuming its Oriental character.

The little world of St. Ringans also took considerable interest in these restorations, and the usual tittle-tattle of a small town exaggerated their extent to a marvellous degree, but no impertinent tongue ever hinted that there was any further acquaintance between Miss Hepburn and the young artist than what beseeemed their respective positions in life. Some wondered that there was so little, considering how solitary was the life the young heiress led at Kinburn, but all confessed that it was befitting a Hepburn, one of the proudest of old Scotch families, to discourage the acquaintance of a man whose sole letters of recommendation were some artistic talent, and a good-sounding Border name; for none but himself and Lina knew it to be a false one.

And thus time rolled on. Lina maintained the reserve suited to her own proud spirit, and to the conservative predilections of her grandfather, while Maxwell apparently preferred the conversation of his host to that of his granddaughter.

But there was a sequestered spot on the grounds of Kinburn which could have told another tale, had its echoes been gifted with speech.

Close by the sea-shore, some quarter or half mile from the mansion-house, was a little nook which had caught Lina's fancy on her first arrival, and which was her favourite resting-place in her walks. An indefinable something in its scenery reminded her of the coast near Verville. It was true that here gloomy fir-woods replaced the orange and myrtle groves of the sunny South; it was true that

the sea was neither so blue nor so sparkling as the Mediterranean, and that the beams of the sun were far less powerful, the lights and shadows wanting in brilliancy and depth. Still there was in it, taken as a whole, one of those likenesses which we sometimes trace between the faces of a fair and a dark person, different yet alike; and Lina's heart clung to the belief that this spot was like Ver-ville, with the pertinacity of an over-excitabile temperament. To her morbid fancy, any association with a place where she had suffered great sorrow and enjoyed great happiness, was welcome; and on the wild sea-shore of Scotland she had reacted in imagination the most noted scenes of her short but eventful life.

This was the spot destined by Fate to rennite the broken links that had bound her to one whose influence on her life had been very marked.

It was the morning after Mr. Maxwell's first dinner at Kinburn that Lina, rising early from her sleepless pillow, had sought her favourite retreat, and was brooding over the meeting of the previous evening, when a shadow fell on her path, and, looking up startled by so unusual a phenomenon, she perceived the artist, sketch-book in hand, standing close beside her.

He was the first to speak. With hand outstretched and penitent face, he murmured one word—"Aline!"

"Max!"

For a full minute each fixed on the other a look half questioning, half defiant. At last he sat down by her side, and began to speak rapidly in a foreign tongue. Her answers, at first short and disdainful, softened as the conversation went on, and when they parted it was not with the calm indifference of chance acquaintance, nor was that first meeting their last.

It came by-and-by to be tacitly understood between them, that unless prevented by matters of deep importance, they should meet each morning at an appointed hour at the trysting-stone. And the spring flowers were succeeded by the summer roses, and the roses by the harebell and heather, ere their meetings came to an end.

But the end did come at last.

They had met one evening—an unusual event, for their fixed tryst was for those early hours when Sir Robert was sleeping the heavy sleep of age, and the servants, occupied by their morning occupations, had little leisure to waste upon the pursuits of others. But circumstances had induced them for once to meet at sunset as well as sunrise, for it was to be the last meeting save one.

“Yes, Max,” she had said, “it ought to be, it must be so—at least till you are free. When that time comes, you shall return hither, but not till then.”

And he had yielded, so it was to be.

The time they had appointed for the very last came also, and Lina rose with the dawn, and dressed herself hastily. The morning had a sultry, oppressive feeling, which seemed to presage the breaking up of the magnificent summer weather, and as she unclosed the wicket-gate which led from the shrubbery to the rough path skirting the Kinburn, she shrank back in spite of herself at the threatening aspect of the cloud-bank gathering above the sea. Timid to a fault, she dared not have exposed herself at any other time to the storm that seemed ready to burst overhead. But there are seasons when the most cowardly woman braves danger with a recklessness which the rougher sex seldom attains, and the present was such a one for Lina Hepburn. So she walked quickly onwards, without daring to glance at the sky.

On emerging from the wooded path, the first muttering of the thunder was heard, and one or two heavy drops plashed through the leaves into the burn beneath. Should she turn back? Would he expect her on a morning like this? And if he were not at their trysting-place, what would become of her alone on the sea-shore, exposed to the fury of the gathering tempest? She must go back. It was madness to go on.

She took one or two steps homewards, and then stopped. She had promised to go at all risks. “And Max must have this!” she exclaimed, clutching more closely the packet she held in her hand. “He trusts me. I must not disappoint him, or he will doubt my love. I must go on.” And turning on her steps, she pushed resolutely forward in the direction of the shore, bracing herself up with the

hope that, as Max was a man, he would not hesitate to encounter the perils from which her weaker nature still recoiled. He was certain to be at the tryst, and with him to cheer her, her idle fears would vanish, and oh! how she longed to hear him say again, as he had said last night, "You are my guardian angel, Aline! You remember wants which I myself forget!"

This reflection gave her courage, till a sudden and vivid flash of lightning streamed across her path, and she stood rooted to the spot with fear. But a moment's consideration taught her that it was easier to go on than to return, and wrapping her plaid more closely round her, she struggled on through the now drenching rain. She reached the trysting-stone, but Max was not there. Alas! alas! how desolate she felt in the ever-increasing gloom that gathered round her. The waves beat on the shore with a dull booming sound, the firth was of a leaden grey flecked with white, while the swiftly-advancing thunder-cloud had already engulfed the opposite coast in lurid darkness.

Lina cowered down under the lee of the rock, but its shelter could not protect her from the drenching rain, far less from the blinding glare of the lightning. The deafening roll of the thunder grew each instant more appalling, yet where could she seek refuge? There was no cottage within sight, the wooded path that skirted the burn was at some distance, while the asylum it offered was more perilous than her present exposed situation. There was, therefore, nothing for it but to wait patiently till the storm-cloud passed over her. But would it ever do so? It seemed to come nearer and nearer, the thunder re-echoed from cliff to cliff, and the lurid flashes of the lightning illuminated the whole country round, sending out in strong relief its most prominent features, the storm-lashed sea, the rugged rocks, and the far-stretching lines of gloomy fir-trees.

The trembling girl drew her plaid over her head, and cowered still lower on the rocky ground. Her face almost touched the earth, as, with her hands clasped over her closed eyes, she strove to shut out the wild war of the elements from her aching sight. In vain; nothing seemed to veil it from her, and at last came a flash of such terrific brilliancy as

seemed to sear her very eye-balls through their closed lids, and accompanying it was a rattling, crashing peal of thunder, that appeared to strike the very ground at her feet. With a wild cry she flung her arms aloft, and then all was a blank, till whispering voices round her, among which she distinguished her grandfather's, told her she was at home. But how she got there she never knew.

LETTER FROM SIR ROBERT HEPBURN TO HIS DAUGHTER,
MRS. UPTON.

“Kinburn, October, 12.

“MY DEAREST BESSIE,—You must come to me at once. A sad disaster has happened. I told you some time since that Lina has been looking ill and making me uncomfortable by her unaccountable restlessness, so that I wanted your womanly skill to find out what ailed the child. The fever that has been upon her increased after I wrote to you, and in spite of Brown's warnings, she would continue those absurd early morning-walks. Yesterday she was caught in a thunder-storm—the servants got uneasy about her, and after a long search, found her lying senseless on the little bridge over the Kin, and brought her home. Brown cannot yet determine whether she was struck by the lightning or merely fainted from terror. At all events, the girl is really ill, and complains much of her eyes. She declares that the last flash blinded her. Brown thinks this will go off as she gets better: but at present I am very miserable about her.

“Tell Lionel that if he will go to India, the sooner he sets off the better, so as to let you come to me at once, but that it is not yet too late to reconsider my proposal. He has now had time fairly to test the ‘commercial life’ of which he spoke so grandiloquently a little while since, and what has it done for him?

“One thing, however, I do thank him for that he has persuaded my dear Bessie to return to her father's house during her son's absence. And so, if he hold to this absurd plan, wish him from me good speed. I have desired £300 to be placed to his account at Coutts's. Tell him to use it without scruple. If you possibly can, come to me without an hour's delay.—Your loving father,

“ROBERT HEPBURN.

“P.S.—Did I tell you that the fellow I took a fancy to,

and allowed to become a tenant of the Whim, has given me leg-bail? Half artist, half everything, and whole scamp, he leaves no end of liabilities behind him. As for me, the rent does not much signify, as he leaves the dear old house in better case than he found it."



CHAPTER II.

SAXENHAM.

THE spring and summer of that year had been very unhealthy in the midland counties of England, and the drying up of springs and wells, never known to have failed before, had produced an epidemic in the manufacturing districts, which had assumed some very peculiar and dangerous symptoms. In the town of Saxenham the mortality occasioned by it had been unusually great, but a young Scotch physician had distinguished himself by the skill and courage with which he faced the formidable visitation.

George Stuart was only a "dispensary" doctor, and therefore his practice hitherto had been chiefly among the poor; but his success in quelling the virulence of the fever in his own district, attracted the attention of one or two of the great mill-owners connected with it, and opened up to him the one opportunity which is proverbially offered to every man once in his lifetime, and on the use of which depends his after success or failure.

Dr. Stuart had caught at it with alacrity, and a few weeks saw him exchange the anxieties of an unknown practitioner, plodding his weary way through the slow steps of dispensary and non-paying prescriptions, for that of a marked man in Saxenham, quoted by his medical brethren, and with a most lucrative practice opening up to him in various quarters. The danger was lest, before he was enabled to take advantage of this bright opening, he should break down under the weight of his Herculean labours; for his success in treating the disease had borne its usual fruits, the burden was laid on the willing horse, and day and night he was in harness. Committees, public meetings, charitable societies, all turned to him

for aid, and he gave it heartily and modestly, but never permitted his extraneous labours to interfere with his patients, especially his gratuitous ones.

The unhealthy spring had been followed by an oppressive summer, and now, though autumn had begun, the extreme sultriness of the weather continued unabated.

It was already the middle of August, and the sickly fumes of the asphalt pavement, half melted by the unusual heat of the sun, added a new element of discomfort to the loaded atmosphere of a manufacturing town, and rendered the narrow street in which Dr. Stuart resided anything but agreeable. The windows were opened to the utmost to admit every breath of air which could find its way into the smoke-laden thoroughfare, but in spite of this, the small family-party assembled round the early dinner-table gasped for breath, and were almost too languid to eat.

There were but three at that meal,—the physician himself, a handsome, pleasant-faced man of thirty; his aunt, Mrs. Ellis, a widow lady of no very prepossessing appearance; and his sixteen years' old sister, Agnes. Dr. Stuart had been giving them a hasty summary of his morning's labour and success; but the act of listening was almost a hopeless task, for it was market-day, and also the dinner-hour of the Saxenham clerks and tradespeople, so that the rattle of omnibuses carrying their living freight to their mid-day meal, the grinding of carts laden with heavy machinery, and the regular beat of the steam-engine which worked the silk-factory on the opposite side, made a perfect Babel of their little street at one o'clock, and induced Mrs. Ellis to insist on the closing of the window.

"You look thoroughly exhausted, George," Agnes Stuart said, anxiously. "Can you bear up longer against this strain on your energies?"

"I must, Agnes. If I give in, others will step before me in the race, and I should never regain my lost ground. Besides, the fever is decidedly less virulent than it was. There are ten fewer cases this week than last."

"I hope," said Mrs. Ellis, bitterly, "that the next case won't be in your own house, George. I can't say that

either Agnes or you look as if you could stand much, and I warn you that *I* cannot. Indeed, I was a fool not to carry Agnes away from Saxenham when the epidemic first broke out."

"I don't think we run much risk, Aunt Ellis," Agnes said, cheerfully; "George is very careful of us, too careful I sometimes think. I should so like to help him in his good work."

"Nonsense, Agnes, you are always in heroics," and the old lady proceeded to expatiate upon the position in which *she* should be placed were her nephew to be seized with fever. "I should have thought," she ended her philippic, "that your family had suffered enough formerly from such romantic charity, if charity it be."

Agnes was silent. She was pained by this careless allusion to the death of her parents and three brothers and sisters from the outbreak of cholera in her father's parish, when she was a mere child. But George answered hastily:

"It was charity, Aunt Ellis, the purest, most Christian charity, which brought those sufferings on our family, and neither Agnes nor I would shrink from similar exertions under similar circumstances. The present case is different, and I shall do all I can to shield both you and my sister from danger. "Who do you say, Martha?" he added, as the servant entered to inform her master he was wanted immediately.

"A young man, sir, from Fox and Snell. A lady is took very bad, sir, in their office, and please will you go immediately."

Dr. Stuart rose from his half-finished dinner, regardless of his aunt's remonstrance not to leave home again until he had had a comfortable meal. Agnes quietly poured out a glass of wine and handed it to him without saying a word. He smiled, drank the wine, and soon after left the house.

Mrs. Ellis, offended by her nephew's neglect of her recommendations, finished her dinner in silence, and the ladies retired to the drawing-room without having exchanged a word after Dr. Stuart's departure.

It was a pretty room enough, for the bright chintz curtains and delicately papered walls, on which hung one or

two old pictures, gave it a more clothed and cheerful aspect than could have been expected in so gloomy a situation as Old-street, Saxenham, and the evidence of ladylike tastes and habits was shown in a thousand little feminine touches, which caused the simple furniture to assume an air of home-comfort which is not always found in more ambitious households.

Mrs. Ellis retired to a comfortable arm-chair in the darkest corner of the room, and, early as it was in the day, settled herself for her accustomed siesta. Agnes took up a book and seated herself near the open window, nominally to read, but in fact to watch for her brother's return, and to speculate on the possible results to him of the events of the last month or two.

A very deep affection subsisted between Dr. Stuart and his sister—one rendered unusually earnest from having been tested by trials of various kinds, that of narrow circumstances being no inconsiderable item in the list. Through all these trials, through all these struggles, their mutual affection had been their sheet-anchor, and, great as was the difference of their years, Agnes had been her brother's confidante, and sometimes even his counsellor, ever since they had been left alone together to fight unaided their sore battle of life. Agnes was scarcely fourteen when her family fell victims to cholera, and she was recalled from school to cheer George's solitude at Saxenham. But, at Mrs. Ellis's suggestion, her residence with her brother was not at that time of long duration. His aunt's arguments by no means convinced George Stuart of the necessity that Agnes should return to school. It appeared to him that, as his aunt presided over his household, nothing could be more natural and proper than that his only sister should continue to reside with him, and pursue her education at home, with the assistance of the very tolerable masters which Saxenham could provide. But Mrs. Ellis did not appeal to his judgment, she appealed to his purse. It had suited her convenience to take up house with her nephew shortly after he went to Saxenham, and at the time she did so Dr. Stuart was not in a position to pay his full quota of the house expenses. It was the aunt, not the nephew, who rented No. 16, Old-street; she also engaged the servants; therefore,

he was only the nominal master of the house, and Mrs. Ellis had not scrupled to use the power which this gave her over the whole establishment. Even at the time in question, this was still the state of affairs, for Mrs. Ellis told her nephew, in so many words, that if Agnes were not sent back to school—the expense of which she was willing to undertake—her agreement to live with him must come to an end. She said that she had done as much as the most attached relative could be expected to do, when, for his sake, she sacrificed her well-grounded prejudices against trade, and consented to the degradation of inhabiting a manufacturing town; it was a little too much to expect that, besides this, she should enact the part of governess to his sister.

Dr. Stuart's poverty, and not his will, consented to this second and most unnecessary separation from Agnes. And it was a hard struggle to have her restored to him the Christmas preceding the events about to be narrated.

To both brother and sister the reunion had been in every way advantageous. Agnes found innumerable ways of making herself useful in the little household, and George's comfort was enhanced a thousand-fold. He never met from her the stately rebuffs with which Mrs. Ellis repulsed his endeavours to make her acquainted with his Saxenham friends, for to the affectionate sister it was a sufficient recommendation that such or such a one had been kind to George, to be to her a desirable acquaintance.

She also persuaded her brother that her aunt was wrong when she advised him to refuse any civilities which he could not return. Why should he not go to dinner-parties when he was asked? A cultivated gentleman, such as he was, was always welcome, and especially so when "without encumbrances." He listened to her advice, and, acting upon it, he soon found his social position improve. And though neither their poverty nor his sister's youth permitted of her entering into society, he hoped that a time would come when the bright spirit that made his poor home so happy, might have a larger scope, and others might learn to appreciate his little sister as he did.

For some months this hope seemed to have but slight chance of ever being fulfilled. But the epidemic came, and the prospect gradually began to clear. The few families

who had found Dr. Stuart an agreeable man in society, were ready, as soon as his horizon brightened, to prophecy that opportunity alone was needed to prove that he could act as well as talk, and their prophecies brought in part their own fulfilment. His name was in everybody's mouth, and those mill-owners who had tested his powers in his own district, and had found him enter heart and soul into their benevolent plans for their work-people, began to court his society and invite him to their houses. By-and-by, when, as is invariably the case, the pestilence which began among the poverty-stricken dwellings of the artisans spread gradually onward and upward till it reached the home of the millionaires, these men naturally called Dr. Stuart into consultation when their own families were attacked. Thus George Stuart's fortunes looked more promising day by day, and he had now learned to smile, instead of shake his head, when Agnes hinted, that in a year or two he would be a rich man.

The struggle, however, was not yet over. There was much ground to be gained before he attained a firm footing on the upper rounds of the ladder, and when Agnes scanned his haggard face and thin form as he steadily fought his way upwards, she breathed a secret prayer that the success they aimed at might not come too late. To-day especially she had been struck by his extreme paleness, and by the languor of his walk. No doubt the weather was oppressive, and his extreme exhaustion might be easily explained by over-work and the weight of the atmosphere. Still it might as well be the precursor of fever, and if he were stricken down——. She shuddered and turned from the window.

"I must not think," she said to herself—"must not unnerve myself by gloomy anticipations. After what has come about, it is a want of faith to anticipate evil."

The thought had scarcely passed through her mind, when her brother's quick rap at the door made her forget everything, to run and meet him.

"Agnes!" he exclaimed, the moment he saw her, "I need your help, love. A poor lady has been taken seriously ill at Fox and Snell's. I want you to get a bed prepared for her without delay. She must have immediate attention, or I cannot answer for the consequences."

Agnes hardly waited for the close of his sentence before she flew off to fulfil his wishes, and Dr. Stuart proceeded to the drawing-room to inform Mrs. Ellis of what was necessary to be done.

"Aunt Margaret," he said, as she roused herself from her slumbers at his approach, "I am come to ask your aid in a rather difficult matter. The lady to whom I was called is a stranger in Saxenham. Even the solicitors, at whose office I found her, do not know in the least who she is, or where she comes from, and she is in such a state of prostration, that I fear it may be a day or two before she can be moved to any distance. I have desired Agnes to have the spare room prepared for her. I trust you will not object to my offering her this temporary shelter?"

"Why should she not be carried to an hotel?" was Mrs. Ellis's rather snappish answer, as she attempted, but in vain, to settle her cap and wig straight on her head.

"The distance to the nearest is too great. Besides, what she requires most is a woman's kindly help, and I thought——"

"Do you mean, George Stuart, that you expect me—me to attend on a—a—you don't know who? How can you be sure that she is a proper person to cross an honest woman's threshold? How can you tell that she is not infected by this plague-fever?"

"That I *can* tell. She came in a cab from the railway station, and in her pocket is a return-ticket from Chollingforth. There is no fever thereabouts."

"I am not so sure of that. But, at all events, I won't see the woman. You know my ideas on these subjects, George. I am very particular as to the persons with whom I associate. And as it is, you, of all people, must feel that after what I have done for you in admitting to my acquaintance——"

"Yes, aunt, I am aware of what you have submitted to for my sake," Dr. Stuart interrupted, "and if you really object to see this lady, of course I shall urge you no further. But I must have the poor thing brought here. In fact, I have already given the necessary orders."

Mrs. Ellis drew herself up primly as she said, "Very

well, George. If you must, you must, I suppose; but remember this, that I wash my hands of any mischief that comes out of this romantic nonsense."

This solemn protest failed to induce him to reverse his orders, which indeed nothing could have forced him to do, unless his aunt had distinctly refused to allow his patient to be brought to *her* house. Not having done this, he felt justified in following out his original intentions, and, after he had seen the advance his sister had made in her preparations, he hurried back to Fox and Snell's office.

By-and-by the opening and closing of doors informed Mrs. Ellis of what was going forward. Now, as it happened, there was but one spare room in the house, and hitherto it had been held sacred from all but Mrs. Ellis's particular friends and relatives, who were but few in number, so the old lady had made up her mind that even yet they would respect its sanctity, and would contrive some other arrangement for the stranger's reception. "Probably Agnes would give up her little chamber, and be content for once to sleep on a sofa." And yet Mrs. Ellis was not quite convinced that such would be the case; and though her dignity prevented her from going openly to see what was doing, yet, being of a very inquisitive disposition, she resolved to gratify her curiosity at least to some extent. So she rose from her seat, and, gently unclosing the drawing-room door, peeped out. At that very moment Agnes flew down-stairs with her arms full of sheets and blankets, while Martha rushed up from the lower regions with a warming-pan in her hand, and both disappeared into the sacred precincts of the spare room.

"Upon my word," Mrs. Ellis soliloquised, "this is a business! I must and shall interfere!" But before she could put her threat into execution, a cab stopped at the door, and she had to delay her interference that she might rush to the window and see what was going on in that quarter.

She was almost too late. She could only catch a single glimpse of a grey silk dress and straw bonnet, as Dr. Stuart, assisted by one of Fox and Snell's clerks, conveyed a motionless figure into the house. There was a shuffling

of feet as they slowly bore their burden up-stairs, and then the door of the chamber closed, the clerk ran down-stairs, banged the outer door behind him, sprang into the cab, and drove off.



CHAPTER III.

URSULA.

FOR two long hours the stranger lay in a deep swoon, and Dr. Stuart, alarmed by the failure of all his efforts to restore her to life, was on the point of summoning some of his medical brethren to share the responsibility of the case, when the unknown heaved a faint sigh, and gave other tokens of returning animation. Very, very slowly she regained her senses, and when at last her dark eyes assumed a look of consciousness, she fixed them on Agnes, kneeling by the side of her bed, gave a faint smile, and then, wearily closing her eyes, sank into a calm sleep.

"She will do well now, Aggie," said Dr. Stuart, much relieved. "As soon as she awakes, give her a spoonful or two of wine, or strong beef-tea—Martha has it ready—and don't let her talk too much. I must rush off to my work, but shall return as soon as possible."

"And if she asks explanations, what shall I say?"

"That *I* shall give them." And he turned to go; but ere he closed the door, he looked back to add: "It will be better, dear, that you only are present when she awakes."

"Very well!" And Agnes seated herself by the bed, and patiently waited for the stranger's waking. While she sat there it was impossible that she should not scrutinize the sleeper's countenance, and, as she did so, a vague impression came upon her that the well-cut features were familiar to her, though she vainly attempted to recall where she had seen them. The face was very handsome, though dark complexioned, and very thin and haggard. It was a pure oval, the nose slightly aquiline, the black eyebrows delicately pencilled, the eyelashes richly fringed, and the hair dark and glossy. Yet there was something wanting to make the countenance beautiful as a whole. The mouth, though small, had a peculiar and unattractive curl, and the

slightly protruding chin gave an impression of obstinacy and pride. In short, Agnes felt that the spirit of which this face was the interpreter was more likely to break than to bend, to tyrannize than to persuade, as a womanly woman ought. The marked lines, too, about the mouth and temples hinted at violent passions uncontrolled.

She was still gazing earnestly at the sleeper, striving to catch the end of tangled thought which floated vaguely through her brain in connexion with the dark beautiful face, when the eyes unclosed, and fixed themselves with a half doubtful, half inquiring gaze, on hers. At length the lips trembled, and a faint voice murmured, "Agnes Stuart! Is it really you?"

"Ursula Reynard! How changed you are! I did not know you till you spoke," Agnes answered, eagerly.

The clue was found now, and she recognized in the stranger a schoolfellow, who had been fond of her before she came first to Saxenham, three years previously.

"Changed am I, Agnes? Possibly. I have had enough to change me, child. Don't you know I am married?" And there was an emphasis on the last word which made Agnes uncomfortable, she scarce knew why. "Help me to rise, dear child!" she continued. "I am puzzled and confused, and want you to explain how I came here." And she put her hand to her head, and pushed back the heavy masses of hair that fell over her forehead.

"Nay, Ursula," Agnes replied, gently but firmly, "you must hear nothing till George returns. He bade me keep you from speaking; so you must be a good and obedient patient. And, to begin well, you must take this." And bringing her a glass of wine, she raised her head on her arm, and made her drink it. "Ah! the colour is coming back to your cheeks already!" she said, triumphantly. "George is a first-rate doctor. Now you must lie down again till I get your soup." And flitting out of the room, she returned immediately, carrying a quaint, old-fashioned salver covered with snowy damask, on which the slender repast was so delicately served as to tempt the most capricious appetite.

Ursula raised herself on the supporting pillows Agnes placed for her, and ate with the docility of a child, "though,"

as she afterwards declared, "there was nothing she detested so much as beef-tea and dry toast!" When she had finished, she sank back indolently on the couch, saying, "Now, Aggie, tell me who 'George' is. You are not married, I hope?"

Agnes laughed a clear, happy, girlish laugh. "I married, Ursula? Oh no! George is my brother—my only brother now. He is a doctor here in Saxenham."

"A doctor? Humph! I don't like doctors," was the ungracious reply. "But I begin to see through the mist at last. I begin to understand that heat, fatigue, and want of food brought on one of my bad fainting-fits, and I suppose some good Christian brought me to the first doctor's door! Heigho! to think of Ursula Reynard being taken into a house out of charity!"

The bitter tone in which she spoke vexed Agnes, and she said, hastily, "No, that was not it. George was called in to see you when you fainted, and he thought you would be more comfortable here. That is all."

Again Ursula passed her hand across her brow, as she said, languidly, "That was the way, was it? I have a vague recollection of toiling up some long stairs to a lawyer's office about some business as to which I wanted advice, and I think I fainted before I uttered a word. The last thing I remember is the scared look of the poor clerk; it makes me laugh to think of it. And yet, God knows, there was little laughable in the business that took me there! Agnes, is your brother a clever, shrewd man?" she asked, suddenly. "Is he one to whom one dare appeal in a matter of life and death?"

"I think he is, Ursula."

"He must have Christian charity to have brought me here—me, a stranger, with no recommendation save my desolate position."

"George is a Christian," Agnes quietly replied; "and of one thing I can assure you—he is both tender and true. He is trustworthy to the heart's core, and never utters a syllable he does not mean."

"That is a family failing among the Stuarts, I suspect," Ursula answered, with a faint laugh. "I remember that little Agnes never would utter even a white lie to keep

either herself or others out of a serape. Ah me! what ages it seems since I was at Miss Doneaster's!"

"Three years, is it not?"

"Three centuries, you mean. Do you know what has happened to me since then?"

"No, except that you married."

"Ay! I married such a charming man! the ideal of a girl's most romantic dreams, handsome, clever, fascinating, and—a very devil!"

"Ursula!"

"It is true, Agnes. By the way, my husband is a doctor too. That accounts for my fondness for the profession!" she said, sneeringly. "I wonder whether he will settle in Saxenham? It would be good sport to see Dr. Weld and Dr. Stuart together! My husband is so partial to Christians! Oh dear me," she added, in a gentler tone, "how I wish he would! Fancy what a blessing it would be for me to have a friend I could trust! And for my little Charlie, too, if my mother no longer consents to keep him safe." The last sentence was uttered in a dreamy style, as if the speaker were thinking aloud rather than addressing her companion.

Agnes was pained by these mysterious innuendoes, which, nevertheless, greatly excited her curiosity; but remembering her brother's orders, she said, soothingly, "Don't think of your troubles now, Ursula. You shall tell me all by-and-by, when you are better."

"Tell *you*, child! Heaven forbid! But you are right; I am not myself yet; my brain whirls, my thoughts are in a maze. Give me another glass of wine, and let me sleep till your brother returns. When he does, tell him to come to me at once, and to act for me as you, dear love, would if you were a man. What a child you are still, Aggie," she continued, gazing up into the sweet girlish face that hung over her. "You do not look a day older than you did when we parted. Kiss me, Aggie. Let me just for a little while forget the dreadful chasm that has yawned between us since we were at school together."

Agnes obeyed silently and sorrowfully. There was such utter wretchedness in the expression of Ursula's voice as made her heart bleed for her. She closed the curtains, and

was stealing quietly out of the room, when her patient called her back.

"You are not going to leave me alone, Agnes! Oh, pray stay with me! It does me such good to have you near me!"

"I shall return shortly. I am only going to tell my aunt, Mrs. Ellis, that I have found an old friend."

"Your aunt!" she said, with a sudden irritation. "Is she bed-ridden?—is she ill, that she does not welcome the guests in her nephew's house?—that she leaves a young girl like you to tend unknown strangers?"

Agnes felt puzzled how to answer this characteristic speech. At length she said, "George and I are so accustomed to work hand-in-hand——"

"Nonsense, Agnes! Don't try to disguise the truth. Do you suppose that your voice has not already told me that your aunt is——Well! well! what does it signify? except that she will be sure to catechise you as to my antecedents. If she does, tell her simply that we were schoolfellows years ago, and that you know no more of me. Don't look so scared, child. That will be quite sufficient. If not, you may say you don't even know my married name."

"That is true enough. You have not told it me, Ursula."

"If you care to hear it, it is Weld—Reynard-Weld they call us, because I was an heiress. An heiress, Heaven help me! An heiress of what? Of a heritage of misery, dissension, sometimes even want. But I won't talk of that. Tell your prim lady-aunt that Mrs. Reynard-Weld, of Foxhall, is her unknown guest. Odd, by the way, that I should select solicitors of the names of Fox and Snell! All the better, perhaps, for the business I expect them to do for me."

The name and position of the stranger worked a marked change in Mrs. Ellis's feelings towards her. If she were in a respectable rank in life—and the Reynards of Foxhall were, she knew, a good old family—that made *all* the difference. She would no longer hesitate to go to her if she wished to see her. She was very glad now that they had given her the spare room. Did Agnes think there was anything that Mrs. Reynard-Weld would like? Perhaps a roast fowl

might do her good, or the pheasant they had sent her from Utterstone Park? A roast pheasant was very nourishing food for an invalid.

Agnes declined to give an opinion on this delicate question, hinting that it would be time enough to decide the matter when George came in, and she hurried back to her sleeping friend—for she was sleeping now, calmly and soundly. The flush of excitement had faded from her cheek, and the countenance had regained much of the beauty which Agnes had been wont to admire in the old days when Ursula Reynard had been the head of Miss Doncaster's school, the leader in all wild pranks, the spoilt, passionate, but warm-hearted patroness of her childish self, and all who were younger and more timid than she.

By-and-by Agnes heard her brother's well-known rap at the outer door, and hastened to give him all the information she had gleaned as to his unknown patient. He listened silently and seriously, and on hearing that she was again awake, he entered the chamber.

"You must leave me alone with your brother, Agnes," Ursula said, as they came in together. "He knows, as I do, that the mind is too often the source of the ailments of the body, and I must tell him for what purpose I came to Saxenham, and ask his advice how to get others to do for me what I can no longer do for myself."

Agnes bowed, and left the room. Ursula raised herself on her elbow, and looking straight into Dr. Stuart's eyes, said, "I think I may trust you?"

"You may, Mrs. Weld; but pardon me if I suggest, that if it is legal business which distresses you——"

"It is *not* legal business," she interrupted, impatiently, "and you must listen to me. My pulse tells you that I am cool and quiet now?"

He shook his head.

"Well! it would do so if you knew me better, and I must have this matter settled at once. Dr. Stuart, when I was scarcely eighteen, my father's death left me an heiress. My mother, who has an independent fortune of her own, still lives. I married at one-and-twenty, and had the prudence to insist that my fortune should be settled on myself. My husband has no claim on it now or hereafter, unless I pre-

decease him without heirs. I have one son, and he, for reasons I need not mention, has been placed under my mother's care. Because I insisted that my boy should live with his grandmother, my husband quarrelled with me and left me. We have been separated some time, and I have, since he deserted me, lived with my mother. She, however, is about to marry again. Fancy a woman of forty-four relinquishing her liberty a second time! My home, therefore, is taken from me, and I have nothing for it but a reconciliation with my husband. Tell me how that can be effected, so as to ensure my personal safety?"

"Madam!"

"I repeat my question. What legal means can I take to ensure my personal safety, if I consent again to live with my husband, but persist in retaining my fortune in my own hands, so as to secure it from his extravagance?"

"I am not lawyer enough to answer your question. I know too little of the circumstances which dictate it. You imply——"

"I imply that my husband and I have both fiery tempers, that our quarrels have ever arisen from discussions on money matters. I am not ungenerous, though he says I am. I would fain allow him the advantages of my wealth if I dared to trust him, but I know that to give him the power over it which he demands would ruin us both within a twelve-month."

"You might give him power to use the income arising from your property, and yet retain the capital in your own hands," Dr. Stuart suggested, a little amazed at finding himself consulted on topics so foreign to his profession.

"But what he demands is control over the capital, and that I cannot give. I would rather die than leave my son a beggar."

"Forgive me for the question," Dr. Stuart asked, with some embarrassment. "Mrs. Weld, do you love your husband? Do you trust him?"

"Love him? Yes, after my own fashion. Trust him? No. A thousand times No. I must guard myself, my child, my fortune, against him. And yet—and yet I cannot live without him." And the unhappy woman hid her face on the pillow, and sobbed in anguish.

"You must let me have time to think over the strange confidence with which you have entrusted me, Mrs. Weld," Dr. Stuart said, after a moment's consideration, "and if I can give you advice, I shall do so, whether it is palatable or not."

"That is all I ask. To-day I was about to execute a deed giving up to him half my fortune, but—I was prevented. Fate prevented me. I wonder for what end?"

"I shall send Agnes to you," broke in the doctor, "and, if you feel fit for the exertion, it might be as well that you should join our family circle by-and-by. It is not good for you to lie still and think."

"No, it is not. But, first, will you telegraph to my mother that I am safe? The address is Mrs. Reynard, Foxhall, Chollingforth."

"I shall do so at once. Of course," he added, with slight hesitation—"of course you will not repeat to my young sister what you have told me?"

"No, Dr. Stuart: let her remain, as long as she can, in the belief that—that—that the world is better than it really is."



CHAPTER IV

DR. AND MRS. REYNARD-WELD.

THE renewal of Agnes's school-friendship with Ursula was destined to have a marked influence on the little party at Old-street.

Dr. Stuart had sufficient knowledge of the world to see, on reflection, that it would be extremely foolish to accept the responsibility Ursula proposed to him, in undertaking to arrange the terms of reconciliation between her and her husband. Still it required some tact to persuade her that the Foxhall solicitor's knowledge of her family affairs made him a far more judicious counsellor than a stranger could be, and a better legal adviser than Messrs. Fox and Snell, who were totally unacquainted with anterior proceedings.

Very reluctantly did Ursula yield to this decision, but she did yield at last, and after an interview with Mr. Lister, the head of the firm in question, she announced that

she was about to return to Foxhall to consult her mother as to what course she should take—a resolution which met with unqualified approbation from Dr. Stuart.

For some weeks after her departure they heard no more of Ursula, and Mrs. Ellis fretted continually over Mrs. Reynard-Weld's broken promise to return soon to Old-street.

“After having been so long martyred by the total want of *savoir-faire* shown by the mercantile community of Saxenham,” she said, “it was a new life to me to come once more in contact with one of the landed gentry; and I wonder, Agnes, that you take the matter so easily.”

“Oh, Aunt Ellis, I have not leisure to fret over it. George wants me to go with him to call on the Lorimers, and Annie Burnett is to come to us on Friday for the concert, and I have my dress to make and my bonnet to trim, and to copy out George's notes for——”

“Agnes, you are a fool!” was her aunt's comforting interruption. “But after all, what does it signify whether you are or no? It is better, perhaps, that you should have no higher aspirations than those of the people you live with.” And Mrs. Ellis took up the thrilling novel she had laid down, and tried to find comfort and sympathy in “the world” which Mrs. Gore describes as *the* world of fashionable life.

But Ursula did keep her promise. Nay, she went beyond what she had undertaken, for one day she brought her husband to introduce to her Old-street friends, and informed them that they had come on a house-hunting expedition, Dr. Reynard-Weld having resolved to settle in Saxenham.

Mrs. Ellis was in a fever of delight at this intelligence. Agnes quietly welcomed them, but could not help feeling a little timid as her friend introduced her husband, a tall, moustached man, more like a soldier than a doctor. “Was George likely to become intimate with him?” was Agnes's first thought. And, at the instant, Dr. Stuart entered, and Ursula named the two gentlemen to each other.

“Dr. Stuart, Dr. Weld;” adding, in a little petulant manner, “Do you know, Dr. Stuart, my husband will not have my name tacked to his own, declaring it spoils both. Is not it absurd?”

"Why absurd?" he asked. And his voice, as he spoke, struck Agnes's ear unpleasantly, although its tone was full, deep, and manly.

"Oh!" Ursula said, with a nervous laugh, "because two names are better than one in a place like this. They give one a kind of effect—a place in society."

"Now, I think," said the husband, "that unless one has landed property, it is absurd to assume it by one's name. While Mrs. Reynard lives, Foxhall is, to all intents and purposes, hers, and as it is my intention to practise in Saxenham, I should prefer to be looked upon as a professional man, and not as a mere amateur."

This was said very quietly, but with a certain air of dignity which prepossessed Dr. Stuart in his favour. As the conversation went on, the agreeable impression gained force, for it was impossible to deny that, whatever faults he might have in domestic life, Dr. Weld was an intelligent, agreeable man, who had the faculty of avoiding common-places in his conversation. There might not be much worth remembering in what he said, for on a first acquaintance people seldom plunge into subjects of moment; but that first half-hour in Old-street impressed his auditors with the conviction that he was a highly cultivated and original thinker, and that he saw most things from an unusual point of view. He was also polished in manner, as well as a really handsome man. His features, though marked, were well cut: his forehead was white and massive; his nose aquiline. But there was one peculiarity about him which at first sight jarred against one's feeling of harmonious colouring. His eyes were large liquid black eyes, capable of the most varied expression, from suave gentleness to fiery impetuosity; but his mouth, that most telling feature, was concealed by a thick moustache and beard, which, as well as his curling hair, was a most decided red—not auburn or chesnut, but undeniably red. This, in contrast with his dark skin and coal-black eyes, had an incongruity about it difficult to overlook.

On Agnes it produced a painful impression, and, in connexion with his voice, made her feel so uncomfortable in his presence, that his charms of manner and conversation failed to set her at ease. With Dr. Stuart it was different.

No doubt the physical peculiarity gave him at first an odd sensation, akin to that which distresses an artistic eye in the bad drawing or colouring of a picture, but he soon forgot it in the pleasure of conversing with an intellect on a par with his own; and, but for Mrs. Weld's confidences with regard to her husband, might have been drawn at once into intimacy with his new acquaintance. Fortunately, however, he had the temperament of a canny Scot, and, though perfectly polite, contrived to put that off until he had tested Dr. Weld more carefully.

Mrs. Ellis was less prudent. Dazzled by Ursula's "county" connexions, she accepted both husband and wife as friends, and did all she could to force Agnes into a close intimacy with her old schoolfellow. But here she found unexpected opposition. In her own home Agnes was quite willing to show Ursula kindness, but an instinct she could not account for, made her shrink from entering Dr. Weld's house.

She was obliged to do so in common courtesy, and there was nothing in the *ménage* that she could disapprove, not one point on which she could put her finger, and say, "This is wrong." Still she intuitively felt that it were better to go seldom, and never, if possible, unaccompanied by her aunt and brother. But Ursula urged her constantly to come and see her, Mrs. Ellis seconded her entreaties by distinct commands, and so Agnes's prudent intentions were overruled, and her visits were frequent, though she always made an excuse to shorten them when she found Dr. Weld at home.

She had no cause to complain of his conduct to herself personally. Nothing could be more polite, more cordial, than his manner towards her. Indeed, the sole fault she could find was that he distinguished her too much, seemed to take pains to remember her tastes, and to indulge them whenever it was in his power.

Ursula jestingly assured her that she ought to be vain of engaging so much of Weld's attention. He was so little of a lady's man, that she was surprised to find him capable of making himself so agreeable; and then she added, "But remember, Aggie, I am not jealous, not one bit."

"You have no cause, Ursula."

"None in the world, dear. I know Weld thoroughly."

These words somehow disturbed Agnes. She knew that Ursula had no cause for jealousy as regarded herself. Dr. Weld's civilities to her were merely a man's way of showing attention to a girlish friend of his wife's. But had Ursula always been as free from suspicion of her husband?

Most people would have said they were mutually attached. They showed each other a deference not always shown by the kind-hearted but rather plain-spoken married couples of her acquaintance. Each addressed the other in terms of affection. Dr. Weld seemed to delight in bringing his wife little dainty knick-knacks to adorn her drawing-room, while she appeared ready to relinquish any fancy she had indulged if he desired it; and yet Agnes always felt, when with both together, that she was standing on the crater of a volcano, covered, it is true, with flowers and verdure, but which might at any moment burst forth into flames and convulsion.

This impression was deepened by a little scene of domestic discord she witnessed not many months after the Welds came to Saxenham, which, though made light of by both parties, had raised the veil for an instant, and allowed her to perceive the skeleton in Ursula's home life, which in society she draped so skilfully that no one suspected its existence.

For the Welds very soon became popular in Saxenham. His distinguished manner and bearing, together with his aptitude of suiting himself at once to the tastes of those with whom he was thrown in contact, made him a courted guest at the magnificent entertainments which were the fashion at Saxenham, while her beauty and childlike enjoyment of society, her graceful liveliness, and the naïve way in which she expressed her readiness to accept any hospitalities which did not demand equally grand receptions in return, fascinated the Saxenham magnates, and made them declare that so cordial a reception of their civilities was a sufficient return for them.

But though a favourite from his social qualities, no prospect of medical practice opened itself to Dr. Weld. "No, no;" people said, "he is a clever talker, an amusing companion, but no one in Saxenham would ever think of

employing as a doctor a man who wore a moustache, and moved and spoke more like a prince in disguise than a prudent, plodding, medical practitioner."

A lucky chance, however, by-and-by opened out to Dr. Weld a new career. In the course of some experiments he and George Stuart had made together, the latter was struck by his unusual chemical knowledge, and stid to him :

"I wonder, Weld, that you have never turned your attention to chemistry connected with manufactures. It seems to me that your talents lie much more in that direction than towards medicine, and I prophesy that, if you are content to keep to that sort of thing, you will gain an immense reputation."

"How do you mean?"

"That colour, for instance, would make your fortune, if you could utilize it for dyeing purposes."

"Would it?"

No more was said at that time, but a week or two later, when on a professional visit to Alexander Gibson, the father of the cotton-printers of Saxenham, Dr. Stuart was surprised to learn that he had just patented a rich Tyrian dye he had purchased from "that good-looking fellow Weld."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, indeed! and it promises to be a successful speculation for both of us. Never thought he had it in him, Stuart. How do you think he found it out? Accidentally or by skill?"

"By skill," was the hearty answer. "His knowledge of chemistry is marvellous."

"Ah! then I must have a talk with him, and see whether we cannot strike out some more grand discoveries between us."

Shortly afterwards it was whispered that Dr. Weld was about to relinquish medicine for the prosecution of "mereantile chemistry," if such an expression is allowable. Agnes had heard the question talked over at a dinner-party to which she had accompanied her brother, and supposing that Ursula would enjoy, as she would have done in like circumstances, to listen to the praise she had heard lavished on Dr. Weld's talents, she congratulated her friend on the discovery he had made.

"Discovery!" said Ursula. "Of what kind?"

"Surely you have heard of it." And as Dr. Weld entered at the moment, she added, "I trust I have done no mischief, Dr. Weld, in repeating to Ursula the praise I heard lavished on you last night. I hope I have not prevented you from being the first to tell her of your success?"

His face clouded a little at the question, and a slight frown contracted his forehead, giving him a look of ill temper Agnes had never remarked in him before, as, pulling his moustache, he replied, "Why, to tell the honest truth, Miss Stuart, you have forestalled me. I was coming this very instant to boast of my discovery. I am sure Ursula will be charmed to hear that for once I have been successful. You must know, Miss Stuart, that hitherto I have failed so often, that my wife could not be brought to believe that it was possible for me to succeed. But now," turning to Ursula, "she will, I know, congratulate me."

He spokè as he always did, gently and blandly, yet there was a something in his manner that told Agnes he was greatly annoyed by her disclosure. Ursula, moreover, looked quite put out as she said, hastily, "What are you both talking of? It sounds vastly like nonsense."

"Why, my love, I have been fortunate enough to make a very valuable scientific discovery, and my Saxenham friends, including Dr. Stuart, urge me to prosecute chemical discoveries, and relinquish medical practice."

"If you do you will ruin yourself."

"I think not. On the contrary, I hope to make my fortune, my love. Your brother, Miss Stuart, thinks that I may do so?" He was always particularly courteous to Agnes, and never lost an opportunity of saying a civil thing of Dr. Stuart.

"I dare say he does. I don't know," stammered Agnes, a little perturbed by his question and by Ursula's black looks.

"Well! I know he does," Dr. Weld replied, with a smile. "Moreover, I am myself convinced that it is better for me to give up practice. In truth, I lack both patience and temper to make me a good physician. The sight of suffering affects my nerves, and the sight of folly discomposes my good humour. I can't soothe old women's fancies,

or make as much of a finger-ache as of a typhus, and when dangerous illness befalls my patients, I must confess I get horribly afraid. It is, therefore, far better that I should experiment upon cotton than on human beings—should affect the complexion of a dress or a handkerchief by my drugs than risk the life of a fellow-creature. In short, Miss Stuart, I mean to follow your brother's advice, and become a drysalter."

"A what?" screamed Ursula, from the couch on which she had flung herself at the beginning of this long speech.

"A drysalter, my dear."

"Good heavens, Weld! you will drive me mad! Did you not promise that, if I gave into your wishes, you would win your bread as a gentleman might, not as a low, petty, peddling tradesman?"

"I do believe, darling, you suppose I mean to sell pickles and preserves, cheese, candles, red herrings, and tea," he said, quoting the words of an old nursery song, and laughing heartily. "You fancy I am going to set up a shop, perhaps, and to ask you, love, to stand behind the counter—ha, ha, ha!" And he rubbed his hands with strange glee, and paced up and down the room, singing, in a deep but not unmelodious voice:

"Oh Fortune à ton caprice,"

while his black eyes danced with fun at his wife's evident confusion and ever-increasing irritation.

"I will not have you a tradesman, Weld!" she shrieked aloud, her passion almost making the words inaudible. "I have borne too much already from your low ways. Remember, I am a lady born, whatever you may be."

"I, madam," he said, blandly, "am a gentleman by birth and education, and have also the honour to be your husband, and, when we married, it was you who promised to 'obey,' not I." And, turning on his heel, he resumed his song:

"L'or est une chimère," &c.

"You shall not insult me in this way!" screamed Ursula, fairly beside herself with rage, as, starting from her recumbent attitude, she was flying at him with the fury of an enraged tigress, when Agnes gently touched her on the arm, and said, very low:

"Ursula! dear Ursula! you don't understand. It is all a mistake—a mistake on both sides, I assure you. Dr. Weld means that some chemical experiments of his have been so much thought of by men of practical science, that they wish him to devote himself to chemistry rather than medicine. Already he has discovered a new process of dyeing, which it is said may revolutionize the whole trade of cotton-printing. His discovery may bring a fortune. That is all he means."

"Then why did he tell me a lie? Why insult me by pretending he was to be a shopkeeper, and sell salt and spices?"

"He was only in fun. Drysalts are the materials used in dyeing. It was foolish to puzzle you with such a technical word. I know it was years before I suspected that it meant anything but red herrings and pickles."

Ursula laughed, but her laugh was not a natural one. "It was wrong of you, Weld," she said, turning to her husband—"very wrong!"

"Yes, darling, it was, I acknowledge," he replied, soothingly, and attempting to caress his wife.

"Don't kiss me!" she cried out, struggling to escape from his embrace. "I won't submit to that, mind you! I said I never would, and I won't!"

Agnes was shocked by the defiant look Ursula cast at her husband as she uttered these words, and, chancing to turn her eyes from her countenance to that of her husband, she observed that he had suddenly become as white as a sheet, his eyes glowing like live coals, and his moustache trembling like a lion's about to spring. The sudden change this made in him struck terror into Agnes's soul, and, conscious that any further interference on her part might do infinite harm, she remained silent, and waited for what should come next.

For an instant both husband and wife stood glaring at one another in perfect silence. Dr. Weld was the first to recover himself, and, turning to Agnes, he said, with a forced laugh: "I dare say, Miss Stuart, you look upon us as a couple of fools, but the truth is that Ursula has some whims—among others, a great dislike to any demonstrations of affection from me in presence of strangers. My

nature is so impetuous that I sometimes forget her scruples, and so get into deep disgrace with her."

During this speech, Ursula's wide-open eyes and parted lips seemed to presage a violent attack upon her husband, but, controlling herself by an effort, she turned from Dr. Weld to Agnes, and said, with concentrated bitterness, "I think, dear, it would be well if you could leave us alone together. You are too young to be initiated into the mysteries of married life." A hysteric sob closed the sentence, and Agnes, only too ready to make her escape, sprang to her feet.

"Don't speak to me, child," Ursula gasped, as Agnes advanced to the couch on which she had again flung herself. "Go at once!" And another burst of sobs showed Agnes that no other course was open to her but to obey implicitly.

"This is too bad!" Dr. Weld said, as he opened the drawing-room door for her. "But, at least, I may be allowed to conduct you down-stairs, Miss Stuart?"

"No, no!" screamed Ursula. "You shall not go with her, Weld! Send him back, Agnes!—send him back!" And the sobs rose almost to shrieks in her vehemence.

"Pray leave me," Agnes said, deeply pained to be thus a bone of contention between the two. "It is better, believe me! Besides, Ursula needs your help."

Dr. Weld simply shrugged his shoulders as, closing the door behind them, he led the way down-stairs, and Agnes, seeing that further remonstrance was useless, followed him in silence. As they reached the open door of the parlour, he paused, and said, in a low but peremptory voice: "Step in here a moment, Miss Stuart. I have a word to say to you."

He spoke in jerks, as a man might do under the influence of very powerful excitement, and Agnes, feeling sorry for him, complied with his request, and entered the room. Leaning his arm on the chimney-piece, he went on, in the same broken voice:

"Miss Stuart, you have had a glimpse behind the curtain. You know now what a life Ursula and I live together. I dare say that you, like others, think me an indifferent husband. If it be so, I cannot help it. I must

submit to the natural construction put upon my actions, however little my motives may be at fault. But you—you are almost one of the profession, Miss Stuart, and therefore I may tell you what—what I have never told any one till now. My wife is subject to attacks of hysteria so dreadful as sometimes to amount almost to mania. I have done what I could to subdue them, but—but—In short, the sole remedy I have as yet discovered to quell their violence is total neglect. I have, therefore, to assume an indifference I do not feel, and to-day you have had a specimen of my mode of cure. It is generally successful, but it is painful to me, and I am very desirous to have your brother's opinion on her case. I fear—I fear that Dr. Stuart will find my wife to be in less robust health than she appears." As he said this he drew his hand quickly across his brow, and fixed his eager, penetrating eye on Agnes.

"I shall tell George your wishes."

"If he could look in upon us this evening, I should be glad. I do not wish to agitate Ursula, but I confess that I get alarmed by the frequent recurrence of these fits of excitability."

Agnes did not know what to answer. She could not but confess that to-day Ursula was far more in fault than Dr. Weld, and yet she could not rid herself of an increasing repugnance towards him, which made her long to get away from him before she was forced to commit herself by words either in his favour or against him.

"So you won't shake hands with me?" he said, as, after a short and uncomfortable silence, the young girl, assuming that the interview was ended, bowed and turned to leave the room.

She blushed very much. Something in the tone, rather than the words, made her feel embarrassed, but, with a little short laugh, she put out her hand. He held it a moment in his, as he said:

"I can well imagine that the scene you have just witnessed has lowered us *both* in your opinion, me perhaps more than Ursula?"

"Oh no!" she said, ingenuously, "not more, I assure you. I could not fail to see that Ursula was very foolish, very irritable, but——" And she hesitated.

“But what, Miss Stuart?” And his iron gripe closed so forcibly on her fingers, that she saw it was hopeless to release them before answering.

“But I think that, in her place, I also might have been vexed to find myself ignorant of a success of which every one was aware but me.”

A slight shake of the head and raising of the corners of his moustache—the only hint of a smile ever perceptible on Dr. Weld’s countenance—showed Agnes that he differed from her entirely as to the source of Ursula’s indignation. But as she was very young—scarcely seventeen—she went on, with the imprudence of her age:

“I am convinced I am right, Dr. Weld. Ursula would glory in the success of those she loves. The only thing she cannot forgive is a want of faith in her affection.”

Again the moustache trembled, and a curious light gleamed in the bright black eyes, as, relinquishing his grasp of her hand, he said, gently, “Ah! Miss Stuart, you speak from the impulse of your own warm heart, but, alas! you do not quite understand my wife. Still I confess I was wrong, very wrong, to conceal it from her.”

“Besides,” Agnes continued, “she so completely misunderstood you when you explained matters.”

“True. And knowing her detestation of mercantile pursuits—‘trade,’ as she always calls them—I ought to have been particularly careful. It is all the fault of my cursedly excitable disposition. In high spirits myself at the thought of possible independence, I forgot to ‘*menager*’ her little peculiarities. Ah! Miss Stuart, you little know how it chafes a man’s temper to be entirely dependent on his wife. It reverses the natural order of things, and—Nay, nay,” he said, quickly, as he perceived a shade pass over Agnes’s countenance at this remark—“nay, Miss Stuart, don’t misunderstand me. I do not mean to breathe the shadow of an accusation against my wife. It is natural that, the fortune being hers, she should wish to see it used in a way that she approves. I have not a word to say against her in that respect. And yet there are pursuits a man has which—But why discuss the matter further? The less one says on some points the better.” And he led

the way to the outer door. "Only"—and he raised her hand to his lips as he bade her farewell—"only remember, when inclined to judge me harshly, that I have had my own trials in life."

Agnes only bowed in answer. The longer this interview continued the more uncomfortable it made her, and his mode of leave-taking by no means met her approval. But she had sufficient penetration to perceive that her wisest course was to let it pass for the present, and to endeavour to avoid being exposed to such a thing a second time. Her quick walk home was by no means a pleasant one. She was puzzled by what she had seen. She could not understand Ursula's behaviour, nor could she conceive what should tempt Dr. Weld to make *her* his confidant. It was well for her that she could not understand his object. Afterwards the truth became all too clear.

She took the first opportunity of confiding to her brother all that had passed. George shook his head gravely as he listened.

"Oh, Aggie, darling, why were you there at such a time? No doubt 'tiffs' are common enough in the lives of some married couples, but it was cruel to make you a party to them. Henceforward, dear, you must be as little with the Welds as you can help. Kind and hospitable you may be to them in your own home, but don't go there often."

"Indeed, George, I have no wish to go."

Dr. Stuart was painfully impressed by what his sister had told him. He himself scarcely understood why he felt so anxious about it. It is true that Ursula's first conversation with him had given him an idea that Dr. Weld was not a desirable acquaintance, but he had watched him carefully, and had as yet seen nothing objectionable in any way.

Well! he would go to see Ursula that night. And he did go. He found her in the drawing-room, looking more blooming and radiant than he had ever before seen her, and ready to welcome him with a cordiality which showed complete ignorance of his mission. Dr. Weld joined them shortly afterwards, and an hour was passed in a manner so pleasant as to banish most of his gloomy forebodings.

Another hour was spent in the chemist's study, where his exquisite experiments, and the vast amount of knowledge he displayed, enhanced his admiration for Dr. Weld's talents. He left the house thoroughly puzzled by both husband and wife.

"They are an odd couple," he said to himself, as he walked homewards. "She is hysterical—not a doubt of that; and he is a clever fellow—a trifle too clever, perhaps! Yet why should I think so? It seems prejudice. And yet—and yet I don't like him, that's the fact. I won't let Aggie be intimate in that house."



CHAPTER V

HOMME PROPOSE, DIEU DISPOSE.

"I SHALL not let Aggie be intimate in that house." So George Stuart resolved, but he soon found that his decision could not hold good against circumstances.

Mrs. Weld was seized with dangerous illness. For weeks her life hung on a thread, and it was impossible for Dr. Stuart's tender heart to resist her entreaties that Agnes should frequently be with her.

"It was so dreary to be alone in a strange place," she moaned. And George, aware that Dr. Weld was at that time engaged in a process which, if interrupted at that special stage of success, must be entirely destroyed, yielded to the invalid's wish, and Agnes devoted every leisure moment to her.

During this long illness, Dr. Weld's evident anxiety—one might almost have said terror—as regarded Ursula's condition, favourably impressed both brother and sister. He made no show of his affection to her; he pursued his occupations in his study for hours together, but it was visible in a thousand trifles, and, above all, in his haggard cheek and in the eager glance with which he scanned Dr. Stuart's countenance on leaving the sick-room. He surrounded her with every comfort which a knowledge of her tastes and habits could suggest. He made every allowance for the feverish and capricious fancies of an invalid, and gratified them whenever it was possible to do so. When first she was moved

from her room, it was in his arms that she was carried to the couch in the drawing-room, and he never seemed weary of devoting his precious evening hours to her amusement; he who till now had said, and acted on what he said, that an evening at home without society was an impossibility for him.

Agnes, softened by his behaviour, began to feel more cordially towards him, and even Dr. Stuart was so struck by his long-continued devotion, that he, too, might have been tempted to believe he had done him injustice, had not one or two trifling words and traits of character showed themselves in the course of their more intimate acquaintance, which, when most inclined to approve of Dr. Weld, obstinately clung to his memory, and made him suspect his motives even while he admired his conduct.

“I am so glad to see you up and dressed so early,” Agnes said one morning, as she entered Ursula’s drawing-room, “for I fear that henceforward I shall have little time to come and see you, as a niece of Aunt Ellis’s is expected at Old-street to-day, and I must not be too much absent from home.”

“A niece of your aunt’s! Why could you not say a cousin of yours?” Ursula said, half pettishly.

“Miss Ellis is only my aunt’s niece by marriage,” Agnes answered. “We, alas! have no cousins. George and I are the last of our race, and are therefore very solitary beings in the world.”

“Solitary! Good heavens, child! You little know what it is to have no relation whatever! I would give all I have for the love and protection of a brother.” Then, with a sudden change of tone, she added: “But who is this Miss Ellis? And what on earth brings her to Saxenham?”

“A truant disposition, good my lord,” Agnes answered, gaily. “That is, she is on her way to India—in autumn”—and there was a faint touch of satire in Agnes’s tone as she said the last word—“and Aunt Ellis thinks she would be the better for seeing a little of English society before she is thrown into the vortex of Indian amusements.”

“English society in Saxenham, Agnes!” Ursula exclaimed; “how green you must be to believe that that is

Aunt Ellis's reason for bringing her to Old-street. You may depend upon it, she wants to pick up a rich husband for the girl here."

"So Harry Thorpe declares," Agnes answered, with a merry laugh; "but I say that you are both green to fancy such a thing possible in Saxenham. Why, don't you know that here it is only those who are rich themselves who marry riches?"

"To those that have shall be given!" was the reckless answer. "Is that the code of Saxenham? Well! it is a good one. There is no mistake greater than a marriage where the money is all on one side."

As she spoke, Dr. Weld's remark on the same subject flashed on Agnes's recollection, and she thoughtlessly remarked, "Not when on the gentleman's?"

"Of that I have no experience," Ursula bitterly answered: "but the other I know well. What do you think, Agnes? Weld has been working on my gratitude to—— But tush! I promised your brother not to initiate you too early into such things. So let us return to Aunt Ellis's niece. Do you know her?"

"She was three months at school the year I left. Don't you remember her, Ursula? She was very lovely."

"You don't mean that Nelly Ellis, the girl of all others I most disliked at school, is the guest you are so ready to welcome?"

"Why not?"

"You did not know her, Agnes. I did. If ever there was a smooth-faced hypocrite and mischief-maker on earth, she was. The first few months she was soft as velvet, sweet as sugar; but gradually the claws peeped out from the velvet sheath, and the sweet-sounding phrases left bitterness behind them, and sometimes made wounds hard to heal. Don't trust her, Agnes. She looks like the innocent flower, but is the serpent under it. Above all, guard against the efforts she will make to sow dissension between your brother and you."

"She can never do that," Agnes said, raising her head and fixing her sparkling eyes on Ursula. She was in her favourite attitude, standing by her friend's couch, and the eager look of the sweet young face touched Mrs. Weld.

She stretched out her hand, and drawing Agnes to her with a rare tenderness, smoothed her bright hair, and said softly :

“It would take much, certainly, to make you and your brother quarrel. God grant, darling, you may never be tempted to doubt each other, for to doubt those we love is hell on earth. Yet once more, I say, beware of Cornelia Ellis ! for she is dangerous. But now let us talk of other things. How do you and Saxenham society get on together?”

“Marvellously well ! I find dinner-parties to be most amusing.”

“Dinner-parties amusing to a girl of seventeen ! My dear Agnes ! when I was seventeen I only cared for balls.”

“No doubt I shall like balls also when they come,” she said, merrily, “for I like all that is bright and all that is pleasant. Moreover, George delights in them, and so I am sure I shall. But for the present I am quite satisfied. I do so like to see how much George is thought of at these grand dinners.”

“George—always George, Agnes. Now I want to hear what people think of George’s sister ?”

“Really I do believe they like her well enough, Ursula. But she puzzles them. They don’t know how young she is, and I suspect—at least, George declares—that in her ignorance she has said no end of queer things.”

“How, dear ?”

“Why, I don’t exactly know how or when, but I think it must be so, for George laughs so heartily at my report of my ‘table-talk.’ My first dinner, you know, was at the Smiths’ I was placed between two grave, silent men ; and neither looked as if he could utter a word. But I resolved they should talk. So observing that the one who had handed me down-stairs so solemnly, looked curiously at the *épergne* filled with really lovely flowers, I ventured a remark on their beauty, and lo, the dumb man found a tongue, and, before dinner was over, he was quoting Shelley’s flower-pictures with as much zest as I could have done myself.”

“Of course you advanced to the language of flowers,” Ursula said, with a slight sneer. But the sneer was lost on the innocent girl, who said, ingenuously :

"No, indeed, we never thought of it. But our animation excited my other silent neighbour, who struck into our conversation on the first available opportunity, and carried us off to the magnificent autumn tints of American forests, to Niagara, the Rocky Mountains, savages, Cooper's novels, Longfellow's poems, Kent, Story, American artists, &c., &c., all jumbled together, just as if he had given us the rough notes of his travels, and was trying them upon us to see whether they were worth printing. I wish you could have seen George's face on the opposite side of the table as he caught scraps of our conversation."

"And that was all?" Ursula asked.

"All at the Smiths' But at the Ainslies' I had the good luck to sit next a Captain le Grand, who seemed to have been all over the world, though he looked quite young. He began with a description of the wild pranks he had played as an ensign, and then diverged to garrisons, transports, and so on, till, just as Mrs. Ainslie made the move, we were rounding Cape Horn. I was so sorry, for I am crazy about Cape Horn."

Ursula laughed heartily. "But no doubt you resumed your cruise later in the evening?" she said.

"No, no. *Then* I had Mr. Ralph Ainslie to talk to me. He diverted me extremely, for you must know he has been in Paris on some business of his father's with the President. Is it not odd that a Saxenham merchant should visit the Elysée? He charmed me by his account of his reception there, but gravely added that he ought to have had a more particular introduction to the Prince President, for, though perfectly civil, Louis Napolcon paid him *very* little attention! Was not that good? However, he was consoled by being frequently at the English ambassador's, and was so charmed by the easy flow of conversation there, that I greatly fear he is becoming a confirmed aristocrat. I had much ado to conceal my amusement at the parallel he drew between Parisian and Saxenham society. There all so charmingly suave and graceful, here everything solid and 'slow.' Fancy this, Ursula, from a stout, florid, plodding young gentleman, who drops his 'h's' and transposes his vowels!"

"Ah, Agnes, beware! It is dangerous to become the

confidant of so attractive a hero," Ursula laughingly exclaimed. "Really you tempt me to get well if such exhilarating society is within reach. You will introduce me to Mr. Ralph Ainslie, will you not? Of course Aunt Ellis will give some parties in honour of her niece?"

"Oh yes, that is already decided; and you, Ursula, must help us to make things go off well. But now, indeed, I must run away, as my preparations for Cornelia's reception are still incomplete."

Ursula's eyes followed the bright, girlish form as it quitted the room, and a feeling of desolation stole over her as she compared her fresh, full enjoyment of such common-places with her own weary distaste of life.

"Heavens!" she exclaimed, "who could suppose that those lively spirits are so evanescent—who could anticipate that a year or two's experience of the world should turn a life once happier, brighter than hers into bitterness? My husband false, my mother estranged, my wealth a bane rather than a blessing! My boy, my heart's darling, entrusted to others to save him from his father's violence! Alas! what reason have I to care for life?" She paused for a moment, then went on rapidly: "Can I have misjudged him? Miserable woman that I am to doubt him, as I *must* doubt him, and yet love him still!" And she clasped her hands across her eyes, as if she would shut out even from her thoughts the agonizing dread which no change of scene or place, no amusement, no occupation, had power to quell.



CHAPTER VI.

CORNELIA.

WAS Ursula right in her judgment of Miss Ellis? Agnes thought not. Her own recollections in no way confirmed Mrs. Weld's opinion. All she remembered of her aunt's niece was, a lovely face and enchantingly caressing manner. And though they had been but three months together, surely her real character must have shown itself in that time? No, no, Ursula was prejudiced. She sometimes was so. And yet—and yet there was a weight on Agnes's

heart, a cloud on her open brow, as she waited in the twilight drawing-room next evening to receive her guest.

But who that saw that bright vision of beauty cross the threshold of 16, Old-street, could have conceived that a shadow had crossed it with her which was to take the first girlish enjoyment of life from Agnes's young heart, and fill it with doubt and anxiety? Certainly Agnes herself did not think so when, advancing timidly in the wake of her aunt to greet the new comer, Cornelia flung her arms round her neck, and, gazing fondly in her face, exclaimed: "The dear sweet face! just as loveable as of old! Agnes, my darling, I am very glad to see you again."

That was the first pleasant impression, and first impressions go far. The next was the reception she gave Dr. Stuart. It was timid, it was maidenly, and yet there was something in the manner in which the large brown eyes rested for a moment on his manly face, and then fell modestly beneath the shade of their long lashes, that pleased both Agnes and her brother. The union of frankness and shyness was very attractive, and the idea that coquetry lurked beneath it all never entered the minds of the simple brother and sister. Agnes thought it perfectly natural that a young girl should be a little afraid of George, so clever and grave as he was; and she took the first possible opportunity of assuring Miss Ellis he really was anything but formidable, and liked very much to talk with her, and listen to all her little whims and fancies, so Cornelia must not be afraid of George.

"Nellie, please, not Cornelia, Agnes," said the other, putting up her red lips like a child to be kissed. "I am only Cornelia to those I don't care for. You know, love, I do care for you. How nice it is to be with you again. How nice to be with dear Aunt Ellis. It looks so like home—that is, it would, if you really think I need not be afraid of your grave brother."

Agnes repeated her assurances, and, as she spoke, George entered the drawing-room, and, with his usual courtesy, addressed himself to his guest. She answered at first rather hesitatingly, but, meeting Agnes's laughing eyes, she smiled in return, and then her trembling voice grew steady, the little hand that had clutched Agnes's so

tightly relaxed its hold, and by-and-by she began to look at ease.

And Agnes had leisure to look at her quietly, and to see how very lovely she was. A year or two older than herself, she appeared even younger, for her figure was slight and girlish, only that few girls were so graceful; her hair, of a deep rich chestnut, hung in soft curls round her exquisitely-formed head and throat, her lips were like coral, and her eyes had a trick of glancing timidly from between their fringed lids, which made her more fascinating than any one Agnes had ever seen before.

She did not know that Nellie was perfectly aware of her own fascinations, she never suspected that her timidity was assumed, and that her feminine weaknesses were encouraged as very useful adjuncts to the thousand little selfish schemes which lurked in her pretty head. Ah! feminine weakness is a powerful weapon when wielded with tact over the single-minded and generous-hearted. Nellie Ellis knew its value, and encouraged it admirably. Her enchanting helplessness and timidity, her sweet girlish simplicity, were the perfection of art—they did so simulate nature. Yet the one enabled her to ask for anything she wanted, the other to make her tastes and wishes patent to all who had the will to gratify them. Yet no one accustomed to such machinations could have suspected them from one like her. It is true that she was seldom half an hour in company with any one without in some way or other profiting by the companionship, but it is equally true that no one, at least of the rougher sex, but felt honoured by the privilege of doing any service to one so fair.

Dr. Stuart fell a captive at once to her charms, and found himself moving heaven and earth to procure tickets for concerts, art-unions, balls, and so forth; for, according to her own showing, Nellie was gifted with an exquisite appreciation of all that was beautiful in art or nature, but Fate had hitherto been unkind in denying her the exercise of her rare faculties.

Even Agnes, forewarned as she was, soon found herself a slave to Nellie's caprices, albeit as yet unconscious that there was a flaw in her idol, or that she was capable of anything so human as a caprice. Nellie's weapon to conquer

Agnes was her well-got-up admiration of Dr. Stuart. Her timid dread of him passed away like mist when the sun shines. She began to whisper "how droll he was, how original, how very nice," and her white eyelids would rise as she fixed a half-startled, half-pleased look on the young doctor, and asked some little simple question which she well knew would demand a long explanation, and force him to come nearer her.

A week after her arrival she confided to Agnes that she had at last quite overcome her fears, and thought there was not a man on earth so nice as Dr. Stuart. If she had a secret in the world, she could trust it to him. She remembered how long, long ago, Agnes used to speak of her brother George's tender love to her; and Aunt Ellis had always said that there was something touching in their mutual affection, and she saw now that all she had said was true. Her aunt had also told her that they were constantly together, talked together, went into society together—in short, were inseparable. And she longed so to tell Agnes, to tell them both, that she hoped her being in the house would not put an end to this charming brotherly and sisterly union, but that everything should go on just as if she were not present; above all, that they would not think of declining any engagements because she was not included in the invitation. If any one were kind enough to ask her to join a little quiet party, of course she would go, but Agnes must remember that her visit to Saxenham was not for amusement.—Who, indeed, could have spirits for enjoyment with such a banishment before them as she had?—It was only to see dear Aunt Margaret before going to India. So Agnes must promise to treat her just as one of themselves—a cousin in feeling, if not in blood.

Agnes was young, unselfish, and credulous, and this address of Nellie's roused all her generous feelings, and made her resolve that, if any particularly pleasant engagement was offered to them, Miss Ellis should be included in the party. She was sure George would not object; she was sure it would be a pleasure to George to escort them both. When she hinted at this, Cornelia said, "How kind you are, Agnes!" and kissed her again and again, and the conversation dropped.

Agnes had spoken in all sincerity, but she was scarcely prepared for the effect of her words. The first invitation that came she asked Nellie to go too. Nellie said she should like very much to go, and then Aunt Ellis announced that where Nellie went she must go. Agnes could go out alone with her brother, if she chose, but Nellie must be properly chaperoned.

There was a show of reason in this remark, and Agnes agreed, simply remarking that in that case she should stay at home, as three could scarcely go.

“Certainly not.”

George laughed when Agnes told him what had been arranged, and reminded her how a few weeks since Mrs. Ellis had refused a pressing invitation to the Ainslies', saying that even wild horses could not drag her to a Saxenham soirée.

But Mrs. Ellis was turning over a new leaf. She was becoming “affable,” and extending her invitations to an “at home” to *all* Dr. Stuart's friends, and the brother and sister were amused by the sudden change. But Agnes soon learned that, as respected herself, the change was anything but agreeable. Hitherto her brother's sole companion, she had been *the* lady to whom invitations were addressed, and on whom all kindness was lavished; and no longer constrained by the poverty which formerly had been the one bitter drop in her cup, she had thoroughly enjoyed the sunshine of her present life, and, with high animal spirits and few anxieties, had entered into society under the happiest auspices.

Now all was changed. By some odd legerdemain it was contrived by Mrs. Ellis that, whatever was most agreeable in the invitations that reached 16, Old-street, was reserved for herself or Nellie; whatever was tiresome or dull, fell to Agnes's share. How this was managed, Agnes could not quite make out, for some time elapsed before she could believe that Nellie had any part in the manœuvre, although she certainly made no objections to the selection her aunt made, nor seemed to perceive that Agnes made any sacrifices for her sake, when giving up her favourite engagements for her.

But whoever else might be blind as to what was going on,

there was one pair of eyes in Old-street which were wide open to every slight Agnes received, and a tongue that did its best to enlighten her as to Cornelia's real character. These sharp organs belonged to a certain Harry Thorpe, who spent fully as much time at Dr. Stuart's as he did elsewhere.

But who was Harry Thorpe, and what title had he to interfere in the domestic arrangements of 16, Old-street?

He was Dr. Stuart's favourite pupil, a lad a few months younger than Agnes, whose parents had been the most intimate friends of the Stuarts' parents, and as they lived close to each other, the two families had been almost brought up together.

Harry's sister, Isabella, had been at the same school with Ursula Reynard and Agnes Stuart; and Harry himself had been patronized by Agnes when, in the grandeur of her seventh birthday, she had looked down on the "little boy who was only six."

"Six and a half," insisted Harry.

"You are only six till you are seven," the young lady had retorted.

"But I am a big boy, and you are only a *very* little girl, less than me," Harry was wont to exclaim, angrily, "so you must not order me about."

"I will order you about," was the answer, "for I am older and wiser than you, and everybody knows that a girl of seven is a big girl, while a boy of six is a little boy."

Such had been Agnes and Harry's childish squabbles, and such, in some sort, they were still, though ten years had passed over both their heads since then. Agnes still insisted that a girl of seventeen was a woman, while a boy of sixteen was only a boy. Nevertheless, they were great allies, and as Dr. Stuart allowed Harry to consider 16, Old-street as a home-house, they were in the constant habit of seeing him there, and of allowing him to consider himself almost a part of the family.

Now Harry was very proud of Agnes, and had been gratified to find how much the Saxenham world admired her, and he was a little discomposed to see that she was now frequently superseded by Miss Ellis, on whom, with boyish big-wordedness, he had bestowed the title of a "double-faced coquette."

His indignation, however, might have been kept within bounds had not an incident occurred which wounded his own self-love. A first-rate concert was to take place in the music-hall of Saxenham. Dr. Stuart, as a subscriber, was entitled to two tickets, but lest Agnes should be left out, Harry had set to work, and with some exertion secured an extra ticket, specially for her benefit. His wrath, therefore, was extreme when, on going to Old-street the evening of the concert, he learned that Mrs. and Miss Ellis were to accompany Dr. Stuart, while Agnes remained at home; and he said, with some sharpness:

"Agnes, it was not right of you to give up what had cost me such trouble to obtain for you. It was you whom I wanted to hear Alboni. As for the others, they don't know 'God Save the Queen' from 'Jenny Jones.'"

"I am very sorry, Harry; sorry for my own disappointment as well as yours, but I could not help giving my ticket to Miss Ellis when——"

"I don't like Miss Ellis, Agnes," he interrupted.

"Don't you, Harry?" She knew pretty well he did not, but she felt it was the safest answer she could make.

"No, I don't. She's a regular humbug, and I cannot understand how you and Dr. Stuart can allow yourselves to be taken in by her."

"Perhaps we are less blind than you fancy," she said, with a mischievous laugh. "Perhaps we understand her quite as well as Mr. Harry Thorpe does."

"I don't believe it. You think her a delicate, helpless, fragile little thing, who must be petted and made much of, and all that sort of stuff. Now I think her——"

"What, Mr. Thorpe? for I suspect you are talking of me," said the fair Nellie, gliding into the room, and looking up in the speaker's face with the prettiest little air of naïve curiosity.

"As lovely in person as you are gifted in soul," the young man answered, with such ready presence of mind that even Agnes could scarce discern the slight sneer in his tone, as, starting forward, he presented a chair to Miss Ellis.

"You are an adept in pretty speeches," she answered, with a pleased smile; "and yet I wish I could have had

courage to stay one other instant behind the door, to have heard the *real* ending of your sentence."

"I am glad you did not," he continued, with Young England effrontery, "for one can express one's admiration of a lady's perfections to a third person, in terms one might hesitate to use to the lady herself. But, *à propos des bottes*, Agnes, have you heard that your friend Mr. Ainslie declares Mrs. Ellis to be the most *propre* *personné* he ever met with. He is certain that nothing but the habit of frequenting the highest circles of *bon ton* from childhood could have made any one so learned in the noble science of etiquette.

"Harry, don't talk nonsense."

"Nonsense! I assure you it's not nonsense. I'll tell you all about it. This young gentleman, Miss Ellis, has been abroad; he has had an audience at the Elysée; he has dined with the English ambassador at Paris, and yet he came to me last night, with Mrs. Ellis's 'at home' card in his hand, and seriously consulted me, as a friend of the family, whether he ought to appear in morning or evening dress. The hour was late, certainly, for morning dress; still Mrs. Ellis had been kind enough to intimate that she would be at home at that time, and he did not see how he could call at any other. Only he wondered, he really did wonder, whether Mrs. Ellis and Miss Stuart would consider a surtout a thing *de rigueur*."

"Harry, surely you are embroidering a little?"

"No, upon my word. Only please don't tell Mrs. Ellis about it, for she might look down on him, poor fellow, and he is really a good creature."

Miss Ellis rose from her seat. She was quite discomposed to find that this lad of sixteen, whom she had intended to dazzle by her condescension, was not at all inclined to be patronised, but presumed first to make her a bantering compliment, which was more insulting than flattering, and then turned his conversation entirely to Agnes, though he pretended to address herself. But what cared she for Mr. Ainslie? She had never seen him, and he was evidently a worshipper at Agnes's shrine. She was turning over in her mind the question, whether it would be a sufficient reproof of these silly "children" if she left the room, when Mrs.

Ellis's appearance relieved her of the difficulty. Harry offered his arm to the elder lady to hand her to her cab; and Dr. Stuart, hearing their voices on the stairs, opened his study door and escorted Miss Ellis.

"But where is Agnes?" he asked. "I hope she is not waiting for me. It would be a pity to lose even one of Alboni's songs."

"Dear Agnes is not going to the concert," was the soft-voiced answer; "she preferred to spend the evening with her sick friend, Mrs. Weld. At least, so she says, but I half suspect, Dr. Stuart," she added, with an appealing look in her soft eyes, "I half suspect the errand was invented to induce me to go to the concert in her stead. You know I had declined going at all."

Dr. Stuart knew nothing about the matter. Agnes was not the girl to make a merit of the sacrifices exacted from her, but he was vexed that she should have given up this particular concert, as he knew how much she wished to hear Alboni; and then it flashed through his mind that, in spite of all the fair Nellie's professions of indifference, she had of late been everywhere and Agnes nowhere. The amateur theatricals, the madrigal concert, the mayor's ball, for all of which tickets had been sent to his sister, had been handed over to Miss Ellis. Now this was very generous and kind-hearted on Agnes's part, but it was not exactly as it should be. He was glad to give his guest some amusement, but he did not feel it right to deprive his good little Agnes of it entirely. He must speak to his aunt about it.

Meanwhile he went to seek his sister. "Agnes, dear, I am sorry you gave up your ticket to-night."

Agnes blushed, but made light of the sacrifice. Perhaps she might have another opportunity of hearing Alboni, and Nellie might not.

"Kind-hearted little puss," he said, fondly, "but you must not let your good nature carry you too far, Aggie. For instance, I don't like you to go so late as this to Mrs. Weld's."

"I am not going there to-night, George," she answered, in some surprise. "I never intended it. It is not at all necessary. Ursula is much better, and quite counts on being at Aunt Ellis's 'at home.' My sole reason for not going to

the concert is, that I have sundry preparations to make for our first party, and—and Aunt Ellis wanted Nellie to have my ticket.”

“Oh!” he said, a new light on both aunt and niece coming upon him, together with a determination to put a stop to such selfish tyranny. And then he questioned Agnes as to Mrs. Ellis’s arrangements for her soirée; and when it oozed out that all the hard work—for there is hard work in preparing to give a large party with a small establishment—was intended to fall to Agnes’s share, he started from the sofa, looking, for him, really angry.

“I won’t have it so,” he said; “you are not fit to do all this, Agnes. Moreover, my aunt understands nothing of what Saxe-ham expects on such occasions. A supper, a bonâ fide solid supper, is essential. Why, child, more than half your guests dine at one o’clock, and would hate me if they were sent home without a hearty meal.”

“Oh, George, what shall I do?”

Agnes’s tones were so piteous, that her brother laughed heartily, in spite of his discomposure, as he said: “Don’t distress yourself, Aggie. Leave it all to me. I shall tell Aunt Ellis that I cannot consent to knock up my servants and kill my little sister for any soirée that could be given. So I shall desire my friend Mrs. Bacon to attend to the commissariat, and, to prevent interference, I shall go and give my orders now.” And, with a fond embrace to Agnes, he left the room.

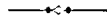
His hand was on the lock of the outer door, when Harry came in, looking flushed and radiant. “Oh, Dr Stuart,” he exclaimed, “I have had such luck. I went, as in duty bound, to escort the ladies to the music-hall, and at the door I met Ainslie. He looked quite disturbed not to see you or Agnes, and he got me tickets that you might both go. Will you? Agnes wants so to hear Alboni.”

Dr. Stuart hesitated. An important engagement an hour later would only allow him time to take his sister to the concert and leave her there. And after the insight he had obtained into her aunt and Miss Ellis’s double-dealing with regard to her, he hesitated to trust her alone to their tender mercies. Yet he did not like to decline when Harry had done so much to give Agnes pleasure. “I can’t do it,

Harry," he said at last. "I must go in quite a different direction. But why should not you escort Agnes? You are in evening dress, and I know would take care to see Agnes safe under my aunt's wing. That is the best plan by far. So run for a cab, and I shall see that Agnes is ready for you when you come back."

Harry's eyes lighted up with pleasure, and off he set without an instant's delay.

This, then, was the result of Cornelia's pretty white lie. It did not deprive Agnes of her promised pleasure, but it undermined the insensible influence which her sweet words and apparent affection to his sister had produced on George Stuart. Till this evening she had had a great chance of escaping India by securing, if all other efforts failed, the heart and hand of the most rising physician in Saxenham. But the unnecessary little fib of which she had been guilty opened Dr. Stuart's eyes to her other failings, and thenceforward her power over him was gone.



CHAPTER VII.

THE RETURN FROM THE CONCERT.

It is not necessary at this time to describe Saxenham manners and customs, though there are many of an original kind. It is enough to mention one peculiarity. Saxenham was decidedly an unmilitary town. It had barracks, cavalry and infantry, and the mayor was very polite in sending to the colonels of both regiments tickets of admission to all public places of amusement. The authorities had also decreed that the officers of both services should be exempt from the stringent rules which prevented civilian non-subscribers from entering the concert-halls, the lecture-rooms, and especially the Exchange, which were one and all the glory of Saxenham. But there all civility ended. A few of the church dignitaries admitted military men to their tables. One or two individual officers penetrated, by means of private introductions, into the inner circles of private life in Saxenham. But they were the exceptions that proved the rule of social exclusion, which went so far as to greet any young man who visited at the barracks with head-

shakings and eyebrow-raising, implying that he was on the high road to destruction.

Such being the case, Saxenham was by no means a favourite military station, and when Agnes Stuart met Captain le Grand at the Ainslies', he had been rather pathetic in his lamentations over the kind of moral quarantine in which the barracks were held. He alone had had invitations to dinner; but only twice before the present time. And Agnes had been a little sorry for him, though she was Saxenhamite enough to think it was all just as it should be.

Imagine, then, her dismay when, on entering the concert-hall on Harry Thorpe's arm, she found Mrs. and Miss Ellis seated on the ottoman under the gallery, a conspicuous position at any time, surrounded by a group of hussars in full uniform, who were talking and laughing with them as if trying to make up for long-enforced silence. How had this happened? She looked to Harry for advice and sympathy, her countenance asking, as plainly as if she had uttered the question in words: "Shall I join them, or shall I go home?"

Before he had time to answer, or to give advice on this momentous matter, Captain le Grand stepped forth from the conspicuous mass of red-coats, and, with a bow to Agnes, informed her that there was a place for her near Miss Ellis, and congratulated himself on her having changed her mind, and honoured the concert with her presence.

Slightly disconcerted by this address, yet at the same time grateful to be relieved from an awkward dilemma, Agnes took the proffered place, and hurriedly explained to her aunt how she came there, and told her that her brother was prevented from coming, and had sent Harry in his stead.

"Oh, indeed!" was Mrs. Ellis's cool rejoinder, as, turning to the officer who stood nearest her, she said, with some temper, "I am quite vexed, major, to find that Dr. Stuart will be unable to join us to-night. A professional man, you know, is so tied down by unavoidable interruptions."

"Still," said the major, courteously, "I trust that we may yet have the pleasure of making your nephew's acquaintance?"

"I hope so, I assure you. And if it would not be too much to ask before he has called, I should so like if you and any of your officers, who would care for a quiet party, would

join us to-morrow evening, when we hope to see a few friends. Eight o'clock is our hour" (she *dared* not say half-past seven). "Saxenham, you know, has very primitive fashions."

Agnes's amazement knew no bounds. What would George—what would George's friends—think of such an importation of red-coats! For the opportunity of getting out of barracks on any plea was irresistible to all the officers present. The whole eight of them rapturously expressed their gratitude, and before she had realized it all, Agnes found Major Valentine, Mr. Carter, Mr. Wynne, &c., &c., introduced by Captain le Grand to her as her brother's representative, and herself launched at once into the flow of military small-talk.

A song of Alboni's gave her a few moments to regain her presence of mind, during which she was vexed to see Harry Thorpe strut off, as if highly disapproving the whole proceeding. And then Major Valentine told her what a good thing it was that Miss Ellis had recognized Le Grand and Carter in the lobby and introduced them to her aunt, and so given them their first chance of seeing a Saxenham interior; for, upon his honour, he had not entered a private house since he came. Then, remembering his allegiance to Mrs. Ellis, the major turned away, while Captain le Grand, claiming the rights of old acquaintanceship, informed Agnes how he and Carter had become acquainted with Miss Ellis at a country-house in Hampshire in autumn, and how uncommonly lucky they thought themselves to find her and her aunt about to enter the concert-room unattended,—“could such a thing be permitted in any place but Saxenham?”—thus entitling them to offer their services as escort. “And so,” he said, “*vous voilà.*” While this was going on, Miss Ellis was engaged in a strong flirtation with Mr. Carter.

It was quite a new light in which to see her, and Agnes was a little surprised to find that she talked and laughed with this young man, just as other girls did who had the character of being “fast.” Very different hitherto had been Miss Ellis's manner. In Dr. Stuart's presence she was gentle, simple, unworldly. What he liked she adored, what he said was always right. But now the self-same subjects were discussed in an altered style. Saxenham was dull and stupid to a degree; its inhabitants in-

tensely slow and vulgar; conversation was at a discount; manners were rough and discourteous. She detested Saxenham, and longed for India and its gay quarters.

Every now and then Agnes lost some sentences, but she was thoroughly startled into attention by hearing her urge Mr. Carter to get up some garrison theatricals, promising that if he did she would patronise them. The answer was this: "By Jove, Nellie! you are a plucky girl! and I promise you we shall do it in style, if you will come. We'll give a ball, too, if you will provide the ladies. Some of them dance, I suppose?"

Captain le Grand caught Agnes's eyes as these astounding words were uttered, and seeing their look of horror and amazement, said, deprecatingly, "Carter is a little mad to-night at having a lady to speak to. We are all, I fear. You don't know, can't conceive, what it is to have only men to talk to day after day. But suppose, Miss Stuart, we did give a ball, would ladies condescend to honour us with their presence?"

Agnes laughed constrainedly. "I am almost a school-girl," she answered, "and, therefore, the worst person in the world to consult on such subjects."

Just then Mr. Carter's communications with Miss Ellis became so very confidential, that he found it necessary to seat himself on the back of the ottoman, and lean over the cushion, so as to put his lips on a level with "Nellie's" ear—a position which seemed not at all to disconcert the lady, who laughed and tittered in answer to his whispered remarks. But Captain le Grand evidently disapproved of their proceedings, and seemed anxious to distract Agnes's attention from them; for, placing himself so as to force her to turn her back on the offenders, he renewed his jeremiads on the dulness of their life in barracks, and explained to her that his own case was peculiarly hard, as he had exchanged from the 50th to the 91st Hussars to avoid being sent to Ashenford—a dull station twenty miles from Saxenham—and had been punished by his new regiment getting the route for Saxenham itself, a station a thousand times worse than even Ashenford. And all to keep order in the manufacturing districts. Was ever anything so absurd? Why, the manufacturing districts were as quiet and well-

behaved as possible. Indeed, so much so, that Carter and he had proposed to the major, the colonel being on leave, that they should lock up the barracks, and let the soldiers take care of themselves. What was the use of mounting guard day after day only to amuse a dozen jolly little blackguards, whose sole occupation seemed to be to peep through the barrack-yard railings, and repeat Cobden's suggestion to send the officers to the workhouse, in most overpoweringly broad Lancashire? If anybody came to see their manœuvres—ladies, for instance—there would be something to work for; but, as it was—Ah! if Miss Ellis and Miss Stuart would but honour the barracks some day, and have an inspection of the troops! The band should be out, and all that sort of thing, if they would but come. A luncheon to ladies would be such a treat!

Agnes listened and smiled, and uttered a few common-places in return, but her thoughts were too much pre-occupied to enter with her usual spirit into his amusing nonsense. A veil had fallen from her eyes to-night, and she saw Cornelia Ellis as she was, and shuddered as she saw, much as poor Christabel did when she recognized the serpent nature of Geraldine. A little while ago Agnes had seen with pleasure that George admired Nellie, and that Nellie courted his admiration. She had fancied it might end in his giving her Miss Ellis as a sister, and in spite of Harry's prejudices and Ursula's warnings, she almost wished it might be so. *Almost*, but not quite; for, as she then appeared, Nellie was too soft, too dependent on others, to make the active mistress of a family necessary to be the helpmate of an over-worked man. Since then little acts of caprice and selfishness had cropped out which made the idea more distasteful to her, and the duplicity of her conduct as regarded the concert-ticket had naturally had its effect on her mind. But it was her present behaviour which distressed her most. She shrank from the idea of her darling brother being connected with one who could do and say such things as Nellie had said and done to-night. The dread lest George should find out her real character too late, made her very wretched, robbed Captain le Grand's conversation of half its charms, and made even

Alboni's beautiful "In questa semplice" sound distasteful to her ears, for was not the "libertà" so eagerly sought in the refrain just such as Nellie would have desired, complete from control of any kind?

She thought Harry was thinking as she did, for he stood at some little distance watching what went on, and there was a look of disapproval in his face, quite apart from the expression of contempt, mixed with envy, natural to hobbe-dehoys who find themselves eclipsed by men of the world in their attentions to ladies.

It was not till the finale that Harry made up his mind to return to Agnes, to learn whether he could be of service to her. "None of you look fit to walk home," he said, "though perhaps it would be the easiest plan to-night, for there is a crush of carriages."

"Walk home!" Agnes said, looking wistfully towards her aunt, while even Nellie exclaimed, "Oh, pray let us walk, auntie!" But Mrs. Ellis had some grains of discretion left, which taught her that to walk home, escorted by half a dozen officers in uniform, was rather too much, and she said, "No, no—no walking. Call the first cab, Harry."

So Harry departed on his mission, begging them to meet him at the side-door. They got down-stairs with difficulty, and reached the centre waiting-room, from whence Agnes endeavoured to direct them to the side-entrance, but in vain.

"Nonsense!" was Mrs. Ellis's only reply to her reminder that Harry was to bring the cab to that door. "Nonsense! Harry could never have made such an arrangement. Nobody goes that way except professionals. So I shall wait here."

There was nothing for it but to yield to this decision. Time passed on, but of course no Harry appeared, and no cab was announced. Agnes was vexed to see the irritation produced in consequence, and again tried to call their attention to being in the wrong place, but Mrs. Ellis silenced her by exclaiming, "George should have come himself to bring us home, instead of trusting us to the care of that silly boy!"

"It is slow work for you, hanging on here, Mrs. Ellis," observed Captain le Grand, as he muffled himself up in his

cloak, and in so doing clashed his sword against his spurs with a musical ring which attracted more than one pair of eyes on their party.

"It is only an amusement to us," was the gracious answer; "but I am sorry to detain you."

Of course sundry polite speeches followed, but as it was evident that the gentlemen were tired of waiting, the idea of walking home was again mooted, and eagerly caught at by the whole party.

"'Tis but a few hundred yards to Old-street," they urged, in answer to Mrs. Ellis's objections. "The night, too, is warm, and, with such a military escort, you run no risk."

Nellie confessed that she doted on such pleasant little adventures. What did Aunt Ellis think? Did she object very much?

Aunt Ellis thought anything was preferable to staying on where they were, and what could poor Agnes's protestations avail against two wilful ladies and twice as many cavalry officers? So they set off, Agnes, of course, along with them. She alone had the slightest notion of the turn they should take to reach Old-street, and even she got puzzled when Mr. Carter and Nellie started off to the right hand instead of the left, and hurried on so quickly that they had crossed East-street, and were turning down the Camford Road, when Captain le Grand, Mr. Wynne, and Agnes overtook them. When that feat was accomplished, it was necessary to turn on their steps to find Mrs. Ellis and Major Valentine, who had taken another wrong direction; and when at length the party was gathered together, it was discovered that the various divergences from the right path, joined to the extreme darkness of the night, had so confused them that nobody could make the faintest guess which direction to take.

"We must hail a policeman," Captain le Grand suggested. "I see a bull's-eye gleaming down there to the right, so I'll see about it, Wynne, if you will take care of Miss Stuart."

The bull's-eye, however, was nothing save a ruddy light from an open door, which closed just as Captain le Grand reached it. The sudden gloom caused by its extinction,

and the economy of the Saxenham officials in only lighting half the street lamps when there *ought* to have been a moon, prevented Captain le Grand from discovering what sort of man it was who had issued from the door of the house where the light was, and who was now walking quickly down the street, but he called out:

“Stop a moment, my fine fellow, and tell us how to get to Old-street? We have lost our way.”

The quick footstep paused as he spoke, and a gentlemanly voice answered, “Old-street? Why you are going away from it as fast as you can. Turn right round and make for Saint Peter’s Church—you see the illuminated dial there?—take the turn to the right, and you are in Old-street.”

“Thank you.”

The speakers had by this time approached the one lighted lamp where the ladies were standing. Captain le Grand said: “We are to make for that light out there, and shall find ourselves close to Old-street. I wish, Miss Stuart, we had listened to your advice.”

The man who had given the direction started perceptibly as he heard the name of Stuart, and seemed about to walk quickly forward, when the light chanced to fall full on his face, and Agnes recognized Dr. Weld. Without thinking, she uttered his name, and he, turning back, expressed his surprise to see ladies in the Upper-gate at that hour of night. Agnes explained what had happened, which seemed to amuse him greatly, and he observed, laughingly, that if that was the case he must see them home himself; it would never do to allow them to lose themselves a second time, as they were sure to do with such limited bumps of locality.

As he said this he drew Agnes’s hand within his arm, and they walked on together in silence. What it was in his silence that made Agnes uncomfortable she could not exactly tell, but that it had that effect on her is certain, and to put an end to it, she said, in her usual lively way:

“And how came it, Dr. Weld, that we were so fortunate as to meet you in this part of the town?”

“I came professionally,” was the curt reply.

“I beg your pardon that such an idea did not occur to

me," she said, quickly, feeling somehow that he considered her inquiry impertinent, "but of late we hear of you so much as a man of science, that we forget you are also a physician."

"The sooner you can forget it, the better, Agnes," was his gruff answer.

Agnes, offended at his making use of her Christian name, tried to withdraw her hand from his arm, but he held it tight. "I want to speak to you," he said. "I want to tell you something. I have wanted to tell it you for a long while, but I never see you alone. Why don't I? Are you afraid of me? You know how much I admire you, how much superior I think you to most silly girls."

Agnes got more and more angry. "Dr. Weld," she said, "I don't choose you to speak to me in this way. If you have anything to tell me of Ursula, do so; if not, let us join the others."

"Ursula! always Ursula!" he said, mockingly: "but it is of her I want to speak. I want you to tell your brother that she is going mad."

"Good heavens! you are not in earnest. I saw her yesterday. She seemed unusually well. She promised even to join us to-morrow evening."

"It is perfectly true, I assure you, That is," he said, with a sudden change of tone, "her irritability is so great, that—that—In short, I am wretched about her, and can only attribute her strange fancies to insanity. You saw one little specimen a few months ago. What was then occasional is now almost unremitting. I called it hysterics then, I can't call it so now. You know how I love my wife, and perhaps you know she loves me. At least, she likes no one so well, and yet—and yet there are times when she seems to think me a devil incarnate. I wish Stuart would see her. I wish he would tell me what he thinks."

He uttered all this in the same broken tone in which he had spoken on the occasion of Ursula's first outbreak in Agnes's presence, and it was difficult to make out whether his disturbed manner arose from real loving anxiety with regard to his wife, or to a worse motive. At all events, it made Agnes feel very uncomfortable, the

more so that, in the vehemence of his speech, he had hurried her onwards at so rapid a pace that they had far outstripped the rest of the party.

“I shall tell George to call on her to-morrow.”

“Not to-morrow, I know Thursday is a busy day with him, but on Friday—I shall be at home on Friday—I should like to advise with him on her case.”

“Then he shall come on Friday, but I shall try to see her to-morrow.”

“She told me you said you would not come to-morrow,” he said, quickly, “and if you said so you had better not go. She might fancy something was wrong, that I considered her health was in danger. No, don’t come to-morrow, and don’t be surprised if neither of us attends your soirée. I dislike excitement for her, and if I can persuade her to keep at home, I shall. Ah, here is Old-street; I must bid you good night.”

“I think George must be at home,” Agnes said, “so pray come in. You will explain Ursula’s condition better than I can.”

“No, thank you, I am in haste!” and he hurried away, leaving Agnes standing alone on the door-step, without another creature visible in the street. She rung the bell loudly, and the door was opened by Harry Thorpe.

Explanations ensued. Harry was very angry—angry with Mrs. Ellis, with Agnes, but most especially with Dr. Weld. “What could he mean by leaving you in this way? In the Upper-gate did you meet him, Agnes? Came out of a house in the Upper-gate? Pray never tell any one such a thing. It—it—it would be better not.”

Agnes was puzzled by this request, for, long as she had lived in Saxenham, her brother had so carefully hedged her round from all knowledge of the sins of large cities, that she had but a vague impression that there was vice and iniquity in the world, and had no idea how near its haunts were to her own innocent, happy home. Had she heard Mr. Carter’s remarks to Miss Ellis she would have been painfully enlightened.

“Good heavens!” he exclaimed, “what a fool Stuart must be to allow his young sister to have any acquaintance with a man seen coming out of one of the Upper-gate hells

at this time of night. I am not strait-laced, as you know, Nellie, but even I would cut a fellow who so disgraced himself."

"Oh, Dr. Stuart is as innocent as a baby," was Nellie's answer; and she proceeded to investigate the why and wherefore of Mr. Carter's excited remark, but he cut her short by an abrupt reference to a previous subject, which even Nellie felt a strong hint to ask no further questions.



CHAPTER VIII.

AUNT ELLIS'S SOIRÉE.

AGNES firmly resolved that night that she should see Ursula next morning, and herself judge whether her husband's hints were well founded. Somehow she had grown suspicious of Dr. Weld, and was not inclined to take his assertions for granted without personal investigation. Besides, she had excuse enough for going to her friend, in the events of the evening, and the unlooked-for addition to their guests. It was only fair that Ursula should know what to expect.

But when morning came, her bright visions disappeared. Mrs. Ellis was in a particularly bad humour, in consequence of George's interference with her arrangements, and his precautions to save his sister trouble resulted in nothing. Mrs. Ellis contrived to find so many little things to be done to make her party go off well, that evening was approaching before Agnes was permitted to relax in her exertions.

The girl's position at home was peculiar. Her aunt arrogated all domestic power to herself, but allowed all the weight of household cares—and they have weight when it is necessary to make a respectable appearance on a narrow income—to fall upon Agnes. Indeed, since the latter left school, she was in reality "*the person of the house.*" Everything that required sense, ingenuity, or neat-handedness, devolved upon her, and she accepted the task with alacrity.

Mrs. Ellis was not gifted with administrative capabilities. She liked to be mistress, but there her management of the household ended, except in so far that she believed that, whatever tended to comfort—that is to say, to the comfort of

others—must necessarily be extravagance. Agnes looked upon matters in a very different light. With her, economy meant to make the best use of limited means, and having a clear head, a pleasant way of making others work under her, and a capital use of her hands, she had contrived to effect a very great improvement in the Old-street *ménage*, and this without more expenditure than formerly.

George appreciated her exertions, and often told her that now, indeed, he had “a home,” but Mrs. Ellis only thought she did her duty, and, with the usual tact of the selfish, contrived to make the willing horse do all the hard work; and so much was found for to-day, that Agnes had not a moment at her own disposal to devote to her proposed visit, and scarcely even one so undisturbed as to allow her leisure to think her own thoughts. True, she did find time to speculate on the effect which would be given to their first *soirée* by Captain le Grand's pleasant chat, and by the *savoir-faire* of his brother-officers, and a few agreeable anticipations of personal enjoyment in consequence flitted across her girlish fancy. She remembered Mr. Ainslie's panegyrics on the easy flow of conversation among the aristocrats of the British Embassy, and she laughed within herself as she fancied that Captain le Grand's spirited talk fulfilled all the conditions of which he had spoken so feelingly.

But these were only transient thoughts. Her hands and her brain were too much engaged by the duties of the present to dwell long on extraneous matters, and it was not till the last finishing touches had been given, that, wearied by her exertions, she crept to her own little room and threw herself into her easy-chair to rest and think. Then, for the first time that day, she had leisure to dwell on her disappointment in not seeing Ursula, and to wonder whether she would make her appearance that night. Was she really ill? she speculated. If not, what could Dr. Weld's object be in saying anything so dreadful? His excited manner last night, when speaking of his wife, ought to have been excused by so terrible a fear having taken possession of him. And yet it occurred to Agnes that, if he really loved Ursula, he would have taken every precaution to prevent her only girl-friend from suspecting that which might estrange them from each other. He would have kept his suspicions secret

from all but her medical adviser. And then a hot flush rose to the girl's face as she remembered his calling her "Agnes," and speaking to her as he had done. Something in his manner more than his words had made her miserably uncomfortable during that short walk home, and gave her a half-shudder as she thought of having to meet him again and treat him as a friend. An innate feeling she could not quite explain had made her conceal this growing repulsion from her brother. He had seemed so annoyed by the whole business, that she made as light of it as possible; and he had said, with some meaning, that perhaps the less said about it all the better.

What his opinion of Ursula was she had not dared to ask, and he had not volunteered.

As she sat by the comfortable fire which Martha had lighted for her in the tiny boudoir opening into her little bed-chamber, Agnes thought of these things, and slowly sipped the coffee provided also by the old servant's loving care. But, gradually, brighter visions rose before her. Captain le Grand's pleasant face rose to her recollection, and she began to wonder how George would like him, and whether he had contrived to call at the barracks, as her aunt had requested. She hoped he had, because——

Just then seven o'clock struck, and she remembered that she had not a moment to lose in dressing, if, as Mrs. Ellis desired, she were to be in the drawing-room by half-past seven, lest any of the guests should be so *gauche* as to make their appearance at the hour indicated by her "At home." So she rose quickly and proceeded with the duties of her toilette as rapidly as possible. She had no maid, the ever-helpful Martha being on that especial evening thoroughly occupied. Still she made such good speed that she was fastening into her corsage the bunch of lily of the valley Harry had brought her, when a peal of the hall-bell told her that the first guest had arrived.

A few minutes later, a light tap at the door of her boudoir showed her that she was not ready a moment too soon.

She hastened to open it.

"Yon, George!" she exclaimed, as she saw her brother in morning dress at the door. "You are not called out, I hope?"

"Yes, and on a painful mission too, Aggie," he answered, as he entered. And the light falling full on his face showed him to be very pale, while a look of real sorrow rested on his face.

"What has happened?" she said, drawing the arm-chair in front of the fire, and making him seat himself in it. "Can I help you?"

"Yes, dear, you can. Wait a moment; I am so shocked, so amazed, that I must think an instant before I tell you what it is." And he leaned his head on his hand, and looked as if he would faint.

Agnes ran to her dressing-table and brought some eau-de-Cologne, with which she bathed his face and hands. He looked up at her with a grateful smile: "You have done me good already, my Aggie—always ready, always hopeful."

She stooped and kissed his brow. "Now, tell me," she said, "is it Ursula?"

"Yes. She is down-stairs, in a sad state of excitement. She has had a regular quarrel with her husband, and has taken refuge here—here of all places, and to-night of all nights in the year."

"What is the quarrel about?"

"I can't tell you, dear. At least, not yet. I think she has made a great mistake. I think, when matters are cleared up, she will confess that she has. But, meanwhile, it is very awkward, and whether he will ever forgive her I cannot tell. At all events, I must try what can be done. I must go to Weld—I had rather go to any other man—and see what he says. Perhaps he may stand it better than I expect. But she is in so excited a state, that I dare not take her with me, and you know she can't stay here."

"I will take her home, if you like."

"No, indeed, *that* you must not do. But if it were any other night, I should have asked you to bring her up here till I try to set matters straight."

"And why not to-night? No one ever intrudes here. Fortunately there is a fire, and Martha, the only person who has seen her, knows that she was expected this evening."

"Yes, that will do. She has been taken ill here! That, at any rate, is true. It is the only safe course. So go to

her, dear, and bring her as quickly as you can. I have given her a composing draught; so I think she will now be tolerably reasonable. And I shall seek Weld. I don't like the business, but it must be done. Good heavens! there are people coming already. You must make haste, love."

Agnes flew down-stairs and entered the study. At the sound of the opening door Ursula sprang to her feet with a startled scream; but, on recognizing Agnes, she threw herself into her arms, exclaiming:

"Agnes, Agnes, save me from him! Don't let him see me. Don't let him know I am here."

Agnes soothed her as she would have done an infant. "You must not alarm yourself, Ursula. I am going to take you to my own room. You will be safe there. George bade me come for you."

"Are you sure George thinks I shall be safe there?"

"Quite sure."

"Then I shall go. I shall do anything he bids me, for he is true and honest." And, like an obedient child, she put her hand in Agnes's, and quietly walked up-stairs. They were just in time, for as they reached the upper landing the door of the tea-room opened, and a group of gaily-dressed people crossed the hall into the drawing-room.

Agnes heard her brother greet them by name, and excuse himself for being obliged to run away from his guests for half an hour. And then the usual jokes followed, which are considered quite allowable to a medical man.

"Ah! sent for suddenly? Yes, yes, we all know what that means! Your practice is getting enormous, Stuart; but don't eut your old friends altogether." And then the door closed, and Agnes led her trembling friend into her own chamber.

The sudden emotion she had evinced on seeing Agnes was past now, and a strange dull apathy had succeeded. She was like a person walking in a dream. She followed where Agnes led, permitted herself to be wrapped in a thick shawl and placed in the easy-chair before the fire; but, though she stretched her hands towards the blaze, she

seemed rly unconscious of where she was and what she was doing. The change in her whole appearance was such that Agnes gazed at her with a shuddering dread, she was so unlike the Ursula of former days. She wore a low-cut evening dress of some foreign fabric, the prevailing hue of which was a rich amber, softened by a tunic of black lace. But in her hurried flight from home the tunic had caught in the hinge of the cab, and hung in shreds round her. The heavy plaits of her raven hair, escaping from the gold net which had confined them, fell in disordered masses on her white neck and shoulders. Her hands were gloveless, the flowers which had looped up her dress were crushed and broken; so that altogether her appearance was more that of a maniac escaped from thralldom than of a rational gentlewoman.

But it was the expression of her face more than the disorder of her dress which distressed Agnes. Never had she scen anything like it before. Her cheeks were pallid, her features shrunk and haggard, and her hollow eyes looked out from their deep dark caves with a glare that terrified one to see. Never had they looked so large and black; and fixed and glassy though they were, they seemed to shine with an uncanny light, a something despairing and yet dangerous, which Agnes could not fathom.

For a time both sat in silence. The rattle of carriages, the arrival of the guests, the voices of servants, and, by-and by, the murmur of conversation in the room beneath, all struck painfully on Agnes's ear, but in the chamber itself not a sound was heard. Ursula was evidently unconscious of what was going on. She sat motionless, staring into the fire with that desperate changeless glare which it was so painful to watch. How long this lasted Agnes did not know. But at length she distinguished her brother's step on the stair, and flew to meet him.

He smiled as he saw her, and said, cheerfully, "All is right, dear; at least it will be so soon. Just slip quietly into the drawing-room, as if you had been there all the time, and wait till I send for you. Mrs. Weld is still in your room, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"And quiet now?"

“Quite quiet. She has not uttered a word since you left.”

“So much the better.” He saw the inquiring look of his sister’s eyes, but made no further explanation. “You shall hear all by-and-by,” he said, kissing her fondly. “God bless you, Agnes; you are a great help to me.”

Agnes saw the perplexity in her brother’s face that gave the lie to his cheerful words, but she felt it would not be right to press him further at that time; so she went back to her room, took up her gloves and fan, and glided out again so softly that Ursula never raised her head or uttered a word of inquiry.

As she entered the drawing-room, Mrs. Ellis called to her at once, and, as she approached, said, in an unusually kind tone, “Well, love, you have finished your labours in the tea-room just in right time, for I promised that, if Captain le Grand would sing for us, you should play his accompaniment.”

Agnes, glad to escape so easily, did not think it necessary to explain that she had not been in the tea-room, but, quietly accepting the duty imposed upon her, took Captain le Grand’s offered arm to lead her to the piano. What followed she scarcely knew. She supposed that she acquitted herself well, for Captain le Grand paid her sundry compliments on her playing, saying it was easy indeed to sing to such an accompaniment, she so thoroughly “sympathized” with the spirit of the words.

Agnes smiled as he said this, for it relieved her of the dread that she had made a complete bungle of the whole thing. The truth was that she had played by a kind of instinct, the notes had seemed to dance fandangoes before her eyes, and as to the words, she had not heard one, though she found herself unconsciously soothed by the melodious tones of the voice, which excited even Mr. Ainslie to eloquence in its praise.

Has it ever happened to you, my reader, to have been forced to read aloud when you were fully absorbed by a secret care you longed to hide from those with whom you were associated? Have you ever put a force on your inclination, and, taking up the book, proceeded to fulfil the task with a faint hope that the exertion might draw

you from your own contemplations, and found yourself at the close of a chapter without an idea of how you reached the goal? You heard, perhaps, the echo of your own voice, you were told you had read with taste and expression, and yet, if examined on the matter you had read, you must have confessed you knew no more of it than the magnetic patient knows of the revelations he has made when under the influence of the charmed sleep from which he is suddenly aroused.

If you have undergone this experience, you will then understand Agnes's sufferings that evening. She was still listening to Captain le Grand's compliments, when she was startled by a voice whispering close in her ear, "Your brother wants you immediately."

A more nervous person might have screamed at this interruption, for the speaker was Dr. Weld, the last person in the world she had expected to see that evening, after what had passed regarding Ursula; but Agnes contrived to control the inclination, though she could not repress a faint shudder as she felt his touch on her arm, and heard his voice so close to her.

She turned to answer him, but he was gone, and Captain le Grand was still talking to her, unaware of the interruption. Agnes answered him lightly; then, with a trifling apology for leaving him, she hastened to obey George's summons.

He met her as she crossed the passage. "Agnes, dear, I must have your help once again. It is of importance that that poor thing should show herself in the drawing-room to-night. You must try to make her presentable."

"Is she fit for the exertion?" Agnes asked, remembering the state of despairing apathy in which she had left her.

"I think so. I hope so. At all events, the effort must be made. When she is ready, she will find Weld in the tea-room waiting for her. They must go in together. And you, Aggie, must contrive to slip in before they appear. I am going now."

Agnes was puzzled; but if she had hesitated to demand an explanation previously, much more did she do so now; so she obeyed in silence.

On entering her own room, she was surprised to see

Ursula, with a smile on her face, standing before the mirror, and endeavouring to show poor frightened Martha how to loop up her tunic so as to conceal the rents it had received. The change in her within the last hour was magical. She looked a new creature. The fixed stare of her eyes was gone, life and colour had returned to her face, and she laughed merrily when Martha's blundering fingers wandered hopelessly in her unaccustomed efforts to restore her dishevelled tresses to order.

"Oh, Agnes!" she exclaimed, "I am so glad you are come to my aid. Poor Martha is nearly out of her wits at my demands, and is, besides, on thorns to get back to the tea-room. I know she is." And, with a little bow, Mrs. Weld dismissed the trembling attendant.

When the door closed on her, Ursula turned to Agnes, and, clasping both her hands in hers, exclaimed, "Aggie! Aggie! you have reason to be proud of your brother. He is a good as well as a skilful man. He has done me an inestimable service. I dare not tell you what it is—he bade me not—but it is one I never can forget. He has told me how to act to-night, and I shall do it, and do it well. No one shall suspect what has happened. Even Weld shall have no hold over me with regard to my behaviour to-night. You don't know what I mean. Never mind, I know, and that is the great matter. Now, dear, give me something to put on that will make me look less wild, less like a tragedy queen than I do with these tattered garments, these broken ornaments. Yes, these flowers will do beautifully." And with artistic grace she twisted a few roses in her dress, while Agnes smoothed her long, dark, beautiful hair, and arranged it once more in its jewelled net. A large black lace shawl was then thrown round her, so as to conceal the torn lace of her tunic, and Agnes looked with satisfaction on the effect produced. "Thank you, love," Ursula said, with a fond kiss; "you have made me for once look like a respectable matron. And now"—she paused an instant, and her small white teeth closed themselves firmly on her ruby lip, as, with an air of resolution, she added—"and now you must find Weld, and tell him I am ready."

Again Agnes obeyed without asking an explanation,

and then flitted quietly back to the crowded drawing-room. A minute elapsed, and the husband and wife entered together, and, during the remainder of the evening, acquitted themselves so well that no one suspected that aught lay concealed beneath the frank sociability of the one or the lively grace of the other. Agnes and George alone knew that each was playing a difficult part, but the representation was good, and those to whom they acted had most of them their own little *rôles* on hand, which prevented too close an examination into those of their neighbours.

"Who is that pretty little woman," asked Mr. Carter of Miss Ellis—"the one in amber satin and black lace, and with a jewelled net on her splendid hair? Surely she is not a Saxenhamite?"

"She is the wife of the tall bearded man talking to Miss Stuart. Their name is Weld. She was at school with Miss Stuart. A Welsh heiress, I believe."

"Ah! I thought she had blue blood in her veins. The husband is a remarkable looking man. I feel as if I had seen him before. Neither his face nor beard are likely to be soon forgotten, and yet, by George! I can't remember where we met."

"It was he who guided us home last night! Don't you remember how disgusted you were with him for joining us after——"

"Yes, yes," he broke in, abruptly. "I remember. Weld, you call him! Ay, I thought so. I guessed how the land lay, even then!"

"You are enigmatical."

"Well! I wish I had not said a word about it, Nellie. The truth is, the man is a blackguard. You need not say I said so, you know. You are not a girl to spoil sport, and I don't want to be called out by a fire-eater like that. But if you can, just give Miss Stuart a hint to have as little to do with him as possible! Of course, Stuart himself does not know the character the man bears. But *we* learn these things pretty soon."

"In what way a blackguard?" persisted Nellie. "A gambler?"

"Worse." And Mr. Carter turned away to end the conversation.

The evening was over at last.

It had been a success. Saxenham was not in the habit of giving evening-parties, and the novelty of the thing took. Besides, Dr. Stuart was popular. The world was inclined to look kindly on all he did. And it was *well* done. The wine was unexceptionable, the ices were good and plentiful, and if there was no "sitting-down supper," there was a constant moving to and fro to the ante-room, where the more solid refreshments were laid out. Moreover, the ladies had all on new dresses. One must have become a dweller in Saxenham to comprehend the full amount of praise expressed in that adjective. The host was attentive to every one, and, let people say what they like against military men, those who were at the Stuarts' were really pleasant and gentlemanly.

So, as I have said, Aunt Ellis's soirée was a complete success, and congratulations (Saxenham fashion) were showered upon the happy lady in consequence. She and Miss Ellis were radiant with the triumphs of the evening, but it may well be believed that George and Agnes's greatest satisfaction was that it was over, and well over.

The brother and sister had a long confidential chat that night after Mrs. and Miss Ellis had retired. George described his interviews with the husband and wife, and explained by what means he had brought each to reason.

"But it is a hollow peace," he said, with a sigh, "and I tremble to think what the end may be. Had she a home she could go to, I should most heartily second her desire to have a legal separation; as it is, I fear she must dree her drag."

"Is Foxhall shut against her?"

"Quite so. She quarrelled with her mother for marrying again, and all that she would condescend to was to permit her son to continue there."

"I can't make it out, George."

"Nor I, I assure you. I shall tell you, Agnes, what my great difficulty is. I am not satisfied that either of them tells the truth; most certainly neither tells the whole truth. I incline to believe her more than I do him; still, if his tale be true, that there is insanity in her family, all the rest is credible enough."

“You can easily ascertain that, George.”

“How ?”

“From the Foxhall solicitor. You have seen him, and he knows you well enough to understand what reasons you may have to get the point cleared up. To be sure of that fact would, of itself, be much.”

“It would indeed. It is a clever suggestion of yours, Aggie.” He rose to leave the room, and, as he bade her good night, he said, “I know I need not tell you not to hint at this matter to strangers. That I am sure you will never do. But you must be on your guard, dear, with her, and with him also. He will, I am certain, do all he can to find out how much or how little you know.”

Agnes promised to be careful, but she little guessed when she said so how much she should be tried.



CHAPTER IX.

GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY?

THAT there are some black sheep in the medical profession is, no doubt, true ; but where, as a whole, can be found a body of men more charitable, more kind-hearted, and less self-seeking ? One rarely takes up a newspaper without finding in it some record of the generosity or unselfish devotion of a medical man. And yet what is his life day after day ? Scenes of sorrow, suffering, and sin, meet him on all sides ; there are ceaseless claims on his purse, his sympathies, and his time, as well as on his professional skill ; there are responsibilities forced upon him, secrets entrusted to his keeping, demands made upon him, of all descriptions. Many a family dissension owes its cure to “the doctor,” many a married couple are indebted to him for the restoration of peace and respectability to their lives, and many a sinful soul has owed its salvation to his whispered words by the sick-bed ; words not of authority, as from the lips of a minister of Christ, but the gentle, humble teachings of a fellow-sinner and fellow-layman.

Those who have never lived in a manufacturing town like Saxenham, have little conception of the religious in-

fluence of a medical man of tact, education, and principle, on the lower classes.

The antagonism to the Established Church that lurks among the *esprits forts* of such a town is great. The people are full of prejudices against the clergy, from the prevalence of the old-fashioned notion that the very position of a rector or vicar makes a man "a bloated aristocrat," who lives on the fat of the land, and does as little for his money as he dares to do.

The doctor, on the contrary, is looked upon as one who has feelings like other men. To him are often confided the mortal fears of death, which are so carefully concealed from the rector, and to his encouraging words may often be traced the first struggle to forsake a life of sin for one of righteousness. But does the world ever consider the weight of anxiety thrown upon the doctor? Does it ever weigh the difficulties which must beset a man who is the recipient of so many confidences, the struggles it may cause between his sense of right and his sense of expediency, when worldly prudence advises him to let things pass, and a higher duty whispers to him to act, and this in circumstances which may gravely imperil his own future? To such trials every medical man is, in a degree, open, but a town like Saxenham, where wealth and education do not always go together, necessarily presents more of such difficulties than most places. Among born gentry, self-control and delicacy are rather the rule than the exception, but in a place where a man may be to-day almost a beggar, and to-morrow a millionaire, things are reversed, so that what is the rule elsewhere becomes here too often the reverse.

Of this, George Stuart was fully aware. His experience of Saxenham had long since taught him that, however prudent he might be, it was not easy to steer clear of the rocks and quicksands which endanger the success of a young physician. He had escaped shipwreck hitherto, but sometimes so narrowly, that the slightest indication of fresh embarrassment made him anxious and uneasy, and it seemed as if his acquaintance with the Welds was destined to give him an infinity of trouble.

Yet how could he avoid it? Both husband and wife had flung themselves upon him with a faith in his good will

which it was not easy to withstand. On some pretence or other, Dr. Weld had contrived to be so constantly seen in his company, that he and his wife were generally known as "Stuart's friends," or those "cousins of Stuart's," for Saxenham was in the habit of assuming that persons who were tolerably intimate must necessarily be relatives. This idea had greatly tickled the Welds when they first heard it, and they had made it an excuse for greater intimacy than either the brother or sister had desired.

George Stuart was vexed that it was so, for though far from suspecting the real character of Dr. Weld, he had seen enough to make him desirous not to have his young sister thrown much into his society. But common charity had obliged him to allow Agnes to visit Ursula during her long illness, while he, having been formally called in as her medical attendant, had to see her frequently. Her husband, moreover, frankly confessed that she had lost all faith in his professional skill. "No man, you know, Stuart, is a prophet in his own country, so it is better to give up practice even with regard to my own wife. And," he added, civilly, "I know she could not be in better hands than in Dr. Stuart's."

Dr. Stuart of course was obliged to accept the charge thus imposed upon him, and in answer to the questions he had put as to his patient's condition, Dr. Weld had replied with sense and good feeling, but at the close of their interview had said, with a rather peculiar glance of intelligence:

"I have other reasons for requesting you to attend my wife, which, however, I shall not allude to at present. If it be necessary, I shall explain them to you hereafter."

Dr. Stuart, recalling his first interview with Ursula, had thought it better to make no answer to this concluding speech, but had at once set himself to the consideration of his patient's case, which he found to be rather peculiar. The daily attendance at Camp-place which followed, thus made the intimacy he had resisted compulsory, and it was not long before he became a witness to sundry matrimonial squabbles of a like nature to that which his sister had described. On those occasions he also had found himself generally compelled to acknowledge that Dr. Weld was in the right, and more than once, when appealed to by Ursula, he had said so openly. But, strange to say, these frank

expressions of his opinion seemed in no degree to affect Mrs. Weld's faith in him. On the contrary, she received his award as final, and yielded implicitly to any suggestion he made for putting matters straight with her husband. In one sense this was gratifying to Dr. Stuart, but in another quite the reverse. He disliked extremely to hear his opinions so often quoted as conclusive, and at length he ventured to remonstrate with her for doing so.

"I cannot understand why?" she answered. "You are a clever, right-thinking man, and I can see no reason why I should not tell people you are so."

George was silenced. He could not, without impropriety, hint to her that, with the gossiping tendencies of Saxenham, it might be hurtful to him, as well as to herself, to be held up as an example of all that was most charming by a woman whose domestic squabbles with her husband were patent to her servants, if not to the world generally. He was, therefore, frequently forced to laugh at that which gave him grave cause for discomfort, and to endeavour, for his own sake, to restore at least the semblance of peace between the husband and wife. He had at length flattered himself that his efforts were to be attended with success, and Mrs. Weld's improvement in health had permitted him to relax his close professional attendance upon her, when his hopes were crushed by the miserable scenes of the present evening. He had been about to leave his study to prepare for the reception of his guests, when the door was flung open, and Ursula rushed in, clutching a medicine bottle in her hand, and shrieking out that her husband had poisoned her, and she had brought the proof in the bottle she held.

It was some little time before he could comprehend her strange story. But at length he gathered that the preceding day she had sent to Dr. Stuart's chemist for a fresh supply of a tonic mixture he had ordered. Her husband brought the medicine to her. It was carefully wrapped up as usual in paper, stamped with the chemist's name, and no idea of its having been tampered with occurred to her. She took some of the mixture that night, and slept more soundly than usual, and the next day, though she felt very languid and oppressed, she never thought of attributing her odd sensations to the draught. But in the evening, when she

had finished dressing, she became strangely giddy, and the girl who attended her suggested that the medicine she had just taken seemed stronger than usual. Then it suddenly flashed upon her that the mixture was *not* that to which she was accustomed, and, on examining the bottle more carefully, she perceived that neither the smell nor colour of its contents resembled that she had previously had, although she had perceived no difference in taste. Her suspicions once aroused, she remembered that the bottle had been put into her hands by her husband, and then the conviction came upon her that he had poisoned her.

"This is a grave accusation, Mrs. Weld," Dr. Stuart said, as she finished her almost incoherent narration; "but I can easily tell you whether the medicine has been tampered with."

"It has!" she exclaimed, as she perceived the change in his countenance on tasting it.

"It is certainly not what I ordered," he said, quietly; "but it seems to me more likely that the mistake has occurred at the chemist's, than as you suppose."

"You do not know him, Dr. Stuart," she answered, impetuously. "I never told you all, but I must now. He wants me dead. He hates me. He loves another, and—and it is avarice alone that has hitherto saved my life. If I were to sign the paper he is always importuning me to sign, I should put my hand to my own death-warrant. Listen to me: you shall hear all he has done to me—all——"

"Not now, Mrs. Weld," he said, firmly—"not till the matter is cleared up. I shall instantly take measures to ascertain the truth. If it is not, as I suspect, an accident, I shall listen to you. Till then, I am not entitled to do so."

"You do not mean that you will take me back to him?" she said, piteously.

"Only with your own will," he answered, "but I hope to convince you that you are quite wrong in your suspicions. If you are not, you shall be saved from him, believe me. Now take this"—giving her a draught he had meanwhile been preparing—"and wait here patiently till I return."

When he had placed her in his sister's hands, Dr. Stuart drove quickly to Lilford's, the chemists, and saw the prin-

cipal partner. A strict investigation was made, and it was discovered that in the bustle of the previous day—market-day—the making up of the prescription had been entrusted to a new apprentice, who could remember nothing about the matter except that he had made up “something” for Mrs. Weld from the prescription-book of a certain date. The book being referred to, was found to contain two prescriptions of the 14th of April, one a tonic mixture, the other an embrocation, and the lad could not tell which of the two he had put into the bottle in question. On examination, the contents of the phial were found to be neither more nor less than the embrocation, whose ingredients, taken in infinitesimal doses, had as yet produced no bad effect, though, if persevered in, they must have ultimately been fatal.

So far this was satisfactory, and Dr. Stuart next proceeded to find Dr. Weld. He was shown into the library, where, immersed in scientific experiments, he confessed himself quite oblivious of his engagement at Old-street.

When he heard of the peril his wife had so narrowly escaped, his face grew deadly pale, and his moustache vibrated violently, but for some minutes he did not utter a word. At length, in a curiously nervous voice, he exclaimed :

“Lucky escape, both for her and me !”

“For you, Weld ?”

“Why, yes, for me. I never liked to put it in plain words before, Stuart. I wished you to find it out for yourself, as I am sure you would in time. But the fact is, that what I have called hysteria in Ursula, is neither more nor less than insanity. There is madness in her family. Her father killed himself, and so did her only sister. I did not know it till after our marriage, and it is not a thing one likes to blazon forth, but I must tell *you*, for you see the turn the hereditary taint takes in my wife is to insist that I want her dead, and that I have tried to poison her. It is hard to bear,” he continued, with a sigh, that, if not natural, had a great air of nature in it ; “but there is a skeleton in every house, and, however well one may drape the fleshless bones, there are times when the grinning death’s-head looks out on one and makes one shudder. It has often been a

question with me, Stuart, whether I should give up the game altogether and part from her entirely. We are not happy together. I need not tell you that, for we doctors are pretty close observers, and you must long have seen the *dessous des cartes*. But I believe she loves me still, after her sort, Heaven help me, and——Well! it is no use to make myself out better than I am; she is the purse-keeper! She took care of that when she married me, and if we separate I am penniless.”

Dr. Stuart listened to this revelation with no pleasant feelings. He had expected some such communication after what Dr. Weld had said to Agnes the evening before. Still, he was unprepared for the force and apparent truthfulness of the speaker, and was a little shaken in his previous prejudice against him. He was silent for some moments, thinking what was most judicious to answer. He could not tell him that the accusation he expected had been made by his wife, but he saw very great need that they should be persuaded to appear together that evening at Old-street, so that, should the story of the changed medicine ever come out, their apparent cordiality would put a stop to all gossip on the subject.

He delicately placed this view of the matter before Dr. Weld, hinting, at the same time, at the tattling propensities of Saxenham.

“It may be so,” he said, rising unwillingly from his work; “there is no knowing what foolish people may say if her flight to Old-street is known. Still it is a bore; though I suppose one must do in Turkey as the Turks do,” he added, with a smile, “and throw dust in the eyes of the world. Wait for five minutes, Stuart, and I shall go back with you.”

The task of bringing Ursula to reason was less easy, but, as we know, it was done at last, and the success of the move was complete. When it oozed out, as all such stories do in some unaccountable manner, every one said how “plucky” it was of Mrs. Weld to investigate the thing at once, so as to clear her husband of what might have been an awkward “fix” for him. It was a stupid mistake of Lilfords’ people. But it was a mistake, and that was all.

So the Saxenham world was satisfied, but the Stuarts were not, and they suspected that, in spite of Ursula’s assur-

ances that she was thoroughly convinced that the chemist's apprentice only was in fault, she had still a vague impression that Dr. Weld had something to do with it.

She had one or two private consultations with her family solicitor soon after, and it was shrewdly suspected that she had entrusted him with some overtures to her mother for a reconciliation; but Ursula, with all her frankness, was in some things extremely reserved, and the Stuarts took pains to avoid any unnecessary confidences from her.

At Whitsuntide, George Stuart took his annual holiday, and as Miss Ellis's three weeks' visit had now expanded to several months, and seemed likely to go on for an indefinite period, he proposed that Agnes should accompany him to Paris. Mrs. Ellis chose to be offended by the suggestion, declaring that her niece, if not herself, deserved more consideration than to be left behind in that unceremonious way, but George Stuart could be firm when necessary, and, as he saw that Agnes required a change, he held his ground. That winter had been a trying one to so young a girl. Not only had she been kept in constant anxiety with regard to Ursula, but she had also been subject to a good deal of worry and annoyance from her aunt, of which the fair Nellie had been the principal cause. It does not concern the present history what these annoyances were, further than that the attention Captain le Grand bestowed on Agnes, and the indifference he showed Miss Ellis, had a good deal to do with the disgrace into which she fell with her aunt.

The brother and sister were a fortnight absent, and returned in high health and spirits. But to what new trials? Dr. Stuart found an urgent note awaiting him from Mrs. Weld, entreating him to come to her the very instant he reached Saxonham.

He went, and was astonished by the change which a single fortnight had made in her. She looked like one in rapid decline—the last illness he should have expected to attack one of her excellent constitution and well-developed form.

She seemed to guess his surprise, for she said with some meaning, "You see that there is something seriously the matter with me. I cannot tell what is wrong, but you must not seold me, Dr. Stuart, if I repeat my conviction that Weld is at the bottom of it."

"You are anxious about your husband?" he said, purposely misunderstanding her.

"Anxious about myself, rather," she replied. "I told you before that he hates me, that he wishes me dead. I *thought* so then, I *know* so now. I feel that he is poisoning me—how I know not, but he began it the very day you left, and all my precautions to avoid taking it are useless. Don't fancy this is a monomania of mine. It is true that he has poisoned me, and that it is from that, not disease, that I am what I am."

She then proceeded to relate several circumstances which, though by no means proofs of her assertion, still produced a disagreeable effect upon her hearer's mind, and made him suspect that there might be grounds for what she said.

Still he did not allow that her suspicions could be true. No poison with which he was acquainted could produce the symptoms he now saw, and he was inclined to believe that, in spite of all probabilities to the contrary, his patient was suffering from deep and rapid decline. On this point he desired to call in the most skilful consultant in Saxenham, and Dr Weld agreed to his wish most readily.

"All he desired was to do the best for his poor wife," he said.

The consultation was fixed for the next morning, for George saw that no time was to be lost, if her life were to be saved. But that evening he paid a visit to the Foxhall solicitor, whom he had been unable to see before leaving home.

After informing him of Mrs. Weld's danger, he asked whether there were any grounds for supposing that there was hereditary insanity in the Reynard family?

"Insanity among the Reynards of Foxhall?" Mr. Percival repeated, "nothing of the kind. Never was there a saner race. They have tempers, no doubt, but madness, pooh! such a thing is unknown among them." The old gentleman got quite excited by such a scandal, and after puffing and blowing for some moments, he asked, "Who told you this lie, Stuart? Somebody must, I am certain."

George evaded the question by remarking that the deaths of Mr. and Miss Reynard gave a kind of excuse for such a report.

"Not a bit of it," Mr. Percival replied. "Old Reynard

died of brain fever, brought on by the shock of his daughter's accidental death by drowning. Everybody knew that there was cause and effect there. Everybody saw that there was not a touch of insanity in either case."

"I suspected as much," George said, quietly, "but a medical man only does his duty in assuring himself of the falsity of some reports."

"Humph! I have a tolerable guess who was your informant," Mr. Perceval growled. "He has tried the dodge before now. But it won't do—it won't do, and I thank Heaven we managed to tie up the property as we have done. Three hundred a year settled on him during his life is quite sufficient for him to make ducks and drakes of. Pity that she and her mother don't hit it off better together! But how could they, with such tempers; and it was aggravating of the old lady to marry again at her age."

"I am ignorant of Mrs. Weld's family or fortune, Mr. Perceval. As Miss Reynard, she was at school with my sister—hence our acquaintance; otherwise, I make it a rule to know nothing of my patients' pecuniary affairs. That is, when it can be helped," he added, with a smile.

"Not always easy to help it, though," Mr. Perceval said. "I often think what mischief you doctors could do if you chose. You know far more of our clients' secrets than we do."

"Not in this instance, I assure you."

"Well, the less you know of Weld's the better, perhaps." And, with this oracular warning, the gentlemen bade each other good-bye, the solicitor promising to inform Mrs. Taylor of her daughter's danger. Dr. Stuart departed with a new element of distrust in his mind against Dr. Weld, and he resolved to watch him carefully.

The consultation was over. Dr. Stuart had purposely refrained from hinting to his colleague the impression his patient had of the cause of her illness, and at his request Ursula herself was silent. Thus the first decision was, that Mrs. Weld was suffering from rapid decline. On his second visit, however, the physician was evidently struck by some unusual symptoms in his patient, and, although he made no remark to her, he expressed his doubts to Dr. Stuart.

"I can't understand this case," he said, "The hectic

fever is there, the cough, the spitting of blood, but there are peculiarities"—naming them—"which I never before met with in decline."

Then it was time to speak, and Dr. Stuart frankly stated the particulars of his patient's delusion, if delusion it were, with regard to her husband. He mentioned the incident of the changed medicines, showing that there was no proof that Dr. Weld had anything to do with it, the only apparent part he had in the matter being that he had handed the bottle to his wife some hours after it had been placed in his possession by the chemist. This incident, trifling though it was, had created great suspicion in his wife's mind, principally, as he had ascertained, because a similar accident had happened, a year or two previous, to her then infant son, whom she had never since permitted to remain in the same house with his father.

"This is a strange story, Stuart," Dr. Stanfield replied, "but I am glad you have told me. It may, as you suggest, be a delusion on the wife's part, but it may also be true. I don't believe it is, you know; still one must be cautious, very cautious, to secure her against all risk. I shall tell Weld that a nurse is essential, and we must give her strict injunctions that nothing reaches the patient save through her hands."

So said, so done. Both medical men took pains to avoid anything that might suggest to Dr. Weld that he was watched, but a very careful system of surveillance was carried on with regard to him, and it must be confessed that one or two trivial circumstances told against him; nothing tangible exactly, only enough to give a shadow of suspicion when taken in conjunction with his wife's fears.

The end came at length. Ursula's days were numbered, and it fell to Agnes's lot to warn her that it was so.

She received the intelligence very calmly. "I have suspected as much from the first," she said, languidly, "and I have tried to prepare myself for it, dear Agnes. I have brought myself to be resigned to my fate. My sole regret is that I shall not see my darling little Charlie again in this world." She was silent for a few moments, and one or two tears rolled slowly down her thin cheek. At length she said, with a touch of her old spirit, "You see,

Aggie, I knew him better than you did. I knew he would make away with me some day, and he has done so."

"He? Who, Ursula?" Agnes exclaimed, for her brother had carefully concealed from her the suspicions against Dr. Weld. "You don't know what you are saying."

"Don't I, dear? I know perfectly well. I warned your brother long ago that my husband wished me dead. And that wish was father to the thought and the act, Agnes," she said, excitedly. "Yes, let them say what they will, I *know* that Weld has poisoned me. He tried it once before, and failed. This time he has succeeded. And if he were here now, I should tell him so to his face."

"Do so," said a deep voice, close by. And Dr. Weld suddenly drew back the bed-curtain, which had hitherto concealed his entrance into the room. "Miss Stuart shall witness the accusation. Or perhaps," he added, bitterly, "you may also wish the servants to be present?"

His unexpected appearance startled the dying woman, and for a full minute she looked at him with her large hollow eyes, struggling vainly to speak. At length she said, in a low, husky voice, "Francis Weld, I accuse you of two crimes. The first, an endeavour to poison our son, that you might gain his inheritance; that attempt in mercy failed. The second, to poison me. In that you have succeeded. Your own conscience tells you I only speak the truth." With the last word she sank back upon her pillow, panting and exhausted.

"Ursula!" he answered, "I little thought your madness would have carried you so far. That it is madness, I know, and the doctors know. I warned them of it long ago."

Slowly, and more like the movements of a spirit than a living creature, Ursula raised herself on her thin arm, and again fixing her glittering eyes on him, gasped out: "You told them this? Even the bitterness of death could not satisfy you. You must add this trial, this calumny—God forgive you, Frank, and may He one day bring you to repentance. Now leave me. I must have my thoughts undisturbed to make my peace with Heaven. Go!"

As she spoke the curtain fell from his hand, and he slowly turned to leave the room. But, as he passed Agnes,

he whispered: "Miss Stuart, you must not permit my poor wife's ravings to lead you to condemn the guiltless."

This is no sensational story. If I could have avoided this slight sketch of a well-known tragedy, I would have done so. But without it I could not have shown how Agnes Stuart's character was moulded and strengthened. It is only as far as she is concerned in it that the history of this wretched couple comes upon these pages.

Ursula died; and the physicians having declined to sign a certificate as to the cause of death, an inquest was summoned. It was due, they said, to Dr. Weld, that the vague suspicions which had arisen among the servants and neighbours should be investigated, and, if possible, done away with. The result was that Dr. Weld was arrested on the charge of poisoning his wife, and was ordered for trial at the autumn assizes at Normanpool.

I shall not attempt to describe the trial. Every one knows the difficulties that attend conviction in a case founded only on circumstantial evidence, especially when conflicting medical opinions are brought to bear on the case. The symptoms attending Mrs. Weld's death were declared by several physicians to be those natural to decline, and others, who dissented from this opinion, attributed them to some occult disease, as no known poison could produce such results.

Still the suspicions against Dr. Weld were very strong. Particulars had been elicited in the course of the trial which hinted at a life of low principle and morality. Gambling was by far the least failing of which he was accused; while an unfinished note found in his portfolio, bearing the date of the night his wife died, began thus: "Chère Reine de Golconde;" and, so far as it went, seemed to imply some motive to desire Mrs. Weld's death.

On these particulars I shall not dilate. What I have to do is to show the effect of this trial on my heroine, Agnes Stuart, who was summoned as a witness for the defence.

"Oh, George!" she exclaimed, piteously, "what shall I do? How can I escape this dreadful ordeal?"

"You cannot escape it, my darling," he said, sorrowfully. "It was a cruel thing in Weld to call you into the witness-box. I cannot conceive what he expects to gain by it."

"He can gain nothing. You never told me your suspicions. I never suspected that he had poisoned her till she said so solemnly the night she died. I thought it a delusion of poor Ursula's."

"You have only to say so, dear Agnes," said her brother, much relieved. "Only to answer straightforwardly the questions they ask you."

"But if my evidence should lead to his condemnation?" she said, with a shudder.

"It cannot do so, dear. It may assist him to escape a conviction. It cannot lead to one."

"Then I shall do my best to go through with it. Much as I dislike him, George—and you know I never have liked him—I could not bear the thought of being art and part in his condemnation."

There was complete silence in the court when Agnes took her place in the witness-box. The course of the trial had already shown her intimacy with the dead woman, and great expectations were formed on both sides as to the result of her evidence. And when, her veil being raised, they saw her young, fair face, pale with agitation, yet calm and composed—when they marked how truthful and direct her glance was, and heard her low, clear voice answer the questions put to her with modest firmness—the popular feeling in her favour grew intense. Those who had been prejudiced against her by "that villain," as they termed Dr. Weld, calling her in his defence, felt that circumstances, not inclination, had led to an acquaintance on her side with such a man. And even the counsel for the prosecution, a man of rather rough and harsh nature, softened into comparative courtesy towards her when he found how readily she answered his questions. This was all the greater triumph, as he elicited from her nothing against the prisoner's case. It was due solely to the gentle dignity and straightforwardness of her replies. Every one could see by her look and manner that the prisoner was distasteful to her, but whatever she had to say, for or against him, was said simply and without exaggeration. It was evident, as her examination proceeded, that she could say nothing legally hurtful to him, but it was quite as evident that her own feelings condemned him. And

so the trial was over, and he was pronounced "Not guilty."

But not with Dr. Weld's release did the effect of his trial end for Agnes. The judge in open court had complimented her on the admirable appearance she had made in a position of great difficulty, combining at once candour and good feeling with womanly dignity and self-possession. And as she left the court-house on her brother's arm, the crowd cheered her heartily, and cursed the impudence of the late prisoner for daring to summon *her* in his favour.

Such homage was painful to Agnes. She was thankful to find she had acquitted herself creditably, but she shrank from the publicity to which she had been subjected. She felt herself lowered in the estimation of right-minded people by having her name mixed up with so miserable a tragedy, and she longed to leave Saxenham, and hide herself till the nine days' wonder was past.

It was at this critical season of her life that her brother's affection shone out in full lustre. He sympathized fully in her miserable feelings, but he helped her to struggle against their becoming morbid. His encircling arm seemed round her in every difficulty, his cheering words helped her to bear patiently even the personal compliments which were showered on her with more cordiality than refinement. He told her laughingly that it was doing *him* all the good in the world, as the best men of Normanpool and Saxenham had asked to be introduced to him to congratulate him on having such a sister, and that gratified her. It did not come upon herself; it was a homage that benefited George.

But though with her brother's help she weathered this trying time, she was greatly "oldened" by it. She had entered the court a trembling girl; she had left it a woman, and the careless light-heartedness of early youth had gone for ever.



CHAPTER X.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

FIVE years had passed since Dr. Weld's trial, and Dr. Stuart and his sister were alone together in the drawing-room of 16, Old-street. Agnes was bending over a work-frame

containing a piece of embroidery on white satin, which was advancing rapidly beneath her nimble fingers. Every now and then she cast a quick glance at her brother, who, immersed in his own thoughts, was leaning against the mantel-piece, apparently forgetful of her presence.

After a time he crossed the room to where she was sitting, and leaning over her chair, began to admire her work.

"For Annie?" he asked.

"Yes. Do you think it will please her?"

"I am sure it will; and the only objection I can find to it is, that it is too delicate in its beauty to stand the smoke of Saxenham."

"Thank you, George. You have given me exactly the praise I wanted, for brides, they say, always prize most those presents which are utterly useless, and I want Annie to prize my bridal gift."

"Agnes!"

The reproachful tone in which the word was spoken made her look up at him inquiringly. In general, George laughed at such lively retorts, but now there was not an approach to a smile on his face. What could be wrong? And she said, in a graver tone:

"The truth is, George, that Annie herself chose the pattern and materials. I told her plainly that the value of any present I could give must arise solely from association, such as being my own handiwork, and, like her dear little kindly self, she told me she had long desired to have a screen like this, so here it is."

"And I am sure that, being your work, Aggie," Dr. Stuart answered, "she will prize it far more than costlier gifts."

"I am sure she will," was Agnes's simple answer, "for I know she loves me dearly."

"And you her?"

"Dear George, do you doubt my love for Annie?"

"Never till to-day, Aggie. I had always believed till now that my marriage would give you a sister, not that it would deprive me of one."

"It does, dear George."

"Then Aunt Ellis was talking nonsense when she said you would leave Old-street when I married?"

“No, she was not.”

“Then it is as I said, my marriage deprives me of my sister. You like Annie as an acquaintance, but cannot reconcile yourself to living here when she becomes mistress of my house?”

Agnes looked distressed. “It is not that, indeed, George,” she said, eagerly; “but yet it is better we should go.”

“I thought you were above the vulgar prejudice that sisters-in-law cannot agree.”

“I hope I am. At all events, I know that I can never be so happy anywhere else as I should have been here with you and Annie. But could Aunt Ellis be happy here when another is mistress of the house? or could Annie, good and loving as she is, reconcile herself to my aunt’s little peculiarities as you and I have done?”

George winced at this direct question. “I have told Annie what my aunt did for us long ago, and she honours her for it. And as to Aunt Ellis, she cannot fail to see that my wife, and my wife only, must rule my house.”

Agnes shook her head. “You may bend a sapling, George, but you cannot twist the knotted oak into a new direction. Annie may be as considerate and as loving as she will, but it will never content Aunt Ellis. She is old, and must be humoured. Old people are generally a little selfish and wedded to their own ways. Only those who are called on by duty to yield to them can do so readily. In Annie’s place it would be wrong that she should do so. This I saw from the first, and have tested it since.”

Dr. Stuart was silenced by this last remark. He did not, indeed, choose to confess it to his sister, but he could not help recalling one or two antagonistic speeches which had already been exchanged between Mrs. Ellis and his betrothed—trifles, no doubt, when taken by themselves, but of moment when looked upon as suggestive of future contests. Annie, of course, was always in the right, but that, perhaps, made the matter only the more anxious.

Agnes, after a pause, went on. “I have studied the matter very carefully, George, and the more I have done so the stronger my conviction has become, that, for a time at least, you and I must separate. Aunt Ellis must rule, or, at least, fancy that she rules, wherever she is, and

whatever her little foibles may be, neither you nor I can forget that she alone of our friends and relations came to our assistance when we needed help, and at seventy years of age we cannot allow her to go out into the world alone."

George drew a heavy sigh. "Still it is unjust that you should be the sacrifice."

"Nay, George, sacrifice is too strong a word. There are often thorns in the path of duty, but not thorns only. I love Aunt Ellis, and I think she loves me."

"No one could help loving you, dear Aggie, unselfish, dutiful, loving as you are!"

It was so seldom that George Stuart expressed in words his deep love for his sister, that his eager exclamation brought tears to Agnes's eyes, but she answered cheerfully, "Well! that being settled, the next question is, where shall we go?"

"You do not mean to leave Saxenham?" he said, with a fresh touch of vexation in his tone?

"My aunt speaks of living in the country."

"Oh, at Smedley? Well, perhaps that would be more agreeable for you. You would not be far off, and yet would get quit of the fatiguing bustle of the town."

"No, George, not Smedley. No place near this. Aunt Ellis means the complete country, far from railways or manufactories."

"My dear, you little know what that implies. From your childhood you have lived in the midst of action and bustle, and you would weary to death of the still life of the country. But my conviction is," he added, with an attempt at a smile, "that the selfish old woman will whisk you off to Scotland before you know where you are."

"And why not, if it makes her happy?"

"By Jove, Aggie, you make one suppose that the old woman's happiness is of more importance to you than your own or mine."

Agnes rose from her work-frame, and going close to her brother drew his arm round her neck, and, as she leaned her head on his breast, she said: "Listen to me, George, and you will see that I have considered your happiness most of all. For seven years we have lived together; neither of us during all that time had a secret from the

other. You have been to me far more than ever a brother was before to a sister. You have made me your confidant and secretary, and now Annie only should be the one or the other."

"True; but——"

"Let me go on. You agree with me that Aunt Ellis must leave Old-street. You almost allow that she ought not to go alone, and, as I only am left to go with her, I feel that it would be best for me, when I leave this dear home, to go somewhere where I should be forced to alter every habit of my life hitherto. I am only a woman, you know, George, not an angel, and I fear if I lived in Saxenham, or anywhere near it, I should feel like the peri weeping at the closed gates of Paradise." She said this lightly enough, but George saw that, in spite of her smiling lips, she spoke seriously, so he urged her no further.

"And now," she added, when she recovered the voice which her brother's silent embrace had almost reduced to a sob—"and now, George, I promise you that if I am unhappy with Aunt Ellis, or if I find she can live without me, I shall come *home*. Will that content you?"

"Yes, if it is a promise."

"It is, I assure you. And now, darling, you believe that I leave you, not because I wish it, but because I must."

He stooped and kissed her fondly. "Agnes, my own dear sister, you are what you ever have been, tender, true, and unselfish, never swerving from the right path, however rough it may prove. God bless you, dear, and reward you for your self-denial."

He quitted the room hastily as he said the words, and Agnes saw that he was convinced by her arguments, and she rejoiced, but with a very sorrowful joy. Hitherto her fate was in the balance, now it was decided; and when she thought what that meant, she hid her face in her hands and wept bitterly.

Agnes was no longer a young girl. She was three-and-twenty, and she knew well that to leave Saxenham, to leave George, was a wrench that would pull up by the roots all her old happiness, all that had been hitherto her life. Till now her heart, her soul, her talents, her whole existence,

had been merged in her brother. The poverty, the difficulties they had surmounted together, had bound them closer than most brothers and sisters are bound, and now that they were to live apart, her affections, though not her reason, struggled hard to convince her the sacrifice was unnecessary. But everything told her that it must be, and also that it was right. Nor was the ordeal she was about to undergo an uncommon one. Every day some woman has to endure it. Every day the sister or daughter who has for years, perhaps, devoted herself to the service of a brother or a father, even to the sacrifice of her natural hopes of a home of her own, finds herself suddenly supplanted by a sister-in-law or step-mother. She may approve heartily of the new-comer, as heartily as Agnes did of Annie, but that does not make the change itself less trying. Lately, perhaps, presiding over a large establishment, her time, her thoughts occupied, living a full and happy life, she is at one fell swoop deprived of all. She must seek new interests in her home, if, indeed, a home is left to her, or must, if deprived of it, as is too frequently the case, begin life altogether afresh. The tide of circumstance has stranded her on a barren rock. It rests with herself whether she lies there like the idle weed rotting on Lethe's shore, or, bravely breasting the breakers, snatches some relics of happiness from the waves which have despoiled her of so many hopes and enjoyments.

It is a trying position to most women when this test of their faith befalls them, and it is to be feared that few receive it in a right and teachable spirit. The weak in health and principle generally yield tamely to their fate, and drift down life's current, a weary burden to themselves and others. Some take to "religion and ragged schools," less, it is to be feared, because religion is their sheet-anchor in time of trouble, than because it offers a new excitement in the place of that they have lost. Some fritter away the remains of their lives in folly or worldly pleasures. Only those whose faith is strong in God's wisdom and mercy, only those who steadfastly believe that He it is who fits the back to the burden, the trials and temptations of life to the powers He has given to withstand them, can act a worthy part in such circumstances. To them the remembrance is always present

of Him who has appointed their place in this world of probation; and trusting to His promise to aid those who call upon Him in time of trouble, they find themselves strengthened to bear the trial, they see that many mercies are still vouchsafed to them, they find gleams of brightness in their cloudy horizon, green spots of verdure in their desert waste; they believe that the present discipline would not have been inflicted on them by their all-merciful Father save for some gracious end, and they do their best to discover what that end is, so as to attain it most perfectly.

Even to them, no doubt, the struggle is often one of life and death, but the victory is surely theirs if they keep steadfastly beneath the banner of the Cross, and put their faith in Him who died that they might live.

Some such thoughts floated through Agnes Stuart's brain as she laid her weary head on her pillow that night. Her experience of life was beyond that of most single women of her age, and her faith in God's guidance had already been tested in so many ways, that she felt it would be ingratitude indeed not to look forward with humble but steadfast hope to the future, and with a sincere belief that the cup she was about to drink would have much of hidden sweetness mingled with its bitterness.



CHAPTER XI.

BUT WHITHER?

THE wedding passed off to a wish.

Agnes's strong affection for George, and her still stronger conviction of what it was right to do, had enabled her to receive her brother's parting embrace with a smile. But now that it was all over, the reaction had come, and she felt very wretched and very desolate, as she cowered, shiveringly, over the fire, and retraced the life she had passed under George's roof. For seven years she had, in fact though not in name, presided over that well-ordered household. For seven years she had been the recipient of all George's schemes, the assistant in all his endeavours to do good. For seven years she had been accustomed to the conversation of clever men, not always polished in manner, per-

haps, but full of talent, energy, and liberal views; and as she retraced all that she was about to lose, her exile from Saxenham seemed a living death. It was death to all that had hitherto been the brightness of her life, and though for George's sake she made the sacrifice cheerfully, she could not help remembering that, but for the duty she owed her aunt, she might have remained where she was.

"Ay, but not *as* I was," she hastily added. "It is better as it is, far better."

Then she set herself to consider where they should go on leaving Saxenham. She supposed it would end in their taking a cottage at Smedley, for the time for decision was short, and Mrs. Ellis had as yet made no effort to fix on one place more than another. Agnes gave a little shudder as she thought of Smedley as their home. She knew enough of it to be aware that it was more full of petty tittle-tattle than even other small towns, and she could not but dread that if they were so near Saxenham, Mrs. Ellis would constantly expect attentions from George and Annie, which it would be impossible for them to give.

She was still immersed in unpleasant anticipations of the discomforts that might ensue were they to choose such a residence, when Mrs. Ellis awoke from the comfortable nap in which she had indulged after the fatigues of the day, and starting up from her reclining posture on the sofa with the wide-awake energy of one who assumes never to have been asleep, she exclaimed, "So, Agnes! George is fairly married, and I suppose the sooner we are out of the house the better. Where shall we go? I am sure I have not the shadow of a choice. It matters little what becomes of us now that George has set us adrift."

"Oh, aunt, don't say that."

"But, Agnes, it is true, and you know it is. Indeed, for that matter, does not the Bible itself warn us that a man will forsake his father and mother to cleave to his wife, so it may well be expected that he will forsake his sister and his poor old aunt. Yet I confess I did not quite expect that, after devoting my best years to my nephew, he would launch me on the world at sixty-nine without making an effort to find me a home. But it is no use to make a moan about it. He is married, and good luck go with him,"

Somehow, the last words did not sound exactly like a blessing, and Agnes, who generally received Mrs. Ellis's speeches most philosophically, was to-night so over-excited and exhausted by what she had gone through, that she fairly burst into tears.

"Now, Agnes," was her aunt's rebuke, "what is that for? What have I said to hurt you? I am sure if I spoke sharply, it was as much because I was vexed with George's treatment of you as of myself. To think of his going off without securing a home for his orphan sister! putting me altogether out of the question. But all men are selfish when they are in love. It thrusts everything else out of their heads. I fancied that our George might prove an exception to the rule, but you see he has not. And then to fix his wedding-day in this month of all months! just as if he intended to set off on his wedding tour in a snow-storm."

Agnes smiled at the diseursiveness of this speech, but brought her aunt back to the point by the remark that, as they had told George they wished to decide on their future dwelling-place at leisure, he might naturally suppose that they did not wish him to interfere with their plans."

"Interfere, indeed! As if either you or I should have resented any interference that showed some interest in the comfort of an old woman who has done for him what I have done! But it puts me in a fever to think of it, so let us say no more about it. The present question is to decide where to go; so say at once, Agnes, what your wishes are."

"Should you like Smedley?" This was said in rather a dubious, hesitating tone.

"Smedley? No. Certainly not. A dirty, smoky place, where the inhabitants are mere *roturiers*, tradesmen, and that kind of thing, worse even than Saxenham itself."

"I have no wish to go there, Aunt Ellis," Agnes interrupted, "only I thought you might care to be near George and Saxenham."

"Agnes! when will you understand that I detest this place, and all that it contains? It is for your sake and your brother's that I have submitted to the degradation of visiting people in trade, and now that George has connected himself—Well, well, I shan't touch on him any more."

"You once spoke of Cheltenham, or Brighton," Agnes said, quickly, to turn the subject.

"Well! there are some niceish people at both places. But Brighton is all glare and sea, and as for Cheltenham, as somebody says, it is either powder or pomatum, dust or mud, and I detest both."

One or two other places were mentioned with equal bad success, and Agnes was on the point of giving up the discussion when her aunt suddenly exclaimed, "Goodness gracious, Agnes! that is the door-bell! Who on earth can be coming to disturb us to-night? It is just like Saxenham manners to come and inquire all about the wedding, and how it went off. And oh, dear me! I have been lying back on my cap, and have crushed it as flat as a pancake. Agnes, Agnes, run and prevent any one being admitted!"

"It was only the post-bell," Agnes replied, as soon as her aunt permitted her to edge in a word.

"The post-bell! Nonsense, child! They have not had time to write to us yet. They only set off this afternoon."

Before Agnes could answer, Martha brought in a letter.

"For Mrs. Ellis, Miss Agnes."

"For me? That is curious. Where are my glasses, I wonder?" And the old lady sought first in one pocket and then in the other. "At least, child, you might tell me the post-mark," she said, crossly.

Agnes had, meanwhile, been engaged in lighting a reading-lamp, which she had just placed on the little table close to her aunt's sofa, on which she found the missing glasses. Mrs. Ellis snatched them from her, settled them comfortably on her nose, and carefully perused the outside of the letter.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, "the St. Ringans' post-mark, so it must be from Bessie Upton. By the way, Agnes, I should not dislike to live at St. Ringans. It was there my happiest days were spent, when I was a young careless lassie, long before I ever saw Mr. Ellis, or dreamed that I should spend ten long years in the manufacturing town of Saxenham. But let me see what Bessie has to say." And, as was her custom, she proceeded to skim the letter half aloud, in a way peculiarly tantalizing to listeners. "Hm! hm! 'Congratulations,' 'nephew's marriage,' 'change to

you and his sister.' Change! You never wrote a truer word, Bessie; it is a change, indeed!" Then the murmuring was resumed, but for a time in less audible fashion. But suddenly interrupting herself, she pulled off her spectacles, and said, in an excited tone, "Lay down that book, Agnes Stuart, and listen to me. Hear what my good friend Bessie Upton suggests to me, and see whether it is not worth something to have well-wishers like her. Ah yes! childhood's friends are the best and truest always."

She proceeded to explain that Mrs. Upton offered her a small house within the Kinburn grounds for a twelvemonth, at a nominal rent, or without rent at all, if she would accept it. All she wanted was to see her old friend again.

"Well, Agnes, what do you think of that? It seems to me just what we want. The cottage is not far from St. Ringans, and yet is quite in the country, with a good sea view, not far from church, and within a stone's throw of the Kinburn policies. I think I had better close with Bessie's offer."

A few minutes previous Agnes had desired that any one rather than she herself should decide on their future destination. But when she heard her aunt speak of going to Scotland, she almost felt that she was suffering from the curse of a granted prayer. It was therefore with some effort that she contrived to say, "It sounds well, but don't you think, aunt, that it would be best, before making our decision, to ascertain the size of the house, and the actual amount of that vague expression, a nominal rent?"

Mrs. Ellis popped on her spectacles again, and re-perused the letter. "Here it is, quite distinctly: 'Five bed-rooms, besides servants' accommodation, a nice little kitchen and back kitchen, and three sitting-rooms, not large, but light and cheerful-looking.' That would suit us exactly, Agnes. Then there is a garden and offices, and we may have a cow's grass as well, if we please. Just what we want, you know. And the rent? Let me see. Ay, here it is: 'If you are too proud to accept the house rent free, the steward tells my son that the last tenant paid my father £20 a year.' Twenty pounds a year, Agnes, for a furnished house and garden near church and market! It seems to me a marvellous piece of good fortune!"

"It is too much, Aunt Ellis," Agnes said, touched by the genuine delight her aunt showed at the consideration evinced in Mrs. Upton's offer—"far too much."

"Too much, Agnes?" was Mrs. Ellis's amazed answer. "How can you say so? I thought it very little indeed. Let me tell you, Agnes, it is not every day one could get such an offer. Besides, you must remember that the house is furnished, though scantily. Indeed, I wonder what you would have, Agnes Stuart. Things are always either too high or too low to please you."

Agnes laughed heartily. "I mean by too much, that we get more than we are entitled to expect for such a rent."

"Oh! you are coming to your senses now. So I shall write my acceptance at once."

Agnes smothered a sigh as she placed her aunt's writing materials before her, and, while the latter was in the course of inditing her reply, she took herself seriously to task for the repulsion she felt to a scheme which seemed to give Mrs. Ellis such real delight. Had she not confessed repeatedly that it was better for her to leave Saxenham and its associations far behind? And now that it was decided, she shuddered at the distance that would so soon separate her from her brother. Yet what did two or three hundred miles signify in this age of railways? Twenty-four hours would bring them together when necessary, and Aunt Ellis would be happy, rationally happy, at St. Kingans.

Yes, reason showed her all these things in a moment of time, and she confessed they were true: yet, when Mrs. Ellis placed her letter in Agnes's hand for perusal, and she saw that, besides accepting the offer of the cottage on the terms proposed, she also agreed to pay Mrs. Upton a long visit at Kinburn before taking possession of "The Whim," she had difficulty in repressing some words of remonstrance. She did do so, however, and a little reflection told her, that though she herself might desire at once to settle in their new home without delay, it might be a risk for her aunt, at such a season, to go at once into a house long uninhabited.

On returning the letter to her aunt, she said, quietly, "It will be a relief to George to hear that we shall be near old friends of yours, Aunt Ellis."

But that night, when tossing restlessly on her sleepless couch, she recalled George's exclamation: "That selfish old woman will carry you off to Scotland."

Strange to say, his prophecy was fulfilled.



CHAPTER XII.

THE LODGE AND THE MANSION-HOUSE.

AMONG the many ideal pictures Agnes Stuart had formed of her new home, none of them approached the reality. Mrs. Upton had written of "a eottage," but the Whim was as unlike as possible to a building bearing so simple a name.

It was a "whim" in every respect, unlike any house she had ever seen, and, at first glance, very unsuited to its position on a little hill on the eastern coast of Scotland.

Originally intended to be one of the gate-houses of Kinburn, it had been rendered useless in that capacity by a change made fifty or sixty years previously in the high road which lay between the south gate and the little town of St. Ringans, so the then laird of Kinburn pulled down the lodge and built a "villa" on its site. But what a villa! Never was one devised more unsuited to Scotch habits or climate. But Sir Cosmo Hepburn was an eccentric man, who had imported from the East many peculiarities of taste which accorded ill with his position as a Scotch laird, and among these were some curious theories of architecture. With difficulty dissuaded from pulling down the old mansion-house of Kinburn to rebuild it in Oriental fashion, he was persuaded first to experiment on the south lodge, and the result was the "eottage" in question, to which he gave the name of "The Kiosk," but which his neighbours denominated "the mad laird's folly."

In its first glory, the Kiosk was an edifice of two stories, built round an interior court, into which all the windows of the house—if house it could be called—opened. At each corner of the quadrangle was a small dome-roofed building, lighted only from a cupola, and the whole interior was fitted up most luxuriously. Baths and marble flooring, arabesques and gilding, prevailed in every quarter; while

the court was laid down in soft turf, interspersed with foreign plants, trees, and fountains, which it was soon found necessary to guard from the cold by covering the whole quadrangle with glass.

In short, "the laird's folly" nearly ruined him, and his immediate successor did not care to preserve so expensive a toy. So the glass roof fell to pieces, the tender shrubs faded and died when exposed to the bitter blasts of a Scotch spring, the fountains ceased to play, and, in course of years, all, save one side of the Kiosk and its two octagonal flanking towers, was pulled down, and the place turned into a possible, though very quaint, dwelling-house, to which was given the name of "The Whim." Nothing of its Eastern appendages remained, save a few degenerate scions of the foreign plants and shrubs, and one magnificent cedar of Lebanon, whose youth having been sheltered from inclement blasts, had gradually become acclimatized, and was now one of the wonders of the neighbourhood, so rapid had been its growth, and so wide-spread its luxuriant branches.

Agnes was enchanted by the first glimpse of the so-called cottage. But poor Mrs. Ellis was more amazed than delighted. Mrs. Upton read her dismayed countenance, and remarked:

"You understand now, Margaret, why I begged you not to decide to take the Whim till you had seen it? Remember, moreover, that I told you it was unlike other cottages."

"Unlike other cottages!" echoed the troubled old lady.

"I fancy you never saw it in old days? We had moved to Kinburn before you came to St. Kungans, but we used to like the Whim when we were children."

"No, I never saw it before," Mrs. Ellis said, with an effort to shake off her bewilderment. "Your brother had just taken possession, you know, and——" Mrs. Ellis stopped abruptly; she did not like to recall Mr. Hepburn's eccentricities.

"Ah, true. I remember," Mrs. Upton said; then went on as if anxious not to touch upon sad recollections: "It is more comfortable inside than you might suppose. My father made great improvements in the house while we lived there, and a few years ago much was done to it by a tenant."

“Do you mean that fellow Maxwell, who went off without paying his rent?” asked Mrs. Trotter, Mrs. Upton’s aunt, who had accompanied the party on their voyage of discovery.

“Yes.”

“I can’t fancy *he* could know much about the requirements of gentry,” Mrs. Trotter said, contemptuously. “A man who was in the habit of wearing a slouched hat and long cloak, like a bandit on the stage, would be more likely to fit up billiard-rooms and smoking-divans than drawing-rooms and kitchens.”

Mrs. Upton smiled as she saw Agnes’s eyes open wide at this speech. “Mr. Maxwell was a very extraordinary genius, aunt,” she replied. “In spite of his non-payment of his rent, my father used to speak of his talents with great admiration.”

“Humph!” was Mrs. Trotter’s irreverent reply. “Robert was wonderfully easily imposed upon for so shrewd a man. If I had been at Kinburn at the time, I suspect I should have found him out at once.”

“You never saw Mr. Maxwell, then?” Agnes ventured to ask.

“I never did, Miss Stuart. More’s the pity. But one can easily guess what sort he was from what one hears of him, and I cannot understand my brother’s credulity in listening to his cock-and-bull stories. Why, the man dropped down on St. Ringans one day as if he had dropped from the skies, stayed just long enough to turn everybody’s heads, and then disappeared as he came. If I had been in England at the time, I should have spoken my mind about him to Sir Robert.”

Mrs. Trotter was so much in the habit of “speaking her mind,” that people who knew her well generally listened to her with indifference; and even her gentle niece frequently ignored the operation. At present, Mrs. Upton, turning to Agnes, observed:

“I see you are interested about this tenant of my father’s, Miss Stuart, and from all I heard of him when I came to Kinburn five years since, he was quite a hero of romance. Very handsome, very agreeable, a good artist, a tolerable mechanic; in short, a man gifted with rare genius. As to his failings, we need not dwell upon them at present, but

that he had many I quite believe. However, my father took a great fancy to him, enjoyed his conversation extremely, and was enraptured when he set to work to embellish the few rooms he inhabited at the *Whim*. You shall see how thoroughly he entered into the genius of the place, and can imagine how pleased my father was to find him sympathize fully in his love of the old house, and devote his artistic talents to its restoration."

As she spoke, Mrs. Upton unlocked a glass door opening from the garden into the east octagon, and bade Agnes enter. She started back in surprise.

The exquisitely proportioned room was full of sunny light, which found its way through tinted glass, ingeniously inserted in the rich cornice surrounding the ceiling. The ceiling itself was painted so as to represent a domed roof, while the sides of the room were formed into eight recesses, four arranged to hold statues or flower-vases, the others containing long, narrow windows, the glass door when closed simulating one of the four. In these recesses were low divans of sea-green damask; the walls were hung with the same delicate tint, surrounded by a deep arabesque border of gold and colour which followed each indentation of the curiously-recessed chamber.

From the windows the eye embraced extensive and varied prospects, of which the sea formed the background, and the formal but pretty garden the foreground.

"How very beautiful this is!" Agnes exclaimed, with delight, turning her glowing face to Mrs. Trotter, who chanced to be nearest her.

Few people save Mrs. Trotter could have resisted the appeal for sympathy expressed in those sparkling eyes, but she was a strong-minded woman, accustomed to the enthusiasms of two excitable nieces, and she said, calmly, "Pretty enough on a bright day, but I confess, I should not care to live in a room where one must do without a fire, summer or winter."

"Ah dear! no fire-place!" exclaimed Mrs. Ellis, with some dismay "I fear, Bessie, that won't suit my old age."

Mrs. Upton quietly touched a knob in one of the niches, when the apparently solid wall moved aside, and showed a neat little grate fitted into the recess. Mrs. Ellis was as

pleased as a child by the transformation. Agnes recalled a similar surprise described in poor Hood's "Tylney Hall," and Mrs. Trotter said it was "a mountebank trick, quite suited to that artist fellow;" and, turning away with a shrug, she proposed to examine the rest of the house.

Most of the other rooms were as common-place as even Mrs. Trotter could have desired, the sitting-rooms, of which there were two, being square, straight-sided, two-windowed apartments, of average size; and the bed-rooms with one exception, square and comfortable. That exception was the second story of the garden octagon, and was, according to Mrs. Ellis and Mrs. Trotter, the reverse of all that a bed-room ought to be. "It had a glare of light, no straight wall, nothing but corner-cupboards and windows."

"Quite true," Mrs. Upton said, with a smile; "and yet, were I twenty years younger, this should be my choice."

"Bessie, Bessie, how romantie you are!" sighed Mrs. Ellis. "Not, however, that it is an ugly room," she added, unwilling to wound her friend's feelings, "only——"

"Only that it suits Miss Stuart's taste and mine better than yours and aunt Kate's," she replied, drawing Agnes's hand within her arm, as she called her attention to the curious odds and ends of furniture the room contained.

Agnes's eyes thanked her for her kind sympathy, and from that moment Mrs. Upton and she were friends.

Generally speaking, there is some resemblance between such near relations as Mrs. Trotter and Mrs. Upton, but Agnes had failed in their case to see any, either in appearance or disposition.

The niece had attracted her the first evening they met, the aunt always put her into an antagonistic humour. Mrs. Upton was gentleness itself, a woman of such a loving, clinging disposition as to be almost faulty in her pliability of temper and desire not to interfere with others. Mrs. Trotter, on the contrary, was entirely self-dependent, and realized Agnes's ideal of a female detective, having an eye that seemed to dare any one to deceive her, and a voice that had lost all the sweet modulations of womanhood. Yet in many respects Mrs. Trotter was better than she seemed. She had brought up two orphan nieces with liberality and kindness, and in their presence she was very different from

what she was among strangers. In early life she must have had great personal beauty, for her features were fine even yet, though age and disappointment had hardened their outlines, and though her countenance was austere, a smile now and then brightened and softened it, seeming to show that sorrow as well as temper had lined her face, and that she might be a true friend though an unsympathizing one.

On arriving at Kinburn, Agnes had been somewhat puzzled by its inmates. They consisted of Mrs. Upton, her niece, Miss Hepburn, an invalid who had suffered so much from her eyes as to be almost stone-blind, and Mrs. Trotter. But what position the last held in the house she could not at first find out. She took the landlord's seat at table, saying she always did so when Lionel was absent. She ordered the servants about far more authoritatively than Mrs. Upton did. She dictated to Miss Hepburn what she should eat and where she should sit, and cut her meat for her in a manner that brought the poor girl's infirmity constantly before the new comers, and caused her pale cheek to colour with anger.

In short she assumed almost supreme power in the direction of the household, and Agnes privately groaned at the thought of spending six weeks under her control, and was proportionably relieved when Miss Hepburn informed her that Aunt Kate was only at Kinburn on a fortnight's visit. This information was as much prized by Mrs. Ellis as by her niece. Old recollections of Kate Hepburn, who had married late in life, were among the least agreeable of Mrs. Ellis's reminiscences of St. Ringans, and she confessed to Agnes that she would never have consented to come to Kinburn had she expected to meet her there. As it was, perhaps she could endure her for two or three days longer.

Mrs. Trotter rather "took to" Agnes, and, the day before she left Kinburn, expressed a hope that she and her nieces, Sophy and Effie Weir, might become friends.

"The girls," she said, "are at present in Germany. I shall go for them early in autumn, and shall bring them home before Christmas. They are good girls, and clever as well, and I am sure you will like them, Miss Stuart; and I can only say you shall always be welcome at St. Ringans' Lodge, my present home. I returned to St. Ringans when

I became a widow, that I might be near my brother, Sir Robert, at Kinburn, and for four years I have lived there humbly, but happily, with my two girls. My household, it is true, is limited, compared to what it once was, but I am proud to say that that has not prevented me from being an esteemed member of the society of the county, as well as the burgh of St. Ringsans."

She went on to say that her friends and neighbours still remembered that by birth and marriage she was entitled to respect. It had not been the will of Heaven that her husband should survive his father, but she was always treated with the respect due to the widow of Hercules Trotter, younger, of Dragsworth, and to the daughter of Sir Walter Hepburn, of Kinburn, and the sister of Sir Robert.

"My true position," she concluded, with great dignity, "is thoroughly appreciated, and, though I am as much entitled by birth and fortune to keep my carriage as some people are, who in other respects are *very* far from liberal"—she shot a meaning glance at Mrs. Upton as she said this—"yet my friends respect me for not doing so. *They* know that it is quite within the bounds of possibility that I may one day be owner of Kinburn"—here her voice sank into a mysterious whisper—"but they see that, as things now are, it is the more dignified part to keep quiet, quite quiet. However, till the matter is legally settled, perhaps the less I say on the subject the better."

Agnes looked her surprise at this announcement, but Mrs. Trotter went on, without heeding her :

"Still I think it would have been better for all parties, and certainly more decorous, had my brother, Sir Robert, left my grand-niece, Alexandrina Hepburn, under my care, rather than under Mrs. Upton's. For *her* to live at Kinburn," she said, with a contortion of her face which was frightful to see, "is not, according to my ideas, exactly what should be. But men have less perception of the higher proprieties of life than we women have, and perhaps Mrs. Upton imagines that propinquity may——Hm ! hm ! hm ! However, these family matters are best not talked over."

Notwithstanding which remark, she proceeded to animadvert in no measured terms on Miss Hepburn's eccentricities, on the bad habit she had acquired of sitting so

much in her own apartments, and on her short, abrupt way of breaking off a conversation which she chose not to like. "I have no doubt you have remarked it, Miss Stuart? Now, had Sir Robert left her in *my* charge, I should not have permitted her to fall into such unsocial ways. It is not good for young people to be so reserved with their elders. If they were as silent with young folks," she said, with a grim smile, "perhaps it might not be so bad, for, to tell you the truth, my dear, Alexandrina Hepburn can talk fast enough when she gets any of her favourites alone with her. I have remarked she chats away with you when *I* can't get a word from her, and to Sophy and Effic she often says things that—Well! I suppose I am old fashioned in my ideas, but I confess that one educated as she has been is—In short, I don't encourage the girls being with her more than I can help. You see what she has gone through, and my brother's faulty indulgence to her, have altogether—Hm! hm! hm!" And there, to Agnes's disappointment, the old lady broke off, and, before she had recovered her surprise at the sudden change of subject, she found her embarked on the advantages and disadvantages of the school management at St. Ringans.

Now, if the truth be told, Agnes cared very little for schools in general, and nothing at all for those of St. Ringans in particular, but her interest, as well as her curiosity, had been greatly excited by the blind girl. Her pale intellectual face was even now very beautiful, and, as Longfellow says, seemed "to have a story to tell." But of what nature that story was, save that it was a sad one, she could guess nothing. Mrs. Upton was very kind and tender to her niece, but was more reserved in speaking of her than she was in most things, and the girl herself was very silent, especially when Mrs. Trotter was present. Yet she seemed to like to have Agnes with her, and once or twice had made an effort to discover her tastes, and in so doing had shown her own acquaintance with books and music. On other topics she seldom touched. Thus Mrs. Trotter's remarks upon her had been very tantalizing to Agnes; more so by far than her hint of the possibility of being one day the possible mistress of Kinburn, for already Agnes had discovered in her a tendency to exaggerate her own merits

and grandeur, especially when by so doing she depreciated those of the Uptons. Therefore, though aware that there were legal difficulties in the arrangement of Sir Robert Hepburn's affairs, Agnes could not imagine it possible that any accident should place the Kinburn estates in Mrs. Trotter's hands while Mrs. Upton, her son, and Miss Hepburn lived. It was many a long day before Agnes fully understood the difficulties of the Kinburn succession, but a slight incident occurred before Mrs. Trotter's visit ended, to show that her interferences there did not pass unmarked by the gentle lady of the house. The matter itself was trifling, but it induced Mrs. Upton to turn to Agnes when her aunt left the house that evening, and exclaim, "Now, my dear, we shall be all cozy and comfortable together. Poor Aunt Kate! how little she imagines the irritation these petty interferences produce! My son cannot submit to them patiently; the consequence is, that when he is at Kinburn, Mrs. Trotter is only invited on state occasions. I see my dear boy too seldom to permit him to be made uncomfortable while he is at home."

Agnes smiled, and said, sympathizingly, "I know quite well what you mean. Trifles *we* can and do bear, fret the lords of the creation beyond endurance, and it is hard to see home made unhome-like, when a little consideration is all that is wanting to make everything go smoothly."

Mrs. Upton saw she spoke from experience, and said: "I see, my love, that you have studied the question, and have, perhaps, had your own anxieties on such matters. But you must not misjudge Lionel from what I have said. He is really very good-natured to his aunt, and is not like other young men, constantly requiring amusement or excitement. Far from it. His greatest pleasure is in domestic life, and he often tells me I find dulness for him where he himself finds none; but there are circumstances connected with his grandfather's will which make Kinburn not the best home for him at present. Yet I have not the heart to send him away from me when he is inclined to come to me. Ah! Miss Stuart, one grows very selfish when one's whole heart is bound up in one's son."

"Dear Mrs. Upton, you are unjust to yourself, I am sure! You are capable of *any* sacrifice to secure the welfare of those you love."

"Of many, not of all," she replied, and was silent for some little time. At last she spoke again, but on a new subject. "I am so pleased, Miss Stuart, to see how much my poor niece is attracted towards you! Hers is a very dark and lonely life, and, except Sophy and Effie Weir, she has no young friends or companions."

Agnes looked interested, and Mrs. Upton went on:

"Her infirmity, poor child, makes her now quite dependent on others, but she has strong likes and dislikes, and one never can tell to whom she may take a fancy. I can seldom persuade her to leave her apartments when my aunt is on a visit here. At present, I think your presence has tempted her to be more social," she said, with a slight caress.

"It struck me," Agnes frankly replied, "that Mrs. Trotter made too little allowance for Miss Hepburn's blindness. To me it seems extraordinary she should do so much, rather than that she should do so little. I think you say that her total loss of sight only happened lately?"

"Within the last few months. She has suffered from her eyes for years, but till lately she resisted all assistance, even from her maid. Poor Lina! Had you seen her when I first came to Kinburn, you would compassionate her even more than you do now. She was then a very lovely girl, and, had she been ordinarily prudent, she might have retained both health and sight. But nothing could induce her to take care of herself. She went out in all weathers, exposed herself recklessly to the greatest extremes of heat and cold, and used her eyes constantly, until at last she brought upon herself this trial, which to one of her energetic independent spirit must be fearful. Her grandfather's last illness put the finishing stroke to it. I never saw any one in such a state of misery as she was when my father died. She wept perpetually, and refused to save herself in any way, so that for a year past her recovery has been hopeless."

"Poor girl!" Agnes said, with deep sympathy; "and now what does she do?"

"Nothing. It is the saddest thing in the world. She sees no one, but shuts herself up in her own sitting-room, once my father's business-room. There she paces up and down half the day. In short, I am very unhappy about her. I dare say, Miss Stuart, you know enough of life to

sympathize with my compassion towards one who, deprived of all outward brightness, is thrown entirely on memory, and that memory full of sadness."

"I can imagine it," Agnes said, with a sigh, "but, thank God, nothing in my own lot has as yet given me any personal knowledge of the kind. My life at home was full of occupation and happiness. I have lived in a world of sympathy and affection, which have hitherto made existence very bright."

"While Lina's has been lonely and dark. Poor Lina! you will try to love her, Miss Stuart—will try to unlock her closed heart. I cannot, I am too old, and besides—besides, I am Lionel's mother," she said, with a faint smile. "You will understand what that means by-and-by. I hope, however, it won't have an equally bad effect on you, my love!"

"What?" asked Agnes, innocently.

"That I am Lionel Upton's mother."

"No, indeed," she said, laughingly, "for I do not know him."

"No?" Mrs. Upton said, in some surprise. "Why, love, it was at his suggestion that I offered the Whim to your aunt. He said he was sure that your society would be a pleasure to me, and it is so," she added, with a kindly caress.

"Mine?" repeated Agnes. "Why, I never saw Mr. Upton in my life—unless," she added, with a burning blush, roused not by a recollection of the gentleman in question, but by the disagreeable events which occurred at the period of Dr. Weld's trial—"unless it was Mr. Upton who visited my aunt on his way to India five years ago."

"Yes, that was my son. You remember him now?"

"Forgive me," she said, still blushing, "but I cannot recall anything of that visit except that I was at the time rather averse to going out to parties, and that Mr. Upton's arrival forced me to go to one or two."

"Well, dear, don't look so penitent. You may forget him, but assuredly he does not forget you, and I hope you will be friends when you meet."

"I have no doubt we shall, if he is at all like his mother," Agnes said, with the *aplomb* of one who had been accustomed to the esteem, if not the admiration, of clever men.

Mrs. Upton, who had scarcely expected the answer, looked at her inquiringly before she asked, rather abruptly, "How old are you, my dear?"

"Three-and-twenty."

"So much? I thought you were younger—you look so."

"Do I? Somehow, I feel older than my age. Perhaps because I have lived such an active life."

"Yes, you look both younger and prettier than I expected from Lionel's description."

Agnes laughed heartily, and then sighed a little as she said: "No one but my brother George ever thought me pretty before. But you mean, I am less plain than you fancied?"

"Exactly so," Mrs. Upton answered, playfully. "Lionel described you as a pale, thin girl, with irregular features, but an intelligent countenance, so it never occurred to me that you could be so pretty as you are when you speak or smile, Miss Stuart."

"Please don't call me Miss Stuart. My name is Agnes."

Mrs. Upton stooped forward to kiss her. "My child," she said, softly, "I had a daughter once of your name. She had eyes and hair like yours. When Lionel saw you he was struck by your likeness to his sister, and so took pains to see whether you resembled her in mind as well as in name and in person. You do, and we both love you for it."

There was a short pause, followed by a few more kind words, and, before the visit to Kinburn was over, Lina Hepburn, as well as Mrs. Upton, was Agnes's friend.



CHAPTER XIII.

THE KINBURN SUCCESSION.

It is only the very young who care to be thrown suddenly and entirely among new people, and delight to "change old lamps for new." Those whom experience has taught the lesson that friends and acquaintance are not synonymous terms, are apt to believe that in after-life few new intimacies can fill up the gaps occasioned by the loss of the old. And even the real affliction Agnes began to feel towards Mrs.

Upton and her niece did not make up to her for all she had left at Saxenham.

Mrs. Ellis had pleasant associations with the neighbourhood of St. Ringans. With many of its inhabitants she could retrace the happy days of her girlhood, and, as she explained to Agnes, it was a comfort to live in a place where people knew her antecedents, and where she was not considered an "anybody," as she had been in Saxenham. But with Agnes it was different. The kindness she met with was that of strangers to a stranger. No one knew her in any other capacity than that of Margaret Ellis's niece. No one took the slightest interest in Saxenham and its doings, indeed scarcely knew its name, unless as connected with silks or printed calicoes. That it was a place where liberal-minded men devoted themselves to the discussions of grand political views, where philanthropy held its principal seat, and where life was full of movement and interest, was what seldom or never occurred to them. Local politics was their world, and even those of the neighbouring town of Fairholm were almost excluded from their narrow ken. St. Ringans alone was of moment to them, together with the doings of the few county families who were in any way connected with the little sea-port. Still they were a kindly, hospitable race, who prided themselves on their attention to strangers, and accordingly Mrs. Ellis and Agnes were duly invited to luncheon, dinner, tea and cards, and supper. Mrs. Ellis was immensely gratified, and Agnes accepted the proffered kindness with cordiality. Still her life was very colourless, and she dreaded the time when she should have completed the arrangement of their new home, and systematized their present household into the perfection of clock-work regularity which had obtained in that at Saxenham.

And the time came at last. Even Mrs. Trotter's sharp eyes failed to find out any deficiencies, and Agnes was thrown on herself for fresh occupation and interest. What should it be?

"I advise you not to let yourself be drawn into Aunt Kate's toils," Miss Hepburn remarked one day, when Agnes had confided her difficulties to her. "If you do you will find yourself drawn into all sorts of charities, be

dragged into committees, clubs, &c., which, I am sure, you would thoroughly dislike, and probably disapprove. Besides, St. Ringans has not the shadow of a claim on your services."

"I should not take that into consideration," Agnes replied, "if that were all. But I have Scotch caution enough not to walk blindfold into anything, however good."

"I am glad you are so prudent."

"Perhaps," Agnes said, with a laugh, "it is Mrs. Trotter herself who has made me so. She took such pains to prove to me that without her help I should be nothing here, that I began to take fright at my own position. She insinuated that I was of exactly that anomalous age when girls would find my society a bore, and elderly people would hesitate to receive me into their coteries, unless some respected member took me under her wing."

"Aunt Kate to the life!" Miss Hepburn exclaimed. "But there is a vein of truth in what she says. This is really a stupid place for an active, energetic girl, unless she has a 'mission' either for schools or scandal. I had neither, and I suffered for it. But how I suffered I cannot tell you now. Perhaps I may some day, when you know me, and I hope love me, better."

The tone in which she spoke was full of sadness, but Agnes, seeing that the suffering to which she alluded was something far beyond Aunt Kate's disapproval, was too delicate to press for an explanation. It may be that the very great desire she had to see into the inner life of the poor girl made her the more reluctant to force her confidence. One day, perhaps, it might come to her unsought.

A longer acquaintance had endeared Miss Hepburn to her more and more. The contrast between her own rude health and the blind invalid's fragile helplessness, her own sunshiny spirit and the other's brooding melancholy, excited her deep compassion. "Lina," as she began to call her, seemed to have as little brightness in her soul as in her eyes, while Agnes, though she had undergone many a rude shock, many a bitter disappointment in life, could still look upwards and onwards with hope, and could thank God for having bestowed on her so many good things. Was it not, then, her duty to do what little lay in her power to

aid the blind girl in her solitary battle with the Giant Despair ?

As this thought occurred to her, Lina said, suddenly, "It seems to me quite providential that Mrs. Ellis and you came to St. Ringans just at present. The gossips have talked over my grandfather's will and my cousin's eccentricities *ad nauseam*."

Agnes smiled. "I suppose," she said, "that Mr. Upton's return will soon exclude us from their thoughts."

"Perhaps. You know my cousin, don't you ?"

"I have seen him, but must confess he made but a slight impression on my memory."

"Poor Lionel !"

Agnes did not quite like the sarcastic tone of the exclamation, and said, quickly, "When is Mr. Upton expected ?"

"Really I can't tell. I am the last person to be in his confidence. He was to have been absent a month, he has been three, and may be as many more, for aught I know."

"He is in Italy, is he not ?"

"Only *en route* to Smyrna, it seems. Where he may be before he returns, who can tell ?"

"He must be very fond of travel to leave such a home as this."

"Do you fancy my cousin travels for pleasure ?"

"Surely. What else ?"

"Business, dear—business. Oh ! Agnes, have you been so long at Kinburn, and still suppose that Lionel Upton is a free agent, and travels for pleasure ?"

"Indeed I did. I knew he had been a merchant, but supposed that, on succeeding to Kinburn——"

"He has *not* succeeded to Kinburn," was her impatient answer. "Nobody has succeeded to Kinburn, and whether *he* ever does so depends, perhaps, more on my will than his."

"I do not understand," Agnes said, surprised by her bitterness. She had frequently heard Lina speak slightly of her cousin, but to-day her voice was that of hatred rather than indifference.

"My aunt," Lina went on, excitedly, "wants people to be ignorant of the terms of the will until the time appointed

for their fulfilment. I think she is wrong. It puts us all, me especially, in a false position."

"I am quite puzzled," Agnes said.

"It would be odd if you were not. We all are; and for my part, I think the will very unjust, and I see no reason why I should be forced to accept it."

"Was there not some talk of a later will, which had unaccountably disappeared? I think Mrs. Trotter told me so."

"Mrs. Trotter cannot be trusted with a secret," Lina said. "There was some talk of the kind, but there was no proof that there ever had been a later will. Sir Robert was constantly making wills. First, my Uncle Cosmo offended him, and he cut him off with a shilling. Next, my father went against his wishes, when he disinherited him and reinstated Uncle Cosmo. Then, when both sons were dead, he proposed to make my cousin, Lionel Upton, his heir, on the condition that he took the name of Hepburn. He refused, so I was next to succeed. But whether I or my cousin get Kinburn, remains to be proved."

"I thought you said Mr. Upton was passed over?"

"No; he *may* succeed under certain circumstances, but ——" She stopped suddenly in her explanation, and Agnes observed:

"Ah! I remember. Mrs. Trotter mentioned something of encumbrances."

Lina laughed a hard laugh. "Encumbrances! 'I thank thee, Jew, I thank thee for that word.' It is a good word in the present state of affairs. But you must understand, Agnes, that only my will can relieve him of these *encumbrances*, and my will is not favourable to Lionel Upton."

"If there are such difficulties in the arrangements, could you not agree to follow out the terms of the last will? You know them, I presume?"

"Where is the proof that there was one?" Lina asked, doggedly; "I don't see that because my grandfather wrote to my cousin, begging him to come home, that he might initiate him into the management of the estate, it is therefore to be presumed that he made a will to the effect that Lionel was to be his heir. But my cousin believed it, and you may fancy his disappointment, when he returned to

Kinburn, to find his grandfather dead, and no such will forthcoming."

"Of course," Agnes said. "And I have no right to pass an opinion upon such intricate matters. Still, Lina, supposing it were ascertained what Sir Robert's last wishes were, even if he had not put them in a shape to be legally binding, I should have supposed that moral equity might induce you to——"

"Yield all to Lionel Upton? Never! You forget," she said, excitedly, "that I am the real, the natural successor of my grandfather. Lionel is only an Upton—I am the last of the Hepburns. Besides, does anyone give up that which the law allows to be his?"

"Some do. You would, I fancy, if it were right."

Lina coloured, and said, in a softer tone, "Ah! Agnes, you judge me by yourself. But I have been brought up in a different school from you. All my life my hand has been against every man, every man's hand against me, and so my first thought is *myself*."

She was silent for a moment, and her restless fingers knotted and unknotted the slender gold chain she always wore. After a time she continued:

"Besides, if I were so Quixotic as to yield up my claims, do you suppose my cousin would accept aught at my hands? Even Kinburn, which he professes to love so dearly? No, indeed. Lionel Upton is a proud man. He has as much of the obstinate Hepburn blood in him as I have. He would never accept as a grace that which he thinks ought to be his by right."

"Yes, I can suppose that. It would hurt any man's pride to receive such a gift, even from a woman, in these circumstances."

"Even from a woman! Do not many men receive such from women, and glory in so doing? Are there not thousands who delight to make themselves woman's slaves, who follow her beck, and are guided by her will?"

"I fear it is so."

"You fear it! Ay, but you believe it if you fear it, and that is what I want to come to," Lina said, in a tone which seemed to imply that she caught at any excuse for avoiding further discussion of the Kinburn succession. "You do

believe that a clever man has again and again been so influenced by a woman as to have no will but hers?"

"I do; but I pity the woman who dares the responsibility of thus overturning all that it has pleased God to arrange for the welfare of His creatures."

Lina gave no heed to these words, but said, rapidly, "Ah, that I had such a gift! What would I not do with it!"

"It is an evil gift—a sore temptation," Agnes whispered.

"One which I should welcome with my whole heart!"

And the blind girl's cheek glowed, and her countenance brightened into positive beauty. "I often gloat over the delight it would be to see those who rule others bow to my lightest word! Oh, what ecstasy it would be to have a Napoleon or a Wellington yield himself my slave!"

"I should dislike it," was the quiet answer.

"Oh, Agnes, if you think so you have never loved! To me it would be life, liberty, hope, all that makes existence sweet to a woman. But, perhaps," she added, with a sigh—"perhaps I think so because I know better what it is to be tyrannized over than to tyrannize; because a few kind words from a man would make me do and think what he would; because from childhood I have been taught to bow implicitly to the will of the rougher sex. And I have done so without a thought of rebellion, although, Heaven help me, when a woman has tried to guide me, I have resisted to the death."

"Lina! Lina! you cannot know what you are saying. Such a thing is impossible."

"Impossible!" she said, with trembling lip and eager voice—"impossible! Alas, no! My fate has been a trying one, Agnes. Accident, not my own fault, threw me while a mere child into strange guardianship. That guardian ruled me as if his will were mine, and he would do so still, if—if we met again."

Agnes sat silent. What could she say to so strange a confession? Lina, too, was silent for some moments. When she spoke again, it was in a tone so sad, that Agnes's sympathy was once more excited towards her.

"Agnes," she said, "I cannot see your face, but your silence tells me that I have shocked you. I cannot help it.

I am not good, like you. But if you knew what my life was till I was almost a woman, you would pity me, and try not to give me up to the misery of my lonely broken heart."

"Dear Lina, I am sure that what you said just now was uttered in a moment of excitement, and——"

"True, it was. Still, I meant what I said, and I deliberately repeat, that if the gift I crave were granted me, I should snatch at it as the drowning wretch grasps at a straw. But remember, I only desire to influence *one*, not all. Universal conquest I despise. And you, Agnes, good, well-principled as you are, must have some sympathy with this humble aspiration? At some time or other you must have desired to influence *one*!"

"Never! My whole thoughts were bound up in my brother, who was my guide in great things, though, perhaps, biased by me in little ones. And I have sometimes fancied that, because it was so, it was becoming a snare to me, and so we were parted!"

She said this so simply, that Lina felt she spoke as she felt. Yet she could not help asking, "Was Dr. Stuart the only man who was influenced by your wishes?"

An angry flush rose to Agnes's cheek at the question, but it died away as swiftly as it came, and her calm voice betrayed no agitation as she answered, "The only one at least on whom I did exercise it."

"You evade my question," Lina said, with her hard little laugh. "But at least I see you never were fairly in love, Agnes."

"Thank Heaven, no!"

"And wherefore that pious ejaculation?" she demanded, with some pique. "Is it unwomanly to lose your life in the life of another?"

"I do not say so, Lina. Still, as I was placed, it was better for me not. And I do heartily thank God that, while we were together, no affection came between my brother and me."

"Between you and your brother, you mean!" Lina satirically remarked; "a very different affair, is it not? But suppose, for argument's sake, Agnes, that the love you lavished on Dr. Stuart had been bestowed, not on a

brother, not on any near relation, but on one whom—well! whom others did not esteem as you did! Suppose that from childhood he had been the sole creature on earth to whom you looked up with reverence or affection—suppose that, your parents dead, you were left alone in the world, with only that one to give you a kind word, an encouraging smile—suppose that you had been dependent for daily bread on relations who had rather have had you in your grave than know that you cumbered the fair earth, what would you have done then? Where had been your power to influence others? Where the *snare* of which you speak so anxiously? In such a case, believe me, the real snare would have been to know, or at least to believe, that any single human being cared enough for you to bid you ‘Do this. Think that!’”

“I cannot grasp so sad a fate. It is too strange—too unnatural.”

“Agnes, that fate was mine for years and years. And now I wish you would try to put yourself in my place, and reflect how a training so different from your own might have affected you. If you feel it might have made you other than you are, then pity me, and do not judge me. Now leave me, dear. I am exhausted by what I have said, and what I have felt in saying it.”

CHAPTER XIV

CHARLIE REYNARD.

AGNES quitted the blind girl with a heavy heart. The glimpse so strangely given her of the state of her mind, was sad indeed. To those in full health, such recollections had been bad enough, but to one forced by her infirmity to dwell on the past, it was misery to brood on such shattered hopes, such bitter memories.

From a very early period of their acquaintance, Agnes had suspected that Miss Hepburn was not the gentle resigned girl she appeared. Little outbreaks now and then had hinted at hidden fire beneath the ice, and even Mrs. Upton's guarded manner of speaking of her seemed to imply that she was a very onerous charge. This, however, was

the first time that Agnes herself had been permitted to see the wrong side of the fair tapestry.

"Unhappy girl!" she thought; "who could judge her harshly? With such a childhood, with such uncontrolled feelings, it is not strange she should speak and think as she does. But how miserable it must make her!" And the momentary repulsion Agnes had felt to one who could seriously speak as Lina had spoken, gave way to the most sincere compassion, and to the wish to aid her as far as possible to bear her heavy burden. To do so, she must endeavour to gain her confidence, so as to entitle her to touch upon topics which were beyond the interference or advice of a mere acquaintance.

With this idea in her mind, Agnes did not allow many days to pass before she repeated her visit to Lina. She was shown at once to her private sitting-room, and, her thoughts still haunted by the echo of their last conversation, she felt unusually nervous and depressed, for it was the first time in her life on which she had entered, unsupported, into an interest of this kind.

It therefore jarred upon her feelings, as well as excited her surprise, when, on entering the long passage leading to Miss Hepburn's boudoir, her ear was assailed by the sound of childish voices, and she heard Lina's peculiarly ringing laugh join in the shrill merriment of the little ones.

"Come in, Agnes!" Lina called out, as she paused in the doorway. "I hear your step. Come in."

Agnes stood yet a moment silent, fascinated by the really pretty scene before her. But Lina's impatient "Do come in!" made her step into the little circle.

Three little boys, from six to nine years of age, were clustered round Miss Hepburn's sofa, while she and it were covered with flowers, heliotrope, myrtle, geranium, and every fragrant autumn blossom. Agnes observed that not one scentless flower was there. They had evidently been pelting each other with them, for the floor was strewn, and the little fellows' hands were full of them.

"Where are you, Agnes?" Lina said, stretching out her hand. "I want to introduce you to my little pets. They only came home last night, and have come to me at once. This is Freddy, and this little Joscelyn, and this Charlie."

And Lina lightly passed her fingers over each child's face as she named him, but her hand rested more caressingly on the head of the last mentioned than on either of the others.

He was a very handsome boy, and Agnes was at once struck by his beauty, and by the frank boldness with which he returned her glance.

"What, boys!" Lina exclaimed, "no greeting for Miss Stuart! Freddy—Charlie—have you no flowers left for my friend?"

Freddy, a little blue-eyed boy of eight, looked shyly away. Little Joscelyn hid himself in the folds of Miss Hepburn's gown, but Charlie, the eldest of the trio, gathered a few of the prettiest geraniums together, stuck in a sprig of myrtle here and there, and, taking a string from his pocket, tied it up into a most skilfully-arranged bouquet, with which he advanced straight to Agnes, and, with a slight bow, said, "I wish they were less faded, but you see we brought them all the way from England, and chose the sweetest rather than the freshest for Miss Hepburn. But perhaps you will accept them, though so unworthy."

Startled by a speech so totally unlike that of a child of his age, and fascinated by a look in the boy's face which seemed familiar to her, Agnes accepted his offering in silent wonder. Where had she seen such a countenance before? He was a fine manly fellow, dark complexioned, but with delicately-cut features; his eyes were black, and full of depth and expression, while his massive chin and firm mouth gave a look of power rarely seen in one so young. And yet there was something in his face which impressed Agnes disagreeably. Was it that deep scar above his left eye, which, destroying the symmetry of a brow that was otherwise remarkable for beauty, hurt her artistic sense, giving a sinister look to what but for that had been perfect? No; for when the profile was turned so as to hide the scar completely, the uncomfortable impression his face had made on her became stronger. Perhaps those baby features reminded her of some older person with whose remembrance she had unpleasant associations. This seemed the only explanation, but she could by no means recall any

such person, nor could she trace a resemblance in the boy to any former acquaintance.

Only a moment or two had been spent in these thoughts, but her silence, meanwhile, and her steady gaze, annoyed the little fellow; and, turning suddenly to Miss Hepburn, he said, in a tone of deep mortification, "Miss Stuart despises my flowers, and yet if she put them in fresh water they would revive."

Agnes said, hastily, "Indeed, Charlie, I don't despise them in the least. Scarlet geraniums are my favourite flowers. But—as she busied herself in fastening the nosegay in her dress—" but something in your face made me fancy I had seen you before, and I was trying to remember where."

Miss Hepburn suddenly raised herself on her couch as Agnes said this, and looked interested, but Charlie said, readily, "I never saw *you* before, Miss Stuart, or I should remember you."

Agnes smiled at the compliment. "Perhaps," she said, "I may have known your parents, or some one belonging to you. What is your name, my little fellow?"

"Charles Oswald Reynard," said the boy. "My home is with grandmamma at Lowestoft. We have been staying there for the holidays. Perhaps you have been at Lowestoft, and know grandmamma?"

Agnes shook her head. "No, dear, I never was at Lowestoft. You are not like your brothers, Charlie," she remarked by-and-by, for the two other fair-haired boys had sidled up to listen to the conversation.

"Fred and Jos are not my brothers," he said; "they are the little Hornbys. I live with them at the Parsonage. You know them?"

"No, dear, not at all. Of course I have seen Mr. Hornby in church."

"Of course," Fred ventured to remark, "for papa always preaches. He never takes a holiday."

"But, perhaps," suggested Charlie, "Miss Stuart does not go to church. She may be a Presbyterian, and attend the kirk!" The slight sneer accompanying the last word startled Agnes, and suggested more strongly than ever a resemblance to some one whose recollection—if one dare

give such a term to a feeling so vague and uncertain—was connected with painful impressions.

But she answered quietly, "No, my dear, I am an Episcopalian, and go to *chapel*."

Charlie tossed back his head at the slight emphasis on the word "*chapel*," implied as reproof; but Fred, advancing timidly, laid his hand on her arm, and said:

"Surely you know mamma? She was at school with you, wasn't she? And Uncle Harry was at school with your brother?"

Agnes looked mystified, till Lina remarked, "I intended to tell you about it, Agnes. Mr. Hornby called a few days since, and was inquiring what Stuart you were. His brother-in-law, it seems, studied medicine under a Dr. Stuart, a great friend of his wife's family. When I told him you came from Saxenham, he said it was all right, and his wife should call immediately on her return from Lowestoft."

"Hornby! to be sure. Isabella Thorpe married a gentleman of that name, but it is so common a one among us, that it never struck me that the clergyman of St. Mary's could be Isabella's husband, or that this was the place they came to when they left Lowestoft. Do you think your mother intended to call to-day?" she asked Fred.

"We left her at the Whim as we passed," the boy replied; and Agnes, with a hasty Good-bye, rushed off in the hope of still finding her friend at her own house. As she kissed the children, she invited them to come and see her. The little Hornbys hung down their heads, but Charlie said he would very soon, for he wanted to see her again, and he also wanted to get inside that queer house.

Of course Agnes reached home too late, and found her aunt by no means gratified by the Hornbys' visit, as she had soon discovered that it was more intended for Agnes than for herself. "Mr. Hornby," she said, "sat silent all the time, and when I asked him a question, stammered and blushed like a child. His wife, to be sure, talked enough for both, but chose to speak only of you and of George's marriage, which she said was 'so nice, so very nice.' I told her plainly I did not think it nice at all to be turned out of house and home at my years, and that only because

my nephew chose to fancy a red-cheeked, blue-eyed girl. And, by the way, Agnes, I don't think Miss Annie has written you a line the last ten days. As to George, he never writes at all. I knew he never would after he married."

In vain Agnes assured her that she had two late letters from her brother in her desk—letters which she had only answered to Annie. "But that is all the same, for writing to one is writing to the other," she said.

This speech, instead of soothing Mrs. Ellis, irritated her to the highest pitch, and Agnes had to listen to a long tirade against herself, against her brother, against Annie, all ending in a mean at their ingratitude to herself. This was now but a common incident in poor Agnes's daily life, but habit had not accustomed her to bear it philosophically. She learned to listen in silence to these attacks, but she did not feel them the less, and they did not tend to brighten her new existence. With all her efforts to be cheerful, there were many times now when she felt her life very empty, and could with difficulty prevent herself from looking back and longing that she dared return to Old-street. Her aunt's abuse of George was her severest trial, and sometimes she could not help speaking out boldly in his defence. But it was of no use. To defend the absent seldom is so, at least, to one who assumes to be better acquainted with the delinquent than you are yourself.

Besides, Mrs. Ellis had no other excitement than that of scolding Agnes. The first *celat* of her coming was over. She had eaten all the dinners and drunk all the teas given in her honour, and now she began to feel the Whim a very dull home. She missed the noise and bustle which she had formerly railed against in Saxenham; she missed the power she had there of showing herself more conversant than other people with the rules of etiquette and the fashionable world, for at St. Ringans everybody knew his or her place in society, and everybody kept it. Accustomed to George's humorous sketches of "people he had met, and things he had seen," she wearied of the petty gossip which was the staple at St. Ringans.

"What does it signify to me," she would say, "how many egg-shells are seen daily to float down Mrs. Thom-

son's gutter? And what do I care whether Mary Brown or Helen Fitchett is to be the new schoolmistress? The one is a cripple, the other a termagant, and so neither is fit for the post."

Even towards Mrs. Upton her feelings had suffered a sad change. It was no longer "Darling Bessie," but "How can that poor thing talk so eternally of her private concerns? I am weary of her son Lionel's perfections, and don't care ever to set eyes on him again, except that another coat would serve to break up the long lines of gowns one meets at the parties here."

But why pursue the old lady's daily grumbles further? It is enough that they did not serve to brighten the home atmosphere. Thus the discovery of an old friend in Mrs. Hornby was a great boon to Agnes. They had mutual acquaintance and interests, for her brother Harry's long stay at Saxenham had made Mrs. Hornby conversant with all its ways. There was but one uncomfortable recollection connected with the past, but as it was one she hoped Isabella was ignorant of, it did not weigh heavily on Agnes's mind, as early next morning she prepared to return Mrs. Hornby's visit, in which courtesy Mrs. Ellis declined to share.

The walk to the Parsonage was a pleasant one. Opening the gate at the bottom of the Whim garden, she entered the shady lane which skirted the Kiuburn grounds, and led over height and hollow to the little episcopal church a mile distant. It was a soft, bright autumn day, the distant sea sparkled in the radiance of a level sun, the stubble-fields were covered with cattle, the trees were decked in their richest and most evanescent colours, and the sky was blue as summer. The fragrance of the thymy turf on which she trod, the sharp, resinous odour of the fig-trees which edged her path, were pleasant to her. She was not beyond the age when actual existence is a delight, when the freshness of the air, the breath of the west wind fanning the cheek, are enough to raise the spirits; and as she walked swiftly forward, her thoughts gradually took a brighter tone than they could always retain under the depressing influence of home.

"I wonder," she speculated, "whether country-bred

people feel the enchantment of a scene like this as we do? I wonder whether custom makes the sweet scents, the robin's song, too familiar to be remarked, of too little account to be worth thanking the Giver of all Good for them? I hope not. I trust that such pleasures remain always fresh and new. I trust the time will never come when it will pall upon me."

And then she set herself to reflect on the balance of good and evil in the world, and, glancing back on her own past life, remembered how every trial she had suffered had been of use to her, and silently breathed a prayer that her present struggles might ultimately result in good. Perhaps the cheerfulness on which she had piqued herself at Saxenham was less a merit than——

But, ere she reached the end of her speculations, the shrill voices of children caught her ear, and looking over the low wall which separated the lane from the moorland, she recognized the young Hornbys and Charlie, who, with a lady and little girl, were engaged in a game of romps.

"Isabella!" she cried, as she leapt lightly from the wall.

"Agnes Stuart!" And the two friends were in each other's arms.

"Who would suppose," Mrs. Hornby said, as she scanned Agnes's face and figure—"who would suppose that you and I were at school together? Why, I am an old woman, and you a girl—a mere girl."

Agnes laughed. "You forget, Bella, that I was not one of the great girls. I was the youngest, and you and poor Ursula the eldest."

"True. Still I never should have expected to find you so little changed. Why, child, it is ten years since we parted. Freddy is nearly nine. And Harry told me you were oldened so much."

Agnes blushed. "Perhaps the country air has made me young again, but I assure you I was old in Saxenham. You know I had a good deal to trouble me there."

"Ay, indeed, my poor darling. That horrid man! I wonder what has become of him. It was reported he was dead, but that can't be true, for he draws his three hundred pounds a year regularly. Is not Charley strangely like him, and yet like his mother as well?"

"What!" Agnes exclaimed. "Is Charlie their son? How could I have failed to find it out when I was so haunted by a likeness to some one? And that scar, too, it ought to have told me. But the name of Reynard, oddly enough, threw me off the scent. Why do they give him his mother's name?"

"His grandmother fancies his own too notorious, and I think she is right. He is a fine bold child, but his origin makes one anxious how he will turn out. Indeed, he is a charge in many ways. First, we feared his father might try to take him away, and now we have to guard against any chance of his knowing who he really is."

"Has Dr. Weld tried to see him?"

"Yes, but not to take him away, and we think he only threatened to carry off the child to vex Mrs. Taylor. Poor old lady, she is in a constant fever about it!"

"Does he know Charlie is with you?"

"My husband suspects he does; but if he is aware of it," the wife added, with some pride, "he must know that Mr. Hornby is not a man to be trifled with. Harry has a legend that he took service with the Bashi-Bazouks in the Crimea. He thinks he saw him there. I wish he had seen him—— Well, I had better not say where; it would not be quite the thing for a clergyman's wife. Let's talk of something else. What do you think of my clicks? Baby is named partly after you—Harriet Agnes. Harry is her godfather," she added, with a laugh, "and fixed on the name."

Agnes blushed a little as she said, "And a very pretty name it is. I hope she will do credit to it."

"I hope so. Do you know, we expect Harry here very soon? When he knows you are here he will lose no time, I suspect."

"I shall be glad to see him again," Agnes said.

"Really, Aggie?"

"Really, Bella, if he forgets, and lets me forget, one little half-hour of our acquaintance."

"Ah! Agnes, how cruel you are!"

"Not cruel, Bella, only sensible, for both our sakes."

CHAPTER XV

AN OLD STORY.

AGNES's meeting with Mrs. Hornby gave her many new interests and occupations, but by no means interfered with her efforts to gain Lina Hepburn's confidence. The more she thought of what she had told her, the more she felt anxious to aid and comfort her. But for many days Lina evaded any return to the subject they had lately discussed, and, with a tact it was impossible to resist, drew Agnes on to describe more fully the life she had led at Saxenham.

Lina listened cagerly to all she told her of Dr. Stuart, and sympathized in all save her admiration and love for Annic.

"You cannot like her, Agnes. You cannot feel common charity towards her."

"Indeed, Lina, I love her dearly."

"And believe she loves you, and encourages your brother to care for you as he did?"

"Implicitly."

Lina shook her head. "I wish I had such faith."

"I have never had cause to doubt George," was the half angry answer. "I know he can do without me, but his marriage has given me a sister's love without depriving me of a brother's."

"Agnes, don't be Quixotic. The thing is impossible!"

"Not at all."

"Well, it seems so to me. Had I a brother, as Heaven help me I never had, and his marriage deprived me of a home, I should hate his wife, and should consider each mark of his affection to her as an insult to me."

"I would not hear your enemy say so, Lina," Agnes said, gently. "When we really love any one as I love George, we forget self to secure his welfare."

"You may—other's don't. But you are so unlike others—so unlike me. Placed as I am, you would give up Kinburn to my cousin without a struggle?"

"Yes, if I knew I ought. I could not help it, if I loved him as I do George."

"Ah! 'your *if* is your only peacemaker.' Now, supposing—But why touch on that sore point. What I

really want to find out is whether your theories are founded on principle and experience, or simply on ignorance."

"I don't quite understand you," Agnes said, a little hurt by the question.

"You assert that self-abnegation is the proof of true love; that if the sacrifice of our own happiness can add to that of the loved one, the act becomes not only a duty, but a pleasure. This, it seems to me, you call love. Now I call it folly."

Agnes winced. "I think," she said, "you have taken me up wrong. What I mean is, that such sacrifices, hard as they may be to the natural man, yet become possible—God helping us—when we see that they only can make the happiness of our loved ones."

A slight cloud passed over Lina's face as she answered, impatiently, "That is all well enough, and of course one would highly respect a person whose feelings were so perfectly under control; but don't be angry, Agnes, if I say that, till I knew you, I should have said they must be wondrously milk-and-water kind of people, and called that duty which was only shallow-heartedness."

"Then you think me shallow-hearted?"

"No, Agnes, I don't. I said till I knew you I thought so. But now that I do know you, now that I see how keenly sensitive you are, and how deep your affections, I begin to suspect that you have a power beyond others, and only one thing makes me hesitate to adopt your theory, though perhaps not your practice."

"May I ask what thing that is?"

"Simply, that as yet you have never been exposed to the whirlwind of passion, Agnes, and have not a conception of that which I call love. Indeed, you have tacitly confessed that hitherto your affections have been bound up in a brother."

"Not quite," Agnes answered ingenuously; "my affections have had many outlets."

"Friendship, I suppose? and family love?" Lina said, with an almost imperceptible sneer. "But what besides? Nothing—absolutely nothing. Your quiet, well-ordered heart knows little of the war of inclination and duty, and less of the storms of what most people, and I among the rest, call *love*."

"It is possible," Agnes quietly replied; "and to speak plainly, Lina, I do not see that such discussions are of use to either of us. Still, I quite see the difference you point out, for I have witnessed more than one romance of real life with which no fiction can compare. I have seen principle victorious over what you rightly call passion, and I have honoured the victor. I have seen the reverse, and I have thanked God that he has so hedged in my life that I have never been exposed to the misery—the crimes—in which ill-regulated affections result. Let us talk of something else. This makes me miserable."

"Does it, my poor Agnes? What, then, would you suffer if you saw one you loved—onc, at least, for whom you had some slight affection, but who had not, like you, been hedged in as you were, exposed to the sirocco blasts you so much dread? What if she had escaped from worse than death by a miracle? Would you lose all caring for the poor wretch because of this? Would you fling her from you and leave her own miserable thoughts to eat deeper and deeper into her sinful soul?"

"Lina, Lina, why do you speak of such things?"

"Because I desire an answer to a straightforward question, Agnes, and on that answer much may depend."

"I cannot conceive your drift, Lina," she said, after a moment's hesitation; "but, believe me, I do not lightly break the bonds of friendship, and where I think I can be of comfort or assistance, I would willingly risk danger to myself, if, by so doing, it could serve any one I care for."

"You have answered just as I expected, Agnes. And—you almost tempt me to tell you my own sad story, and ask you to help and advise me. My aunts know nothing of it. They never saw me till I was a woman, and I have never had courage to confide even to Aunt Upton much that has made me—made me what I am! But first tell me, can you keep a secret?"

"I think—I know I can," Agnes answered, for she remembered how she had been tested in the days when poor Ursula Weld used to make her the confidante of her domestic trials. "But," she added, frankly, "though I *can* keep a secret, I am not fond of having anything to conceal."

"No one would suspect you had any secret of mine in your

keeping, Agnes," she said, pleadingly, "and I do so want help and comfort, yet cannot seek either unless I tell you why I need it."

"Well, then, I shall keep it."

"Thank you—a thousand thanks!" Then, with a sudden change of tone, she added: "Ah! how incomprehensible it is that I, Lina Hepburn, the reserved, the self-sufficing, should have suddenly become so humble as to entreat a stranger to listen to my story for pity's sake! But I am only a woman after all, and I believe that the veriest wretch the world ever saw pines for some human heart into which he can pour his whole inner self, and show the good and the bad, the false and the true, within him. I firmly believe that not even Cain himself could have lived had he not made his wife the confidante of his guilt, and I sometimes long to be a Pa-pist, were it only to have the relief of frequent confession."

Agnes tried to speak, but she went on without a pause.

"Do you remember how well that hankering for human sympathy is described in 'Villette,' when Lucy Snowe enters the confessional at Brussels, and in 'Transformation,' when Hilda does the same at St. Peter's? Poor Hilda! how often have I fancied myself in her position, and realized the misery she must have suffered in being cognizant of the guilt she dare not betray."

"Yes," Agnes said, with a slight shudder, "to be the actual and only witness of a crime must be terrible; it is a sufficient strain on a woman's mind to suspect that one has been committed, even when the evidence is not sufficient to make it her duty to denounce the criminal."

Lina allowed this remark to pass without reply. But by-and-by she threw her arms round Agnes, and said, in a soft, caressing voice, very unusual to her, "Have you a notion why I thought you would listen sympathizingly to my life-history, and why I fancy that you,—good, high-principled as you are,—would pity more than blame me?"

"No, Lina—why?" And Agnes kissed the pale cheek that rested so trustingly on her breast.

"Because something I heard of you long, long ago, made me believe that you would rather give a helping hand to one against whom suspicion was rampant, than crush out his last chance of safety."

“What do you—what can you mean?”

Lina raised herself and said, in a firm tone, “The first time I heard the name of Agnes Stuart was in connection with that dreadful poisoning trial at Saxenham, and the evidence you gave taught me to believe you were a very uncommon character. Young as you were, bound as you were by old friendship to—to the poor lady, you had still the courage to stand up boldly in the prisoner’s defence. It always seemed to me that your testimony turned the scale in his favour.”

Agnes was not only surprised, but rather shocked by this speech—it almost seemed as if Lina’s sympathies were more with the murderer than his victim, and she said, a little constrainedly, “You are mistaken, then; my testimony was not of more weight than my brother’s—than the other doctors’”

“Yes it was; for, as a woman, it was natural that you should take the side of the woman.”

“There was no power of my doing so, if I would. I was asked certain questions, I gave them honest answers, and that was all. Pray—pray, Lina, don’t let us speak of that miserable time. Let me rather hear what you have to tell of yourself.”

“By-and-by, Agnes; but first, I must ask you one or two questions. Cases of circumstantial evidence have always had a great fascination for me, and there was something about this one that took a peculiar hold of me. The whole story was so mysterious, the motives adduced as likely to have suggested the crime were to my mind so inadequate, that I studied it as if it were a problem given me to solve, and I have never lost an opportunity of trying to find out more regarding it.”

Agnes was silent, and Lina went on:

“Perhaps it was, that, being ill at the time, it haunted my imagination more than was good for me. But my impressions of the whole thing were so vivid, that I felt almost as if I understood the matter better than the judge and jury, and I could not conceive why the prisoner, in spite of his acquittal, should be so unpopular.”

“I would rather we did not speak of it.”

“Forgive me, Agnes, but now that the subject has been touched upon, I *must* speak of it. If you suffered as I do—if—if you were blind and lonely, you would understand better

how a tragedy like that entirely possesses one, haunts one's dreams—becomes in fact, a monomania. Of course, I have formed my own opinion of the prisoner's guilt or innocence, still I want to know what *you* really and truly think about it."

"I wish you would not ask me. He was not proved guilty, that is enough."

"Not for me. I want to have it quite cleared up to my own mind. I want to know all the concomitant circumstances. I want to know your real opinion both as to him and his wife, and then, perhaps, I shall be able to forget all about it. I wish I could forget it—I wish I could." And she sank back wearily on her couch.

Agnes was surprised by her persistence in so strange a whim, but she had before met with invalids who allowed themselves to be haunted by odd fancies, and she said, reluctantly, "If you will have the story, Lina, I had better give it you from the beginning."

"Yes, that will be best. Tell me, first, how you came to know him."

"I did not know him till he came to Saxenham. But I knew her at school. After my mother's death, I went to Miss Doncaster's, where Mrs. Hornby, then Isabella Thorpe, and Ursula Reynard were among the elder girls. The Thorpes were old friends of our family, and Isabella took great charge of me. Ursula was her particular ally, and naturally took an interest in me as she did."

"She was very beautiful!" Lina said. "Really so?"

"Very—except when transformed by passion, a thing too often the case, though the outbursts were more violent than lasting. Her great fault was jealousy; indeed, it was her besetting sin. If she cared for any one, she demanded an entire subjection of thought, will, everything, to herself, and many a time Isabella and I came under the lash of her anger because we refused to give ourselves up entirely to her lead. Yet she had many rare qualities, and in spite of frequent quarrels with her, we loved her dearly."

"I did not fancy she was so attractive."

"Indeed she was. But, on my return to Saxenham, I had too much to do to keep up school friendships, and it was only because Isabella's brother was a pupil of my brother's

that even with her I continued to correspond at intervals. From her I learned that Ursula was married, but to whom she did not mention."

"You learned no particulars, then? They did not tell you whether it was a marriage of affection or of — In short, what came out on the trial?"

"Not a word. Well! a year or two later my brother was summoned to a lady who had been suddenly taken ill at a lawyer's office, where she was quite unknown. George had her carried to our house, and, on recovering from her swoon, she recognized me, and I found the stranger was my old school friend."

"Yes? And she told you her story?"

"No: I believe she told my brother something to account for her strange position, but it was long before I even guessed how miserable her married life was. At last she hinted to me that Dr. Weld had married her for her money."

"You are sure of that?"

"Quite sure. She loved him, however, and never suspected his mercenary motives till after they were married."

"Ay, that accounts for the proposal coming from her. She asked him, did she not—not he her?"

Agnes was startled by this inquiry "What made you suppose so?" she asked.

"He said so, did he not?"

"If so, I never heard of it. I never read the trial, so it is quite possible that he gave that account of it in his defence. They said it was a clever speech, and he was quite capable of throwing any possible blame on poor Ursula."

"Well, well, it does not much signify. You allow that the love was entirely on her side, so it matters little how the marriage was concocted. Pray go on! I want to hear the *dénouement*."

The callous indifference to poor Ursula's fate displayed in this speech deeply pained, almost disgusted Agnes, and she was tempted to break off her narrative abruptly, but, remembering that what caused her such harrowing recollection was a simple gratification of her listener's curiosity, she proceeded more shortly than before.

She described the quarrels which had succeeded Ursula's discovery of his mercenary motives, which were brought to a climax by an attack—the second, Ursula said—which he had made on his infant child.

“*He attacked the child?*”

“Yes, and with such violence that Ursula, in terror for its life, escaped with it next day, and took refuge with her mother at Foxhall, near Saxenham.”

“That accounts for their being in that neighbourhood?”

“Yes: Foxhall is on the borders of Cheshire and Lancashire. To Ursula's surprise, her husband made no effort to follow her, and a week or two after her flight, she saw the house they had inhabited at Exmouth for sale, and on sending to make inquiries, learned that Dr. Weld had sold everything immediately on her departure, and had gone no one knew where.”

“She never discovered, did she?”

“Never. He kept that secret well, but I afterwards learned that he constantly referred to the happy time he spent away from her, and excited her jealousy by half hints she could neither forgive nor forget.”

“What miserable folly!”

“Miserable indeed. Well! a reconciliation followed; they came to Saxenham, and were, from many unavoidable accidents, thrown constantly into our society. You know the rest. The trial told it all.”

“Tell me what you saw.”

Thus pressed, Agnes recapitulated shortly what the reader already knows, but was again and again interrupted by Lina's questions.

“You say he was extravagant. In what way?” she asked.

“I cannot tell you. George was very reserved on that point and others. Indeed, the trial—which I never read—made others more conversant with his history than I was.”

“And you really saw him strike her to the ground?”

“Once I did.” And Agnes shuddered as she remembered the terrible scene. “Ursula had been suffering from sleeplessness, and her husband, as was natural enough, seeing that he was a doctor, offered to make up a composing draught for her. I saw nothing in his manner to excite suspicion. It appeared to me that he spoke on the

spur of the moment, and from a kindly impulse. But to Ursula's excited fancy this was not the case, and she exclaimed, bitterly, 'So as to give you an easy opportunity of getting rid of me! No, no, sir: I am well aware that I stand between you and happiness, but I am not dead yet, and I have a certain satisfaction in preventing you from——' She had not time to finish. He started forwards with a look and an imprecation I can never forget, and struck her to the earth."

"Impossible!" said Lina, shuddering, while Agnes passed her hand across her eyes, as if to shut out the miserable recollection.

"I can't tell you what followed," she said, with agitation. "It was a dreadful scene. Of course I told George, and together we consulted what could be done. If a separation had been possible, then, perhaps, the end might have been different."

"What prevented it? Did he—did—did Weld refuse?" Lina asked, eagerly

"There was no opportunity of testing him. Ursula would listen to nothing of the kind, and when shortly afterwards we left home for a while, they seemed on better terms than usual."

"And then?"

"And then came her last illness, which she did not scruple to attribute to poison. She told me later that she had never felt well after a certain cup of coffee her husband had made for her from an approved Turkish receipt. I dare say the trial told how carefully the medical men endeavoured to find out the truth."

"Yes, but there was not a shadow of proof against him?"

"To say the least, Lina, there was very, very grave suspicion."

"You, however, did not share in it? You never believed him guilty. I am sure he thought you did not."

"Why do you think so?" Agnes asked, much surprised by the assertion.

"I—I gathered it from his own statement," she said, hastily; then added, "you yourself thought so, I am sure."

"No, indeed. He must have known my conviction of his guilt, although he also knew that I could not prove it."

"Then," Lina exclaimed, eagerly, "you really and truly think he did it? I am so disappointed. I thoroughly believed you considered him innocent."

"You cannot mean that you do?" Agnes asked, with some sharpness, for the girl's sympathy with this man shocked her.

"Yes I do. Judging from the printed report of the trial, my conviction is that he was unlucky man, who, from a strange combination of circumstances, became the object of unfounded accusations. Besides, where was the motive for his crime? Not money? for he gained nothing by his wife's death."

"He lost nothing," Agnes said, curtly. "But was there no other motive suggested by that unfinished note? Was nothing implied in the passionate wording of the passage beginning 'Chère Reine de Golconde?' Nothing suspicious in the words, 'A few days will free me from this hateful bondage?'"

Lina changed colour perceptibly as she said, "That might be construed as a motive; and yet, when his wife was so notoriously jealous, a milder judgment——"

"Lina, how can you attempt to defend so cowardly an assassin?" Agnes said, losing temper.

"If I believed him an assassin, I would not defend him; but I cannot find anything in what you have said that shakes my faith in his innocence. As far as I remember, no one found out to whom that letter was addressed?"

Agnes made no immediate answer. She was trying to overcome her repugnance to discuss the matter further with one who looked upon it so differently from herself.

Lina repeated the question, but with a kind of trembling in her voice that touched Agnes.

"No," she said, at length—"no, fortunately for her. Poor wretch! her punishment as it was must have been sore enough, to feel without that proof that she was the real cause of Ursula's death."

"Agnes," said Lina, growing deadly pale, "what do you say? She the cause! Such a thought must have been her death-blow. But she could not think it. Everything proved his innocence. Why, then, should she, of all people, suppose him guilty?"

Again Agnes was silent.

"Tell me, why do you think so?" Lina repeated, impatiently. "I will—I must know."

"Lina, you have forced me to speak on a painful subject, and all I have said seems only to confirm your mistaken views of the man I look upon as a great criminal. You suppose we only suspected Dr. Weld's guilt. Shall I give you proof of it."

"Proof? You said you suppressed nothing in your evidence?"

"Neither I did. What I am about to tell you came out after the trial. Had it been discovered before, I do not think he would have been acquitted.

"Well?"

"You know that the public feeling against him was so strong that he dared not show himself in Saxenham. My brother bought a good many books and chemicals at the enforced sale of his effects, and among the latter a small cabinet, carefully arranged, in which were the proceeds of his latest discoveries, as also a collection of poisons labelled as such, and prepared in unusual ways. Among these was one marked 'Drei,' and George vainly attempted to discover what it was; no analysis could make it out, until he accidentally fell upon a marked passage in a 'book of magic' that had belonged to Dr. Weld. There he found drei described as a gipsy medicine, prepared from poisonous fungi, and on experimenting with it on some of the lower animals, the symptoms evinced were similar to those from which Ursula had suffered, so like and yet unlike decline. George was then convinced that drei was the subtle poison used to remove her."

"Good heavens! Is this true?" And Lina's face and voice evinced such genuine horror, that Agnes saw that for the first time she was now convinced of Dr. Weld's guilt.

Really sorry for the pain she had so innocently inflicted, she said, kindly, "I wish, dear Lina, you had not forced me to tell you all this. But when you insisted he was guiltless, I was forced to show you what he really was."

"What he really was!" she repeated, mechanically; then, with a half sneer, she added: "And, after all, what

does it signify to me whether there is a murderer more or less in the world?"

Agnes's new-born sympathy evaporated at this cold-hearted speech, and, rising hastily, she said, "Good-bye," and turned to leave the room.

As she did so, Lina said, faintly, "Will you ring for my maid, Agnes, before you leave me. I feel very giddy and ill."

Agnes flew to her as she gasped out the last word. She had fainted.

Note.

¹ DREI.—Among other jealously-guarded secrets of the gipsy race is the art of preparing what they term the "drei," or "dri," a most deadly and insidious destructive agent, and for which medical science knows no antidote. Analysis detects no noxious properties whatever, and the most careful examination, microscopical or otherwise, shows it simply to consist of apparently harmless vegetable matter. The "drei," then, is merely a brown powder, obtained from a certain species of fungus forming the nearest connecting link between the animal and vegetable kingdoms, the powder consisting of an infinity of sporules. These fungoid sporules possess the peculiar property of being further developed only by intimate contact with living animal matter (as when swallowed, &c.); they then throw out innumerable greenish-yellow fibres about twelve or eighteen inches in length. When the "drei" is administered, usually in some warm drink, these sporules are swallowed, attach themselves to the mucous membrane, germinate, throw out millions of these silky fibres, which grow with awful rapidity, first producing symptoms of hectic fever, then cough, eventually accompanied by incessant spitting of blood, till death finally inevitably supervenes, usually in about a fortnight or three weeks' time. A case of this description came under my notice in Italy in 1860. Although the patient was attended by eminent physicians accustomed to deal with cases of slow poisoning, no suspicions of foul play were entertained till the day after the decease, when an autopsy being held revealed the cause of death. The fibres, the growth of which had ceased with the cessation of the animal life and heat that had supported them, were already partially decomposed; had another day or two elapsed, no trace would have been left of the foul deed.—*From the Times.*

CHAPTER XVI.

HARRY THORPE.

IT was late in the afternoon before Agnes could leave the blind girl, who had fallen from one faint into another, and had only recovered at length to beg that she might be left entirely alone.

Affected by her illness and by the painful recollections roused by the conversation which led to it, Agnes had, as soon as possible, escaped from the drawing-room to the quiet of the garden octagon, where she was allowed to think undisturbed of what had happened.

It was a quiet, dreamy, autumn evening. The sun was setting, and his level rays rested on the sea, lighting up the open trestles of the fishing-pier with a ruddy light, and flinging a golden bridge across the waters. The robin was singing on the bush close to her, and the scent of the fallen leaves rose up not unpleasantly to the open window. Agnes had fallen into a reverie, of which Lina Hepburn was the object. The strange levity she had shown when speaking of that fearful tragedy, pained her deeply. Ursula's fate seemed to her a matter of complete indifference, and Dr. Weld alone seemed to receive her sympathies.

What could it mean? Was she totally heartless? That could not be, for she had spoken sometimes as if she knew by experience what real feeling was, and her affection for Agnes herself was evidently not simulated. As she thought of this, as she remembered her earnest pleading for help and sympathy, Agnes's feelings softened towards the blind girl. She was at once attracted and repelled by her, and yet, if she could do her good, if she could lead her to happier, better thoughts, was it not her duty to forget everything except that she needed help?

Perhaps this was the work appointed her by Heaven—this, it might be, that had called her to a neighbourhood so far from what had hitherto been her home. At all events, if Miss Hepburn were not benefited by her efforts, she herself would be by the endeavour to do good to her neighbour.

Thus far her reflections had carried her, when Martha opened the door of the octagon and announced Mr. Hornby.

It was growing dark now, and as Agnes rose to receive her visitor, she perceived that he was not alone, but could not ascertain who was his companion.

With an access of his usual nervousness, Mr. Hornby apologized for the late hour at which he had called, "only," he said, hesitatingly, "my brother-in-law *would* come this evening, and would not come alone."

"Dr. Thorpe?" Agnes said, inquiringly, and stretched out her hand to the dark figure still lingering in the shadow of the doorway.

"Oh, Hornby, why did you tell her? I wanted to see whether she would recognize me," Harry said, springing forward, and heartily shaking her offered hand.

"Dear Agnes, how well you look. I am so glad to see you again."

Agnes was touched by the real pleasure he showed in meeting her, but a little fear of the consequences if she received him *too* kindly, made her answer rather coldly; "Isabella told me she expected you soon, so I was quite prepared to recognize you."

"But you are glad to see me?" he persisted, still keeping tight hold of her hand.

"Oh yes. All old friends are welcome here, especially Saxenham ones."

Harry looked exceedingly mortified by this answer, and Mr. Hornby, seeing something was wrong, repeated his apologies for coming at that hour. But it was not till Mrs. Ellis appeared, that any of the party recovered their entire self-possession.

Mrs. Ellis had been so long deprived of male society, that, forgetting all old faults in Harry, she welcomed him with a cordiality at once gratifying and unexpected, and the young man's courage rose as he decided that, if Aunt Ellis received him thus, she could have no knowledge of what had happened between him and Agnes the day he left Saxenham. So he was soon chatting gaily with the old lady, though both Agnes and Mr. Hornby remarked that his eyes and words were more often directed to the niece than the aunt when he said anything worth listening to, and Harry Thorpe had enough of "the great I" in his composition to make him believe that most of his remarks were so.

Agnes, meanwhile, had leisure to see how much he was altered, and was forced to confess that he no longer looked "the boy" she had contemptuously considered him when they parted. His great height was not now the formless overgrowth of a stripling, but had the bulk and bearing of a fully developed man, while the slight want of firmness that had been the defect of the lower part of his face, was concealed by a thick curling beard and moustache, whose reddish tinge betrayed that his almost black hair was a rich dark chestnut.

In short, Harry Thorpe was now decidedly handsome, and without a touch of boyishness. His overhanging eyebrows, flashing eye, and deep low voice, were those of a man, and though his manner bore traces of youthful impetuosity, it had lost its former awkwardness. He was still abrupt and engrossing, but no observer of character could watch him for any time without perceiving that he was really clever, though, perhaps, little inclined to hide his light under a bushel.

This tendency to self-worship was a bit of the original Harry, and had induced Agnes, during his pupilage in Saxenham, to treat him sometimes *de haut en bas*, for she soon perceived that he was one who must either tyrannize or be tyrannized over, and for her own comfort and his advantage she preferred the latter. In those days experience had not taught her the selfishness and vanity of mankind generally, and she had prided herself on having brought Harry into perfect discipline, little suspecting that the tyranny she exercised was in itself a flattery, or that very young men are too apt to take it for granted that a woman's interest, however it be shown, does not arise from general philanthropy, but from special and peculiar admiration of the individual. Into this mistake poor Harry fell, and the evening before he left Saxenham laid his heart and hand—he had *no* other property—at Agnes's feet. Her amazement at the practical result of her tutelage might have amused any one who was cognizant of it, but no one was so in Old-street. Agnes was too much mortified even to confide what had happened to her brother.

This, then, was the explanation of her speech to Mrs. Hornby the first day they met, and now she awaited with

some anxiety what was to come next. Was Harry going to continue his folly, or had he learned to see how foolish he had been? His excited manner was somewhat suspicious; it was not like that of calm friendliness. And then, Isabella's remonstrance? Oh! she hoped, she trusted, he would not be so silly; but, if he were, how should she bring him to his senses? While these thoughts troubled her, Mrs. Ellis was questioning Dr. Thorpe as to his history since they saw him last; and at the moment when Agnes had recovered herself sufficiently to hear what was going on, she remarked, "I suppose you did not go to Russia, Harry? The war, of course, prevented you?"

"No, it did not prevent me," he said, laughingly; "in fact, I traversed rather more of the empire than I quite liked."

"How was that?"

"Why, when I found I could not go to Moscow, as I intended, I went as an amateur to the Crimea, and had the luck to be taken prisoner."

"Prisoner, Harry?"

"Was not it jolly? How else should I have seen what I did see? I was trundled over dreary steppes in springless carts; I lived for weeks on messes of cabbage, to which sheep's head or black Spartan broth are as Birch's turtle; I suffered all the horrors of a hyperborean winter, together with those of a prisoner of war."

"And now what do you intend to do?"

"Ay, what indeed? Do you advise me to set up my tent at St. Ringans? Is there an opening for a doctor here, Mrs. Ellis?"

Agnes was startled by this inquiry, and, turning to Mr. Hornby, she said, very low, "He does not mean to settle at St. Ringans, does he?"

Mr. Hornby had long ere this got over his natural nervousness in speaking to Agnes, and, struck by the tone in which she asked the simple question, he said, kindly, "The plan has been mooted, but perhaps you see objections to it, Miss Stuart?"

"I?"

"Yes, you." And he drew his chair closer to hers, and added, in a meaning tone, "I know that Isabella and

Harry mean to consult you about the project. It seems that Dr. Brown has thoughts of relinquishing practice, and perhaps arrangements could be made for Harry to succeed him."

"He has talent," Agnes said, "which, no doubt, will tell in practice; but St. Ringans is a narrow sphere, Mr. Hornby."

"True; but every man must make a beginning, and, if you offer no objections——"

Agnes saw that he meant something particular by repeating this "if," and said, "I see, Mr. Hornby, you wish to tell me why you think I might dislike this idea. Pray do so without hesitation. We know one another well enough now, I hope, to dare to speak frankly to each other."

"Thank you, Miss Stuart: you save me much difficulty by saying so. I do wish to put you on your guard with respect to this little plan of my wife's. You know, and I know, that neither Isabella nor her brother have the faculty of keeping anything secret—not even what relates to their own affairs. Thus it happens that I know what reason you have to dislike Dr. Thorpe's settling in your immediate neighbourhood, and I wish you to consider whether, by a little self-denial and courage, you cannot so manage matters as to make it not only possible for him, but agreeable to yourself."

Agnes blushed painfully. "How can I do this?" she asked.

"He is older now. He is no longer likely to misinterpret the interest you may take in his affairs. And remember, dear lady, that no real service can be done to our neighbour without the chance of entailing some sacrifice on our own part."

"But," she said, hesitatingly, "I tried to do him good at Saxenham, and I failed utterly."

"No, you did not fail. The intelligent sympathy of a right-thinking woman is never thrown away on a young man. You suffered, certainly, for bestowing it on Harry once; but, believe me, you will not regret it by-and-by. I am sure that you may trust him now implicitly."

"Thank you," Agnes said. "I believe you are right."

At least, I shall try what I can do. I really like Dr. Thorpe——”

“And, by-and-by, you will have no cause for fear. You have given him a useful lesson. He will not forget it, I am certain.” So saying, he rose, wrung her hand heartily, and said, “I must go, Harry. Will you accompany me or follow me?”

Dr. Thorpe glanced rather sheepishly at Agnes before he gave an answer.

“I think you must stay a little longer,” she said. “I have not yet heard your Russian adventures.”

The doubtful look passed from his face, and as Mrs. Ellis, with old-fashioned hospitality, accompanied Mr. Hornby to the outer door, his brother-in-law crossed the room, and sat down by Agnes. At first there was a slight embarrassment in the manner of both, but Agnes by an effort shook off hers, and said :

“Mr. Hornby has been telling me you have some thoughts of entering into practice at St. Ringans, and I want to know all about it.”

The tone in which she spoke reassured him, and, as if the spell were broken, he resumed his old manner before the little quarrel had taken place. He told her all that had been done, how Dr. Brown thought of retiring, but wished no mention made of his intentions until all arrangements were concluded. Then he asked her opinion of the plan, and whether she thought he had any chance of making a livelihood at St. Ringans.

Agnes entered with alacrity into the matter, discussed the pros and cons with sense and spirit, and when the question came at last, “Shall *you* like me to come here?” she cordially answered, “Yes.”

“Then you forgive me? We are friends again?”

“On one condition, fast friends.”

“You need not tell me what that condition is. Your manner has done that,” he said, a little dolefully.

“Is it not better we should understand each other once for all?”

“I suppose so; but—I wish—I wish you would call me Harry again.”

The climax, or rather anti-climax, tickled Agnes ex-

ceedingly, but with praiseworthy self-control she gravely promised she would.

"Agnes, you shall never have cause to regret that promise," he said, as he shook her hand at parting.

And he kept his word.

There was, it is true, a little self-consciousness on both sides when next they met under Mrs. Hornby's eye; but that once over, all went well, and Harry resumed his Old-street habit of dropping in at all hours, and—Mrs. Ellis rather liked it than otherwise! So different were things now, that Harry Thorpe, the horror of her Saxenham life, became quite an acquisition at St. Ringans.

Indeed, she lamented more than Agnes did when, after a fortnight's stay at the Parsonage, Harry called with his sister at the Whim to say "Good-bye."

"But remember, Mrs. Ellis, I shall soon be back again." (They had not trusted the old lady's discretion by telling her what was intended.) "I am like a bad halfpenny—sure to return on your hands when least expected."

"Well, my dear boy, the sooner the better. And perhaps when you come back you may have more temptation to stay than you have now, for Mrs. Trotter expects her two nieces, the Miss Weirs, home from Germany in a few weeks; and we all know, Harry, that flirting is your vocation."

Poor Harry tried to look miserable at such an imputation, but, catching Agnes's eye, he laughed, and said, "Well, Mrs. Ellis, if you dare me to flirt with the Miss Weirs, of course I shall try. But I can't fancy flirting with Aunt Trotter's nieces. I fear they must be very *wary* girls."

"Harry, Harry, for shame!" But the old lady laughed heartily at the wretched pun, and Mrs. Hornby reminded her brother that the boys were waiting for the game of romps he promised them.

"Is not Charlie Reynard Weld all over?" he whispered to Agnes, as he bade her good-bye. "I wonder whether the fellow in the Crimea was Weld, or only like him? I suppose he thought it would whitewash him to serve among the Bashi-Bazouks!"

CHAPTER XVII.

CONFIDENCES.

DURING the fortnight of Dr. Thorpe's stay at the Parsonage, Agnes had seen nothing of Miss Hepburn. "She was not ill," Mrs. Upton said, "but had one of her depressed fits; they were very frequent with her. Agnes must not be alarmed by them. She often shut herself in her own room for weeks together."

But at length she was admitted to Miss Hepburn's boudoir. It was a pretty room, but the very brightness of its sunny aspect was sad to Agnes, contrasted with the unchanging darkness of its miserable occupant. To-day this struck her more than usual. The sun shone full into the room, lighting up pictures, ornaments, and furniture of the softest and richest hues, and displaying books, work, and music all thrust away into remote corners, while the blind girl lay listlessly in a crimson lounging-chair near the window, through which the light streamed full on her face and figure.

Byron's well-known lines recurred to Agnes's thoughts as she gazed upon her, lying there so still and pale:

"And mark'd the mild angelic air,
The rapture of repose that's there,
The fixed yet tender traits that streak
The langour of that placid sleep.
And but for that sad shrouded eye——"

Yes, but for that, how beautiful Lina would have been—how beautiful she was even now! Could it be believed that those sweet, placid features ever exchanged their angelic air for the wild excitement which Agnes had seen distort her countenance, or that the cold sneers with which she had listened to poor Ursula's story could alter that rapture of repose, and make her utterly repulsive-looking for the time being? No, no, it was impossible that she could in reality be as cold-blooded, as selfish as she had seemed then! And yet there was a timidity in Agnes's tone and manner as she addressed her. She could not forget the shock she had so lately caused her—could not treat her with the same heart-felt affection she had done previously

"I am sorry to learn you have been ill, Lina," she said, timidly.

"I have not been ill," was the quick answer—"in body at least. This shattered husk of a vehement spirit must suffer always to some extent, but not now more than usual. That was not my reason for shutting myself up and refusing to see you, Agnes. So don't put that gloss on my eccentricities."

"I feared," was the hesitating answer, "that I had over-exhausted you the last day I was here, and one does not like to cause pain to others, however unwittingly."

"I never said you did not give me pain," she retorted, "for you did so once and again. So much, that ever since I have been cogitating whether or no I should give you the confidence I promised."

"And have you decided?"

"Almost. I told you that I believed that every human being *must* have some confidant, and having once selected you as mine, it would be cowardly to change my mind simply because you see matters in a different light from me. What wonder!" she added, bitterly, "when you still bask in the blessed light of heaven, and my mental as well as my bodily eyes have been blinded by the glare of the lightning!"

"Dear Lina," said Agnes, soothingly, "you must not dwell on such sad images. Look beyond and above, and they will give place to brighter hopes and calmer thoughts."

"Agnes, you do not know what blindness is, either of the physical or spiritual organs. I know both."

"The one may pass away if not the other, were you to seek the right remedy."

"Ay, so they told me with regard to 'the other,' long ago. But how could I be still and patient when my happiness or misery hung in the balance—when there were things I must see with my own eyes, or run risks which I at least had not courage to face? But you shall hear my story, and then you will see that I had reasons for the 'perversity' of which they accuse me, though perhaps these very reasons were my greatest crime."

"You use strong language!"

"Not stronger than I ought, as you will soon learn.

Already I have shocked you by calling things by their right names. As I go on, I shall shock you far more. Nay, I am aware that what I am about to reveal may so far lower your opinion of me, as to make you entirely withdraw your friendship from me. But should this be so, remember that, had I remained silent, I might have kept it, and at least give me credit for honesty in not choosing to retain on false pretences that which I value—oh, how intensely !”

The tone in which the last few words was spoken touched Agnes, and, stooping down, she kissed her brow, and said, “I seldom give up those whom I have once liked.”

“Liked !” she repeated, in a tone of reproof. “Yet it is better to use so mild a word, for I can believe it. Had you used a stronger, I might have doubted its truth. Still even to that you must not pledge yourself till you have heard my story.

“I suppose most girls have a love-tale to tell before they are out of their teens. That you have not, Agnes”—with a faint attempt at pleasantry—“is the exception that proves the rule. Mine began when my teens were scarcely entered upon. I gave you a hint that my childhood was not happy. How this came to be so you shall hear. My grandfather, Sir Robert Hepburn, had two sons, both of whom wished to enter the army. From some foolish prejudice, he refused his consent. Cosmo, the elder, was a gentle boy, not unlike Aunt Upton, and yielded to his objections; but the younger, Alexander, my father, was a thorough Hepburn, and rebelled. He left home, and did what many a brave Scot has done before him—took service with Austria. Sir Robert was angry, but he was proud of the boy’s spirit, and might in time have pardoned him, had he not committed the fresh imprudence of marrying my mother, the daughter of his Austrian colonel. My grandfather detested foreigners, and this marriage he never forgave—at least, he refused to do so while my father lived. The union of my parents was not a happy one. Child as I was, I saw that, and the misery of our domestic life made a powerful impression on my mind. I was an only child, and my education, especially as regarded religion, was a constant bone of contention. My mother was a bigoted Roman Catholic,

my father, if anything, a Protestant, and the bad health of my bachelor uncle made him anxious to throw no fresh obstacle in the way of my ultimately becoming the heiress of Kinburn."

"Poor Lina! what a miserable beginning of life!"

"A beginning worthy of the end, Agnes," was the despairing answer. "My mother died, and my father's health beginning to fail, his desire to return to Scotland, and to see his father's face before he died, became uncontrollable. He wrote to entreat Sir Robert's forgiveness, and, requesting that the answer might meet him on his way home, he and I set off for Scotland. I was then just thirteen, and the peculiar education I had received gave me a woman's knowledge in some respects, and more than a child's ignorance in others. Well, we quitted Vienna in company with a young student of nineteen, who was returning to Paris to finish his university career. He, like myself, was of English origin, though in all else—birth, parentage, appearance, and disposition—he was as un-English as possible. The name by which I shall speak of him was his second christian name, Sigismund; that by which I addressed him was far sweeter and dearer. But——No matter.

"We had reached a small seaport town in France, when my father became dangerously ill, and, but for M—— Sigismund, my situation would have been pitiable indeed. He remained with us for weeks, dividing with me the care of nursing my dear father, and when he was forced to leave us, he did all that was possible to make our enforced stay at Verville as little uncomfortable as possible."

She paused for a moment, and Agnes said a few words to show her sincere interest in her story, adding some praise of the so-called Sigismund.

Lina's lip quivered as she spoke, but she made no other answer than to resume her narrative.

"My father's strength ebbed fast, and, calling me to him, he gave me his dying instructions. He told me that, as Sir Robert had not answered his letter, he had written to his brother, committing me to his care and guardianship, and that, till my uncle came or sent for me, he had arranged that I should remain at the Pensionnat Bertin, to the head of which establishment he had paid my first quarter in advance."

“And your uncle neither came nor sent?”

“Neither came nor sent; but on receiving a letter from me to tell him of my father’s death, and inquire how I should proceed so as to place myself under his care, he wrote to me, kindly enough in words, but cruel in essentials. He described himself as too weak in health to undertake the charge of a girl of my age, and expressed regret that my Aunt Upton was so circumstanced as to be equally unable to receive me. He added, that as my grandfather had refused even to hear my name, he saw nothing for it but that I should remain for a time in the care of the Madame Bertin whom my father had selected as my temporary guardian. He would undertake the necessary expenses. And there ended my uncle’s care of me. Not one of my relations came near me, wrote to me, inquired about the orphan girl, for four long years. My Aunt Upton was not to blame. She had her own struggles to go through in those days, and my Uncle Cosmo had never told her a word about me, taking it for granted she could and would do nothing. Oh! if he had told her! But what is done, is done.”

“I am so glad Mrs. Upton did not know. I could not bear to think she had made one of that cruel family-compact.”

“Compact there was none. It was only that I was a girl and an alien, therefore of consequence to no one. Moreover, the Kinburn estates, unlike most Scottish properties, were not entailed; I was not, therefore, *necessarily* the representative of the Hepburns. But to return to my tale. My uncle’s letter filled me with despair. Fancy a girl of thirteen years of age thrown, without money or friends, upon the kindness of a second-rate schoolmistress in a second-rate French watering-place! What, then, could I do but what I did? I wrote to—what did I call him?—Sigismund.”

“He answered you, of course?”

“He not only answered me, but came to me; he encouraged me, he put some of his own aspiring ambition into my heart, and to please him, more than from any higher motive, I laboured to make myself an accomplished and attractive woman. It was a strange position in which we were placed. Was it unnatural that to me the result should

be a most entire devotion of heart, mind, soul, to the only being who ever treated me with kindness? He never forgot me. Poor as he was—and he depended almost entirely on his own exertions—he contrived each time he came to Verville to bring me some trifle, to prove that he had not forgotten me. He was working hard, and could not come often. But when he did, he was looked upon by Madame Bertin as a kind of guardian, and therefore I was permitted to see him.

“Thus time went on till I was sixteen. I was considered very pretty, for in that southern clime my fair complexion and golden hair were as uncommon as here they are the reverse. And in those days,” she added, with a sigh, “my eyes were large and brilliant, and of a blue so deep as to seem in some lights almost black. About this time there came to Verville a mother and daughter, both handsome, the latter especially so. She was a brilliant brunette, and people used to call us Day and Night when we chanced to be together. She was a year or two older than I, and, on hearing my story, took a great fancy to me, and insisted on having me frequently with her. I liked, and yet disliked, her, if you can understand what I mean; for, while her kindness and petting were agreeable to one who had few such pleasures, my Hepburn pride took fire at her little airs of patronage.

“She had heard of my youthful guardian, and frequently declared that she would not leave Verville till she became acquainted with him. Somehow, I never could exactly explain to myself why, I hoped that they might not meet. But they did. She ‘flung herself at him,’ as is vulgarly said, and he laughed at her behind her back, and, while criticizing her to me, implied how very, very different his Aline was, and——Well, I won’t shock you by repeating what he said. Enough that for a few short weeks I was supremely happy. My English acquaintances were to leave in a few days, but ere they went, a boating-party was to take place to a little island off Verville, in which we were all to join. Oh, how I remember each instant of that, my last day of happiness! It was indeed a dream of delight, for he was with me constantly, and I believed that he really loved me. You know I had loved him from the time I was

a child! On our return, by some awkward accident our boat was upset. We were not far from shore, and no one was seriously hurt except me. I was a tolerable swimmer, and was striking out for shore, when I saw that the old lady had fainted from sheer terror, and I contrived to support her above water till more efficient aid came. The exertion, however, was beyond my strength, and I received so severe a strain, that for weeks I was confined to a sick-bed. Sigismund remained at Verville till I was well enough to be carried to the sofa in my little sitting-room, and so did the English ladies. They left first, and, on bidding me good-bye, they promised to write to me frequently, and begged me to come and visit them in England. 'For now,' the daughter said, 'I feel as if I had a certain claim on your affection.' I paid little attention to this speech, fancying it an English politeness for my exertions in saving her mother. But after they were gone, Sigismund explained it in a different and very miserable way. 'She means,' he said, 'that when we are married, she will have a right to your love as the wife of your guardian.'

"'Marries you!' I exclaimed, in a tempest of grief. 'You will not, cannot marry that girl!'

"'Not her, but her money,' he answered, gloomily. 'She is rich, I am ambitious. Her wealth shall be my ladder to fame.'

"His answer seemed to pierce through my very heart. That he should be mercenary, that he whom I considered the ideal of all that was generous, noble, *true*, should sell himself for gold, was very terrible to me—more terrible even than the deep wound his doing so gave my affections. For a time I was silent, but my love, my passionate and yet—believe me—unselfish love, forced me to speak, to remonstrate, to entreat he would draw back from so fatal a step.

"He listened to me patiently, acknowledged that my arguments were good, that no doubt such a marriage would not make his happiness; but what could he do else? His was not a temper that could consent to take the lower seat at the world's feast if the higher were proffered for his acceptance. And then, stooping down, he gently patted my

cheek, and added, 'You have done your duty, dear child, in warning me, but I *will* do it.' And so left me. 'Whom the gods doom to destruction they madden!' I exclaimed. He turned back. 'Dear Aline,' he said (I was christened Alexandrina, but he always called me Aline), 'dear Aline, in thus looking after my own interests, I have not overlooked yours. She loves you, she owes her mother's life to you, and when we are married, I shall make it a point that you stay with us. We have loved each other too long and too well to be parted. And *then*, no one can object to your making my house your home.' The angry blood rushed to my cheek and brow at these calmly uttered words. I strove to keep down the bitter answer that rose to my tongue, but in vain. What I said I know not—much, I fear, that I ought not, but, at all events, it caused a change in him. 'Unhappy girl!' he exclaimed, 'Why, why do you say such things to me? After that, we must part once for all.' And, catching me in his arms, he kissed me again and again, then threw me from him, and rushed out of the room. Next day he sailed for England."

"My poor Lina!" Agnes said, with a fond caress.

"Are you not shocked? Do you not shrink from me when I tell you such things? Ah! that I could see your eyes—ah! that I could read in your countenance whether I dare go on."

"Go on. I am so deeply interested."

Lina gave a sigh—almost a groan—and then continued:

"I cannot describe the months that followed. You may read them in the words of Shakspeare's *Titus* :

"A blank, my lord."

But such a blank! It seemed to realize to me the torments of hell, for I did not *then* know what one can undergo and live. I had not regained my lost strength, and I had a relapse, not dangerous, they said—the doctors called it a *maladie de nerfs*, but politely laid the blame on the shock of the boat accident, and advised amusement, exercise, fresh air, and my guardians gave me freedom of action; they cared too little for me, indeed, to interfere with it, and I walked perpetually. Everybody at Verville knew who I was, and attributed my love of locomotion to my English

descent. Ah! could you but know what the Pensionnat Bertin was, you would understand that sheer necessity alone induced me to be ten minutes of the day beneath its roof. It was at this period that the great change in my fortune took place. My grandfather sent for me to Kinburn on my uncle's death; I came readily enough, and, though the arrow in my heart still rankled, I was comparatively happy. I had occupation, I had comforts, nay, I had affection, and in time I might have, perhaps, learned to begin life anew, but Fate willed it otherwise.

"You have, no doubt, heard them speak of a young man who once inhabited the Whim, an artist, to whom my grandfather took an amazing fancy, and who was much at Kinburn the year after I came to it?"

"Yes. I have intended to ask you about him, but supposed you knew as little of him as your aunts do. It was he, was it not, who decorated the octagon-room so tastefully?"

"It was—and if you had applied to me, I could have told you much, very much. The so-called artist was Sigismund. I recognized him the first time he called on Sir Robert, but he did not guess that the pale heiress of Kinburn was the blooming girl he had known at Verville. Gradually the truth dawned upon him, and how I hoped, how I yearned, for some exclamation of joy when the discovery was made! But it did not come. He said coldly and calmly that he rejoiced to see me in the position to which I was entitled, and to which I would do honour, but that was all. My heart sank within me. I felt like one who has toiled for days and days through the arid desert, panting for the water-brooks that are so far away, when suddenly he sees the glitter of the spring, dashes eagerly towards it, and finds it but the mirage. No sleep closed my eyes that night; I speculated on the change in him. His manner, his countenance, his very name was altered. Why was this? Were all assumed? and for what reason? I rose with the dawn, and wandered out alone, as was my custom, to a favourite resort of mine by the sea-shore. Do you know it, Agnes?—that little cove where the rocks lie huddled together in such picturesque groups, and where the wild roses seem to form almost a carpet to the banks near

at hand, so closely do they grow to the earth. You must know it. To reach it you open the little garden gate of the Whim, cross the road to the wicket in the Kinburn enclosure, thread the wood till you reach the bridge over the Kin water, and track its course to the sea. Oh, how lovely it is! What would I not give if my sightless eyes could behold the sun set or the moon rise there once again!"

For a moment she was overpowered by her recollections; she lay back in her chair, her face upturned, her lips half parted, and the most delicate tint on her marble cheek, while her restless fingers ever twitched the golden chain that clasped her slender throat.

"Well, it was there we met. He saw me from the octagon window, and followed me to the shore, and I soon learned that prudence alone had checked the expressions which I had so longed to hear, and which I did hear now to my heart's content. His change of name had not originally been intended. A mistake of Sir Robert's had suggested it, and as it was of moment to him, for pecuniary reasons, that his whereabouts should not be easily traced, he availed himself of the lucky accident."

"How came he to want money? I thought his wife was an heiress?"

"It was a long, sad story. My worst anticipations had been realized. His wife and he did not suit in any one respect, and when it flashed upon her that he had married her for her money, she did all she could to keep it in her own hands, which—unluckily for him—was in her power. It would have melted a heart of stone to have heard his descriptions of their domestic life. I do not say, *he* never pretended, that his conduct to her was irreproachable. It certainly was not. In many ways he had shocked her English prejudices, and she resented it by keeping him so short of money as to force him in some measure to yield to her caprices. I knew, Agnes, that when you were telling me the particulars of that sad tragedy of the Welds, you were shocked that I should have more sympathy for the man than the woman. The explanation is, that I had learned from my own early recollections, and from Sigismund's story, what the misery of a household without love

really is. A woman, you know," she said, with a sigh, "is apt to be influenced by her personal experience, and so——But what has that to do with my autobiography? Well, matters went on with Sigismund and his wife from bad to worse, and at length he was forced to fly to Scotland to secure himself from arrest."

"But what brought him to St. Ringans? Had he heard of your change of position? Did he know——"

"No—a thousand times no," Lina interrupted. "His coming here was the merest accident, or rather, I ought to say, it was a leading of destiny, which neither of us could withstand."

"Dear Lina, that is a dangerous doctrine."

"To me it has ever proved a truth," she replied, sorrowfully, "but I acknowledge it may be dangerous. Still, how else can I account for his coming here just as I was trying to reconcile myself to my new position, just as I began to contemplate the possibility of entertaining the views my grandfather had formed for my future? At all events, when he did come, my half-formed desire to agree to Sir Robert's wishes passed away, and left no trace. The old influence resumed its empire, and to feel for and through Sigismund became again my life."

Here she made a long pause, and Agnes, struck by the ghastliness of her complexion, suggested she should delay the conclusion of her story till another day.

"No," she said, "that must not be. I have of my own free will sought this ordeal. My foot is on the burning ploughshare, and it is now too late to draw it back. Yet how can I make you understand what that summer was to me? You have all your life lived in an atmosphere of purity and family affection, you have been hedged round by all the proprieties, all the sweetness, of a woman's existence, and to you it must seem incomprehensible that day after day I consented to meet Sigismund clandestinely in the woods of Kinburn, instead of contenting myself with seeing him now and then in Sir Robert's drawing-room. All I can say is, that from infancy I had given him my whole thoughts, and that, circumstanced as I then was, it was necessary for his sake that we should not betray to my grandfather what our former intimacy had been. We met

daily, that is all I need say; but everything comes to an end, and so did this.

“He came to me one day in great agitation. He had heard from his wife, who was dangerously ill, and who besought a reconciliation before she died. She promised that, if he returned to her, he would never have cause to regret it. Putting the letter into my hand, he bade me read it, and asked me whether he should believe his wife’s professions—whether he should go or stay?”

“You did not hesitate, Lina? You bade him go?”

Lina made no answer at first. After a time, she said, as if ignoring Agnes’s question, “He decided he should go. What led to that decision is no matter now. But I reminded him that, whatever happened hereafter, he had one friend he might trust, and that if ever he required pecuniary aid, and I was wealthy, as no doubt I should be some day, he must seek it from me without scruple. He thanked me with all his heart. ‘Ah! Aline,’ he said, ‘would that I had listened to your warnings three years ago. But it is too late now. I tlung happiness aside then, and I cannot now take it up when I will. Still’—and he hesitated—‘if what she prophesies come true—if—’ He said no more, but I understood him. ‘You will return to me?’ I said, eagerly. ‘To what end? To be scouted, looked down upon, thrust out by your rich friends, as a needy adventurer?’ Don’t despise me, Agnes, but my answer was passionate enough. I told him that friends, fortune, nothing was of value without him; that were he a beggar, nay worse, a criminal of the deepest dye, he would be to me the whole world; that, as Cain’s wife clove to him when God and man east him out, so would I cleave to him if—if he came again.”

As she said the last word her head fell forward on her bosom, and for some minutes an entire silence reigned. It was Agnes who spoke first.

“And so he went?”

Lina started at the question. “Yes,” she said. “At least, it was agreed that he should go next morning, when we discovered that he had not the necessary funds for the journey, and that I must supply them. My grandfather had been very liberal to me, and I had no difficulty in

doing so, only—we must meet again! And so it was arranged.

“The present interview had taken place at an unusual hour, and had lasted so long that I half feared my absence might have excited attention, and I had to hurry away with a thousand things unsspoken. ‘We shall talk of them to-morrow,’ I said, as we parted, and his last words were, ‘And remember, Aline, that you have solemnly pledged your word that, if I return, we never part again.’

“‘I shall hold to my promise.’

“‘That is well.’ And, folding me in his arms, he sealed the compact with a kiss. ‘And to remind you of your pledge, Lina, I shall bring you to-morrow the locket you gave me when your father died. Wear it till I claim you as my own.’

“Next morning the sky was red and lowering. An unnatural oppression weighed on the atmosphere, the birds were silent, and the whole aspect of nature so threatening, that, save for the object I had in view, I dared not have ventured forth. But I could not fail him at the last moment, and so, trembling and terrified, I stole through the wood, and reached the trysting-place on the wild sea-shore. Agnes! Agnes! I pray that my worst enemy may never have to endure the agony I experienced when I found myself there *alone*, and the storm in all its fury broke loose. They say that, in death by drowning, the whole events of one’s life rush palpably before the mind in one instant of time. But as I was placed, each moment expecting that the next flash must strike me dead, isolated scenes alone stood out in my memory with terrible distinctness, but all were connected with him. In that dread hour, much that I had hitherto deemed innocent assumed a darker complexion, and the promise I had given lost its former brightness. I felt then that it ought never to have been uttered, but I could not, would not, allow myself to regret that it was so. I knew I was very wrong, but I did not repent.

“The thunder gave a fearful echo to my fears, the lightning flashes maddened me with terror, and the words of the Revelations rung in my ear, ‘For the great day of His wrath is come, and who shall be able to stand?’ and

yet I could not regret our compact. I tried to pray; my tongue clove to the roof of my mouth, and my thoughts were filled only with him. I wondered whether he would come hither when the force of the tempest was spent, and if he found me dead, whether he would mourn for me as I should for him in like circumstances. I wondered whether his love for me was like mine for him. And then a strange lull came over my senses, and I can recall nothing more save an abortive attempt to scrawl his name on the packet I held. After that I knew nothing, remembered nothing, till I found myself in my own chamber, unconscious of the mode in which I had reached it. They told me a servant passing by the little bridge over the Kin, had found me there in a dead swoon, and brought me home, and I asked no further, but I did not believe them, for it was impossible I could, even under delirium, have staggered so far from the shore. Besides which, my packet was gone, and round my neck was this little gold chain and the locket he had promised me."

"And this fatal expedition was the cause of your bad health since?"

"Yes, that and very much sorrow and anxiety that followed. Aunt Upton came soon after to Kinburn. She was very kind to me—alas! poor thing, I ill repaid her care—but the truth was, her ceaseless attention fretted me beyond endurance. I wanted to write to and hear from him, and the torment of being constantly under surveillance, lest I should hurt my eyes, worried me intensely. My grandfather, too, began to speak of him differently from what he had done; 'adventurer,' 'swindler,' and other such appellations, were frequently bestowed on him, and by-and-by I found out that certain unsettled debts at St. Ringans had called forth these epithets. Knowing his position, I felt that I must pay them, but for the present I must wait. I had given him every shilling of my allowance, and the next was not yet due. How miserable this made me, no one ever guessed. How could they? Well, I won't drag out my story further. I contrived to obtain the money I wanted, and his debts were paid, but of course my efforts to get this done did my health some injury, and made them think me hopelessly self-willed and obstinate."

"Did it end there, Lina?" Agnes asked, anxiously

“No, the end is still to come. When my grandfather was dying——”

The patter of little feet, followed by a loud knock at the door, broke off the narrative. Agnes was disappointed, but Lina looked relieved, and only whispered as Agnes took farewell of her, “Oh, dear friend! don’t give me up yet, not till you hear all.”

Agnes stooped down and kissed her. “I am eager to hear all you can tell me, for you know”—and she tried to speak lightly—“you know one cannot judge a case unless one knows all.”

“Heaven help me! that is true. But thank you for that kiss. You could not have given it if—if——”

“What, Lina?”

“If you had thought me beyond redemption.” And she bowed her head on Charlie Reynard’s shoulder, so that Agnes could not see her face.



CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE.

AGNES left Kinburn with more sympathy for Lina Hepburn than she had experienced on their previous interview. She had no doubt shown herself more passionate, more unregulated than before; still the sad story of her childhood offered great excuses for her faults, and her punishment had been so heavy that it was impossible not to feel more for it than for the failings that had caused it. But what was the end? She had said that this was not all. Did they meet again? Had she learned, then, that it was the heiress of Kinburn, not Lina Hepburn, who attracted him?

As she pondered on these things, Agnes walked rapidly forwards, alike insensible of the direction in which she was going and the rate at which she went, until she found herself on the little bridge over the Kinburn, which had played so prominent a part in Lina’s story.

She paused and looked down the stream towards the firth. The winter day was closing in slowly, and the sky was stormy and threatening, yet she was half tempted to extend her walk as far as the trysting-place so frequently

mentioned, but, just as she reached the turn towards it, she came face to face with Mrs. Hornby.

“You here, Agnes!” she exclaimed, in surprise. “I had no idea that you had taken to solitary rambles. I fancied you more esteemed the busy haunts of men and the human face divine than such lonely spots as this.”

“I believe I do—at least, so they used to allege when I was in Saxenham; but since I came here, I find I can enjoy nature in any shape, and I was on my way just now to see the waves dash on the rocks down there.”

“Oh, put that off for the present, and turn back with me. I have such quantities of things to talk over with you; Harry’s prospects, the Weirs, the children’s Christmas tree, and many others. But first, let me tell you of such a sad scene I have just gone through. In that cottage down there a poor child lies dying, and its mother’s grief is heart-rending.”

“I did not know there was a cottage thereabouts. It must be a miserable one.”

“Miserable enough—a mere hut—but it serves to protect the poor woman and her child from the weather, and that is all she cares for.”

“Can any one—can I do nothing for her? You never told me of her before. Who is she?”

“Well, the truth is, my own knowledge of her is recent. She is, or rather was, one of Dr. M’Farlane’s congregation, and Mr. Hornby does not like me to interfere with his people, unless distinctly requested to do so. But last week, when the child’s illness began to be hopeless, Nanny came to beg me to see it, for I was a mother, she said, and must feel for her. I went, and, thank God, I, or rather my husband, has been useful to her. Her proud reserve gave way at last, and she told us all her miserable history. I think now that comfort is slowly stealing into her heart, even though she has lost all hope of the child’s recovery.”

“Is it her only one?”

“Yes, and a very lovely little thing; but, to my mind, it is merciful that it should be so early taken, for it is the old miserable story. Nanny comes of a respectable family, but she is a mother without being a wife, and as the child is a girl, the blot on her birth could never be forgotten.”

"Poor Nanny does not think of it in that light?"

"No; she looks upon the child's seizure as a judgment on herself, and it was this that made her so intensely miserable before Frederiek spoke to her. Her story is rather a romantic one. You have heard, no doubt, of a man named Maxwell, your predecessor as tenant of the Whim?"

"He is not the child's father?" Agnes exclaimed, in great astonishment.

"Indeed he is!"

Agnes could scarcely repress the words, "Poor Lina!" But she said instead, "Then he was really bad?"

"Thoroughly so. He had left the country long before we came, but I heard a great deal about him at first, and some things in his favour, so that I fancied Mrs. Trotter's abuse of him was unjust. Lately, however, sundry things have come to our ears, which prove she knew what she was talking about, and prove also he was an immoral, bad man. You never chanced to hear, I suppose, how far Miss Hepburn's acquaintance with him went? No, of course you have not. She is far too close to let that out, even to you. And as neither her aunt nor grand-aunt were here at the time, they are as ignorant about it as we are. Miss Hepburn's story must be an odd one."

"She has evidently suffered much," was Agnes's diplomatic answer.

"I am sure of that, and this difficulty about her grandfather's will must be trying enough."

"I can't make that out," Agnes replied.

"Nor I, except that Mrs. Trotter hints that a marriage between the cousins would put all straight. But that never can be. Fancy Lionel Upton with a blind wife. Why, his wife ought to have a dozen eyes."

"Is he so wanting in perception?"

"Far from it. He is a fine fellow, with sense and spirit, too, in some things, but he is what the people here call, 'douce.' He needs a deal of rousing. I like him notwithstanding, and so does Frederick. As to the children, they delight in him. Yet I doubt whether *you* will get on with him Agnes. He is not half romantic enough for you. A nice, gentlemanly, well-informed man; but, as Harry would say, no 'go' in him."

Agnes laughed. "I confess I have hitherto been accustomed to men with 'go' in them," she said, "but perhaps the change may be an interest to me. I cannot fancy what an indolent man can be like."

"Oh! but Mr. Upton is not indolent. He is a hard-working, industrious man. He has, however, had rather a struggling life. Fortune has been a good deal of a step-mother to him, so that he is grave and more cautious than one expects in a man of his age. Nevertheless——Ah, there are the boys! Well! my little men, what news of the tree?"

"Oh! mamma, Mr. Upton has sent orders that we are to have a regular beauty, and he is bringing us such funny fruits and things to hang on it, and, best of all, he will be home himself to see it." "All the little fellows capered with delight at the thought. "All we want now to make a jolly Christmas is a jolly good fall of snow."

"Which I dare say you will have, my dears, if those clouds don't speak falsely. I think it grows colder already, so suppose we all run home together. Agnes, will you come?"

"Not to-day, thank you, but I shall come and help you to dress your tree when you get it."

"Oh!" little Jos exclaimed, "Sophy and Effie are to do that—they know how."

"So does Miss Stuart!" interrupted Charlie Reynard, vehemently. "Miss Stuart knows better than they. They are little and white, and she is big and brown—she must know best. Besides, I like her best, so she shall come."

"Children, children!" exclaimed Mrs. Hornby, half laughing at the eager partizanship of the two boys, "you shall have no tree at all, if you quarrel about it. Remember what the Christmas motto is, 'Peace and good-will.' Where is your good-will to your kind friends, the Miss Weirs, Charlie, if you want to put them aside for Miss Stuart; and Jossie, where will peace be if you and Charlie quarrel about it?"

"She may come too, then," Joscelyn said, putting up his little face to be kissed, as Agnes bade them good-bye at the wicket-gate; but as she stooped to give Charlie the salute he requested, he threw his arms round her neck, and whispered,

“You must come; you are worth twenty such white mice.”

Agnes could not resist a smile at the boy's impetuosity, but she regretted to see so much of his parents' temperament in him, and answered, “I have not been in Germany, Charlie, as the Miss Weirs have, and they make the prettiest Christmas trees there. But I can help, if they show me what to do.”

Charlie pouted a little, but ventured no further remonstrance, while Fred, who had stood silently by meanwhile, solemnly remarked that Miss Stuart was a peace-maker, for she always spoke kindly of everybody; a speech of which his mother's approval was visible in the words,

“Is not Fred like his father, Agnes?”

This little interlude did Agnes good by changing the current of her thoughts, but when she again found herself alone, the narrative she had listened to in the morning, and the light thrown on it by what Mrs. Hornby had told her of the hut in the wood, came back upon her, bringing an increasing dislike of the heartless Sigismund, and more tender compassion towards the blind girl, for whose infatuation she began to find a thousand excuses.

She eagerly longed to hear the end of her romance, and cherished a humble hope that, through her instrumentality, Lina might one day see all things with new eyes, and fix her trust on that sure anchor which alone is steadfast in the surging waters of life's ocean.

These hopes were for the present, however, interfered with by a sudden attack of illness which befell Mrs. Ellis. During the fortnight she was shut up in her aunt's sick chamber Agnes heard nothing of Lina, and, when she had leisure again to call at Kimburn, she, as well as Mrs. Upton, were fully engrossed, the one by her Christmas charities, the other by the expected arrival of her son. So it was no season to press for the end of Lina's story.

“Ah! Agnes,” she had exclaimed, the moment she entered the room, “I have missed you so much. I wanted your help in making presents for the children's tree. But Sophy and Ellie Weir have done wonders for me. At least, so says Aunt Trotter. What do you think?” And she placed the basket of treasures in Agnes's hand.

There must necessarily be a certain family likeness in the knick-knacks prepared by fair fingers for the adornment of a Christmas tree, but to an observant eye there are certain disparities in the execution which seem to betray the dispositions and taste of the makers; and Agnes, when examining the little trifles the Miss Weirs had prepared at Lina's request, was favourably impressed towards them, from the dainty neatness with which everything was made. No slap-dash effects, no long stitches and untidy ends, but all as carefully finished as if intended for close inspection; while the colours and materials used had a delicacy and harmony with the purpose they were to serve that gave an impression of such being in some degree the characters of those who had put them together.

Agnes expressed this to Lina, who smiled and said, "You are quite right. They are very 'harmonious' girls; they never jar you in any way. I sometimes wonder how they come to be dear Aunt Trotter's nieces, till I remember that I am her niece also, and *we* don't assimilate closely!"

"I have not yet seen the Miss Weirs," Agnes replied, "but if Aunt Ellis keep tolerably well, I go to-night to Mrs. Trotter's to be introduced to them."

"Oh, do go. I want you to know and to like them. And pray make them sing my favourite 'Vöglein flieg fort;' it suits their voices so well."

Agnes did like the two sisters. At the first sound of their sweet rippling laughter, her dread of any likeness to Mrs. Trotter vanished. They were soft, blue-eyed girls, with a little German sentiment engrafted on their sterling Scottish qualities—a combination very charming, though rare, so that the Miss Weirs promised to be the most acceptable additions to the limited society of St. Ringans.

Nothing about them was grand or heroic, but neither was anything mean or petty. They had pretty though indefinite features, nice natural manners, alike devoid of forwardness or shyness, sweet little chirruping voices, dainty little feet and hands, charming little accomplishments, and considerable taste in dress and fancy works. Never did Mrs. Trotter show to more advantage than when in company with her nieces. The hard eye and firm mouth relaxed into smiles when they were praised; she endured without rebuff their

kitten-like endearments—indeed, seemed to like to be “made much of” by such sweet little things. Afterwards, Harry Thorpe used to compare them to graceful harebells clinging to a barren rock, but whatever simile was made regarding them, it was always a pleasant one. Everybody liked “the Weirs,” and nobody ever thought of quoting their individual good points. Indeed, it never seemed to enter people’s minds that they had individualities about them. They seemed to fancy that they could neither act nor think apart. They sung, walked, talked together; and even Agnes, close observer as she was, took some little time to discover that the one mind which guided both was Effie’s.

They “took to” Agnes the first time they saw her, and by the time they met at the Christmas festivities at the Parsonage were sworn friends.

That same Christmas party was as pretty a scene as possible. Agnes and the Miss Weirs had been the most efficient assistants in the preparations. Innumerable pretty adornments had been sent from Kinburn from the tree, and it was whispered that Mr. Upton himself was to be one of the guests. Agnes thought this report of Charlie’s very improbable. Few grown-up men care to be present at a children’s party, and on entering the Hornby’s drawing-room, she found she had judged correctly. No Mr. Upton was there. And she forgot all about him soon after, when she, as well as Sophy and Effie, plunged into the midst of the children, and entered heartily into their sports. Most of the little things were so young that intellectual games were quite beyond them, so they contented themselves with blindman’s-buff, &c., and, to the surprise of the elders as well as the younger, Agnes proved herself a capital leader in every merry game.

She was in the act of being “caught” by Charlie Reynard, when a tall, serious-looking man glided quietly into the room, and stationed himself in the background to view the scene. Agnes did not observe his entrance; she was too thoroughly taken up by her endeavours to disengage herself from the clinging clasp of Charlie’s arms round her throat.

“Charlie, you will strangle me,” she said, half stifled by laughter and by his close embrace.

“I don’t mind—I don’t mind,” said the boy, vehemently.

"I have got fast hold of you, and I won't let you go." And he held tighter and tighter.

"Charlie, I shall be angry," she said, as gravely as she could. "You must let me go. See, you have pulled out my comb."

"All the better," said the reckless boy, "for then I shall see whether you wear your own hair or a wig." And flinging away the comb, he proceeded to untwist Agnes's hair, saying at the same time, "How jolly long it is; it would make such a rope to hang you with."

"Charlie, Charlie," screamed Sophy and Effie, in concert, "come down, you naughty boy." But Charlie's excitement had carried him beyond control, and Agnes actually expected him to put his threat into execution, for she felt her hair wrapped round and round her throat, and yet from the position in which the child held her she could not extricate herself from him. But suddenly his hold relaxed, a slight howl followed, and the boy darted out of the room with a look of intense rage and mortification, while a voice close to Agnes said, "I hope the little tiger did not hurt you, Miss Stuart?"

She turned and recognized Mr. Upton. Till now she had had no remembrance of him, but when she heard his voice and saw his brown, soft eyes, she suddenly remembered how astonished she had been in Saxenham to find that so young a man should look so old and careworn.

"Not at all, thank you," she said; "but I am really obliged to you for releasing me from so awkward a position. Ah, yes! my poor comb," as he handed it to her. "I must run away and make myself a little presentable, if you and the Miss Weirs will undertake the charge of the youngsters till Mr. and Mrs. Hornby return. They have gone to light the tree."

"I think," Mr. Upton replied, "that the discipline inflicted on their leader will keep the rest in order. What say you, little Jos?" taking the youngest of the boys in his arms.

"Yes, we will be frightened of you now, Mr. Upton. You gave Charlie such a licking."

"He deserved it," said Freddy; "he had no business to touch our Agnes."

"Our Agnes!" repeated Mr. Upton; "that implies a great deal, Miss Stuart? But I think, after that opinion of

the justice of my punishment, we may undertake the care of the little people."

"Yes, I am sure they will behave nicely now," Sophy and Effie exclaimed.

"And Mr. Upton is a most useful and trustworthy aide-de-camp," Agnes said, laughingly, "otherwise Jos would not have got near him. So adieu—*au revoir*."

When she returned she held Charlie by the hand, and though the little rebel's face was flushed, and his cheeks tear-stained, she had evidently brought him to order, for he went straight up to Mr. Upton and begged his pardon.

"It's Miss Stuart's pardon you should ask, my boy," Mr. Upton said, kindly; "but that I suppose you have already?"

"Oh, yes," was Agnes's eager answer. "We none of us bear malice or are unforgiving. Are we, Charlie?"

The boy's dark cheek reddened. "You are not," he said; "but he"—pointing to Mr. Upton—"hit pretty hard."

"And you pulled pretty hard," was the reply. "Suppose, Charlie, you let me do to you what you did to Miss Stuart?"

"No, I won't," said the boy, doggedly; then, catching a glimpse of Mr. Upton's laughing face, and of the kindly smile that accompanied the words, he said, with a broad grin, "Agnes would not let you hurt any of us, not even me."

"Well, I promise not to do so again, unless I find you trying these wild-cat cantrips a second time."

The boy blushed as he replied: "You see, sir, I never meant to do it, but when I got her hair down, it was such jolly fun I forgot it might hurt her. It was only fun, sir; it was not vice!"

"Well, Charlie, I hope not. But now tell me about your sliding. How many 'clytes' did you get?"

"Freddy got 'clytes'—I didn't." And Charlie's fear of Mr. Upton passed away, and, seating himself on his knee, he told him a long story about a snow-man they were making, with a pipe in his mouth, a stick in his hand, and coals for eyes.

CHAPTER XIX.

WALKING HOME FROM CHURCH.

IN spite of her fatigue the evening before, Agnes rose betimes on Christmas morning, that she might attend the early service at St. Mary's. The sun glinted brightly on the snow-covered branches of the cedar, and all nature looked gay in its bridal dress of white, sparkling with frost-jewels.

It was freezing hard, and where the snow still lay it was so slippery that she with difficulty retained her footing, but she did contrive to do so, and also to arrive at church before the last chime of the bell sounded. She had been in the habit of sitting in the Kinburn pew, as Miss Hepburn seldom came to church, and Mrs. Upton preferred the Presbyterian service, and she had her hand on the door when, perceiving Mr. Upton seated in her favourite corner, she was turning aside to enter another, when he rose, held the door open for her, and gave her his own place. She bowed her thanks, and in another moment her companion was so deep in his devotions as apparently to forget her presence. It was not till service was over that he seemed to remember her, and then, as before, he opened the door and stood aside for her to pass, but made no effort to accompany her on her walk homewards.

Mrs. Upton had told Agnes that her son paid little attention to the *petits soins* one expects from a gentleman, and Lina had said that she had great doubts whether her cousin Lionel had ever in his life wasted a thought on any woman but his mother, so that Agnes had been both surprised and gratified by one or two little civilities he had shown her the preceding evening, and was comparatively disappointed by his indifference to-day.

"It might be more manly, perhaps, to treat such trifles with indifference. It was, at all events, better than being incommoded by over-civility——"

Her speculations were suddenly cut short by her foot slipping on a loose piece of ice, so that she had considerable difficulty in maintaining her equilibrium.

"I thought you would soon need the help of my arm, Miss Stuart," said Mr. Upton's deep voice behind her, "and

you should have had it ere now, had not Mr. Hornby stopped me a moment to ask a question. How fast you do walk." And, without further ceremony, Mr. Upton tucked Agnes's arm within his own, as if it were a daily habit to offer such attentions and have them received.

Agnes, diverted by this practical commentary on her previous reflections, smiled as she said, "I believe I do walk rather quickly."

"I never saw any one go at such a pace."

"Is it not better on such a day? It is too cold to saunter."

"I should have said, too slippery to walk fast. I really cannot make out how you reached St. Mary's without spraining your ankle. Besides, ladies are generally so ill shod for such a walk. You are not, though, I perceive." He glanced at her feet as he spoke, which, though neither so small nor pretty as the lady's in the old ballad, "whose little feet, like mice, stole in and out," had still something in their compactness and shape which pleased his critical eye, and he added: "The Arabs would say of you as of Lady Hester Stanhope, that your foot betrays a royal race, for water would flow beneath the instep. Really, Miss Stuart, with that mark of royalty, and your name, you ought to be a very queen in everything."

Agnes blushed at this strange speech, but she could not help laughing at it as well, and the ring of that merry laugh, the sparkle of her eyes, and the gleaming of her white teeth, made her look really pretty that Christmas morning. At least, so Lionel Upton thought, and he began to suspect he had done her scant justice in the sketch he had given of her to his mother. He was about to say something of the kind, when Agnes remarked: "Arab or no, my foot has certainly a wonderfully good hold of the ground, and I can generally keep my balance very well. The treacherous piece of ice was my enemy to-day. Indeed, Mr. Upton, it seemed as if it had happened merely because you were near. This is not the first time"—alluding to Charlie's embrace the previous evening—"that you have seen me in an exceptional position."

Mr. Upton did not answer her laughing glance by a smile. On the contrary, he looked so grave, that Agnes added, in

some confusion, "Last night, for instance, you found me half strangled by Charlie Reynard, and to-day you had the luck to see me almost down on the ice. It is well for me that previously you had seen me at my brother's house in Saxenham, and had learned—at least, I hope you had—that I really was a quiet, sedate young woman."

Mr. Upton smiled *now*, and his smile lighted up his sunburnt face agreeably. "Yes," he answered, "if I had not seen you before—if I had not learned to think well of your self-possession and dignity—perhaps your exploits last night might have made me suppose you very different from what you are."

"What a strange speech!" Agnes thought. "He seems given to making strange speeches!" and she unconsciously quickened her pace so much, that he said:

"Pray, Miss Stuart, have pity on me. Remember I am an old Indian" (he had been there three years only), "and cannot exert myself so tremendously. Ay, that is a more rational mode of progression, and allows me to renew my acquaintance with you. Indeed, my mother says we ought to begin it from the beginning, as you utterly ignore any remembrance of me."

"I had forgotten you, I confess," she answered, ingenuously, "but the first glance of your face and sound of your voice made me remember you perfectly, and remember, also, how anxious my aunt was that you should sail to India in the *Pioneer*, as her husband's niece was going in that vessel."

"You remember that?"

"Yes, and also her regret that you should not have met the young lady at Old-street. She had spent six months with us, and left just before you came."

"Ah! I had forgotten all that. Well! what else do you remember of that visit?"

"Not much," she said, with slight hesitation. "I was ill at the time, and——"

"You must have been ill," he interrupted, "for in those days, excuse me, you looked older than you do now."

"In those days," she answered, "I had a good deal to make me anxious and careworn. Now I have only to amuse myself."

"How do you set about that here? You must find this place insufferably dull after Saxenham?"

"Oh!" she said, evasively, "one can like any place if one sets about it heartily."

"I wish you could tell me how."

"The receipt is simple enough. To do one's duty, and, instead of looking back, to look at the present, and, above all, to look at it on the sunny side, not on the shady one, for you remember, 'There's nothing bright on earth but has its shadow too.'"

"Well!" he said, after a moment's consideration, "the receipt is a good one, if one could but follow it. I cannot say that I should find it easy."

"Find what easy?" Agnes asked, a little maliciously. "To do your duty, or to find life pleasant?"

He turned sharp round, and gave her a quick keen glance, as if he longed to read in her face whether her words had any deeper meaning than they expressed; then, with a half sigh, he said, rather sadly, "Miss Stuart, I have tried to do my duty in life; whether I have succeeded, Heaven only knows, but, in the course I have pursued, I cannot pretend that I have found life pleasant—far from it. Neither have I learned to like those who are disagreeable to me. Ought one to do that also?"

"If one would be happy."

"And it is, you think, part of our appointed duty in life to be happy? You must do so, for your receipt is to do your duty—and find it so—therefore you consider the one a corollary of the other."

"Not exactly," she replied, dropping the playful tone in which she had hitherto spoken, "for a corollary is the natural sequence of an axiom. Now, it is an axiom that man ought to do his duty, but it is no natural sequence that doing his duty will make his life a happy one. For, to do one's duty thoroughly, one must sacrifice many things essential to one's individual happiness, or exercise such self-abnegation as must often make the world very unpleasant, though of course it would be more so if we thrust duty aside for the sake of expediency."

Lionel Upton did not immediately reply to this speech. His previous acquaintance with Agnes had not prepared him

either for the child-like enjoyment with which she had last night entered into the Christmas-eve sports, nor for the curt though clear expressions she had now used. They displayed a cultivated mind and thinking brain, and, though apart from her last night's liveliness, this might not be uncommon, it was, as far as his limited experience of women went, very unusual when combined with it.

"You look as if you did not quite agree with me, Mr. Upton?" Agnes said, when she received no answer to her remark.

"Pardon me, I do completely agree with you, Miss Stuart, but I was pondering on the unexpected pleasure I felt in hearing my own well-considered reflections expressed by—a girl!"

"Nay," she said, "not a girl, a woman! and one, too, who has had the advantage of being for years the companion of a clever, right-thinking man. I hope,"—and she laughed—"that it has not made me too didactic."

"Far from it. But you must miss such companionship bitterly." And the tone in which he said this somehow conveyed to Agnes the idea that he would have no objection to fill up the vacant place. How it did so, she scarcely knew, but she said, quickly,

"I do very much. But I suppose I had learned to lean too much on George, and so I was forced into a position where I must stand alone."

There was a short pause. It almost seemed as if Mr. Upton had taken her remark as a rebuff, and she was considering how to show him that, if it were so, it was unintentional, when he said, rather abruptly, "Miss Stuart, I feel as if it were not honest to conceal from you, that the first time I saw you was not at your brother's house in Saxenham."

"Indeed?"

"No, it was in the court-house of Normanpool."

Agnes changed colour. Was that dreadful trial to be brought up against her continually—first by Lina, now by her cousin? But she replied, gravely, "You may well call that an exceptional position, Mr. Upton. What took you there?"

"Mere accident. I was in Normanpool on business; every

one was talking of Weld's trial, and of the testimony expected to be given in his favour by a lady-friend of his wife; I became interested in what I heard, and went out of sheer curiosity."

"What could you think of me, finding me summoned as a witness in his defence?"

"Exactly what every one else thought, Miss Stuart—that it was a cruel position you were placed in, but that you acquitted yourself in a manner few of your sex and age could have done. It seemed to me, and I believe to others, that you had the worst opinion of the prisoner, and were morally convinced of his guilt, but no expression passed your lips which confirmed the idea, or which tended to bias the jury. You contented yourself with relating 'facts' only, and left to them the onus of decision."

Agnes drew her breath quickly. "I am glad you have told me this, Mr. Upton—glad and yet sorry. You judged me fairly enough, but no one can conceive the misery that trial cost me. Does your mother know?" she added, after a moment's pause.

"Yes, your aunt wrote of it when it occurred."

"Ah, true! I forgot that Aunt Ellis would write of it. That, then, explains her amazement to find me young and lively? Associating me with such a tragedy, she must have expected some one very different."

"Perhaps. But"—with a smile—"I think she is quite content to have you as you are. My mother likes cheerful people."

"How kind she was not to allude to that sad story to me!"

"My dear mother's good feeling and good taste can always be trusted," he answered, with much feeling. "I do not know that I could promise as much for Aunt Trotter."

"She knows nothing, I hope?"

"Nothing. She was abroad for several years with her husband, and only returned to St. Ringans eighteen months ago. Of course you must be aware that the Hornbys are in the secret? Mrs. Hornby tells me you and she are old friends."

"Mrs. Hornby, Mrs. Weld, and I were schoolfellows."

"Then your remark to Charlie last night was '*pour cause*'?"

"Yes, poor child. In face and temper he painfully reminds me of both his parents."

"I cannot recall Dr. Weld's appearance minutely enough to trace the likeness. What struck me most, I remember, was the contrast of his brilliant black eyes with his auburn hair and beard. I confess the combination was to my eye peculiarly disagreeable. Yet I heard ladies in court call him handsome."

"Charlie is fully more like his mother. She was a very beautiful girl, and his dark complexion resembles hers. But let us not speak more of them just now. I try to forget that story as much as I can, but something always recalls it in a startling and unexpected way."

"Forgive my having done so."

"Indeed I do. You could not know how I shrunk from any allusion to it. But here we are at home. Will you come in?"

"Not to-day, thank you, but I shall do so soon, if you will allow me. I have only a short holiday at Kinburn. I return to Fairholm a fortnight hence. But I hope to be backwards and forwards frequently." And, raising his hat, he opened the little wicket gate into the Kinburn grounds and disappeared.

Agnes looked after him with a doubtful smile. "He is odd," she said, "but I think, in spite of Isabella's prophecy, we shall be friends."



CHAPTER XX.

THE LITTLE RED BOOK.

LIONEL UPTON came to much the same decision with regard to Agnes that she did with regard to him. "They should be friends;" and they were so from that day forward.

But no element of romance was mingled with their friendship. Each learned to esteem and appreciate the other more the better they became acquainted, but there was nothing in the manner of either to attract the gossiping eyes of St,

Ringans, even when the New Year's gaities of the neighbourhood threw them often together, and enabled the talkers to see for themselves how well they got on.

And thus time rolled on with little to mark its course. Lina had evaded all Agnes's efforts to resume the subject of her own history so abruptly interrupted, and, but for Sophy and Effie Weir and the Hornbys, Agnes would have found that winter a very dreary one, even though her solitude was now and then broken in upon by visits from Mr. Upton, which, however, were more welcome to her than to her aunt.

Mrs. Ellis thought that he stayed far too long when he did come, and talked too much about politics, and science, and things nobody cared to hear. Poor Mrs. Ellis! she was not more easily pleased now-a-days than when she underwent the frequently-alluded-to martyrdom at Saxenham.

She was one of those people who was apt to fancy whatever is wrong, and she could not endure to hear Agnes and Mr. Upton get excited about the progress of the world, the advance of liberal opinions, and so on. But to Agnes it was like new life to listen once more to a "man's" views of the stirring events then going on in Europe—harbingers, as she believed, of much good to come. The French Emperor's New Year's speech, the Congress at Paris, and innumerable topics that stirred her heart and brain, were but as caviare to the multitude of St. Ringans. Lionel Upton was the first person who had talked to her of such things since she quitted Saxenham, so they came to her with a fresh relish, and she looked upon these pleasant political discussions as bright spots in her monotonous life.

When Mrs. Trotter heard that her nephew called now and then at the Whim, she tossed her head a little, and grunted a few words of disapproval; but, keen as were her ears and eyes, she failed to find anything in them to excite her suspicions of a "flirtation." Lionel spoke of and to Miss Stuart with a coolness he could not have done if he had cared for her more than as an acquaintance, and as for Agnes herself, she laughed at him quite as much as with him, so there was no cause for alarm. Indeed, when one of the St. Ringans coterie suggested that perhaps "Mr.

Upton found Kinburn more attractive since they had neighbours at the Whim," Mrs. Trotter put her down at once.

"Nonsense, Mrs. Brown; my nephew is not quite a fool. Agnes Stuart has neither wealth nor beauty. She is an amiable, good sort of person, not clever enough to be dangerous, nor dull enough to be tiresome. Quite a safe person, I assure you—quite safe."

So Mrs. Brown was silenced, and nobody ventured thereafter to allude to so absurd a report.

It so happened that one day in early spring, Mr. Upton was opening the little garden gate of the Whim when Sophy and Effie Weir overtook him.

"Ah, Lionel! I am so glad you are going to see Agnes. She says you are the only person who can tell her what is going on," said Effie.

"And we do want to know," chimed in Sophy, "whether they really are going to sacrifice that poor Sardinian princess to old Jerome Bonaparte?"

"I can relieve your mind on that point, Sophy," he said, with a hearty laugh. "Princess Clotilde has only married Jerome's son, not himself. Bad enough, perhaps, but not so bad as you suppose."

"Now, Effie, did not Agnes tell us——"

But Effie checked any further revelation of her sister's rather hazy political knowledge, by saying, "Do come with us to the octagon, and let us hear all about it."

"The octagon! May I?"

"Oh, yes. We can have such a much better chat there; and, besides, you have had a cigar, and Mrs. Ellis would scold you for bringing a smoked paletot into the drawing-room, not to speak of muddy boots; so come away." She crossed the garden, and, without ceremony, unclosing the glass door into the octagon, ushered him into Agnes's sanctum.

Her occupation was not quite in keeping with the room, for she rose to receive them from before a table strewed with school-books and catalogues. "Mr. Upton," she said, with a smile and a blush, "how came you to this den of confusion? Have you come to help me to cover the books for Mrs. Hornby's school library?"

"I will if you will show me how. But, in truth, I was

brought here by the girls. They said Mrs. Ellis would not admit me into the drawing-room with muddy boots and a paletot redolent of cold smoke."

"While my nerves can stand anything? Well! I suppose I must make you as welcome as I can, but as this room is only furnished with 'strays' from the rest of the house, I doubt whether I can give you all seats. An easy-chair"—with a little hit at Mr. Upton's acknowledged predilection for a comfortable lounge—"I cannot give you."

"Oh, this will do beautifully!" And, drawing a low ottoman in front of the fender, he seated himself, man-like, so as to concentrate the rays of the fire on his own person. "Nothing suits me better than a low seat like this. But we ought to find you a better, Miss Stuart. It is not right that in a 'furnished house' you should be without an easy-chair. I shall have the oversight rectified without delay."

Agnes laughingly declared she was not at all dependent for comfort on an easy-chair, and Effie at the same moment suggested they should seek one in the lumber-room at Kinburn. "According to Aunt Trotter," she said, "everything is to be found there, from a needle to an anchor. At all events, there are chairs and tables enough."

The proposal, made in jest, was carried out in earnest, so far, at least, as to lead to an agreement to explore the old mansion-house, which Agnes had not yet seen, and, to the amazement of every one, Lina Hepburn begged to accompany them on the expedition.

"I wish," she afterwards told Agnes, "to revisit the library where I used to sit so much with my grandfather. It is my cousin's study now, and I can no longer see whether it remains as it did then, but I have a craving to be in the room once more, to sit in the old window-seat, and to touch the furniture. It seems to me that, if I do so, I may settle some of the painful doubts, the aching suspicions, that now distract me."

Agnes was puzzled by this explanation, especially by the last few words, but it served to show how eager Lina was to pay this visit to the scene associated with much of her life on first coming to Kinburn. Besides which, it seemed to hint at a return to the old confidence which had subsisted between them before Lionel Upton's return, and this idea

Agnes hailed with delight. She had been more pained by Lina's unaccountable silence than she cared to confess even to herself.

Kinburn was one of many old Scotch houses built in the very beginning of the seventeenth century, and full of quaint useless rooms and passages, stairs that seemed only to go up that you might come down again, turrets that were too small to make use of for any purpose in modern days, chambers where the tapestry hung on the walls seemed as permanently fastened thereunto as the room papers of the present time, but which by means of springs and bolts, known only to the initiated, could be folded back so as to display a recess in the thick unplastered wall, amply sufficient to hide a dozen men.

The two young girls were enchanted by all their discoveries, but Lina, who had placed herself under Agnes's care, said abruptly, after a time, "Mr. Upton, I am tired—would you object to let me stay in the library till you have shown the others the rest of the house?"

A little startled by the request, he hesitated a moment before he agreed. "It is my business-room, you know——"

"Well, what if it be? I am not likely to read your private papers," she answered, with a tone half mournful, half reproachful. "Besides, Miss Stuart has not seen that room, and I wish her to see it."

"Very well, let us go. Only," he said, turning to Agnes, "you must make allowance for its deficiency in tidiness. It is the only room in the house where I may indulge my laziness by leaving my things about as I please."

"After the state in which you found *my* sanctum the other day," she said, "apologies are unnecessary."

"Oh!" exclaimed Sophy and Effie, "I hope, Cousin Lionel, we shall find your things in a mess." But their expectations were disappointed. The only "untidiness" visible was that a pair of comfortable slippers lay on the hearth-rug, while a huge arm-chair stood invitingly by the fireside, near which was a small table littered with books on all sorts of subjects, and beside them was a meerscham pipe, while an embroidered Turkish wallet of tobacco hung close at hand.

The room itself, though lighted by three large windows,

had a gloomy aspect, partly arising from the darkness of the green draperies, partly from the black oak of the panelings, only relieved—if relieved it could be called—by the faded gilding of the Russia-bound folios and quartos which filled the massive book-cases, and by the deep green tone of the tapestry which clothed one end of the room.

A large table, laden with papers tied with suspicious-looking red tape, encumbered the floor; a few splay-footed chairs stood against the wall; and one or two riding-whips, and such like symptoms of masculine occupation, showed the room to be the sanctum of the master of the house.

“Take me to the west window, Agnes,” Lina said, the moment she entered; and she obeyed, although to do so it was necessary to remove a large reading-stand in front of it.

Lina seated herself in the window-seat, leaned her elbow on the broad sill, and turned her sightless eyes seaward, without uttering even a word of thanks. But Agnes saw tears stealing slowly from between her closed lids, and, sympathizing deeply with her feelings, stationed herself so as to conceal her agitation from the others.

Sophy and Effie were chatting gaily to Mr. Upton meanwhile, asking a thousand trivial questions about the books, the pictures, and the quaint knick-knacks which were displayed on the broad mantel-piece.

“Agnes,” Lina said at length, “tell me how the room is arranged! Is my grandfather’s picture over the fire-place, and my grandfather’s easy-chair on the right hand of the chimney? And where does the secretaire stand? It used to be formerly at the Whim, but Sir Robert had it brought here some years before he died, and he always used it afterwards. I did so wish to have it as my own, but did not like to say so, and what use could I make of it now?”

“There is no secretaire in the room,” Agnes answered, looking round.

“Are you sure?”

“Quite sure.”

Lina leaned her head on her hand in silence for some minutes. “Describe the room exactly,” she said, peremptorily

Agnes did so.

“ You moved something from the window before I sat down—what was it ? ”

“ A book-stand, with a large Greek Testament open on it.”

Lina’s lip gave an insensible curl. “ Oh ! that is my cousin’s favourite study, is it ? ”

“ A good one, don’t you think ? ”

“ If I were a Bible student, which, unfortunately, I am not, I think I should apply myself more to understand the spirit than the letter.”

“ Does not the one help the other ? ”

As she asked the question, Mr. Upton joined them, and said kindly to his cousin, “ I fear being in this room again is trying to you ! ”

“ Very much so,” she answered, curtly.

“ I have kept it as nearly as possible in the state in which our grandfather left it.” Agnes remarked a slight emphasis on the pronoun, as if to remind her of their relationship.

“ Have you ? Then where is his secretaire ? ”

He seemed surprised by the question, asked in such a tone ; but he answered quietly, “ That I did remove. It was inconvenient and lumbering, and I understood had only been brought from the Whim immediately before Sir Robert’s death.”

“ Some years,” Lina answered, coldly ; “ and if it had been I who had the direction of affairs, I should have said, move anything but that. It is the thing most associated with my grandfather. It was his as a youth, as a man, as a feeble octogenarian. Part with anything rather than that.”

“ My dear cousin,” Lionel said, soothingly, for he was startled and shocked at her vehemence, “ had I suspected you had any such associations, I should have left the secretaire untouched. I shall have it at once brought back here.”

“ No ; as it is gone, let it go. It is better, no doubt, as it is.”

“ It is easily replaced,” Lionel insisted. “ I shall have it done now, if you like.”

“ No ; I do not wish that. But, if it is not otherwise disposed of, I should like—— ” She hesitated.

“To have it in your own parlour?”

“No; to have it sent back to the Whim. It used to stand in the octagon room, and I am sure Agnes will allow it to go back there. Will you not, Agnes?”

“Most certainly; nothing would please me better.”

“It shall be done to-night,” Mr. Upton said. And so the matter ended; but Agnes guessed, from the sudden clutch of Lina’s hand on hers when she asked, “Will you not, Agnes?” that other associations besides those connected with her grandfather were filling her mind at the moment.

“You will let me rest here awhile, Lionel?” Lina asked, with a tone of unusual softness when addressing her cousin.

“Alone, Lina?”

“Yes, alone—quite alone. I should like it so much,” she said, throwing herself back on her seat with an air of lassitude.

“Certainly, if you wish it.”

On leaving the library, Mr. Upton said, “You know my cousin well enough, Miss Stuart, to understand, I dare say, that one is sometimes puzzled how to please her. Who could have supposed that the removal of that secretaire would have vexed her?”

“What shall you do with it?”

“If you will really allow me to do so, I shall send it to the Whim. For both my own sake and Miss Hepburn’s, I should rejoice to have it sent out of the house. You see how the very idea of it excites her!”

“And for yourself?”

He laughed rather constrainedly. “For myself I spent so many days searching through its labyrinth of drawers and secret receptacles in search of my grandfather’s last will, that, like a child, I detest the very sight of it.”

“In that case, I shall be delighted to give it house-room in the octagon. I am so fond of those old relics.”

“Theoretically I can understand that, but practically it is different, and I doubt, Miss Stuart, whether even your love of old things could have resisted the weariness to which I was subjected when compelled to wade through our family correspondence. It seems to me cruel to retain these old mementoes to the close of a long life only to leave

them to the perusal of any ehanee survivor. My grandfather, as I dare say you know, was an odd-tempered man, and did not live eomfortably with his children, and unfortunately he never burned a letter. So in this seeretaire I found a record of his dissensions with his family, together with notes connected with—with events of later date," he added, as if half thinking aloud. "I was therefore most thankful that my mother never asked to read them. They would have pained her unnecessarily.

"I have had old cabinets to examine too, in the course of my life," Agnes said; "the eontents were often mournful, but there were some of them I would not part with for the whole world."

"Miss Stuart, you were one of a loving family, and, don't think me a brute if I add, your brothers and sisters were most of them taken away in ehildhood. It is rarer than you suppose to find a whole family reach mature age without a breach, not perhaps of their affection, but certainly of their interests. And it is not wise to leave family matters to the perusal of a second generation."

"Perhaps!" And yet Agnes was thoroughly convinced, as she said the word, that she and George could never have separate interests.

"Besides which," Mr. Upton went on, "our family had a talent for disunion, and were apt to forget that though, in the course of time, spoken words may be forgotten, those that are written are ever in evidence. But you must not let me forget our errand to the lumber-room. Have you found a ehair to your mind, Effie?"

"Yes, this is just the thing."

Some badinage followed, but as they were leaving the room, Mr. Upton called Agnes's attention to the seeretaire, and taking the keys from a bunch he had brought with him, plaeed them in her hands. "I think these are all. The three small ones are for the inner eompartments."

"You are eertain it is empty?" she asked.

"Quite. I was too anxious to find the will to leave a possible or impossible part of it unexamined, or a secret spring overlooked."

"Then you give it over to me with its eontents, whatever they may be?" she said, with a little malieious twinkle in

her eye, as she took up a small book, bound in red morocco and gold, but sorely chafed by years and bad usage, and held it out to him.

He changed colour perceptibly as he took it from her. "How did this come here?" he exclaimed.

"Probably you overlooked it when clearing out the other papers."

"No, it was not that. I remember all about it now. I had it in my hand when Mrs. Trotter came suddenly into the room, and, to prevent unnecessary inquisition from her, I flung it into the open secretaire, shut it up, and forgot it!" For a moment he stood silent after this explanation, with his eyes fixed on the first page of the little volume. "You can imagine, Miss Stuart," he said, putting it into her hand, that such an inscription as that was not one to show to Aunt Kate."

The words were :

"To Lionel Upton, from his sincerely attached *Cornelia*.
—October, 185—."



CHAPTER XXI.

LIONEL'S STORY.

THE incident of the red morocco book seemed to make a fresh bond of intimacy between Mr. Upton and Agnes. Not that either alluded to it again, but the sense on the one side of having confided his secret, and on the other of being in possession of something no one else knew, insensibly broke down many of the little barriers between acquaintance and friendship. But that was all. No other change took place, either in their outward manner to each other, nor in the daily monotony of their lives. The seasons changed, but nothing else did; and so it naturally came about that Mr. Upton's visits were to Agnes the pleasant breaks in an otherwise very dull life.

They seemed the only things that stirred her intellect, and proved to her that she had not entirely lost her relish for what had once been her life. As she listened to his political theories, to the hopes and aspirations which most liberal-minded men then cherished for the world's future,

her heart swelled, her thoughts expanded, and she tasted the pleasure of feeling that her latent powers could still be roused, her intellectual faculties could even yet grasp and comprehend what she heard.

Lionel Upton was not what the world would call a genius; but he was clever, notwithstanding, and his views were sound and worth listening to. And to him their conversations at the Whim were to the full as agreeable as they were to Agnes. It was as a mental relaxation that he sought them, but he soon found that it was no indolent amusement he had secured for himself. Agnes had her own opinions, and supported them with knowledge and talent; so that he found himself put on his mettle when conversing with her, and was obliged to allow that it did him no harm to be forced to consider subjects of politics, science, art, or literature, from other than his own stand-points. He was, like most men, by no means a consistent character. He had prejudices and weaknesses like other people, and at first he was a little dismayed by the lively attacks Agnes made on both. But gradually he enjoyed the amicable contests they had together, and almost forgot the care that oppressed him while parrying her sportive sallies, or listening with satisfaction to her enthusiasm with regard to subjects in which he was interested.

Strange, perhaps, that he did not confide his troubles to her! Strange that he did not seek in her ready sympathy encouragement to struggle with the anxieties that oppressed him! But Lionel Upton was in many respects more Scotch than English in character, and, while frank and courteous in general society, he was very reserved about his own affairs, and especially about his feelings. They lay too deep to be brought forward on any but the most important occasions, and were sometimes concealed under a veil of shyness, that looked like pride and indifference. Thus he had confided to Agnes some things he had never told even to his mother, but he shrank from telling her how very different his real position was from what it appeared. Had they remained only common acquaintance he might have done so ere now, but there was growing up in his heart a something stronger than even friendship to Agnes Stuart, and with the inconsistency of a shy, proud nature,

he hesitated to dwell upon himself, until he could say *all* he wished to say, and at present that was impossible. He had not *fallen* in love with Agnes, but he had a vague consciousness that some day or other he might *walk* into it; but he resolved not to take the decisive plunge till it was ascertained whether he could offer her the broad lands of Kinburn, or simply the very modest competence he had already acquired as a Fairholm merchant. In the mean time, however, he indulged himself in long and frequent visits to the Whim, for he was a man of really too humble an opinion of himself to imagine that there could be danger to Agnes in their *tête-à-têtes*.

But in this he was mistaken, though Agnes herself did not know it. She was conscious that she looked forward to what were now becoming his regular Saturday visits as the red-letter days of her calendar; but as yet she persuaded herself that this arose solely from his being the only person in St. Ringans, with the exception of Mr. Hornby, who could talk with her on subjects which she cared for. In short, she had reached that stage of interest in him, which led her to weigh carefully every word which fell from his lips, and to compare him with what was still her standard of perfection—her brother George. But she had not yet attained the power of thinking all Mr. Upton did was right; on the contrary, she viewed his little failings almost too harshly. This, I am aware, is not generally esteemed a sign of love; but I suspect it is something approaching to it. A clever girl is naturally clear-sighted, and if she find enough of interest in a man to care to consider what he says and what he does, she cannot fail to discover that he has mortal failings like other folk. At first this discovery pains her, makes her restless and uncomfortable in her own mind, and in most cases leads her to be unjust to him. By-and-by a new phase takes place, and she either fancies his failings are less than she at first supposed, or, more delicious flattery still, believes that her own influence has cured them.

Agnes had only reached the first stage as yet. She liked Mr. Upton extremely. In their long talks together she was charmed to find a thousand little traits which the world could not know of poetic feeling, deep religious

principle, and a refinement of tone and expression, which gradually impressed her more and more in his favour. And yet there were some things that irritated her in his habits of mind. He was indolent in many things, and apt to take a depressed view of all that concerned himself. For others he could hope, for himself he seemed incapable of looking forward with any pleasant anticipations. This was a spirit so uncongenial to her, that she had little patience with it, and found herself repeating, "George would not have acted so," and then adding with a sigh, "but who can compare with him, dear fellow!" She still always came back to the one point, "She liked Mr. Upton exceedingly, and but for him her life at the Whim must have been dulness personified."

March came—a March delicious in stillness and beauty, the lion for once giving place to the lamb. It was such an one as not unfrequently follows a bitter winter, as if to recompense us for the hope so long deferred of lengthening days and brightening skies. It was Saturday afternoon. The south window of the octagon was open, admitting the perfume of the Neapolitan violets which grew beneath. The sun was hot as well as bright, and the thrushes in the lilac-bush near at hand sang as merrily as if summer-time were actually come. A reddish tinge was on every forest tree, while the soft buds of the early flowering shrubs were swelling with the quickening life of spring, and here and there a shoot of tender green stood out against the pale blue sky.

Mr. Upton and Miss Stuart were alone, Mrs. Ellis having wearied of their learned discussions of the probable effect of Cavour's circular despatch with regard to Sardinia's exclusion from the proposed Congress.

The conversation had lasted for a considerable time, but Agnes, with womanly eagerness, still dilated on her hope that this might be the turning-point for Italy, and ultimately result in its unity and independence.

"I trust it may," was her companion's answer; but the tone in which he uttered the short sentence was not one of assured hope.

Agnes was disappointed. She had wound herself up to such a pitch of excitement, that the calm assent fell like a

dash of cold water on her enthusiasm. "My Italian furore is overstrained, you think?" she said, sadly.

"No, Miss Stuart," he replied, rousing himself by an effort to resume the discussion. "No; I fully believe that the day of Italy's salvation has already dawned. I sympathize entirely in your aspirations. It was not that which made me answer as I did. The truth is, we are selfish beings at the best, and, while my heart goes with Italy and her success, my purse will suffer in consequence, and that one cannot altogether forget."

"I don't understand," she said.

"It is impossible that you should. But, if I explain that any disturbance of the peace of Europe necessarily embarrasses trade, you will see at once that such embarrassment must fall heavily on merchants."

"Yes; but then——"

"I am a merchant, Miss Stuart. What affects others must affect, has already affected, me; and, while I desire all good to Italy, I am personally injured by war."

"I see that perfectly."

"But neyour to says that the few must be, and ought to be, sacrificed for the good of the many?"

"You put it strongly," she said, with a nervous laugh; "but I believe you are pretty nearly right; and," she added, with eagerness, "I cannot believe—I never fancied—that such a house as yours could run any great risk in consequence."

"Perhaps no risk of failure, if that is what you mean."

"Yes; and a temporary difficulty could be borne, could it not?"

"Borne! Oh yes, it could."

Agnes was annoyed by these unsatisfactory replies, and said, with a half reproachful tone, "I cannot make you out, Mr. Upton. You answer as if you only cared to be a merchant for what it *brings*. I am not so foolish as to think that of no account; but, if one runs no actual risk of failure, I can fancy few things more exciting than the life of a merchant. It is a pursuit which requires such a range of thought—one in which politics play their part, and in which knowledge of all kinds is so essential to success. To me it seems as if the excitement of such a life could never flag."

“And can you not conceive, Miss Stuart, that to some natures this constant excitement may be burdensome as well as hurtful, and that the success is prized more for the sake of ‘filthy lucre’ than for the success itself?”

Agnes's face said “No” as plainly as face could speak, but she remained otherwise silent.

“Did you ever consider, Miss Stuart,” he continued, in a deprecating manner, “what the excitement of gambling must be to a man whose whole fortune hangs on the cast of a dice?”

“You are no gambler,” she said, with a shade of anxiety in her tone.

“No, not a gambler, certainly, nor even much of a speculator, though all mercantile men must in some degree be a little of both. It is not of business generally I speak, but of myself personally. But it so happens that on the success or failure of the speculations of our house within the next few weeks hangs my fate in life. I have not a doubt that ultimately I shall be a rich man if I remain in my present position, but my happiness depends on success *now*; and the present state of trade is so affected by the rumours of European war, that I have every reason to expect that my riches will come too late.”

Agnes was moved by the melancholy tone in which he spoke, but to her buoyant nature there seemed a certain want of manliness in this confession which vexed her, and therefore she made no answer.

He too was silent. He leaned his elbow on the broad window-sill, and looked out into the far distance for several minutes. At last he said: “I sometimes blame myself for not giving in at once. It suits neither my health nor temper to undergo these constant fluctuations of hope and depression; but my mother's heart is so set on my being laird of Kinburn, that I shall struggle on to the end. I confess, too, that it would pain even me to see the lands that have been in our house for hundreds of years pass to strangers.”

“I do not know what you mean, Mr. Upton. What has your success as a merchant to do with the Kinburn estates?”

He laughed at the sudden change in her expression as this new idea flashed upon her. “I fancied you knew all about my grandfather's will.”

"I know that it was not exactly what you expected; but I fancied the great difficulty was, your refusal to drop the name of Upton for that of Hepburn."

"Who gave you that version of the story?"

"Miss Hepburn."

"Oh! Miss Hepburn!" in a rather contemptuous tone.

"One could scarcely expect complete candour from her."

Agnes looked both hurt and surprised by this remark, but, without apologizing for it, he went on:

"My grandfather certainly wished me at one time to take his name, but not latterly; and, if you care to hear a long story, you shall learn the real facts of the case, and perhaps may discover," he added, with a smile, "why it is that my cousin and I are not the best of friends."

Agnes acknowledged she should like to hear the particulars, and, without further introduction, he began:

"I have hinted to you ere now that my grandfather, Sir Robert, was of an imperious temper, and seldom forgave those even of his own family who thwarted him. Thus he quarrelled with both of his sons, and for a time also with my dear mother. I shall, however, restrict myself to the particulars of my own private history. My mother married, as I dare say you know, against Sir Robert's consent. My father, Colonel Upton, was a most estimable man, but he made one great mistake in life. He left the army on his marriage, and entered into mercantile life. He had not been educated to business, and the consequences were fatal. Before his death his affairs were so seriously embarrassed as to verge on bankruptcy. I, though educated in a mercantile house—that in which I am now junior partner—was about to relinquish commerce for one of the learned professions when this crisis in my father's affairs took place, and I naturally sought my then master, Mr. Campbell's advice, before I took the step. He knew my aversion to business, and had hitherto encouraged me in relinquishing it for the Church or the Law, to one or other of which I had intended to devote myself. But on hearing what I had to tell, he told me frankly that his advice was to continue as I was, and give up all thoughts of change. He is a kind, good man as ever lived, but he sees things as they are; and when he showed me what I

could do for my father if I sacrificed my own tastes, I could not, of course, hesitate. He undertook the management of my poor father's affairs, and became guarantee for the gradual liquidation of his debts, on condition that I at once accepted a mercantile position in India which he had in his gift, and gave up all idea of changing my profession. Should I agree to this, and give satisfaction in India, he promised me in due time a junior partnership in his own house. The generosity of these offers you cannot, of course, understand, Miss Stuart; but they were such that no man in his senses could refuse them, and my consent was given at once. The creditors made no difficulty with my father when he was supported by Campbell's name, and so in a few weeks I prepared to start for the East, carrying with me my father's dying blessing, and my mother's grateful thanks, for giving up my own wishes to filial duty."

"How little have I understood you till now!" Agnes said, ingenuously. "I have been so unaccustomed to think of a man selecting the profession he adopted, that it never occurred to me that you only cared for yours as a means of saving those you loved from great suffering."

He smiled as he said, "You remember telling me on Christmas morning that the fulfilment of duty was one of the greatest sweeteners of life?"

She blushed at this reference to what she had said so long ago, but answered: "So it is; but yet to follow a pursuit from mere duty is so different from doing so from taste. But I interrupt you; pray go on."

"My father died before my preparations were complete, and my grandfather wrote to me at once, offering to adopt me as his heir, on condition that I took his name, and utterly relinquished all connexion with commerce. Of course I could not break my promise to Campbell, and, as my grandfather did not propose to pay my father's debts, there was nothing for it but to thank him for his offer, and give my reasons for declining it. Had my grandfather at that time had any real caring for me, he would not have grudged a few thousand pounds to relieve me of my engagements; and Campbell being his own particular friend, he could with ease have arranged matters satisfactorily. But he did not. His reply was a formal one, stating that Sir

Robert Hepburn had no intention of paying the debts of a man who had twice disregarded his wishes, alluding to my father's marriage and to his mereantile speculations. I showed the note to Campbell. He laughed at it, and said, 'Never fear, Lionel; all will yet go well. Sir Robert is beginning to find his proposed heiress not quite so charming as he expected, and, take my word for it, you shall yet inherit Kinburn.' And he prophesied correctly; Kinburn was left to me."

"How then this confusion?"

"It arose from the disappearance of my grandfather's last will, and the necessity of acting upon a previous one, made the very day he wrote me that letter. At this time his wish was that I should marry my cousin, and thus unite our several pretensions; and to render this desire obligatory upon both of us, he willed that whichever of us refused to marry the other, should either relinquish the estate, or pay a fine of £20,000 for its redemption within three years of his demise. £15,000 of this were to go to the other party, and £5,000 to his sister, Mrs. Trotter. Should neither be in a position to pay down the fine without burdening the property, the whole estate was to be sold, and the proceeds divided equally between my mother, Mrs. Trotter, Miss Hepburn, and myself."

"A curious will, indeed."

"Both curious and unjust. And this injustice, especially as regarded my mother, my grandfather became at last aware, and, assisted by Mr. Campbell, he made a later arrangement of his property, by which the landed estates were left to me, and my mother and Miss Hepburn duly provided for. A draft of this will—unfortunately without signature—Sir Robert sent to me in India, nearly three years ago, accompanied by a confidential letter, in which he explained his reasons for depriving my cousin of Kinburn, and for the very stringent arrangements he had made with regard to her money affairs. His letter ended with a very handsome compliment to myself for having steadily pursued the course I considered right, in spite of the temptations he had offered, and with a request that I would not lose a moment in making arrangements for my return to Kinburn, where my presence was essential."

"You obeyed?"

"Yes. My kind friend Campbell arranged that for me, but I arrived too late. Sir Robert was dead, and his will was nowhere to be found. We searched everywhere. The secretaire there was ransacked most carefully, and I even ventured to appeal to Miss Hepburn to assist in the search. Circumstances I must not enter upon made us a little suspicious that she could, if she would, throw some light as to the fate of the missing document. She refused to aid us in any way; and assumed that my carefully guarded inquiry was nothing more nor less than an accusation against her of having made away with the will. In short, it was a scene so painful, that neither of us can forget it. I thought it my duty to tell her that it was my grandfather's last expressed wish that Kinburn should be mine, and implied, as delicately as I could, that I should prefer to make it so by payment of the fine rather than in any other way, supposing the latest will was not found. You know my cousin, and can imagine how she received my intimation. Thenceforward we understood one another, and, though my mother regrets we are so little friends, she has no idea of the cause of our estrangement. "Sometimes," he said, with a faint smile, "I fancy she still believes it possible that Kinburn may yet be mine by marriage."

"That never can be," Agnes said, startled out of her prudent reserve by this suggestion, and then flushing up painfully, as she remembered what she said.

"No," he answered, "never. You know enough of my cousin's history, I suspect, to be aware that she, as little as I, desires such a thing. You know——"

"Oh, Mr. Upton, pray go no further. What I know of Miss Hepburn's history, I learned in confidence from herself; it would be dishonourable even to confess that I do know it."

"I will not ask it of you, Miss Stuart. All I desire is, that, having gained the influence you have over my cousin, you will do what you can to save her from the effect of her own wild delusions. If you know what I think you know, you will understand what I mean. I have done my best, and have failed. But you have no stake in the matter, and you may succeed. God grant it, for hers is a miserable

history, and may be more so, though she won't believe it."

"You mistake, Mr. Upton, if you suppose she has given me her entire confidence."

"Well, then, I shall tell you so much on the chance that you do not know. I dare not tell my mother, for in some things my dear mother, gentle and loving as she is, has prejudices which might in this case be serious. And I have reason to fear that a time may come when poor Lina may need a friend who can guide her better than she can herself. I believe you could be that friend, Miss Stuart, if you will."

"If will only is wanting, you may depend upon me," Agnes said, touched by his earnestness. "Heaven knows I would help her if I could, but——" She hesitated. "But you will not be offended if I do not always see things as you do: and, above all, you will not insist that I should answer any questions which might entail a breach of confidence?"

"Of questions you need have no fear," he replied. "All I desire is, to have some helping hand held out to that poor thing; for I cannot express to you, Miss Stuart, the deep compassion I feel towards her—blind in body and soul, and refusing from her relations the natural aid which her infirmity requires. But to my tale. My grandfather had at one time so completely quarrelled with my mother, that on my Uncle Cosmo's death, he resolved to make my cousin—the only child of his younger son—his heir. She was a Hepburn: she was young, and had suffered, and therefore he thought that if he treated her with kindness, he would find her docile to his will. For some time he was quite satisfied, and, though he regretted she was a girl, he still believed she would one day fill his place with talent and dignity. Shortly, however, before I went to India, he began to suspect that my cousin was not acting towards him as she ought. He watched her, and found that it was her habit to meet clandestinely a young man with whom she had become accidentally acquainted. But just as he had learned this, he learned also that this man Maxwell had left St. Ringans, indebted to every one, himself among the number. My cousin was ill at the time of this discovery,

but, when tolerably recovered, he taxed her with meeting Maxwell, and demanded an explanation of her conduct. It was given boldly and unflinchingly. 'He had been kind to her in her desolate childhood, and she loved him for it, and gloried in her love.' That was all that could be drawn from her. Who he was, or what was his real name—whether he was an Englishman or a foreigner—she refused to tell. My grandfather demanded her promise that she should neither see nor correspond with him without his knowledge; but this she flatly refused. She would see, would correspond with him whenever she could. And it was afterwards found that four-fifths of her very handsome allowance were devoted to this man. Again Sir Robert remonstrated with her, reminding her that it depended on his will alone whether she was left heiress of Kinburn or a beggar."

"How did she answer?" Agnes asked, as he paused to take breath.

"At first she remained absolutely silent, and when she did speak, it was to say that she had never sought the inheritance of Kinburn, and that her grandfather might leave it to whom he would. To her it was valueless, if burdened by conditions."

"And Sir Robert did make the conditions?"

"Probably he would have done so, at all events; but on his declaring that he would at least prevent her bestowing the lands of the Hepburns on that rascal Maxwell, she lost all self-control, and burst into a perfect torrent of invective against her grandfather, and against all her relations, for their treatment of her father and herself. 'He whom you so malign,' she exclaimed, 'was the only human being who in those days showed me either sympathy or kindness, and shall I sacrifice all my fond recollections of him to your prejudices? No! you may leave me the beggar you found me, but I shall never desert my friends as you deserted me!' And these were the last words she would deign to give on that matter. After this, my grandfather saw it was hopeless to advise or guide her in anything, and, though he entreated my mother to live with him, he knew her too well to tell her what he had gleaned of his grandchild's story. Had my mother known of her intimacy with this man, and

of her many clandestine meetings, the same roof would not have covered her and Lina."

"Impossible, Mr. Upton! Your mother is so good, so affectionate, so tender to the feelings of others!"

"Even so, Miss Stuart; but every one has some little peculiarity of disposition, and my mother's is unsparing and unforgiving to all who in the slightest degree swerve from female delicacy and propriety. Well, to bring my story to an end, I have learned from Mr. Campbell, who was appointed executor to both my grandfather's wills, that my cousin still continues her correspondence with Maxwell; at least, that almost all her income is sent away, and as we *know* she had no other friend or correspondent, we are entitled to believe that he is the recipient of her bounty. Whether he is aware of the terms of the will I cannot of course tell; but if he is, £1500 is but slight temptation to an adventurer, and I fear lest Miss Hepburn should ultimately become his victim, even if she do not succeed to Kinburn."

"You can prevent that—I mean her succeeding?"

"I fear not. It was I refused to marry her, not she me. She therefore is entitled to the estate, unless I can pay the forfeit, and that may be beyond my power"



CHAPTER XXII.

THE FOREIGN LETTER.

As Lionel Upton quitted the octagon, Agnes threw herself on the window-seat; and as she watched the glorious canopy of clouds that gathered round the setting sun, she pondered over all that she had heard, and confessed that hitherto she had not done him justice. She had found him a pleasant companion, and because of that, and also because his mother loved him so dearly, she had thought well of him; but some remarks of Mrs. Trotter, with whom he was no favourite, and of Lina's, who esteemed him still less, had taught her to believe that there was something in his character which she had failed to fathom. Now that she understood why Lina disliked him, she saw things in a new light, and

she also understood the hints Mrs. Trotter had given as to his "hardness" in money matters. It was necessary that he should be hard if he were to reach his great object, and the deep tone of sympathy with which he spoke of his cousin convinced her that he would have been a friend to Lina had she permitted it.

But most of all she dwelt on the sacrifice he had so nobly made of his own wishes to filial duty. She thought George would have acted thus, and though the characters of the two men were in so many points dissimilar, she liked to think that neither of them flinched from duty, but went at it steadily and quietly, making no moan as to what they had given up, but doing their part in life to the best of their ability. No doubt George was a more energetic character; he would not have taken the gloomy views Mr. Upton did, but would have hoped as well as worked. But then there was this difference, that George had selected and followed a profession he loved, while Lionel—somehow the Christian name came more naturally to her thoughts just then than the surname—while Lionel disliked his profession, and had *not* chosen it.

Would he ever succeed in his efforts? How little she had thought of that effect of Italy's regeneration! No wonder he looked so worn and anxious; it would be such a terrible disappointment to fail when on the very borders of success. And then she remembered how, during her brother's short stages of depression, she had been able to comfort and encourage him. Could she not do something of the same kind for Mr. Upton? Even to have some one to whom he could speak openly might be of use to him. She would, she must, try to help him a little; it would be so pleasant to think that Heaven had left her still some such duties to perform. She thought Mr. Upton would not take it amiss if she did press a little for his confidence. He had already volunteered a good deal—a good deal, at least, for a shy, proud man—and therefore she felt sure that, with a very little encouragement, he might tell her from time to time how he got on. At all events, she could comply with one wish he had expressed; she could at least *try* to wean Lina

from her reserve, and endeavour to awake her from her false estimate of "Sigismund." False, it must be, from the calculating cruelty with which he had treated Nanny. Mrs. Hornby had persuaded the poor girl to tell her all, and it was as heartless a case as it was possible to conceive. "If Lina could but hear Nanny's story," Agnes cogitated, "she must cease to care for Sigismund." And perhaps this idea had crossed Mr. Upton's mind when he spoke of his cousin; for Mrs. Hornby had learned that it was he alone who assisted the poor woman in her trials, and he who advised her to send to the Parsonage.

With these thoughts still at work, Agnes resolved that on her next visit to Lina she would force her, if possible, to tell her the end of her sad story; and with this purpose full in her mind, she set out for Kinburn next morning at an earlier hour than she was in the custom of calling there.

She found Lina in the drawing-room with her aunt, who was reading to her. It was the first time she had seen them together in so domestic an aspect; and as she looked at the pale, worn face of the younger lady, and the sweet, motherly countenance of the elder, she sighed to think that circumstances had so long estranged them, and had brought them together at last too late for happiness—perhaps even for comfort.

"Ah, Agnes!" Lina said, the moment she entered, "I was just telling Aunt Bessie that if you did not call this morning I must go to the Whim and fetch you. I have so wanted you the last few days!"

"I am rejoiced to hear it," Agnes answered, with her merry laugh. "Nothing pleases me more than to find that my friends miss me. What can I do for you, Lina?"

"Come to my room, and I shall tell you." And, without further preface, Miss Hepburn rose as if satisfied that so slight an expression of her wishes was sufficient, and left the room.

"Does she not look ghastly, Agnes?" said Mrs. Upton, the moment she disappeared. "I cannot tell what is wrong, but something serious, I am certain. Perhaps you can find out, dear child; for I am really anxious."

"Has anything occurred to annoy her?"

"Nothing that I am aware of, except one of her usual

squabbles with poor Lionel. Whence it arose I do not know, but I found them in angry discussion yesterday morning, and, though they were silent as soon as I appeared, I overheard her use some very harsh words to my son. It distressed me to hear them, and I fear that my remonstrance vexed her, for she left the room as soon as Lionel did, and did not appear again all day. But this morning, when I told her I regretted to have spoken so hastily, she threw her arms round my neck and burst into tears; but she gave me no explanation. I am very sorry she did not; but she will perhaps tell you, Agnes; and do try to make peace between her and Lionel."

Agnes hurriedly gave the required promise, and followed Lina to her boudoir. She found her restlessly paeing up and down, and the moment Agnes entered she asked, in a somewhat authoritative tone, "What has delayed you, Agnes? Why did aunt call you back?"

Agnes answered unhesitatingly, "Because she is anxious about your misunderstanding with her son, and begged me to endeavour to reoneile you, as evidently her interference would be unweleome."

"True; it would be unweleome. Lionel Upton and I can never be friends. But the 'misunderstanding' in question was nothing. As for Aunt Bessie, I am sorry she should have diseovered there was a quarrel. Neither of us wish to make her unhappy."

"In that case, dear Lina, why do you not gratify her by opening your heart to her?"

"I? I open my heart to Aunt Upton? Agnes, are you mad? If she knew but one half, one twentieth part, of what I have told you, the same roof would never again shelter us both. No, no: the sole chance of our remaining friends is to be as ignorant of each other as if we were strangers; and, thank Heaven, though we have lived in the same house for more than five years, Aunt Upton knows no more of the real Lina Hepburn than I do of the man in the moon."

"If it is so, Lina, is it right?"

"Tut, tut, Agnes! You always come down on one with some such startling query; but in this instance it is right, for Aunt Bessie, guileless as she is, tender as she is—and

no child could be more guileless, no mother more tender—would spurn me from her if she even suspected what you and my cousin suspect, but in which you are both mistaken.”

Agnes started, and felt half tempted to ask what she meant; but a moment's reflection led her to refrain from the question at that particular moment, and to say instead,

“I have often thought you misjudged Mrs. Upton.”

“No, Agnes, I do not. There are two strongly contrasted classes of persons who are very cruel to their fellow-women—those who have never done wrong themselves, and those who have. Aunt Bessie is of the first class, and she so shrinks from even the appearance of evil, that she condemns imprudence as if it were sin. What I have done would make her cast me off without compunction. I dare tell her nothing,” she said, sadly. “And yet I sometimes feel as if even, as it is, she doubted me.”

“She never speaks as if she did.”

“Why, then, does she call me, ‘poor Lina’? Why always fancy I have some concealment from her?”

“Your deprivation of sight arouses her compassion; your extreme reticence, her anxiety.”

“You are never at a loss for an answer, Agnes; I wonder, will you give me one to an abrupt question?”

“I will, if I can.”

“What opinion have you formed of me since you know me better, and especially since I forced my confidence on you and then suddenly retired into myself again? I fear, you dare not say what it makes you think of me?”

“Yes, I dare,” she answered, quietly. “I have been pained, no doubt, by your sudden reserve; but knowing, as I do, that a craving for human sympathy was the sole reason of your confidence, I can easily understand that, when I frankly expressed my opinions on the events and on the characters you described, you found it harder to bear than the weight of your secret. You therefore resolved not to deepen the impression against—against Sigismund by telling me more.”

Lina gave a quick gasp of surprise at this reply

“You do indeed give a bold answer to a bold question,” she said, while a slight flush of anger suffused her face;

“but I like you the better for doing so. You resemble a dash of cold water thrown over a fainting patient. The first sensation is wretchedly uncomfortable, but it recalls one to one’s senses. Well, you are not far wrong. In some degree, such were the motives which actuated me. Now can you guess those which induce me to resume the broken thread of my narrative?”

“I may guess, but I cannot do so with any probability of success.”

“I long to hear what you suspect?”

“Will you forgive me if it do you injustice?”

“Certainly. I ask the question for a reason which I shall explain hereafter.”

“I imagine that you have till lately been enabled, somehow or other, to maintain a correspondence with the——”

“Call him Sigismund,” Lina broke in, impatiently.

“Well, that you can no longer do so without assistance, and therefore wish to carry it on by my means.”

“Agnes!” and the poor blind face turned ghastly white from the intensity of her surprise. “How could you possibly guess that?”

A twinge of remorse thrilled Agnes’s heart for having so rashly expressed her belief, but, conscious that it was kinder in the end to have done so, she replied:

“Many things combined to make me think so. You had yourself told me you had corresponded for years. Mrs. Upton had bemoaned the obstinacy with which you continued to write and read letters long after you had been assured that to do so might incur the total loss of sight; and, last of all, when you opened your desk, a few days since, to give me that little ring I now wear, I chanced to see a sealed letter lying inside the lid, addressed to you in a foreign hand. Other things added to these made me draw this deduction.”

“One, perhaps, was that my cousin Lionel informed you that I had received a letter from my bankers, and that, unable as I was to read it myself, I declined to allow it to be read to me?” she said, sharply.

“No, Mr. Upton told me nothing about that; but——”

“Go on: I hate broken sentences.”

"But he did tell me that he was glad you seemed to have confidence in my affection for you, as you so haughtily repelled his good offices."

"Oh, indeed! he said that, did he? And may I inquire in what way he supposed that his good offices could have helped the poor blind girl?" Her tone, as was usual when speaking of Mr. Upton, had a sneering inflection that was almost insulting.

"Mr. Upton did not take me into his confidence so far," Agnes said, gently; "but the best help any one could give you, my poor Lina, would be to persuade you to study Sigismund's character more carefully than I fear you have done hitherto. Accident has made me acquainted with some circumstances connected with his conduct while at St. Ringans which lead me to suspect he deceived even you."

"Deceived me?" And her pale cheek glowed with anger at such a supposition.

"I thoroughly believe it, and I think I can prove to you that he did."

"Agnes! this is unkind, ungenerous."

"No, Lina, it is not."

"Of what act of his can you be cognizant that I did not know? He left debts behind him certainly, and I told you that he did, but that they were paid in time."

"By you, not by him."

"What matter! He knew they were paid."

"I was not thinking of pecuniary debts."

"What then? Do say what you mean at once."

Agnes nevertheless hesitated a moment before she said, "The poor child!"

Lina's countenance changed.

"Who told you of that?"

"Mrs. Hornby."

"Ah! of course she knew, and why should she not mention it? Well! there was a child, and was it not natural that I should be interested in the poor little thing?"

"Quite natural!" and yet Agnes was surprised that Lina knew anything about the child; for in the few visits she had herself paid to Nanny since her daughter's death, she had spoken much of Mr. Upton's kindness, but never alluded either to his mother or cousin. Perhaps, however,

Lina had bound her over to silence. So, after a short silence, she remarked :

“It was one of those sad cases in which one could hardly desire that it should live.”

“What do you mean, Agnes ?” Lina said, in strong agitation. “Surely your abhorrence of my poor friend does not go so far as to wish that his very name should be erased from the earth, no son of his succeeding ?”

Agnes was greatly puzzled by this speech. What could Lina possibly mean by it ? “I do not understand you,” she said ; “but *my* meaning is easily explained. It is bad enough for a boy to have to bear a blighted name, but for a girl it is worse, especially when her mother’s relations are respectable. Indeed, poor Nanny herself confessed that her darling was taken in merey.”

“For Heaven’s sake, Agnes, tell me plainly of what you are speaking ? Who is Nanny ? What little girl are you talking of ? Either you or I must be under some strange delusion.”

Then she did *not* know ? And Agnes, as delicately as she could, told her the whole tale, and how it had come to her knowledge.

Lina listened in unbroken silence. Once or twice a question seemed to tremble on her pale lips, but she repressed it, and sat quite still, her teeth set, her small hands clenched together so tightly that the nails left their mark on the tender skin, while the veins in her temple stood out like knotted cords. A full minute elapsed after Agnes ceased speaking, before she moved or uttered a word. When she did so, her voice was harsh and dissonant as she said the three words, “Is this true ?”

“Perfectly so.”

“I must see this woman. Will you take me to her ?”

“At once, if you like. But it is some distance ; shall I ring for the carriage ?”

“No, I shall walk ; and if you will help me to dress, Agnes, I should prefer not to send even for Livingstone.”

“Certainly ;” and, with ready cordiality, she followed her to her room and aided her in her preparations. The only words that passed between them were directions where to find what was required. And when her toilet was

finished, Lina requested Agnes to tell her aunt she meant to walk out with her.

Agnes did so. Mrs. Upton expressed herself pleased by the intelligence; and then they went out by the French window of Lina's boudoir, and took the path through the wood, without exchanging a single syllable. The blind girl walked with a quick elastic tread, very unlike the languid step with which she generally moved across the floors or gardens of Kinburn. But when she reached the bridge, she pressed her friend's arm and said, "Stop here; I must rest."

Agnes led her to a large stone that jutted out from one side of the path, and begged her to sit down; but she declined.

"No," she said: "I want to lean against the wall of the bridge; I want to turn my face towards the sea; I want to listen to the murmur of the stream and to the distant beating of the waves on the shore; and then perhaps I shall be able to think, to understand, and to teach myself to bear this also."

Agnes led her to the point she wished, and, passing her arm round her slender waist, supported her as well as she could till the trembling of her limbs ceased, and the countenance, hitherto so troubled, grew calm; but she did not speak a word. Lina seemed to understand her silent sympathy, for after the lapse of a few minutes she heaved a heavy sigh, and murmured, "God bless you, Agnes Stuart; you are a true friend. Now take me to this cottage, tell the poor woman who I am, and leave me there. I must see her, must speak to her alone."

Agnes offered no remonstrance: she saw that she had set a stone rolling which she had no power to stop, and, wisely confessing that it was better not to make the attempt, she left the result in higher hands, and only breathed a fervent though silent prayer that the result might be for good, not evil. Oh, how often that prayer rises to the lips of those to whom Heaven has given a power of influencing others! How often, while the world congratulates them on their successful endeavours to do good, their own hearts tremble under the responsibility they have incurred, and they breathe to Heaven a humble prayer that they "who preach to others be not themselves castaways!"

Such at least was Agnes Stuart's feelings as she waited, waited, waited for Lina's reappearance. Seated on a fallen tree on the edge of the wood, she watched for the door of the hut to open; but the sun had dipped beneath the sea before Miss Hepburn came forth. Her veil was down, and she said not a word; but Nanny, who carefully led her to join Agnes, had her eyes full of tears, and as Lina put out her hand to bid adieu, she caught it in both of hers, raised it passionately to her lips, then turned suddenly away and took refuge in the cottage.

It was not till Lina was once more seated in the high-backed chair in her own room that she spoke. Agnes was leaning over her to unfasten her shawl, when Lina threw her arms round her neck, drew her face close to hers, and, kissing her, said, "You have done me an inestimable service, and I thank you for it with my whole heart. Do me one other favour. Take my keys, open my desk, bring the sealed letter and read it to me."

She grew so pale as she made the request, that Agnes hesitated. "I shall come back to-morrow, dear Lina, if you will. You look too much exhausted for any present exertion."

"I am quite capable of this effort, Agnes, and the sooner it is done the better. Have you never read, 'It is the first blow of the lance or mace that pierces or stuns; those which follow are little felt?' So with me. As long as I believed him faithful to me, I enjoyed a kind of happiness. It is gone now; the rock has fallen on my heart and crushed feeling out of it. I am sure that the letter is from Sigismund, because I never had any other correspondent all my weary life. And now that I know what he is, I would fain know also what he seems! Ah me! I suppose things will right themselves in the end; but as yet little of the 'right' has come to me. You have found the letter, though. Read it, dear."

Agnes cast her eyes over the first page. It was written in French, and apparently contained nothing save a formal acknowledgment of a remittance, forwarded in due course by Messrs. Glass of Leghorn. It was signed John Smith, and dated "Genoa, the Eve of St. Joseph."

After reading it aloud, Agnes closed the letter, saying, "That is all—a mere business letter."

“Have you looked on the other side of the sheet?”

“It is blank.”

“Hold it to the fire for a few instants. Is it blank still?”

“No, there seems some faint writing.”

“Let me hear it also.” Lina’s voice was very calm, and her face wore a fixed, resolute look as she spoke; but the quick reiteration of the request showed Agnes how strong a force she was putting on her passionate spirit.

The letters were so faint that it was difficult for her to read consecutively, but at last she made out the following words, written, like the body of the letter, in French:

“Aline, is it because you cannot or will not write to me, that I am still in ignorance as to your heirship? I almost feared that you had forgotten me till your remittance reached me. But you could not forget our oath the night we parted, how many years ago! The time is come now—the time for both of us. I am free; so are you, even from your grandfather’s influence. If I do not hear from you within a reasonable period, I shall risk a visit to England, whatever be the consequence to myself or others. Now, as through life, your devoted,

F.M.S.W ”

The four initials were so strangely intertwined that Agnes could scarcely make them out. When she raised her eyes, they involuntarily fixed themselves on Lina. The same rigidity pervaded her face and form; but her colour had changed from its usual pallor to a deathly grey, which made her look actually as if transformed to stone.

“Thank you,” she said at last; and the voice was so hollow and tuneless that Agnes, prepared as she was for some great change, started at the sound. “Now it must be answered. Have you time to complete the task I have imposed upon you, or would you prefer to return to-morrow?”

“I am quite at your disposal either now or then, as is best for yourself, dear Lina.”

“Now then, if you please. You will find the materials for writing in my desk.”

She was silent for a few moments, less as if to decide upon the substance of her answer than upon the mode of expression. When that was resolved upon, there was no hesitation, no alteration of a word, but she dictated rapidly and clearly. The answer, like the letter, was in French:

“Your letter has reached me. I could not read it or answer it myself, for I am now, as I warned you I should soon be, totally blind. This, were there no other reason, would necessarily put an end to our correspondence; for there are few eyes save my own which I dare trust to peruse or answer your letters. As to my heirship, it is only lately that I have known what it is. To my regret, I find the will very different from our expectations, but, as you may guess, more favourable than that which has disappeared. A few months will settle all; and whatever be my fortune, you may rely on your usual remittances, or more if it be in my power. When they no longer reach you, you may be assured that I have ended a life that has not been a happy one. I do not reproach you for your share in my sufferings; but you ought to know that I have this very day learned something which has taught me that while you were here, six years ago, you taught others besides me to fix all hope for time and eternity on your being ‘free.’ Now that this has come to my knowledge, you cannot expect to hear from me again. The attempt to write, or to see me, will only bring fresh misery on me, and possible destruction on yourself.”

“Is it written?” she asked, as Agnes’s pen stopped.

“Yes.”

“I must sign it. Give me the pen, and show me where to write ‘Aline.’ He will know that I only could finish the name so. Now fold and address it, ‘John Smith, junior, care of Messrs. Glass and Co., bankers, Leghorn.’ You will find the necessary stamps in my desk.” As she said this, she threw herself back in her chair with an air of most complete exhaustion.

“Can I do nothing more?”

“Yes, one thing. Post the letter for me yourself; I do not wish it to go by the Kinburn bag.”

“And dare I leave you alone, Lina?” Agnes said, affectionately, as, at her request, she was hastening away to catch the evening post.

“Oh yes,” she said, wearily; “I am not dangerous either to myself or others—at least not now,” she added, plaintively. “My hope in death was to meet him. That hope is gone; I do not wish to meet him now, either here or hereafter.”

It is impossible to express how slowly and despairingly these words dropped from her. Agnes stooped to give her a farewell kiss; but Lina gently pushed her away, saying, with mournful earnestness, “Not now, Agnes; I cannot bear it; and—and you must try to forget what you have seen and heard to-day, except—except in your prayers.”

The last few words were barely audible, but Agnes hailed them as an earnest of better things.



CHAPTER XXIII.

SUSPICIONS.

IN criminal cases an advocate's chief [difficulty is to prevail upon his client to tell him the whole truth. If he does so, success is frequently attainable in spite of the difficulties which beset him; but if any incident, however trivial, is suppressed in hopes of making the case better, an obstruction is thrown in the way of his advocate which the highest skill cannot always overcome.

Such, in a lesser degree, is the fatal effect of a half confidence between friends when advice is asked, and the judgment of the listener is required to decide upon the part as if it were the whole. This was the present position which Agnes held with regard to her blind friend, and it was by no means a pleasant one. On her own side was perfect candour and readiness to help; on the other there had hitherto been nothing but evasion when Agnes implied her wish to have some rather doubtful circumstances explained. Even with regard to Sigismund's letter there were expressions in it and in the answer which could be interpreted disadvantageously to Lina, and yet she

volunteered no explanation. For a few days Agnes waited patiently in hopes of some communication which might entirely exonerate the blind girl from the suspicions which she herself had hinted were allowable, but she waited in vain. As it had been before, it was now. Lina received her with unusual expressions of affection, called her her only friend—her darling Agnes—but skilfully averted any return to the subject which filled both their thoughts.

Now Agnes, though a generous, sweet-tempered girl, was by no means without her share of pride and sense of justice, and she secretly resented Lina's behaviour in allowing her so much of her confidence as might enable her to be of use, but denying aught beyond.

Vexed as she was, however, she tried to find excuses for her conduct. Perhaps the discovery just made of Sigismund's treachery had so wounded her that she dared not yet touch on so painful a topic. That Lina did suffer was evident enough, for she grew even paler and thinner than ever, and acquired a habit of pacing restlessly the whole day long either up and down her sitting-room, or the terrace beneath.

But, with all her efforts to think leniently of her, Agnes could not avoid feeling, and she feared showing, a slight constraint in her manner to Miss Hepburn. She was so conscious of it herself, that she dreaded lest Mrs. Upton might observe it, as she guessed from her son's manner that he did. But there was no help for it. She could not appear otherwise than mortified and disappointed by Lina's conduct towards her.

It so happened, however, that her attention was about this time partially withdrawn from Lina in consequence of an expected arrival at the Whim, which she knew would make a great change in her domestic comfort.

Mention has been made early in this history of a niece by marriage of Mrs. Ellis, who paid a long visit in Old-street about the time of Mrs. Weld's last illness. It may be remembered that the invitation for three weeks had been extended to a visit of six months, and that she only quitted Saxonham shortly before Mrs. Weld died. Her stay had latterly been a great *gêne* to both the Stuarts, and Agnes was thankful that she had quitted them before the sad events

of the trial began. Greatly as she had suffered then, she was conscious that her troubles would have been increased a thousand-fold by the presence of Nellie, who had proved herself, during her residence with them, the most quiet but efficient of mischief-makers.

Miss Ellis went to India, married, lost both her father and husband, and was now returning to England with her only child, Godfrey, a boy nearly five years of age: Her progress from India had been slow, for it was at least a twelve-month since she had quitted Calcutta. They took an odd route, too, for an unprotected widow and young child, through Syria, Egypt, Turkey, and Italy; but Mrs. Vaughan seldom did things like other people, and had generally very good reasons for what she did.

She had written from Paris to offer Mrs. Ellis a visit, and the old lady had caught at the idea with pleasure, and was quite elated by the anticipation of the effect she expected the widow of Colonel Vaughan and the daughter of the Governor of Maputta to produce on the little world of St. Ringans.

To Agnes the proposed visit was by no means welcome. She had had too long an experience of Nellie's ways, her selfishness, her slyness, and her other defects, to hail her coming with any satisfaction; but she had no right to interfere, and she followed her aunt's orders with regard to the necessary preparations without demur, until it was suggested to her that the octagon should be turned into a nursery for little Godfrey. At this she demurred. She knew too well what was implied by a "fortnight's" visit, and firmly declined to give up her only quiet resting-place in the house.

Mrs. Ellis was very angry; but when Agnes saw how determined she was that everything should give way to Nellie's convenience, she became more decided to retain the room for her own private use, but she did not say so. Her remonstrance having had no effect, it was better, she knew, to act than to speak more about the matter, so she summoned their old servant Martha to receive the orders necessary.

"Martha," she said, quietly, "Mrs. Ellis is expecting a visit next week from Mrs. Vaughan."

Martha only answered by a grunt and a gloom on her countenance, very foreign to its usual benevolent expression.

“Mrs. Ellis wishes me to give up this room to the little boy.”

“No, Miss Agnes, that must not be,” she answered, decidedly; “when Mrs. Vaughan comes you must have your own room for your own self, and, if I was you, I think I would keep it locked.”

Agnes needed no further interpreter of old Martha's thoughts, and found her a ready coadjutor in fitting up an unoccupied lumber-room as the nursery.

“I'll get it done, Miss Agnes, when Mrs. Ellis is at Mrs. Trotter's this evening. Just leave all to me.”

And after a few suggestions, which were readily caught up and adopted by her willing handmaid, Agnes did leave it to Martha; but she could not as easily fling aside the other uncomfortable anticipations suggested by this visit.

Adieu henceforward to her pleasant *tête-à-tête* walks from church with Lionel Upton. Adieu to their Saturday conferences, to the freedom of their friendly *tête-à-têtes*. Nellie Vaughan's eyes, Nellie Vaughan's tongue, had the power and the will to turn these happy meetings into trouble and discomfort.

She remembered her machinations against her brother George, and how narrowly he, with his clear judgment and strong common sense, escaped her snares. Mr. Upton was a far more impressible, a far less decided man; was he likely to escape as George had done? Agnes was startled to find the hold this idea took of her, and still more startled to find how much it pained her. It was no business of hers, and yet—and yet it made her suffer.

“How tired you look, Agnes!” Mrs. Hornby observed, when in the course of the morning she dropped into the octagon to condole with her on Mrs. Vaughan's coming, the news of which she had just learned. “But I don't wonder. Harry has told me of her exploits in Saxenham. I hope she will work no mischief here.”

“How can she?” Agnes asked, with a suddenness which amazed herself as much as her friend.

“Nay, dear, that is for you to answer, not me.”

"I have no longer a dear brother about whose happiness I am anxious."

"No, certainly no brother," Isabella answered, a little markedly.

"What else have I to fear?"

"If you have nothing, Mrs. Upton has, I can tell her; for unless Mrs. Nellie is greatly altered, which I don't at all fancy, she may think that the laird of Kinburn is worth looking after; but that, fortunately, is his concern more than ours!"

Agnes winced at this remark. It might be no concern of hers, but, nevertheless, the more she thought of Mr. Upton's danger the more anxious it made her.

"I cannot conceive what brings her here," she said, after a moment's silence. "She dislikes the country, and has more than once taken Aunt Ellis to task for settling in a place seven miles from a railway."

"Ay! Well, then, I suspect the dear lady has run short of funds, and has a fancy to live for a few months at her friends' expense," Isabella said, with a laugh which grated painfully on her listener's ear, perhaps because what Mrs. Hornby had said was probably the truth.

When she was left alone, Agnes set herself to examine whether she was justified in the extreme dislike she had to the thought of Mrs. Vaughan's coming to the Whim. Why did she fear Cornelia's influence on Mr. Upton?

Good Heavens! was not Cornelia the name in the little red morocco book, and was not the date 185—, the year she sailed for India? Was it possible that Mrs. Vaughan was Lionel Upton's first love?

And with the power she had of fitting one link of a chain of evidence into the rest, Agnes rapidly went over all that she had heard from him and his mother of his voyage to India, and exclaimed, "Ah! that accounts for it; that is why she is so anxious to see dear Aunt Ellis." There was an unusual bitterness in Agnes's tones as she uttered these words aloud, and then, as if struck by some miserable thought, she buried her face in her hands and burst into tears.

Poor Agnes! at last "*le cœur a parlé*" Well for her had it been silent for ever. And yet not so. There was nothing wrong, nothing unwomanly, in her caring for Lionel Upton.

He had sought her, not she him. He had opened his most secret thoughts to her, and confided in her—demanded her sympathy, her help, her advice—and if, woman-like, her heart had gone with her intellect, was she to blame when there was no barrier, human or divine, between them? She recalled many little words and deeds of his that served to prove his interest in her, and as she thought of them, she remembered also the look and tone with which he had called her attention to the entry in the little red book. No man who really loved a woman could have spoken of her as he did then of Cornelia. It was plain, therefore, that his illusion was passed for ever. She had broken her truth to him—given him up for another; and men seldom forgive such a slight as that. And now was he more likely to fall into Nellie's toils than before he knew Agnes?

Agnes felt it was not wise to pursue the subject further. She must wait and watch, not him, but herself. She must be on her guard, and not permit the present to blind her to the possible future; must not fling her heart recklessly away, and find, too late, that it was given unasked; and she murmured a silent prayer that she might be strengthened to bear what must be borne, and to act as was best for his happiness as well as her own.

She was sitting where Mrs. Hornby had left her, in Lionel's favourite window, leaning, as he was wont to do, on the broad sill, and looking unconsciously at the lovely scene before her. Summer was coming on apace, and the tender green of the larches and the rich foliage of the lime contrasted with the still folded leaves of the beech, and the bare, rugged branches of the oak. A rich golden hue lighted up the moorland between her and the sea, while the falling tides showed the white line of surf that marked the fatal but sunny bar of the Garvie Sands. It was as soothing a scene as the eye could rest upon, and she gradually felt its influence, and reasoned herself into a more placid frame of mind. How beautiful God's earth was! Did it not seem as if intended to remind her that man's lot here below is not all miserable—all joyless? "No doubt," she thought, as she glanced upwards at the evening sky—"no doubt heavy shadows come sometimes, but we must remember that 'behind the clouds the sun is still shining.'"

As she uttered the words, a few straggling rays of sunshine shot out from the mass of clouds, making a kind of Jacob's ladder between the earth and heavens; and L. E. L.'s lines flashed upon her memory:

"We make
A ladder of our thoughts where angels tread,
But sleep ourselves at the foot. Our high resolves
Look down upon our slumbering acts."

"Mine must not do so," she thought, springing to her feet as the clock struck seven, and she remembered that she had promised Mrs. Hornby to take Nanny some work that evening, and that she must do so now, or it would be too late.

The road she followed was as far as that she had taken on her first visit to the Rectory, but it was now adorned by all the glories of early June, which is sometimes so exquisitely beautiful in Scotland. The

"season betwixt May and June,
Half pranked with spring, with summer half embrown'd."

The sun's disc was already hidden in the sea, but the banks were edged with a gloriously bright edge of furze, shining like burnished gold in the soft evening light, and making it seem as if still glowing in sunshine, for scarce a tiny speck of green could be seen between the rich full blossoms. Above her hung the tassels of the larch, still wearing their first delicate verdure, while clusters of purple lilac and long drooping sprays of laburnum hung across the path, bright as the jewelled gardens of Aladdin. The turf under her feet was thickly enamelled with wild flowers of every shade and colour—cowslips, primrose, hearts-ease, the crimson-tipped daisy, and the fragrant wild thyme, yielding its perfume to the foot that crushed it. These and the sweet singing of the birds made a whole so delicious that Agnes's vexations were forgotten for the time, while her heart rose up to God in grateful thanksgiving for all His mercies—those mercies which we too often forget under the temporary presence of sorrow or annoyance.

As she reached the little bridge over the Kin, she was surprised to see a very smartly-dressed woman lounging

wearily against the bridge, as if waiting for some one, and on coming up to her, she recognized Livingstone, Miss Hepburn's maid.

"How came you here?" she said, kindly. "Are you waiting for anyone, Livingstone?"

"My mistress is in there," she answered, sulkily, pointing to Nanny's cottage. "She goes there almost every night, and makes me wait for her."

Agnes was surprised yet rather relieved by the information. It had vexed her to think that Lina had shown no caring to visit Nanny after that one night.

"Perhaps you would not mind waiting for Miss Hepburn?" the girl continued, when Agnes made no remark upon what she had told her. "I think she would be the better of your company, Miss Stuart, I really do. For my part, servant though I be, I can't think it well for my mistress to be so often with that young woman. She comes back as gloomy and silent as anything. I wish, Miss Stuart, you would speak to her about it; I would, if I dared."

Agnes, half stunned by the waiting-maid's loquacity, did not at first perceive the full meaning of her speech, till, on inquiring whether she thought her mistress would like to walk home with her, Livingstone said, eagerly, "Oh, I am certain of it, Miss Stuart—she would like it of all things. Everybody knows that if Miss Hepburn cares for any one it is for you, ma'am; so good evening, Miss Stuart." And the damsel, with a pert curtsey, turned away, and was immediately out of sight.

Agnes sighed. "Poor Lina!—to be dependent upon the companionship of such a girl as Livingstone! You do indeed need a friend, if you could but believe it."

By this time she had reached the cottage. The door was open, and she distinctly heard a voice inside reading the Bible. She hesitated to knock, but the sound of her approach had caught Lina's quick ear, who abruptly called Nanny's attention to it. She ceased reading, and came to the door.

"Oh, Miss Stuart," she eagerly exclaimed, "how good of you to call in! and Miss Hepburn too is here. I am so glad, so thankful!" and she stood aside to allow her to enter.

Lina had already risen to go, and, hastily saying Livingstone must be waiting for her, was hurrying away, when Agnes explained that she had come in the maid's place to walk home with her, if she would allow her.

"Oh!" was Lina's only reply; but she took Agnes's offered arm, and they walked on together.

For the first few hundred yards not a word was uttered on either side. At last Agnes remarked on the fineness of the evening and the sweet singing of the birds.

"Are they singing?" Lina answered, absently. I really did not hear them. I was thinking of other things."

"Perhaps," Agnes timidly observed, "of that striking chapter of Colossians you were hearing when I interrupted you?"

No answer.

"How kind it is of you, Lina, to induce Nanny to read the Scriptures to you!"

"Ah, poor thing," she replied, "I let her do so because she thinks it will comfort me to hear them. She fancies I gain the same good from them as she does herself."

"And do you not?" was Agnes's anxious question.

"No!" she replied. "What gives one person comfort, gives another torment."

"Dear Lina, what can you mean?"

"I will answer by another question. Do you believe that all the Bible says is true?"

"Certainly."

"You know that it is there written that if any man teach another to do evil, it were better for a millstone to be fastened round his neck, and for him to be cast into the sea, than to put occasion to fall in his brother's way?"

"Yes."

"Yes? you acknowledge it is so? that this is said, not once nor twice, but repeatedly, and in various ways, but all with the same fatal meaning? Nanny read one of these passages to-night, and yet you ask me if her reading did not give me comfort. I tell you, Agnes, it gives me misery, despair—anything but comfort."

"How so, dear Lina? You have never led a soul to evil?"

"Do you forget the compact I made with him by the trysting-rock?"

"No; you told him that, were he free, you would be his at all risks."

"Yes, Agnes, I said so, and he knew I meant it. But alas! alas! it never occurred to me what might come of such a promise."

"Nothing did come of it?" Agnes asked, with a sick feeling of dread.

Lina was silent.

"You say he acted upon it; what do you mean?"

"Can you not guess? I never believed it till now, Agnes, and even now I cannot realize it. But since I have known about Nanny I cannot quite disbelieve all they have told me. A new light has dawned upon me, and I seem to understand myself and him also, alas! as I never did before. Oh, Agnes! Agnes! pray to God to save you from knowing as I now know the meaning of 'the worm that never dies.' Better, far better for him and for me, that I had never been born."

"You have been sinned against, Lina."

"Ay, that I have," she interrupted, "more grievously than any but he and I know. He was my ideal as well as my idol. I believed in him as I believed in Heaven, and when that faith was wrecked, all went with it. Like our first parents in the Garden of Eden, 'I heard the voice of the Lord God, and I was ashamed,' for it showed me not only his guilt, but my own. If he sinned, was not I the instigator?"

"This wild rhapsody made Agnes tremble. What did she mean? was she speaking in sober earnest, or under the excitement of the remorse all feel when they begin to realize the sinfulness of their human nature?"

"I can understand," she said, gently, "that the discovery you have lately made should shake your faith in Sigismund, but that does not necessarily make your friend——"

"Don't call him my friend," she passionately interrupted; "my enemy if you will, my most bitter enemy, as I, alas! have ever been his. My very affection has been his bane; my idolatry his destruction and mine. Oh! that I had died when left a desolate orphan!"

She was silent for a few instants, and Agnes, rapidly reviewing what she had allowed to escape her, was struck

by a wild doubt, a miserable suspicion. Mysterious as Lina's words were, they pointed to crime, a crime such as Dr. Weld had committed, and probably from a similar motive. Could Sigismund and he be one and the same man? Many of the circumstances which Lina had narrated did not certainly tally with her knowledge of Dr. Weld, and yet her unaccountable interest in his trial made her uncomfortable.

Her reflections were broken by Lina saying in a calmer voice, "I interrupted you, Agnes. What were you going to say?"

"You have hinted at some crime committed by Sigismund. Was it what the law calls criminal?"

Lina did not answer, and Agnes's vague suspicions took so strong a hold of her that she ventured to add, "You have learned, I know, that instead of being as perfect as you supposed, he was an immoral man. Still that alone——"

"When faith goes, all goes," she said, sadly.

"In one sense that is true, but not in all. Though a man be morally culpable, it does not follow that——" (she hesitated) "he should be a murderer?" As she uttered the word, she fixed her eyes on the blind girl's countenance.

Lina turned away her head, but Agnes saw that a grey ashen hue had stolen over her face as she answered, "I never accused him of such a thing. I only said that when a man shows himself guilty in one instance, he is capable of any other sin."

"Not so, Lina; he may nevertheless be incapable of crimes which are considered so in the eye of the law."

"I do not agree with you, Agnes. Since I have known that of him, all belief in his goodness has failed me. I have weighed the past with the present, and have seen how we have both trodden the downward path to destruction. I have gloated like a ghoul on the dreadful fascination of crime, and have taught myself to believe him what—they said! Above all, I have satisfied myself that, bound up as my life has been in his since infancy, I must—*must* have some part in his criminality."

"Lina," she said, eagerly, "the very power of saying such a thing in that calm, concentrated tone, shows that you do not know how much your words imply"

“I do, I assure you. Why should I not be calm? David prayed and tore his hair so long as his child lived; when it died he arose and ate bread. So I. While I doubted, I struggled with, and tortured myself nigh unto death. When hope fled, I learned to be still. It has been proved to me what he is in one thing, and, in my estimation, the other accusation is little worse.”

Agnes was silenced. The utter hopelessness of this speech, the strange reckless tone in which it was uttered, showed her that Lina was in that state of mind in which the over-strained spirit glories in an assumed indifference, with which it tries to deceive itself as well as others.

At length she said, “You have convinced me of your belief that Sigismund has committed some crime, whatever it may be; but you cannot convince me that you had any complicity in the deed, unless you purposely instigated him to commit it.” She spoke thus in hopes of forcing Lina to defend herself, and the ruse had a certain degree of success.

“Oh! no, no, no,” she said, with real earnestness. “The wild, passionate words were used only because they seemed to express with sufficient strength how entirely I was bound up in him. But that was all I meant. Do believe me that it was. No doubt I wished that a certain event, which I thought was about to happen from natural causes, might befall one day; and I believed that when it did I should possess the one object, the one happiness, which had been the desire of my heart, but I had no further thought.”

“Nor did you suspect him of having any? You had no proof that he put a forced construction on what you said?”

“No, I assure you, save in so far that what I desired did happen sooner even than I was led to suppose probable. And then strange things were said of him, and the happiness I had looked for floated away farther than ever. And so time passed slowly, slowly, and I was left with nothing to rest upon but vague, anxious longings, half fear, half hope, and that sickens the heart more even than hope deferred. And then as the talk still went on, the gnawing doubts came back, however often thrust away, till sometimes I almost believed he was—what they called him.”

“But,” persisted Agnes, “till the event you allude to

happened, you never dreaded the effect of your parting words, never imagined he could misconceive their meaning?"

"Agnes, how could I? I believed in him as in myself, and to me my passionate words embraced but one thought, 'I love you.'"

The simple pathos of this answer went straight to Agnes's heart, and deepened both her sympathy and compassion for her blind friend, and she said with much feeling, "*If* the thing that you suspect really did happen, you must try to think, Lina, that you but shot an arrow o'er the house and killed your brother. It was by no will of yours that the act came to be done."

"No," she said, excitedly, "I did not wish the deed done, but I did wish that—that the result had been—what—Oh, Agnes! I believe that the devils have thus much power over mortals, that when we earnestly desire that an evil thing should happen, they can turn such desires into accomplished facts. Else how do you explain the expression, 'the curse of a granted prayer'?"

Agnes was silenced. Every word Lina uttered seemed to confirm the truth of her first vague suspicion. Could it be that the man she loved was Weld? She shuddered at the idea, and yet how many circumstances tallied with it! If it were he, was the result of her passionate words so unaccountable? To his evil mind such expressions might prompt an evil deed. As these uncomfortable thoughts chased each other through her mind, she vainly endeavoured to find some soothing or encouraging words with which to answer the blind girl's appeal, but none would come. How could she quote the Book of Books to one who sought in their every word judgment rather than mercy?

"Tell me what you think, Agnes," Lina said, pleadingly.

And with an effort she replied, "You know, Lina, that as yet I have a very imperfect acquaintance with your sad story. I gather from stray allusions that the poor lady died, who you told me was so ill as to send for her husband on her death-bed. What reason have you for suspecting foul play? Why should she not have died a natural death?"

"I cannot tell you—I have no grounds for my suspicions."

Then it cannot be Dr. Weld, was Agnes's rapid conclusion, for I gave her good grounds for suspicion, for certainty rather, as to him. "If you have not, then give him the benefit of the doubt, Lina. Excited as you now are, you are not capable of a fair judgment. A thought, brooded on from day to day, becomes in the end a monomania; but it can never really transform a coincidence into a proof of crime."

"Would to heaven I could believe it a mere coincidence!" she exclaimed. "But why beat about the bush longer? One day you will, no doubt, learn the truth; and it is better you should hear it from me. And you shall hear it if you give me a solemn pledge never to reveal to a living soul the real circumstances, nor the name of him whom I have called Sigismund."

"That I cannot do," Agnes said, after a short consideration. "I am so situated that I might be forced to break such a promise. But if it will satisfy you that I engage not to do so without your knowledge, I can promise that."

"No, that will not do. I must have your solemn word of honour never, by word or deed, to tell any one, especially my cousin Lionel, who it is who once ruled me by love, and now—by fear."

"Dearest Lina, if you have anything to dread from this man, why conceal it from those who are most willing and able to help you?"

"Because I must, Agnes. I can give no other reason. Oh, how I should have liked that you knew the truth! You could have helped me in any strait. You, so wise, so good; one whom he——" She stopped abruptly, and then added, "Will you not listen to me? Will you not give me your promise?"

Perhaps it would have been better if Agnes had boldly given as the reason for her refusal that her suspicions pointed so strongly to Dr. Weld, that she did not choose to hamper herself with anything which could militate against her warning the Hornbys and others of his temptation to visit Kinburn, but she did not like to say what she thought to Lina. It might—if mistaken—cause a breach between them that could never heal. So she gently, but decidedly, repeated her refusal, except with the stipulations she had

already made. "I assure you," she said, eagerly, "they will be quite effectual in preventing any danger to your friend."

"It may be so," Lina replied; "but I can be as dogged in holding to my resolution as you, Agnes. Ah, me! had I but my eyes I should be independent of any one's aid. As it is, I must sue for help, for sympathy, for kindness, and have my suit denied."

The cruel injustice of this complaint, as far as Agnes was concerned, seemed to strike even herself as the words were uttered, and she added apologetically, "I do not blame you, Agnes, in saying this. You may have your reasons for refusing what I ask; but oh! if you knew what it is to be alone in the world, as I am now! If you could conceive the misery of having garnered my hopes, my affections, my sympathies, on one idolized object, only to find them betrayed! If you could guess the wrench it is to have a wish, a thought, apart from his interests, you would understand what I feel now, and what the temptation is to end this dreary, miserable existence by my own hand. But for the something after death, it had been done long ago. I tried it once. I thrust myself in Death's way, but he would not strike. I lost health, sight, hope, all that makes life worth having; but life itself remains! I have not won death, but I have won its bitterness—a bitterness that will never pass away."

"It will, dear Lina," Agnes said, hopefully.

"Never, Agnes, never. Silence, and darkness, and loneliness of heart have taught me to regret the good gifts I squandered for his sake, but they have taught me nothing more. Instead of peace, I have torment; instead of resignation, despair. But we are at home, are we not? I must bring you no farther. When once I enter the garden gate, I can find my own way."

"No, Lina, I cannot leave you with such thoughts to keep you company."

"How can you help it? Have I not proved to you that the Bible itself, which ought to bring a panacea for all mortal evil, a balm for every wounded heart, only echoes and re-echoes my condemnation?"

"You are wrong, Lina, quite wrong. God is all-mer-

ciful, and if, instead of brooding upon isolated texts, you would but embrace the whole spirit of the Gospel, you would soon learn that no sinner is without hope. Salvation is freely, unreservedly offered to all who seek it through our Lord's great sacrifice."

"Agnes, there is a sin unto death, of which the Apostle says, 'I do not say ye shall pray for it.'"

"That is wilful, perverse sin, dear Lina. Yours is not of such. Why, why will you not cling to our Lord's clear, simple promises of salvation?"

"I cannot. God knows I would give much to believe as poor Nanny does. If you can show me how to do so I will bless you, Agnes, to my dying day."

How weak, how powerless, how ignorant Agnes felt as this piteous appeal fell on her ear, and she exclaimed, "Ah, Lina, if the Bible itself cannot teach you, how can I? I can feel for you, but to teach you—alas! Lina, I am a weak, ignorant woman. Oh, if you would but seek help from a minister of Christ!"

A blush, either of anger or confusion, tinged Lina's cheek at these words. "If *you* cannot help me," she said, "no one else shall. I know already what priests would say to me. They would call me a miserable sinner, and bid me repent. But what good would that do me? No, no, Agnes, that cannot be. When Mr. Hornby came here first, two years ago, I took pains to show him that, as a friend, I should welcome him, but would receive him in no other capacity. You know, Agnes, I could not open my heart to him as I have done to you."

Agnes urged her proposal no further, but, accompanying her friend into the house, she sat down by her, and in a meek and gentle spirit endeavoured to instil into her mind the hopes to which she herself clung. She could not do much—what human being can in such matters?—but remembering that, in bodily ailments, tenderness and delicacy of handling are sometimes as efficacious at first as strength and science, she used the simple means within her grasp. She uttered loving, cheering words. She selected portions of the Holy Scriptures that inspired hope rather than despair. She described the seasons of depressions which had assailed herself, and the means of comfort which she had

found to be efficacious in time of trouble, and by-and-by she perceived that her simple efforts had some effect.

It was not one day's labour only to instil hope into that storm-tossed soul; but one by one trembling rays found entrance, and a happy morning came at last, when Lina, of her own free will, expressed a wish to have Mr. Hornby's views on one of the subjects they had discussed together.

How eagerly Agnes followed up the suggestion! how earnestly entreated Lina to seek help from one so much more fitted than herself to guide her trembling steps!

For a little while the blind girl resisted her persuasions; but the thirst for knowledge was beginning, while she unconsciously gave a certain adhesion to the authority of Mr. Hornby's sacred office, and she said at length, "So be it, Agnes; but remember he does not come to me as a father confessor."

"No," Agnes replied; "he comes simply as the servant of the Great Physician, to administer the healing balm of the Gospel; and," she added, reverently, "remember, Lina, that 'the effectual, fervent prayer of the righteous man availeth much.'"



CHAPTER XXIV

HARRY'S RETURN.

THE time Agnes so fondly anticipated, when Lina should realize the peace that passeth understanding, had not come yet—did not come for many a long day. Dispositions like hers make but slow progress to such a goal, and any rash endeavour to press them on too fast is apt to end fatally. But a beginning was made, and so Agnes was content to leave her gradual advance in the right way to Mr. Hornby's experience, without probing either her confidence or her religious progress further.

It was not many days after the walk home together from Nancy's cottage, that Lionel Upton ventured to sound Agnes as to whether she had yet found the open sesame to his cousin's padlocked heart.

Agnes answered, rather constrainedly, "I think I have in some measure, though not entirely."

"I suppose I dare not ask how?"

"No," she said, with a smile; "for as it happened the padlock gave way of itself; I made no effort to force it."

"And you expect me to follow your good example?"

"Yes; for the little I could tell you would be valueless, except this—that accident enabled me so far to do as you wish, and shake her faith in the so-called Maxwell."

"Indeed! What a skilful enchanter you are!"

"Not so; I only used the weapons that came to my hand accidentally."

"Accident seems to play a very wonderful *rôle* in your good deeds, Miss Stuart," he said, pointedly. "Are you quite certain that a clear judgment and a special faculty of turning to good account the opportunities which others overlook is not a true explanation of your success?"

She coloured as she replied, "And are not opportunities the accidents Providence sends to aid us in difficulty? I dare say you remember the lines:

" 'Oh, who art thou, so fleet proceeding,
Thus casting back thine eyes of flame?'
'Known but to few, through Earth I'm speeding,
And Opportunity's my name.'

" 'What form is that that scowls behind thee?'
'Repentance is the form you see.
Know then the fate that may betide thee,
She seizes them that seize not me.'"

"I never heard them before. They are very striking—very true. One does bitterly repent of a lost opportunity." And he leaned his head on his hand, while his eyes wore the dreamy look which tells of an absent mind. "Yet, like all striking remarks," he continued, after a moment's silence, "it has its converse; for we as often regret rash words or deeds as we do neglected opportunities."

Agnes smiled unconsciously, for as far as she knew Mr. Up'ou, he seemed the last man in the world addicted to the failing of impulsiveness. And yet is it not often the most prudent, the most cautious people in ordinary affairs, who have their lives blighted by yielding to a sudden and overwhelming impulse?

"Well," she said, "I hope it is not a rash question which

I am going to ask you. There is a certain peril hanging over your cousin—at least I suspect there is, though I have failed to learn anything distinct; but, lest I have guessed rightly, I desire to know to whom I should apply for help to avert it in case of need. To you?”

“Oh, no; not to me. My cousin would never forgive any interference on my part, however well intended. The person to apply to is Campbell, my senior partner. He is more conversant with Miss Hepburn’s affairs than most people. She likes him, though I believe he has spoken more plainly to her than most, and his kind heart and zeal are only equalled by his discretion.”

“You describe a very sterling character, Mr. Upton, and with such a one to fall back upon, I can look forward to the mysterious future with less anxiety.”

She spoke with evident relief. Mr. Upton glanced at her in astonishment.

“Forgive me, Miss Stuart; but you really are unlike any person I ever met before.”

“In what way?”

“Why, you take this tangled skein of my cousin’s in hand, you unravel it thread by thread, and yet manage the whole affair as coolly as if there were nothing to pride yourself upon in succeeding where all have failed hitherto.”

“I have not succeeded, Mr. Upton,” Agnes said, rather sadly; “I wish I had. I have only caught one little glimpse of a possible clue to this mystery; but if it is what I believe, Mr. Campbell’s aid will be necessary to gain a chance of ultimate success.”

“I think you have not yet seen Campbell?” he said, as, rising from his favourite lounge in the window-seat, he drew a chair close to Agnes’s work-table.

“No. The only time he has been at Kinburn since we came was during my aunt’s illness; but you and your mother have spoken of him so frequently, that I almost fancy we are already acquainted.”

“I am sure you will like him, and I trust you will meet next week at Kinburn. By the way, I have a note for your aunt from my mother,” diving his hand into one pocket after another. “Ah, what wretched messengers we men make! I have left it in my paletot pocket in the hall.

Pray, Miss Stuart, remind me of it. What were we talking about?"

"Mr. Campbell."

"Ay; but I need say no more of him, for you will so soon have an opportunity of judging for yourself. I remember now. I was going to ask you whether you happen to know a brother of Mrs. Hornby, who is, I understand, to succeed to Dr. Brown's practice at St. Ringans?"

"Oh yes, very well. We were playmates as children, and he was afterwards a pupil of my brother at Saxenham."

"Oh," and Mr. Upton's countenance changed a little, "I think I remember him at Old-street. A handsome, dark-eyed lad, with a good forehead. He is very young, is he not?"

"Not very young. Harry is nearly four-and-twenty."

"Four-and-twenty. Oh! He is not a relation of yours, is he? I remember, I fancied he was when at Saxenham."

"No relation—simply a friend. We have known the Thorpes all our lives."

In spite of herself, Agnes coloured at this explanation, less because she was embarrassed when speaking of Harry, than because Mr. Upton's eyes were turned upon her. Now Lionel Upton's eyes, though very quiet, peaceable ones in general, had a kind of penetrating power of their own when he took the trouble to fix them on any particular object, and somehow or other Agnes felt uncomfortable, and bent her head over her work.

"But you are interested in Dr. Thorpe's success?"

"Oh yes!"

"I thought so, for Mrs. Hornby told me that you prophesy he will, by-and-by, have the largest practice in the county."

"Harry is very clever," Agnes said, with an attempt at liveliness, "and is also my brother's favourite pupil; so it is natural I should expect him to succeed. But really, Mr. Upton, if I did say such a thing to Mrs. Hornby, it was only a broad way of expressing my hope that he would be popular. As a new-comer, I have no right to answer for his success at St. Ringans."

"A new-comer," he said, laughingly, "sometimes sees

the lie of a country better than 'the oldest inhabitant;' and, if one may judge from appearances, Miss Stuart has contrived, in some way or other, to be deeper in the secrets of St. Ringans than those who have lived in the parish half their lives."

Even to herself Agnes could not explain why this intended compliment vexed her as it did. Perhaps an unconfessed discovery of her feelings towards the speaker made her struggle to prove to herself that she would not swallow his pretty speeches wholesale; perhaps she fancied that Mrs. Hornby might have said rather more than was necessary with regard to herself and Harry; perhaps she was out of tune that soft May evening, as we all are sometimes, without any power of explaining why or wherefore; but, at all events, she chose to resent Mr. Upton's remark, and said, with a sharpness quite unusual to her, "I wish, Mr. Upton, you would not say such things, even in jest. I assure you it is not by my own wish that I am so deep in your family secrets. It was from no desire to receive compliments that——"

"My dear Miss Stuart," he interrupted, utterly dismayed by this ebullition—"my dear Miss Stuart, I am utterly at a loss to understand you. Surely you do not think so ill of me as to suppose that my silly speech implied *blame* to you?"

"Not blame, perhaps," she said, ashamed of her outburst; "only you already said something this evening which led me to suspect that you fancied I triumphed in succeeding where others had failed, so that when you again alluded to——" She stopped abruptly.

"To your having won the confidence of so many new friends?" he added, fixing his eyes once more on her troubled face. "Well! what possible blame could there be in that? Can you suppose that I, that any of us, can feel aught but gratitude for your unselfish efforts to comfort my poor cousin? My mother blesses the hour when your foot crossed our threshold. I myself owe you much. You have not only sympathized with my own little troubles, but your influence with Miss Hepburn is such that we can now meet without a quarrel, and can reside under one roof without making my dear mother wretched. All this is your work;

how, then, can you suppose I spoke mockingly of that which has made us all so much happier?"

As he spoke, his voice gained a power and volume unusual to it, his eyes darkened and deepened, and the truthful earnestness of his countenance made him, for the moment, almost handsome. In spite of herself, Agnes raised her eyes and looked at him. There seemed a fascination in the steadiness of his glance that she could not resist; but yet her confusion increased as she answered, "Forgive my petulance. I fear that it is not good for me to be so flatteringly considered." And she tried to smile, but her lip quivered in the attempt.

"Don't say, don't think so," he said, kindly. "You see you are of a very different type of character from our family. We are resolute and obstinate, but we lack softness; and, more than that, we lack your bright, sanguine temper. We plod through difficulties, but we don't assail them with the ready tact with which you are gifted. And so—and so we rather admire those talents we have not ourselves."

"You are very good to put it so. But——"

"No more explanations," he again interrupted. "You have been accustomed to talk on equal terms with a brother. I—well! I sometimes try to forget that you are not in reality the dear sister Agnes of whom you so often remind me. I find myself watching your changing countenance, listening to your rounded tones, and trying to delude myself into the idea that such she would have been had it pleased God to spare her to us. But she was taken from the evil to come, and who shall say that the removal was not merciful? And yet I often feel the need of a sister's sympathy, a sister's readiness to enter into my thoughts, my anticipations, my fears. At least, I did till you came to the Whim."

Agnes's heart beat fast; there was a tenderness in his tone and in his look which she had never marked before, and, for an instant, the idea flashed through her brain that, after all, he did care for her as she cared for him! But the next words did not confirm the impression.

"And now," he continued, that that little difficulty is overcome, I must go back "to what I was about to say

when your sudden fit of humility interrupted me. It was not from mere euriosity that I questioned you about Dr. Thorpe. Campbell was speaking to me yesterday——”

Before his sentence was completed, and while Agnes still trembled with the agitation produced by her own wild hopes so suddenly roused, and as suddenly put to flight, a clear, manly voice from the drawing-room exclaimed, “Is Agnes in her sanetum, Aunt Ellis?” The door between the rooms was suddenly flung open, and Dr. Thorpe entered.

Agnes started to her feet, with flushed cheeks and moistened eyes, and made a few steps forward to meet him. Mr. Upton’s glance followed her with surprise. Never before had he seen her so animated, so pretty; and, as it did not occur to him that his own sweet words had aided and abetted the transformation, he very naturally attributed it to Harry’s presence.

Now, it happened that the ostensible reason he had assigned to himself for calling that day at the Whim, was to consult with Agnes whether it would not be wiser for Dr. Thorpe to propose himself as a candidate for a rather advantageous medical position in Fairholm, than fix himself “seven miles from a railway.” But the little misunderstanding between them had prevented him from reaching his intended point until the object of his interest appeared on the scene, and, oddly enough, caused him, instead of announcing the object of the visit, to be seized with a fit of prudenece, which led him to delay any allusion to the Fairholm project until he had had more opportunity of discovering what sort of young man Dr. Thorpe really was. And thus, on his introduction to Harry, he addressed to him a rather formal speech, intimating that he was on his way to the Parsonage, to inquire whether Dr. Thorpe had arrived, that he might call upon him.

Harry opened his eyes very wide at this announcement, and answered by a little foreign bow, but was a good deal relieved when his sister and Mrs. Ellis entered and called Mr. Upton’s attention from himself. Taking advantage of the opportunity thus afforded, he dropped into the chair his new acquaintance had just vacated, and began to speak to Agnes with the greatest eagerness.

"You never saw Harry before, I think?" Mrs. Hornby said, addressing Mr. Upton, and following the scrutinizing glance he turned on her brother and Agnes.

He gave a little start as he replied, "Miss Stuart reminds me we met at Saxenham some years since. He is greatly altered since then."

"For the better, I hope?"

"Yes, certainly for the better." His calm cold answer mortified the affectionate sister, and, turning to her brother, she asked him whether he remembered Mr. Upton.

"I?" he said, with a look of surprise, and perhaps with a slight tinge of vexation to be interrupted in his *tête-à-tête*. "No; we never met before, did we?"

Agnes smiled at the curt rejoinder. Mr. Upton smiled also, but it was with his most formal manner that he explained when and where they had seen each other.

"I half wish this were our first acquaintance," Harry said, with a grimace, "for I have a kind of notion I was a bit of a bore in the days of my pupilage. Was not I, Aunt Ellis?" The question, however, though addressed to the aunt, was pointed by a turn of the dark eye to the niece.

"Nonsense, Harry," was Mrs. Ellis's reply; "you were nothing of the kind. You were a very clever, well-behaved youth."

"There, Agnes!" he exclaimed, with a chuckling laugh, "Aunt Ellis has come over to my side now, so I dare you to say a word against me."

"What do you mean by that, Harry?" Mrs. Ellis rejoined. "You know well enough that you were always a prodigious favourite with Agnes."

Both Harry and Agnes coloured at this remark, while Mrs. Hornby laughed heartily, and gave Agnes a meaning smile. Mr. Upton looked from one to the other with a puzzled air, feeling that something was going on from which he was shut out, and with an ever-increasing dislike in consequence to Dr. Thorpe. So he rose abruptly, and bade them all good-bye.

On shaking hands with Harry—he felt he ought to do it whether he liked it or no—he said rather patronisingly, "You have two good recommendations to this neighbourhood, Dr. Thorpe, that you are my good friend Hornby's

brother-in-law, and that you are an acknowledged favourite of the ladies of the Whim. I do not doubt that you will do credit to both."

There was something in this speech that disconcerted Harry. "No doubt the fellow meant to be polite, but it was a little too absurd to hear a man only a few years his senior addressing him as if he were a schoolboy on his good behaviour." Still the cordial grasp of his hand—a greater effort, by the way, than Harry at all suspected—made a pleasant impression on him, and, as Mr. Upton left the room, he said to Agnes,

"So that is the laird of Kinburn! He seems a last-century sort of fellow."

"He is so, if you mean that his manners are more those of the old school than the new. I suppose that was why Isabella predicted that I should not like him."

"And do you?"

"Very much."

As these words passed her lips, Mr. Upton again made his appearance, with one or two cards of invitation in his hand, and, apologizing for his previous forgetfulness, handed one to Mrs. Ellis, another to Mrs. Hornby, and the third to Harry, saying something civil about his hope that he would waive ceremony, and allow his mother and himself to have the pleasure of seeing him at Kinburn.

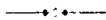
Harry bowed, mumbled something about being most happy, and Mr. Upton vanished through the garden door as suddenly as he had appeared, at which Agnes was extremely astonished, until the croaking sound of Mrs. Trotter's voice, approaching from the drawing-room door, enlightened her as to the cause of his flight. She had been long enough at St. Ringans to be aware that Lionel Upton seldom cared to extend a visit when the shadow of Mrs. Trotter's black poke-bonnet fell upon him.

Harry made a worse grimace than ever when he recognized the lady in question; but the cherub faces of her nieces arrested him in the act of following Mr. Upton in his flight, and he made such good use of his introduction to the Miss Weirs, that Sophy and Effie thought him even more agreeable than a certain Count Vandeweld whom they had met in Germany, and who had fascinated even their

strong-minded aunt by the grace of his manner and the exquisite little attentions he had paid to them all, and to Mrs. Trotter in particular.

Their delight, therefore, was great when they learned that he was to be one of the dinner-party at Kinburn, and visions of wearing their new pink muslin dresses, instead of the old white with scarlet trimmings, darted quickly through their innocent minds at the intelligence.

Happy girls! they had still the faculty of enjoyment in the thought of wearing pink muslins, and in believing implicitly that Dr. Thorpe, whose face was framed in dark curling hair and beard, and who spoke so eloquently of German music, really did desire, as he said he did, to hear their "Volklieder."



CHAPTER XXV

THE KINBURN DINNER-PARTY.

"I AM glad we meet at last, Miss Stuart! I thought there was a spell against it. Here have you been months at the Whim, and I have never seen you till now."

Agnes frankly returned the cordial hand-shake with which Mr. Campbell accompanied his address, and scanned him carefully, as if she expected him to resemble the fancy portrait she had formed of him, when hearing him spoken of so frequently. He was a tall, wiry man, with grizzled hair and marked features; but his countenance was redeemed from plainness by the sparkle of two brilliant black eyes, and by two rows of strong white teeth, which gleamed from between his firm lips, and gave peculiar brightness to his countenance when he smiled. His forehead, too, was broad and white; and when one listened to his charming laugh and full mellow voice, one felt he was a benevolent as well as a clear-headed man.

He seemed diverted by Agnes's scrutiny, and returned it with interest, as he said, "How comes it that Mrs. Upton has never brought you to Fairholm? There is plenty to see there. Some first-rate factories. Our member, you know, has some of the largest flax-mills in Scotland, and our docks are next to those of Normanpool. You know

Normanpool, of course. Quite close to Saxenham, is it not?"

"I have been only once in Normanpool," Agnes answered, the special occasion which called her there rushing freshly back on her memory, and making her cheek burn; "and I did not see the docks. I should like much to see those at Fairholm."

"Then you shall see them, and in the best way. I'll settle that. You must come up to my place—you and the 'twa bonnic lassie,' Effie and Sophy Weir. They are very dear bairns, though their aunt, Mrs. Trotter, is a thought gruesome. But she has her good points too, if you can but find them out. Everybody has good in them, you know, if we have but the sense to touch the right spring, Miss Stuart. But what ghost is that?" he suddenly exclaimed, as Miss Hepburn glided noiselessly into the room, leaning on Effie Weir's arm. "Bless me! is she fey to come once again among us? Poor lassie! poor lassie! how thin and white she is. Ah, Miss Stuart, if you had seen her when I saw her first, with her bonnie bright face and her sparkling blue eyes and her little foreign airs and graces, you would grieve as I do over the change. Lionel tells me you have been a friend to her, and few have more need of friends." He broke off abruptly, for Lina, still leaning on Effie, came up to them.

Mr. Campbell hastily rose, and with gentle forec placed the blind girl in his own chair, saying at the same time, "I am heartily glad to see you, my dear. Now let me hear all you have been doing and thinking since I saw you last."

Agnes was touched by the kindness of his manner to Lina. Lionel had told her that this man knew more of her sad story and unaccountable behaviour than any one, and yet the delicate courtesy of his treatment of her was that of a perfect gentleman.

Lina's voice trembled a little as she answered him, "Thank you, Mr. Campbell; you are always ready to help those who need it. You have given me your own chair by Agnes?"

"Well!" he said, with a laugh, "why not? I can stand, and what's more, I can carry you safely down the cranky stair to the dining-room, if you will let me. I

assure you, Miss Lina, I know its turns better than the young fellow who looks as if he wanted to be in my place at this moment. Who is he, my dear?" turning abruptly to Agnes.

She followed the direction of his eyes, and saw Harry Thorpe gazing at Lina with the most surprised admiration, and certainly, at the moment, she was well worthy of it. Her dress, of some light gauzy stuff, floated round her like a cloud, and its delicate tint harmonized exquisitely with her fair complexion and the rich masses of her golden hair. Her eyes, it is true, were veiled; but the soft white lids, richly fringed with lashes of a deeper shade than her hair, and the pencilled eyebrows, gave a force and expression to her countenance that, for a time, made a stranger forget that the eye itself was mute.

"It is Dr. Thorpe," Agnes answered.

"Ah! I am glad of that. I want to see what that young man is made of."

Harry had by this time approached, and was already whispering to Agnes, "Do introduce me; she is as lovely as a dream."

The move to the dining-room prevented her from granting his request; for already Mr. Campbell had tucked Lina's arm under his, and then, with a sudden recollection of previous arrangements, he exclaimed,

"Ah, dear, bless me! I was to have taken Miss Stuart. Well, it can't be helped now;" and away he trotted, to Agnes's great amusement.

"Has Campbell deserted you?" Mr. Upton said to her, as, with Mrs. McFarlane on his arm, he brought up the long procession; "his impulsiveness always throws things into confusion. But you will take my other arm?"

"Thank you, I am quite satisfied with my lot," she said, with a bright smile, drawing Effie's hand within her arm as she followed Mrs. Upton's guiding glance, and seated herself between her hostess and her own false knight.

It was the first time that Agnes had seen Lina in anything but a family party, and she was taken by surprise to find her join in conversation with the grace and *aplomb* of a person in the constant habit of society. She was piquant without satire, sprightly without affectation, and showed

very wonderful tact in drawing out Mr. Campbell in his most favourable points. Under her inspiration he told good stories, related racy anecdotes, and so merry was the laughter at their end of the table, that Agnes more than once observed that Mr. Upton's eyes turned with inquisitive glances towards them, even while endeavouring to converse with Mrs. M'Farlane on the delinquencies of the parish and the inconvenience of the manse.

The gentlemen soon followed the ladies to the drawing-room, and Agnes gave a little start when she saw Mr. Upton make straight for the sofa where she was, and possess himself of the easy-chair close by. It was, no doubt, the most comfortable chair in the room, and it was one of his little jokes against himself, that he had a faculty for selecting such for his own use; still, the way in which he took it convinced her that he wished to be near her, and it would have been mere affectation to pretend not to see that she was his principal attraction to that part of the room.

"You were very merry at your end of the table," he began, abruptly. "What amused you so much? I really felt aggrieved to be so completely left out."

"You looked as if you did, Lionel," broke in Mr. Campbell, coming up at the moment, and indulging in a hearty laugh. "Why, we were all astride my hobby, theatricals, and it is my positive belief that Miss Stuart is three times the age she looks; for she discourses as learnedly on Kemble, Siddons, and Edmund Kean, on Mara, Kitty Stephens, and Mrs. Salmon, as if she had been in the habit of seeing and hearing them night after night. But she has promised to sing me some of the delicious old tunes that made me weep long ago; so rouse yourself, my boy, and open the piano; for, you, know, I must leave you soon, with that seven miles' drive before me, and no moon."

Mr. Upton rose as he was desired, but Mrs. Trotter looked black as thunder when she saw her nephew and Mr. Campbell pressing Agnes to sing, while nobody seemed to remember Sophy and Effie's powers. But the young girls themselves were of that fresh, loving disposition, without a tinge of jealousy, which made them rejoice to listen to Agnes and utterly forget themselves. Harry Thorpe thought Effie's blew eyes quite lovely, and her rose-

bud mouth enehanting, as she looked up in his face and asked him whether he did not think that there was something in Miss Stuart's singing which no one could equal.

But in truth the secret of Agnes's power was a simple one. She was quite without pretence, and had a very clear articulation of the words of her songs. Her voice was more sweet than powerful, but she knew enough of the science of music to accompany herself well, and to transpose the keys to suit her capabilities. It was this which the Weirs thought marvellous. To them, to play without a book was almost a miracle, but to do so from knowledge rather than memory, was incomprehensible.

She quite satisfied Mr. Campbell's craving for old ditties, and when at last she sang "Sweet Home," he got so excited he insisted on an encore. Every singer knows what a difficult request this is, so she ventured to substitute the quaint little song of "Flavia." At first Mr. Campbell frowned when he heard an unknown "tune," as he called it, but when she got to the lines—

"When wit and sense like hers agree,
One may be pleased and yet be free,"

his delight was intense.

He burst forth, "That is sense—that is worth listening to—as superior to the loves and doves, passions and fashions of the present day, as Kitty Stephens was to our Fairholm *prima donna*, Mrs. Noel. Ah, Miss Stuart, you are the one who can understand what an old fellow likes! You have made me really happy to-night, and"—with a glance at his huge gold repeater—"and I would go away perfectly satisfied if you would but sing me one of Haydn's canzonets; that one——" and he attempted a few bars in a rough but not unmusical voice.

"My mother bids me bind my hair?" With all my heart!"

As she finished, she was surprised to see the old man's eyes brimming over with tears.

"Lady," he said, as he took her hand in both of his, "you don't know what pleasure you have given me. That was a tune my dear mother used to sing to me when I was a little chap not higher than that. Another of hers was

'Peaceful slumbering on the ocean.' You don't know it, though?"

"Yes, I do," Agnes said, with a laugh which tried to conceal how Mr. Campbell's emotion had touched her; "but I am not going to sing it to you to-night." And she rose from the piano with a pretty little determined air. "We must not sing *all* our songs the first night; besides which everybody wants to hear the Miss Weirs and Dr. Thorpe's German 'Lieder.'"

Mr. Campbell made some not very polite remark with regard to German "Lieder," but at that moment his carriage was announced, so he sprang up, gave her hand a hearty squeeze, hoped they might meet soon again, and, with a hurried bow to the rest of the party, he rushed away.

"You have made a conquest of Campbell," Lionel Upton remarked, as he subsided into the same tempting chair he had previously occupied. "He tells me you have promised to visit him at Fairholm, see its lions, go to the theatre, and what not."

"Yes," she answered, "I could not decline so many tempting offers, especially as we are expecting a niece of my aunt's to visit us soon, and I doubt whether she will submit to the still life of the Whim as easily as we do."

She was determined to give him a hint of who Mrs. Vaughan was, but he seemed perversely to throw obstacles in her way, for he answered:

"I have often thought what a contrast it must be to the full life you used to lead at Saxenham. Dr. Thorpe and I were talking over the pleasant style of your society there; less polished, perhaps, than in some more pretentious places, but so full of original thinkers—men of action and vigour; while here——"

"Here we have trees and flowers instead of men, and the wild war of ocean instead of the war of opinions," said Agnes, lightly.

"True. Still it seems to me you are one who would find more pleasure in men than scenery, in books than brooks, in the human face divine than in the changing ocean."

"I thought so once, but, thank Heaven, I begin to find

that a country life has charms no town can give, and that to live in an intimate circle of friends, almost recompenses me for the changeable society of mere acquaintance.”

“*Almost!* You are wise to say that,” he said.

But she saw the Weirs rise from their places at the piano, she felt that they were urging Dr. Thorpe to sing, she knew that Mrs. Hornby would make him ask her to play his accompaniments instead of doing so herself, and so if she wished to speak of Nellie Vaughan she must lose no time. Thus she interrupted him by saying: “We are, however, doing our utmost to bring life and variety into our present circle. My aunt’s niece, Mrs. Vaughan, comes to us next week.”

“Mrs. Vaughan?” And Agnes saw the name was not unfamiliar to his ear.

“Yes. She is a widow, just returning from India, where her husband died two years since.”

“She is a cousin of yours, you say?”

“No; Mrs. Ellis’s niece, but no relation of ours. Her maiden name was Cornelia Ellis.”

At that moment Dr. Thorpe came up. “Miss Stuart,” he said, “will you compassionate me and play the accompaniment of ‘*Land meiner seligsten Gefühle?*’ I cannot come it myself, and Isabella is lazy.”

Agnes rose at once. Mr. Upton never stirred. Indeed, the brown study into which he fell was so deep that his mother had to summon him twice before he could be made to comprehend that Mrs. McFarlane was going, and he must offer her his arm down-stairs.

The company was dispersing rapidly, and as Mr. Upton handed his aunt and Mrs. Ellis into the Kinburn chariot, which invariably carried the lady of St. Ringans Lodge to and fro, Mrs. Trotter whispered: “Lionel, you must see that Mr. Hornby walks home with the girls, and not Dr. Thorpe.”

“Should you like me to be of the party?” he asked.

“Thank you—thank you kindly; I should be much relieved if you were.”

Lionel was half ashamed of the heartiness of his aunt’s gratitude; for he had made the offer less because he wished to gratify her by his care of Sophy and Effie, than because

it occurred to him that by joining the walkers he might have an opportunity of exchanging a few words with Agnes. But the pricking of his conscience did not prevent him from informing Mrs. Hornby that his aunt had entrusted Sophy and Effie to his care, and that he meant, therefore, with her permission, to join the walking party.

"Indeed," Mrs. Hornby said, with an amused smile; "but I hope you are not ordered to prevent Harry accompanying us?"

"How can you ask that?" And he turned abruptly to Agnes, and said, very low, "I want to say a few words to you, so contrive it somehow."

Agnes might have been indignant at this reversal of the general order of things, had she not guessed what he wished to know, and so she bowed an affirmative and made no objection to Mrs. Hornby taking her husband's arm and putting the two girls under her brother's care. Agnes and Mr. Upton dropped a few steps behind.

"You have done me an unintentional service, Miss Stuart," he began, as soon as the others were out of ear-shot, "in telling me who your aunt's expected guest is. She and I were fellow-passengers to India in the *Precursor*, in 185—. I think you said Mrs. Vaughan was a Miss Ellis?"

"Yes, Cornelia, or, as we all call her, Nellie Ellis. She sailed for India shortly after you were in Saxenham. I think it was in the *Precursor*."

He was silent for a moment and then said: "You remember the little book you found in my grandfather's secretaire. She gave it me, and at the time I received it I had little doubt that the affection I felt for her was reciprocated. I promised to follow her to Macutta as soon as I had concluded some pressing affairs at Madras. I did so, and found her married, though scarcely two months had elapsed since we parted as betrothed, and with every prospect of a speedy union. It was a great shock to me! I had not had a very bright youth, and this had been my first gleam of real happiness. I thought then that it was the last, but hearts are less brittle than the poet sings. I have learned since then to rejoice that things had not turned out as I then desired. Still, I were less than man, could I

forget the circumstances under which we met and parted the second time. How very lovely she was then!"

"And is so still," Agnes said, not daring to hazard any other answer to an exclamation which seemed inconsistent with his declaration, that he rejoiced that all was at an end between them.

"I can believe it. Such loveliness as hers cannot be evanescent. She is one of the rare instances of a beauty that is more striking in sorrow than in smiles. Poor Cornelia! How amazed she will be to find me her nearest neighbour!"

Agnes doubted this very much. She knew that Mrs. Ellis had very faithfully described all their neighbours, and it had occurred to her, ere now, that the vicinity of Kinburn might perhaps have something to do with Mrs. Vaughan's visit to the Whim. However, she only answered:

"I know that my aunt has told her niece how near we are to Kinburn."

"Ah, but Cornelia is quite unaware of my having anything to do with Kinburn. She only knew me as Lionel Upton, the merchant, for you may well believe that when I sailed for India, I had not the slightest expectation of succeeding to my grandfather's estates. The second time we met, her circumstances prevented any allusion to my own concerns."

Mr. Upton said this with a full conviction that he spoke the entire truth; but he was mistaken, for, in explaining the urgent necessity for his immediate return to England, he had casually mentioned why he was recalled.

"I think I told you," he went on, "that I met her again at the time of Colonel Vaughan's death?"

"No, you did not allude to a second meeting at all till to-night."

"Did I not? Well! we did meet the very day he died. They had been travelling towards Calcutta when his illness became fatal. Their servants deserted them, and, by a strange accident, I was the means selected by Providence to relieve her from a situation of great peril. Oh, Miss Stuart, had you seen her at that time of misery and danger, you would have admired, wept with her. I did both, and

yet, as I said before, I never wished to revive the past, I do not wish it now. We shall be happier apart, and henceforward, we both acknowledge, we can be nothing to each other. As for me, I look back upon that episode in my history as if it had happened in a previous existence, so completely past is any warmer feeling than that of compassion towards her. But I dare say you will think it odd that, in spite of this, I have a curiosity to know why she gave me up. I long to discover whether it was of her own will, or——”

Mrs. Hornby's voice interrupted him.

“Do you accompany us to St. Ringans, Agnes, or go home?”

“Home, please.”

“Then let us turn this way.”

“Miss Stuart,” Mr. Upton resumed, “it is well for you that my tedious tale is interrupted.”

“I did not find it tedious,” she said, ingenuously.

“But I hope you understand that it is past,—quite, entirely past,—and that you alone are cognizant of the truth, you, from whom I conceal nothing.”

The words were uttered in a tone that made her heart beat quick; but, with wonderful self-possession, she answered, “I quite understand, and you may be certain that I shall not betray your confidence.”

“Of that I am as sure as of my life,” he answered, eagerly; “but one word more: should I come less often to the Whim, hereafter, than I have done of late, you will know my reasons?”

A stop of the whole party at the garden gate of the Whim prevented a reply; but the tone in which she said good night, convinced him she knew what he meant.



CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FIRST SHADOW.

“You will understand my reasons.” These words rang in Agnes's ear, as in the quietude of her own chamber she thought over what Mr. Upton had told her that night, and felt that so far only could she understand it. What his position with Nellie was—whether, as he had said, he desired

to be nothing more than an acquaintance, or whether in his secret soul he still cherished some attachment towards his first love—Agnes failed to discover. Perhaps he scarcely knew himself.

Still, what he had said was true enough, that to her he had confided much that men are not in the habit of acknowledging to every lady acquaintance, and she scarcely thought he would have done so, unless—and there she pulled up sharp. She was resolved not to allow her thoughts to stray in that direction, and so she set herself to prove that his position was such that he had been *accidentally* led to “conceal nothing,” as he himself expressed it, from her. It was a mere concurrence of circumstances that occasioned this unusual intimacy, not her own attractions. At least not necessarily so. At all events, it was not wise to try and analyse too closely either her own feelings, or the motives which had induced his revelations.

To-morrow was Sunday. They had gradually acquired the habit of walking home from St. Mary’s together, and Agnes had lately looked forward to these weekly walks as one of her greatest pleasures. They could not be the same after Mrs. Vaughan’s arrival, if they took place at all. But to-morrow might still be hers; to-morrow he might, if he would, resume the conversation of last night.

“Yes, to-morrow will decide everything,” she said, as she laid her head on the pillow.

Everything? What did she mean by everything? Ah! that was a secret which lay folded in the innermost recesses of her heart, and which she dared not yet drag into the full light of day.

To-morrow came, one of those sweet peaceful Sunday mornings which seemed filled with a holy tranquillity, apart from that of the quietest of week days. A morning when the breath of the flowers seemed to rise like incense to their Maker, when the song of birds was full of praise, when the lark’s heavenward flight drew the soul of man towards the gracious God who clothes Himself with light as with a garment, and whom all in earth and heaven adore. Oh! how lovely nature was! how impossible it seemed that care or sorrow could dim the eyes of any human being to the mercies lavished on them in this world of marvellous

beauty! And still more impossible that evil passions could subsist when surrounded by such soothing, such delicious images of peace and mercy and goodness!

Such thoughts floated through Agnes's mind as she walked leisurely towards the little school-house before morning service at Kinburn Chapel, and permitted her eyes to wander abroad on the lovely scenes which each turn of the road presented to her mind. And yet at that very moment her own heart beat with vague anxiety, and with the conviction that the walk home from church might possibly be the turning-point of her life.

There are moments in the lives of most women when the dawning of a new hope makes them restless and uncomfortable, when craving to know the best or the worst which can befall them, they seem unable to fix their thoughts on any one standing-point. And such was Agnes's state of mind at the present time. She could not but be aware that a gradual change had of late taken place in Lionel Upton's manner towards her, and her heart had trembled with a timid joy as it had whispered what that change might imply. But the discovery of Mrs. Vaughan's identity with the Cornelia of the red morocco book, had instilled an element of dread into her future anticipations, and marred her tremulous hopes. She tortured herself by recollections of "Nellie Ellis's ways of going on," and a dark cloud seemed to hang over her dawning happiness. True, he had said that the past was past for ever; but, he did not know Nellie through and through as she knew her; and she felt a vague anxiety as to the particulars of the last interview to which he had referred with so much emotion. Had he really given her no clue on that occasion to his possible inheritance? She suspected that he had done so, however unintentionally. Her more thorough acquaintance with Nellie's idiosyncrasy, suggested to her that the faintest hint of such a succession was enough to make Lionel Upton an object of interest to the wily widow. Her present means were limited, and though it might not have been worth while to retain the allegiance of Lionel Upton, the manager of the Campbells' house at Calcutta, it was a very different matter when he was looked upon as the laird of Kinburn.

As the conviction of Mrs. Vaughan's perfect acquaintance with her old lover's expectations deepened in Agnes's mind, her step quickened, her pulses beat fiercely, and she turned over in her thoughts the possibility of putting him on his guard by telling him the real character of the woman whose beauty still dazzled his imagination. Cunning, heartless, self-seeking, and false, could she endure to consider her as Lionel Upton's future wife? It was bad enough to have watched her machinations against George. "But George could protect himself," she repeated, "and Lionel cannot."

The more she considered the matter, the more she was convinced that Mr. Upton was very likely to become the prey of a designing woman.

"Well! well! this morning's interview will show me what is best to be done."

But that interview never took place. We all know how often, in common life, a trivial incident overturns all our best contrived projects. And yet, the impediment is such, that it were folly to complain of it. So it was now.

Mrs. Hornby had a headache, and sent Agnes a message through her husband, to beg her to take her class after church. It was impossible for Agnes to give her real reason for wishing to decline the proposal, so she said she would. And thus passed from her the sole opportunity she should ever have of learning the particulars she desired to know.

Mrs. Vaughan came, and, with her coming, a change passed over St. Ringans and Kinburn, as well as over the Whim itself. Every place and every person insensibly fell under the spell of Nellie Vaughan's velvet hand and iron claw.

I have often thought, when listening to the enthusiastic descriptions of those old playgoers to whom the names of Kemble and Siddons were words of meaning, that the marvellous power of the latter over the mind of the spectator must have been akin to that exercised in private life by a thoroughly unscrupulous but beautiful woman. I have heard them say, that when acting Macbeth with any other than his sister, Kemble's personification of the great usurper forced on all who saw him the belief that such a man required no prompting from his wife to become thane of

Glamis and of Cawdor, "and king hereafter:" that in spite of the text, one felt that it was his own unassisted and fertile mind which devised each ambitious scheme, and that he was as capable of relentlessly following them out as of imagining them.

When Mrs. Siddons was his Lady Macbeth, how great the change! It was she then who was the life and soul of all, he sunk into comparative insignificance. Without her help it seemed that he must have failed in every guilty scheme; her ready brain, her unscrupulous hand, her ruthless will, controlled everything. Macbeth was but a puppet in her hands, working the evil deeds under her sovereign influence.

And in a minor degree such is power acquired by a cold-hearted, ambitious woman in actual life. She not only directs events according to her will, but she also affects the personal identity of every one who treads the stage along with her. She not only flings them into shade by her superior attractions, but seems also, for the time, to endow them with her own deteriorating attributes, and instils into them a spirit quite at variance with their original nature.

Such a woman was Cornelia Vaughan. She took the world of St. Ringans by storm. Her grace, her beauty, her softness of manner, her fascinating conversation, were the theme of every tongue. None suspected one so charming of having flattered themselves for the purpose of attaining certain private ends; no one guessed that under a show of pleasing the tastes of others she manœuvred successfully to carry out her own plans. No one, at least, save Agnes and Dr. Thorpe. Every one else dilated on the sweet sympathy which led her to sink the sorrows of her widowed heart to enter into the projects of general amusement; and it was not their part to tear the veil from such a lovely fiend. She joined in all the summer gaieties of St. Ringans, and who but they suspected that the expensive expedition to Ferran's Tower, ending in that pleasant dance on the lawn by moonlight, was actually forced upon Dr. Thorpe by the resolute will of the fair Nellie? Who but Agnes herself was aware that the champagne breakfast Mr. Campbell gave in her honour at Fairholm, was accepted, not by her but Mrs. Vaughan? Who

imagined that any one save Mrs. Ellis herself had originated the charade party at the Whim, given in honour of little Godfrey's birthday, but in which he, poor child, had as little part as he had enjoyment?

In short, a sudden mania for pic-nics, *fêtes champêtres*, carpet dances, &c., seized on the whole neighbourhood; and though all allowed that Mrs. Vaughan's presence enhanced their delights, it never occurred to the generality that they were one and all suggested by the widow; nor did even Dr. Thorpe fathom *all* her reasons for setting them a-going. Agnes understood them well enough. She at once perceived that in those crowded parties Nellie and Mr. Upton were more thrown together than in the narrower circle of everyday life. Eyes had other occupations than to watch their neighbours; and words could be uttered, and effects produced, by a skilful tongue and a skilful hand, that must have failed in the quiet home-life of Kinburn or the Whim.

Their first meeting had been in a crowd. Agnes had seen it. It was well managed on Mrs. Vaughan's part. The slight start, the broken exclamation, the outstretched hand, were just enough, and not too much. No man could resist the flattery implied by the moistened eye, the low voice whispering pleased surprise at their unexpected meeting.

"Kinburn so near! I did not know—I fancied Aunt Ellis said—in short, I have been very stupid, very, very. And yet I am glad. I cannot help being so, that—that—we must meet sometimes." And then Lionel sat down by her, and Agnes felt that the narrow end of the wedge was introduced. Time and opportunity alone were wanting to drive it home.

And so her short-lived dream was over. But no one had even suspected it, that was one comfort; and she had no leisure to sit down and think. It was better so. She could do nothing; and to watch the gradual falling away of a bright hope, without the power to act, is killing work. Moreover, Mrs. Vaughan's visit gave her sufficient home-occupation. Old experience had forewarned her it would be so. The exquisite beauty, the honeyed sweetness, the social talents which made the pretty widow a favourite abroad, were not wasted on home-life. There the veil was

withdrawn, and she showed herself the same petty tyrant to her servants, the same selfish egotist to her hosts, that she had been as a girl. But what most distressed Agnes was her treatment of her son. Godfrey was naturally a fine-spirited little fellow, with affectionate impulses, and a high sense of rectitude; but his mother's injudicious conduct to him, alternating between reckless indulgence and the strictest nursery discipline, was gradually teaching him to be a coward and a liar; and Agnes's heart burned as she saw Mrs. Vaughan's utter indifference to the effect of her selfish behaviour on the poor child.

By degrees Godfrey learned to look for sympathy from Agnes more than from his mother; and she, touched by the child's affection for her, devoted to him much of the little leisure now left her from domestic duties. From the moment of Mrs. Vaughan's arrival, a complete *bouleversement* took place in the daily routine of affairs at the Whim, and it devolved on Agnes to fulfil the fancies of her guest without making too serious a drag on their limited income.

It was a true comfort to her at this time of constant occupation to remember that Miss Hepburn was no longer dependent on her alone for help and comfort in treading the new path she had set before her; for, as things were, her visits to Lina were necessarily restricted as to time and frequency. But her place was amply filled by Mr. Hornby, under whose guidance a change for the better was gradually taking place in the blind girl. Less exacting, and more cheerful than of old, she was now endeavouring to take such an interest in things present, as to forget, in some degree, to brood over the past; and Agnes found her willing to listen to all she had to tell her of Nellie's success at St. Ringans, on which she made remarks with wonderful acumen.

"A changed life this makes for you, Agnes," she said, after Mrs. Vaughan had spent a fortnight at the Whim; but I doubt whether it makes you happier."

"Why should you suppose I do not enjoy it?"

"I feel it, somehow. And my impression is---You won't be angry if I speak frankly?"

"Oh no."

"My impression is, that your pretty widow is making mischief."

“Between whom?”

“Everybody. I had a chat with Effie Weir yesterday, and she let me far more behind the scenes than you do. In the first place, Mrs. Vaughan has tried hard to make the two girls jealous of you.”

“Of me?”

“Yes. You ought to know it. She has been hinting that you are engaged to Dr. Thorpe.”

“Cornelia told her so?” and a thousand circumstances which had within the last few days puzzled and distressed Agnes were suddenly made clear.

“You never were engaged to him?” Lina continued.

“Never.”

“I was sure of it. I told Effie so decidedly I insisted that you were only friends, and added, what perhaps was not true, that you were considerably his senior.”

“By five months,” Agnes said, with a laugh. “But I have always treated him as a boy, and I do so still, I am afraid.”

“In short, you don’t choose to tell me the truth; but, as Mrs. Hornby did so, you break no confidence in confessing it. Only, of course, I did not tell *that* to Effie. Poor child! let her fancy, if she can, that it is first love on his side as on hers.”

“Will Mrs. Trotter approve?”

“I don’t know. He must be cautious. I advise you to warn him. What is this they are saying about his giving up St. Ringans for Fairholm?”

“I have not heard of it.”

“Oh! perhaps I should not have mentioned it. I overheard Mr. Campbell talking to my cousin about it. They think it would be wiser for him to go to Fairholm. An opening is expected from some resignation in the staff of the Infirmary.”

Agnes did not answer. What Lina had just told her had opened her eyes to many things she had allowed to pass without reflection during the last few weeks, but which now gained real significance. Since the morning Mr. Upton had been introduced to Harry Thorpe, he had paid him great attention, and had, she now remembered, watched both him and herself very attentively whenever they met. He had

also talked much to her of Fairholm, as if desirous to discover whether she should object to live there. At the time, the idea had passed through her mind that, if he failed to become laird of Kinburn, he might himself live there. And that—But she must not think of those wild delusions now, when Lina had taught her the real meaning of such inquiries.

“I think,” Agnes said, rousing herself by an effort from her abstraction—“I think Harry would succeed well at Fairholm.”

“Then if you are asked your opinion,” Lina said, meaningly, “be sure you answer in a straightforward manner, and take the opportunity of showing that you still look on him as a boy.”

Agnes promised she would; but her heart fell, as she thought how difficult it would be to do so. Still, she had too much sense and spirit to allow a false statement to be made with regard to her, without taking means to contradict it; and, before the evening closed, she contrived to relieve poor Effie’s mind of her jealous fears. That part of the business was easy enough. She drew the conversation to the Hornbys, and from them diverged, naturally enough, to her long acquaintance with the Thorpes, giving one or two anecdotes of her treatment of Harry, and her glorification in being entitled, by her five months’ seniority, to look down upon him.

“Five months’ seniority is not much,” Effie suggested.

“No, when it is between men and women; but between children it is a great deal, and I do not think it is ever forgotten, even when they grow up. At least, I cannot help treating Dr. Thorpe very cavalierly still, and I dare say you have been a little shocked at me for ordering him about as I do. But I fear I shall never be able to persuade myself he is anything but ‘little Harry,’ as I used to call him long ago.”

Effie made no other reply than to fling her arms round Agnes’s neck and kiss her heartily, and from that time forward *she* resolutely persisted in denying Agnes’s engagement to the young doctor. But she was almost solitary in this belief; and when Dr. Thorpe left the Parsonage for a few days, rumour decided that he had gone to Saxenham to

demand Dr. Stuart's permission to marry his sister, and not even Mrs. Hornby's laughing denial availed to contradict the story.

It fell on one person very unpleasantly—and that person was Lionel Upton. Scarcely aware, as yet, of his feelings towards Agnes, her reported engagement affected him painfully, and caused that change in his manner towards her, of which he was himself unconscious, but which rendered her very unhappy. He did not quite believe the rumour, it is true, but he had made a kind of promise to himself not to touch upon his half-formed hopes until his position in life should be ascertained. A couple of months would decide his fate, for at the end of that time the day appointed by his grandfather's will for the settlement of his affairs would have arrived; and, till all was decided, he fancied it would be unjust to Agnes to entangle her fate with his.

But this rumour almost overcame his resolution. Perhaps as yet it was not an engagement, only an admiration on one side, and he might have as good a chance as Dr. Thorpe if he came forward? Only, how could he do so, when Cornelia Vaughan was not only in the neighbourhood, but in the very house with Agnes? The idea was repugnant to him. He no longer loved Cornelia, but he felt it go against the duty he owed her as a woman, to think of devoting himself to a rival before her very eyes. No; he must wait. He must keep away from the Whim while Mrs. Vaughan remained there.

Such was his resolution. But there are some women in this world who contrive to overturn the best laid plans by sheer force of their will, and Cornelia Vaughan had made up her mind to bring her former captive once more to her feet. She knew his weaknesses, and how to work upon them skilfully; while his generous simplicity, his chivalric treatment of woman, and his, if possible, overstrained sense of what he owed to others, were in her estimation but tools in her hand to be wielded against himself. Her first object had been to contrive a meeting between herself and him. That once done, the rest was, or seemed to her to be, easy enough. She read him like a

book; but he studied her as he might have done an abstruse problem, and found himself unconsciously fascinated by the endeavour to solve it.

It is an ungrateful task to track out the tortuous course of a designing woman. It is enough that, under the mask of a romantic admiration for Agnes Stuart, she soon drew from Lionel Upton the secret he as yet scarcely knew himself, and set herself to work to nip the opening preference in the bud.

A less clever manœuvrer would have attempted to lower her rival in his estimation. She was beyond such transparent arts. She never spoke of Agnes save with the greatest apparent love and admiration. She painted the brotherly and sisterly affection between her dear cousins (she had a habit of claiming cousinhood with the Stuarts when convenient) in the most glowing colours. She dwelt with enthusiasm on the manner in which Agnes identified herself with all George's interests and occupations, illustrating it by her increased care for Dr. Thorpe when she learned how much her brother appreciated him. "Indeed," she said, with a little laugh, "it almost seemed as if George's love for Harry had been one principal reason for Agnes's—" And then she stopped, with a half guilty lowering of her eyelids.

"Pray go on, Mrs. Vaughan."

"Agnes's admiration of the clever young doctor! But remember," she added, hastily, as if she had been drawn into a revelation she had not contemplated—"but remember, Mr. Upton, you must not allude in the remotest manner to Agnes's engagement. I never hinted it before (that was a downright lie, Mrs. Vaughan!); for, in truth they were both so young when I left England, that I thought it possible it might be broken off. However, you can see for yourself how things now are. Certainly they are models of constancy."

"It has, then, been an engagement of long standing?" he asked, doubtfully.

"Pray, Mr. Upton, do not take my authority for thinking such a thing. I may be mistaken, of course. Only—only when I remember the dear happy days at Old-street—when I see Agnes's sweet countenance brighten when Ie

speaks to her now as it did then—when I know that he takes no single step in life without consulting her—it is difficult to suppose that things are not what they seem. I have never heard Agnes allude to her engagement, however. Hers is a mind so full of refinement that she never discusses such matters; but I do not think I am mistaken. Why should the match not take place? They are alike in age, tastes, dispositions; it is the most natural thing in the world. Neither has fortune, to be sure; but he has decided talent, and she—— We all know what Agnes is, Mr. Upton?”

He knew it at that moment better than he had ever done before. All her sweetness, all her talents, all her feminine qualities, came back upon him as he listened, and though he refused entire credence to what he had heard, he could not prevent himself from feeling that it was *possibly* true. With his miserable talent of self-depreciation, he put himself in comparison with Dr. Thorpe, and gave judgment against himself. He was ten years older than the young doctor in actual age, and twenty in spirit. He lacked the sanguine temper, the determination to command success, which would, he knew, one day make Harry a man of mark in the world; nor could he persuade himself that in personal advantages or in social brilliancy he dared compete with his rival. He might, indeed, surpass him in other qualities as intrinsically valuable; but these things had no outward show, and Agnes could not, he thought, have perceived them. Save as the possible owner of an old property, he saw himself in every way inferior to Dr. Thorpe; and that doubtful possession of Kinburn was becoming more doubtful every day.

An instant's silence permitted these sad thoughts to flash through his brain, during which Mrs. Vaughan watched him furtively, to learn the effect of what she had said; and he sighed unconsciously as he deliberately answered:

“Yes, we can most of us appreciate Miss Stuart.” And, rising, he left her.

But the wily widow saw that her shaft had struck the gold, and thenceforward neither she nor Agnes could fail to see that a change had passed over Lionel Upton.

“Let it work,” Cornelia said to herself: “much meddling makes mischief.”



CHAPTER XXVII.

TO GO OR STAY.

“LET it work.”

Yes, if Lionel Upton had been like many other men, Mrs. Vaughan’s policy would no doubt have succeeded perfectly, and he have fallen, as many a loyal-hearted, generous-tempered man has done, into the snare laid for him. But Lionel had one thing in his favour, of which Mrs. Vaughan had little experience. He inherited a certain amount of the Hepburn obstinacy, and when once he took a thing in hand, he kept to it with the quiet, silent gripe of a bulldog. Thus, though he confessed that there were ten thousand chances to one that he did not become owner of Kinburn, to that one chance he held stoutly, resolved that no neglect of his should deprive him of his rights. And, in his object of gaining Agnes Stuart as his wife, he thoroughly appreciated his rival’s advantages; but he no sooner began to realize his own affection for her, than he resolved to win her, unheeding the obstacles that stood in his way. It required a little time, however, to convince himself that what he felt for Agnes was love. His previous experience of the passion had been a wild delirium, from which he awoke a sadder as well as a wiser man. But in his caring for Agnes there was no delirium, it was solid waking bliss; he esteemed more than admired her, was soothed rather than excited by her presence, and perhaps, if Harry Thorpe had never come on the scene, he might never have suspected that this calm, gentle feeling was—love! The first sight of the young doctor, and the easy familiarity of his manner to Agnes, had given him a shock, and made him uncomfortable and irritable, and had induced him to watch both him and Agnes very closely; and the more he watched the more conscious he became of her many estimable qualities. The *tête-à-tête* in the octagon had not yet ended, though they were now and then broken in upon by Harry, whom Agnes ordered about in a way she never did him-

self; and if there was any difference in her manner to Lionel when Harry was present, it was that it was a little more soft than at other times; but the alteration was too slight to be very evident.

It was reserved for Mrs. Vaughan to attribute Agnes's frank cordiality towards Harry to the effects of a long engagement. But such news, oddly enough, aroused in Lionel's mind a determination to learn for himself whether this was true, and not to sink his own hopes on the mere chance of its being so.

Some men only prize a thing or person when they find themselves on the point of losing it; others are incapable of appreciating its value until their sense of it is quickened by the plaudits of others. But neither of these was Lionel Upton's case. He had appreciated Agnes from the first moment of their acquaintance, but, owing to the uncertainty of his prospects, had obstinately refused to listen to the suggestion that this appreciation was love, though, when he looked back, he found, to his surprise, that in all his fairy visions of the future he had seen Agnes the mistress of Kinburn; so that the report of her engagement, together with the sudden deprivation of the quiet talks in the octagon and the pleasant *tête-à-tête* Sunday walks, assisted him very quickly to understand the force of his latent feelings.

But Mrs. Vaughan knew nothing of this. She had heard of those walks and talks, no doubt, for there was no lack of busy tongues to tell her of them; but nothing of the kind happened now, and though he generally sought Agnes out on entering a room where she was, he never paid her any marked attention, and she fancied that, after her late revelations, he almost neglected her at times.

She never suspected that he was purposely leaving the coast clear for Harry, that he might judge for himself of the truth of her report; and that often when she pointed out how Agnes's eye brightened while speaking to Dr. Thorpe, he was secretly hugging the remembrance of looks far softer and kinder bestowed on himself, and thinking that Moore was not far wrong, when he professed himself ready to have his lady-love smile on others, if she kept her tears for him.

Had not Agnes done this for him? He had seen her large grey eyes fill when he had spoken to her, but not when Dr. Thorpe did; and, to his feelings, the conscious lowering of her glance, if it suddenly met his own, was more flattering than the perfect composure with which she met Harry's.

It was such reflections as these which, though Mrs. Vaughan did not know it, enabled him to treat Agnes with *apparent* indifference. He had convinced himself he loved Agnes; but he had also convinced himself that while Cornelia remained at the Whim he ought not to make any formal declaration to her. So he would watch and wait, and, feeling perfectly secure against the widow's blandishments, he saw no reason for avoiding her, or refusing himself the pleasure he really received from her clever chit-chat.

Nellie's heart swelled with triumph at the rapid advances she was making. She knew that her style of conversation was of that racy sort which most men prize, and that Lionel, like other quiet men, was glad to have the "*frais*" undertaken by another, and had no objections to be amused. So she racked her brain to recall the subjects he had cared for long ago, and set herself to fascinate him now as she had done then: for she flattered herself that, if she could but renew in him the habit of seeking her society, his heart would speedily return to its old allegiance. That habit seemed to be growing day by day! He no longer avoided her, as he had done at first; and she thought the game was in her own hand when, after having stood irresolutely before her, one evening, coffee-cup in hand, he set it down on the table near, and gently subsided into a comfortable *causeuse* by her side.

Her elation, however, was premature; for, in the course of that very evening, a little incident occurred to show her that her victory was not secure. In the midst of one of her most telling remarks she saw him glance suddenly across the room to where Mr. Campbell, Dr. Thorpe, and Mr. Hornby were grouped round Agnes, all talking with animation, and all seemingly deriving their inspiration from her.

Mrs. Vaughan sighed a very soft sigh. Mr. Upton could not but look inquiringly towards her.

“You will laugh at me, Mr. Upton,” she said, in answer to his look, “but do you know, I almost grudge Agnes to Dr. Thorpe. Clever as he is—and you know I do full justice to his talents—she seems to me too good for him. Only see how she inspires those older men. Mr. Hornby loses all his shyness and hesitation with her. Mr. Campbell, who, they tell me, never till now bowed at the footstool of any woman, seems as if he could lay down his life for her. So don't you feel as if Harry were scarcely deserving of such a treasure?”

The stroke was a bold one, but Mr. Upton parried it skilfully. “These are points no one can decide on so short an acquaintance. But what I have already seen of Dr. Thorpe inclines me to like him.”

“Like him, oh dear, yes! that all must do. But—but—you can't be expected quite to understand me, Mr. Upton. You have only seen Agnes here in this quiet corner of the world. I have seen her so very differently placed, and I repeat I do grudge her to Harry Thorpe.”

Mr. Upton smiled a little, but made no answer. Mrs. Vaughan began to lose temper. She had not expected this quiescence, and it irritated her. She must go a little further—she must pique him, must make him fancy that Agnes had been boasting of her influence over himself, and she said, after a short silence:

“Forgive me, Mr. Upton, if I try to make you understand my feelings in this matter. It is not that I love Harry little, but that I love Agnes more,” she said, with a nervous laugh. “He is so clever that he will soon have a large practice, and such a wife as Agnes will, no doubt, enhance his popularity. One *must* make a confidant of one's doctor; but how charming it would be if one dared also to make a confidential friend of one's doctor's wife! One could, if she were Agnes Stuart. Ah! if you knew how true a friend she can be, how delicate her sympathy, how trustworthy her judgment! In any real difficulty I could pin my faith on Agnes Stuart's opinion. But,” she added, with a slight raising of her white eyelids—“but why should I say this to you, who, if all I hear be true, have had opportunities of tasting how sweet dear Agnes's sympathy is? You smile? You can then appreciate her

as I do? though you can never feel, as a woman does, the luxury of having a friend on whose judgment you can rely as ever wisest, discreetest, best! You are, I know, superior to many masculine prejudices, but I doubt whether you have ever allowed yourself, as I have done, to take Agnes's opinion in preference to my own, to avail myself of her talents, her energy, to aid me in any difficulty?"

As she said this she fixed her eyes upon his face, watching the slightest tremor as a guide how far Agnes had made her way in influencing him. She thoroughly believed, as most women do, that a weak man—and she did think Lionel Upton weak—cannot endure to have it supposed that he is under the dominion of a woman; and she took it for granted that if he became suspicious of Agnes's influence he would throw off all kindly feeling towards her. And an accidental movement of Mr. Upton's features, a casual thing of no account, taught her to believe that he winced under these remarks. So she went boldly on:

"Yet who can doubt that most men fall under Agnes's spell the moment they approach her? I wonder how I should feel if gifted as she is? Ah! how many she has influenced for good! Not ladies only—though you see that already all at St. Ringans quote her as an authority—but men also—clever, ambitious men. I had almost said unscrupulous ones, when I remember her power over that dreadful Dr. Weld. What an effect Agnes's slightest word had on that bold, bad man! I remember one particular evening—but I can't go back on it—it is so painful."

And yet she did go back upon it, and described the walk home from the concert, with such exaggerations—a bushel of lies to a grain of truth—as to make it appear that Agnes's conduct on that occasion had been very peculiar. Indeed, one who did not know Agnes as Mr. Upton did, *might* have been led to believe that she had more than liked Dr. Weld, and that that had made the sad catastrophe so terrible to her. Thence Nellie diverged to her friend Colonel—then Captain—le Grand's infatuation for Agnes. But for that Weld business, she should not have been surprised if—But he must not think there was anything in dear Agnes's behaviour that led to all these little tender-nesses towards her. No, it was her perfect unconsciousness

of her attractions which made them so great. She little thought when Agnes and she parted at Saxonham that she should still be Agnes Stuart, and herself—And a delicate hand brushed away a tear. But why dwell on such topics? She forgot when talking to him that—that they were no longer the friends they once were. And a sigh ended the conversation.

She was perhaps surprised that he permitted it to end there; that instead of catching at the little feeler she had put out at the last, Mr. Upton's unspoken commentary on her remarks was to cross the room and drop into a chair behind Agnes. But as that was all, as he did not join in the conversation, and Agnes, apparently unaware of his vicinity, went on talking to the others quite placidly, Cornelia took courage. Rome was not built in a day. Still her full faith in herself drooped a little. Mr. Upton's conduct was not quite to her mind, even though she lulled her anxiety by thinking that quiet men are far more difficult to manage than demonstrative ones. She had overcome his reluctance to sit by her and listen to her honeyed words. She had seen him fix his eyes on her face as if realizing the charm which once had completely enthralled him, and she tried to believe that the old spell of her beauty was revived. "Who could withstand it?" she asked herself. "Who could see the soft, pleading look of those generally brilliant eyes, and not feel it steal into his heart? Who could resist the flattery of a manner so self-possessed and animated with others, so timid and hesitating to him only?" No man could resist it, she thought. Like the bird fascinated by the rattlesnake, he might flutter as he would, but, inch by inch, he must approach nearer, until he yielded entirely.

Such were Cornelia Vaughan's reflections: and yet in her secret soul there lingered a doubt of ultimate success; for there was that in Lionel Upton's disposition which, as yet, she had not fathomed. It is not given to many women to understand the secret windings of a masculine mind, though she may, and often does, influence his actions. Seeing the result of her suggestions, she often fancies that she knows the man himself; but this is not always the case. On the contrary, many women who have calculated

on the manner in which a man will conduct himself in certain circumstances, finds herself right in nine cases out of ten; but, in the tenth, some secret spring is unconsciously touched, which counteracts her influence, and shatters her preconceived idea of his character.

Some such doubt hovered over Cornelia Vaughan, so, in case of accident, she resolved to strengthen her own hands by working upon Agnes as well as Lionel. It was a difficult task, no doubt; for Agnes was not one whom she could pique into a folly which would run counter to Mr. Upton's overstrained ideas of feminine propriety. Agnes was as particular as himself in such things; but she was proud, and it was possible to make her show herself to him in a disadvantageous light, if Cornelia could but contrive to impress her with the idea that her caring for him was greater than his for her. Should that fail, she must force her to quit the field for a time. A month or six weeks' absence would do wonders; and Cornelia knew enough of her Aunt Ellis's character to be tolerably certain that she could make her insist on Agnes's paying a long visit to her brother.

Forthwith she began her operations.

"Aggie," she said, one evening, "what odd people there are hereabouts! Fancy what a rigmarole history they have got up about you—they say you are resolved to be lady of Kinburn!"

"Indeed!"

"Yes; and they made me quite angry by the way in which they talked of you."

"What did they say?"

"All sorts of things. For instance, that your love for Mrs. Upton was all a pretence, and that——But really I cannot repeat all the absurd things they told me."

"You need not," Agnes said, placidly; "I know well enough what such gossip is; but, fortunately, there is no shadow of foundation for it; and I flatter myself my Kinburn friends know me well enough not to be biassed by such nonsense."

"Well, love, I *hope* so; but——"

"But what?"

"A remark of Mrs. Trotter's to-night made me a little uncomfortable. Of course we all know what Mrs. Trotter

is: but I do not think she would say that Mrs. Upton was vexed about it unless she fancied really that there was some truth in it."

"Please to speak out frankly, Nellie. What is it you have heard? What do you want me to do?"

"Do, dear! Well, since you ask me, I must say that it is a pity you cannot control your feelings a little. Not that I am surprised that you should love Lionel Upton. He is a most estimable man; and his position and so forth are quite what one can approve. Still, dear, he is so fastidious that I think it would be better if you did not come *above* half way."

At this insulting speech Agnes's soft eyes kindled and her cheek burned; but she controlled herself sufficiently not to interrupt Mrs. Vaughan, and, when she paused, said quietly,

"You think so? Well, and what more?"

"More! Only, dear, that if you do care for him so much that it is impossible for you to conceal your feelings, I should advise you to leave home for a little—I really should. I know Lionel Upton better than you do, and, if he cares for you, 'absence will make the heart grow fonder;' if not, why, dear, the less you make your affection for him conspicuous, the better for both parties."

Was it surprising that this impertinence almost conquered Agnes's self-possession—that she could with difficulty prevent herself from uttering very bitter words to the woman whose treachery to him of whom she spoke had been so flagrant? But, angry as she was, she still maintained her usual quiet exterior as she replied, that her conscience so fully acquitted her of the indelicacy attributed to her, that she could afford to despise such an accusation. She liked Mr. Upton, she confessed. They had been friends from their earliest acquaintance; and as neither had done anything to forfeit the good opinion of the other, she saw no cause to alter her behaviour towards him.

"Very well, dear, you know your own business best. I spoke from the kindest motives, and because I hoped that my experience of the world and my thorough knowledge of Lionel Upton's character might be of use to you; but I see you are the old Agnes of Saxenham, and persist in your own opinion in spite of the better knowledge of your

advisers. And, talking of Saxenham, do you hear that the 10th Regiment has left Fairholm, and that the 91st Hussars have come in their stead?"

Mr. Campbell mentioned it to me; but you know I have no military acquaintance."

"Oh dear no! Of course not. We never flirted with Captain le Grand at Saxenham; certainly not. It had gone such lengths before I left, that I really did fancy, Agnes, that he was *épris*! But, you see, I was mistaken. I wonder how it is that gentlemen like you so much as an acquaintance, but never think of going further? Dear child! don't flash your eyes at me in that way! If any one saw you, they would suppose you had a temper. But—to go back to the 91st—Le Grand is colonel now. Poor Valentine was killed in the Crimea, and the former colonel sold out when they went to India. Le Grand married a relative of Colonel Vaughan's, so we saw a good deal of them in India."

"I should be glad to see Colonel le Grand again," Agnes said, as Cornelia ended her little explanation. "Both George and I liked him very much."

Cornelia was annoyed at the quiet answer, but said, with a hard laugh,

"Oh, then, I may ask him to the Whim? Aunt Ellis said I might; but you know Aunt Ellis is but a name at the Whim—the real power is with you."

"Nellic!"

"It is true, Agnes. Even the child knows that if you allow a thing, neither my aunt nor I dare to object. So I shall write at once to Le Grand. As he is married now, it is quite correct," she said, in a mocking tone; "and as Julia is not at all jealous, you may flirt with him to your heart's content. No one will talk about it, as they do of your little affairs with Mr. Campbell, Mr. Upton, and Harry. I wonder which you will marry in the end, Agnes? Harry is too young, Mr. Campbell too old, and Lionel Upton, poor fellow!—well, he is right enough in age, but in other respects——" She paused, curled her lip into a sneer, and added, "Were I you, I should try for the rich old merchant. It would be no bad thing to be a young widow, with such a fortune as he can give."

The repeated insults she had received could no longer be borne, and Agnes rose up abruptly, and said, "Colonel le Grand, or any guest of my aunt's, will always meet a welcome from me;" and, without another word, she left the room. But she carried the smart of Cornelia's stinging words away with her, and the clear-sighted widow saw it, and chuckled over the mischief she had done. She had not yet forced Agnes to leave St. Ringans, but she had prepared the way for it; and if she failed there, she had other weapons in store which might, she thought, be quite as effective.

It seemed, however, as if those would not be required; for, bravely as Agnes had faced Mrs. Vaughan, each shaft had struck, each wound rankled, and her utmost efforts failed to enable her to behave to every one, and especially to Lionel Upton, as unconstrainedly as before. Moreover, she began to see a decided change in his manner to Cornelia. He seemed to court, rather than avoid her; and though she reminded herself that he knew what Nellie was, and that "vainly is the snare set in the sight of any bird," yet the proverb did not put her heart at ease, for the very conviction that he could not again be deceived was a possible peril to him. Many a sane man has fallen from that very belief. And Nellie was so pretty and, when she chose, so fascinating! Ah, it was a dangerous thing to be constantly thrown into the society of such a syren! And Agnes could not put him on his guard. She must stand helpless on the bank, and see his boat gliding nearer and nearer to destruction, without the power to save or warn him.

And then the thought came, Was it wise to stay where she was powerless to do him good, and yet with her heart racked by this deadly fear? Were it not wiser to go to Saxenham, and stay there till his fate was settled one way or other? They would rejoice to see her at George's, while here she was of advantage to no one.

It was not often that Agnes yielded to such sore depression; but, as she sat early one soft, hazy August morning alone in the octagon, the tears dropped from between her fingers, and she felt as miserable as any sentimental heroine of the *Minerva* press.

"This is folly!" she exclaimed, at last; "I must not, will not, yield to it."

And, seating herself before her secretaire, she began the letter which was to tell Annie she could, at last, be spared to visit her dear old home.

But the first words only were written, when a light tap at the window startled her. She looked up and saw Lina Hepburn! Springing to the glass door, she opened it with the exclamation, "Lina! how came you here, and at this hour? It has not yet struck seven!"

"I knew you were up betimes, and I wanted to find you alone, which I seldom do now. Mrs. Vaughan haunts you like a shadow," she said, testily; "and I need you, Agnes—oh, how I need you!"

Agnes led her into the room, closed the door, and placed her in the easy-chair brought from Kinburn the day when the pocket-book was discovered.

"I know this seat," Lina said, suddenly; "it used to stand in the library at Kinburn. I sat in it one night—but I will tell you about that by-and-by. I have things more peremptory to discuss now. I want you to read this."

"From Mr. Maxwell!" Agnes exclaimed, as the still closed letter was placed in her hands. "When did it reach you?"

"Last night. I could scarcely resist bringing it to you at once. But—I am trying to learn patience."

She spoke in a tone of weariness and despondency, which struck mournfully on Agnes's ear. But she felt it was no time to touch on any other question than the letter, and opened it without delay. It ran thus:

"In answer to Miss Hepburn's communication of the 15th ultimo, Mr. Smith begs to inform her that, as business brings him to ———shire in the course of a few weeks, he will do himself the honour of calling at Kinburn, and receiving Miss Hepburn's commands in person."

The only date was "July, 185—," but the postmark was Paris.

"God help me!" Lina exclaimed, hiding her face on Agnes's shoulder. "This is hard to bear. Ah, me! ah, me! it is too true, that as we sow, so must we reap. Agnes

you must help me. You must be with me. I cannot, dare not, see this man alone."

"Dear Lina, I shall be in Saxenham."

"Agnes, do not leave me, I beseech you. You would not if you knew all: if you knew who—I mean what—this man is."

"He is not your husband, Lina?"

"Thank Heaven, no! Once I hoped, I believed, he would be. But I could not be then, and must not be now, whatever claim he may assume over me."

"But what claim has he?" she persisted.

"Do you forget my oath?"

"That can never be binding, morally or legally, given at such a time."

"But it was repeated, Agnes—solemnly sworn to—and that not so long ago. Listen to me. You shall have all but—his name. If I can keep that from you, I shall."

And then, with a rapidity of utterance difficult to follow, she took up her story from the point where it had been so suddenly broken off.

"His wife died—when or where it matters not—and he came to tell me the circumstance as soon as was practicable. I was still ill, had hardly recovered my strength. But, when his summons reached me, we met in the old place. My position as well as his at that time prevented the fulfilment of our oath; but he contrived a means of corresponding secretly, and, at intervals, it has continued ever since. You may imagine how scanty my news of him has been; but the peril of having these letters intercepted was too great to risk more; for I had already discovered that my grandfather had some vague suspicions of the truth.

"At last an explanation took place with Sir Robert. He taxed me with my duplicity, and told me if I did not give up all communication with him—with Sigismund—he would leave me a beggar. I dared him to do so. I told him the truth, that the man they spoke of so contemptuously had been to me a guardian—a saviour—when *they* cast me out, and that I would never forsake him. What more they said it is needless to repeat; but I saw that my inheritance of Kinburn trembled in the balance. I wrote to Sigismund,

and told him so. He did not answer my letter; but he came to me, and we met more than once.

"The risk was great, but he dared it. He took refuge at the Whim, and, playing on the superstition of the people, enacted the ghost of old Sir Cosmo, and in that guise escaped detection, but narrowly, very narrowly.

"My grandfather had had an attack of paralysis, and was almost entirely confined to bed. It was impossible for me to leave him for any length of time, and therefore I was forced to consent to Sigismund coming to Kinburn House. We met in the library. He was active as a squirrel, and by means of the pillars that support the balcony he easily ascended to the window, which I took care should be unfastened, and I took care also that the spring that opens the recess behind the tapestry was carefully oiled, so as to give him a refuge in case of surprise. The precaution was not needless. One night as I was about to keep tryst there, I was prevented by the sudden arrival of Mr. Campbell, who came on business to my grandfather. I had no means of warning Sigismund, and when he entered the library, I had only time to make him hide behind the arras when Mr. Campbell entered. He came to me from my grandfather. He told me that, since I refused to comply with his wishes, it was necessary for the respectability of the family, and the safety of the property, that it should be put into better hands than mine. For the last time, the alternative was placed before me, of giving up my clandestine correspondence with the so-called Maxwell, or giving up Kinburn. Mr. Campbell was very gentle to me, Agnes. He told me, as you did, that he could understand my gratitude for past kindness, and that hitherto it might have been excusable in me to continue to care for Sigismund. But now that he had shown himself so unworthy of trust, by forcing me to keep secret from all my friends the extent of our former acquaintance, and encouraged me in going completely against my grandfather's wishes, it was time to give him up. His conduct on this point was not, he said, the only objection that Sir Robert had to my acquaintance with his runaway tenant. There were graver accusations against him, some of them of such a nature as to make him an unfit associate for any young woman, and most certainly

totally unsuited to be one day laird of Kinburn. Mr. Campbell, you see, thought like you, Agnes, that Sigismund was or would be my husband.

“Imagine what it was for me to hear this, and know that *he* heard it also. Of course I could not hesitate what decision to make. I said, as I had done before, that nothing could tempt me to give him up, and that, in spite of all precautions they might take, I should still find means of corresponding with him. Mr. Campbell tried to shake my resolution. He told me of Sir Robert’s letter, and of the will he had made in my cousin’s favour—a will which only required a signature; and if I persisted in my refusal to give up Maxwell, that signature was to be appended to-night. I did persist, and he left me.

“I hastened to release Sigismund. He thanked me for having made him privy to the plot forming against our happiness, but, with a flash of his eye, of which I well knew the force, he exclaimed, with a strange smile :

“‘But we shall baffle them yet, Aline.’”

“And he did baffle them so far, though he was unaware that my grandfather had previously executed another will, the one on which they are now acting. He thought, as I did, that I should succeed to Kinburn as heir-at-law.”

She stopped suddenly.

“Is that all, Lina?”

“Not quite. The week my grandfather died, the ghost of Sir Cosmo was seen at Kinburn. I did not see the apparition, but I suspected the truth, when Sir Robert’s repositories were opened and the will was nowhere to be found.”

“You do not know what became of it, Lina? You are incapable of concealing it?”

“God knows what I might have done, had temptation come in my way, Agnes; for in those days, if *he* willed a thing, I did it. And yet—and yet I do not believe that even for him I could have stolen that will for my own benefit. But,” she added, humbly, “no one can tell until they are tested whether or no they can resist temptation. No doubt, since then I have learned the misery of crime, and found it ashes and bitterness; but then I had no experience of such remorse, and I dare not say that I might not have done it, had he desired me. But, thank Heaven, he

left me in complete ignorance of the fate of the will. I do not even know whether it exists, or whether it is in his possession. I was not privy to the theft at the time. It was many months before I even knew, with certainty, who had taken it."

"And since you do know, will you not act upon the terms of the lost will? Of course you know what they were?"

"Yes, I do know them," she answered, with much of her old bitterness; "they were cruel, unjust, unnatural. I was left almost entirely dependent on my cousin's generosity. And the giving up of my claims would do no good; there are other complications, other claims, such as Aunt Trotter's. Moreover, Agnes,"—and there was a spice of her old spirit in her tone—"moreover, I will not be the means of putting it into Lionel Upton's power to make that woman, that Mrs. Vaughan, mistress of Kinburn. Had you been his wife, I might perhaps have done it; but I will not have her exalted over us all."

"Lina, Lina!" Agnes said, impulsively, "the question of restoring Kinburn to the rightful heir has nothing whatever to do with his affection for Mrs. Vaughan. You must not look upon it in that light. We have no right to do evil because good may come of it, and as little are we entitled to refrain from doing good lest evil come from it."

"Yes, yes, I know. But let me finish my story. I was sitting in this very chair, Agnes, when Sigismund told me of the fatal effect my grandfather's will must have on our prospects, if it were ever executed. Insensibly he led me to talk to him of Sir Robert's peculiarities, of his habits, and of his reasons for changing his successor. Somehow, I cannot now remember how, he also led me to tell him where he kept his important papers, and he laughed a little when I told him that the secretaire which had been at the Whim was his favourite repository. I never suspected his object in drawing me to speak of those things; and even when I learned the loss of the will, it never occurred to me. I only gloried in my cousin's discomfiture and in our own brighter prospects. When the truth dawned on me, I had learned so to hate my cousin that I did not regret the theft. Of late I have seen it in a new light: I think differently of

myself and him. Alas! Agnes, the idol I worshipped has fallen from its place and crushed me in its fall. For long I sat in silence and darkness, brooding over schemes of vengeance that might embrace both him and myself in destruction. But even that is past now. My only remaining wish is to die. My death would put many things right, and no one would miss me—no one, no one;” and hot, burning tears rolled slowly from between the lashes of her sightless eyes.

A long silence ensued. It was broken by Agnes.

“Lina, I can see no means by which Sigismund can compel you to take any step contrary to your own wishes.”

“Can he not reveal the past, and all the connexion that I have had with it?”

“If he does, he blasts his own reputation, not yours.”

“His own? Oh, Agnes!”

“Is it beyond injury? Can he lose nothing by the notoriety such an act would bring upon him?”

“Nothing!”

“And yet, Lina, you have loved this man?—perhaps love him still?”

“Agnes, Agnes, have pity upon me. I did not know him as he really was. It was my own ideal I loved, not him. But even yet there are moments when the old spell comes over me, and I tremble to feel that, perhaps, were I with him once again, once again listened to his voice, softened to those low delicious tones which no voice but his can breathe, were I to feel his arm round me, his kisses on my lips, I might forget and forgive all.”

There was such genuine pathos in those passionate words, that Agnes was moved in spite of her reason. Ineffable pity overcame all other thoughts, and folding the blind girl closely to her heart, she whispered: “Lina, dear Lina, He who has hitherto saved you by His almighty power from this bold, bad man, will save you still, if you but cling to Him with all your heart, and earnestly pray to be saved from temptation.”

“Ay, *if!* But suppose, Agnes, that I do not wish to be saved from temptation? Suppose that, even while I pray, my rebellious heart turns longingly to the worse than Egyptian slavery I have escaped? What then?”

Agnes's only answer was to murmur the words of poor Anne Brontë:

“ I know I owe my all to Thee ;
Oh, *take* the heart I cannot give,
Do Thou my strength and Saviour be,
And *make* me to Thy glory live. ”

“ Ay, that is my only chance,” she said, despondingly. “ I cannot pray otherwise. But you, Agnes, you will not forsake me in this sore strait? You will pray with me and for me? You will stay with me, and watch over me—will guard me against myself? I entreat you, Agnes, do not leave me! Bear what you have to bear here for my sake, and believe it will in the end come to good. You fancy I do not know what you suffer; you fancy the blind girl knows nothing of what is going on. But she does know, and is working against it; and, please God, we shall one day win the victory! But I must go now. Will you take me home, Agnes? I bade Livingstone go back after she brought me here. Poor Livingstone! she finds mine a dull service.”

As Agnes unlatched the wicket that led from the Whim garden to the Kinburn policies, Lina exclaimed:

“ Ah! how often I used to walk this way long ago! how often listened for the click of that little gate! And yet even then he was deceiving me—even then he was with poor, poor Nanny! Ay! this was the very season of year when I was so happy! Listen, Agnes. Do you hear, far off, the whirr of the partridge? and nearer—quite, quite close—the ‘cockcock’ of the pheasant? What scenes these sounds recall! The golden morning light streaming between the branches, and shedding the trellised shadows on the grass! The sea gleaming through every opening of the woods, and glimpses here and there of the glorious blue of the heavens! All that I shall never see again in this world. God grant I may see things more glorious hereafter!”

“ How patiently you have borne the deprivation of sight, Lina!” Agnes said, tenderly.

“ Patiently! Alas! no. I seem to do so only because that deprivation is so slight compared to what I have lost

besides. Think what it must be, Agnes, to hear still echoing in my ears those soft, sweet words which once lent unspeakable gladness to my heart, and yet to remember that they were false! Think what it must be to wrestle daily and hourly with my rebellious heart, which refuses to believe that which it knows to be so sadly, cruelly true! And think, above all, what it must be to have hanging over me the interview which I know must come, when I shall have to tell him what I think of him, and why I must give him up for ever! Oh, Agnes, I fear it—I fear him more than I can express.”

“Can no one save you from this trial? You refuse to trust me or your cousin. But Mr. Campbell, who was so kind to you—who knows what you have to fear from this man—will you not trust him, allow him to act for you? He is a good man; I feel I could trust him with a secret of life and death.”

“I dare say he might be trusted,” she answered, with a sigh, “but if I were to tell him what I have told you, of the stealing of the will, he would be forced to act against Sigismund, and he would be a second time exposed to the chance of dying a felon’s death. No, I dare not risk it—not now, at all events—not till I have told him what I must tell him—not till I have warned him of his probable fate unless he restores the will. If he does not, after that, give it up, why then I must do my duty, and, when the right time comes, I will not shrink from it.”



CHAPTER XXVIII.

ALEXANDER HEPBURN'S FRIEND.

Mrs. Trotter was going to give a soir e. The news was received with amazement; for hitherto Mrs. Trotter’s entertainments had consisted of the very dreariest of tea-drinkings, and one annual dinner-party, more formal than the tea-drinkings themselves. But at this soir e there were to be music, dancing, and officers, ices and champagne! Was Mrs. Trotter fey? It was the usual impression that she was; but that did not prevent her invitations being accepted with alacrity.

Her nieces had begged that the soirée might be a ball (the suggestion, of course, was Mrs. Vaughan's); but Mrs. Trotter demurred, saying that Sophy and Effie were growing sad gadabouts. But she smiled as she said it; for, in truth, she rejoiced to see her nieces so popular, and resolved to indulge them as far as propriety would admit. It was against her theories of what should be that a widow should give a ball; but she had no objection to allow the girls a carpet dance, followed by a good supper, if that would satisfy them. Surely Mrs. Trotter was growing humanized to make such a concession; and not even to object when the girls hinted that they had met with so much civility from the officers of the 10th, that, if Aunt Kate did not object very much, they should like to ask one or two of them to their party.

And with this fresh enjoyment to look forward to, Sophy and Effie were in the gayest of spirits at the perfection of all their little arrangements, when it was announced that the 10th had got the route for Manchester, and that the 91st were come in their stead. Alas, alas! their soirée would be shorn of its brightest ornaments.

But here Mrs. Vaughan came to their aid, with a petition to Mrs. Trotter to allow her to introduce the colonel of the new regiment, Colonel le Grand, who was a very old friend of hers, and also a connexion by marriage. Sophy and Effie listened to the request with trembling eagerness, and it was granted! Nay, more than granted; for Mrs. Trotter, with unwonted courtesy, added permission to invite to their little party any of the officers of the 91st whom Colonel le Grand, as a married man, could conscientiously propose as acquaintances for herself and her nieces.

Mrs. Vaughan's gratitude was eloquent. She was herself acquainted with many of the 91st; indeed, she might almost call several of the officers *friends*, she had seen so much of them in India; and Colonel le Grand was very particular with regard to the morals of the young men whom he introduced to his wife or cousin.

Mrs. Trotter smiled graciously, and, armed with the necessary credentials, Mrs. Vaughan drove off to call on Mrs. le Grand, knowing all the time, however, that she had

not accompanied her husband to Fairholm. On her way to the barracks she *chanced* to meet Mr Upton, and contrived to make him her escort thither. He was charmed by the reception Colonel le Grand gave him, and, on his acceptance of Mrs. Trotter's invitation, made arrangements for their going together from Fairholm.

So Sophy and Effie were consoled, and looked forward to their little party with renewed anticipations of pleasure, and did their utmost to extend their invitations to all who might care to come.

Among others, they urged Lina Hepburn to give up her recluse habits for once, and join the rest of their friends. They were to have music as well as dancing, and it would be so very nice if dear Lina would come.

Lina shook her head. "I never have been present at such gay doings, Effie," she said, fondly stroking the young girl's hair, "and it is too late to join in them now. But I shall have my little *fête* as well as you, and have the Parsonage children to spend the evening with me."

The children came, and were very merry and noisy, and went home early, loaded with those common gifts which, to children, are as valuable as gold and jewels; and Lina, who, during their stay, had been as gay as themselves, threw herself back in her easy-chair, and felt wretched and miserable now that the sweet, shrill voices no longer rang in her ears, and the soft arms had ceased to clasp her neck. The cause of her misery was natural enough. Since Sigismund's last letter she had been haunted by the thought of the interview which he demanded, and which she had no power to withhold. A crisis in her fate was impending, but in what form she was still ignorant; and the very uncertainty of how and when it might come rendered the anticipation of it the more vague and disagreeable.

She made every effort in her power to escape the haunting thought. She tried with all her heart to picture to herself what was now going on at St. Ringaus' Lodge, how Sophy and Effie were looking, and how such a party was carried on. But her neglected girlhood and solitary youth had prevented her from having one single prototype in her recollections of such a scene. She had never, in her whole life, seen a crowded ball-room, never known the inspiring

sound of a quadrille band, never floated round in a waltz on the arm of a favourite partner. Her only *fêtes* had been the hours spent with *him* on the shores of the blue Mediterranean, and their meetings at the trysting-rocks that one sultry summer, when he was tenant of the Whim. Apart from him she had no past, and the memories once so dear were darkened now. With her, alas !

“Memory makes her influence known
 By sighs, by tears, and grief alone ;
 I greet her as the friend to whom belong
 The vulture’s ravening beak, the raven’s funeral song.
 She tells of time misspent, of comfort lost,
 Of fair occasions gone for ever by,
 Of hopes too fondly nurst, too rudely crost,
 Of many a cause to wish yet fear to die.”

No, no, it is not easy to force the thoughts from dwelling on such harrowing recollections, nor to turn the stream of life into new channels after it has for twenty years run one single course. More especially difficult is the task when the sufferer is—blind ! Poor Lina ! with all your follies, all your failings, who could refuse to pity one so helpless, so desolate and miserable ?

Lina Hepburn’s boudoir opened by French windows to the terraced garden, and was one of the quietest, and pleasantest apartments in the house ; and for a time after the children left her she lay back in her chair, listening listlessly to the twitter of the swallows which had made their nests in the overhanging caves, and to the distant caw of the rooks, wending their homeward way to the beech avenue. By-and-by even these sounds ceased, and the deep unbroken silence of a summer night reigned supreme. Not a leaf stirred, not an insect chirped, and the perfume of night-blowing flowers came through the open window near her with an almost overpowering fragrance.

“Does the odour of these flowers really increase as night advances ?” Lina speculated ; “or is it only that one’s own senses grow more keen, just as one’s ears seem sharpened at this hour to interpret sounds which one could not discover during the day ?” The consideration led her into quaint musings, which gradually subsided into that pleasant state between waking and sleeping, in which it is difficult to distinguish dreams from reality.

Suddenly the blind girl starts up in her chair, pushes her hair from her ears, and listens keenly. Was that really a step on the terrace? No; all is still save the lapping of the tide on the distant shore. She blames herself for her nervous fears; but, since that letter, she expects Max at all times and in all places.

It is a sound!

Ay, and one formerly familiar to her! his well-known step on the terrace. The dreaded hour is come! What shall she do? She shivers with emotion; the silent ghosts of former happiness rise up to her mind's eye! Oh, that she could go back to those delusions of her youth! Oh, that she could feel once more the innocent affection of her childhood, and could believe in him as she did then!

It is too late; she knows him now, she can never believe in him any more! Again the shudder thrills through her. She cannot believe, and yet the temptation to do so grows stronger with every moment she indulges in the thought.

The steps come nearer, ever nearer; and at last she hears a peculiar tap at the farther window. How well she remembers that sound! Often has her heart bounded to meet it. And now she must not stir, must not answer it.

She lies back in her chair, panting with excitement, but giving no outward sign of emotion. She tries to think how she will address him if he enters, but resolves on nothing, though she has so often anticipated this meeting, and tutored herself to be prepared for it.

The familiar signal is heard again.

She clutches the arms of her chair with her small hands, as if by a physical effort alone she can restrain herself from answering it; and her eager ears are stretched to catch his next movement.

A voice, his voice, whispers, "Aline! Aline! where are you?" and an eager hair-encompassed face is protruded into the darkened room.

She does not see it, poor girl; and she is herself unseen where she is seated, deep in the deepest shadow; but she hears and recognizes, not the voice alone, but the quick though stealthy movement with which he gently pushes the window open and steps across the threshold. Oh! why had she not closed it when the first ring of his footstep

had caught her ear? She sits so still, she scarcely seems to breathe; but an eager prayer rises from her heart to heaven. "Father, have mercy! Save me from this hour!" Short as the petition is, it seems to bring an immediate answer; for suddenly a till now forgotten means of escape suggests itself, and strength seems afforded her to make use of it. She rises softly, totters to the bell-pull, and rings furiously. The clang of the bell peals through the room, and startles the intruder, who steps hastily across the window-sill, but in a louder whisper repeats the words, "Aline, it is Max!"

No word of answer comes; the poor girl grows faint from terror, and drops helplessly into her chair. But her eager summons has already brought an answer; a quick step sounds along the passage, and her maid enters.

"It grows chilly, Livingstone," Lina murmurs; "shut the window."

Eagerly she listens as the girl prepares to obey, but there is no sudden cry as she fulfils the order.

"He is gone!" she murmurs. "I am safe. Thank God!"

But the reaction was too much for her. She had fainted.

* * * * *

A quarter of an hour later a military-looking stranger rang at the grand entrance of Kimburn, and inquired of the astonished servant whether Sir Robert Hepburn would admit him at that late hour.

"Sir Robert has been dead nearly two years, sir," was the man's answer.

"Dead!" the stranger answered, with a slightly foreign accent. "And his family?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Upton live here still, sir."

"Upton! Who are they?"

"Sir Robert's daughter and grandson, sir."

"Oh! indeed! I am a stranger in these parts, and, of course, am ignorant on many points. It was Sir Robert himself whom I knew, and his granddaughter, Miss Hepburn. Perhaps you can give me some information as to her. Is she alive? Does she reside here?"

"Yes, sir, she does live here; but she never receives strangers, sir. She dislikes company."

"Ah! that is embarrassing;" and he was silent for a moment, as if reflecting what to do. "Perhaps," he said, at length, "if you take Miss Hepburn my card she might receive me. I am an old friend; I knew her father abroad."

The servant took the card, a foreign-looking one, with the name "Count Sigismund Vandeweld" engraved on it, and, twirling it awkwardly in his fingers, said: "I beg pardon, sir, but this would do no good. Miss Hepburn is quite blind. But if you will allow me to show it to Mrs. Upton, sir, she might see you, Mr. Upton is at St. Ringans' Lodge this evening; but Mrs. Upton has already returned home."

The stranger seemed scarcely to listen to this speech; for he repeated the word "blind" as if it alone had caught his ear; but, after a moment or two, the man's suggestion seemed to dawn upon him, and he said:

"Yes, that may do. Take my card to your mistress, and tell her that, if not too great a liberty, I should be glad to see her as an acquaintance of her brother, Colonel Alexander Hepburn."

The servant took the message, and by-and-by returned with the information that Mrs. Upton would be glad to receive Count Vandeweld, and he followed his guide into the old lady's presence.

He was quite aware of the difficult task he had set himself, but he was resolved to place himself in a position which would give him access to Lina without suspicion, and the knowledge he had of Colonel Hepburn and his family was, he believed, sufficient to carry him through the interview he sought.

Even had Mrs. Upton been as well aware of the circumstances of her niece's history as Count Vandeweld was of hers, she might have been thrown off her guard by the specious manner of the foreign count; but, as it was, all she knew of Maxwell was that he was a run-away tenant of her father, and the idea of connecting him in any way with the soldierly-looking figure before her was out of the question. Moreover, the tale he told her was well imagined. He said he had been at Kinburn many years ago, sent thither by Alexander Hepburn to endeavour to make his peace with his father. His mission failed, but in its

execution he had learned to see Sir Robert's many good qualities, and had retained a real interest in him as well as his son, and in that son's orphan daughter. Business having called him to Fairholm, and remembering its vicinity to Kinburn, he had ridden a few miles out of his way, in the hope of seeing Sir Robert and his granddaughter. He was grieved to hear that Miss Hepburn was much of an invalid; but could she not be persuaded to receive her father's friend? He most earnestly desired to see her.

Mrs. Upton, touched by his apparent interest in her dead brother, who, being next herself in age, had been her dearest companion and friend in early life, promised to do what she could to persuade Lina to see Count Vandeweld. But though she herself carried the message, Lina refused to see him, contenting herself by informing her, through Livingstone, that she was too ill to leave her room, and positively declined to receive any stranger.

Mrs. Upton returned to her visitor, looking very much crestfallen, and though she put her niece's refusal in the most polite words, he shrewdly guessed the truth, but saw also from her mode of expressing herself that Mrs. Upton had not the most distant idea of the reason of Lina's ungracious answer.

He assured her that he could quite understand Miss Hepburn's reluctance to meet strangers: delicacy of health often produced such shrinking from society, &c., &c. And so skilfully did he pursue the subject as to draw from his unsuspecting companion all he cared to know of Lina's retired habits, and of the daily routine of her monotonous life.

He contrived likewise to induce Mrs. Upton to speak of her father's will, and of all the complications which arose from the unaccountable loss of that by which Lionel expected to succeed to the property, and, most important of all, he learned that only a few weeks now must elapse before the one they had found was to be acted upon. He led her next to talk of her son, for the fond mother could not resist the deft questioning as to her beloved Lionel. And then, when he had gained all the information he desired, Count Vandeweld bade her a courteous farewell, and expressed in suitable terms his gratitude for so hospitable a reception.

"I may not remain long in this neighbourhood," he said, "or I may find it advisable to spend six weeks or two months here. It is yet impossible for me to decide; but if you, lady, will grant me permission, I shall make at least one more effort to see Miss Hepburn, for her father's sake!"

"Pray do," she said, cordially. "I long to introduce my son to his uncle's friend."

And Count Sigismund Vandeweld bowed himself out of the room, leaving a most favourable impression behind him.

His horse was waiting for him, and he sprang lightly into the saddle, a satisfied smile resting on his face as he muttered, "*Ah, chère reine de Gélcoude, nous nous reverrons bientôt.*"



CHAPTER XXIX.

A SURPRISE.

THE gayest, brightest, youngest-looking guest at Mrs. Trotter's soirée was Cornelia Vaughan. She had flung her widow's weeds entirely aside, appearing in a rich white silk dress covered with lace, and wearing on her head something that was neither cap nor veil, but a pleasing combination of both, from beneath whose fairy texture her soft rich chesnut hair floated in luxuriant curls on her white neck and shoulders. She was very lovely that night, and, when she joined the dancers, no one could have believed that light elastic figure to be other than a mere girl.

Several officers of the 91st were present; and as soon as Colonel le Grand could escape from Mrs. Vaughan, he claimed acquaintance with Agnes.

"I am a bachelor at present," he said, gaily, when the first greetings were over, "but I hope soon to introduce Mrs. le Grand to you; for Mr. Campbell and Mr. Upton have already put me in the way of securing a comfortable house. My wife detests life in barracks as much as our friend Mrs. Vaughan likes it, and I agree with her heartily. How strange it is that you, Nellie Vaughan, and I should meet again, Miss Stuart, in this out-of-the-way corner of

the world! You don't look a day older, while *she*"—with a glance of his eye towards Mrs. Vaughan—"is exactly what she was. Like the Bourbons, years and trials have taught her nothing. She is as beautiful, as heartless, and as mischief-making as ever. Don't look so shocked, Miss Stuart! The reason I speak of her so is, that her husband was a relation of my wife's, and my bosom friend, and she led him a wretched life. What man could be happy with her? However, we cannot break entirely with her, out of respect to the name she bears; but my wife will not like Fairholm the more when she knows that Nellie Vaughan is here."

"Seven miles from Fairholm, and no railway," Agnes suggested, "cannot be called *near*."

"Not to most people, but it is to Nellie. I suppose it is pretty dull at St. Ringans? At least she told me that you lack amusement. She was carrying on a flirtation with a half-squire, half-merchant, merely *pour passer le temps*, she said."

Agnes coloured.

Colonel le Grand saw it, and went on, as if merely finishing his sentence: "It is not Upton, I hope, she has in her toils. He seems far too good a fellow to fall a victim to Nellie."

The contemptuous use of Mrs. Vaughan's Christian name did not escape Agnes; but she said, calmly, "Mr. Upton is an old friend of Cornelia's; they were fellow-passengers to India in 185—."

Colonel le Grand simply replied, "Indeed!" but the "indeed" was as suggestive as Lord Burleigh's nod.

"I recognize another Saxcuham friend here," he said, after a pause—"Dr. Thorpe. They tell me he is to settle at Fairholm shortly. I am glad of it, if we stay. We met in the Crimea once or twice, and I liked him; he has pluck, and sense as well. He will get on; I am sure of that."

"I think he will." Agnes said this very composedly, but she was conscious of a sharp interrogative glance from her companion as she spoke, which again made her change colour; but it also gave her courage to add, "As a pupil of my brother, I take great interest in his success."

Something in this speech made Colonel le Grand smile. It taught the man of the world that no tenderer interest in

the young doctor agitated the speaker, and he said, kindly, "You are not alone in your good wishes. Campbell and Upton are moving heaven and earth in his favour. By the way, I met a man to-day at Fairholm who was questioning me closely about Thorpe—a Crimean man also, but not one of our set. He was in some of the Volunteer corps—'gad, I had almost said the mercenaries, and that would have sounded ill! But he is a queer fish, and I can't make out what brings him to Scotland. He seems to have some knowledge of this neighbourhood; but that he may have gleaned from Mrs. Vaughan. He is another friend of hers, I find. She has a knack of making friends, you know, especially if they are good looking; and this fellow is so, there's no denying it. Thorpe!" he exclaimed, as Harry passed at the moment, "did you ever fall in with a Mr. or Count Vandeweld in the Crimea?"

"I don't remember the name."

"He saw you at Fairholm, and asked me about you."

"Vandeweld? No. What sort of a man is he?"

"Oh, like scores of those foreign fellows—sallow face, black eyes, and no end of beard and moustaches; wears a coat covered with braid, and prefers a fez to a wide-awake; rides like a Centaur, and has a certain elderly gentleman's own luck at cards."

"He has the advantage of me," Harry answered, as he strode away to secure Effie for the next waltz.

"Metal more attractive!" Colonel le Grand said, good naturedly, as he led Agnes to a seat, where she was immediately pounced upon by Mr. Campbell.

From the day of their first meeting at Kinburn, the old merchant had frankly declared himself Miss Stuart's most devoted slave, and the openness of his admiration and the forty years of disparity between their ages, would have made it seem an affectation of prudery had Agnes declined his little civilities, or taken his rather grandiose speeches *au pied de la lettre*. So she had accepted the music and flowers he sent her, and they became great friends. But, after Mrs. Vaughan's arrival, there somehow grew up a kind of constraint between them, arising partly from Cornelia's constant jests at Agnes's early admirer, but still more from the avidity with which she secured for herself all the advan-

tages of the acquaintance. In Agnes's name she suggested and accepted many kindnesses which *she* would have contrived to escape; and once or twice made her seriously angry by availing herself of Mr. Campbell's ready hospitality in a manner which Agnes thought no woman was entitled to do save from a very near relation.

Cornelia could not be made to see things in this light. "If a thing is worth accepting," she said, "why decline it, Agnes? Besides, Mr. Campbell is rich, and likes nothing better than to set a-going parties of pleasure; and I," she added, with a little laugh, "like nothing better than to join in parties of pleasure, on condition that the expenses don't come out of my own pocket."

Agnes made no answer—she saw it was useless; but, when she had the opportunity, she escaped every invitation she could of Mr. Campbell's, and when forced, by Cornelia's manoeuvres, to accept them, she contrived to have her aunt or Mrs. Upton included with the Weirs in the party. Yet, spite of all precautions, this constant parrying of kindnesses was disagreeable, and gradually made Mr. Campbell's acquaintance less pleasant than formerly. Cornelia's hints, Cornelia's remarks, made Agnes nervous and self-conscious in his society; and the happy freedom of their previous intercourse was gone for ever. On the present occasion she met Mr. Campbell with real confusion, owing to a late machination of Nellie's. A few days previously the old gentleman had described with spirit some feats of *diablerie* which he had lately seen at the annual fair of Clayton, a small old-fashioned town near Fairholm. Agnes had listened to him with interest, and had casually expressed a wish to see something of the kind, but thought no more of the matter. But the hint was not lost on Mrs. Vaughan, and she managed, no one knew how, to induce Mr. Campbell to engage the professor of the Black Art to visit Fairholm, and give an entertainment in the town-hall, under his patronage, and principally at his expense. When all arrangements were made, he informed Agnes of his success, and placed in her hands a number of blank invitations to attend the performance, and also a champagne luncheon at his house.

Mrs. Vaughan was enchanted. Agnes, on the contrary,

was as much disconcerted by the fulfilment of her wish at so much trouble and expense, as poor Beauty was by the fatal results of her request to her father to bring her home a rose. The tickets had arrived that morning at the Whim, and now she must express her high sense of Mr. Campbell's kindness.

But his first observation drove the subject, for the present at least, from her thoughts.

"What is this I hear, Miss Stuart?" he said, with evident pain in his voice; "that you are going to leave us? I hope it is not true?" he added, as he saw her look of surprise.

"My plans are not quite fixed," she answered, shocked by the determination to force her away, which was shown by a report which Cornelia Vaughan alone could have originated.

"Then there is some foundation for the rumour," he said, eagerly. "I wish you would tell me why you go, where, and when?"

"I had some thoughts of paying my brother a visit at Saxenham."

"Had some? Then you are not going?"

"I cannot exactly say that," she replied, with a faint smile, "for indeed my plans are as yet quite vague. My brother wishes me to come to him, and while Mrs. Vaughan is with my aunt I could easily be spared."

"No, you could not," he said, bluntly; "if Mrs. Ellis can do without you, we cannot. Mrs. Vaughan can never fill your place with us, with some of us at least," he added, as, with a frown, he perceived the lady in question sitting at the opposite side of the room, and Lionel Upton leaning on the back of her chair listening with evident attention.

Agnes's eyes followed his, and with a suppressed sigh she said, "A vacant place even in our little world, Mr. Campbell, is soon filled."

"Why should you say so trite a thing?" he asked. "Experience has never taught it you."

"Yes it has," she replied, with an effort at playfulness. "It is a lesson all must learn, and it is well when the teaching comes, as it did to me, gently and lovingly. No one is, no one ought to be, *essential* to the happiness of another."

"I don't agree with you," he said, his face working with emotion. "In every life there is some person or thing whose removal changes light into darkness, happiness into that dreary aching void which is seldom, if ever, filled up. We may subdue such grief, but it is scotched only, not killed. A word, a smile, brings back the past and its bitterness, and we feel, O Heavens! how desolate! My Job's comforters told me, a quarter of a century gone by, that time would cure my misery. My head is grey, my youth is gone long, long ago, and that wound has not been even scarred over—till now!" The last two words were spoken so low as to be scarcely audible, and Agnes, if they reached her ear at all, never thought of attributing to them the meaning he intended.

She said softly, "And yet, Mr. Campbell, you have lived a not unhappy life?"

"Not unhappy. Ay, perhaps. But what would it have been had *she* lived?"

"It was not of such deep heart-wringing separations I thought, when I said what I did," Agnes continued. "The having my place filled up simply alluded to my brother's marriage. Till then we had been constantly together, and I fancied that neither of us could exist without the other. But I soon found my mistake. He loves me as much as ever, but he can do without me in his new-found happiness; and as for myself——" She stopped; for the trembling of her lip taught her she could not finish her sentence without tears.

"Are you not happy?" he asked, eagerly. "Is it not true what that prating cousin of yours says, that your engagement to the young doctor there has been the dream of your youth, and that for him you have rejected——" He stopped abruptly, startled by the stern look that stole over her face as he spoke.

"What do you ask, Mr. Campbell?" and her voice, like her countenance, became cold and severe. "I should be glad to hear what Mrs. Vaughan says of Harry and me."

"Well, perhaps I had better not; for it was a kind of secret, told me, she said, to enhance my interest in Thorpe's success."

"I must know what she said," was the persistent demand.

“ Well, if you will know, she said that, from the time you were girl and boy together at Saxenham, you had loved one another. And—and it was, to the full, as much to permit the fulfilment of your five years’ engagement, as because of Thorpe’s merits, that Upton and I flung ourselves so heartily into this Infirmary election.”

She changed colour as she said, very low, “ I thank you both; for though what Mrs. Vaughan has told you has not a shadow of foundation, I am sure that Harry Thorpe will do you both credit. But you said something more. Will you be so kind as to repeat what else Mrs. Vaughan told you ? ”

“ Tut, tut, I must *not* repeat that. Besides, what’s the use ? it is too late now,” and unconsciously his eye again travelled across the room and rested on Cornelia, over whose chair Lionel Upton still hung in the same lover-like attitude.

Agnes’s lip quivered involuntarily, and for a single instant she was obliged to delay any reply, that she might steady her voice. When she had resumed her power over it, she said, very gravely, “ I do not generally speak of such things ; but I think I ought to tell you, frankly, that Mrs. Vaughan is not my cousin, and is not, never has been, my confidante—I may almost say, has never been my friend. Circumstances alone have thrown us together, and she knows no more of my wishes, of my real self, than you do. Nay, not so much, for I could trust you with—— She stopped and blushed a good deal, feeling that she was going too far.

Mr. Campbell waited an instant, in the hope that she might finish her sentence ; but, as she remained silent, he said, abruptly, “ Then Thorpe *never* was engaged to you—never asked you to marry him.”

A conscious blush again dyed her cheek as she replied, “ We never were engaged, and the report that we were so might do him serious mischief in another quarter.”

“ A man *must* stand these things,” he said, bluntly ; “ but——Well, it’s no use to think what might have been ; but I heartily wish that woman had never come here ! ”

How devoutly his companion echoed the wish he could never guess. Both were silent for a few instants ; and

when he spoke again, it was to make her a formal offer of marriage.

"I am an old fellow," he said; "I might, in years, be your father, or your grandfather, for that matter; but—but if you have not learned that you could be happier with another, would to Heaven, lassie, you would give me the chance of making your life bright by all the love and worship a true heart can give."

Her eyes filled as he said this with a simplicity and pathos that found their way straight to her heart; the more so, perhaps, because at that moment it was deeply wounded by another's indifference. But she could not do otherwise than decline his offer, telling him that the idea of his caring for her in that way had never suggested itself till now, and that though it was impossible to accept it, it was equally so not to appreciate the honour, which she considered the greatest she had ever received.

He listened sadly, but not surprised. "Well, well!" he said; "if it is so, let no more be said about it. I was a vain fool to fancy such a thing possible. But"—and this he added in a tone of feeling quite irresistible—"but you won't, for this, strike me off the list of your friends, Miss Stuart? You won't forbid me to come to the Whim now and again? You won't refuse sometimes to come to Fairholm? It makes no difference in my caring for you; don't let it make any change in you, lassie, caring for the old fellow you used to like."

"I will not," Agnes said, cordially; "you and I alone shall ever know what has passed between us."

"I don't mean that. I am not ashamed of what I have done, he said, eagerly; "only if *you* could forget the last half-hour, it might be better. I shall never allude to it again." So saying, he rose up, crushed her hand in both of his, and, with a murmured "God bless you!" he hastily left her, and soon afterwards, the house.

Fortunately for both actors in this little scene, a slight bustle was going on in the room, owing to the cessation of dancing and the commencement of music. The piano, hitherto thrust into a remote corner, was wheeled into the centre of the room amid much laughing and talking, in which Dr. Thorpe's deep voice was quite as audible as

Sophy and Effie's girlish trebles, and every one was too busy to attend to any one but themselves.

Agnes, therefore, seized the opportunity to escape from her now rather prominent position near the flower-filled fire-place, and took refuge in the comparative gloom of the deep bay-window, which formed a quiet shady nook in the brilliantly-lighted room. Here she hoped soon to conquer her agitation under the shock she had undergone, and to brace her nerves to encounter any fresh ordeal to which that evening might expose her. For a secret intuition warned her that, though deeply moved by Mr. Campbell's words, though grieving sincerely to have to inflict a disappointment on so kind a friend, it was not that only that put brain and heart in their present state of tumult and misery. Even while listening to his words, one or two had reached her from the couple who sat at a short distance from her on the opposite side of the fire-place, and they were such as to make her fear that Cornelia's wiles, Cornelia's serpent-tongue, would conquer in the end. Otherwise, why should Lionel's eyes fix themselves on her with such earnestness that he seemed unaware of all that was passing around him; and why should that rare smile of his gleam once and again over his face, lighting it up with such a sunny glow? And Nellie? It was evident that she felt she was making an impression upon him. Nor could Agnes wonder that such beauty shed a glamour on all who saw her. Generally speaking, the expression of her countenance lacked heart and earnestness, but to-night *nothing* seemed wanting. Her large, finely-shaped, but not always frank-looking brown eyes, were raised with such a pleading look as few men could resist. There was a slight glow in her cheek, a depth of colour in her lips, that was not always there; and as she proceeded in her tale—for it was evident she was recounting something that greatly interested him—his face bent lower and lower, as if anxious not to lose a syllable, till at last a quick graceful movement of her elegant little head caused one of her perfumed ringlets to sweep his cheek. As it did so, he drew back with a start and blush, till she said something to him, which made him resume his position, and gallantly touch the stray lock with his lips. Cornelia smiled. Agnes winced; for how could she guess, she so

innocent of coquetry, that Mrs. Vaughan had alluded to the days of the little red morocco book, and almost dared him to do now as he had done then? On his part, it was a Quixotic act of courtesy to a pretty woman; on hers, a deep design to show her power over him. *She* knew Agnes's eyes were watching their every movement; *he* was puzzled and confused, drawn into a net he could not escape without an almost insulting repulsion of the woman he had once loved, and yet feeling at every moment a more decided shrinking from one so wanting in feminine delicacy and good taste.

These things Agnes could not guess; but she was conscious that an unusually troubled expression was stealing over the manly face she so keenly watched. She failed to fathom its cause, but she was fully convinced that it boded an impending crisis to herself, and what the ordeal might be to which she was to be exposed was startling to think of. For a time she forgot the busy, gay scene before her; her head drooped, her eyes grew dim; the past and the future seemed to blot out the present, and the force on her a certainty she had long struggled against, and that certainty was her love for Lionel Upton. Alas! such a discovery as she then made does not always make a woman's happiness. Far from it! As Agnes was now situated, it brought acutest misery; for, inch by inch, she saw Hope's anchor losing hold, and for the moment felt, with poor Mr. Campbell, that there are some losses in this world which can never be repaired.

She turned from the brilliant in-doors scene to rest her aching eyes on the calm twilight beauty of the outer world. The bay-window had three lights, two looking only to the court-yard, standing back a little from the main street of St. Ringans, the other commanding a widely-extended view seawards. There was still a faint roseate tinge in the west, while the flickering moonbeams danced cheerily on the sleeping waters of the Firth, as if rejoicing in the delicious coolness of the sea, that hot August night.

Insensibly the sight of these tranquil waters seemed to breathe peace into Agnes's torn heart, while the dreamy stillness of the hour was enhanced, not destroyed, by the sweet, child-like voices of Sophy and Effie warbling these lovely lines of Byron:

“ There be none of Beauty’s daughters with a magic like thee,
And like music on the waters is thy sweet voice to me,
When, as if the sound were causing the charm’d ocean’s pausing,
The waves lie still and gleaming,
And the lull’d winds seem dreaming.”

The music and the words seemed the natural interpreters of the scene, and Agnes’s senses were being gradually lulled into a sweet, vague dream, when the sharp ring of a horse’s hoofs in the court-yard called her back to common life.

It seemed as if the lighted windows and the sound of music had attracted the rider towards the house, for he drew up his horse beneath the window, and sat patiently waiting for the close of the strain. When it ended, he sprang from his saddle, threw the reins over the spear-headed railings of the court-yard, and, striding up the high steps to the hall-door, rang loudly.

A voice, which seemed unaccountably familiar to Agnes, spoke for a few moments to the servant, the outer door closed, steps were heard on the staircase, there was a slight bustle in the room, a few pleased exclamations of “How good of you to find us out!” from Sophy and Effie, a growl of satisfaction from Mrs. Trotter, and the crowd round the doorway gradually dispersing, Agnes saw that the new-comer was a tall and very remarkable-looking man in military undress.

“I consider this a real proof of friendship, Count,” Mrs. Trotter said, with unusual cordiality, as a second time she heartily shook hands with the stranger. “We have often wished to see you again, and thank you for all your kindness.”

And Sophy and Effie chirped and blushed as they fitted from friend to friend and related how they had met Count Vandeweld in Germany, when Aunt Kate had joined them at Nuremberg, and he had been such a help to them, extricating them from some of those little difficulties into which unprotected females are so often thrown when abroad.

At the name of Count Vandeweld, Agnes remembered Colonel le Grand’s mention of him early in the evening, and looked curiously at him, wondering what it could be in his voice that was so familiar to her. In appearance he was unlike any one she had ever seen, and yet that voice, and

one or two unconscious movements, reminded her hazily of some one she had come across long ago; but who that some one was she failed to remember. He was a man above the medium height, well made, and decidedly foreign in manner and speech, but with nothing "tigerish" about him. He looked as if the title of Count was his by descent, and the slightly military cut of his braided surtout harmonized well with his close-curling beard, moustache, and hair—all of raven black—and with the deep scar that seamed his face from brow to chin. But for this scar he would have been really handsome. His eyes, like his hair, were a deep black, full of fire and intellect; and though now and then a covert glance shot from them which, when taken in connection with his scarred cheek, gave a momentarily sinister effect to his countenance, it was speedily dissipated by a flashing smile, which displayed two rows of strong, even teeth, rendered more dazzlingly white by the contrast of the black muzzle surrounding them.

He recognized Colonel le Grand with a frankness approaching to cordiality, and, on being introduced to Dr. Thorpe, stretched out his hand, and said, smilingly, "You forget me, I see; but I am indebted to you for kindness and skill when I lay wounded in the Crimean trenches. Doctors forget their patients, but the patient cannot forget the doctor to whom he owes his life."

Harry, who was still young enough to redden when praised in presence of his mistress, grew crimson as he said, curtly, as he had previously done to Colonel le Grand, "You have the advantage of me;" but, notwithstanding this, Count Vandeweld's mode of expressing his gratitude flattered him.

As by a kind of fascination, Agnes's eyes followed this man as he moved from one group to another, and finally stationed himself by Mrs. Vaughan, who greeted him with evident *empressement* and surprise.

Agnes's attention was soon called away from him by having to play Harry Thorpe's accompaniment, but as she moved from the window to the piano she passed close to Count Vandeweld, whose eyes fixed themselves upon her as if infected by the same curiosity with regard to her as she had felt as to him; and she almost fancied she saw him

change countenance as she calmly returned his gaze. In that, however, she might be mistaken, as she felt now she had been in her fancy that they had met previously. On coming nearer him she was convinced she had never seen him before. Still he interested her, and, when Harry's song was over, she glanced round the room in search of him, but he was gone, and Lionel Upton stood by her side.



CHAPTER XXX.

THE SPELL.

"WHY are you not singing to-night?" he asked, abruptly. "You are ready enough to help others, but you seem to dislike the more prominent place for yourself."

Agnes laughed nervously, as she replied, "I don't think you quite do me justice in that respect. At least, I flatter myself I come quite as prominently forward as I ought. And, once upon a time," she added, maliciously, "you hinted to me that I was a little inclined to take *too* much upon me."

"I? Impossible."

"Indeed you did! but you turned the reproof so neatly that it might almost have passed for a compliment." Then suddenly recollecting that her remark might lead the conversation into an awkward channel, she said quickly, "The reason I do not sing to-night, however, is, that I have a wretched headache."

"That, then, explains why you ensconced yourself in that dark window-seat? Mrs. Vaughan was speculating on your choice of position."

"Agnes coloured. "It was one reason, at all events; a bad headache is always aggravated by a glare of light, and the heat of the evening made the air from the open window pleasant."

"It is very oppressive to-night," he said, pushing his hair back from his forehead. "I don't think you can do better than let me take you back to your cool retreat."

Before Agnes could answer, a soft hand was laid on her shoulder, and in her most sugared accents Mrs. Vaughan said, "You *are* going to sing, dear?"

Mr. Upton answered for her. "Miss Stuart has too bad a headache."

"Headache!—nonsense. When Agnes has headaches, her eyes are dim and her cheeks pale, and even then she can race round the Rectory garden with those rough boys; or sing ballads for the hour together to Godfrey. To-night her cheeks are bright, and her eyes also; so don't tell such a transparent fib, my dear Agnes. Say you *won't* sing, if you like; but as for *can't*, it is nonsense." And stooping down she whispered in a kind of stage aside, quite audible to Lionel, "Aggie, dear, is it not heartache, rather than headache, that ails you?" and she darted a meaning glance across the room to where Effie sat on a low chair, looking up in Harry Thorpe's eyes with an eager, radiant expression on her cherub face. "If it be, dear, don't let these people see it."

Agnes flushed angrily at this deceitful speech. She saw through the whole design, and perceived that it had been managed with great dexterity; for Mr. Upton's eyes involuntarily followed Cornelia's, and gained confirmation of the rumour Mrs. Vaughan had set a-going by attributing Agnes's indisposition to jealousy of Effie.

"I am at a loss to understand you," Agnes said, aloud.

"Are you, dear? I am sorry, for in that case— —But, at all events, allow me to persuade you to sing? It will be most judicious to do so, I can assure you. What song was Lionel—Mr. Upton, I mean—asking for?" As she pronounced his Christian name, she shot a penetrating glance, first at him, and then at Agnes.

Agnes turned a shade or two paler at this mark of the better understanding between them; but his countenance remained utterly impassive as he replied, "Nothing particular, I believe;" and he continued to turn over the music in the portfolio he had been examining for the last few moments.

"Pray choose something for me," Agnes said, "if I must sing."

Mrs. Vaughan smiled triumphantly, and Lionel placed before her Weber's "*Zauberkreise*," saying,

"I should like to hear this, if you do not object to sing it."

It was the English version; and Mrs. Vaughan, after rapidly glancing through the words, said, "Pray do. I should greatly like to hear it to-night."

Something in the manner of both caused Agnes to look interrogatively from one to the other; but as neither vouched any explanation of their choice of that particular and rather peculiar song, she said quietly, "I shall sing it, if you like. Shall it be in German or English?"

"In German," the gentleman exclaimed; while at the same instant the lady said, "In English?"

"Which is it to be?" Agnes repeated.

Mr. Upton bowed, and said, "Of course in English, as Mrs. Vaughan desires it; and then he withdrew from his place near the piano, to station himself, as was his custom, exactly opposite the singer, so as to lose no expression either of feature or voice in her performance. At first this habit of his had rather annoyed Agnes, but latterly she had become so much used to it that she would have missed him had he been in any other part of the room.

Meanwhile, the conversation which had attracted Mrs. Vaughan's attention, between Dr. Thorpe and Effie, was going on with great animation. Evidently it was a revival of an old discussion; for Effie said, "It is very ill-natured of you, Dr. Thorpe, to be so severe on Mrs. Vaughan. I am sure she never says anything of you but what is kind and flattering of you."

"She does me honour."

"Your tone does not imply as much!" she retorted, with her little rippling laugh. "But, notwithstanding, you must confess that she is the very prettiest person you ever saw?"

"Why will you say such things, Miss Weir?" Harry replied, with a comical distortion of face. "You know that, if I could, I would say, Yes; but my conscience rebels, and I am obliged to confess that she is not at all the kind of woman one could love, however much one might admire her. There is not an atom of repose about her—nothing on which one could rest either eye or heart."

"Oh, Dr. Thorpe!" Effie exclaimed, a little startled by this mode of discussing a lady's good looks. "I only wish I were as pretty. Her features are perfect."

There was a curious smile in Harry's eyes, though his lips were grave, as he answered quietly, "Her features are well cut, certainly; moreover, her eyes are fine and very effective, her colouring is good, and her hair of a very lovely shade of chesnut. But what of the contracted expression of her mouth, and the narrowness of her forehead? Do you admire them? To me, Miss Weir, they are utterly subversive of true beauty."

Effie gave a little shake of her head, as she said, laughingly, "In short, Dr. Thorpe sees beauty in no one unless——" and she looked up at him with a little malicious twinkle of her eye—"unless in Miss Stuart?"

How sweet the little pouting rosy mouth looked as she said this! There was not an atom of jealousy in the remark she made; just that *souppçon* of coquetry which is allowable in a pretty girl who feels, though she has not confessed it even to herself, that the man to whom she addresses a remark will take it in the best spirit.

Harry did so, evidently; for he not only laughed in answer, but blushed a little, as he said, "I see you have guessed my weakness on that score, Miss Weir, and I frankly confess that I do heartily admire Agnes Stuart. But"—and he paused long enough to give point to the next words—"but when we are better acquainted, you will, I suspect, find out that even Agnes Stuart is not my ideal of beauty. It is her countenance I admire, not her features. I acknowledge them to be irregular, and I can even confess that I think her nose the very least little bit too Romanesque for beauty; but her mouth, eyes, and forehead are faultless. Look at her now! Did you see that flash of her eye, that curl of her lip? What shaft has that lovely little fiend launched at her? She has said something cruel, I am certain; but only see the calm dignity with which Agnes rebuts the calumny, whatever it is! See how gracefully her head turns! And now the cloud passes; the sunshine of her smile breaks forth again. Yes, I do admire Agnes Stuart; but——" He made a full stop there, and fixed his dark eyes on the sweet face before him.

Effie felt conscious, she scarce knew why, and said, quickly, "And yet do you know, Dr. Thorpe, some people think Miss Stuart plain."

"You don't? No, I am sure you appreciate her."

"I think I do," she said, timidly; "but," with a return of girlish perversity, "I *should* like to be as pretty as Mrs. Vaughan."

"You are far prettier!" burst from the excitable young man's lips.

Effie pretended not to hear; but her cheeks, which had deepened in colour with every fresh remark of Dr. Thorpe, grew redder than ever, and even the tip of her delicate ear grew rosy. Nevertheless, she had sufficient self-command to say, quite quietly, as if finishing her previous sentence, "But there is one charm Miss Stuart has which is totally wanting in Mrs. Vaughan—a lovely voice. In speaking, as in singing, it is perfect music."

Harry smiled. "Yes; Agnes's is like the full swell of the organ, Mrs. Vaughan's like the piping of an untuned fife."

"Dr. Thorpe, you are very sarcastic."

"Only against hypocrisy and affectation like Nellie Vaughan's. Affectation I despise; hypocrisy I hate." And the gleam of the black eyes was such that Effie afterwards confided to Sophy that they looked like live coals. But at the time their glare frightened the timid girl, and she murmured piteously,

"Dr. Thorpe, please don't look like that."

At this appeal, his eyes turned on the sweet child-like face, blanched by terror at his vehemence, and a softened smile passed across his countenance, as he said, tenderly, "You have no cause to fear that any one should ever despise or hate you for any such failing. What I like in you and your sister is, that you are both so—so—transparent! A queer word to use, perhaps; but by this time, Miss Effie, you must know that Harry Thorpe is a queer fellow. But not altogether bad, believe me. He can see good in others, and can admire it heartily, I give you my word."

"Of that I am certain," she answered, ingenuously. "It was you who taught Sophy and me thoroughly to appreciate Miss Stuart. We had liked her from the first; but after what you told us of her we *loved* her."

"Will you explain the difference between the two words?" he said, a little wickedly

Most girls would have been discomposed by the question, but Effie was too genuinely simple to hesitate, and answered readily, "Why, you know, when you *like* a person you are glad enough to meet them as acquaintanee—you don't *dislike* them, in fact; but when you *love* them, you wish to gain their esteem, their affection—in short, to have them as your friends."

"Thank you," he replied, with a feeling of hearty respect for the frank purity that could dictate such an answer to such a question. "You have defined the distinction admirably, and I would fain hope that one day Harry Thorpe may gain Miss Effie Weir's friendship on such terms."

"Oh! I assure you," said the simple girl, "Sophy and I often say that we expect by-and-by to be very good friends with you. Already Aunt Kate——" And there Effie's revelations suddenly broke off, for there was an expression in Dr. Thorpe's face just then that startled her, and suggested a vague dread lest she should have been too open in her communication with this comparative stranger.

"Well," he said, with a provoking smile, "what does Mrs. Trotter say?"

"Oh! only that—that—she does not wonder you are such a favourite with Ag——I mean, with everybody, for you are both good-natured and clever." And Effie blushed as if she had confessed something dreadful.

Again Dr. Thorpe smiled, this time showing his whole range of white teeth, as he said, "I am truly obliged for Mrs. Trotter's approbation, and still more so to you, Miss Effie, for letting me hear it. I hope I may never do discredit to her good opinion or yours."

The last emphasized word put the climax to poor Effie's discomfiture, when, fortunately for her, Agnes struck the introductory chords of the "Zanberkreise;" and exclaiming, "I must listen to that lovely song," Effie suddenly rose up, and took refuge under Aunt Kate's wing from Dr. Thorpe's strange smile, his glittering teeth, and glancing eyes. He did not attempt to detain her. He had gleaned enough from her innocent prattle to look forward to the dawn of a bright hope. And so he leaned against the pillared chimney-piece, and gave himself up to the luxurious pleasure of

listening to Weber's exquisite air, sung with real taste and feeling.

"How well she enunciates it!" he thought. "One might almost fancy she had gone through that strange whirl of feeling herself! But *she* could never love unworthily!"

At that instant Agnes had reached the close of the second verse, which she intended should end the song; but Mrs. Vaughan said quickly, "Don't cheat us of a single word, Agnes. I must have that last verse;" while Mr. Upton made a step forward to say, "Pray go on. You express the feeling of the song exactly."

Mrs. Vaughan smiled. Agnes's heart sunk; but she went on, and certainly contrived to do justice to the idea of the words and the music—the struggle between reason and passion, the fighting against a fascination from which it vainly tried to free itself. She rather breathed than sang the last four lines:

"In vain I struggle and complain,
In vain my guardian spirit whispers low,
'Awake, and flee that magic presence!'
I would, but cannot go; I would, but *cannot* go."

The melancholy emphasis on the "cannot" was the last despairing sigh of a victim. It seemed to fall like a weight on every heart, till Mrs. Vaughan, with her little sharp laugh, exclaimed,

"A foolish song, admirably sung!" And so she moved away; but there was a gleam of triumph in her eye, and a glow of satisfaction on her face, which showed Agnes how she, at all events, interpreted the last verse.

Hardly had she moved from the piano ere Mr. Upton approached it, and, bending forward so as entirely to prevent Agnes from rising from her seat, he drew the music towards him, and carefully read through the words.

"I see," he said, "you have improved on the printed translation. I like your rendering of it better, especially the four last lines. You point out the struggle against the spell's influence."

"The truth is," Agnes said, with a smile, "that it runs so in my own edition, and the words came more natu-

rally. It is, nevertheless, as Mrs. Vaughan says, a foolish song."

"Foolish, no doubt; and yet I think, Miss Stuart, you must have felt, as I have, that a silly verse of a silly song is frequently more apt to haunt us than a lofty poem. This is my case to-night. Circumstances have occurred, words have been uttered, which, in spite of myself, brought this particular song into my mind. I had heard Sophy and Effie sing it, but was utterly unprepared for the powerful effect which it would produce upon me sung as you sing it."

Agnes was silent. The confession did not take her by surprise; still it pained her, and she could not assume an indifference she did not feel.

He paused, in hopes of some rejoinder; but, as she made none, he continued: "And your rendering of it—the last part especially—has helped greatly to arrange my thoughts, and show me my actual position."

"In what respect?" she could not help asking.

"I wish you to know—I wish you to understand," he said, as he drew in a chair, and, leaning his elbow on the instrument, seemed to prepare himself for a long story. "In a crowd like this one can talk as confidentially as in a *tête-à-tête*. Nobody hears, nobody heeds, their neighbour, so I may as well seize this opportunity of telling you all about it; for now that the octagon is not what it once was, I have no one to open my heart to."

Agnes's pulse beat quick. There was something so unlike himself in Mr. Upton's manner that she was terrified, she scarcely knew why; while the melancholy tone in which he alluded to their old meetings in the octagon touched an answering chord in her own heart. But a bow was her only answer.

"You remember the finding of the little red book in my grandfather's secretaire?" he asked.

"Perfectly."

"And what I then told you of the way in which it came into my possession?"

"Yes."

"Well, you would no doubt like to learn the wind-up of the romance? I think you are aware that we met again,

when she was newly widowed? The sight of her grief and desolation touched me deeply, and overcame any selfish irritation I might have retained towards her. But of course at that time I could not touch upon old days, nor could any explanation take place between us, supposing there were any to give. So we met and parted as those meet and part who never expect, never wish, to meet again on earth. When she came to the Whim I avoided her, as you know. At present I am greatly occupied by business, which often keeps me prisoner at Fairholm; but I could have come oftener, had she or I wished it. I did not, and, I fancied, neither did she. But to-night a strange thing happened. Accident led us to touch on our first acquaintance, and she told me—told me something which I had once, but not lately, longed to know; and words were uttered which a year or two since I would have clung to as the most acceptable that ear could hear, though whether they might even then have secured me happiness Heaven only knows!”

Agnes shivered involuntarily. She seemed to understand his meaning without further explanation; the song had given it:

“I would, but cannot go; I would, but cannot go.”

It was thus Mrs. Vaughan had interpreted his desire to hear the song, and, as she listened to the words, they had seemed to her the pæan of her victory. And he—was he not going to acknowledge that victory complete?

“You speak in riddles,” she said, with effort.

“I do, no doubt; for in truth, Miss Stuart, the happiness”—there was a doubtful emphasis on the word—“has come upon me so as to stun rather than exalt me. I cannot comprehend it, and I want you to help me to dissect that strange revelation, and teach me what I ought to do.” He spoke in a reckless, broken way, and his excited look pained and puzzled Agnes; she did not know whether he spoke in earnest.

“If to talk over what has happened,” she said, very gravely, “can be in any way a relief to you, Mr. Upton, I hope you know that I am entirely at your service; but——”

"Yes," he interrupted, "I do know it; and what is more, I know that whatever you say will be strictly what you think. There are not many of whom I dare give such an assurance."

So far only had he spoken, when a second time that evening Cornelia's hand touched Agnes's shoulder. She started as she felt the coldness of the slender fingers; but Mrs. Vaughan's manner was perfectly composed as she reminded her it was late, and that they ought to go home. What had she overheard? How long had she been there? It was as impossible to tell this as it was for Agnes and Lionel to conceal their confusion at being thus interrupted. But Mr. Upton at once rose and offered his arm to conduct Mrs. Vaughan to the carriage.

As he placed Agnes in it, he whispered, "You shall hear the rest to-morrow."

Agnes only bowed in answer; but these few words seemed to allay her fears, though why they should do so she could not explain.

The drive home was very silent. Mrs. Vaughan lay back in the carriage, with her eyes closed, and her shawl gathered closely round her, while Agnes leaned out of the open window, watching the ghostly changes made in the familiar scene by the flickering moonbeams, and resolving not to think of what she had heard that night until to-morrow, when she was to learn the end.

Ay, it was a wise determination, if she could keep it: but was that possible?

The best thing she could do would be to plead her increasing headache as an excuse for not talking over the evening—as was their custom—and going straight to her own room. But even this she was not to do.

Cornelia walked straight into the drawing-room, turned up the lamp on the table, threw herself on a couch, and exclaimed, "Agnes, I want to speak to you; I have something to tell you."

At this announcement Agnes hastily closed a note Martha had given her on entering the house, and, seating herself by the still open window, she said, quietly, "What is it?"

She was surprised how calmly she spoke, when her heart was beating like a sledge-hammer

"I can't talk to you at that distance; you must come here, close to me."

Unwillingly, Agnes rose, and, advancing to the fire-place, she leaned her elbow on the low mantel-piece, and looked down on Mrs. Vaughan, who, half reclining on the couch, seemed like some Eastern princess equipped for conquest.

"How very beautiful she is!" sighed Alice to herself. "Who could wonder if she did fling a spell over a man's senses?"

"Agnes," Mrs. Vaughan said, suddenly, "what ails you to-night? I never saw you look so odd, so *distrainée*."

"Do I? My head still aches. Is that a sufficient answer?"

"No, it is not. I want you to have all your senses alive. I want your sympathy, I want your good sense, I want every bit of you, to think of me and of my fortunes; and you must not put me off, as you tried to do Lionel Upton, with the excuse of a trumpery headache!"

Agnes made no answer.

"Do you hear me, Agnes Stuart?" Cornelia said, raising herself on her elbow, and trying to peer into her companion's face, veiled by the arm on which she leaned.

"Yes, I hear you. What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to listen to me, I tell you—listen as you would to the tiresome platitudes of that blind woman, or to the girlish confidences of the Weirs."

"Yes." And Agnes removed her hand and stood erect, gazing down on her.

"Do you know what has happened to-night?" she asked, pitilessly.

"No," Agnes answered boldly; but the sudden spasm at her heart made her feel faint, and resume the resting-place for her arm.

"I thought Lionel might have told you."

"When you interrupted us Mr. Upton was telling me something that interested me," was Agnes's quiet answer.

"Ah, I thought so! They told me you were great allies; not that I have seen much sign of it myself, however. But that might be *pour cause*. You know, I suppose, that we met in India?"

"Yes."

"Well! Shall I go on? Can you stand news that may surprise you—pain you, probably?"

"Why should you think your news should pain me?"

"'For a reason I have,' as the Irish say. You remember the little quarrel we had a short time since? I fancied then that——In short, I believed that you saw Lionel Upton with my spectacles."

"If you mean that I care for Mr. Upton," Agnes said, boldly, "I acknowledge I like him very much. We are fast friends also, but that is all; so you may say what you please about him."

"Ah, thank you, dear! That quite relieves my doubts. I dare say it was very absurd to fancy that you had any *tendresse* for him; you are so totally unlike one another, and never could be *more* than friends. Still, as everybody here seemed to think him a phoenix, I feared you might perhaps feel a very little care for him. Nay, more; since I have placed myself in the confessional, I may as well tell you that when I worried you so much about Lionel—asking you all sorts of impertinent questions, and so forth—I had just the very least little fit of jealousy on me. I thought that he might have learned to like you, and that I might be superseded. As he seldom spoke to me, I fancied he had forgotten many things; but I wronged him in that, Agnes. I find he has forgotten nothing, nothing—not even the way he used so foolishly to caress my vagrant curls!" And as she said this, she took up one, and, stroking it gently, touched it with her own lips as Agnes had seen him touch it with his.

A shiver she could not control thrilled through her as she looked and listened; but she gave no other sign of emotion. She had a kind of intuitive perception that she was being closely watched by those furtive grey eyes, and resolved to deny them the triumph they sought.

"Do you know, Agnes, why we asked you to sing 'The Spell'?" Cornelia said, abruptly.

"I guessed; I did not know," she answered, with a slight stress on the last word.

"You could not guess; you had no grounds."

Agnes was silent; she did not choose to confess how deep she was in Lionel Upton's secrets.

"No, you could not guess," she repeated; "for you did not know that we met after Colonel Vaughan died."

"You are mistaken; I did know it, Cornelia."

"Oh, you did!" And the same triumphant expression that had passed over her face as she listened to the song returned to it, and made her look—Agnes could not deny it—very beautiful. Perhaps it was not the most lovable kind of beauty, it had so little softness in it; but the light in her eyes, the colour in her cheek, the slightly disdainful curl of her red lip, were very striking. Any man, Agnes thought, might be flattered to find that that haughty beauty condescended to bow to him, and to him only. Cornelia went on: "Then, if you know so much, let me tell you more. There was a time when I might have been Lionel Upton's wife. He and I alone know why I refused. We met again. I saw he was unchanged; but delicacy forbade any explanation between us then. A third time fate has brought us together, and now—now there is nothing to prevent the fulfilment of that early dream. So you see, Agnes, why I trembled lest you should have embarked your hopes where they could only meet shipwreck. You see, dear, I was not so unkind as you believed."

Was she not? Why, then, did those pitiless eyes peer so into her face? Why did that cruel voice use the words and tones which she knew must thrill most keenly through every sensitive nerve? Why, above all, did she demand those expressions of sympathy which her heart told her—if she had a heart—could only be granted under a penalty of intense agony?

But Agnes bore it all like a martyr at the stake—pale, firm, and self-possessed. She bore even the last sharp thrust—"Yes, Agnes, you who know, who appreciate, Lionel as he deserves, you can and will sympathize in this—this late fruition of all my dreams of happiness?"

"I do appreciate Mr. Upton," was the firm answer, "and I know it will not be his fault if his wife is not a happy woman."

Mrs. Vaughan was evidently disappointed by this answer, but, with a malicious smile, she hastened to turn the flank of her self-possessed opponent.

"And you will permit me in return, dear Agnes, to con-

gratulate you on your prospects? I have made my confession; you must make yours."

"Mine?"

"Nay, don't be absurd, Agnes! You cannot suppose all eyes were blind to the pretty little drama enacted between you and Mr. Campbell this evening? Nor can you say of *him*, 'We are friends—nothing more.'"

"Indeed, Nellie, I can."

"Nonsense! I saw what I saw, and I believe my own eyes."

Agnes's only answer was to put into her hands the note which Martha had given her as she entered the house half an hour previously.

It was dated,

"The Star Inn, St. Ringans,

"Thursday, 11 P.M.

"DEAR MISS STUART,—Did I make it distinct to you that it is at two o'clock on Saturday that I expect your party from St. Ringans? Do not fear to bring too many. There is a chair and welcome for everybody. I fixed the hour so as to enable you to drive over before the heat of the day sets in. One or two of our military friends join us; so don't forget that punctuality is the soul of the army.

"Remember, I expect you all, down to little Godfrey, if his mother will let him come.

"Yours faithfully,

"ROBERT CAMPBELL."

Mrs. Vaughan was fairly checkmated. The note was so simple, she was forced to disbelieve her well-founded surmises, and she exclaimed, in unfeigned amazement, "Then you really will accept Harry Thorpe, after all?"

Agnes's overstrained nerves gave way at this climax, and the laugh in which she indulged became almost hysterical before she could control it.

"Wrong again, Nellie," she said. "It would save you much trouble if you settle it, as I do myself, that I shall be an old maid. Remember, I am five-and-twenty."

"Then you do go to Fairholm on Saturday?"

"Yes, I intend to do so." For, however disagreeable it was to visit at Mr. Campbell's house, his note rendered it imperative that she should.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE WALK HOME.

LIONEL UPTON and Harry Thorpe walked home together from Mrs. Trotter's evening party. For a few hundred yards, both puffed their cigars in silence.

At last Harry said, abruptly enough, "Upton, suppose they bring me in for the Infirmary, and I show myself likely to succeed in practice at Fairholm, would you or her other friends think me presuming if I tried to win your cousin Effie?"

"My consin Effie?" was the startled rejoinder.

"Yes. I dare say you think I am a cool hand to think of such a thing. But the truth is, I can't help myself. Already I love her dearly, and, if we are thrown together much oftener, I can't promise not to let her know it. But you have all been so kind to me, that I could not help telling you what was impending. If you do not see any strong objections to my wishes, I shall be at ease. If you do, why I believe I ought to leave St. Ringans without delay."

He spoke with some agitation, but in so manly a way that Lionel felt his heart warm to him—all the more, perhaps, that this unexpected revelation swept aside all the cobweb doubts he had hitherto had as to his rivalry with himself.

"As far as my approval goes, Thorpe, you have nothing to fear. But, to tell the honest truth, I have little influence with my aunt. Besides, the Weirs are her husband's nieces, and therefore no relations of mine whatever."

"I am sorry for that; for I am a little wee bit afraid of Mrs. Trotter."

"I don't think you need be. She would like you all the better if you spoke to her as frankly as you have done to me. Besides, Effie is not penniless. She has a little fortune of her own, and can afford to marry a poor man. And you?"

"I, too, have something. Not enough for luxury, but enough to live on," he said, with a little laugh. "We should have bread, but no butter yet awhile."

"Never mind the butter," Lionel said, quickly. "You are

both young, and——” he sighed unconsciously, as he added, “a man needs some such stimulant to make work bearable.”

“Thank you; then I’ll face Mrs. Trotter bravely. Effie is such a dear simple darling, that it would be wrong to try and win her before I know her aunt’s fiat.” From which it appears that Master Harry had very little doubt of his success with the young lady, supposing he chose to try.

This little specimen of vanity passed unnoticed by his companion, who puffed his cigar for some moments without speaking.

“Thorpe,” he at last exclaimed, “were you acquainted with Mrs. Vaughan at Saxenham?”

Harry laughed. “Ay, that I was,” he said. “A man—or, I suppose I should say a boy—of eighteen cannot haunt a house, as I did Old-street, without knowing pretty thoroughly the characters of its inhabitants. Why Nellie Ellis was there six months; and a mischievous little creature she was, with her creeping ways and soft insinuations. But I beg your pardon, Upton,” he said, hastily interrupting himself; “I have no business to say this to you.”

“Why?”

“Oh, because——” he hesitated a little—“because, you know, people say that——”

“Out with it, man. I want to hear what they say.”

“Well, if you will have it,” said Harry, rather sheepishly, “they say she means to be lady of Kinburn.”

“Ay, they say so?”

“Yes. And so, you know, it is no use to tell tales out of school. Moreover, she was a girl then, and I confess we—Stuart’s pupils—teased her considerably. You see, we were greenhorns enough to fancy Stuart was sweet upon her, and, like donkeys, we resolved to send him a round robin to show her up. Fancy, Upton, such babies! when all the time Stuart knew what he was about better than we did, and read her through and through the first day she was in the house.”

Poor Harry! when once embarked in his story, he forgot prudence altogether, and felt rather caught when his companion said,

“My acquaintance with her began on our way out to India in the same ship.”

"Ah, I think I heard so," Harry answered: and added, as a sweetener, "she went through a good deal there, I believe."

"A great deal. But my mentioning this to you is because — In fact, Thorpe, I wish you would tell me who informed you of our engagement."

"Then it is true!" he exclaimed, impetuously. "Upton, my good fellow, I am very sorry to hear it. I know I have no business to say a word; but you have been so true a friend to me, that I should never forgive myself if I did not entreat you to think twice before you ratify that engagement. You never could be happy with her—never!"

Lionel was touched by the "effusion" with which this was said, and answered quickly, "Don't distress yourself, Thorpe. I might have been in danger a few months ago; I am safe now. Indeed, my private conviction is that Mrs. Vaughan far more admires Kinburn than she cares for Lionel Upton, who, as it happens, may never possess Kinburn."

"Never possess it. What do you mean?"

The question entailed a recapitulation of the two wills, with no additional particulars save this, that the state of trade had deteriorated within the last few weeks, and that all prospect of having the command of the requisite funds to retain the property in his own hands seemed hopeless.

"And so far it is well," Mr. Upton concluded, "that it will save the other legatees much heart-burning; and, in truth, Thorpe, I am not ambitious."

"Does Mrs. Vaughan know what you have told me?" was Harry's reply.

"Possibly not. It was my mother's wish to have the matter kept quiet till the time fixed for final arrangements."

"But you will allow me to tell her?"

"Certainly, if you wish it;" and with a cordial grasp of the hand they parted, and Lionel struck into the wooded path across the park.

He was in a very peculiar and, for him, a very excited state of mind. Harry's communication had certainly relieved one of his vague fears, but in other respects the conversation had vexed him. Did everybody know Mrs.

Vaughan's real character better than himself? Had she fooled him from the first? Those sweet words in the *Precursor*—were they false? Humble-minded as he was by nature, this thought disturbed him excessively. And now what was her object? Even while he had listened to her that night, and when his reason had told him that much of what she said was untrue, or at least gross exaggeration, he had been spell-bound by her beauty, so that, but for the remembrance of Agnes, he must have yielded himself up to it body and soul. Those lovely eyes glistening with tears—for Cornelia had the rare gift of looking more beautiful when weeping—had had a certain effect upon his imagination: and the tale she had told him of being forced by a stern father to break her troth to him to marry Colonel Vaughan, was so aptly rendered as to affect him even while he hesitated to believe it to be true.

Yes, he had doubted her at the time, but yet, in that strange "biological" state which he had endeavoured to explain to Agnes, he had found it difficult for his reason to act when exposed to the marvellous fascination of her beauty and clever acting. He listened in spite of himself. He mixed up her words with conversation that was passing round him. He caught up stray sentences that Agnes spoke first to Colonel le Grand and then to Mr. Campbell. He looked at Cornelia, but marked every change in Agnes's face. He saw her seek the bay-window, and longed to escape that he might try to chase the trouble from her brow; and all the while—so strangely is man constituted—he felt a kind of pleasurable sensation in listening to Cornelia's passionate words, and in allowing her to suppose he believed them.

How he hated himself for his whole conduct that night! He had been cruel to Cornelia, and what had he been to Agnes? Was she not entitled to think him not only neglectful of her, but almost insulting? How could he have asked her to listen to such a confession as he was about to make in such a place? And he had promised to see her to-morrow! To-morrow, when he must be at Fairholm the whole day! Yet, with Cornelia at the Whim, he dare not—actually dare not—send a note of apology. His step quickened as these disagreeable reflections assailed

him, and, turning from the direct path to the house, he crossed the little bridge and walked forwards till he found himself by the rocks so often mentioned as poor Lina's trysting-place with her false lover.

What was it in that place that seemed to give a sudden turn to his thoughts, and chase his own difficulties in compassion for his cousin? Perhaps it was the knowledge that this was once her favourite haunt, though he little knew how fatal the spot was to her. Kinder feelings towards her stole into his soul, as, flinging himself on the broad flat stone where once she had cowered in terror for the lightning's glare, he gave himself up to the soft influences of the sweet summer night. He looked abroad on the sea, across which the moon still wove her chain of brightness; he listened to the quiet ripple of the tide as it lapped up on the shore till it almost touched his feet, then fell back as a timid child might do when longing yet fearing to make friends, murmuring the while its gentle lullaby, that sound which in all nature seems most endowed with the power to soothe the human heart.

"Poor Lina!" he exclaimed, half aloud. "What a wretched fate yours is! Condemned to darkness—condemned to lose all that might have made life happy! Well, it is better, perhaps, for you that I cannot have Kinburn; it would have been hard on you to see me its possessor; and as for my mother, she will bear the disappointment bravely when she knows I have done my best to save the old place for her more than for myself."

He rose from his lowly seat as he said this, and as he walked home he fell into quiet dreams of the happy life that would be his if Agnes would consent to share it with him. Harry Thorpe's confidence had relieved him of all fears in that quarter, and when he had an opportunity of telling her *all*, she would listen, she would make him happy. Little did he guess that at that very moment Cornelia was pouring into her ear those truthful-sounding falsehoods which were to cause both many days of anxiety and distress.

CHAPTER XXXII.

COMPLICATIONS.

THERE are certain complications in life from which there seems at first actually no escape. A thousand impediments bar our path in every direction, and we fold our hands and say, "I must wait." Nothing else is in our power.

We might perhaps surmount sundry of the obstacles, could we persuade ourselves to throw off at once all the trammels that surround us; but the cure would probably be worse than the disease. At all events, no true woman could nerve herself to try the experiment. In such cases she is content to suffer until, in some unseen way, good overcomes evil.

So thought Agnes as she tossed that night on her sleepless bed. Her anxiety for Lionel Upton was great, and that apart from selfish considerations. She felt, though she could not tell why she did so, that he did not really love Cornelia, and that some unfortunate concurrence of circumstances alone had resulted in the present fatal resumption of her power over him, and that a time would come when he would awake from his delusion. But that awakening might be "too late."

Ay, it might be; but *she* could not hasten it; she must sit by and watch and pray; nothing more was in her power.

Weary and exhausted by anxiety, she sunk to sleep long after the morning light had shone upon the sea, crept over the distant tops of the beech woods, gilded the broad branches of the cedar, and finally flooded her room with brilliant sunshine. Thus she was late of making her appearance in the breakfast-room, and was surprised to find Mrs. Vaughan (generally a late riser) installed as tea-maker, and Mr. Upton seated at the breakfast-table, with little Godfrey comfortably established on his knee, the while Mrs. Ellis looked on with a satisfied smile.

The contemplation of a scene so domestic staggered her, and swept away the doubts of the sleepless night. But she regained her presence of mind, as most women do regain it when thrown into a position of real difficulty; and, after the usual greeting to her aunt and Mrs. Vaughan, she advanced

directly to Mr. Upton, and with a smile expressed her pleasure in seeing him, and apologized for her laziness.

"Aunt Agnes never was late before," Godfrey exclaimed, struggling to escape from Mr. Upton to her. "It is mamma who is always late. Mamma, give Aunt Agnes her own seat; you can't make tea one bit."

Mrs. Vaughan reddened, and said, sharply, "You are a naughty child, Godfrey; go to the nursery."

"No, I won't!" was young hopeful's answer. "Aunt Agnes likes me to breakfast with her, and I will."

By this time he had twisted himself free from Mr. Upton, and, darting to Agnes, flung his arms round her neck and nearly suffocated her by his embraces.

"The child should be yours, not mine, Agnes," Mrs. Vaughan said, with a forced smile; "no one can manage him but you;" for already a few whispered words had brought the little rebel to his senses, and he had quietly slipped to the floor again and drawn his little chair close to that in which Agnes had seated herself.

"Godfrey," Agnes said, gently, "your mamma bade you go to the nursery; you must not stay here without her leave."

The child looked up sleepishly from under his dark brows, but, seeing the grave eyes that met his, slipped down from his chair again, and slowly, very slowly, advanced to his mother.

"Mayn't I stay, mamma?" he blurted out at last. "I want to stay."

Mrs. Vaughan put her arms round him, and lifted him on to her knee, saying in her softest tones, "Yes, my child, if you will be good and quiet, and not disturb us when we are talking."

Godfrey, evidently amazed by this unusual tenderness, laid his head lovingly on his mother's shoulder, but unfortunately contrived, in doing so, to entangle his long curls in one of her filagree bracelets, and in his endeavours to extricate himself pulled off one of the dangling ornaments, and overturned a cup of tea on her pretty pink muslin dress.

"You little tiresome monkey!" broke sharply from the aggrieved mother's lips. "For Heaven's sake, Agnes, take him away; and do you make tea, for when this boy is in the room I get so nervous I can do nothing." A little

forced laugh concluded the speech, and she hastily exchanged seats with Agnes, who with difficulty refrained from a smile at the utter failure of the little domestic tableau.

Peace restored, Mrs. Vaughan turned at once to their guest, and was soon deep in arrangements for the Fairholm visit of the next day. "We mean to ride," she said. "Colonel le Grand sends a horse for me; Sophy and Effie have their ponies; and Dr. Thorpe accompanies us, and you of course."

"And Miss Stuart?"

"Aggie is a bad horsewoman, but she will find her way somehow. She must take Godfrey, you know."

The child's eyes lightened. "Am I to see the man, auntie, that eats swords and gives people wine out of big, big bottles? Charlie and Freddie want to go, but they can't get. Oh, how nice! how nice! how nice!"

Evidently Master Godfrey's education was not yet perfected, as his exhibition of that morning showed.

"I think Mr. Campbell did very foolishly to ask Godfrey," observed the tender mother, aside to Mr. Upton; "but as Agnes promises to take charge of him, I don't mind. Well, then, we start from this door at twelve precisely; so be punctual, I beg of you. By-the-by, has Mr. Campbell invited Count Vandeweld to be of the party? If not, tell him from me that he must. He is a great favourite of mine. You will call on him, Lionel?"

The Christian name *seemed* to slip out accidentally, for she instantly corrected it to "Mr. Upton;" but Agnes could not fail to observe that he reddened more than she did at the mistake—if mistake it were—and that there was a slight formality in the tone with which he said, "I have promised my mother to do so. It seems he knew my uncle Alexander when he was a boy, and there is a talk of his meaning to rent Hawkhill for a few weeks' grouse-shooting."

"Hawkhill! where is that? That pretty little place on this side St. Ringans?"

"No; rather nearer Fairholm—where the old abbey is."

"Ah! that is charming! We shall make him give us a picnic in the ruins. I am so glad I have resumed riding again. Riding to those things is far nicer than being shut up in a carriage. I know you think so, Lionel. By-the-by,

is Roland waiting for you? What a beauty he is! Would he carry a lady, do you think?"

As she spoke, she rose from breakfast, and sauntered through the open window into the verandah. Mr. Upton followed her. Agnes fancied he looked back to her, as if he expected her also to leave the breakfast-table; but she did not care to interrupt the *tête-à-tête* Cornelia had so evidently arranged. How often people *seem* too dull to comprehend the wishes of those around them, when in reality they see clearly enough, but feel it is wiser to resist the temptation offered!

But Godfrey had no such delicacy of feeling, and he no sooner heard that Roland was at the door than he dragged Agnes from her seat, insisting that she should accompany him to see the dear, darling horse; and he whispered, "Do make Mr. Upton give me a ride. He will, if you ask him. Don't let mamma do it, though."

But before they reached the porch Mr. Upton had galloped down the avenue, in no very good humour, it must be confessed, having been completely out-manceuvred in his hope of having a few minutes' conversation with Agnes. Cornelia's *tête-à-tête*, therefore, had not been of long duration. Agnes fancied she looked slightly discomposed as Godfrey expressed his disappointment; at all events, she gave the child a sounding box on the ear, and bade him go that instant and find the bit of her brae-let he had broken; and "I tell you what, Godfrey," she added, "I shall have all those nasty curls of yours cut off at once. They are in everybody's way."

The boy broke into a loud cry, and, as usual, the scene ended in a regular struggle for power between the two, in which poor Godfrey came off the loser.

Agnes turned away with the bitter thought in her heart, "And this is the woman Lionel Upton means to marry!" and hastily re-entered the breakfast-room.

"Aunt Ellis," she said, "do you go to Fairholm to-morrow?"

"I? Certainly not."

"Does Mrs. Upton or Mrs. Trotter?"

"I believe not. What should any of us do at so silly an entertainment? I am sure, Agnes, you know well enough

that all these things weary me. I could not even sit out that stupid affair at Kate Trotter's. And as you have Nellie as your *chaperone*, I really don't see you need any one else. But I suppose you are prudish, as usual. Believe me, Agnes, true delicacy is shown most in never fancying evil. You always do."

This unexpected rebuke startled Agnes, who answered, meekly, "It is not that I meant, Aunt Ellis; but as the others are going to ride, I wished to know how Godfrey and I are to reach Fairholm."

"For my part, I think you would both be better at home: nobody wants either of you," was the consolatory reply; and the old lady took up her newspaper and waddled out of the room.

Agnes was deeply hurt by the callous rejoinder. Was it so? Did nobody want her? Would it be better, after all, to go to Saxenham at once? If she had not given her promise to Lina, she would.

As if in answer to her doubts, a message was just then brought her that Miss Hepburn would be glad to see her at her earliest convenience.

"She will relieve me from this absurd dilemma," she said to herself; "or Mrs. Upton will. I am sure of help from them."

But when she saw Lina, she felt it was no time to intrude her own little troubles on her attention. She was lying on her couch, pale and exhausted; but the moment she heard Agnes's step she rose languidly to meet her, a bright red spot on either cheek, and her feverish hands trembling with eagerness.

"Agnes," she said, "the crisis of my fate is near. He has been here, in this room, in my presence. I heard his voice, heard him call on me by the dear old name; and yet I would not answer, would not let him know that I heard him, that I was aware of his presence." Such were the broken sentences with which the blind girl began her tale of the fruitless visit of the previous evening. She described the whole scene vividly. She painted in thrilling words the effect produced on her by the once-familiar voice, the struggle between past recollections and the nobler principles on which, of late, she had striven to ground her conduct, and exclaimed, as she concluded, "And now what

shall I do? How shield myself from a fresh intrusion? My own folly has given him power over me. Oh, Agnes, Agnes, how true it is that as we sow we must reap! The harvest may be delayed for years, but it must come one day." And she hid her face on her friend's shoulder, and wept bitterly.

"But, Lina, you have escaped him once; why not again?"

Lina at first answered only by her sobs, then, controlling them by a powerful effort, she said, firmly, "You little know what you say, my Agnes. Gentle, innocent as you are, you cannot imagine the force of temptation offered me. What can you know, you whose heart has never throbbed save in unison with what is right and admirable, of the tempests of the heart, the whirlwinds of passion, which uproot all safeguards of prudence or propriety? How can you guess what are the struggles I undergo at this moment? I am changed in some things, thank God! I can look back and acknowledge with sincere repentance what is past; but when his voice thrilled on my ear last night, I was like one under the influence of mesmerism, and it required the strongest effort of my physical powers, and," she added, in a lower and more solemn tone, "the most earnest mental prayer, to prevent me from flying into his arms, and forgetting all save that it was my own dear Max who called me. By Heaven's help I resisted then; but could I do so a second time? Alas! no."

"Yes," Agnes said, firmly: "the second effort would be more easy, the third easier still. You are anchored in a sure haven now, Lina. You are no longer tossed about by every breeze that blows."

Lina shook her head. "Agnes, you are like a sane man arguing with one utterly mad. My real safeguard were flight; but where can I go, friendless, blind as I am? Like Prometheus fastened to the rock, I must lie here, bound and helpless, and bear my fate as I may."

"And why not frankly say what you fear? Your cousin, Mr. Hornby, Mr. Campbell, would one and all protect you from this man."

"Ay," she answered, bitterly; "and would they protect me from myself? It is no use, Agnes. You don't know all. You don't know *why* I must keep his secret. If you could

guess that which I have solemnly sworn never to reveal, you could help me. As it is, I must wait, as I have waited all my life in vain, for peace and rest. I wonder, will even death bring either to one like me?"

"Do not doubt it, Lina. Even in this world, I prophesy both for you."

But Lina was not listening; she was restlessly twining and untwining the chain round her neck, a habit she had when discomposed, and asked abruptly, "Who is to be at Mr. Campbell's to-morrow?"

"At Mr. Campbell's?" Agnes repeated, startled by the apparently *inapropos* inquiry.

"Yes; is it to be a large party? Could I take the Rectory children? They long to go to the conjuror's."

Agnes hesitated. Such an addition to that ill-omened luncheon would be to herself a great gain, one element less of complication in her present dilemma. Moreover, Lina's presence would form an excuse for anything preoccupied either in her own manner or that of her host, and the boys would divert attention from them both, and she said, as if in answer, "Godfrey Vaughan goes with us; but we have not yet made any arrangements how he and I are to get to Fairholm. If you go, it will be a great matter for me, as I dislike being alone. The others ride, you know."

"Ride? Sophy and Effie told me of some such project, but I fancied it was a mere talk. Mrs. Vaughan's device, I suppose? I can't make out her game. The other dear little things, of course, follow her lead. *They* never guessed that you were no horsewoman."

"If I were, where is my horse?" Agnes asked, gaily; "and what would become of the child?"

"Were *no* arrangements thought of for either of you?"

"No. When I consulted my aunt, she said we had better stay at home, as neither of us was wanted; and I believe she is right. For my own part, I would stay away gladly, if I could."

"Agnes, darling, it is not your own bright cheerful self that suggested that depressed speech," said Lina, fondly passing her arm round her neck. "What ails you? What has happened? for something has happened to make you speak in that melancholy fashion."

“Nothing; or rather I find, as many women have learned to their cost before me, that the affection I have not sought is mine, and——” But she had not courage to complete the sentence.

Lina, however, needed no ghost to tell her the natural context, and she said, softly, “You may trust me, Agnes. I am no tale-bearer, and it may be that, blind and helpless as I am, I may yet be able to aid you a little. At all events, I can give you sympathy.”

Agnes needed sympathy, and presently the tale of Mr. Campbell's proposal dropped slowly from her lips. “He told me I need not keep it secret,” she said, apologetically; “but I would have done so if I had not felt some difficulty in explaining to you why I cannot propose your plan to Mr. Campbell, as I should readily have done in other circumstances.”

“Yes, I see,” Lina replied; “you could not now take the initiative in any way; but don't discompose yourself about that, I shall arrange everything. Only what you tell me is so strange! I cannot comprehend it. It is as if all our friends had purposely put themselves *à tort et à travers!* However, I am glad you told me; your secret is perfectly safe with me; and it will be better for you to have me and the boys added to the party, than to feel yourself singled out as the queen of the *fête*. Every one knows it was made for you; and it would not do to be an ungracious, embarrassed queen. I shall take all the odium of the change on my own shoulders. It is my whim, and there is an end of it. *You* are quite put out of court in the matter.”

Agnes was struck by the change in Lina's manner. A little while ago she was languid, hopeless, and despairing; but now she was ready-witted and cheerful. The doubts which had depressed her so long as her own affairs alone were concerned, gave way to decision and rapid action where they trenched on those of her friend. Of course, Agnes never guessed the secondary thought that lay hid beneath her openly announced “whim.” It never occurred to her that the Sigismund, or Max, as Lina had called him to-day, whose appearance the evening before had so shattered her nerves, was almost identified in her thoughts

with the Count Vandeweld so cordially received at Mrs. Trotter's. She never suspected that a chance of having her doubts on this matter satisfied, one way or other, was the real reason why Lina desired to go to Mr. Campbell's, or that the idea of taking the Rectory boys was suggested to her by any other desire than the ostensible one of letting them enjoy the conjuror's feats.

It was enough that the project was brought into form without her intervention, although it was impossible for her totally to shake off the weight on her spirits, or look forward to the morrow with any pleasurable anticipations.

It was late that evening before Lionel Upton left Fairholm; so, instead of returning by the high road, as he had been in the habit of doing ever since Mrs. Vaughan came, he took his favourite route across the country, which brought him past the Whim to the south entrance of the park. As he approached the gate, he fancied he saw Agnes advancing along the path from the house; but the languid step and bowed head were so unlike her elastic tread and upright carriage, that he scarcely believed his eyes. Never before had he seen her downcast or dispirited. What could have occurred to make such a change?

She approached nearer, and, unable longer to doubt, he sprung from his horse, threw the rein over his arm, and, quitting the avenue, turned into the path and accosted her before she perceived him.

"Miss Stuart," he said, stretching out his hand eagerly, "how lucky it was I thought of coming this way to-night?"

In spite of herself, the unexpected meeting brought a vivid blush to Agnes's cheek, and called up the sweet sudden smile he liked to see, as, putting her hand in his, she said, "You are late, Mr. Upton. All at Kinburn had given you up."

"I certainly had no thoughts of being home to-night," he answered; "one must pay for one's holidays by extra labour, you know. However, Mr. Campbell insisted that I should come and make fresh arrangements for to-morrow. You have heard of my cousin's strange fancy?"

"Sudden—scarcely strange. It is natural she should wish to indulge the Rectory boys as well as Godfrey Vaughan. He was asked, you know."

"Ah, I had forgotten. Well, *that* is natural, perhaps; but surely it is strange that she should herself accompany them. I can imagine no entertainment more likely to forec her loss of sight upon her."

"Where children's enjoyments are concerned, Miss Hepburn forgets herself," Agnes said, heartily; "and for myself, I think their going a vast improvement on the scheme."

"Mr. Campbell fancied you would," was the slightly embarrassing answer, "and therefore, with the best grace in the world, he transforms his select champagne luncheon into a scramble-dinner for children. He bade me tell you he should send an omnibus for the whole party in ample time."

Agnes was touched by the old man's ready adoption of a project which, though nominally Miss Hepburn's, he evidently imagined to be in reality hers. But, conquering her emotion, she said, "It is a charming idea, and will not interfere with the riding-party."

"That was a mere jest," he said.

"No, I assure you Cornelia looks upon it as a settled thing, and anticipates more pleasure from that than any other of the day's amusements."

"But you do not ride?"

"No; but Lina's plan makes it all right for Godfrey and me."

The sweet temper evinced by this answer might have called out some marked answer, had Mr. Upton had any idea of Agnes's impression of the present state of affairs between him and Mrs. Vaughan. Indeed, as it was, he mentally contrasted them together, very greatly to Agnes's advantage, and, after rather an awkward pause, he said abruptly, "Miss Stuart, I called this morning in the hopes of finishing the half-confession I began last night. I was foiled in that wish, and to-morrow's arrangements are equally embarrassing. May I, then, tell you what I have to tell now?"

"Oh, no, no!" she said, in great agitation; but suddenly remembering that he might misunderstand her refusal, she added, more quietly, "I mean, it is already so late that I must return home without a moment's delay, and—and Roland, poor fellow, longs to be in his stable."

Roland was an old acquaintance of Agnes, and was showing his affection to her by gently rubbing his head against her shoulder.

“But you will listen to me some day?”

“Most readily; but——”

“But what?”

“Would it not,” she said, hesitatingly, “be better to wait a few days?”

“Why?” he said, much astonished. “What is there to make delay necessary? And yet it may be better,” he added; “for then I can tell you all to the very end. One only stipulation I must make, however, that you will not misjudge me till you know everything.”

“I will not, I assure you;” and she put her hand in his, and, bidding him good night, walked quickly towards the postern-gate.

He looked after her till the winding path hid her from sight. “Yes, it is better,” he said; “then I can tell her *all*, quite all.” As he spoke, Agnes emerged once more from the winding path, and, as she left the shadow of the trees, a gleam of light from the sunset sky streamed full upon her, and made her graceful figure stand out on the dark background like sunshine in a shady place.

“There is no comparison between them,” he muttered, half aloud; “and yet—Heaven help me!—I have got myself into a most uncomfortable dilemma.”

Agnes meanwhile felt as if she trod on air. Nothing had been said—no explanation given—and yet, as if by magic, the burden had fallen from her shoulders, and “Hope, the charmer, smiled and waved her golden hair.”

Mrs. Vaughan was by no means pleased by the result of Agnes’s visit to Kinburn. “What on earth can make a blind girl go to see conjuring tricks?” she exclaimed. “I suppose we shall next hear of Mrs. Trotter dancing a jig, and Mrs. Upton playing the Par’s pipes!”

Agnes laughed. She could not help it; the images conjured up were so ludicrous, and—she *could* laugh now. But her assurance that the riding-party would go on all the same comforted Nellie.

“Ah, that is well!” she said, more amiably. Young Graham declared he would come over to escort us. He will

help Dr. Thorpe to take care of the two girls, and I shall have Lionel all to myself."

Most people would, if such a thought had struck them, have kept it to themselves; but Cornelia said it out loud, and meant to act upon it too. But the best-laid plans do not always turn out satisfactory to the projectors, and this Mrs. Vaughan was doomed to learn by-and-by



CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE INTERVIEW.

To a true lover of children, few enjoyments are greater than to mark the rapture of delight which they evince on a first visit to a conjuror's. They are troubled by no speculations as to "how it is done;" the "exhaustless bottle" is, to them, like the Fortunatus's purse of the fairy tales; the production of "living birds in cages, and endless bouquets of flowers from a carton an inch deep," is only the realization of the fabled genius who was compressed into the brazen coffer, from which he could not emerge till Solomon's seal was removed from its cover. Thus the elders of the large party that filled the patron's chairs at Herr Doppelganger's entertainment on that eventful Saturday had their own pleasures enhanced by the delighted shouts of the Rectory children and Godfrey Vaughan.

Colonel le Grand was especially enchanted by them, and a glance of intelligence between him and the conjuror led to innumerable charming interludes, in which the young people unconsciously bore their part in the entertainment; and marvellously did their traits of character come out in the course of the performance. Little Agnes-Harriet's soft heart showed itself in the burst of tears that greeted the information that the pretty canary she had held so softly and carefully in her chubby hands was dead. Her tender conscience pricked her, lest, in her eagerness to keep the "bonnie yellow birdie" safe, she had crushed its life out; and it was not till the conjuror had, as she supposed, breathed fresh life into it again, and she saw it quiver its little wings, fly right round the theatre, and finally perch on her shoulder at its master's command, that she heaved

a long deep sigh, and, nestling herself against her mother's arm, whispered, "Oh, I am so glad I did not kill it dead!" Godfrey Vaughan sympathized with Fred in his little sister's grief. Jos speculated whether it was a real bird, or just a machine like the bird in Rosamond; while the less soft-hearted Charlie Reynard asked what was the use of such a to-do about a bird. He wouldn't mind shooting a dozen of them, or wringing their heads off, just for a bit of fun. And forthwith he put himself forward as Herr Doppelganger tried the gun-trick; and wherever anything like danger was anticipated he got fearfully excited, and almost lost temper when nothing that was done produced any fatal results.

"It is just baby-play, that," he said. "I could do it myself. I wish I could get hold of the gun; I would shoot the people dead, and no mistake."

"What a ferocious young savage!" Colonel le Grand whispered to Agnes, as Master Charlie muttered his complaints in her ear; for Lina found, when it came to the test, that she could not undergo the fatigue of the entertainment, and had remained behind at Mr. Campbell's. "Who on earth is he?"

"A pupil of Mr. Hornby," she answered, with a slight hesitation.

"I shouldn't relish such a pupil."

"He is a little out of himself to-day with excitement," she said. "He is not usually so bloody-minded. Charlie, you do not mean what you say? You would not really hurt any one for fun?"

"I wouldn't hurt you, or the Hornbys, or Miss Hepburn," he said, boldly; "but I wouldn't mind the rest. Oh, how I should like to see a man that had been in a war and killed people!"

"But that was not for fun, Charlie."

"Well, maybe not; but tell me, Agnes, have all these gentlemen with swords been in the wars?"

"I have, my boy," said Colonel le Grand; "and, I can tell you, you wouldn't like the idea of killing people, if you had seen what I have."

The boy instinctively crept nearer to the colonel as he spoke. "Tell me, please," he said, clutching hold of his

arm, "is it like what one reads about in Byron—the dogs crunching the bones, and all that?"

"Child," said the Colonel, gravely, "it is worse. I'll tell you about it some day, but not now. Ask Mr. Hornby to bring you to the barracks the first holiday, and you shall hear more than you like, maybe."

"That I am sure I won't," he said, with eager, glittering eyes; "but just tell me one thing, sir. Were you ever wounded?"

"Yes; look here." And slowly and deliberately pulling off his left glove, he showed the boy that the hand was pulled off with it. "That is one little wound," he said, with a smile, as he saw Charlie turn suddenly pale. "Do you believe now that I know what I am speaking of?"

"That officer has been wounded too," Charlie said, glancing furtively, as he spoke, at Count Vandeweld, who, leaning against a pillar near at hand, seemed watching and listening to the boy with an amused smile.

"Yes," Colonel le Grand answered; and, stooping forward, he whispered to Agnes, "Did you ever see anything so odd as the likeness between this little fellow and Count Vandeweld? They might be father and son."

Agnes followed his glance, and was as much struck as he by the resemblance; but, at the moment, the Count turned on his heel, and the eager questions of the children for a time prevented her from catching at the clue thus offered to her. But it came upon her shortly afterwards, and threw a light on much that had puzzled her sorely for many months.

Count Vandeweld meanwhile left the theatre, and, striking up one of the many streets which converged at that point, he walked swiftly forwards towards the west end of Fairholm, and stopped before the handsome house which called Mr. Campbell master.

"Miss Hepburn is in the drawing-room?" he said to the servant who answered his imperious summons; "I wish to see her. You need not announce me."

His authoritative manner commanded obedience. The servant bowed respectfully, and stood aside for him to pass, and, without a moment's hesitation, he strode up stairs, entered the little ante-room into which the handsome land-

ing opened, and drew aside the *portière* which separated it from the drawing-room. But his rapid movements made no sound. His foot fell noiselessly on the thick velvet carpet. His steady hand seemed gifted with an occult power to move aside any impediment in his way without making the slightest noise. The crimson-and-gold draperies did not rustle as he brushed past them, and he had reached the centre of the apartment without Lina being aware of his presence; for, overcome by heat and fatigue, the blind girl had fallen into an uneasy slumber. He stood for a full minute by her sofa, silent and motionless, and with an indefinable look of pity and compassion depicted in his countenance. How pale and shadowy she looked, contrasted with the rich colouring of the couch on which she lay, and what an air of hopeless despondency was betrayed by her attitude!

When he had last seen Lina Hepburn, she was in the full glow of health and beauty. Her fair cheek had flushed with every changing thought, her eye had lightened, her lovely lip trembled with the slightest excitement. Now the blue eyes were dim and sightless; her cheek bore the pallid hue of confirmed bad health. Even her lips were blanched, and round her mouth and brow were deep lines caused by sorrow and ever-gnawing anxiety. And they were *his* work!

No man is altogether evil; and as he stood there gazing on what she was, and recalling what she had been, tears—real, genuine tears—rose to his eyes, and, with an impulse he could not control, he caught her to his breast and kissed her passionately.

He forgot how weak she was; he forgot everything but himself and his own remorse, till, starting from her slumbers with a faint shriek, she pushed him from her with the uncertain movements of a blind person, her face wearing the most piteous expression of pain and terror. Then indeed he remembered how cruel it was to act as he had done, and, flinging himself upon his knees beside her, he clasped her cold hands in his, and in the most melting tones of his manly voice he whispered, "Aline, my heart's darling, it is Max—Max, who has loved you since you were an infant!"

A faint tinge of colour dyed her cheek, as, yielding to the

old influence, she murmured as in a dream, "Max come at last!" And, passing her hand fondly over his face, she sighed as she said, "Alas! Max, I shall never see your dear face again! Why—why did you leave me so long to battle alone with fate?"

"I would have come," he said, deprecatively; "but till now it was impossible. I have much to tell you, dear one, of my long exile. When you hear all, you will forgive me, and will, perhaps, confess that my sufferings have been little less than yours."

As he spoke, he put his arm once more round her slender waist and folded her in a close embrace. For a moment her head lay lovingly on his shoulder, but for a moment only. Suddenly the recollection of what he was—so unlike the idol of her youthful fancy—came back upon her, and, wrenching herself suddenly from his grasp, she exclaimed, "God forgive me! I forgot all in the rapture of hearing that dear voice once more. But my dream is past now, Max, and I know, as you do, that henceforth we never can be more to one another than—than we are now."

"Aline," he exclaimed, totally unprepared for such a declaration, "what are you saying? I have come to redeem my pledge, and I have a right to demand the fulfilment of yours." And again he tried to clasp her to him; but the poor blind face turned on him such a look of terror that he gently withdrew his arm, and only asked her to explain her meaning.

She shook her head sadly, but remained silent.

"Tell me," he repeated, authoritatively; "I must know what you mean. Why should we part now—for that seems what you hint at—now, when, for the first time, fate permits our union?"

"Because," she said, "I am changed."

"Foolish child!" And, catching her hand, he pressed it to his lips again and again. "Do you not know that your very helplessness will but make me love you better, make me a slave to your slightest wish?"

A faint flush dyed her cheek, and her lip quivered painfully as she murmured, "Alas! it is not that change I mean, though it were enough to force such a resolution. I know you too well to permit you to be the husband of a blind

wife. I do not mean you would make *me* unhappy," she said, as an angry pressure of her fingers taught her that what she had said displeased him, "but you would be unhappy yourself—a thing of far more moment to me, Max." And her sweet low voice sank almost into silence as she said the loving words.

"Let me judge of that," he interrupted, eagerly. "That is my concern only."

"But that is not all," she went on; "the change I speak of is a moral, not a physical one. I see things differently from what I did long ago, and I have vowed a vow to the Lord," she added, with a slight shudder, "that I shall never be your wife. We have both erred; we must both bear the punishment—apart."

By this time he had risen from his knees, and was striding up and down the apartment, gnawing his moustache in silent rage. By-and-by he planted himself in front of her, and said, "Aline, you owe me some explanation of this mad, this sudden resolution."

"It is no sudden resolution, Max," she said, sadly; "it is the fruit of long miserable reflection and most fervent prayer for guidance during many weary months of darkness and despair. As you have treated others, you *might*, perhaps, treat me; but, believe me, it was no fear of you that brought me to this decision."

"You know I never loved but you," he said, doggedly. "I said so openly."

"Did you so, Max? What, then, did you whisper to your wife? What promise to poor Nanny? Were the vows made to them less to be believed than those you made me?"

Had Lina been capable of perceiving the change which Nanny's name made in his countenance, she would have known that her shaft had gone home; but his voice betrayed no agitation as he answered, "My enemies have calumniated me, Aline; and with you, as with the rest," he added, with a sneer, "*les absens ont toujours tort.*"

Lina was silent, and with some heat he continued, "It is easy to see why such tales were fabricated. They want to prevent the heiress of Kiuburn marrying any one but her lack-a-daisical cousin. But remember this, Aline, my claim

is prior to his, and I will not relinquish it without a struggle."

"Max! Max! you wrong me by that thought, and them also. Lionel Upton is not mercenary enough to marry one he——" "despises" she was about to say, but she substituted the words, "does not care for; and you must know that I never would give another what I have refused to you."

"And yet you say you will not marry me!"

"Never!"

There was a determination in her tone that showed she spoke in earnest, and he resumed his walk up and down the room. At length, pausing directly in front of her, he said, "Time presses. I must not be found here; therefore, my words must be brief. You seem to have forgotten, Aline, that if you persist in this resolution, so as to force me to compel the fulfilment of our bargain, things may come out which might not be pleasant for you. Therefore, I advise you to reconsider it. I am a needy and a desperate man, and you know of what I am capable. If you consent gracefully to fulfil your pledge, I will try to make up to you henceforward for all you have suffered—all I have made you suffer. If not—you must take the consequences."

Lina trembled visibly. "Max," she said, "you do not suppose that, as far as money goes, you would suffer by my determination? You cannot think so poorly of me? But I have less in my power than you imagine. Even supposing circumstances should make Kinburn mine, I lose it if I marry a foreigner."

"What!" he exclaimed, in overpowering rage, "what devil's work have you been after now?" and he caught her slender wrist in his iron grasp, and glared at her with the fury of a wild beast.

She shuddered at his violence, but answered boldly enough, "If I could have told you this sooner, I would. But I learned it when I was no longer capable of writing to you."

"There was no other will than *that* one?" he said, savagely.

"There was, indeed. I did not hear of its existence till after my cousin's return. But there certainly is a will

written after—after you were at the Whim. Its provisions are so complicated, that I cannot tell you what they are. But so far it is certain that, if I refuse to marry my cousin, he is entitled to Kinburn on paying me a heavy fine. If I marry a foreigner, I lose all.”

A muttered curse broke from Max as he heard this. “You should have sent me a draft of that d—d will,” he said. “How could I? It was not till I had Agnes Stuart to read your letter to me that I knew where to find you.”

“Agnes Stuart!” he exclaimed, in evident perturbation; “you were not mad enough to admit her into our secret?”

“Max! Max! Do you not know that, rather than betray you, I would be torn by wild horses?”

“I believe it, Aline,” he said, more gently; “but if I fear one human being in the world, it is Agnes Stuart.”

“You need not fear her. She has not the faintest suspicion of your identity.”

“See that she never has,” he said. “But now I must leave you. Remember, however, that you must for the future receive me as an old friend of your father. As such I have represented myself to Mrs. Upton; and, as I shall be your neighbour for some little time, you must meet me as a prized acquaintance. You owe me something, Aline, for getting me into this confounded mess. Another will! (Curse him!)” And with this ejaculation he quitted the room, and the closing of the street door told Lina that the painful interview was over.



CHAPTER XXXIV

ILLNESS.

THE results of that expedition to Fairholm were greater than any of the large party imagined, although scarce one of them, save the children, retired to rest that night with a heart quite at ease. Even little Effie was sad, because Dr. Thorpe, who had been her pleasant companion on their ride to town, had, on his return, deserted her for Mrs. Vaughan. It is true that he had hinted to her in the morning that, as soon as it was in his power, he intended

to examine into the fair widow's attractions more carefully than he had yet done, as he wished to prove to her that he was a very apt pupil, and did feel her reproofs the other evening. And Effie had laughed, as she always did laugh, at Dr. Thorpe's odd speeches. But she was by no means prepared to hear him volunteer to Mr. Upton—who, from press of business, could not return with them—to escort Mrs. Vaughan. As he did so, he gave Effie a meaning smile, and, for perhaps the first half-mile, she submitted to his desertion with equanimity; but as time passed on, and he still remained by the widow's bridle-rein, as she saw them in close and earnest talk, she began to wish she had said nothing about Mrs. Vaughan's beauty, and wondered, as such dear little innocent hearts will wonder sometimes, what folly could have possessed her to suppose that her own conversation could have any attraction for so clever a man as Dr. Thorpe. And then the light died out of little Effie's eyes, and the half-formed hope from her heart, and with a heavy sigh she wished she were as able to talk to him as Agnes and Mrs. Vaughan were. Poor, simple child! to imagine that men value most as the companions of their lives those whose conversation satisfies their intellect. They may choose their friends after that fashion, but seldom their wives.

As the equestrians stopped at Mrs. Trotter's door, a little gleam of comfort came to the wounded child-heart; for Dr. Thorpe was ready before any one else to lift her from her saddle, and to whisper in her ear, "What do I not deserve for the obedience I have shown to-night?"

"Obedience!" she repeated, startled by the glitter of his dancing eyes and the mischievous smile which, somehow, always gave her such an odd feeling at her heart when it gleamed full upon her.

"Ay, obedience, lady mine! You owe me something, don't you, for my self-inflicted banishment? What guerdon shall I seek for such knightly service?"

Effie blushed, in spite of herself, as she answered, "Nonsense!" And he saw the blush, and enjoyed her confusion heartily.

"I shan't ask very much," he said, laughingly. "In the meanwhile, I shall be content if you will give me that bonnie little flower you have worn all day long. I should

like some memorial of a right happy day." And the very impertinent young man put out his hand, as if to ask and to have were one and the same thing.

Effie, feeling slightly aggrieved by the confident tone of the request, was tempted to draw back from the outstretched hand. But a secret intuition making her suspect that the rose, if not given, might be taken, she thought it better to yield with a good grace; so she unfastened the flower from her habit, and said, quietly, "It is a pity you did not ask for it when it was fresh."

"I like it better as it is," he said, very low; "and I thank you for it with all my heart. '*Bis dat qui cito dat.*'" And, raising his hat courteously, he remounted, and rode slowly after the rest of the party.

Agnes had returned long before Mrs. Vaughan, and was endeavouring to give Mrs. Ellis some amusement by a recapitulation of the events of the day; but Mrs. Ellis was unamusable.

"You need not trouble yourself to give me descriptions of such nonsense," she said. "What do I care for pancakes made in hats, and tricks with cards? Give the boy there some tea, and let him go to bed; I am sure he is tired enough."

"I am not tired one bit," was Godfrey's dogged answer, "and the tricks weren't stupid, and you are telling fibs, auntie, to say so. You are as bad as mamma. You both tell fibs by dozens. Only Agnes tells true."

Agnes hurried the child away. A storm was evidently brewing, and she suspected that the mother's arrival would not calm it. Cornelia's manner all day had been strangely excited. She had made it evident to every one that she looked on Mr. Upton as her lawful prize. She had called him repeatedly by his Christian name; she had demanded his attentions in the marked manner which only an acknowledged engagement could excuse; in short, every one had supposed it a settled thing, and nothing in Mr. Upton's conduct had belied the supposition—at least, until it was time to return home, when his announcement that he intended to remain that night at Fairholm amazed all, and Mrs. Vaughan most especially. She tried to carry it off with a laugh, assumed to have been in the secret of his

intentions from the first; but, to those who knew her, her mortification was evident, and was not decreased when it appeared that Count Vandeweld had also proved faithless, and that Colonel le Grand, a young ensign, and Harry Thorpe, were the only cavaliers who volunteered to escort them to St. Ringans.

Agnes knew Nellie's countenance too well not to understand the meaning of the thunder-cloud on her brow and the lurid light of her eye; and she did not envy Harry his ride home with her, as they set off together. But Harry's spirits never flagged, and the tone of triumph with which he told his sister, on reaching the Rectory, that he had put a spoke in Nellie's wheel, which would rather interfere with her designs on Kinburn, betrayed that he had chosen her as his companion with some object beyond that which he had acknowledged to Effie.

The effect of the ride on Mrs. Vaughan was that she reached the Whim in what Colonel le Grand called "a very devil of a temper;" but, as the Colonel was to take up his quarters for that night at Mrs. Ellis's, the angry beauty was forced to put some control on herself, till, no longer able to command her ill humour, she pleaded fatigue, and retired even before her aunt.

As Agnes was following them, Colonel le Grand begged one moment's conversation with her; and, after a turn up and down the room, he said, bluntly, "Miss Stuart, may I ask you whether you know who Vandeweld is?"

"Yes," she said. "At least, I guess."

"I thought you did. I have had my suspicions for long that he was not quite what he pretended; but Thorpe happening to tell me whose child Charlie Reynard was, I could not see them together without putting this to that. He is a bold fellow to come among so many who knew him at Saxenham."

"He must have some object in coming here."

"Ay, that is certain enough; and what it is I shall do my best to find out. But meanwhile, I think, if you can do so without embarrassment, it might be well not to publish our discovery."

"I believe it would be more prudent. Unless, indeed, he has designs on the child."

"I am convinced he has none. He would lose rather than gain by stealing him away, or doing him a mischief; for Thorpe tells me his annuity—or whatever it is—depends on the boy's life, and on his being left undisturbed to the care of the guardians appointed by his grandmother."

"True. But Charlie, when an infant, suffered from his father's violence, and I confess I am afraid of that man."

"Believe me, Miss Stuart, he is more afraid of you than you can be of him. His start on recognizing you at Mrs. Trotter's first excited my suspicions as to his identity; and though his after self-possession for a little while threw me off the scent, the moment I compared his face with the boy's I saw it all: his very disguise made the resemblance between them more striking. But I don't think Thorpe remarked it. He is the only other person, save ourselves, who has previously seen Weld; but," he added, with a slight smile, "his eyes are at present devoted to other discoveries than this."

Agnes smiled also as she said, "Harry was never famous for putting things together, and he——"

"Cannot keep a secret," Colonel le Grand added. "I remember that used to be alleged long ago. So let us keep our own counsel, for a time at least. Be assured that I shall have an eye on the Count, Miss Stuart, and not permit him to do mischief."

"On that understanding I agree to say nothing," she said, after a moment's consideration, "unless, indeed, circumstances oblige me to do so. But I shall certainly not volunteer the information."

"I really think it would be wiser not; for, if we do not betray our suspicions, his motives for coming here may show themselves. At present I confess I can find no clue to them. But, that being settled," he said, kindly, "I must detain you no longer. You do look sadly weary. It is exhausting work devoting oneself for a whole day to the amusement of children, and you did it so heartily."

Agnes's tender conscience shrunk from the implied praise. She well knew it was not that which had knocked her up, and she said, timidly, "I was a mere aide-de-camp to Miss Hepburn."

"Still, an aide-de-camp has often hard work to do when

keeping the guerilla troops under command," he said, laughingly. "But I have not told you the effect Miss Hepburn produced on me. That pale face of hers haunts me like a nightmare. So spirit-like and yet so marvellously attractive. When she had health and sight, she must have been perfectly lovely. In those days I suspect Nellie Vaughan would have found Lionel Upton's cousin a dangerous rival. Little chance she would have had of Kinburn then."

Agnes made no answer to his remark, and he went on: "I suppose it is a settled thing now? I confess I don't envy Upton his bargain; but, luckily, all men don't see with other people's eyes, and it is no use giving them one's own private spectacles."

"No," she answered, mechanically

"By the way, did you observe how M. le Comte watched Nellie and Upton at luncheon? Upon my word, he looked as if he could have stabbed one or the other, which I could not quite make out. But I forget; poisoning is more in his line. I hope he has no grudge against Upton; he is a fine fellow, and I should not be comfortable myself if I had made Weld my enemy. I see you want to be off, however; so good night."

It may well be believed that sleep fled from Agnes's pillow that night, and many a night to come. The ideas suggested to her by Colonel le Grand had struck an answering chord in her own thoughts, and confirmed the fear she had tried to banish when she saw the boding but short-lived scowl on the Count's face as he glared at Lionel. The next instant all trace of emotion had passed, and he was the courteous, amusing man of the world once more; but the look haunted her, and set her wits to work to discover in what possible way Mr. Upton could have incurred the hatred of that dangerous man.

Next morning Agnes awoke in a high fever, and for several days she was completely confined to bed. Dr. Thorpe assured her it was only a bad attack of influenza, caught in the night air of that very fatiguing day; and she submitted to his decision, although in her secret soul she believed that a troubled spirit had quite as much part in her illness as the fatigue and over-excitement to which it was

attributed. However, she kept her thoughts to herself, and endeavoured to utilize the enforced solitude by calling her strong religious principle to aid her in struggling with the difficulties of her present position.

It was, however, a severe trial to be shut out from all knowledge of what was going on, and to feel how many reasons there were for her desire to be up and doing at that particular time. For a fortnight she scarcely saw anyone save old Martha; from her she learned that Count Vandeweld had taken possession of Hawkhill, and that he was daily becoming a greater favourite at St. Ringans. The Hawkhill, shootings for "three guns" enabled him to indulge the slaughtering propensities of some of his Fairholm acquaintance, while his pleasant conversation and many accomplishments, his fine person and little foreign graces, together with his honourable wound and the order of the Medjidie glittering at his button-hole as proof of his military prowess, made him appear quite a hero in the eyes of the ladies.

It so happened that Dr. Thorpe's arrangements for taking up house at Fairholm removed him a good deal just then from St. Ringans, and that a press of business kept Mr. Upton from returning home until late in the evenings, and sometimes detained him in town for several days at a time. Thus, by a concurrence of what seemed the most fortunate circumstances to Count Vandeweld, every person whose investigations or suspicions he had reason to dread was swept from his path, and the position was his, and his only Fairholm opened its doors to him, and allowed him frequent quiet opportunities of seeing Lina. St. Ringans' lodge was an almost daily lounge, and Mrs. Vaughan was always ready to take a ride with him, or to receive him at the Whim. All went well with him, and he never suspected that the civilities of his Crimean acquaintance, Colonel le Grand, arose from any other source than the general favour he enjoyed with every one else.

Martha told Agnes of Count Vandeweld's popularity, and as he never failed, when visiting at the Whim, to ask her cordially how her young mistress was, he became quite a favourite with the old woman, who, comparing his civil inquiries with Mr. Upton's neglect—he, poor man, being

quite satisfied by the daily bulletin he received from Dr. Thorpe—began to exalt her new acquaintance at the expense of her former one. So poor Agnes was forced to listen to constant praises of “the Count,” and eager wishes that he should buy Hawkhill and live there always; for it was evident, the old woman said, that he would be a gentleman who would be an advantage to the neighbourhood, with his little presents of game and fruit, not like some other people she would *not* name, who seemed to think that everything was nothing if it was not turned into money. And then she went off into little hits at the whole Kinburn establishment, and expressed intense indignation against Miss Hepburn for never coming herself to see Agnes, but only sending that set-up maid of hers to inquire how Miss Stuart was.

Vainly did Agnes assure her that she had begged that Miss Hepburn should not visit her till she was better. Martha would not be appeased, and indulged in so many grumbles, that Agnes was frequently obliged to send her away.

And yet she would have given much to know many particulars of what was going on which it was impossible to ask a servant. Martha had told her that Mr. Upton had never called since she was taken ill, and Agnes longed to know how Cornelia bore his defection. Or did they meet elsewhere? Of this she knew nothing; for Mrs. Vaughan studiously avoided the invalid's chamber, announcing that when people were ill the less they were troubled by visitors the better. So old Martha and little Godfrey were her only guides as to what was going on; for even Isabella Hornby, who was purveyor-general of St. Ringans gossip, was so much with her brother at Fairholm that she could, or at least did, only give her information as to Harry's household furnishings.

It was from Martha only that she heard that everybody was entertaining Count Vandeweld, and that he had already announced his intention of giving a *fête champêtre* at Hawkhill a fortnight hence, to which all the neighbourhood was to be invited, and at which even Miss Hepburn had promised to be present. And Agnes, as she listened to all the old woman had to tell, felt as if months instead of days had passed since that exciting Saturday at Fairholm, and that

somehow she had slipped from the memory of her friends.

"Shall you go to Hawkhill, Miss Agnes?" Martha inquired, when no remark was vouchsafed on the exciting intelligence.

"I am not invited," was the evasive answer.

"But you will be; for the Count is always asking me if you are better."

"I am not quite in trim for a *fete*, Martha."

"But you are much better, Miss Agnes, and Master Harry" (she never would call him Dr. Thorpe), "says you will be all the better of goin' to the drawing-room to-day."

"I shall go to the octagon with pleasure," Agnes said; "but you must give me your arm, Martha, for I feel very weak." And as she said so she staggered, and would have fallen had not the old woman caught her. How odd it is that so short an illness should make one so stupid!

"And yet," Martha responded, in an injured tone, "Mrs. Ellis and Mrs. Vaughan tells everybody you were scarce ill a bit; and that, maybe, is why so few have called to inquire about you. The Count, he asks every day, and so does Colonel le Grand and Mr. Campbell; but the Kinburn folk take it mighty easy."

Agnes did not on this occasion defend them. She had indeed begged Lina and Mrs. Upton not to come; but there are some of our requests which we would fain have neglected, and she fancied that *she* would not have allowed a whole fortnight to pass, if either of them had been ill, without making an effort at least to see them. It was long afterwards that Lina explained the reason of her apparent neglect. She could not visit Agnes without confiding to her the anxieties which were weighing on her spirit, and her fealty to *him* prevented her from uttering a word of explanation. As to poor Mrs. Upton, she had frequently endeavoured to see her favourite; but Mrs. Vaughan had so especially requested that Agnes should not be excited by *any* visits, that the meek old lady yielded, contenting herself with sending innumerable messages of kindness and sympathy, which never were delivered.

As Agnes was slowly descending the stair to the lower part of the house, little Godfrey came rushing out of the

nursery, flourishing a huge stick above his head, and shouting at the full pitch of his voice; but the instant he saw Agnes, he flung down his weapon and rushed towards her with cries of delight.

"Aunt Agnes, how glad I am to see you are well again. You will let me stay with you now—not always send me out of the room, as mamma does?"

Agnes was touched with the little fellow's ecstasy, in spite of the selfish element that prevailed in it, and said, fondly, "Yes, dear, if you keep quiet; but I am not well yet; I can't bear a noise."

"Not well yet?" he said, disconsolately. "Oh, I am so sorry. But I like better to sit quiet by you than to romp ever so much in the octagon: and we have been romping there ever since you were ill."

Agnes turned to Martha for an explanation.

"It's quite true, Miss Agnes," she said, bitterly. "Mrs. Vaughan insisted on it; and, though I did what I could, I dare not refuse when Mrs. Ellis said they were to be there—the Rectory children, you know, miss, as were asked to keep Master Godfrey in good humour."

"But we have not done any mischief, Aunt Agnes," said the little fellow, perceiving, as children generally do, the annoyance Agnes felt at the news; "that is, not *very* much. Charlie broke a chair, and I broke a wee flower-pot, and Jos spilt the ink; but nothing more."

Agnes could not help smiling at the boy's ingenuousness; but the smile was succeeded by a frown when, pushing open the door of her sanctum, she found it occupied by Cornelia and Count Vandeweld.

"I did not know they were there. Miss Agnes," said Martha, deprecatingly.

CHAPTER XXXV

RECOGNITION.

MRS. VAUGHAN was comfortably established in Agnes's lounging-chair, her dainty little foot resting on a hassock, a mass of bright-coloured wools in her lap, and a piece of embroidery dangling from her fingers; while Count Vandeweld, on the low window-seat near her, leaned back

in a quite-at-home fashion, his handsome eyes resting listlessly on the fair woman before him. But at the sound of the opening door he started up and exclaimed, "Miss Stuart!"

"Agnes!" Mrs. Vaughan said, as he pronounced the words, "are you there? I thought you were still in bed. I hope you are better—you look so." She half rose from her comfortable seat; but as one or two of her wools slipped to the floor, she sat down again, and added, languidly, "Will you pick them up, Count?"

He stooped at her bidding; he was glad of any occupation which allowed him leisure to recover from the surprise of Agnes's entrance, and said, quickly, "Miss Stuart looks very tired. Perhaps she would prefer having her room to herself."

Agnes smiled assent, but did not hear Cornelia's answer; for the shock of seeing Count Vandeweld established at his ease in her own sanctum quite overcame her, and in her weak state brought on an attack of trembling and faintness, which forced her to grasp at the table near her for a better support than Martha's arm afforded. Count Vandeweld's quick eye saw what was impending, and, springing forward, caught her as her hand was losing its hold of Martha's arm, as she was falling to the ground.

"Dear me!" Cornelia ejaculated. "What makes her faint? I never saw her do it before. What shall we do?"

"Get her some hartshorn," shrieked Martha, "and then we shall lift her into her own chair," looking daggers the while at Mrs. Vaughan for usurping it.

"A glass of wine will be better," Count Vandeweld said, quietly; "and she will recover sooner if laid flat than sitting up, Mrs. Martha."

The decided tone enforced obedience, and Martha trotted away for the wine, while Mrs. Vaughan rose from her chair, gathered her wools into her work-basket, and stood looking down at Agnes with an air of helpless indifference that made the Count's dark brows lower.

"Have you no smelling-salts?" he said, sharply.

"Not here."

"Go and get them, then;" but at the instant Agnes's eyelids quivered slightly, a faint sigh parted her pale lips,

and, looking round her with the vague uncertain glance of returning animation, she murmured, "Where am I? What has happened?"

Count Vandeweld gently raised her head on his arm, and said with real interest, "You are better, Miss Stuart; I am sure you are."

The strange voice seemed to startle her; for a look of dread passed into her eyes, and when they met those full dark orbs of his fixed upon her, she gave a slight shudder, and said faintly, "I think I am; I don't know." And she made an effort to raise herself from his supporting arm.

A slight contraction of his brow showed that this sign of aversion had not escaped him; but his countenance betrayed more sorrow than anger as he gently laid her down again, and, crossing the room to the window-seat, brought thither a cushion to support her head.

At the moment Martha entered with the wine. "Ah, that is better," he said, taking it from her. "You will support her in your arms. Just so. Now raise her head on your shoulder;" and when she had obeyed him, as most uneducated people readily do obey those who speak with decision and an air of command, he skilfully and with almost feminine gentleness forced a few drops of the wine between her trembling lips. Gradually the cordial took effect. She ceased to tremble, the eyes lost their glassy uncertain light, and by-and-by she turned with a sweet smile to Martha, saying, "Thank you, Martha. I have given you a great deal of trouble."

Martha fairly blubbered at this kindly speech; but Cornelia smiled scornfully and said, "I think, Agnes, you would be better in a comfortable chair than crouching on the ground in that absurd fashion."

Agnes heard the words as in a dream. They produced an uneasy feeling in her mind; but she had not as yet recovered sufficiently to comprehend them, and said faintly, "I don't understand. What is it, Martha?"

Martha shot a wrathful glance at Mrs. Vaughan, while Count Vandeweld, putting down the wine-glass, advanced towards Agnes, and, gently raising her from the old woman's arms, placed her in the easy chair, and said quietly, "You will be more comfortable there."

Agnes was still too weak to oppose, almost to be aware of, this summary proceeding. She felt in a state of vague confusion, and, as her head sunk back on the supporting cushions, she wearily closed her eyes again, and repeated, "Thank you, Martha."

"Thank you, Martha," mimicked Mrs. Vaughan, with her sharp, jarring laugh. "Really, Count Vandeweld, your patient is vastly obtuse and vastly ungrateful. Most young ladies would have been enraptured by your gallantry!" The disagreeably sarcastic tone in which this was said irritated Martha beyond endurance.

"I tell you what it is, Mrs. Vaughan," she exclaimed, "I brought Miss Agnes here to her own room for peace and quiet, and as you see now that she *is* ill, maybe you will let her have them. If I was you, I would take my visitors to the drawing-room. That's what I'd do in the circumstances, Mrs. Vaughan."

"You would do very wisely, Mrs. Martha, Count Vandeweld said, forgetting for the second time that he had called the old woman by her name, as he used to do in Saxenham. Fortunately, she was too much preoccupied to remark it. "The sooner we leave Miss Stuart alone, the better; and when I get this confounded window open, I shall take your hint, and apologise for my unintentional intrusion."

Agnes, now well enough to comprehend this little dialogue, endeavoured to make some civil rejoinder; but her words failing her, she gave up the attempt. He had turned to listen; but when she ceased to speak, he busied himself in sundry little arrangements for her comfort, which would never have suggested themselves either to Mrs. Vaughan or Martha, such as placing the hassock under her feet, flinging the window open, so as to allow the soft breeze to fan her cheek, and, finally, wrapping carefully round her a large Indian shawl which lay on the window-seat.

"Now," he said, addressing Martha, "see that you give her lots of wine, and keep people from worrying her, and she will be all right soon. It is weakness that made her faint. She must have been ill indeed, to be so pulled down since I saw her at Fairholm."

"You speak quite knowingly, Count Vandeweld," Mrs.

Vaughan said, with a sneering laugh; "in what university did you take your medical diploma?"

In spite of herself, Agnes cast a terrified glance at him as these words were uttered; but he answered with perfect *sans froid*, "I took my degree long ago, Mrs. Vaughan, in common courtesy and common sense; and both tell me that what our patient needs is rest and quiet. So a truce to mere talking."

Cornelia slightly tossed her head at the implied rebuke; but there was a look in Count Vandeweld's eyes which cowed her, so she merely touched her forehead with a kind of salaam, as she replied, "To hear is to obey, great Pasha; and sailed out of the room.

Count Vandeweld lingered a moment to whisper to Agnes, "I see you know me. Already I owe you much. Make me still more your debtor by keeping my secret a week or two longer. After that you may say what you like; but, till then, I beseech you to keep silence, for your own sake as much as mine. If you do, I may have it in my power to make you amends for all I have made you suffer." As he said this, he caught her hand in his, pressed it to his lips, and vanished.

Agnes sank back in her chair with a cold shudder as she felt those cruel false lips come in contact with her hand, and remembered all that she had striven to forget of his conduct to her during the few last months of his murdered wife's life. It had been one of her severest trials to have him seize, as he had then done, every opportunity of showing his admiration for her—an admiration from which she had shrunk with all the loathing a pure-minded woman feels for such attentions. But then she had a brother to protect and advise her. Now she was alone! Was she, indeed, bound to keep this man's secret? Were it not better to speak out and brave the consequences? Colonel le Grand had advised her to keep quiet for a little. He was watching him. He would not permit him to take any grave step against her, or against any one she cared for. And he had seen that angry look at Lionel; so he was on his guard there especially. Oh, that evil look! those keen, cruel eyes, how they haunted her! He might make her amends for all he had made her suffer! What could he mean?

Very miserable were Agnes's reflections, as she lay back exhausted in her arm-chair; and the fever which still hung about her magnified every anxiety, and made her incapable of seeing anything in an unexaggerated light. She thought how strange it was that one naturally so frank as she was should, without any fault of her own, be mixed up in so many and such dangerous secrets. Ursula—Dr. Weld—Lina.

As the blind girl's name recurred to her thoughts, she remembered the anxiety she had expressed that she should not leave her, lest Sigismund's arrival should place her in difficulties which might force her to demand her help. He had come—Lina had told her so; and yet she had since that time avoided Agnes—caught at the flimsiest excuses for not visiting her during her illness. What could it all mean? And, as she asked herself the question, Agnes started up from her reclining position, pushed her hair back from her burning brow, and exclaimed aloud, "What a blind fool I have been! Sigismund and Count Vandeweld are one and the same man!"

Once before the idea had occurred to her, when listening to Lina's confession; but, many as were the similarities between the two stories, there were differences that had seemed to contradict the idea. In the first place, Dr. Weld was an English Doctor, while Sigismund was a German artist; and Lina had so carefully evaded all personal description of her false lover, that Agnes had, somehow or other, been led to picture Francis Maxwell as a person very unlike Dr. Weld. Her own affairs, too, had latterly engaged so much of her attention that she had devoted less thought to Lina than she might have done. In short, the momentary suspicion of the identity of the two men had passed quite away, and it was only when considering the skill with which Dr. Weld assumed the disguise of a German Count that the forgotten doubt came back upon her mind. When once there, all after-steps were easy. She remembered that Harry Thorpe had said that he fancied he had recognized Dr. Weld in the Crimea. His knowledge of the neighbourhood of St. Ringans was suspicious—a knowledge which he could only have gained by spending some time in the immediate neighbourhood, as the

so-called Francis Maxwell had done. And then it occurred to her that Dr. Weld's Christian name was Francis. Generally, his wife had made use of his surname; but the night of her death she had called him Frank. Yes: Agnes was sure she had. His notes to her brother, too, were signed Francis S. M. Weld. She had seen the signature many times; and, leaning back with closed eyes, it seemed to her that the notes in question rose up palpably before her, and showed her the signature, followed by such a *parafe* as Lina had described—Francis S. M. Weld. The first initial corresponded with the name Sigismund, which Lina had made use of in speaking of him; the other might well stand for Max, which, combined with the surname, might easily be taken for "Maxwell" by the purblind eyes of Sir Robert Hepburn.

Again, Miss Hepburn had said that Sigismund's father was an Austrian nobleman; therefore the title of Count, which he now assumed, might be his by right; while the name of Vandeweld was simply his own name, with the double prefix of Van and De—the one a translation of the other—to which his birth entitled him.

As these facts rushed upon Agnes, she groaned in spirit over her previous obtuseness. A thousand trifling corroborations rose to her thoughts, showing how easily she might have seen it all long, long ago—Lina's marvellous acquaintance with the particulars of the trial, her interest in Charlie, the very expression in Dr. Weld's half-finished note—"Reine de Golconde." It was "Aline" who was "Reine de Golconde," while the possession of her kingdom of Kinburn was a sufficient motive to induce an unprincipled man to wish for his wife's death.

Lina's present neglect of herself, and her sudden desire to go to Fairholm, were also explained. She *dare* not make Agnes her confidante while under the influence of Count Vandeweld; and it was not till she had ascertained that he had taken Hawkhill, and that she could not, therefore, expect to escape a second interview, that she had resolved to meet him at Mr. Campbell's, under circumstances which would prevent either being the subject of remark. Agnes's own agitation that day had prevented any keen observation of her neighbours; but she did remember the paleness of

Lina's face as she was introduced to the stranger, and her inability afterwards to join the party at the conjuror's.

Ay, it was all plain enough now. Lina's first determination not to grant him an interview had been overcome by his generalship. She was again under his control, and was prevented from coming to her for help. Yes, yes; everything was clear, even to the look Count Vandeweld had flashed on Lionel Upton. He knew that he was the one impediment to Lina's heirship; he had discovered that the stolen will had not been the only one which interfered with Lina's claims. And Agnes grew cold at the thought; for she could not forget how he had already removed the obstacles which had lain in his path.

Many people besides Agnes Stuart have ere now been amazed at their own stupidity in not seeing more quickly what seemed plain enough when once they had found the key to it; but to her the immenseness of her dulness seemed incomprehensible.

For weeks the elements of this revelation had lain spread out before her eyes in vain. The lack of one tiny ray of light had left her blind to the whole marvellous combination; and now that the full comprehension of it was hers, she knew not how to avail herself of the knowledge.

The vexatious *contretemps* of Mr. Campbell's rejection deprived her of aid from him; the change in her confidential relations with Lionel Upton were equally potent in that quarter; while the promise of secrecy Lina had exacted, and those she had previously given Colonel le Grand and tacitly Count Vandeweld, complicated her difficulties in every direction. Each obstacle, taken individually, might be overcome in time; but in the mass they shackled her so much that she dared only encounter them if convinced that they would secure any very great good, or prevent any serious evil.

"Alas! alas!" she exclaimed, as she pressed her feverish forehead against the cushions Count Vandeweld had so skilfully arranged for her comfort, "why am I so helpless now—now when, for the first time since I came here, I might be of use to so many?"

Poor Agnes! She forgot for the time that no feeble human hand is needed to bring order out of chaos, light out of darkness.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

FATHER AND SON.

FOR the last fortnight Lionel Upton had devoted himself to the arrangement of his affairs and the balancing of the books of the firm of which he was younger partner, and the result was that he found himself utterly unable to provide the necessary funds for the redemption of Kinburn. His friend Mr. Campbell offered to advance the requisite money; but, on consultation with the lawyer, it was found that Sir Robert Hepburn had so carefully hedged the matter round that the estates could only be Lionel's on condition that the money paid for them was *bonâ fide* his own, and this could not be the case if it were advanced by his friend.

Mr. Campbell was terribly annoyed by the legal decision. "Your grandfather," he said, addressing Lionel, "did not know his own mind when he concocted that absurd will. He thought, poor man, that he had secured the old place to both you and Lina. But by-and-by he understood the matter better, and he wished you alone to be his heir. So don't be Quixotic about it, my boy. Take the money as a gift, and if you never repay it, what does it signify? I have no one to come after me."

But to this Lionel could not agree. The real will was lost; therefore he must act upon the other in the spirit as well as the letter.

"Well!" said the old gentleman, with unusual temper, "if you and your mother will to Cupar, you maun to Cupar, and there is an end of it. But I suppose the next thing will be that you give up business?"

"Not so long as you remain in it," said Lionel, cagerly

The cordiality of this speech dispersed the cloud on Mr. Campbell's brow; but he asked, with a little malicious twinkle of his eyes, how Mrs. Vaughan would like being a Fairholm merchant's wife."

"Mrs. Vaughan!" was the amazed answer.

"Yes, Mrs. Vaughan," said the old merchant, sharply; "they tell me she is to be your wife."

"Thank goodness, Lionel answered, with an odd smile, "she is not."

"Is not, boy? Are you quite surc?"

"Sure enough," was the amused answer. "In the first place, I never asked her; in the second, she threw me over when she learned that Kinburn might not be mine."

"'Tis an ill wind that blows nobody good," Mr. Campbell said, rubbing his hands gleefully; "and I am heartily glad, Lionel, that you found her out before it was too late."

"It is a subject I had rather not talk about, Campbell; for I did love her once. But that was many years ago, before either of us ever saw India."

"Ay, ay!" the old man said, with a tone that implied that his confession explained much that had puzzled him previously; "in that case I shall never say a word more about her, except—that—I—do—not—like—the—woman. And now let us return to business. Do you know that I have had one or two interviews lately with your cousin?"

"About an amicable arrangement of our affairs?"

"Yes. She is willing to make matters as easy as possible; indeed, if it could be done, would not object to act upon the last will, informal as it is. But there, of course, Mrs. Trotter's rights step in. However, she has given me full power to do what can be done to settle things in the most advantageous manner for you."

"You surprise me. When did this change take place?"

"The day you were all here at the conjuror's. I thought she had some whim in her head of more importance than simply to indulge the children, by letting them see a few sleight-of-hand tricks. And she broached the subject before she left my house. You remember how ill she looked at luncheon? I suppose it was the struggle between her pride and her better feelings, poor thing. At least, she told me then that she had changed her mind about contesting everything with you, and hoped that by-and-by matters could be managed so as not to make the whole business the talk of the country."

"And what did she propose?"

"That a small annuity should be settled on herself, enough only to let her live respectably; and that a sum of 5000*l.* should be given her at once, within a month, and that no question should be asked as to the use she makes of it."

"Why do you think such a stipulation is made, Campbell?"

"I did not ask, of course; but I guess she wants to buy off that fellow Maxwell."

"You still suspect they have means of communicating with one another!"

"I have no doubt about it. But, I confess, the only ground I have to go upon is the regular drawing of her income, the certainty that she does not spend it on herself, and that she has not a fraction left at the end of the quarter."

"You know this?"

"Yes, Lionel, I do know it."

"Can we comply with her conditions?"

"So far as the 5000*l.* is concerned, we can do so; but Mrs. Trotter's claims on the estate are less easily settled. They alone would entail the selling of the property."

"It must be sold, at all events."

"I wish I could avert that," the old man said, earnestly.

"It is impossible."

"Well, then, there is nothing for it but that I should purchase it; but I would rather lend you the money on it, Lionel. It hurts my pride in an old family to see a place like Kinburn change owners."

A cordial grasp of the hand was Lionel Upton's only answer for a moment; then he said, with a faint smile, "Well, Campbell, so far I shall yield to you that, when you buy Kinburn, I shall gladly retain the Whim, if you will consent to wait a year or two for the purchase-money. It would please my mother to end her days in the old dowager-house."

"And what becomes of Mrs. Ellis and her niece?" was the rather malicious retort.

"Lionel flushed scarlet. "That and many other arrangements must be made hereafter," he said, pulling out his watch. "I promised Vandeweld to look in for an hour at his *fête champêtre*."

"So did I. Shall we go together?"

"I have a visit to pay first," was the rather embarrassed answer.

"Ah! very well." Mr. Campbell said no more. He

suspected what that visit was, and, much as he liked Lionel, there was a pang at his heart as he thought how he was likely to succeed in that wherein he himself had failed.

His suspicions were correct. For many days Lionel had had this visit at heart, and each morning he had inquired of Harry Thorpe whether Miss Stuart was well enough to receive visitors, and each evening he had entrusted Mrs. Vaughan with a kindly message, which messages had never been delivered. But of that he knew nothing. He only felt his spirits rise as he learned that to-day he might call, and the tacit agreement he had come to with Mr. Campbell added to his pleasure. He would thus be enabled to offer Agnes a home she loved, and, mounting his horse, he rode swiftly in the direction of the Whim.

As he pushed forward he pictured to himself the meeting with Agnes; how he would tell her that the end was come now, and that he could at last explain all that might have seemed strange in his conduct. He would confess everything—his discomfort at being once more thrown into Cernelia's society, his half-conquered jealousy of Harry Thorpe, his resolution not to speak to her of his affection until he knew what he had to offer her. As soon as he did know it, he had hastened to place his position before her, and wait for her decision. He had secretly little doubt what that decision would be, and his heart danced lightly in his bosom as, throwing Rowland's bridle over the old-fashioned "cleck" in the wall, he walked quickly up the garden-path and knocked at the door of the Whim.

Martha came in answer to his summons; but, instead of the cordial welcome she had formerly given him, she said, dryly, that Miss Stuart was particularly engaged, and she could not take it upon her to disturb her.

"She is better, I am glad to hear."

"A bit;" and, to his amazement, the door was slammed in his face without further warning. He turned from it with disappointment and anger. Unconscious of offence, it never occurred to him that the old woman had bitterly resented his never having called personally to inquire for her young mistress, and that she attributed his apparent neglect to the influence of Mrs. Vaughan, to whom the gossips at St. Ringaus had solemnly betrothed him.

With a satisfied chuckle Martha closed the door behind Mr. Upton, muttering to herself, "Ha, ha! young man; there's that going on in the octagon as will make up for your attentions." Servants are sharp observers; and Martha had naturally expected a romantic result from "the young laird's" frequent summer visits, and had been proportionately indignant when, on Mrs. Vaughan's arrival, they suddenly ceased. Since then the reports of Mr. Upton's engagement to the pretty widow had irritated her still more against him; and latterly Count Vandeweld's visit to the Whim, and regular inquiries for Miss Stuart, had caused the old woman's wishes to veer round in his favour. She was flattered by his civility to herself, and elated by the many efforts he made to induce Agnes to attend the *fete* at Hawkhill; and this morning, the very morning of the "shampeater feat," he had come himself to see whether she would not go even yet. And Martha had shown him into the octagon; for she did not see why he should not plead his own cause. Mrs. Vaughan, no doubt, would have liked him to go to the drawing-room; *she* was ready enough to accept his attentions, but Martha knew he did not care that (snapping her fingers) for Mrs. Vaughan.

In one respect Martha was right enough. Count Vandeweld did not wish to go to the drawing-room. He had set his heart on entering the octagon; but it would have vexed Martha had she suspected that he wished to find it empty. To attain this object he had already made many efforts. It was he who had persuaded Cornelia to take possession of Agnes's sanctum during her illness, and once or twice, while waiting for Mrs. Vaughan to prepare herself for a ride or walk, he had hoped to find himself there unwatched; but hitherto he had been baffled in this desire. Some one had always happened, accidentally of course, to come in as Mrs. Vaughan quitted the room, or some equally trivial obstacle had arisen to prevent him from doing what he desired to do there.

But the time had come when it was necessary for him to attain his object. If he failed now? Well, he must *not* fail.

At first, fortune seemed willing to favour his wishes. As he opened the gate into the Whim garden, he met Mrs. Vaughan.

"Ah, lady fair!" he said, gallantly, "where are you bound for?" He knew perfectly well that she was going to Mrs. Trotter's that morning, and had arranged his plans accordingly; but he enacted ignorance with considerable skill.

She answered half-poutingly, and added, "So you *are* going to try and persuade Agnes to come to-day? You will fail."

"Possibly."

"You don't care about it, then?" she asked, with some eagerness.

"Only so far that, as we are situated, I should be glad that your cousin should be seen at Hawkhill. It would look better."

"Then you are civil for *my* sake?"

"Do you doubt it, Nellie?" and he took her hand in his, and fixed his brilliant eyes tenderly on hers.

They drooped under the steady glance. "I like to be assured you really care for me," she said, with more real feeling than she was wont to express either in voice or look.

"So you doubt my affection for you?" he said, catching her two hands in his, and looking at her earnestly. "Of what use, then, are my protestations? Suppose I tell you I don't care a rap for you, what should you do?"

A vivid red rose to her cheek at the mocking tone in which he spoke, and she said, very low,

"I should love you all the same, Sigismund. I can't help it. I know I am a fool for loving you, but I do—I do."

A cloud passed over his face as she said this; was it remorse or regret? Who can tell? He was not a common man, and he had had a heart once, though he had done all he could to stifle its promptings and those of conscience. "Poor little Nellie," he said, after a moment's pause, "so it does love me, does it?" And bowing his lofty head, he kissed her cheek as he might have kissed a child "to make it good," and then added, in a lighter tone, "Well, love, adieu, *au revoir*. Mind you are at Hawkhill early. We have still much to talk over."

Cornelia turned away without answering. She had at last found her master, and she knew it. The ambition of being a countess, which had first attracted her to Count

Vandeweld when she met him in Constantinople, was forgotten now. She had learned to prize the man himself, and, for the time being, was as much bound up in him as if she were still a young, inexperienced girl, with a heart opening for the first time to the hitherto unknown voice of affection, and, believing in her idol, is swayed by his lightest word or look.

His feelings were very different. He did not love her, never had done so, never, almost, professed to do so. His gallant speeches were so gallant that he was almost taken by surprise when he found the world-worn woman believed in them; but, finding it so, the temptation was irresistible. She had a settled income—not large, certainly, but quite her own, her husband, good, honourable man, never for a moment supposing that she *could* withdraw it from their child, and therefore leaving it entirely in her power. This income might be his if he played his cards properly, and if he failed in his endeavour to force Lina to marry him. That he should fail in that, he always felt was possible after he read the note Agnes had written to him at Lina's dictation. And when he learned the provisions of the unknown will, about to be acted upon, he soon decided that it would be worse than folly to encumber himself with a blind wife who had lost her old faith in him. Had Lina believed in him now as she had once done, he might have been content to take her, even with her diminished fortune; but she was obstinate in her own opinions, and that would not suit him.

So it was, in one sense, well for him that Mrs. Vaughan threw herself and her three hundred a year at his head. If all other schemes failed, he might perhaps condescend to accept both the lady and the money.

And other schemes did fail. Lina refused any longer to conceal her guilty knowledge of the lost will, and did her utmost to persuade him to restore it to its rightful owner. She was willing, if he complied, to give up to him two-thirds of any money settled upon herself; but obstinately refused any other arrangement.

“Do you know what you offer?” he asked, bitterly. “I have read the lost will, and all that is settled on you beyond one paltry thousand pounds is left entirely to your cousin's generosity. Do you suppose 65*l.* 13*s.* 4*d.* is a

sufficient bribe to tempt me to relinquish what I have a right to as things are?"

The tone in which this was said irritated Lina's proud spirit, and she said, with some asperity, "Well, then, if you refuse my terms, you had better settle the matter yourself with my cousin. I shall open the way for you by telling him the fate of the lost will."

"A charming plan!" he said, with a laugh. "I suppose you know that to be art and part in the concealment of felony exposes you personally to very unpleasant consequences?"

"That I am willing to brave. I have done wrong; it is right I should suffer for my fault."

"To what end? Your suffering cannot undo the past. Moreover, lightly as you speak of the penalty you incur, I doubt whether you understand what you may bring upon yourself. I need not mention the danger to which you expose me; for of course that you have already considered."

"Danger to you? There can be none. I could not, would not, implicate you."

"How could you help it? Do you suppose that when a man finds a clue to the recovery of a lost property he will not follow it out? Do you imagine your cousin such a fool as not to put this and that together, and guess who it was whom you received in the library at Kinburn? Do you fancy that he—that others—have no suspicion of your clandestine correspondence with Maxwell?"

"I do not know," she said, very low; "but, even if they guessed that, they could not recognize him in the Count Vandeweld."

"Possibly not, though the slightest indiscretion might betray that secret also. But, supposing they did not find this out, of what use would your confession be unless you could recover the lost deed? You do not know whether it is still extant; but you do know that Max Weld is not the man to make his rival rich at his own expense. Last of all, weigh well the consequences of confessing to any human being your life-long intimacy with me. Who that hears of our constant correspondence can fail to remember that cursed note found in my blotting-book, or doubt for an instant that you were cognizant of that miserable tragedy

from the beginning? Think of this, Aline; think what worse things than even this may be attributed to you, and which no denial can clear you from. Your reputation blasted, your health gone, your friends estranged—what would become of you?"

Lina did not answer, did not refuse credence to the miserable picture he placed before her. She knew it might be true. She knew that Mrs. Upton would cast her forth on the wide world, if such tales were even hinted at. And, as he too truly said, the sacrifice she made might be useless.

"You see the force of my arguments, Aline?" he continued, in a softer tone. "You will think twice before you bring such misery on your innocent head, my child; for you are innocent, save in your wretched, unhappy love for me."

"I cannot tell," she gasped. "I am bewildered, stupefied!"

"Then listen to me," he said, in his most fascinating accents. "Leave things as they are. Lionel Upton has already made up his mind to lose Kinburn, and enjoy life in the dull, plodding manner that suits such quiet souls. The property is to be offered for sale. They say old Campbell means to buy it. He will give a good price for it. The proceeds will be divided, and my Aline will have enough to live as becomes her station; and, if she will be my wife, we may yet be happy, and who knows but that her sweet teaching may bring me into right ways before I die?"

Lina's feeble frame shook with emotion.

"It cannot be, Max. I could not consent to such a robbery."

"Not if you could save *me*?"

A deep silence succeeded, broken only by the panting breath of the blind girl. What the force of temptation was with which she wrestled in that minute no one could guess but God and her own soul. It was vanquished at length; but cold drops of agony moistened her forehead, showing how deadly the strife had been. At last she spoke.

"Max, I dare not do evil that good may come. All I can do is to let you leave England in safety, and then—"

take my chance. I cannot live with this weight of guilt on my soul."

"Think it over," he said, very calmly. "You are excited now; you must have time to weigh the consequences. You shall give me your decision at Hawkhill on Monday. Farewell, Aline!"

Such had been their parting interview; but he knew that, in her own quiet way, Lina was inflexible as himself, and therefore had little hope of changing her resolution.

But he was by no means a man to give up a scheme simply from the difficulties that might be thrown in his way. He no sooner satisfied himself of Lina's course of action than he resolved to forestall her confession by the concoction of a plausible story which should account for his having possession of the lost documents, and by offering them to Lionel Upton on certain conditions.

His plan was to marry Cornelia Vaughan, and, when they were safely abroad, write to Mr. Upton, telling him that his wife had found a bundle of papers at the Whim, and had carried them away with her, intending at her leisure to peruse them; that, to her surprise, she discovered one of them to be the lost will of Sir Robert Hepburn, and that she was willing to restore it on the fulfilment of such and such conditions.

The story might seem improbable; but, for Cornelia's sake, her friends and relations were more likely to secure the document on the proposed terms than to track out the truth and bring him to justice, with the chance of losing the deed. Moreover, if he gave Lina his word of honour that he would restore the will before a certain date, he knew he could trust her not to betray him; and, in short, the project was in every way hopeful. Only one difficulty lay in his way, and that was to regain possession of the papers, which he had hidden in a place of safety, rather than keep them in his own possession. It was to effect this that he desired to be left alone in the garden octagon of the Whim.

Martha seemed only too ready to forward his wishes; for when she gave him admission, she begged him to walk into the octagon till Miss Stuart was ready. She would

not be more than ten minutes, she was sure. "Was Miss Agnes better?" Oh dear, yes; quite better. She was just telling her, as she helped her to dress, it was a pity she would not go to Hawkhill; she looked so well, and it was such a sweet day. And, becking and bowing, the gracious Martha showed Count Vandeweld into the octagon, carefully closing the double doors between it and the drawing-room.

Now it happened that, that morning, Charlie Reyard had caught a splendid trout, which he resolved to bring to Miss Stuart. Distressed on his late visits to see her so thin after her illness, he persuaded himself that his trout would tempt her to eat, and make her ever so much better. So, whistling and singing, he unhooked his prize, popped it into his basket, and, unscrewing his fishing-rod, set off post-haste to the Whim, unlatched the wicket at the bottom of the garden, and made his way direct to the glass door opening thence to the octagon.

Setting his fishing-rod in a corner of the verandah, he opened his basket, gazed with triumph on his three-pounder, and, advancing to the door, laid his hand on the lock. What made him start back? He saw through the window that it was not Agnes who was in the room, but the tall dark Count, whose scarred face had attracted him so much at the conjuror's. Once or twice they had met since then in the lanes near St. Ringans, and the Count had always stared at the boy, and the boy had stared at him with an unaccountable interest. Was it the wounded cheek that attracted him, or did some faint childish recollections hover in his memory? Who can tell? At all events, each had stared at the other, and once the count had drawn up his horse and called Charlie to him. The boy had gone reluctantly, and the Count had asked him one or two questions, such as men unaccustomed to children do ask, but had felt uncomfortable as the clear dark orbs, so like poor Ursula's, fixed themselves on his with the steady stare which only a child's innocent eyes can give, and which few guilty souls can stand unflinchingly.

"You are a fine fellow," Count Vandeweld said at last. "You must come up to Hawkhill some day, and shoot rabbits."

"Thank you, sir;" and Charlie, touching his cap, was moving away, when the Count called him back.

"I don't want you to forget me, Charlie," he said, with a touch of softness in his voice; "take these for my sake;" and he dropped a couple of sovereigns into his hand.

The boy flushed scarlet, as he thrust them back indignantly. "I am not a beggar, Count," he said, haughtily. "I only take presents from those I love;" and he darted away, leaving his astonished father in a state of mingled wrath and admiration.

"The curse of gold has not fallen on him, thank God!" he muttered, as he rode slowly on his way.

They had not met since; but, with the recollection of what had then taken place full in his mind, Charlie did not care to force himself just now into the Count's presence. But this did not prevent him from watching him furtively; and certainly his proceedings were rather unusual for a morning visitor. The first thing he did was to turn over the papers and books on the table; the next, to go to the doors leading to the drawing-room, and try whether they were fast; and then he turned to that where Charlie was. An impulse he could not resist induced Charlie to crouch down below the glass part, as the Count approached, and a minute or two elapsed ere he took courage to raise himself up again and resume his inspection. What could Count Vandeweld be doing now? He was standing close to Miss Stuart's secretaire, and fumbling with a bunch of keys he took from his pocket. But it was not the secretaire-lock into which he fitted that long, odd-shaped key. He was stretching up to a protuberance a little way above: and by-and-by a door in the wall flew open, and Charlie saw something white inside the concealed cupboard. The boy's heart beat quick: but, conquering his momentary panic, he started to his feet, dashed open the glass door, and with one bound sprang into the middle of the room.

The Count's extended hand was hastily withdrawn, the little door of the cavity pushed to, and the key dropped into his waistcoat-pocket, as he turned round and faced the boy.

"What business have you to look into Miss Stuart's hidy-hole?" Charlie asked, striding up to the Count, whose

dark brows met in a withering frown at the unexpected demand.

“What business have you to ask impertinent questions?” was the answer.

“Miss Stuart is my friend, and I won’t have her things meddled with,” Charlie said.

“You won’t, won’t you, my young firebrand? And what if I knock you down for your impertinence?”

“I don’t mind,” said the boy; “besides, it is only cowards who hit women and children. You should not be a coward; for you have been in real battles.”

This bold answer actually cowed the man, and he stood for a moment uncertain how to act. At last he said, “You have behaved like a young hero, Charlie; but, all the same, you are under a complete mistake as to what I was doing. I was only looking whether *my* hidy-hole was there still. I used to live at the Whim long ago, and I fitted up this room myself. Ask Miss Stuart, and she will tell you it was so.”

Charlie looked suspiciously at him; but then he continued, “If you like, I shall show you that I know more about this room than you do.” And, walking to the recess where the fire-place was, he touched the spring which opened the concealed panel; in another corner he pressed a knob, which disclosed a curious little crypt, such as one sees in old castles and chapels; and at length the boy’s doubts of him were weakened, and he condescended to allow that he had proved he knew the room well, so he would not bother Miss Stuart about the matter.

Count Vandeweld smiled. “I am glad to hear you say that, Charlie; for Miss Stuart would be vexed if she thought you and I were not friends.”

“Why?”

The awkward question was scarcely uttered before Agnes entered; and when the first greetings were over, Count Vandeweld said, “Miss Stuart, I should be glad if you could persuade this little fellow that I want to be friends with him; and also, that long ago I lived at the Whim. He doubts both one and the other.”

Charlie reddened. There was something in this way of putting the case which discomposed him; and when Agnes

drew him to her and assured him that the Count said only what was true, and that he had a very strong wish to make him love him, the boy's lip trembled, and he said, with a burst of feeling he could not control, "I can't love him, Miss Stuart. I don't know why, but I am only frightened of him: I can't love him, as I do you, and Miss Hepburn, and Mr. Hornby."

"Well, dear, I won't say more about it; but, at least, you will shake hands with him for my sake."

"Well, I will do that, if you will really promise to have my trout for your dinner. See, what a beauty he is! May I take him to Martha, and bid her cook him?"

"Yes, Charlie, if you will be friends with Count Vandeweld."

Charlie walked up to the Count, and thrust out his sturdy, sunburnt hand. "Miss Stuart wants me to be friends with you, sir."

The Count's moustache trembled, as, stooping down, he put his arms round the boy, and, holding him for a moment to his breast, scanned the handsome manly face with eager eyes. As his embrace relaxed, he stooped down and kissed his forehead as he said, "God bless you, my child, and keep you from evil!"

Charlie looked up at him with intense amazement; but, after an instant's silence, he said, boldly, "God bless you, too, sir, and keep *you* from evil;" and then, extricating himself from his unknown father's encircling arm, he dashed out of the room.



CHAPTER XXXVII.

WHAT IS IT?

COMPLETE silence followed Charlie's disappearance. Count Vandeweld sat with his elbow resting on the table, and his hand shading his eyes, while Agnes, still weak and nervous from illness, tried in vain to discover any excuse to rid herself of her unwelcome visitor. After the lapse of some minutes, she said, in desperation,

"There is the making of a fine character in that boy."

The Count started at the sound of her voice, and, drawing

his hand across his eyes, as if to remove the moisture which filled them, he said, "So there was in his father at his age; but of what use was it to him?"

"Perhaps," she replied, gently, "you were denied the advantages Charlie has?"

"Ah, that is true enough," he said, sadly. "I never knew what it was to live among good people. The name of God never reached my ears, save in execrations. My mother died when I was an infant. My father disgraced his family and himself by becoming a professional gambler and bully, and taught his young son to follow in his steps. The instruction I received was to make my way in the world by any means, however objectionable; and my principal education was to learn to tell a lie so plausibly as to make it seem truth, and to hide deceit and dishonesty under an appearance of frankness and imprudence."

"And yet," Agnes said, timidly, "you did not carry out this teaching in everything. There was a time when you followed your better nature, and preferred a career opened to you by honest labour; there was a time, too, when you watched over the orphan child of a dead friend; and one in which you promised to succeed in a noble profession."

A faint flush dyed his cheek as he said, "Why do you remind me of that, Agnes Stuart? Do you not know that the tender growth of good could not withstand the blight of ambition and love of ease? Do you forget that the sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things?"

"Not if the bitter thought bear good fruit, Count Vandeweld. What you have done once, you can do again. You are a stranger here. Save myself and one other, no one has penetrated your disguise. It is, then, possible for you to begin a new life, and redeem the past, by becoming less unworthy of the position you now hold. In one respect you can do this. You can be to your son such a father as you would yours had been to you."

A softened smile stole over his face as she said these words, gently and earnestly; but, as she ceased, he shook his head and answered, sadly, "Too late, too late. Once I might have had power to struggle against my own evil nature; but not now. When the choice was given me, I took the downward road instead of the upward. I passed

the rubicon then, and now I cannot turn back. No one can unlive the past."

"No; but there is one means of escape," she said, eagerly—"one redemption for the greatest sinner. You know where that is to be found; and Charlie is not the only one who would rejoice to learn that you had sought and found salvation."

"Would you rejoice," he said, as he caught her hand and crushed it, in his eagerness, "if I were to seek the right way, if I were to change my life, to earn my bread by the sweat of my brow? Tell me, Agnes Stuart, dare I expect sympathy and encouragement from you?"

Agnes trembled at his vehemence. There was that in his look and voice that made her shrink from him with the same shuddering dread she used to feel at Saxenham, even before she knew what kind of man he was. Then she was a child, and the repulsion she felt was that of the dove for the hawk, the innocent for the wicked. She was a woman now, and knew why she shrunk from him; and it cost her an effort to say, with tolerable equanimity, "My encouragement and sympathy are but slight incitements to a changed life. It were better to have a higher motive, and to reform your life because it is right in the sight of God."

He flung her hand from him, and, suddenly rising, paced the room for some minutes in silence. Then, stopping right in front of her, he said, bitterly, "Your words have sealed my fate. Had you answered differently, there might have still been some hope for the future. As it is, I must pursue the only path left to me; and it will lead me far from you, far from all good people. So be it. It is not my fault. It is *'kismet,'* as the Turks say, and there is an end of it. But, ere I leave you, you must do me one favour—to listen to my story. It is bad enough, no doubt; but there are one or two incidents in it which may make you pity as well as blame me. You spoke, just now, of the career opened to me by my honest labour. Hear the truth. Without money, that career was hermetically sealed against me. I had acquired knowledge. That I allow; but what else? Nothing. I was not simply poor, I was on the border of actual want, when Fate threw Ursula Reynard in my way. I neither loved nor courted her. It was she who sought, who

loved me; and ambition prompted me to accept her love. Had I known then what I learned soon after, nothing on earth would have induced me to engage myself to her. But it was not till too late that I discovered that poor Aline had mistaken my brotherly affection for something very different. My dream of giving her a home when Ursula was my wife was thus rendered impossible, and we parted, as I believed, for ever. So far I had not intentionally done evil. But thenceforward I dare not say I was equally innocent. Ursula loved me—but with what a love! Her imperious and suspicious temper made my home a hell upon earth, and it was not long ere I cursed my infatuation in marrying her, and learned to regret Aline. My ambitious hopes were nipped in the bud by Ursula's narrow-minded bigotry, her penuriousness, and demoniacal jealousy. I could desire no worse punishment to my greatest enemy than to live the life I lived for the few years after my marriage. The gold I had sold myself for was denied me; the prosecution of my profession was interfered with at all points. I was a disappointed man, and soon became a desperate one. We quarrelled and separated. Chance, not my own will, brought me to St. Ringans. I renewed my acquaintance with Aline, and——Well, it does not matter now. All I have to add as to that is, that till I rejoined my wife I was not the devil I afterwards became. The old miserable life was resumed. You know the rest. I was acquitted; but my life was blasted. I wandered, like Cain, over the face of the earth. Nay, worse than Cain; for a woman clung to him through all his troubles: I was alone!"

"You had your child?"

"No," he said, his moustache vibrating at the recollection—"no; I gave him up for ever. He shall never know his father; in that I was determined even then. But I must end these personal recollections," he added, with a glance at the little clock, now striking twelve. "I have other things—business matters—to discuss with you, Miss Stuart. Nothing relating to yourself," he said, as he saw her change colour. "I have to speak of private business of my own."

Agnes tried to answer, but could not. Much as she disliked him, desirous as she was to put an end to the interview, his short sketch of his miserable life had softened

her, and made her more patient with him. But further she could not go, and it was with rather a haughty inclination of her head that she gave him leave to proceed.

"I learn from Miss Hepburn that you were the means of communication between her and me on a late occasion. I presume, therefore, that you are acquainted with the position in which we stand to each other?"

"No, Count Vandeweld, I am not. I know that you befriended Miss Hepburn in time of need; but since then—" Her courage failed, and she could go no further.

"Since then," he said, calmly, "you think that, instead of befriending her, I have become her worst enemy? Nay," he added, with a forced laugh, as he saw her change colour—"nay, Miss Stuart, you have no cause to be ashamed of your plain-speaking to Aline. It was not directed against me personally; for at the time you uttered it, you never suspected that it was I who was the hero of her sad story. Had you guessed it, you would, perhaps, have acted as well as spoken?"

"I do not know," she said, timidly; "as it was I warned her against you, because I believed that she was trusting to a broken reed, who would one day pierce her very heart."

"Ay; but you evade my question. Had you known that Francis Maxwell and Max Weld were one and the same person, what would you have done?"

"Nothing but what I have," she said, more boldly; "more would have added to her misery, and been of no use."

"And yet," he asked, eagerly, "you believed me guilty of murder, Agnes Stuart?"

"You were acquitted," she said, evasively.

A strange, sad expression overshadowed his face at this reply, and he resumed his quarter-deck walk, as if he was striving to calm himself before he spoke. After one or two turns he flung himself into a chair, which he had drawn close to her, and said, "You are, no doubt, wise to be so guarded. It may perhaps be better that, even between ourselves, no words should pass the lips of either that might prevent us being the new acquaintance the world believes us to be. It does not guess that, whatever you may feel to me, I can never forget that you have been to me a *friend* in time of need."

Agnes winced at this remark; and the angry flush rose to his brow as he saw how she shrunk away from him as he uttered the word "friend." But he went on, without any change in his voice: "I suspect, though she has not told me so, that Aline mentioned to you something of an important legal document which disappeared shortly after Sir Robert Hepburn's death?"

Agnes bowed.

"You have probably some suspicions with regard to its loss?"

She started at the inquiry, but said calmly, "I do not think that is a question I am bound to answer."

"Certainly not, though you have made an answer which entirely satisfies me. Let us therefore speak of it in a guarded manner. Let us say, for instance, that the hiding-place of the lost will has been accidentally discovered, and that on certain conditions the finder is willing to restore it to Sir Robert's daughter or grandson. If this be so, do you suppose they could be induced to accept the good fortune offered them without insisting on too minute an examination of the means by which the discovery of the papers had been made?"

"I am sure of it," she said, eagerly.

"And would you undertake to transact the business for the lucky finder?"

"Most willingly."

There was an indefinable expression in his dark eyes as he carefully scanned her face, suddenly lighted up by pleasure at the idea of the restoration of Kinburn to Lionel Upton, and also that it should be restored through her.

"You must remember," he said, "that the conditions must be fulfilled before the deed is given back?"

Her countenance changed. "Are there other conditions beyond that you mentioned?"

"I mentioned none."

"Yes—that no inquiries should be made."

His smile was almost a sneer, as he replied: "That is one condition, certainly; but the more important one is the paying down of certain monies proportionate to the benefit accruing from the recovered will. Surely, Miss Stuart, you did not suppose that I should relinquish the

claims which, as Miss Hepburn's husband, I might have on Kinburn, unless I derived some still greater good from the generosity of Lionel Upton? I thought you knew me too well to attribute such exquisite philanthropy to me."

"I did hope," was her quiet answer, "that you had repented of the evil you had done, and desired to make reparation."

The sensitive moustache quivered as he replied, "I thank you heartily for thinking me still capable of a generous action. Would that I could repair some things! But it is too late. I am what fate has made me."

"Do not say that, Count Vandeweld," Agnes began; but he interrupted her.

"I may not say it, but it is true, notwithstanding," he said, in a gentler tone. "It was not by my will that I bound poor Aline's happiness in mine. I would have spared her, poor child; but destiny was stronger than us both. And now, now when I would fain requite her in the only way left me, she flings me off, and swears that death itself were preferable to life as my wife. What object, then, is it to me to try to do well? What good will repentance or reparation do to me? It is too late for either."

"Do not say, do not think so!" Agnes exclaimed, with earnestness. "There is hope for all, pardon for all who seek it."

"Not for me," he said, sadly; and then, with a sudden change of tone, added, "but time flies. I have no leisure now to discuss questions of morality. Let us return to business. I told you, when first I saw you recognized me, that I might one day, perhaps, repay my obligations to you. I have learned, no matter how, that the one way in which I can pay that debt will be by benefiting Lionel Upton." He paused to mark the effect of his words; but as a slight access of colour in her pale cheek and a nervous trembling of the eyelids was Agnes's sole sign of emotion, he went on: "Therefore I have not destroyed the will which makes him his grandfather's sole heir, and have fixed upon you as the messenger of good tidings. You will, I know, readily undertake the office."

"I had rather that you yourself managed the matter. It would be better in every way."

"Pardon me, it would be worse. I prefer that 'Count Vandeweld' should not appear in any doubtful transaction, if it can be avoided; and if they once learned my identity with the so-called Maxwell, a thousand scandals would rise up against me, and, worse still, against poor Aline, that might be avoided by your intervention. You know all the quicksands and rocks, and have cleverness to steer clear of them."

As he said this, a thousand painful reflections forced themselves on Agnes. The past history of this man, and his connection with Lina, had been enough to make her unhappy. But beyond this was the feeling that *she* was not the person to touch on such private concerns with Lionel Upton. The estrangement between them had silently, but markedly, increased of late. He had forgotten his promise to tell her *all*. He had—if Martha's information was true—engaged himself formally to Cornelia, and had made no effort to see Agnes since her illness. For she knew nothing of the daily inquiries as to her health from Harry Thorpe; she only knew that three weeks had passed since that expedition to Fairholm, and that his name had not been among those who had called at the Whim to ask after her health. And now it was proposed that she should be the medium through whom Kinburn should be restored to him, thus doing away with the last barrier between him and Cornelia.

"I must have time to think over your proposal, Count Vandeweld," she said, after the hesitation occasioned by these thoughts. "But pray believe me that I am the last person likely to influence Mr. Upton to the acceptance of your project. He is not a man to be swayed by any woman, least of all by me."

Again his eagle eye scanned her face at this disavowal, but he said, "Even if it be as you say, I have made up my mind to leave the matter in your hands. You shall have twenty-four hours to consider whether you will do as I ask. If you refuse, all I have to do is to burn the will, and the affair is concluded." He saw the sudden look of terror the threat produced, and added, "You know me well enough to be certain that what I say I do."

"But how," she asked, "can I broach the matter to Mr.

Upton without some explanation of the manner in which I came to be mixed up in this mysterious business?"

"That I must leave to you to find out," he said, with a mocking smile. "All I have to say is, that if you are not clever enough to manage it so that suspicion neither falls on me nor on Aline, our bargain is at an end. In this case, as in that of your refusal to undertake the affair at all, the will shall be destroyed, and you, from your own indiscretion or selfish scruples, deprive Lionel Upton of his estates."

"What reason have you for placing this responsibility on me, Count Vandeweld?" Agnes asked, with emotion.

"Because you of all women I ever saw are most fit to bear the burden, and because I think that I shall in some degree repay my debt to you, if I place in your hands the power of restoring the man you love to his proper position in the world."

Agnes flushed angrily at his plain speaking; but her indignant disavowal was prevented by his continuing, with much feeling, "Forgive me, Agnes Stuart, if I have spoken too broadly, or have wounded your delicacy, by putting in words what I know to be true. I have learned, it is no use to tell you how, that want of means alone has hitherto prevented Mr. Upton from coming forward, and I trust that what I wish you to do will make all straight between you. If you hate me so much as to refuse the offer I make you, I cannot help it. I have done what I could to show you I am not ungrateful for past benefits."

Agnes turned away her head as he said this; but, leaning towards her, he again took her hand in his, and went on, with increasing earnestness, "You cannot suppose that I was fool enough to believe, as poor Aline did, that in the testimony you gave that dreadful day, you leaned to my side of the question. I know that, had it weighed more strongly against me, you would have said so as honestly, as truly, as you did then. But, believing what you did believe, and knowing only what you did know, you acted bravely; for you neither, by word nor look, gave more force to your evidence than was necessary. And by that self-control you saved my life; for the faintest animus, the slightest exaggeration, would have turned the balance

against me. You answered as only such a woman as you are could have answered, and I honoured and respected you as I never did any other woman. I know you do not reciprocate either feeling," he added, with a forced laugh; "but yet it would be a satisfaction to me if I could but hope that, by putting myself a second time in your power, I had done you a service. I beseech you, gratify me in this. Promise me you will do as I ask you."

"I cannot promise. I do not know whether it is right."

"Well, then, I must press you no further. Till you are satisfied on that point, nothing on earth will make you act." And he slowly released her hand from his grasp. "I shall rid you of my presence now; but to-morrow let me hear from you, and I shall, if you agree to my request, make the ordeal you have to pass as easy for you as my own necessities will permit. Were I not as poor as I am, you should have the paper without conditions, believe me."

The tone in which he said the last words touched Agnes, and made her voluntarily stretch out her hand to bid him farewell. He raised it respectfully to his lips, and murmured, "God bless you, Agnes Stuart! If fate had thrown me a few years sooner within your influence, I might have been different from what I am." And, hastily quitting the room by the garden door, he left her alone to chew the cud of sweet and bitter fancies.

The exciting interview had exhausted her, and, flinging herself back in her chair, too weak even to think, she resolved to put off for a time the consideration of the difficult question before her. But an unexpected incident cut the Gordian knot in a manner that she could never have believed possible, unless it had happenod to herself.



CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HERE IT IS.

THE door had scarcely closed upon Count Vandeweld when that between the octagon and the drawing-room was gently opened, and Charlie Reynard stole in, exclaiming, "Aunt Agnes, is he gone? May I come in? I want to tell you something."

"What is it, my boy?" Agnes asked, rousing herself with difficulty from her deep abstraction.

"Oh! I have been waiting such a time, hoping he would go away. But Martha would not let me interrupt you. Only I got so tired I crept in between the two doors to listen, and when I heard the other door shut I peeped in to see. He won't come back, will he?"

"No, dear; but why do you ask? You are not afraid of Count Vandeweld, Charlie?"

"Afraid! No! but I really don't like him; I really don't; and I don't think you do, do you?"

Agnes evaded an answer to the direct question by inquiring why Charlie disliked the Count.

"Because I don't think he is honest. I heard Colonel le Grand tell somebody he thought him a humbug, and he looks at me so queerly I don't half like it, Aunt Agnes."

"But that does not make him dishonest, Charlie."

"Well, I don't know, only sometimes I feel sure he is not. You see he goes prowling about where he has no business. One day he slipped into Miss Hepburn's room at Kinburn and gave her such a fright. She bade me not tell about it, and I never have till now, when I found him do the same sort of thing again. He creeps in here when everybody else is out; and when he thinks nobody is looking, what do you suppose he does? Turns over all your things, and pokes into all your hidy-holes, and I don't know what he would not have done had I not frightened him."

"You frightened *him*?"

"Yes, I did; for when I told him to let that alone, he dropped what he had hold of, and shut up the little door, and half threatened to knock me down for interfering. But when I stood up to him he began to sing small very soon, and told me a cock-and-bull story about living here long ago. Now you know, Aunt Agnes, he could not have done that, for no German Count ever lived at the Whim."

"He did indeed live here many years ago, Charlie, though I believe he was not a Count then."

Charlie was a little disconcerted by this information, and said, in a tone of disappointment, "Then that was the way he knew the trick of the fire-place, and those other funny little cupboards all round the room. I did not know you

had so many hidy-holes, Aunt Agnes! I wish you would show me what you keep in them, and what that bundle of papers was he had in his hand when I startled him and made him drop it."

Agnes was struck by the boy's earnestness, and bade him show her what "hidy-holes" he meant.

"There was one here," he said, going to the window, "and another here; but I can't tell where exactly. The big one, though, was just above that desk of yours. May I climb up on it, Aunt Agnes, and try and find it?"

"Certainly!" and Agnes's heart beat as quick as she began to suspect they were on the eve of a valuable discovery. She helped the boy to clamber on to the top of the secretaire, and his shrill cry of delight soon showed that his search was successful. "Ah, here it is! He was in such a fluster he did not close the door quite, so I found it easily. Look, Aunt Agnes! Is not this a big bundle of papers! Catch!" and, flinging it into her arms, he scrambled to the ground with the agility of a squirrel.

Agnes's wild hope was fulfilled. It was Sir Robert Hepburn's lost will!

* * * * *

It was late that night before she retired to her own room, and later still before she prepared to go to bed. The day had been a trying one, and she felt she could not sleep till she had thought over all that had passed, and weighed the possible results of the discovery of the missing deed.

The interview with Count Vandeweld, Charlie's successful hunt, the letter she had to write on returning the papers to Mr. Upton, had each and all exhausted her; but, beyond this, she had had to listen with apparent interest to Mrs. Vaughan's account of the Hawkhill *fete*.

For some reason or other, Cornelia returned home from it very much excited. She began eager descriptions of the many incidents that had tended to make it a most happy day, and broke off in the middle with an odd nervous laugh. She launched into eager praise of their host's attentions, and suddenly interrupted them to remark upon Miss Hepburn's appearance at Hawkhill, looking like a ghost, but on the most friendly terms with her cousin. And she added, recklessly, "After all, I should not be surprised if they

married, and settled the Kinburn difficulty that way. How it would discompose dear Aunt Trotter!"

"How can you say such things, Cornelia?"

"Why should I not? Lionel Upton, Englishman though he is, is enough of a canny Scot to know on which side his bread is buttered."

"But you told me—" Agnes began, when Mrs. Vaughan interrupted her.

"You are the most literal person I know, Agnes. Lionel Upton and I understand each other perfectly, and you need not be compassionate either of us. But, by the way, where is Godfrey?"

"In bed and asleep hours ago. Why do you ask?"

"Because——Well, really I don't know why. A mother's anxious love, I suppose," she said, with a forced laugh. Then added, "You really are fond of the boy, Agnes?"

"I love him dearly."

"If anything happened to me, would you take care of him?"

"Cornelia, what ails you?" was the not unnatural reply to such a question.

"Nothing; only it came into my head to ask you. No one knows what a day may bring forth."

Cornelia's tender tone as she said this went to Agnes's heart, and she gave her promise that she should always take an interest in the boy's welfare; and, as she did so, Cornelia put her arms round her neck and burst into tears. Such emotion was so unusual on the part of the gay widow that Agnes was alarmed, and the old superstition that she was "fey" crossed her mind as, cordially returning her embrace, she said, kindly, "You have overtired yourself, Cornelia. You must go to bed, and have a good long sleep, and to-morrow you will have got over this nervous fit."

"No; I shall not," she said, sadly. Then, raising her head from Agnes's shoulder, she added, passionately, "Oh, Aggie, dear Aggie! try to love me, try to think kindly of me, whatever happens! And, remember, you have promised, solemnly promised, to take care of Godfrey!"

"Yes," she said, with an effort to overcome the feeling of alarm with which Cornelia's words inspired her, "I have;

but I earnestly hope that I shall never be called on to fulfil my promise."

"You will be, Agnes," was the sad answer; "and sooner than you suspect. But, good night, dear! It is cruel to keep you up longer, when you look so weary;" and, with another tender kiss, Mrs. Vaughan entered her own chamber, and shut the door.

Agnes, too, went to her room; but, tired as she was, she felt it was no use to think of going to bed, so she seated herself in the low window-seat, and tried to soothe her troubled thoughts by her favourite panacea—the sight of the quiet heavens. It was a sweet night. The moon crept on from east to west, and still Agnes sat watching it, now lighting up the wild rocks on the sea-shore, now permitting the ruddy gleam of the lighthouse to pierce the silver bridge flung across the waters; now hiding behind a bank of clouds, and, herself unseen, throwing fitful rays of brightness on the dark fir woods of Kinburn.

How often, when "troubled about many things," do we feel ourselves unconsciously fascinated by such sweet miracles of nature! How often do the over-exhausted senses rest themselves by dwelling on the outward beauties of creation! And, as Agnes saw the moon, so

"Pale for weariness
Of climbing heaven and gazing on the earth,
Wandering companionless
Among the stars,"

a feeling of repose stole over her, till the sound of footsteps on the gravel-walk beneath her window startled her. Very soft and stealthy they were; but, in the surrounding stillness, she had no difficulty in convincing herself that they were footsteps.

Agnes was no coward; but, one or two houses near Fairholm having been lately entered, she could not help feeling rather uneasy, especially when it occurred to her that she had not gone her usual rounds that night, and had also, she feared, forgotten to close the octagon room shutters. Supposing the steps she heard were a robber's, what ought she to do? Her aunt and Mrs. Vaughan would be terrified to death if she roused them, and, with the exception of

Martha, the servants were arrant cowards. Should she seek Martha, or wait to see what happened?

Fortunately her candle had been left at the other end of the room, so that where she sat no treacherous shadow could betray that she was awake and about; so, wrapping a black shawl that hung near over her head and shoulders, she leaned out of the window, and tried to find out what the intruder was. The steps came nearer and nearer, and at last the dark form of a man emerged from the shadow of the house and approached the garden-door of the octagon, where, of course, she lost sight of him. But action, slight as it was, had given her confidence, and it occurred to her that, as it would take a few minutes either to force the lock or break the window to gain admission, she might yet have time to get into the room by the narrow winding stairs leading from her own chamber, and secure both door and shutters before they were interfered with. At least, it was worth the attempt; and, leaving her candle behind her, she groped her way down, and softly drew aside the panel that gave entrance to her boudoir. She looked in with some trepidation; nor were her fears groundless; for the moonlight streamed through the open door, and the housebreaker already stood in front of her secretaire, his arm stretched out towards the secret receptacle where Charlie had found the will.

The truth darted into her mind at the sight, and, softly advancing, she laid her hand on the intruder's shoulder. His back was towards her, her stockingless feet made no sound, so that he was taken completely by surprise, and turned on her with a ferocious scowl. His countenance softened as he recognized her; but when she ventured to say, "You are too late, Count Vandeweld—the will is safe in Mr. Upton's hands," the fierce expression returned, and, muttering a curse, not loud but deep, he seized her roughly by the arm, exclaiming, "You shall pay for this, Agnes Stuart—pay bitterly."

She grew very pale. For well she knew the temper of the man; but her courage did not fail, her voice did not tremble, as she replied, "No, Count Vandeweld, I shall not. What you said to-day you meant. You told me that, if your circumstances had permitted, you would have given

these papers up to me without reward. I hold you to your promise. Circumstances have permitted it, and you are too generous to harm me, because, when accident placed them in my power, I gave the will to its rightful owner. I dare not have done otherwise."

His hand relaxed its grasp on her arm; but he did not relinquish it entirely as he said, "But you forget that I expected five thousand pounds for myself, and a handsome annuity for poor Aline, if I gave up the papers. Do you think that, having deprived me of that, I shall allow you to escape without making me some compensation?"

"You know that none is in my power," was her quiet answer; "and you also know that for any harm you do me you will suffer yourself. Besides which, you would return the benefits you say I have done you by a cruel, unmanly outrage."

Ere she ceased to speak, she was free.

"You have conquered," he said, as he released her; "henceforward we are quits. I leave England to-morrow, and when I am gone you may tell my story to whom you will. But, if it reach my son's ears, do not forget to repeat to him what has occurred to-night. Teach him to know that some spark of gratitude still lingers in his miserable father's heart."

"I promise to tell it, not only to him, but to every one; and believe me, Count Vandeweld, that, if my intercession avail anything, Miss Hepburn shall be amply provided for, and that to you I shall give full credit for your intention to restore the lost deed."

"I thank you," he said, gently. "Farewell!"

"Farewell!" she repeated; "and, in Charlie's words, 'God bless you and keep you from evil!'"

"Poor boy! he little guessed how that innocent blessing would pierce my heart! Take this, Miss Stuart," he added, pulling a ruby ring from his finger—"take this, and give it to my son, telling him to eschew evil and love good. Farewell!"

He was gone; and they never met again.

Agnes slowly closed the door by which he had entered, and, retiring to her own room, humbly thanked God for the

mercies thus vouchsafed to her. She had dreaded a stormy interview with Count Vandeweld. It had come in a very different shape from what she had anticipated, and had ended better. He was not all evil. Some traces of good were still left, and, by God's grace, he might yet turn to better things. Would it were so.

With such aspirations Agnes fell asleep; but the first news she heard when she awoke was that Cornelia had eloped with Count Vandeweld. A note to Mrs. Ellis had told all; and, as the fugitives had four hours' start, it seemed hopeless to overtake them.

It was hopeless. Long before the first messenger returned to recount his ill-success, Agnes received a letter, signed "Cornelia Vandeweld," telling her they had been married at Fairholm that morning, and were on the point of embarking in a Leith steamer for Rotterdam. The last sentence of the note was, "Remember, Agnes, you promised to take care of Godfrey."

My story is ended.

The discovery of the lost will overcame all minor difficulties. Lionel Upton eagerly grasped at the opening given him by Agnes's letter accompanying the will, to explain everything that had hitherto puzzled her and made her wretched.

Harry Thorpe gave himself credit for the sudden alteration in Mrs. Vaughan's devotion to Lionel, when informed of his doubtful claims on Kinburn; and Mr. Campbell thoroughly forgave Agnes's rejection of himself when he learned that she had accepted his younger partner. Of course, sundry old-fashioned jokes were perpetrated on the subject; but, when one is happy, jokes break no bones.

In short, the course of true love ran uncommonly smooth after the departure of Count and Countess Vandewelde, and all went merry as a marriage bell.

But was there no shadow to all this brightness? Ay, there was. Poor Cornelia's fate. And yet even it was less miserable than might have been expected; for she never knew *who* Count Vandeweld was, and though bitterly mortified to find her hopes of wealth and position disappointed, she was one of those women who are happier under the

strong hand of a master than when left to her own devices. Therefore she was not so absolutely miserable as might have been expected.

And Lina? Poor Lina! Her home for the short remnant of her life was at Kinburn, and the two bright spots of her existence were Agnes's affection and her own love for Charlie Reynard.

Godfrey continued to live with Mrs. Ellis; but Agnes never forgot her promise to his mother; and, as he became one of Mr. Hornby's pupils, there is every chance that he may turn out well. It is hinted that he hopes for an ensigncy in Colonel le Grand's regiment, where Charlie is now lieutenant and adjutant.

THE END.

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