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PAUL'S COURTSHIP.

PAUL'S COURTSHIP.

A Novel.

BY

HESBA STRETTON,

AUTHOR OF "THE CLIVES OF BURCOT."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON :

CHARLES W. WOOD.

13, TAVISTOCK STREET, STRAND.

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NOTE.



THE MS. of this story was given into the hands of Mr. Charles Wood when "The Clives of Burcot" was passing through the press. Whilst I was seeking a publisher for my first novel, always a difficult task for an unknown writer, I had courage enough to write "Paul's Courtship." Whatever its faults may be, I cannot plead for them the feeble excuse of hasty composition.

H. S.

HONFLEUR.

April, 1867.

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PAUL'S COURTSHIP.

CHAPTER I.

MRS. MARGRAF never ceased to covet Monkmoor Priory.

Though there was not even a remote chance that it could become hers, she lingered upon the bridge, from which a flight of moss-grown steps led down to the meadow that surrounded it, surveying it with longing eyes. It lay below her in a soft, round dimple of the rich pasture-land, which stretched along the right bank of the river; and the lawn-like meadow sloping down to it was tufted with old hawthorn-bushes, grown into grotesque and fantastic shapes. Beyond was a terrace of softer and smoother sward, cool and shady, with the clear shadows of the

gabled house slanting motionless across it, as if the sun would never bring its western rays to gleam upon it. To the left the ruins of an ancient Priory rose in lofty arches, in delicate tracery of stone-work, festooned with tremulous branches of ivy, and outlined by the sunbeams upon the terrace in all their broken ovals and circles. Every portion of the present dwelling bore traces of the religious house which it had once been. Oriel windows, with fragments of stained glass containing some sacred symbol, opened upon the terrace ; or high up on the second storey checquered the polished floors with cross-barred shadows. A stone stoup for holy water, now filled with long, soft, green moss, stood against the postern of the door. Quaint faces kept watch over portal and window-sill, whimsical and uncouth, or pensive and sad, with eyes of stone that never blinked. A low, arched doorway, and vaulted passage, led into the farm-yard behind the dwelling ; where cattle fed out of rough-

hewn troughs that were coffin-shaped; where pigeons flew into their dove-cot through trefoil windows, and sheep browsed in the gleam and shade of Gothic pillars. In the Priory gardens were ancient avenues of filbert trees; with here and there single seats in which of old the solitary monks meditated in isolated abstraction: in deep, shady nooks were worn-out beds of thyme and rosemary and camomile, which had been left to grow wild and undisturbed ever since monastic husbandry had planned and laid out the garden enclosure.

Lingering awhile upon the bridge, with the faint, ceaseless gnawing of a vain desire, Mrs. Margraf at last descended the steps, and strolled slowly towards the house; pausing again before she rang the bell, to lift up admiringly the long tendrils of moss which hung from the brim of the stoup basin at the door. Her tardy summons was answered by a trim parlour maid, upon whom she smiled with the blandness that won for her universal

popularity. Entering with the air of one who was at home in the dwelling, she proceeded along the groined and vaulted lobbies, up a broad, low staircase of polished oak, to the study of her aunt Aspen.

Mrs. Aspen, the owner of Monkmoor Priory, had been born and reared amidst the romantic ruins she inherited. According to her own firm and innocent belief she was born a poet, and as she was wont to say of herself, "had lisped in numbers, for the numbers came." No birthplace could have been better fitted to foster poetic fancies. The apartment, which had been first her nursery, and afterwards her study, was inviting enough to overcome any capricious shyness of the coy Muse. The fitting up of the room had been attended to with exquisite taste. But its greatest charm was an oiel window, almost overhanging the river, forming a recess large enough to contain a poet's desk of rare device, and two chairs of carved workmanship; where in luxurious ease one

could glance down a long flash of the stream, which stretched below the Priory like a narrow lake. Flowing from east to west the sunset touched its sparkling waters with pencils of ruddy light, and with tremulous waves of brightness guided the eyes to the spires and towers of a neighbouring town. At the farthest point of the lake there was just visible a small island, hedged round with poplar trees ; the latter seemingly as tall as the distant spires, but bending and swaying in the wind with a flexibility that distinguished them from their motionless stability. Sitting in this oriel window ; the silent waters gleaming beneath you, the poplar island and the fixed spires of the town attracting your eye to the distant horizon ; you felt, especially when you recollected that this spot was the sanctum of a poetess, that you were rapidly losing what little hold you possessed upon common, every-day sense, and were being swept into the resistless current of a despised sentimentality.

It would scarcely be correct to say that Mrs. Aspen was the inheritrix of an inhereditary spinsterhood ; inasmuch as her immediate ancestress was a reputable matron, dwelling under coverture of marriage. By what channels ancestral celibacy descends it would be difficult to record ; but for all remembered generations no maiden of the house of Monkmoor had been known to change her condition : and until the father of Clarissa Crofton departed this life, leaving only one child to possess the old patrimony, there had never failed to be a son of the race to transmit it to his posterity. Mrs. Aspen was born, as were all her collateral female predecessors, to live a maiden life, in dignified and elegant spinsterhood. But partly from an unlucky freak of her imagination, and partly in consequence of her position as the last scion of an old family—"marrying," she said, "for the same reason that female sovereigns marry"—at the age of thirty she gave away her poet-hand in wedlock. Her

selected husband, a meek and nervous curate, had a sense of what circumstances demanded from him, beyond what could have been anticipated. After bearing his exaltation with due deference and gravity, and living long enough to pronounce a father's benediction upon his infant son, he gently resigned his honours ; bearing with him to the grave the consolatory assurance that his widow would perpetuate his memory in epitaphs and elegies. Nor, if he was acquainted with what occurred after his departure, could his spirit, however sensitive, have been disappointed in the posthumous renown awarded to him. Never had Mrs. Aspen sung so fluently as when she again retired into single and poetic life : epitaphs, odes, and monodies multiplied ; offspring of the fertile brain, which in some measure supplanted the real, living child. The son of the poetess grew up as his mother called him, "a child of nature," and fortunately the moral temperament descended to him from his meek father was of a mild,

if somewhat heavy order. He passed blamelessly through the phases of school and college life ; came home to Monkmoor ; married the first pretty girl who made up her mind to win him, and subsided into an amiable stolidity. He possessed the most profound veneration for his gifted mother, and an extravagant devotion to his capricious wife, with an utter inability to reconcile the conflicting sentiments of the poetess and her daughter-in-law. Supremely happy as long as the surface was smooth, whatever rocks or quicksands were near ; but the instant a ripple appeared, heightening it into a storm by his very fears. He would even weep sometimes, when he ventured to intercede between them ; with a sore dread and consequently a sure certainty of bringing upon himself both the beloved antagonists.

Mrs. Margraf proceeded leisurely to her aunt's study, and entered it unannounced. Mrs. Aspen was sitting in her usual seat in the oriel window. A tall, erect old lady,

with a slender figure, and a dark, poetic eye which had "rolled in a fine phrenzy" for more than fifty years, and was yet undimmed and brilliant. Small ringlets of grey hair shaded her classic temples, and were confined by a narrow band of velvet, which kept them from falling over her unwrinkled forehead. The widow's robes had been soon discarded; and her dress was usually of some light and delicate silk made with fastidious attention to the elegant and statuesque arrangement of the folds. Her favourite attitude was to lean with her elbow upon the carved desk, her finger or pencil pressed upon her lips, her rapt gaze bent upon the river, or lifted up to the mountains in the far-off horizon. At such moments, and the moments were sometimes prolonged to hours of motionless ecstasy, she was a perfect picture, ready for instant photographing.

Had Mrs. Margraf found her in this position she would have retreated at once, careful not to break in rudely upon poetic contem-

plations. But Mrs. Aspen's attitude was one of ruffled and offended dignity. Emma Aspen was lolling negligently against the chimney-piece in an untidy morning wrapper, her fair hair still in curl papers, and a look of sulky indifference upon her face. John, with tears standing in his wondering brown eyes, was hovering uneasily between them, like the Sabine women between the hostile ranks of their fathers and husbands. He hastened to salute Mrs. Margraf affectionately, and with an air of relief. Emma nodded sullenly. Mrs. Aspen advanced a step or two from her seat with her customary ceremony of high-bred refinement.

"You will be amazed, Sophia," she began, in a slow and majestic tone.

"Not at all," interrupted Emma sharply, "Sophia is used to it by this time."

"Hush! hush! Oh, my darling!" implored John, rushing heavily to that side of the room.

"You will not be amazed, then," resumed

Mrs. Aspen, still more majestically, "at any insult to which I am subjected by my children,—or rather let me say by John Aspen and his wife."

"Oh, no! no!" cried John, rushing back again; "call us your children still, dearest mother. You will break my heart if you call me John Aspen."

As affairs were so evidently disjointed, Mrs. Margraf could not pursue her usual policy of ignoring them. Putting on as neutral an air as possible, she mildly inquired what was the matter.

"It is all my fault," answered John, as both the ladies maintained a dignified silence. "Why, my dear Sophia, this morning my mother produced one of her beautiful sonnets——"

"A madrigal, John—a madrigal," corrected Mrs. Aspen.

"A sweet madrigal," resumed John, "which I wrote down from her dictation. And being sure that dearest Emmy would

enjoy hearing it, I sent Mary to tell her to dress quickly, for I had something to show her. So when she came she was put out a little, you know, thinking it was something else ; and she said ‘ Oh, rubbish ! ’ But it means nothing, Sophia. Emmy is always saying, ‘ Oh, rubbish ! ’ and ‘ Oh, bother ! ’ to me ; and I don’t mind it in the least.”

Emma’s blonde face was so far from meaning nothing that it was at the very moment painfully expressive of an unworthy sentiment.

“ Dear aunt,” said Mrs. Margraf, “ will you permit me to read your new poem ? ”

“ I can repeat the first verse,” exclaimed John, triumphantly ;

“ Fair flow thy waves, oh, river,
Fair flow thy waves !
While on thy shores for ever,
The linnet raves.”

“ There ! ” cried Emma, “ I say a linnet does not rave, it cannot rave, it never did rave. It may rove if you like, but not rave. So I said it was odd.”

“You meant unique, Emma, not odd,” answered Mrs. Margraf, blandly. “I know exactly what aunt means. It is that wild, delirious singing we hear among the trees in the morning. Quite a frenzy of song, isn’t it, Emma?”

“Oh, is that what it means?” Emma asked, with a return of graciousness to her tone and face; “when the birds sing as if they were drunk or mad? I understand now. But I never did care for poetry. It seems such a roundabout way of saying a thing; and you never know where the next line will go to.”

“But there are thousands of people who would appreciate it,” said Mrs. Margraf, “if my aunt moved in a more literary circle. Dear aunt, your manuscripts must be very valuable.”

“Oh, Sophia! I wanted to speak to you,” exclaimed John; but suddenly checking himself, he added: “Emmy, my love, I wish you to come and see the Alderney calf in the

chantrey. Come, and we'll leave Sophia with my mother."

Before going, however, he approached his mother, his broad face brightening into a smile; taking her delicate hand reverentially he kissed it twice. Then drawing his Emmy's arm through his own, he led her exultingly away, while Mrs. Aspen resumed her seat in the oriel window, and fell into an attitude of deep dejection.

"Never understood; never appreciated; ever alone," she murmured; "every aspiration fettered; every emotion thrust back upon my own heart."

"Now, aunt," said Mrs. Margraf, in a decisive, energetic tone, "let us take a practical view of your position. True *we* cannot appreciate your genius, but why not appeal to intellects that can? why not give your poems to the world?"

It was an old, old lullaby, to whose melody she had sung many a grievance to sleep; expecting no more from it than from the jingle

of nursery rhymes. This morning also she sang the familiar charm in Mrs. Aspen's ears; and looked only for the ordinary results.

"Sophia," said she suddenly, in a tone of genuine feeling, "tell me if I am a foolish old woman. I remember sometimes that years are growing upon me. Sixty-four years old I am, and there are fifty birthday odes to myself among my manuscripts. Yet I feel almost as young as when John was born. All that pleased me then, gives me pleasure now; all my senses are as keen; my mind is as vigorous as ever. There has been nothing to age me, and I am not aged. Ought it to be so, Sophia?"

"We have a right to be young as long as we can," Mrs. Margraf answered in the tone of an oracle.

"My dear," resumed Mrs. Aspen, "when the Princess Victoria visited this neighbourhood, I had the honour of presenting a musical trifle to Her Royal Highness. I have often thought since, that lines which

were worthy to be read by royal eyes are surely good enough for the public. Therefore I am resolved to act upon your advice. If I live, there will still be a great interest in life for me. If I die, I shall leave a name to succeeding generations. Clarissa Aspen of Monkmoor will yet lend a lustre to her native place."

Her dark eyes glittered brightly as she raised them in rapturous vision to the western hills; while Mrs. Margraf sat in meditation, considering earnestly the dilemma in which she found herself. "John and I were speaking of it this morning," continued Mrs. Aspen. "It will be an onerous task; and I cannot undertake it alone. Fifty volumes of manuscript poems have accumulated in yonder cabinet. At my age it would be folly to attempt to make a selection unassisted. Neither poor John nor Emma, possess any poetic feeling. You, my dear Sophia——"

A cold shudder thrilled through Mrs. Margraf's frame. She was quite willing to

humour her aunt's harmless eccentricities ; but this was a sacrifice she could not make. The fifty volumes of manuscript verse passed before her in a dreary procession, and as she recoiled from them, a plausible mode of escape presented itself.

“Circumstances so peculiar demand expedition,” she replied. “It is not often that an authoress sixty years of age comes before the public. My assistance would be too casual to be of much value. Why not engage an amanuensis at once, and enter upon the work with energy and spirit ?”

“An amanuensis !” repeated Mrs. Aspen, musingly.

“Yes. Some lady, literary, but perhaps unfortunate, who could appreciate your tone of mind, and take a proper interest in the selection. All her time and thought being devoted to it, no doubt it would be ready for the press in a few months.”

Mrs. Aspen rose slowly from her chair, and paced the room in an abstracted

manner, until upon her face there settled an aspect of high resolve and determination. She approached her niece, and pressed upon her forehead one of her rare kisses of approbation.

“I am in your hands,” she said, graciously, “do what you please with me. Come with me, Sophia, and break the scheme to John and Emma.”

Mrs. Margraf wrapped a gorgeously coloured Indian shawl round the old lady's slender and stately figure ; and they strolled into the ruins in search of John and Emma, and the Alderney calf. They were all together in the chantrey ; but as soon as the two ladies appeared in sight, John ran clumsily to meet them, and to offer the support of his arm to his mother. Walking to and fro beneath the shadow of the arches, they worked out the plan, and built an airy castle of fame for the future. John, who could recite whole pages of his mother's verses, repeated them with new emphasis and gesticulative force ; and persisted in eliciting

Emma's opinion upon each poem. The April morning was bright; the air deliciously fresh and fragrant; the whole scene an inspiring one. Emma herself might have felt poetical for once in her life.

"I never shall forget," cried John, enthusiastically, seating his mother upon the fragment of a fallen pillar, upon which he had spread his own coat, and now standing before her gesticulating in his shirt-sleeves; "I never shall forget how I felt, when I recited one of my mother's sonnets before the whole school at Thornbury, and the doctor asked me if it was Milton's, or Shenstone's, or some of those fellows? 'Sir,' I said, 'it was written by the lady who is my mother!' But whatever shall I feel when this book is published, and I ride through Thornbury? Emmy, my darling, how shall you feel?"

"I don't yet know," said Emma, indefinitely, "but I suppose mamma will not put her own name to it at first. She must have a *nom de plume*, you know."

“A *nom de plume!*” echoed John, doubtfully; and Mrs. Margraf feared lest the suggestion coming from Emma should excite Mrs. Aspen’s ire.

“Yes,” said the poetess, smiling upon Emma, “we must have a *nom de plume*. What shall it be, my children? A significant name; uncommon; if possible, descriptive. Something to suggest birds, or soaring, or aspirations.”

“Goose-quill is not a bad name,” answered John, blundering as usual; “or Crow’s-foot, we used to have them both at school. Swallow-tail, too; and Bat’s-wing. But we want something softer, and more suited to a lady. Emmy, my darling, set your wits to work, and you’ll think of one sooner than any of us.”

But though all puzzled and bewildered themselves, and discussed one name after another, they grew almost weary before coming to a decision. John was particularly disquieted, and strode to and fro through the

cloisters, with his brows knitted into a frown of the deepest anxiety ; returning every two or three minutes to inquire if any of the others had been visited by an inspiration. Upon Mrs. Margraf, who was the only one he could judge severely, he cast an eye of displeasure. Suddenly with a shout of triumph, he began to scale a portion of the ruins ; while under his heavy footsteps the loose stones clattered and rolled to the ground. Mrs. Margraf trembled for Behemoth ; but Emma and Mrs. Aspen looked on undisturbed. Presently he retraced his perilous path, his face crimson with exertion. Scarcely able to articulate, he waved above his head a long, elegant, white plume, tinged with grey, which had fallen from a heron's wing on his flight across the moors. John laid it gallantly upon his mother's lap, and again reverently kissing her hand, he gasped ; "Heron's Plume ! The name is Heron's Plume."

They sat still, in the spring noon-tide, with

Behemoth panting at their feet, but gazing up to them with eyes of honest triumph and devotion. Mrs. Aspen sang one of her own madrigals in a high but clear key. Emma placidly teased the peacock, which strutted proudly around them. By a little harmless and delicate finesse Mrs. Margraf had made three angry people happy ; Mrs. Aspen and John supremely so.

“It may be reviewed in the ‘Athenæum,’” murmured Mrs. Aspen, with a flush upon her cheeks.

“And I’ll tell you what,” cried John, “I’ll send the editor such a hamper of game as shall make him know who the Aspens of Monkmoor Priory are.”

“John,” answered his mother, severely, “no editor must be bribed for me.”

“Certainly not,” said Mrs. Margraf. “But your remark suggests to me that the ‘Athenæum’ is the best paper for us to advertise in. We will send our advertisement to-night.”

The next number of the "Athenæum" contained the following advertisement: "A lady, engaged in a literary undertaking, wishes to meet with an Amanuensis, who has had some experience in literary labours. The sister or daughter of an author, if competent, would receive a liberal remuneration. Address Heron's Plume. Post Office, Thornbury."

There were numerous answers from female relatives in every degree of consanguinity to authors of very limited reputation. But eventually an application was made by a young lady who modestly referred to her father's well known writings, and inclosed a testimonial from his publishers. Mrs. Aspen was acquainted with the name of Lieutenant Arnold, as an ardent explorer, who had perished during an expedition to the western coast of Africa; and Miss Arnold was warmly welcomed to Monkmoor Priory.

CHAPTER II.



UPON the left bank of the river, a little higher up the stream than Monkmoor Priory, stood a small grey church, cruciform, and overgrown with ivy. Originally it had been a chantry, maintained by the monks for the convenience of their parishioners across the water. The benefice pertaining to the monastery, such portions of it as had not fallen into lay possession, had been transferred to this little chapel of Ryton-on-the-Moors, which had been transformed into a parish church. A road, branching from the highway to Thornbury, ran through the quiet village, and stopped abruptly at the churchyard gate, as if there were no other place worth passing on to; save that a narrow lane, grass-grown and arched over with

towering hedges, stretched a little farther to the river-side, and to a few worn steps, hollowed with the tread of many feet, which still bore the name of Monk's Ferry. Close to the church, but inclosed within high walls, and tall trees overtopping them, was the Vicarage ; while more immediately opposite the picturesque ruins, rose the square modern front of a commodious family mansion, confronting the ancient edifice with a contrast which could not fail to strike every traveller who made the Priory the object of a tourist's visit.

Fairfield, by which name the house and estate were known, was that portion of the old glebe seized by lay hands, comprising the richest corn-fields and pasturage of the fertile plain ; so that, though the extent of it reckoned by acreage was small, it produced a fair income of seven or eight hundred a-year. A freehold ; compact and well-cultivated ; lying within a ring fence, and provided with every appliance of scientific agriculture. The late owner, having brought it to the

highest condition of modern farming, had died only a few years previously, bequeathing it to a distant relation. The fortunate heir, who had entertained no expectations of inheritance, had been for some years practising as a physician in Thornbury. Immediately upon succeeding to the property, he relinquished the labours and anxieties of a profession uncongenial to his temperament; he plunged himself into a profound study of the dead languages, especially of Greek verse; reproducing a masculine copy of Mrs. Aspen's life, but with the greater reserve and earnestness of a man's nature, and with no tinge either of bombast or affectation. He was simply a student, shy and abstracted; dreaming away his days to the melodies of Greek verse, or sauntering in a trance of self-communion along the banks of the river, with so grave and melancholy an aspect that the casual passers-by shrank from him, and went on their way without uttering the greeting usual in country lanes.

It was well understood throughout Thornbury and the neighbourhood, that the misanthropy of Dr. Lockley had its origin in a cruel and well-nigh fatal disappointment, which he had suffered in the outset of his career. In the very bloom and sanguine hope of beginning life—when he had made ready his home for the reception of his bride, and had only days to count before he welcomed her to it—he had been stricken to the core by her sudden desertion and elopement with his own trusted friend. There were many who retained a vivid recollection of the dangerous and protracted illness which had followed upon this blow, and the genuine melancholy of the young physician during the years in which he had continued his practice. So firmly was the idea of his established bachelorhood imprinted upon the general mind, that no effort was made, even after his succession to Fairfield, to insinuate those consolations, which many of his fair though unknown friends would gladly have

offered. Their sympathy remained unknown. But for the residence of his sister, Mrs. Margraf, under his roof, and the occasional dim recognition of the maid-servants who waited upon him, Paul Lockley would have grown altogether oblivious to the existence of woman.

Mrs. Margraf, a shrewd, well-knit woman, both bodily and mentally, possessed a bland and pleasant philosophy of her own. She did not believe in mis-chances—scarcely in misfortunes. She had strong confidence in herself, and worked out her designs with boldness, but with delicate management. The reins of her family affairs were well and firmly held in her steady hand, and she drove the family chariot after her own pleasure. When Adolphe Margraf, her German husband, whom she had married during the indiscretion of girlhood, persisted in going out to India to try his fortune, instead of remaining in England as she wished, she did not contend violently with him. She

could make life smooth for herself. Paul was just going to Fairfield, and wanted a house-keeper. She loved neither husband nor brother with disquiet fondness ; but if she had followed Adolphe, the whole tranquillity of life would have been roughened. Circumstances dovetail if one has but the skill to fit them together. It was wonderful how quickly she grew reconciled to Adolphe's absence, until his letters and occasional presents became just an agreeable interlude—a few grace notes—in the harmony of her condition.

But she had her love and her disquietude : a delicate pale-faced boy, with thick masses of brown hair hanging carelessly upon his forehead ; dark eyes shining with a clearer and deeper light than any girl's, though there was something of girlish timidity and tenderness in them ; lips finely cut, and quivering with every emotion ; a colour flushing and fading swiftly under his pale skin—this boy, lying with his head upon her lap, and pouring into her ear his ideal visions, and growing

eloquent in his young enthusiasm, was her love and her disquietude. The others, Adolphe and Paul ; Aunt Aspen and John, and even silly Emma, she liked, and it suited her smooth philosophy to give them pleasure ; but she rarely thought of them when they were not in her presence ; they gave her no uneasiness ; they never excited her. Rufus, the boy entrusted to her by their dying mother twenty years since, she loved. She cared anxiously for him ; in every event she thought first and last of him ; she planned and schemed to trace out a smooth, green path for his feet to tread ; she watched for and warded off every sorrow that might strike upon his sensitive mind and delicate frame. No child of her own could have been dearer to her than her young brother, who had been in truth her child while she still possessed a girl's freshness of heart.

The young men of Thornbury, who spent their summer evenings in rowing up the river to where the arches of Monkmoor Priory

were reflected on the water, soon made the discovery that beside the familiar figure of the poetess in the oriel window, there appeared a young and pretty face ; a thought too sad and subdued in its expression, but with a smile ready to play upon the flexible mouth, and in the quiet eyes. Miss Arnold stated her age to be five-and-twenty ; but she looked younger, in spite of the gravity of her air, and the deep-mourning dress she still wore for her father. She devoted herself conscientiously to her engagements. The young men, rowing under the window and pausing upon their oars among the osiers, saw only the delicate profile of her face bending over the desk, or lifted up in attentive listening to the dictation and corrections of the poetess. At times, indeed, only the fine, boyish features of Rufus were visible in Miss Arnold's place ; and then there was no lurking under the banks at all, and the reed-sparrows piped away in peace.

Mrs. Aspen's study became a place of at-

traction. Even Paul began to take an interest in the forthcoming selection, and helped to hinder its progress by protracted literary interviews with the authoress. Rufus entered enthusiastically into the undertaking, and insisted upon making an elaborate transcript, with exquisite initial letters, of every poem which Miss Arnold wrote out. The task prolonged itself. The fate and fortunes of the selection were exceedingly fluctuating, as Mrs. Aspen experienced all the difficulties of an impartial preference of one of her own poems to another, while each had a peculiar charm to her own mind. Long and anxious consultations were held over it; throughout which the amanuensis preserved a patient but gracious neutrality. At one time Mrs. Aspen decided upon culling all the lines suggested by the river, and calling the volume, "Lays of the Stream." At another she chose the poems descriptive of the haunts and habits of birds, with the title of "Flights of Song." When these were nearly compiled, and

written out by Miss Arnold and Rufus, it was agreed unanimously, in full family conclave, that a miscellany, comprising sonnets, odes, madrigals, monodies, and elegies, and bearing the name of "Monkmoor Roundelays," would be most suited to please the public mind.

Never was a man more happy than John Aspen. Emma was awed by the fact that the living daughter of a real author, whose works were conspicuously arranged on the library shelves, was positively engaged in preparing a volume of her mother-in-law's poems for the press; and she treated both Mrs. Aspen and Miss Arnold with unwonted deference. It became John's supreme delight to creep into the study with laboured quietness, as if awkwardly entering a sick-room, and to gaze rapturously upon the girl's busy fingers, as they traced the magic lines upon the paper. You might have taken him for some bashful lover, fearful of venturing within sight, but standing afar off to look towards his mistress. If his presence were not de-

tected, and he was ignominiously expelled by his mother, he would seat himself in hard but careful silence to watch and listen for an hour, with no safe outlet for his enjoyment save a noiseless rubbing of his hands. The broadest happiness shone through his eyes; the most honest love and reverence beamed upon his face. Nothing that could please Miss Arnold was too difficult for him to do. He was as anxious to propitiate her, as if his mother's life depended upon her exertions. As for Mrs. Aspen, she grew more classical than ever; so classical that she seemed to breathe the air of Parnassus, instead of the common atmosphere inhaled by other lungs. It became a doubtful question whether the volume would not after all be a collection of new poems, rather than a selection from the old ones, so fertile was her Muse. Few mornings dawned upon a night of healthy but barren sleep; and the first duties of her amanuensis were to catch the fleeting fancies that had visited her couch during the wake-

ful midnight hours. In truth, these latest poems were decidedly the best ; glided upon more equal feet, and expressed deeper touches of feeling ; but whether Miss Arnold had anything to do with the improvement was a mere matter of surmise.

CHAPTER III.

ONLY one thing was necessary to complete John Aspen's happiness. It was essential, he persisted, that his mother should have her portrait taken, and engraved to form a frontispiece for the Selection. In Thornbury there resided a young artist, for whom Rufus had contracted a boyish friendship, and whose works were highly praised in the local papers. Rufus added his entreaties to those of John that Mrs. Aspen would consent to sit to him for her likeness, with the understanding that if he were unsuccessful, some Academician of distinction and repute should subsequently attempt the important task. An elegant aigrette, set with small grey plumes, was ordered by John, as a suitable head-dress for the poetess, and presented to her with an earnest petition that she would yield to his

desire ; and one morning late in the summer, Mrs. Aspen, attended by Mrs. Margraf and Miss Arnold, and triumphantly accompanied by her son, drove over to Thornbury, to make the preliminary arrangements with the artist.

Thornbury is one of the most picturesque towns in England, built upon low hills, and almost islanded by its river. Every street is a slope, more or less precipitous. Antique mansions of black timber, with quaint devices and mullioned windows, are occupied as houses of business, and the dwellings of tradesmen. Deep archways, and mouldering oaken gates with rusty hinges, lead into secluded courts, where the best residences are retired in select privacy. An abbey, and a castle of massive, dull red stone, rich-toned with age and a thousand storms ; churches, with tapering spires, at once the pride and jealous torment of their respective parishes, cluster upon the hills, and are seen far off upon the wide plain. Steep pavements, down which one gazes through a contracting vista upon a

living panorama ; narrow alleys, with each story of the buildings overhanging that below, until their pointed and gabled roofs almost touch each other ; unwholesome lurking-places low down on the brink of the river, where the homes of the poor are crowded ; head-long lanes, running askew down through old gateways, and ending suddenly upon the treacherous banks ; streets, and courts, and alleys still bearing legendary titles, which perpetuate the memory of the friars, who, centuries ago, held chantries within their precincts. And on the western side a ruin of the Town Walls, with one solitary square tower, jutting up and out of a row of modern dwellings, as if it still kept melancholy watch over the river gliding past, as it ever did ; upon the unchanged outline of the distant hills ; unchanged, and the same as when wild war rolled down their rapid heights to rage against the impregnable walls. It was no lack of taste in an artist to fix his abode in Thornbury.

A little way beyond this solitary town,

and out of the dust and hum of the busiest part of the town, there stood a low-built, old-fashioned house, a little removed from the street, presenting a front of dazzling whiteness, relieved by massive wood-work of dark oak. It was evidently a relic of a remote past, and its ancient name of Murivance, which it still retained, suggested a time when it was shielded and screened by the crumbled walls. To this dwelling John Aspen drove in an agitated silence, only second to Mrs. Aspen's abstraction. Springing hastily to the ground, he knocked at the door with a vehemence that echoed noisily through the quiet street. It was opened by Rufus, who had preceded them. He admitted them instantly, with the air of one perfectly at home, into a low-roofed entrance-hall, decorated with paintings and models from the ceiling to the skirting-board, like the lobby of an exhibition. Mrs. Aspen would have lingered, but he led them forward to a sitting-room beyond, similarly adorned, and in a

tone of delight announced, "My aunt, Mrs. Aspen, of Monkmoor Priory."

The artist's mother, to whom Rufus spoke, was seated on the sunny side of a window which looked upon a long, narrow strip of garden ground extending to the river side, where a hedge of silvery alders were quivering and gleaming in the morning sunshine. Her face—a rosy, though withered little face, like a red russet pippin, with a homely comeliness about it—was turned eagerly towards the door, with an agitated and inquisitive expression, and eyes, too plainly sightless, which rolled restlessly as with a vain effort to see them. There was a keen impatience in her features, and in her attitude of expectancy oddly and touchingly at variance with the quaint simplicity of her little figure in its quiet widow's dress. But at the sound of Rufus's cordial voice she subsided into perfect repose, smiled and curtsied with antiquated politeness as he mentioned each name to her.

“Is there no one else?” she asked, looking round as earnestly as though she could see for herself, “Mr. Rufus, are these all?”

“Here is Miss Arnold,” answered Rufus, in a low and embarrassed tone.

“The daughter and only child of Captain Arnold, the distinguished African explorer,” said Mrs. Aspen blandly. “You have heard of him, Mrs. Atcherley?”

“I have heard much of her,” answered the blind woman, stretching out both her hands, and clasping Miss Arnold’s fondly the instant she felt it touch her own; “my dear, I almost fancy that I can see you. My son and Mr. Rufus have talked so often about you.”

A faint blush tinged Miss Arnold’s cheek for a moment, but it quickly faded away as she looked up with a reproachful smile at Rufus, whose eyes were fixed upon hers, and whose pale skin flushed into a tawny red while Mrs. Atcherley spoke.

“I will go and call Atcherley,” he said,

abruptly darting from the room ; and John, who was gazing blankly at the pictures that adorned the walls, breathed a deep sigh of relief at this further step to the advancement of their business.

“Speak to me,” exclaimed Mrs. Atcherley, still holding Miss Arnold’s hand. “I cannot see you, but let me hear your voice. Say something to me.”

Mrs. Aspen and Mrs Margraf had taken seats and were looking on, and listening with an air of curious attention to hear the first remark Miss Arnold would make. The silence, momentary though it was, increased the girl’s embarrassment, and made the effort to speak more difficult.

“Rufus—Mr. Rufus Lockley,” she stammered, “has often spoken to me of you and Mr. Atcherley. I was very glad to come and see you.”

“Have you seen my son ?” continued the mother, rapidly, “many times this summer he has rowed up the river to Monkmoor.

Once I went with him, he told me you were sitting in a bay-window near to us with the sunlight falling upon your hair and forehead. Did you never see my son as he passed by in his boat ?”

“I think not,” answered Miss Arnold, hesitatingly.

“Ah ! if I had but my sight,” she said, lifting her hand to her eyes, “I should see everything. I almost see you now ; you, and Mrs. Aspen, and Mrs. Margraf. Rufus described you all for me before you came. Sit down here beside me, Miss Arnold, and let me keep hold of your hand ; it is pleasant to a blind old woman like me. My dear, if you had only happened to notice my son as he rowed past Monkmoor so often, I should have asked you to describe him to me. Very few people can do it for me ; and I have never seen him since he was a little child of three years old.”

Mrs. Aspen sighed, and began a sonnet to
“A sightless Mother.”

"I am very sorry I have not seen Mr. Atcherley," said Miss Arnold, in a low and pleasant voice; "but I shall see him soon, and then I will try to describe his looks to you as well as a stranger can."

"They tell me he has a handsome face," she continued, smiling sadly, "but I know every one of his pictures better than I do him. As he paints them he talks about them to me, until they seem visible to my mind; but he cannot make me see himself. I ask myself a thousand questions about him, as I sit here alone, or go about the house; but there is no answer to them. I cannot tell when he looks ill or unhappy, and he commands his voice. You, my dear—I know you; pale and delicate; sorrowful-looking as if you needed comforting: fair hair, with a golden halo upon it; clear shining eyes; eyebrows straightly pencilled, but sometimes knitted together a little; lips that open readily, but are often firmly closed. You have a homeless look, my son says."

Miss Arnold's face was by no means pale as she glanced round for a moment, and tears were springing to her eyes which she would not wipe away. Nor did she speak; and Mrs. Aspen replied to Mrs. Atcherley in a tone of mingled jealousy and dignity.

"Upon my honour!" she said, bridling, and uttering her patrician oath in dainty accents, "your son has read Miss Arnold's face diligently. But it is the privilege of art to gaze unrebuked upon beauty."

"My son does not speak to me of other faces," replied the blind mother, quickly, "or he observes them only as an artist. This face is unlike that of other women; or how is it that I hear so much about it from both my son and Rufus?"

"Rufus and Mrs. Atcherley are in the right," said John, cordially; "for my part, I am sure I shall always associate Miss Arnold with the happiest portion of my life."

"I sit here among his pictures," resumed Mrs. Atcherley, "and you think perhaps I

am blind to them. But I know them all, and the light in which each one hangs. My son may alter their position as often as he pleases; but he has only to say, 'Mother, I have changed such and such paintings,' and my mind sees them at once. Sometimes I wonder whether they really are what I fancy them; for they are all perfect and beautiful to me, though he finds fault with them. Miss Arnold, my dear, will you describe one of my son's paintings to me?"

"I cannot," murmured the girl, troubled and embarrassed.

"Allow me to have that pleasure," interposed Mrs. Aspen fluently. "Above the fireplace, I see a glowing sunset scene, with golden and rosy tints, and waters flashing under the glimpsing touch of the sunbeams. In the back-ground, a wild, wide moor, deepening into a regal purple in the farthest distance. A rustic shepherdess, an infant slumbering on her peaceful breast, is following a milkwhite, fleecy flock, which are

straying homewards to their fold, through the tranquil evening."

"And there is a calf," added John, enthusiastically. "By George! The perfect picture of our fawn-coloured Alderney. This will do now."

"Do you see a picture which hangs where the light comes in latest in the evening?" asked Mrs. Atcherley. "It is a head only; the face seen almost in profile. Is there any resemblance? Can you recognise the likeness there? My son and Rufus have talked about it, and altered and retouched it a hundred times; and yet they are not satisfied."

If Miss Arnold had any desire to discover how she appeared to the eyes of an artist, she had only to lift up her own to the painting before her. But, as though she guessed what pale yet beautiful features were there idealized and perpetuated, she kept her gaze steadfastly bent upon the carpet at her feet. Mrs. Aspen and Mrs. Margraf left

their seats to examine it more closely ; and John criticised it with a long and earnest scrutiny.

“By George!” he exclaimed again, “it is Miss Arnold herself! My dearest mother, if Mr. Atcherley is as successful with yours we shall be quite satisfied. Why, it is prettier than life.”

“No, no!” protested the artist’s mother, “both my son and Rufus complain of it; but he has had only stolen opportunities to catch the likeness. And it is a difficult face to paint, he tells me. My dear, you must sit for my son, while he touches up his picture, hanging where the last light of evening falls upon it. When he sits here beside me after his work is done, I fancy it shining down upon us in the twilight; shining quietly as the moon used to do; a pale, meek, patient face.”

The girl looked up into the eager face and restless eyes of the sightless woman beside her. But before she could speak there was a

sound of footsteps in the lobby, and Rufus entered the room, turning round when he had advanced a pace or two, as if in quest of some one following. Mrs. Atcherley rose nervously from her seat, and laid her trembling hand upon Miss Arnold's arm; while the rest waited in momentary suspense. Miss Arnold's face was again downcast; and her bonnet strings fluttered with her quick and irregular breathing. But there was no second footstep, and the moment of the artist's appearance was yet delayed.

"I thought Atcherley was close behind me," exclaimed Rufus, in perplexity. Darting a backward glance into the lobby, a gay smile broke upon his face. "I declare he has stopped to examine an old head of Othello! He has caught a glimpse of some new light upon it, and has forgotten all about us. In another second he'll fetch his colours and pencils. Atcherley, my dear fellow, are you lost out there? Come, don't keep these ladies waiting any longer."

“My son!” breathed the blind mother, almost in a whisper, as his tardy footstep was heard crossing the lobby. He paused for a single instant upon the threshold, meeting the gaze of his visitors with a face of deathly pallor, wrought up into an expression of indomitable but dreary endurance. Happy for the mother that she could not see it; she, who was leaning towards him with breathless eagerness, with her hand resting upon Miss Arnold’s arm. The head and face of the artist were fine, but the frame was dwarfed and deformed; more terribly conscious of misfortune than an ordinary man, he lingered within the doorway, as if he would yet shrink away, and hide himself from the eyes he longed to meet. But he entered. Bowing rapidly as Rufus named his expected guests, he crossed the room to the spot where Miss Arnold stood beside his mother, her face downcast and averted, and the fluttering ribbons stirring uneasily with her quick-drawn breath. His deep, dark eyes lifted up

to hers, had something of the mute pathetic eloquence of some dumb animal, though their scintillating pupils were half concealed by the eyelids and the thick lashes. For a moment, a sharp, satirical gleam shot across his features as if in bitter mockery of himself, but it changed at once into an air of hopeless yet cherished devotion.

“Miss Arnold, my son!” said Mrs. Atcherley, extending one hand to him, while she pressed the other more firmly on the girl’s arm to arrest her attention, and bent her grey head forward to listen for the first word spoken by either of them. Miss Arnold raised her eyes slowly; grave, calm, clear eyes, in which shone a glance of profound and ready pity, that told how fully she was prepared for the artist’s appearance. Whose was the first movement none could say, for the whole silent show occupied no more than an instant or two, but they clasped each other’s hands frankly; and a patient, placid tenderness spread over

the expressive face of the dwarf. With a half-suppressed sigh he turned away from her, and addressed the rest of the party with perfect self-possession and ease; and John Aspen immediately entered upon the object of their interview with him.

“Mr. Atcherley,” he said, with solemnity, “I need not tell you that it is important for us to have a first-rate portrait of my mother, Mrs. Aspen. It is not a matter of merely family interest. I only wish you could see her with my eyes! There are moments when she looks inspired; and these moments you have not witnessed as I have. By George! I only wish I had been brought up an artist myself.”

Mr. Atcherley shook off his melancholy, and looked at John with a smile.

“I shall do my best to please you,” he said, “I have seen Mrs. Aspen when my observation was not suspected; and I have not forgotten her expression, I assure you.”

“My mother is not looking quite as well as usual,” continued John, regarding her anxiously and critically; “we must have a prepossessing picture of her. One that will engrave well.”

“Hush, John!” interposed Mrs. Aspen, with dignity.

“If you could introduce some portion of the ruins at Monkmoor,” he resumed, “an arch or a few pillars, or part of the cloister. I think it would be more suitable for the selection.”

“John!” cried his mother, warningly.

“I understand you,” said Mr. Atcherley; “a portion of the ruins would be picturesque, and would make the painting more of a family memorial.”

“That’s it,” exclaimed John, “it has been my mother’s home all her life. I should not like to see her represented as being anywhere else. If you will come up to Monkmoor, instead of Mrs. Aspen’s sitting for you here, there will be a better chance for both of you. She will feel more at home, and you

can study her expression better. My dearest mother, every wish of my life will be gratified when your portrait is taken."

"And Emma's," suggested Mrs. Aspen, jealously.

"And Emmy's, of course," echoed John, his face beaming with satisfaction; "Mr. Atcherley, you must take my wife's portrait. If you are as successful as with Miss Arnold's, I shall be quite content. We were taken by surprise to see Miss Arnold's likeness here. Wherever did you see her? What an eye and a memory you must have! Well, Emmy's face is in the same style, fair, but brighter-looking; and if you catch a smile upon it, it is quite extraordinary. I never was so astonished in my life, and so was Miss Arnold herself. It is an admirable likeness."

"It does not do her justice," said Rufus, warmly; "Atcherley acknowledges it. He has tried to catch her expression a hundred times, and failed."

"Failed!" repeated the artist, in a some-

what dreary and absent tone, stealing a glance at Miss Arnold, who was sitting beside his mother, and listening to some murmured speeches with a sweet though mournful smile. He made a step or two towards them in his abstraction, but recollecting himself, a second sharp pang of self-criticizing sarcasm shot across his face.

“Robert,” said his mother, in her brief, impatient tones, “Miss Arnold promises me that she will sit for you to re-touch her portrait. Let it be done soon, my son. I should like to be certain that it is as perfect as your skill can make it.”

“This very day will be the best,” cried Rufus; “aunt, you can leave Miss Arnold here this morning, and we will write and copy when we come home. I came down in the boat, and Atcherley and I can row her back again. I want that painting finished.”

“Let it be so,” said Mrs. Aspen, graciously. “Miss Arnold will enjoy an hour or two among these beauties of art. My dear, I beg

you will not confine yourself too assiduously to your duties. This recreation will do you good."

"Yes, stay, my love," exclaimed Mrs. Atcherley, rising with the impetuosity of a child; "stay with us to-day. Come and take your bonnet off, and arrange your hair for the sitting. Then you will look more at home with us."

The artist opened the door for his mother and Miss Arnold to pass out, and a flush rose to his broad forehead as he closed it after them; a flush of triumph and delight in the present moment. He contrived to make the rest of the interview very brief. In a short time John Aspen was driving his gifted mother through the streets of Thornbury, while Mrs. Margraf leaned back in silent and shrewd meditation upon the scene she had just witnessed.

Seated in the oriel window of Mrs. Aspen's study, about an hour before the autumn sunset, as the clouds were rolling westward

in all the pomp of a September sky, and the corn-fields were glowing with a browner gold in the intense light ; Mrs. Margraf watched the boat come home up the long flash of sunlit waters. With what lazy, languid strokes did the rowers ply their oars ! How frequently they paused altogether, and rocked idly under the dancing shadows of the willows, until the current carried them back insensibly towards Murivance. It was a long, long voyage up the tranquil river ; a slender thread of pleasure woven into the life of the deformed artist ; spun out with a fine and careful hand until it could stretch no farther, but snapped irretrievably asunder as soon as the boat gained the arches of Monkmoor.

Mr. Atcherley had brought his stretcher and easel, with some other of his chattels, which he and Rufus carried up to the house. Every arrangement for the first sitting being completed, he walked home to Thornbury, and Rufus rowed his sister across the river to Fairfield.

CHAPTER IV.

THE portrait progressed satisfactorily. Mrs. Aspen's aigrette of heron's plumes, and her dress of sage-green satin, with its soft lines and mellow tone, were pronounced by every one, except Emma, to be singularly appropriate and becoming. The sittings were jealously secluded; but that her countenance should be fully expressive of poetic feeling, Miss Arnold read Tasso aloud to her and the artist. Rufus spent most of his mornings lying on the lawn under the open window, where the murmur of a pleasant voice reached his ear in a soft and rhythmical tone, to which the ripple of the stream fretting against the banks sounded as a faint and floating echo. Paul, whose acts of attention and interest were so rare as to ensure a cordial reception

when he proffered them, was admitted freely into the very fastness of art and poetry ; while John was content to bear the chidings which his ill-timed presumptions and blunders drew upon him ; satisfied if he could creep in by stealth to glance at the unfinished painting, and resolving each time that Emma should have her portrait taken as soon as his mother's was completed.

There were of course intervals in the execution of the important work ; but Mrs. Aspen's days were fully occupied. Of all the year, the harvest and the autumn was the period when her poetic genius was quickest with vivid life, and her brain filled with tuneful fancies. It was at the same time the pleasantest season to the families on both sides of the river. John Aspen and Rufus worked shoulder to shoulder with the harvest-men who reaped their fields ; Paul emerged from his reveries and Greek verse to mingle freely with his kind in the general labour and gladness of the in-gathering. In the rich

grass-lands surrounding the Priory, there was the summer mowing of the tall, luxuriant grasses ; the melodious tinkling of scythes ; the scent of long swathes of hay stretching in brown bars across the fresh green of the newly-mown sward ; the sight of bonnetless maidens flitting to and fro with large baskets upon their heads, and harvest-bottles swinging from their hands. When the hay-harvest was past, and the short interlude of rest over, there was a migration across the river to Paul's corn-fields, which were more under John Aspen's husbandry than his own, but where he felt it more binding upon him to take a full share in the work, while the ladies of the two households gathered in an idle and a dreamy group under the hedge-rows. Of all harvests that one was pronounced to be the most balmy and delicious. Day after day the sun vaulted into a sky of serene blue, flecked with tiny clouds that neither threatened showers, nor collected into tempest, but floated hour after hour across the distant

heavens, and cast playful shadows upon the earth. Every one grew rural ; but Mrs. Aspen was pastoral to the last degree. Each brawny harvest-man became a rustic swain ; each brown-cheeked maiden a nymph, or buxom shepherdess ; while the verses which she produced daily, and with great facility, bore a striking, not to say a suspicious resemblance to Shenstone's Poems.

From time immemorial it had been her custom to write a Thanksgiving Hymn for the Harvest, which, after being submitted to the Vicar for his approbation, was sung to any Long, Common, or Short Metre, which the powers of the village choir could master. This yearly celebration was observed upon the first Sunday after the Vicar's own fields were reaped, by which time it was justly concluded that all the farmers whom the Establishment could recognise, would have taken care to secure the produce of their lands, and would be in a fitting frame of mind to join in the Choral Thanksgiving.

The Vicarage, built close upon the river and near to Monk's Ferry, was a low-roofed, rustic dwelling, with dormer windows high up in the shelving roof, which had been wont to look out over a wide-spread landscape, with the picturesque ruins of the Priory in the foreground ; but the present incumbent, a shy and recluse man, had surrounded it with walls as high as though it were situated in the heart of some tumultuous city. The only entrance was through a narrow doorway which led to the smooth turf of a lawn enclosed on every side ; so entwined with clustering rose-trees, interlacing stems of ivy, and blending boughs of trees, that it bore the aspect of some sheltered nest, open only overhead to the blue dome of the sky. The most profound silence and repose reigned within the precincts, except that hour after hour, the clock in the church tower, which was the only outer object visible above the walls, chimed solemnly and slowly ; and the martins, as they wheeled about the belfry or flew

with fleeting shadows over the solitary lawn, uttered shrieks of delight in their own undisturbed revelry. Within the house the hush was greater than without. Mr. Vale, had lived there with no changes for more than forty years, and his two aged maid-servants moved and spoke as if sound of any kind bordered upon crime. But for a faint undertone of the rural life beyond the walls, a silence as deep as that of the grave-yard nigh at hand, would have prevailed through all the quiet rooms.

There had been but one autumn, when the yearly Harvest Hymn was not sung by the village choir, since the epoch when Mr. Vale, a young man inducted into his first living, had taken up his abode in the Vicarage lying opposite to Monkmoor Priory, where the youthful poetess had already begun to weave her innocent lays. It was the autumn succeeding to her marriage with his curate, when he himself was busy with the erection of the walls which shut out the Priory from

the view of his windows. For once, he considered the verses unsuitable, in their blending of bridal elation with the joy of harvest ; and instead of the bride's Thanksgiving Hymn, the choir sang the doleful lines beginning with the words, "See the leaves around us falling." But when the next year brought widowhood and mourning, and once more the poetess sent her hymn, written upon paper deeply edged with black, Mr. Vale's heart was wrung with sympathy and self-reproach. The brief cloud fled for ever ; and though the shy man, dumb with timidity, could never utter his silent love, she had, with a deep-rooted and ineradicable feminine coquetry, which was of the most delicate texture in her gentle nature, never failed to send her annual hymn for his approval ; had always accepted the diffident invitation to honour his dwelling with her presence, which invariably followed the receipt of her missive. Upon all occasions there was a high-toned courtliness in their manner to each other,

which made their meeting a picture of old-fashioned politeness ; whether in stately salutation in the church porch, or when the white-headed clergyman welcomed his old friend and love to his secluded home.

The Vicar's last field was cut. Mrs. Aspen was seen for several evenings leaning pensively against a tree, gazing upon the bands of brawny reapers, and upon the groups of gleaners loitering about the gate for the first moment of admission. An acute ear might have detected unusual sounds about the slumbering Vicarage ; a more hurried opening and closing of doors, the beating of carpets, and even the raised shrill voices of the ancient servants. The coming event cast its shadow before. When the last load of grain, reeling upon the creaking waggon, had been drawn into the Vicar's stack-yard, the Harvest Hymn, written in Mrs. Aspen's own hand, was forwarded by a special messenger to Mr. Vale. On the following morning his old serving-man carried one scented and

tinted note to the Priory, and a second, which, since Paul Lockley's inheritance of Fairfield, had invited his household to the Harvest Home at the Vicarage.

Shy men were rarely shy with Mrs. Margraf. There was a purring, tranquillising quietness in her manner, which set them at ease at once. She could hide her shrewdness and cleverness, as a cat does her claws, beneath bland smiles, and smooth, low tones, and sympathetic glances. Before she had been his parishioner six months, the aged, reserved man had confided to her what he had never ventured to utter in any other ear—the life-long story of his concealed love. He had told it to her in the church-porch looking towards the Priory, his homely and wrinkled face averted from hers, and his broken voice tremulous with emotion. Since that evening she had been an especial favourite with him; and when his brother died, leaving a daughter to his guardianship, she had been tacitly given up to her management. Fortune

smiled upon Mrs. Margraf's projects. This green nest of a Vicarage, this quiet dwelling-place, with its nominal duties, and free, easy life, so suited to the delicate frame of Rufus, and in Paul's gift ; and this pretty young heiress, were dropped into her lap for her boy. She had nothing to do but guard them until Rufus could take orders, and enter the church.

The yearly visit to the Vicarage wore the grace and solemnity of a festival. Mr. Vale was the most courteous of hosts in his old-fashioned dwelling, but he never failed to make it evident that the ceremonial was a homage to his early love. Mrs. Aspen was the cynosure of the day. He drank her health first, and with serious respect. Her hymn was read aloud by him as gravely as if he were giving it out in the public service. She alone was called upon to sing in her treble voice songs of her own composing, in years long gone by, when both of them were young ; while he, with withered fingers, beat

time upon his shrunken knee, and nodded his shaking head in measure with the verse. And before the evening closed in, all the scattered party were summoned from strolling about the garden to repair to the church close by, that Rufus might select, under her direction, the tune most suited to the powers of the village choir, and to the strain of her Harvest Hymn.

Long after Rufus had exhausted his stock of tunes without satisfying Mrs. Aspen's fastidious ear, the party lingered within the dusky church. The boy was playing like one upon whom a new inspiration of harmony had descended with sudden might and beauty; the crimson light from a painted widow close by glanced upon his head, thrown back in ecstasy, and upon his upturned face, glowing with rapturous excitement. In the chancel, where the grey hues of the eastern sky flickered feebly about marble monuments, and coldly touched the golden letters of the Commandments, the

aged Vicar was conversing in slow and measured tones with his old friend. Mrs. Margraf sat alone regarding the enraptured boy with proud satisfaction. John Aspen had found a comfortable corner in his own pew, and was slumbering peacefully, save when Emma, who was trying Mr. Vale's post in the reading-desk, leaned over to pull his hair. Miss Arnold was sitting on the step of the western door, with her face turned towards the river and the sunset, apart and unnoticed; except when Paul, as he paced up and down the aisle, paused for a minute or two behind her, sometimes in silence, and sometimes with a crumb of conversation cast to her in pity for her relative separation.

He was standing thus beside her, looking out upon the landscape, which glistened under the flood of setting sunshine, their lengthened shadows stretching far up the aisle, when Rufus brought his rhapsody of music to a sudden crash and close, and shot a searching glance around him. The spell

that had kept silence in the church snapped. John awoke with a half-uttered groan; Emma descended from the reading-desk; Paul turned back and paced gravely up the aisle again; and the Vicar and Mrs. Aspen came out of the cold shadows of the chancel. Only Miss Arnold, sitting alone and motionless, remained still, as if neither the music nor its conclusion had any effect upon her.

“I am an old man, dear friends,” said the voice of the clergyman, pitched almost to the forced tones in which he addressed his congregation within the same walls; “this is the thirty-third anniversary of the great festival of my life. Thirty-three years ago the dearest of my friends, with her infant son, first honoured my roof by her presence beneath it; and ever at this season has she deigned to grace my poor home for a few hours. Thus the harvest has been made the holiday of my years. But to-day my friend and I have been talking together of our old age, and that which followeth swiftly in its track.

Never before have our thoughts been thus directed to the grave ; peradventure, it is the presence of these young people—younger than we were when our yearly custom was commenced—which has forced upon us the conviction that we are tracing the last stages of our pilgrimage. Seventy years of age am I ; and for forty years I have ministered in this edifice. I would fain look upon my successor. Rufus Lockley, art thou not yet ready to lay aside thy youth, and take upon thee the cares, and duties, and responsibilities of the priesthood ? ”

There was so deep a stillness in the church that the shrill evening notes of the martins in the belfry echoed noisily through the silence. The boy's face showed white and wan against the dark woodwork and gilded pipes of the organ, as he stood beside it for a few minutes, his head downcast, and the fire of his past rapture quenched. Once again he stole a glance towards the western door, and the motionless figure sitting within its

arch ; and then he spoke in eager and rapid tones.

“ I am ready,” he answered. “ I am longing to do something. I have been wasting my life hitherto. Brother, only let me have means to work my own way at college, and I will repay you. I have been only a drone and a dreamer all these years.”

“ Rufus, my boy,” said Paul, striding up to him, and laying his hand fondly on his shoulder ; “ it is I who am to blame for dreaming away my time and yours. You shall enter at Cambridge next term. I ought to have been like a father to you, and I’ve been neglecting your interests all this time. All I have is yours. Sophia, how could you let me forget that Rufus had grown into a man ? ”

“ I had forgotten it myself,” she said, sighing ; and a sharp pang shot through her seldom troubled heart.

The boy’s boyhood was gone, with its freedom and carelessness of its future, its

dependant clinging upon her love ; yet he stood there upon the daïs of the organ his head raised again, erect and jubilant, as if he took his manhood to him consciously as a crown. For an instant the tears burned in her eyes, though it was an hour of triumph to herself. Half her scheme for him was hastening to its accomplishment ; the other half needed but little precaution and judicious management to ensure its fulfilment. She joined the circle that had surrounded Rufus with congratulations ; and her kiss lingered upon his forehead as she relinquished him to the manhood that would become independent of her care.

They left the dusky church, and strolled back leisurely to the green enclosure of the Vicarage, which was to be the home of Rufus in future years. Never had it appeared so pleasant and peaceful to Mrs. Margraf ; while Mr. Vale and Mrs. Aspen sat together in the twilight talking of old times, with fading and partial memories, she was designing

improvements in the old-fashioned dwelling, and peopling the silent garden with a noisy group of imaginary children.

CHAPTER V.

IT was past midnight before Mrs. Margraf lit her candle and went upstairs to her bedroom ; for she sat alone by the fire musing over the completion of her plans for Rufus, long after he and Paul had bidden her good-night. In fact Paul retired to his library immediately upon his return from the Vicarage, as if eager to resume his interrupted studies ; and though Rufus stayed with her for an hour or two, he shunned all discussion of the subject which had excited him so deeply. It was in vain that she endeavoured to beguile him into confidence. The reticence of manhood had fallen upon him ; from henceforth she would be shut out from his inner heart, and be a stranger to its secret workings. She wept some bitter tears over her triumph. But when, upon passing

his chamber, she saw a narrow fringe of light beneath the door, and heard his unquiet step within, she could not conquer the strong yearning to enter, and to soothe his excitement. He did not know how often she had stolen in to look at him while he slept, and shading the light from his eyes, watch the changes of his slumbering face. She tapped softly at the door, and the step ceased for a moment; then came quickly forward, and Rufus stood before her, pale and weary-looking, but with a strange smile in his eyes, and upon his quivering lips.

The apartment, into which she entered, bore some trace of every phase of the lad's life since he had taken possession of it ten years before, when his brother inherited Fairfield. A string of egg-shells, collected in many a feverish hunt along the river-banks, and in the hedge-rows, hung above the fire place, and beneath a model of a ship, which he had constructed with unwearied perseverance. Fishing-rods, and skates, and

guns, were arranged upon the walls, alternated with pictures that had once touched his fancy, and still retained their places for the sake of old times. A recess beside the hearth was filled with amateur bookshelves, whose rough workmanship had given him as much pleasure as Paul's well-fitted library ; they were crowded with more school-books, and more favourite volumes, from the Robinson Crusoe of his boyhood, to the Greek Iliad, which he was reading under his brother's tuition. Near to the window stood a desk covered with music books, and with the carefully illuminated transcript he was making of Mrs. Aspen's poems. His sister glanced round, and shivered as she closed the door behind her. The casement was thrown wide open, and the candle upon the desk flickered in the night-air ; while the face, upon which she fixed her eyes penetratingly, flushed into a deeper and a deeper crimson, until Rufus retreated restlessly from her to the embrasure of the open window.

“Rufus,” she cried, in an appealing tone, “are we then separated? Cannot we talk together as in former times? Oh, my boy! are you already so much a man that you leave me far behind you in your thoughts, and shut me out from sharing your hopes?”

“No, no!” he answered, returning to her side, and drawing her towards the window; “but it is only to-night, Sophia, only this last hour or two that I have known it myself; that I have dared to say to my own heart that I love! I stood a long way off, and worshipped towards her. But when you all spoke to me of my manhood a few hours ago—they might be years—the new life rolling over me brought upon its tide the consciousness that I also felt a man’s love.”

“Love!” she echoed, gazing up into his flushing face, and eyes, which were kindling and deepening into passion, “Love, Rufus!”

“You know what a boy I have been,” he continued, glancing round his room and its mute tokens of boyhood, with an expression

of self-scorn. "If I am altered now ; if I feel any ambition to play a man's part in the world ; if I long vehemently to distinguish myself ; if there be within me a deep regret at my wasted life ; I owe it all to her. She has awakened me. It is her hand that has broken the fetters of childhood which bound me, and at length I am a man."

Rufus drew himself up to his full height, and reared his young head like a war-horse within sight and sound of the battle-field, while his voice deepened into a tone of conscious strength. These few, brief hours had changed him more to himself than to his sister, and she could scarcely restrain a smile, even in the midst of her consternation and dismay, at the exalted style of his speech.

"But who is it, Rufus?" she asked earnestly.

"Sophia," he said, "when I was away at school, I used often to set my face in the direction of home, and so looking, think of you and Paul. It is the same with me now.

All this summer I have opened my window, as of old the prophet opened his window towards Jerusalem, and sat with my face turned thitherward across the river, waiting until yonder light has been extinguished, before I could lie down and sleep. I could not choose but watch as long as the light shone upon the river."

Mrs. Margraf looked across the darkened fields in the direction he pointed out. The moon was setting, and shed only a feeble light upon the landscape, but she could distinguish the indistinct pile of Monkmoor Priory. Very clearly, amid its massive gloom, there shone one illuminated casement; the mullioned and cross-barred window of the room above Mrs. Aspen's study. Mrs. Margraf felt her heart sink within her.

"It is her room," he said, in a reverent whisper. "Every night, long after all other lights are gone out, that is burning as it is now. No wonder that she is pale and weary-looking! But, Sophia, how could I

sleep knowing that she was waking? Or how could I sleep," and his eyes fell for a moment, "while there was a chance of seeing the instant that she put out her light, that I might say, 'God bless her!' All these summer nights I have sat here to read and think, while she was reading and thinking over yonder. And I have been happy. My lady, my darling! The sweetest, dearest, wisest woman for a man to love!"

The boy flung himself from her side, and strode about the room, with a passionate vehemence in his tread, and with his arms crossed upon his breast, as if to calm its tumultuous throbbing. Mrs. Margraf sat still, struck dumb with dismay and consternation. She had been the means of introducing Miss Arnold into their select and well-ordered family circle. A little, demure, saintly piece of hypocrisy she called her mentally; while heart-sick she owned to herself that she could not tell where the mischief would end.

“Sister,” he said, returning and looking across the fields with a triumphant smile, “I am glad that she heard me play as I did this evening in the twilight. I saw her press her hand upon her eyes, as if to restrain the tears, and I could have wept myself. If we had been alone then, I could have told her all, and she must have been won by my love. See, Sophia ; how I tremble ! My life is dependent upon her.”

He trembled with excitement, until the clasp of the casement rattled under his hand. She knew well the impetuousness and ardour of his temperament, blended with a rare constancy ; and she also trembled for her schemes, though she maintained a quiet composure. Suddenly a thought flashed across her mind, and without a moment's hesitation she resolved to act upon it.

“It is gone,” said Rufus, with a sigh ; and she glanced across to the Priory, where there was no longer any gleaming light. He leaned through the window for a minute or

two in silence, and then closing the case-ment, threw himself on his knees before her, and laid his head in her lap.

“Rufus,” she said, running her fingers caressingly through his hair, “dear Rufus, you have said nothing of all this to Miss Arnold?”

“I dared not,” he answered, “I have been fearful of touching her hand, and I could not presume to hope that she would listen——”

“To a boy like you, Rufus,” interrupted Mrs. Margraf, calmly; “she is several years older than you are.”

“Older!” echoed Rufus; “so is every angel in heaven older. Because she has lived three or four years longer than I, am I to relinquish every effort to make myself worthy of her esteem? Or would you have me consider them as a dishonour and blemish to her? Are we to be for ever alienated because for a little while she breathed the air of this world before my birth?”

“No, no,” answered his sister, soothingly,

“but women very seldom love men younger than themselves. Miss Arnold is past the age of rashness, and she will prudently look at your position. What is it, dear Rufus? What could you tell her your income is?”

“It is nothing yet,” he said, eagerly. “I have been an idle dependant upon Paul. But in two years, Sophia, I can take deacon’s orders. I will yet distinguish myself. Oh! how I have wasted my life!”

“But I was not going to talk to you of this,” she continued, sighing deeply, “I do not wish to build up trivial objections. But listen, Rufus. Years ago, while you were quite a boy, your brother loved, with as much tenderness and passion as you love Miss Arnold. He was almost as young as you are, and had to wait as you will; and as the long engagement dragged on, the woman whom he loved proved faithless. The disappointment almost broke his heart. It did root out of it all its richest life, the love and faith it possessed before. It made him what

you have known him, a solitary, moody, self-contained man, with but few sympathies and affections, and those so blended with suspicion that they have yielded him no happiness."

"Poor Paul!" sighed Rufus, "I remember a little of it."

"It has cast a shadow over all our lives," she resumed, raising her handkerchief to her eyes; "but I do not refer to this to warn you of the danger of a long engagement. I do not hint that Miss Arnold would act as Harriet Crofton did. But, Rufus, of late I have noticed a great change in Paul. He is returning to his old glad, genial, happy self, such as he was when he was your age. Have you not heard him laugh more heartily, and has he not joined more readily in these harvest labours? Have you never been struck by the interest he takes in Aunt Aspen's book and portrait? Oh, Rufus, my heart rejoiced to see this change in him; and I thought I had traced its cause."

“What cause?” cried Rufus, lifting up a white face, and gleaming eyes to her, upon which she could not endure to look, and she bowed her head down until her soft cheek rested against his.

“I think that he loves again,” she whispered. Rufus clasped her hand in an iron grip, till she almost screamed with pain, and hiding his face again upon her lap, he muttered between his clenched teeth, “Paul! Paul!”

“If this be true,” said Mrs. Margraf, after a long pause; “if Paul, after twelve years of solitary sadness, with neither wife nor child to make his home happy; Paul, who has been like a father to you; if he has loved at last, and loves Miss Arnold, surely I need not point out to my boy where lies his duty.”

“But is it true?” he groaned, “does Paul really love my darling? I will ask him. To-morrow I will tell him all.”

“Do so,” she said impressively, “and Paul will stifle this new love and gladness that are

springing up in his lonely life. I know him, Rufus. He will not hesitate to sacrifice his happiness to yours. Nay; he would even deny that it was a sacrifice. He would tell you that he did not love Miss Arnold. Yes, you would be a gainer all ways. Paul would never marry, and at his death Fairfield would descend to you and your children."

"Oh, Sophia!" he cried, stung to the quick by the insinuation conveyed in the latter portion of her speech; and again she laid her hand fondly upon his head.

"My boy will not grudge his brother either his love or his possessions," she said. "Rufus, I appeal to your nobler nature. Give up Miss Arnold to Paul; even if the sacrifice tug at your very heart-strings. Oh, be noble, be pitiful! Do not let all the goodness and power of your nature flash away in empty poetry and sentiment. Here is a conquest worthy of you. Be strong, and self-forgetting."

"Tell me," he murmured, "tell me what makes you think Paul loves her?"

Mrs. Margraf hastened to place every scanty circumstance of Paul's slight intercourse with Miss Arnold in a new and glossing light, and with fine touches here and there she contrived to establish a tolerably clear case. Rufus listened in an agony of spirit of which she had but a faint insight ; assenting with the sensitive diffidence of his nature to every word her fluent tongue uttered, though they pierced him like sharp arrows of the mighty. When at length she concluded her carefully garbled narrative, he rose from his kneeling attitude, and led her in silence to the door.

“Go,” he said, in a hoarse and husky voice. “I must be alone to bear this. It is like a death-blow, Sophia.”

She threw her arms about his neck, and kissed him tenderly ; but he extricated himself with gentleness, and locking the door between them, entered alone upon the first sore and bitter conflict of his young life. Mrs. Margraf, nervous and agitated, retired

to her own room, and lay awake throughout the rest of the night, tormented with vexing thoughts, and perplexed with new and complicated schemes for guiding Rufus through this new dilemma.

CHAPTER VI.

AT the first dawn of the morning, Mrs. Margraf's listening ear heard Rufus leave his room, and pass her door with a slow and languid step. She rose herself, and watched him, haggard and weary-looking, as one who had not rested during the night, walking to and fro upon the terrace which lay between the house and the river-side. In a short time he roamed about restlessly, and then wandered along the shaded lane to Monk's Ferry, and detaching Paul's boat, shot swiftly down the stream. The sister's heart ached for him, though she smiled as she caught her own glance in the looking-glass, and thought of the changes Time can effect. First love was a complaint which the heart must suffer before it arrives at maturity. Many young

men cut their first teeth upon an attachment to a woman older than themselves, laughing afterwards at their infatuation, as one smiles upon a coral and bells, when the fingers that hold it are no longer the tiny and dimpled hands of infancy. But Rufus was earnest and impassioned enough now; no art could make him relinquish his coral and bells in anticipation of a future which he could not understand.

Mrs. Margraf proceeded leisurely and carefully with her toilette. There was always something charming in the perfect neatness and elegance of her dress, which added to the unconscious influence she exercised over all around her. No negligence or eccentricity of appearance suggested that she was a woman whose thoughts were engaged in other and graver matters. She was smoothing the glossy braids of her brown hair when a servant brought to her door a letter, which Rufus had left upon the breakfast-room table. She seated herself again at her dressing-table,

and read it with the bland smile that hovered habitually upon her face.

“I cannot bear suspense,” he wrote, abruptly. “This is a matter of life and death to me. Be very tender with me, sister, for I am most miserable. Hear me. I have grown into manhood beside her. Before she came I was a boy, thoughtless and satisfied ; but she awakened me. She drew from me thoughts which were concealed even from you, and while I spoke, gazing into her kind eyes, new thoughts came, and fluent, eloquent words, such as I never uttered before. This has been a new life—fresher, fuller, more divine than any I lived before. I have known what happiness is. I feel that I could distinguish myself to become worthy of her. But you say Paul loves her. You bid me be true to my better nature. If it be so—if Paul, who has suffered so long and bitterly, loves her, and she returns his love, heaven forbid that I should think of her, save as a sister,—the sweetest, dearest, most precious sister in the

world. Yet it is I whom she has singled out, kindly and frankly ; she has turned away from every one of you to talk with me, and if she were not so much better than I, nobler and wiser, I should not doubt her interest in me. But yesterday Paul lingered beside her in the church porch, leaning over and whispering to her—I never saw him whisper to any woman before—and he has been admitted into the study at Monkmoor when I have been shut out. I understand now : she has cared for me as his brother ; she has interested herself in the boy Rufus, because Paul solicited her notice for him. Help me, Sophia. I grow wicked, envious, jealous. I shrink from meeting Paul, who has been the best of brothers to me, and who has dragged out wretched years of loneliness without making us share in his wretchedness. I feel as if I could not bear to see him until this uncertainty is over. I shall be stronger when I know the truth. When I can say to myself, ‘ She is to be my sister, separated from,

yet belonging to me, for ever, through her love to Paul, I shall be able to conquer the deeper and more bitter regret. I will go to college, and fight out my battle alone, until I can smile at the thought that she has found her home in the house where I am called brother. You must find out the truth for me, as you can do, with your kindness and skill. But if you are reluctant to touch upon unhappy memories, I must do it myself. I will speak in such a manner as to give him no suspicion. I will control myself; he shall think it half a jest, or only a boyish fancy. I will not let him throw away his happiness for the mere chance of mine; for if she loves him, she will not care for me; and what am I compared with Paul? But I must know speedily, that I may fly from this place, too dear and too dangerous to me. So long as I remain here, I shall seek for nothing but to see her sweet face, listen for nothing but to hear her voice, as I have done these months past. I shall not return till evening; and then, Sophia, you

shall tell me what it is my duty to do. You shall bid me leave our home, or assure me that our thoughts are groundless."

Mrs. Margraf read this rhapsody with profound consideration. She was not prepared for the depth and decision of her young brother's resolution. Nothing further had entered into her schemes than the design of keeping up the idea she had planted in his mind by a careful and constant false colouring of Paul's trifling attentions to Miss Arnold, until Rufus could be safely removed from her sphere, and plunged into the distractions and novelties of college life. It had become necessary to probe Paul, and to enlist his affections and fears in order to carry out the medicinal and restorative measures required by Rufus's disorder. But the operation needed a skilful hand, and Mrs. Margraf strung up her nerves to a strong and patient resolve before descending to meet her elder brother at breakfast.

Dr. Lockley (by which title he was known

throughout the country) was already seated at the breakfast-table when Mrs. Margraf entered, with a book before him, of which the first leaves only were cut; its scent of new letter-press and binding was as agreeable to him as the fragrance of the jessamine, whose late blossoms still clustered round the window. He glanced up absently with a morning smile and greeting, but subsided again into a profound attention to the volume in his hand, without observing the look of grave anxiety which sat upon her face. Even the absence of Rufus from his customary place did not strike him, until Mrs. Margraf rang the bell, and desired the servant who answered the summons to let Mr. Rufus know that breakfast was nearly over. The girl opened her eyes widely, but Mrs. Margraf's steady gaze checked her exclamation of surprise.

“If you please, ma'am,” she answered, in a slightly resentful tone, “Mr. Rufus went out the first thing this morning in the boat, and I brought you——”

“ You may go, Sarah,” said Mrs. Margraf ; and the girl withdrew.

Mrs. Margraf’s expression deepened into an air of great solicitude, and she laid her soft, plump fingers upon Paul’s wrist, as he stretched out his hand for his cup of coffee.

“ Paul,” she said, the tears standing in her calm eyes as she lifted them to her brother’s face, “ I want to speak to you about Rufus. I am very much concerned about him.”

“ What is the matter with the boy ? ” asked Paul, disturbed and troubled in an instant. And he laid his book down upon the table, with the paper-knife between its leaves, that he might resume his reading at any moment.

“ We have had so much difficulty and care with him,” pursued Mrs. Margraf. “ Do you remember how five years since we despaired of his life, and you and I watched beside him in turns, trembling for and dreading his death every hour ? Oh, Paul ! the boy is very precious to me ! ”

“ And to me, Sophia,” replied Paul, briefly.

“You said then that any great emotion which was not one of gladness would endanger his life or reason, and I have ever since guarded him from every distress and excitement. Paul, Rufus has formed a most unfortunate attachment, in spite of all my care. To a boy of his ardent nature and susceptibility, with his delicacy of health, it is a very serious matter. You said, referring to this very misfortune, that a disappointment like your own might be fatal to him.”

Paul's grave face was deeply suffused for a minute, as the memory of his own adverse love, long since forgotten, crossed his mind ; but the recollection of the bitter anguish and mortification he had then suffered quickened his apprehensions for Rufus.

“Sophia,” he said, anxiously, “it would be almost an irreparable shock to a lad like Rufus. With whom has he fallen in love, that it should be so unfortunate ? Any one beneath him ? I had fixed upon little Flossy Vale in my own mind ; but men will choose

for themselves. Who is it, of the few girls whom Rufus knows ?”

“Miss Arnold, Aunt Aspen’s amanuensis,” replied Mrs. Margraf, watching diligently the effect of her announcement.

“Let them be married,” cried Paul, promptly, and with an air of sudden relief. “Why, Sophia, I see nothing unfortunate in that. She is a nice girl, isn’t she ? A pleasant, unassuming, sensible young lady ; pretty, too, and refined. A very superior girl, and I admire Ruf’s discernment. It would be the making of him to marry such a woman as Miss Arnold.”

Paul’s face beamed with satisfaction, and his hand hovered towards his book, as if the whole matter was definitely settled.

“But, Paul,” exclaimed his sister, “Miss Arnold is older than Rufus, and has no money ; and both you and I have fixed upon Flossy Vale for him. I cannot consent to this marriage.”

“Rufus need not look after money,”

answered Paul. "He will take orders, and I shall give him the next presentation to Ryton, which will be £300 a year ; and I shall never marry. A man nearing forty is too wedded to his own habits to wish to give them up. To make Rufus comfortable, I would settle a certain income upon him when he marries, if his wife has no fortune. As for Miss Arnold being a little older, it is a matter of taste. We have no right to object to it. Some men find more mental equality and companionship in women older than themselves. If Rufus looks for that, rather than mere youth and bloom, I for one do not blame him. They have my full and free consent to be married as soon as they please, and I will manage their money matters for them. My poor Rufus, at least, shall be happy."

He left his seat, and was escaping towards the glass-door leading on to the terrace, when Mrs. Margraf arrested his departure. She had listened thunderstruck to the perfectly willing consent of Paul to a marriage which

would blight all the best prospects of Rufus, though he also had thought of the youthful heiress, who was being trained and educated under her supervision to become the wife of her young brother. It was with tears of real chagrin and dread that she addressed Paul again.

“Stay a minute or two, and counsel me,” she cried. “When I said Miss Arnold was older than Rufus, I was thinking how seldom a woman loves a man younger than herself. She does not care for him, Paul, while he is wildly and passionately in love with her. He was not in bed all last night, and this morning he was off—heaven knows where!—before sunrise. Already his love amounts almost to frenzy, and I shudder to think of the consequences of an unfortunate attachment to him.”

“But what can we do?” asked Paul, seating himself beside his sister, and looking perplexed and unhappy. “I am ready for any effort to secure Ruf’s happiness; but if

the young lady will not have him, we have no power of coercing her. Still, if she have no previous attachment, I shall encourage him to persevere. Any man may marry any woman, you know."

Mrs. Margraf sat thoughtful, with her plump, white hand laid upon Paul's arm, to prevent him from trying to escape again, whilst her foot tapped angrily and impatiently upon the carpet. It never should be, this unsuitable, disadvantageous marriage; yet his last words struck a chill to her heart, while they grated upon her ear. She knew enough of a woman's weakness of resolution when she is ardently beloved, to make her dread Miss Arnold's acceptance of Rufus. In her place she would not herself consider the few years of seniority any great disparity.

"No, Paul," she said, boldly, "any man cannot marry any woman. You misunderstand Miss Arnold. I could almost pledge my life that she would smile at Rufus and his suit as the foolish dream of a boy. She is

old beyond her years—very grave and deliberate. But there is one way by which you can save Rufus ; you, Paul, not me. If you can enlist his sympathies ; if you could make his giving up of this love a sacrifice to your happiness ; if you would appeal to the higher and nobler impulses of his nature to conquer in himself this hopeless attachment ; he might be very wretched for a time, but there would be no danger either to his life or reason, and I tremble for both now.”

“ But again I ask you how I can do this ?” said Paul, with a look of the deepest concern. His book had fallen to the floor, but he paid no attention to it. When his fears were once aroused for Rufus, whom in truth he loved more than any other being, he could not readily dismiss them from his mind.

“ Paul,” replied Mrs. Margraf, fixing her eyes steadily and quietly upon his, with a certain tranquil power of which she knew the full force, though her spirit quailed a little within her, “ Rufus’s love for you is only

second to this passion for Miss Arnold. You read books more than men. Hearken to me. If Rufus believed that you cared for her, he would feel it almost a sacred joy to give her up to you."

"Me!" cried Paul, starting to his feet. "I care for Miss Arnold! Sophia, you know that I never see a woman! They are nothing to me. Since Harriet deceived me, I have not wasted a thought upon any one of them. Not that I continue to regret her; the trouble has passed away long since, like a boy's foolish dream, as you call it. No; I wish Rufus to marry. He needs some careful, tender, fussing woman about him; but it is impossible for me to think of such a thing."

"Did I say that I wished you to do any such thing?" asked his sister, peevishly. "I only want you to let Rufus believe that you feel an attachment to the girl. Three months after he has gone to college he will have banished her from his thoughts, if he thinks

it is his duty to you to do so ; but as long as there is anything to hope or fear, his passion will continue to prey upon him. Paul, you have always trusted to my management and my knowledge of him. I see no other chance for Rufus but to make it a solemn, chivalrous, sacred duty for him to regard Miss Arnold only as his sister."

"Then what do you propose?" asked Paul again, looking down upon her scheming face, which turned to him with the same persuasive, placid power in her steadfast eyes.

"Merely this," she replied, with an inward shiver, as she took the final plunge into her proposed plot. "Enter into a nominal engagement with Miss Arnold. It could be broken off at any time. She will not be in this neighbourhood long, for I shall take care the Selection is finished soon, and then it would die naturally. Nor should it be made at all public ; only ourselves should know of it, and your name would not become the topic of idle gossip. If Rufus believed you

were engaged to Miss Arnold, it would be his salvation."

Paul Lockley looked down so steadily into her upraised eyes that she dropped their lids, and moved restlessly in her lounging chair. She did not see the full scorn and anger that swept across his handsome features, with something more than the habitual contempt with which he accustomed himself to regard all women.

"So," he said, very slowly, "you would have Paul Lockley descend to deceive a woman. To enlist Ruf's honour against his love, you would have me forfeit mine! I am obliged to you, Sophia, for your estimate of my character."

"Oh, Paul! Paul!" she answered, with a mocking laugh, "how vain men are! Dunce! It must be done with Miss Arnold's own consent. It is a conspiracy against Rufus, not against her. Did you imagine that you had only to utter one false profession, and Miss Arnold was ready to be deceived by it, and

to fling herself into your arms? Are you, then, so sure that if you offered yourself—poor, eccentric book-worm as you are—that she would be in so great a hurry to accept you?”

The colour in Paul's pale, studious face was a deep bronze as his sister laughed out her taunt. He was keenly stung by it, and she saw the advantage she had gained. The light she threw upon his eager renunciation of her scheme was mortifying, but very real. A vision had flitted before him of himself acting a lover's part hypocritically, and of the young lady he falsely wooed reciprocating his attachment with a flattering affection; so swiftly had the vision crossed his imagination that he had foreseen the end of bitter disappointment and blighted hopes to the deceived girl. He winced under Mrs. Margraf's raillery.

“Manage it as you please,” he said, stooping to pick up his fallen volume; “only make use of me as a tool as little as possible. I have no talent for acting anything.”

He waited for no further consultation, but strode out of the room, and retreated to his library, where, after some lingering frowns and mutterings, he forgot his mortification in the search after some Greek root. Mrs. Margraf was satisfied with her success, which was more complete than she had dared to expect. There remained, however, the still more difficult task of moulding Miss Arnold to her wishes. An engagement between her and Paul would destroy at once every delusive fancy that might lurk in the heart of Rufus, and would render it impossible that the young lady herself should yield to his impassioned and persevering devotion. As soon as Rufus said to himself, "There is no hope!" the restoration would begin. In a little time, a few brief months at the best, he would be fully freed from his unfortunate and disadvantageous love.

CHAPTER VII.

NEVER had Mrs. Margraf's comely face worn a more bland aspect than when, after her interview with Paul, she summoned the gardener from his work to row her across Monk's Ferry. Her clear grey eyes were fathomless, but tranquil; her smile, as she conversed with her dependant, was serenely peaceful. Rufus, who had strayed no farther from home than the long, narrow osier-bed in the middle of the river; hiding among their slim, feathery stems, where he could watch every moment of the day the oriel window in which his darling sat at work, and could almost catch the sad light of her eyes and the paleness of her weary face: Rufus in his lurking-place heard the splash of the oars, and looked out upon his trusted sister. What

could be her errand to the Priory this morning? Was there any hope for him in the undisturbed tranquillity of her dear face? Or was it only that her uniform kindness caused her to assume an interest in the servant's affairs, while her heart was troubled for his sake? All would be settled by sunset. Either a full-orbed joy would dawn upon his future life, or an utter blankness, which he dared not think of, would fall upon him; but for the present, if he watched closely, he would see by his darling's movements, the very moment that his sister entered Mrs. Aspen's study.

The boy had little idea of wooing, beyond the dumb, distant constancy of watching. Ever since his gaze had first fallen upon Miss Arnold's grave, fair face, and his ear had caught the first low tone of her voice, he had been treasuring up every glance and word as some precious trust committed exclusively to his keeping. He had lain, as I said before, for whole hours, when shut out from her

presence, upon the lawn beneath the window listening to the indistinct rhythm of her voice, as she read aloud from Tasso. In the harvest-fields, whether close beside her or removed to the rank of the reapers, his face had always sought hers faithfully; every night since he had detected the gleam of her midnight light amid the darkened pile of the Priory he had watched like a sentry from his window on the other side of the river; and loving the solitary beam, had never wearied until the extinction of its light released him from his voluntary vigil. This morning at sunrise he had determined to place leagues between him and the place where his fate was to be decided; but when his boat stopped, as of its own accord, under the oriel window, he could not break through the spell which bound him. To see her again; to watch her, it might be, for the last time, without any twinge of conscience, or any sense of wrong done to his brother; to venture upon an agonised dream of possible

happiness while there was still an uncertainty,—he could not deny himself this last pleasure. He crept in among the green wands of the osier-bed, and lying there concealed, watched her with mute faithfulness, and a keener sense of sweetness in the stolen delight.

There was a stir in the oriel window soon after Rufus saw his sister disappear within the door of the Priory. Miss Arnold rose from her seat, and stood with her hand resting upon the desk, until Mrs. Margraf approached her with an affectionate embrace. There was always a degree of embarrassment and reserve in the young lady's manner while in the presence of Mrs. Margraf, though the latter was at all times kind and genial towards her; but her constraint was naturally increased since she had detected—as what woman could fail to detect?—the deep and ardent, yet unconfessed, love she had awakened in Rufus; and she remained shyly in her own place until Rufus, from his post of

sentry, saw his sister salute her with a fondling kiss.

“You are pale, my love,” said Mrs. Margraf, caressingly, “and your eyes are heavy. Rufus tells me that he sees your candle burning till after midnight. Surely, aunt, you are not so hurried about the Selection as to keep Miss Arnold so late at work?”

“Certainly not,” replied Mrs. Aspen. “My dear, I had no idea that you continued writing to so late an hour. I assure you, Sophia, I look forward with dread to the conclusion of the Selection for many reasons; but not the least is, lest Miss Arnold should consider her engagement with me at an end, and persist in leaving our quiet home. I am willing to dally with my poems as long as Miss Arnold will stop with us.”

“That being so,” said Mrs. Margraf, “I am going to carry her away with me for a day’s rest. I am alone, for Paul is of no good in the house, and Rufus is gone out for

the day, My love, you cannot refuse me, or I shall think you are afraid of being dull without Rufus."

It was a skilful touch. Miss Arnold accepted the invitation at once, with a smile almost as cold and placid as her own, and immediately prepared for her visit. Rufus saw them come down together to the ferry-boat with a sharp pang. It could portend but one thing; as the boat glided slowly past him, bringing her sweet and long-watched face close beneath his gaze, he closed his aching eyes to the sight: burying his face upon the ground, he did not lift it again to the sunlight until long after the boat had gained the opposite shore, and Mrs. Margraf and Miss Arnold had disappeared beneath the over-arching hedge-rows of the ferry lane.

Mrs. Margraf exerted herself to play the part of a familiar hostess to perfection. She carried her guest with her into the pleasant kitchen, and the store-room adjoining it, and

called upon her to help in giving out the provisions for the day as if she were in a home and dwelling of her own. Mrs. Margraf's notable housewifery was one of her accomplishments upon which she prided herself; so natural was she in her triumphant exhibition of the skill with which she managed her household, that Miss Arnold's shyness vanished, and the reserve with which she had hitherto repelled her friendly advances changed to a gentle cordiality. The feminine instinct of housewifery was common ground, on which they could meet one another as equals; and Mrs. Margraf was careful that the favourable impression should not die away. The quiet hours glided by in an even and smooth interchange of conversation; and Miss Arnold felt no awkwardness or embarrassment when, towards the close of the evening, she found herself walking arm-in-arm with Mrs. Margraf, as they wandered up and down the terrace, with a show of most confidential intimacy.

“My dear,” said Mrs. Margraf, pausing before a rose-tree to break off a withered flower, and speaking in a careless, incidental tone, “my aunt is a little, just a little, too fond of getting up a scene. Now, I thought yesterday there was just a trifling touch of the theatrical about old Mr. Vale’s appeal to poor Rufus.”

“I did not notice it,” answered Miss Arnold, quietly.

“Of course,” she continued, “I am greatly gratified by his opinion that Rufus is worthy to be his successor, as he surely is. He is the best, purest-hearted, truest boy ; no one fitter to be a Christian pastor. You know, my love, Rufus is really like my own son. Poor fellow, he has no property—positively not a penny of his own, and I am naturally anxious for some career to open for him. Fairfield belongs solely to my brother Paul ; and, though he is very good to both of us, we have no right to expect any more from him than our college expenses and the next pre-

sentation to the living. To be sure, till Mr. Vale's death, he will be only a curate ; but then he will live at home with us, and his salary, however small, will be enough for his very simple wants."

Mrs. Margraf paused ; but her companion was intently watching a hawk, which poised with quivering wings above the bed of osiers.

"Even the living of Ryton is but a small one," she resumed, in a regretful tone ; "not more than three hundred a year, and the fees are nothing—scarcely anybody marries or dies here. Rufus must look out for a wife with a fortune. He is in no way fitted to push his way in the world ; it would be his ruin to fall in love with some fortuneless girl."

Mrs. Margraf glanced aside at Miss Arnold, whose eyes had come back to the flower-beds at her feet, and were bent thoughtfully upon them. She seemed to be considering some important subject, for her brows were slightly knit, and an air of indecision pervaded her

features. Suddenly she looked up straight into Mrs. Margraf's face, with a world of truth and honesty shining in her eyes.

"Mrs. Margraf," she said, with a quickly passing blush, "I am going to speak to you as if I knew nothing of life or human nature, and was merely some unsophisticated country girl. Perhaps it is living out here so much in God's free air that gives me the courage to be simply frank and truthful. Do not be offended, and do not think me very vain; but I believe—I am afraid—that your younger brother is beginning to think too much of me. We have been very often together, and you know it is no very strange thing for a young man to fix his first fancy upon a woman older than himself. It is possible you may have detected it?"

"Has Rufus spoken to you?" asked Mrs. Margraf, evasively.

"I would not have him speak to me of this for worlds," she exclaimed, clasping her hands together over Mrs. Margraf's arm;

“nothing could give me more pain. I am older than my years ; far too old to rest my poor, weary, careworn heart against his young and happy one. I could not do Rufus the wrong of listening to him for a moment.”

“Would it be impossible ?” began Mrs. Margraf.

“Impossible !” she answered, excitedly. “I have no love like that to give to him. No one like Rufus has ever crossed my path before—so simple, so earnest, so enthusiastic, and I care for him very much as a dear, younger brother ; but I say again I would not do him the wrong to love him if I could. In a few years he will find some one better suited to him, brighter and happier than I am.”

Miss Arnold paused in her rapid speech, and sank upon a garden-seat, looking up to Mrs. Margraf with entreating eyes. She had listened with great, though concealed, satisfaction, yet she called up to her obedient features an aspect of grave concern. She

seated herself beside Miss Arnold, encircling her with her arm, while she urged the suit of Rufus with a fair show of eloquent earnestness.

“Mrs. Margraf,” said Miss Arnold at last, averting her face, and trembling perceptibly to the arm thrown around her, “you know how likely every woman is to yield to a love ardently and perseveringly urged. I do not pretend to be wiser or stronger than other women. I am neither strong-minded nor self-willed. If Rufus pleaded long enough I might consent, but I should ever afterwards regret my weakness. I should feel that I had marred his life by my feebleness of resolution. Judge whether I could make him happy if I felt that we were unsuitably and foolishly married.”

An inward tremor ran through Mrs. Margraf as Miss Arnold spoke. Swiftly across her mind there flashed all the advantage of such a marriage to the homeless and friendless girl at her side. If these were pressed

upon her with all the earnestness which Rufus would employ, what chance was there that she would continue firm to her judgment? A vision of the handsome, animated face of the boy, lit up with the eager spirit of a first love, which he would plead with every tender intonation of his voice, passed before her; and she could not believe that Miss Arnold, or any other woman, would have the power to refuse him. The folly, she thought, would be on the side of rejection, especially from a poor dependant upon the caprices of others. For half a moment she felt a gleam of admiration for Miss Arnold's candour and decision; but she was too engrossed with the peril to her own schemes to indulge in any wasteful wonder at her conduct.

“A thousand thanks for your frankness, my love,” she said; “the happiness of Rufus is the great object of my life. Young men change—more so after marriage than before. I know if you became his wife, and ever saw reason to suspect that he regretted being

bound to one older and more worn in life than himself, every chance of happiness would flee. But we could never make him foresee and believe that he will change. If we told him our fears, he would only answer by a hundred vehement assertions that they were groundless. Paul and I were discussing this subject this morning in the very same way that we are now doing ; and Paul positively trembles for the effect his passion may have upon Rufus. He is so delicately and sensitively organised that a disappointment of this kind, unless softened in some way, will without doubt prey upon his mind or his health. I believe Paul would almost rather give his judgment for your union with all its probabilities of unhappiness, than run the risk of such a blow to Rufus."

Miss Arnold had drawn herself away from Mrs. Margraf's encircling arm, and the colour mantled up to the braids of her golden hair, as she heard Dr. Lockley's sentiments. She tossed from her the rose which she held in

her hand, with an impatient gesture, and raised her head with an air of offended pride and dignity.

“Neither you nor Dr. Lockley need fear this marriage,” she said, shortly. “After all, it is I who have to accept or reject ; and I reject it altogether.”

“My love,” cried Mrs. Margraf, in alarm, “I understood you so before, and I assure you I admire your prudence and foresight, so unusual in us women. But if you really care for Rufus, as you say, you will soften this blow for him ; even, love, if it be at some sacrifice of your own pride. I dare not tell him abruptly that you reject his love, for that would drive him to despair. If we could only change it to a brother’s affection.”

“Yes,” said the girl, sighing, “if he would be content with caring for me as a sister, his friendship would be very pleasant to me ; and I have need of friends.”

“Let him regard you as his sister,” replied Mrs. Margraf ; “let him believe it to be his

duty to think of you only as a sister, and then he will conquer himself. I know Rufus well enough to be sure that so long as there is any hope or possibility of winning you, he will never give up the pursuit: the very difficulties in his way will serve to increase his earnestness. But if he believed it to be a crime to cherish this love, he would set all his true heart to conquer it, and in a little while the danger would be passed."

"But what can I do?" asked Miss Arnold.

Mrs. Margraf laid her velvet hand upon Miss Arnold's shoulder, and lowered her voice to a soft and persuasive tone.

"My love," she said, "everything rests upon your consent to a scheme of Paul's and mine. There is but one way by which our poor boy's heart can be detached from you. The first sound of it will shock you; but listen to me patiently. Let Rufus believe that Paul is attracted by you, is attached to you,—is, in short, engaged to you; and at that moment the victory will have begun. It

will be a trial to your pride, I know,—your proper, maidenly pride ; but Paul is a gentleman, my love. You may trust yourself implicitly in his hands ; and it would be no disgrace to you, were it known throughout the country, to be betrothed to Paul Lockley of Fairfield.”

With all her boasted penetration, Mrs. Margraf could not read the expression of the face turned steadily towards her. Every trace of colour had faded, leaving the cheeks very pale and wan ; the dilating eyes were deepening into sadness, yet there was a tinge of scorn dwelling upon the troubled mouth. She was in no hurry to answer ; before doing so, she glanced along the front of the house, and her gaze rested for a minute upon the window of the library.

“Dr. Lockley is willing to act that falsehood ?” she said, in an accent of indignation.

“Falsehood !” echoed Mrs. Margraf.

“Yes. Dr. Lockley is so fearful of this foolish and imprudent attachment, that he

will even descend to imposture. Well, be it so. Everybody cheats in something. We all have our secrets to conceal ; we all act a part not our own. Even Rufus will do the same by-and-by, and will have no reason to complain of our deceit. There is truth nowhere."

A bitter and cynical expression gleamed upon her quiet face, but it passed away almost before Mrs. Margraf could mark it, and she smiled again faintly. Mrs. Margraf gathered encouragement from the smile.

"My love," she said, oracularly, "just consider what the truth would do in the present case. If I told Rufus frankly, 'Miss Arnold does not love you, but she says that if you are earnest and persevering enough, you are sure to win her at last ;' what effect would it have upon him ? My dear, we are too refined for the naked truth in these days. It must wear a decorous drapery at all times, especially when there is some end to be gained. But we will not call your contract with Paul

a falsehood. Let us consider it a reality for the time being ; when it is needed, you shall have the right of breaking it off in any way you please that will satisfy your pride. My love, you will lay us under an everlasting obligation if you will join with us in diminishing Rufus's disappointment."

"I will do as you and Dr. Lockley think best," said Miss Arnold, languidly ; and Mrs. Margraf was content not to push her success by further argument. The sun had set, and in Paul's library was already lighted the student's lamp. Any minute might now bring Rufus home while her purpose was yet unaccomplished, and she dreaded the effect of his appearance upon a girl who owned that she was not strong-minded enough to resist his importunity, though she might distrust his constancy. Once pledged to the course planned out, Miss Arnold would cut off all possibility of a change of mind. Having allowed herself to be regarded as the betrothed of Paul, she could never give ear to the love

of Rufus, even if he could be base enough to urge it. The success of the artifice depended upon its instant consummation. No sooner had Miss Arnold murmured her reluctant and languid consent, than she drew her hand within her arm, and pressing it to her side with an affectionate and reassuring pressure, led her at once into the house, up the broad oak staircase, to the door of the library.

CHAPTER VIII.

DR. LOCKLEY of Fairfield had but one extravagance. It lay in the direction of his studies. He could not deny himself the possession of any new book upon which his mind was set. He gathered about him whatever could heighten the luxury and enjoyment of his life of literary ease and seclusion. His library was the largest and finest apartment of the dwelling which he had inherited ; and it was furnished with the least thought to expense. At one end of it a window opened upon a balcony which was kept filled with sweet-scented flowers, whose perfume pleased him unconsciously. The costly book-cases were laden with volumes bound in scarlet and purple, and glittering with his monogram gilded beneath each title. The carpet was

of the softest pile, that no foot-fall might grate upon his ear, either of his own or those of his few guests ; the door turned noiselessly upon its hinges, marking only by a slight click, which could not disturb his abstraction, the casual entrance of an intruder.

The noiseless door opened, and Mrs. Margraf and Miss Arnold stood for a minute or two upon the threshold ; the latter restraining the rapid steps of her conductor. A lamp stood in the centre of a table, which was strewn with books and papers lying about in careless confusion. The chair placed before it was empty ; the student was standing at the farthest end of the room, with an open book in his hand, which he had reached from the shelf before him ; becoming absorbed in its pages he remained there, reading by the light of a candle which he had set down heedlessly upon a heap of books at his side. The balcony-window was open, and the swaying of the curtains fanned the flame of the candle, and fluttered the hair just beginning to wear

a tinge of grey, which hung thickly over his bowed forehead ; but he neither heeded the flickering of the light, nor raised his hand to push away the overhanging locks. A long, loose morning robe was wrapped round his tall figure, and reached almost to the feet which were thrust into a pair of slippers ; for he had not quitted his retreat since he had escaped it in the morning. Miss Arnold stood upon the threshold trembling with agitation, until Mrs. Margraf grew impatient, and dragged her unwilling steps across the carpeted floor.

“ Paul ! ” she said, “ Paul ! ”

The student answered by a gesture of disquietude and recoil from interruption, yet roused so far from his abstraction as to push back his heavy hair, and to place the candle in a more secure position. But he was still too rapt in his study to turn round to see who addressed him ; the only word he uttered was a peevish exclamation of “ Presently ! presently ! ”

“ Paul,” continued Mrs. Margraf, with un-

usual hardihood, "here is Miss Arnold from the Priory waiting to speak to you."

He came forward, with his air of well-bred courtesy, though he kept his volume in his hand, and held the page open where he had been reading. Even he could not fail to observe the painful agitation of the girl who clung to his sister's arm, and he took her passive hand in his with an expression of surprise and solicitude.

"Is there anything amiss at the Priory?" he asked, leading her to his own arm-chair, and drawing another beside her, upon which he seated himself with the professional air of a physician. "Or does anything ail you, Miss Arnold?"

"We have been having a little talk together," said Mrs. Margraf, leaning over the back of the chair, and laying her hand, soft but firm, upon the girl's bowed head, "we have been talking about Rufus, so dear to all of us; and Miss Arnold most generously consents to aid our plans."

Paul's countenance fell as the morning's conversation returned to his memory, and he shrank away for an instant; but the white face and downcast eyes upon which his inquiring gaze rested reassured him.

"My dear young lady," he said, in the tone and manner of an elderly adviser, "we do not wish to distress you in any way. The scheme may be a good one; but if it be painful to you; and I can very well believe that it is; let Rufus bear his own burden. He would not thank us for sparing him any suffering by imposing it upon you. You must not be led into this affair without your own free consent."

"Miss Arnold does consent," replied Mrs. Margraf, as she remained silent. "It is but a very simple matter after all. A mere ruse among us three to save my poor boy from a lasting sorrow. In six months he will have completed his self-conquest; and then this nominal contract will come to an end."

"Miss Arnold," said Paul, "your feelings

shall not be sacrificed to any fancy of ours. Let me hear your own voice. You have yet to learn that finesse and management are necessary in conducting the affairs of even a small household. Perhaps you judge that the frankest and simplest way would be to inform Rufus at once, and plainly, what your feelings towards him are ?”

There was a tone of sarcasm in his voice, which brought the colour back to Miss Arnold's cheeks, and tingled in the ears of Mrs. Margraf, who waited breathlessly for her answer ; but still she did not speak.

“ Cannot you love Rufus ?” he asked, after a few moments' pause, and addressing her in a softer and lower key. “ We have been thinking of him as a boy ; but he would not appear so to you. Yesterday I saw that he had shot up into a fine, handsome, manly-looking young fellow. You may trust him, Miss Arnold ; never was lad truer and more faithful in his affection ; there is nothing fickle about him. My sister tells me you are

older than he ; but the disparity cannot be great ; not so grave and important as if your minds and tastes differed. If you can be true to him, accept his love. Once let your hand rest in his as pledged to him, and trust me, Rufus will prove himself worthy of your confidence."

Mrs. Margraf shuddered to hear Paul thus pleading his young brother's suit ; she was about to interpose some qualifying speech ; but he raised his hand with a gesture of silence.

" Perhaps," he continued, in a harder tone, " you know something of the world, and may reflect that he is in no position to marry. Attend to me, Miss Arnold. I shall never marry, but I have an earnest wish that my brother should. Whenever he chooses to take a wife to himself, it is my purpose to settle upon him out of my estate such a sum, as will make his income including the living of Ryton equal to my own. It will be sufficient for a country clergyman's family ;

eventually Fairfield will descend to him or his children. I tell you this that you may not reject Rufus with the idea that he has no fortune."

Miss Arnold glanced up into Paul's cloudy face with a keen and indignant protest in her look ; and he smiled back with a more genial expression.

"I understand you," he replied. "You are young enough to disdain prudence. If Rufus is on the losing side, it is not on that account. Well then, my dear Miss Arnold, if the poor lad has no chance, it will be kind of you to destroy his hopes at once. They say hope is the food of love. I know nothing that would more surely effect this than the present scheme. Mrs. Margraf will be good enough to do all the active manœuvring for us. You are only to give a tacit and passive assent."

Paul had said all he had to say, and he waited for Miss Arnold to answer ; glancing discontentedly at his open book, and at the

scattered paper on the table. Mrs. Margraf was silent also. The girl's face was pretty enough to see with its changes of colour, and quivering of lip and eyelash ; but neither of them was looking at it. At last, after several fruitless efforts to speak, her voice was heard in a low but distinct tone.

“ I am willing to do anything you may judge best,” she said. “ I trust myself to you.”

Paul started, and looked down again upon her. There was something both in tone and words which attracted him ; and the face, shy and averted, did not lessen the charm. There flashed across his mind the thought that there might be something not altogether disagreeable in having even a nominal claim upon this young and pretty woman, who could not lift her eyes to his ; and he laughed a short, pleased laugh.

“ I suppose I must call you by your Christian name,” he said. “ What is it ? ”

“ Doris,” she murmured.

which he would gladly escape. Doris was sensitive and proud. Yet a close observer might have suspected that it was something more than sensitiveness and pride which caused the tears to fall unheeded upon her clasped hands, as she leaned against the sill of the window through which the last twilight was fading ; shut out from the study of Paul, and dreading to descend and meet the eager greeting of Rufus.

Mrs. Margraf waited patiently until the paroxysm subsided, not prolonging it by any word of proffered sympathy, until Doris dried her tears, and signified her readiness to descend. Her success was fully as great as she had dared to hope ; her heart throbbed with triumph as she reflected that this step the girl had no power to retrace. Let Rufus be once assured that she was betrothed to his brother, and never could he regard her as one who might become his own wife. Even if Doris should regret her decision, no explanation could set her right in his eyes. The

truth would be intolerable to him as being a treacherous imposture against his most treasured and most delicate feelings ; the supposition that she could change after loving, and being loved by Paul, would destroy all his confidence in her. The more keenly Mrs. Margraf scrutinized her rapidly matured plan, the more pleased was she with its perfect fitness.

At the drawing-room door Mrs. Margraf stood back that Doris might precede her ; and she entered swiftly, crossing the spacious room before Rufus could take a step to meet her. He stood gazing upon her approach with his dark eyes deepening into a look of anxiety, and his pale face growing whiter with the dread which her unconcealed agitation produced. Her hands were extended towards him as if she were almost seeking pardon and pity from him, while her eyes were filling fast again with tears. So quickly had she moved, that Mrs. Margraf had scarcely followed her and closed the door, before Doris caught both his hands in hers, and bowing

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down her head upon them, cried in a sorrowful voice, "Oh, Rufus! Rufus!"

He understood it in an instant; the pitiful voice, the clasping, tender, sisterly hands. If Doris had felt other than as a sister to him, it would have been his part to seek her, to speak, to clasp her hands in his. This very caress, the soft, tearful cheek laid upon his hands, was a sign that she was to be nothing to him of all he had been hoping and dreaming. He felt heart-sick and giddy; and Doris felt the tremor that shivered through his frame. But he had been schooling himself all day in the thought of Paul; of Paul, happy and joyous, after long years of lonely suffering. He would not mar their gladness in its first bright moments. Paul had sent her alone to him that he might gain some strength before he met him with his congratulations. They were worthy of one another; and his self-diffidence had never allowed him to look upon himself as merited to win the love of Doris. His pulses

throbbled tumultuously, his eyes were dimmed, and his voice unsteady; yet he had self-command enough to lift up the bowed head, and take the clasping hands into his own grasp, while he murmured, falteringly, "God for ever bless you, my sister Doris!"

He drew her to a sofa, and sat down beside her, still holding her hands in his, and gazing sorrowfully but steadily at her down-cast face. The boy's manner had assumed a noble self-control and dignity; a lofty surrendering to Paul of all his own most secret hopes, with such kindness and grace as should cast no cloud upon the lustre of the new joy. He thought how Paul's lips had been pressed upon the crimson cheek and quivering mouth which were averted from his scrutiny; but he would suffer no grudge of jealousy or envy to linger in his mind. He might be passing into a region of great darkness and desolation, but they would dwell in the light; he wished to look open-eyed while sitting hand in hand with

Doris upon the halo that surrounded them, before the thick gloom which he felt instinctively was about to envelop himself, should draw between them its impenetrable veil. He bade passion stand aside for this hour ; the time of its victory would surely come.

“Doris,” he said, in a tone of unutterable tenderness, “from my inmost soul I wish you and Paul every happiness. He is so good, so true and honourable ; you may trust him implicitly. And this is a pleasant home ; I know it, who have lived here from my boyhood. I have been very happy here ; and so will you be, my sister Doris. It is yours now. Don’t you feel how happy you will be ? ”

Doris answered only by her tears.

“I wish,” he said, in a deeper and more pathetic voice, “I wish to hear you say for once only that you love Paul. I know you do, my darling ; but I want to hear the words from your own lips, as you might

“speak them to him. Whisper them to me ; they will give me strength and comfort. I need comfort, Doris ; I am going out into the world ; alone and homeless for the first time, to fight my own battle in solitude. Say to me, ‘Rufus, I love your brother Paul!’”

“Oh, I cannot !” she sobbed, “I cannot !”

“I am making you unhappy,” he said, regretfully. “I am selfish, Doris. But I know you love him ; so noble and clever as he is. How could you help it ? When you are my sister you will know him as I do, but not before. I did not think any one was worthy of you ; but I never thought of Paul.”

“Rufus !” interposed Mrs. Margraf, “I am amazed at you ; you are distressing Miss Arnold. You have positively made the tears come. My dear boy, this is not the way a man congratulates, and welcomes his future sister.”

“I have not been a man long,” he an-

swered, smiling faintly, "and Doris will forgive my boyish talk. Ah! my dearest, be quite sure that I am glad of this. If you should ever doubt it, darling, think how many years Paul has dwelt alone in sadness, and say to yourself, 'Rufus is glad that his brother suffers no longer!' If you see me looking gloomy sometimes; perhaps so soon as to-morrow; think that it is because I have some solemn fears of this unknown world I am going to try—some awe resting upon my spirit when I think of myself as a teacher of others. I, who was but a boy yesterday."

The deep silence that followed was broken only by the sobs which Doris could no longer restrain; until Mrs. Margraf drew the curtains over the darkened windows, and raised the light of the lamp. Doris roused herself, and still averting her face from Rufus, said in a constrained voice that it was time for her to return to the Priory. It had hitherto been his office to accompany

her, and row her across the Monk's Ferry ; but to-night he said, with a heavy sigh, relinquishing her hand as he spoke, that he would go and tell Paul she was waiting for him to take her home.

The vivid excitement and exaltation of his mind had not yet subsided, though darker and sadder grew the gloom that was drawing nearer to him every moment. He paused in the open doorway of the library, as Doris had done, gazing wistfully, and with the tears for the first time burning under his eyelids, at the absorbed occupation of his brother, who sat at his desk making notes from a book which lay open at his side. No flush of gladness was on his face, no sparkle of triumph in his eye. It was the same grave, studious countenance upon which Rufus had often looked, when he had stolen into Paul's retreat with some boyish trouble, which had never failed to meet with the student's attention and interest. Rufus remembered these troubles now, and calling

up a smile to his face, he advanced, and laid his hand upon Paul's shoulder.

"Brother Paul!" he said, in the same tender, pathetic voice in which he had spoken to Doris. "Doris is waiting for you to take her home."

"Doris!" echoed Paul, looking up with an air of bewilderment, and keeping his pen poised over his manuscript. "Doris?"

A dark shade gathered upon the face of Rufus, and he spoke sadly and slowly.

"Do you not care for her more than these?" he asked, pushing aside the papers. "Paul, is she not more precious to you than all your studies?"

"Oh! I understand you now," said Paul, guiltily. "You must remember what a poor book-worm I am. Rufus, my boy, tell me frankly what you think of it?"

"I think you will be very happy," answered Rufus, meeting Paul's eye steadily; "but, Paul, you must be very thoughtful of her. She is sensitive and tender-hearted, and

she will suffer from neglect. Your books should not be her rivals. Promise me, Paul, that you will make any sacrifices for her."

"I would make any sacrifices for you," replied Paul. "Believe me, boy, woman's love is not worth a thought compared with brothers' love."

The shadow grew deeper and deeper upon the boy's face.

"Brother," he said, leaning heavily upon his shoulder for support, "I meant never to tell you. But I'll own it to you frankly, for there will be no suspicion of me in your mind. I love your Doris. But for you I would not rest until I had won her. I could make her happy, for I would give my life to it. Nothing; no study, or ambition, or pursuit, should come between me and my love. Paul, if I ever saw Doris neglected or unhappy, I should be miserable. I commit her to your keeping."

Paul shaded his eyes with his hand, while

Rufus spoke in earnest and pleading tones. It was a hard matter not to confess the whole deception, and send the boy down stairs again to urge his love upon Doris. But the issue was doubtful. Mrs. Margraf has assured him positively that he had no chance ; the silence of Doris, when he advocated his suit, confirmed it. The composed manner of Rufus was also against him ; if he could bear the first shock of disappointment with so much calmness, he would soon be as heart-whole as ever. It was, as his sister said, nothing more than a boyish dream, such as his own love and subsequent jilting, which now had almost passed out of memory. Yet Paul's heart ached for the pale, silent boy, leaning over him.

“I wish she loved you, Rufus,” he said, taking his hand within his own hearty grasp.

“It's not likely,” he answered, looking proudly upon his brother's face ; “not likely she would prefer a boy such as I am, to a

man like you. Only be thoughtful of her, Paul. You ought to have been at her side all this evening at least. Come, she is now waiting for you."

They entered the drawing-room together, but it was empty. Doris was gone to prepare for her return; presently they heard her footstep, and Mrs. Margraf's cheerful voice upon the staircase. Paul did not tarry for their appearance, but met them in the hall with his hat in his hand; his morning robe and loose slippers unchanged. He looked little like a lover, though he drew Doris's hand through his arm with a tolerable feint of assiduity. Rufus stopped them for an instant beneath the hall lamp to look at them thus standing arm in arm together; then with a deprecatory glance at Paul he stooped his head and kissed the forehead of Doris with a quick, timid, uncertain kiss, before she went out into the darkness, leaning upon his brother's arm. Mrs. Margraf stood beside him in the portico, listening

for the boat to start ; and when, through the stillness of the country air, the first splash of the oar upon the water reached their ears, Rufus darted suddenly into the house to seek the solitude of his own chamber.

A longer time elapsed than Mrs. Margraf considered quite necessary before Paul's approach was heard on his return. She had thrown herself upon the sofa when Rufus left her, that in perfect repose she might review the occurrences of the day. When Paul entered the room she was apparently enjoying a peaceful slumber ; her round, white hand and arm released, and her eye-lashes resting undisturbed upon her cheek. He paced from end to end of the apartment for a turn or two, unconscious of her furtive scrutiny ; and approaching the mirror swept back the heavy hair from his forehead, and surveyed himself with close attention. There was something in this action and attitude so laughable to his observant sister, that she was compelled to awake at the instant with

a slight cough; upon which the conscious student started, and quietly resumed his journey through the room.

“Did you see Miss Arnold all the way home?” asked Mrs. Margraf, with a well-sustained yawn.

“Yes,” he replied, curtly.

“What did you talk about?” she inquired.

“Greek verse,” he answered.

“You repeated Greek verses to her!” exclaimed Mrs. Margraf, arching her eyebrows.

“To be sure,” he said; “my translations are poor enough.”

“And does Miss Arnold understand Greek?” pursued his questioner.

“I don't know,” he replied, “but it was not unpleasant, Sophia. The river is beautiful at night; and her face opposite to me was pale and soft in the dim light as the waning moon. She has a sweet voice too.”

Being near the door when he finished his

speech Paul walked out leisurely, without waiting for his sister's further observations. Thus left alone for the rest of the evening Mrs. Margraf took up a book, which she had been reading ; and becoming interested in its contents it was again late in the night before she passed Rufus's room.

There was the faint line of light along the door-sill, but the lock did not yield to her silent touch. She rapped gently on the panels ; listening intently, she heard the casement closed, and the curtains drawn, before Rufus crossed the room. He stood in the doorway without moving to give her admission, and a strange pang thrilled through her as she looked up into his sad and haggard face. She flung her arms round his neck, and drew down his head to hers, passionately pressing kiss after kiss upon his brow and lips, but he did not return the caresses. He freed himself from her arms as soon as she released her hold, and stood gazing down upon her with vague and mournful eyes. She

turned away at last with deep-drawn sobs, and reaching the secrecy of her own chamber wept more bitterly than she had done for years ; comforting herself, when the emotion had passed, with the reiterated assurance that it was nothing but a boy's dream, and would soon be over.

CHAPTER X.



WHEN Paul left Mrs. Margraf, with the short and pungent remark that his escort of Doris across the river had not been unpleasant, he retreated hastily to the much-loved solitude of his library. It presented a very cheerful aspect, with its low, clear fire burning in ruddy embers upon the quiet hearth ; and the soft, steady light of the lamp shining upon the gilded titles of the serried volumes on the shelves, which lined every spare foot of the surface of the walls. His chair was where he chose it to stand undisturbed and unmoved by any hands but his own ; his papers were scattered about in a confusion of his own arranging, and no meddling fingers had dared to touch them. There was no trace of any other occupancy save his own

studious presence ; no trivial work, or skein of coloured silk, or tiny thimble to be moved out of his way with a feeling of mingled pleasure and irritation. There was no hint that there were any other interests than those of literature which were worthy of occupying a man. Paul stood within the closed door, which had swung-to noiselessly behind him, gazing round with a conflicting approbation and discontent. Days and weeks, which had accumulated into years, he had spent within these walls, satisfied to be there alone, often congratulating himself indolently upon the freedom and repose of his mode of life. When at times there had arisen a vague longing after the unknown and untasted sweetnesses, which lurked now and then in the poetry he studied, it had been his wont to brace himself up with the satires, good-humoured or otherwise, with which the cynics assailed the character of woman. Upon the grave of his old hopes, slain long ago by the inconstancy of the woman who had jilted him,

he had cast so many stones, that they rose up into a great cairn of reproachful memories. Twelve years ago, when little older than Rufus, he had sworn unending contempt, and distrust, and separation ; until this evening he had felt only satisfaction in the fulfilment of his vow. Yet never had he discovered so much beauty in the verses he had read a hundred times, as when he was reciting them in the dim moonlight, to the listening ears of Doris ; even detaining her within the porch at the Priory door, until the last sonorous Greek line, with its harmonious inflections, had died away upon the soft breeze that rustled and laughed among the ivy-leaves, in the silence that followed. The way homewards seemed lonely ; now that he retired, as had been his custom year after year, to spend a long evening in reading, the hearth, bright as it was, looked desolate ; the old companions of his solitude surrounded him with too complete a silence. The reverie was a long one ; he stood motionless, with

folded arms and knitted brows, eying, as if he were a stranger, his own easy-chair and littered table. After a time he roused himself with a sarcastic smile, and tapping himself lightly on the breast, uttered the unflattering ejaculation, "Fool!"

Having dismissed the subject once for all from his mind there was nothing to disturb Paul's slumbers through the night; though wakeful and weary were the faces of Mrs. Margraf and Rufus, when they sat down with him to breakfast on the following morning. They were all quiet; for Paul was not thinking of the occurrences of the previous day, and the others were thinking of them so intently, that there was no attempt to make conversation. But before the meal was finished, John Aspen broke the silence by a boisterous appearance with his dogs upon the terrace; after rapping with his cane upon the window, and smiling through it until his face beamed with broad delight, he hurried round to the door, and was in the breakfast-room

before Mrs. Margraf could arrest him in the hall.

“My dear Paul!” he cried, seizing Paul’s scholarly, white hand in his own brown one, and shaking it heartily, “I really don’t know what to say to express my pleasure. I could not wait for Emmy, and I stole off alone ; but I shall come with her, you know, by-and-by, to do the thing properly. But, Paul, my dear fellow, I wish you joy. I wish you as much happiness as I have had with my Emmy.”

John’s eyes filled with tears at the intensity of his own hearty congratulation, and he brushed his hand across them before seizing Paul’s fine fingers again in his grip. Paul’s face was far from expressing the rapture of an accepted lover, but he smiled dubiously at the mention of John’s happiness with Emma. Mrs. Margraf was unpleasantly startled ; it had been no part of her plan for the engagement to be publicly recognised, and she had securely calculated upon Miss Arnold not making it known ; though she had decided,

if it seemed expedient, to communicate it as a family secret to Mrs. Aspen.

“I met the Vicar,” said John, nodding gaily, “and he was quite amazed to hear of it. So was Weston from Thornbury, who has been attending some one in the village here ; he said his people would never believe it ; you were set down by them as an incorrigible old bachelor. But, Paul, you are a lucky fellow ; I don’t know a woman to be compared with her, except, of course, my mother and Emmy.”

“Do you mean, John,” asked Mrs. Margraf, with a furtive glance at Paul’s wrathful face ; while Rufus rose and walked out on to the terrace ; “do you mean that you have actually told Mr. Vale and Mr. Weston about this—about Paul ?”

“To be sure,” answered John, rubbing his hands gleefully. “It is the town-talk of Thornbury by this time, or will be in another hour. I’ve not seen Miss Arnold this morning, Paul ; but of course you will come over

to see her as soon as you've finished breakfast ?”

Paul did not answer, for he could not command himself to speak. He felt caught in a trap, and that too with his eyes open. When Mrs. Margraf suggested the deception, he ought to have foreseen the publicity that would attend it, and the new gossip that would attach to his name. He felt himself, reserved and reticent as he was, the town-talk of the chattering circles of Thornbury ; his name passing from mouth to mouth with the swift exaggeration of common rumour. He shrank already from the idea of venturing along the familiar streets, or entering the bookseller's shop, where he had spent many an hour, while old acquaintances, patients of his before he inherited Fairfield, would pass in and out, overwhelming him with unwelcome congratulations. He was almost inclined to denounce the imposture at once ; but how arrest or silence the thousand tongues of the public ? Paul returned Mrs. Margraf's furtive

glance with a look that made her heart throb with a spasm of fear and regret.

“Did Miss Arnold tell my aunt?” she asked in dismay.

“It came out in this way,” replied John, with a joyous laugh: “My mother was prepared for it by something Rufus said to her in the afternoon, for he spent a good part of yesterday with us. And at night, though of course you never saw her, Paul, she was standing at the lattice window in the porch, looking at the moon, when you and Miss Arnold came up. You were speaking in Greek, and as my mother does not understand it, she remained silent. Then, Paul, you remember how you held her hand in yours—how long I don’t know—and said, ‘Good night, Doris!’ When Miss Arnold came in there was no mistaking her face; and my mother asked her at once what was the matter. The poor, trembling, little girl broke down at once, and was quite hysterical; but Emmy and my mother had no difficulty

in discovering the cause. Women are so keen-sighted in these matters. But Emmy says she is quite recovered this morning; and of course you will come over to satisfy yourself that she is all right. But hark ye, I'll not hear a word of the wedding; I'll forbid the banns, until the Selection is finished. You know that is of importance to us, Paul."

"Certainly," replied Mrs. Margraf, a tone of graciousness blending with her dismayed accent. "This discovery is so premature; the whole affair is so sudden; even Paul and I had scarcely mentioned it; I am sorry you told anybody, John. It should have been merely a family affair for some time to come. You know 'There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip;' and town-talk is so unpleasant."

"I've done wrong, then!" exclaimed John, a shade of vexation crossing his good-humoured face; but it passed away as another thought presented itself. "If I had

not told, Emmy would. She cannot keep a secret ; Paul says no woman can ; and she is going into Thornbury to make calls this morning. Oh ! you could not keep such a thing as this a secret. Paul, I can forgive my cousin Richard Crofton now."

"I forgave him long ago," said Paul, moodily.

"Not I," cried John, with vehemence. "I have never offered him my hand in friendship, though he is my nearest kinsman, since he stole Harriet from you twelve years ago. But I'll forgive him fully on your wedding-day. You have made me very happy, Paul."

John shook hands with him again, and kissed the smooth cheek of Mrs. Margraf, with a hearty abandonment to joy which did not communicate itself to the others. But he remained unconscious of their want of sympathy, and laughed with a cordial mirth.

"I must be off," he said, at last. Emmy does not know I've come. When I see you

again, Paul, I shall have to do it all over again." And his laughter again rang through the room.

"You shall take me with you," cried Mrs. Margraf, who dreaded being left with her brother at this crisis; and Paul, angry and chafed, felt that it was wise of her to leave him alone until he could recover his self-control.

No sooner were they gone, than Paul strode out to a seat in the sunshine. Drawing his hat low down over his eyes, and folding his arms across his broad chest, he deliberated over his unforeseen dilemma. His lazy and reluctant consent to Mrs. Margraf's scheme had been given rather to avoid a disturbance of his peace by a collision with her ruling will, than from any definite idea that it was the best mode of weaning Rufus from his unfortunate passion. But he had relied upon Mrs. Margraf's skilful management of the artifice; beyond taking his share in the conversation with Doris, in which he

had placed clearly before her the exact position, in which they mutually consented to stand with regard each other, he had not anticipated taking much part in it. The conspiracy was only against Rufus ; and he had surely reckoned upon his sister doing what he called, all the active dissimulation. But he found himself thrust forward into the principal part ; and to him all the world of Thornbury would look to play the lover. It was an unlucky entanglement. Doris, if he knew her at all, would shrink as much as himself from her false position. But how extricate themselves ? It was impossible now to announce that the whole affair was a mere ruse ; a poor, feeble, feminine stratagem to dupe Rufus. Equally impossible it would be to convert the shadow into a reality. Paul paused there ; fixed his eyes upon the Priory ; recalled the bashful face and sweet voice he had yesterday seen and heard as in a dream ; felt for a moment a glow about his evenly-beating heart ; and then shook off his

dangerous reverie with an angry flush upon his face, and an impatient "Pshaw!" No. He would shield this Doris from all unkind or slighting observations. A sentiment of chivalrous protection, which was underlying his professed contempt for women, made him recoil from the thought of any pain or annoyance befalling her on his account. As far as it lay in his power he would do her honour in the sight of the world; when the proper time came, it should be her act, her own known retraction, that should end the mock engagement. Paul bit his lips savagely; yet he resolved that once more he would confront the gossip and scandal of Thornbury as a rejected and discarded lover.

Arriving at this resolution after a profound deliberation upon his difficult position, which had kept him in his attitude of fixed musing for an hour or more after John Aspen and Mrs. Margraf had left him, Paul cast a regretful look towards his library, and strode with quick, impatient steps down to the ferry.

The boat was waiting for him, with Rufus seated at the oars, ready to row him across the river. The hollows under the boy's heavy eyes were dark with sleeplessness and suffering, and his face had not recovered from the pallor of the day before ; but he smiled with an assumption of gladness as Paul drew near, and held out his hand to steady him as he leaped from the steps into the boat. Neither of them spoke ; but when they gained the opposite shore, Rufus slipped his arm through Paul's, as a sign of the closest friendship and brotherhood, and thus walked at his side across the field to the Priory.

Perhaps no occurrence more suggestive of romance had happened during the even tenor of Mrs. Aspen's life, than the totally unexpected discovery of an attachment between her nephew and the young amanuensis, who had won so greatly upon her own affection. Paul had been the subject of many a suppressed and secret ditty, in which he had figured as a forsaken and love-lorn swain ;

and Doris had been sung as the fair and friendless orphan of a gallant hero; but her imagination, which was indeed of no amatory tendency, had never linked together the two objects of her verse. The weeping, excited, brief confession, which she had extorted from the reluctant lips of Doris, the previous evening, had banished sleep from Mrs. Aspen's pillow, leaving it to the usurped dominion of poesy. The first demand upon Doris's pen in the morning was not to transcribe any poem for the Selection, but to write down, with trembling fingers and burning cheeks, the lines the poetess had composed in honour of her false betrothal to Paul; in which their linked praises were enthusiastically set forth, and prayers for their perpetual happiness harmoniously rhymed. It was in vain that Doris remonstrated. Mrs. Aspen was charmed, kissed her crimson cheek, tapped her trembling fingers playfully; but insisted that the Epithalamium must be written out in the dear girl's own handwriting, and she would

keep it as a treasure until the day of her death.

The pretty scene was interrupted by the announcement of Mr. Atcherley's arrival to put the last touches to the portrait, which was to form a frontispiece to the selection. A few minutes of secret survey would have displayed to the artist a study he might have been glad to transfer to his canvas. The elegant and stately old age of the elder lady, with the fire of youthful feeling lighting up and gleaming through the veil of years that gathered round her ; her caresses of the girl, half soothing and half petulant ; Doris's appealing look, the blushes deepening every moment, as the congratulatory words were traced reluctantly upon the page before her. Yet Atcherley caught enough of the troubled though glowing aspect, to wonder with the instinctive sensibility of his feelings towards Doris, what could be the cause of so much emotion in a face usually so calm ; and Mrs. Aspen's significant smiles did not tend to allay

his curiosity. The town-talk of Thornbury had not reached Murivance before he left it ; but by a secret warning of evil his heart sank within him as from time to time he glanced stealthily at her embarrassed mien.

Never had Doris been so nervous and disquieted. The entrance of Mrs. Margraf and John Aspen startled her so greatly, that she grasped for support the back of the artist's chair, behind which she had been standing for some minutes, and he could feel the trembling of her frame, and the fluttering of her quickly-drawn breath. Yet there was nothing joyous in the face upon which he bent a keen and well-trained regard ; no sparkle of gladness in the startled eye, nor ripple of silent happiness round the unquiet mouth ; there was faint-heartedness, timidity, shrinking ; a pale nervousness, a dim-sighted fear ; but no hidden sunshine. Some secret was shared by the group around him, which glanced to and fro with hints, and smiles, and gestures ; but Doris, to whom they all

referred, remained oppressed and apprehensive. A qualm of fear seized upon himself—a dread of any sudden, blundering announcement of the secret. He set himself sternly to his work, until the gloom of his dogged look sobered the vivacity of John Aspen and his mother.

At last through the open window sounded the voices of Paul and Rufus, and the tacit restraint was broken. Mrs. Aspen rose from her chair opposite the artist, and seated herself again, excitedly, with a smile and a dignified bridling of her plumed head. Doris sprang to her feet, and looked as if she longed to make her escape altogether. John was about to rush from the room to meet the approaching guests, when a word and a glance from his mother arrested him.

“John!” she said, rebukingly. “Miss Arnold, my dear, will you oblige me by asking Dr. Lockley and Rufus to come hither, and have a look at the portrait before it is quite completed?”

Atcherley forestalled John Aspen in opening the door for Doris, and he looked up keenly into her troubled face as she passed him, with a faint effort at her usual smile. Whatever he detected in her features, there was nothing of triumph or joy in them ; and he returned to his easel in greater perplexity than before.

“Mr. Atcherley,” said Mrs. Aspen, bridling again, and smiling graciously, “there is no reason that we should keep from you a circumstance which is no longer a secret in Thornbury. My dear young friend, the daughter of the well known African traveller, Lieut. Arnold, is betrothed to my nephew, Paul Lockley of Fairfield.”

“Paul !” gasped the artist, every shade of colour dying out of his olive face ; “Rufus, not Paul !”

“Nay, it is Paul !” answered Mrs. Aspen. As she spoke the pencil dropped from his nerveless hand ; he staggered across the room to the open window, and sank upon the seat

where, from behind the osiers, he had often watched Doris at her work. He felt faint and giddy; but he set a strong control upon himself. There would be plenty of time elsewhere for yielding to his weakness, and at present these strange eyes were scanning his emotion; he would not subject himself to their supercilious pity, he who had loved without a gleam of hope. The artist shook his magnificent head, and shrugged his deformed shoulders, as he raised himself to his feet again, and shot a sharp, saturnine glance into the eyes gazing upon him.

“I am not well,” he said; “my nerves are shaken this morning. But surely, Mrs. Aspen, I thought my young friend Rufus was Miss Arnold’s lover. These months past she has been the theme of all his conversations with me. But if it be true that Dr. Lockley has won her, I wish him every joy.”

They entered as he spoke. Paul had given his arm to Doris, and was leading her in, shrinking and downcast, with an air of

courtly protection, though his own face wore more than its usual aspect of gravity. Following them was Rufus, with Emma fluttering at his side, and chattering volubly into his inattentive ear. Mrs. Aspen had prepared an appropriate speech for the occasion in florid prose almost equal to her verse ; but at the last moment her treacherous memory failed her. Drawing Doris to her, while she laid her hand affectionately upon Paul's, she murmured almost inaudibly, " God bless you, Paul ! I hope you will both be very happy ! "

Paul almost groaned aloud. Every moment the deception assumed a darker aspect, and never so black as when Mrs. Aspen pronounced her tearful benediction. Doris stole a reproachful and accusing glance at him and Mrs. Margraf, and an awkward silence fell upon them. Touched by the deep solemnity her words had produced, Mrs. Aspen resigned Doris again to Paul, and tripping lightly across the room to the desk in the oriel

window, returned with the betrothal ode, written out in the tremulous character of Doris's handwriting.

"There, Paul," she said, folding it daintily, and presenting it thus closed for his acceptance; "you need not read it now; it is a poor effusion of my own upon this auspicious event, and written by Doris herself, upon which account you will prize it more than even I should do. I intended to keep it till my dying day; but I give it to you as the most fitting memento of this happy moment."

There was no exultation in the glow upon Paul's countenance as he received the gift; and Doris hid her face in her hands. But he recovered himself after a momentary hesitation and embarrassment, and placing the precious document amid some stray notes in his breast-pocket, promised to read it when he was alone. Mrs. Aspen smiled with a world of meaning, and turned the attention of the circle to the neglected portrait, which the artist proposed to leave for another

sitting, when she would be in a less exalted state of mind. Presently, by a train of skilful manœuvres, excelling Mrs. Margraf herself, the study was cleared of all its intrusive occupants, and Paul was left alone with Doris.

He approached her almost timidly as she sat at a distance, resting her aching head upon her hands, her eyes closed, and her whole attitude one of languor and weariness. She had not yet perceived that Mrs. Aspen had followed the others, and her thoughts engrossed her too fully for her to notice the stillness of the room. He looked down upon her with as much pity as reserve; with a strange, and hardly controllable impulse to lay his hand upon her bright hair, he said softly and low, "Doris!"

She started up instantly, and glanced round the deserted room with a swift vacillation of colour upon her unquiet face; but her eyes did not encounter his, and she spoke in a passionate and angry tone.

“I cannot keep it up, Dr. Lockley!” she cried. “I never expected this!”

“Nor did I,” he rejoined, regretfully.

“I must deny it,” she resumed. “I must tell them it is a falsehood; and then I shall be obliged to leave this place, where everybody is so kind, and where I have been almost happy. It is cruel when I have no home to go to: you will drive me away; you and Mrs. Margraf. What have I done that you should want to drive me away?”

“Nay, listen, my child,” said Paul, gaining composure and assurance by witnessing her agitation; “we have been foolish, both you and I, in yielding to Sophia’s absurd scheme; but I ought to have known her, and have been on my guard against her. I thought that none but ourselves would know of this—this folly. But what can we do? Already the news has spread through Thornbury, and I am the talk of the neighbourhood; I, more than you, who are almost a stranger. You

say that you are driven from this home ; but you would escape all the results of our false step ; while I remaining would reap all the ridicule and scandal to which we have exposed ourselves. I shrink from being a laughing-stock. I cannot endure the censure of Mrs. Aspen and Rufus. Yesterday I consented to this ruse for my brother's sake ; to-day I implore you to carry it out for mine. Only for a little while, Miss Arnold. As soon as it ceases to be a nine days' wonder, you shall take any course you please ; only spare me ridicule if you can. Have the goodness towards me of consenting to this state of things until some of the coil can be unravelled. Believe me, I will guard you from every annoyance as far as I have the power to do so."

He spoke gravely and deliberately, with pauses that gave Doris time to think. She could not see very clearly any way of present escape from her difficulty, except by an abrupt departure from her pleasant occupa-

tion and home ; and by this flight she would leave those behind her to bear the full brunt of the ridicule and gossip that would follow. She caught for an instant a reflex of that ridicule and astonishment, and amid all her vexation, an irrepressible smile gleamed upon her face. Paul detected it there with a sensation of utter amazement.

“I scarcely know what to do,” she answered, the tears starting to her eyes, while her lips were still unbent with their smile. “I do not want to leave Monkmoor,” and the smile merged into a vivid blush ; “but no woman could feel a false position like this more than I do. I do not know how I shall look you, or anybody else, in the face. But if I make my escape from this place, the shock will fall very roughly upon Rufus ; and I care for him dearly. I suppose we must carry on this farce.”

She uttered the last word in a tone that stung Paul from his wary discretion. The little flash of disdainful coquetry, which faded

away almost before he caught its light, was very charming, and he looked intently for its return. But Doris was herself again ; quiet, subdued, and shrinking ; she stood before him with folded hands, and head bent forward in an attitude of waiting for his answer, which tended greatly to heighten his embarrassment. If the fraud had been a reality, how pleasant it would have been to pass his arm round the little, drooping figure, or lift up the downcast face, until it glowed and smiled again under his scrutiny. At the perilous thought Paul started, and strode away with a sudden sense of danger.

“ Miss Arnold,” he said, after traversing the room as was his wont when pondering any weighty subject, “ Doris, I thank you heartily ; you shall have no reason for repenting this. But I suppose we shall often be left together thus. I cannot engage your interest in my own trifling affairs. How shall we occupy the time ? What am I to talk to you about ? ”

There was just a flicker of the former smile playing about her compressed lips.

“ My father taught me something of Greek,” she answered, sighing, “ and I am fond of listening to it always. You shall read aloud to me, Dr. Lockley ; when I cannot follow the sense, I will get you to translate it for me.”

A full tide of relief flowed swiftly into Paul's heart. He retraced his steps to her side, and regarded her with an air of satisfaction and approval ; discovering for the first time the traces of great excitement and weariness in her small and delicate features. He was touched by the feebleness of her drooping aspect, and the tone in which he addressed her was one of involuntary and chivalrous tenderness.

“ My dear child,” he said, “ I am a physician, and I am about to prescribe for you. You shall lie upon the sofa yonder, with the windows darkened. I will read to you while

you rest yourself. We have no right to tax your strength in this way."

She resigned herself to his directions like an over-tired child. Presently Paul Lockley, to his own utter consternation, and as if in a dream from which he vainly strove to awake, was seated at a little distance from a woman's couch, with the light toned down to a pleasant dimness, while he read aloud in a carefully modulated voice, the sonorous lines he had been wont to murmur to himself along the banks of the river. He could not resist the curious pleasure of watching sleep steal gradually over the fair, grave face before him, as at the end of every line he lifted up his eyes to mark its progress. When at length Doris's eyelashes rested peacefully upon her cheek, and her lips parted with her quiet, slumberous breathing, Paul dropped his tone to a low whisper; and finally ceased reading altogether while there fell upon him a deep and dangerous reverie.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ruins at Monkmoor were kept in a good state of preservation, but Mrs. Aspen's poetic tastes did not forbid the use of many portions of them for pastoral and agricultural purposes. To her mind there was no incongruity in the sight of the fawn-coloured Alderneys straying about the cloisters, or the sheep lying down in the shadow of the massive and decaying walls. The goat found pleasant climbing among the jagged buttresses, and often stood with his branching horns uplifted proudly against the sky upon the most perilous height of the crumbling arches; the peacock poised himself with gorgeous, outspread plumes upon the columns greyest with creeping lichens. Through the broken mullions of the windows there were

glimpses of yellow corn-stacks, and brown ricks of hay which covered the area of the old Priory chapel and refectory ; the deep, dark, cool cells still roofed with delicate fret-work of solid masonry gave shelter to calves and lambs, and chickens, as if there were no desecration in such familiar use. To Mrs. Aspen the old ruins looked more picturesque, and awoke more poetic fancies thus filled with rural life, than if they had been left an empty space, with a shaven and untrodden sward.

John Aspen considered it incomparably better. From the era when to totter round a corn-stack was an adventurous journey, and a proud achievement, while his baby heart beat quickly at the deep shadows of the great walls, the ruins had been his arena, his domain, his own princely realm. He had buried his sorrows in their blackest crypts ; and exulted over his joys upon their brightest turrets. The long, loose pennons of ivy, waving from the most dilapidated tracery of the eastern window, had grown under his

loving scrutiny ; the damask-rose, which he had planted at the very summit of the highest arch, where no foot had trodden since his own crept cautiously along its mouldering edge, put forth its blossoms, longed for and noted by him. Scarcely a stone could rattle down under the light hoofs of the goat, which he could not have replaced in its ancient niche ; he knew every remote and hidden nook, where the owls blinked all day in the faint light. He could clamber still, ungainly as he was, where no other man dared to venture ; and where the lads of the farm-yard were forbidden to risk a footing. The ruins seemed to know him as their lord and owner ; and he and the goat roamed about them in security.

Up the worn and broken steps of the turret, which ascended from a corner of the chantry, toiled John Aspen, with the exultation of a boy, partly glorying in his deed of daring, and partly dreading its premature discovery. From its summit was the fairest

view of the fair landscape ; from the near spires and poplar-trees of Thornbury to the far-distant range of hills, scooped in their outlines like a gigantic flight of steps ; above the turret the rose-tree, after years of unpruned growth, had shot forth one long graft, that waved to and fro with a beckoning gesture which was irresistible to him. He remembered how he had presented Emmy with a bunch of its roses upon the day after her betrothal to him ; and he resolved, with a cordial glow of his heart towards Doris, to give her one of its blossoms, to add beauty and colour to her appearance in the eyes of Paul. He thought how Emmy would shriek little screams of affright when he returned with his trophy plucked from the turret rose-tree ; and with a broader smile upon his reddened face, John Aspen toiled up the difficult ascent.

He won the summit in safety, but the smile faded. The pathetic beauty of the scene before him, appealing to him through

all the memories of his life, chased away the mirth and drollery from his ruddy face. He could not have told what it was in the sunny landscape, the quiet pastures, the silver line of the river, the majestic and motionless hills, the arched and voiceless blue very far above him, that paled his face, and brought an unwonted sigh to his lips. The whole past, in linked years, all bound and built into these crumbling walls, arose before him. His absences from home had been few and brief; yet he seemed never to have seen it before as he saw it this morning. Some cloud had been cleared away; a new power of vision was given to him. The home was lovelier, brighter, dearer than even he had thought it; yet he had loved it honestly out of the depths of his honest nature. Yonder was Paul's roof; there was the grey, old church, where Rufus had taken up his manhood. He thought of them both with pride in them as his kinsmen. Below him was the home of his mother and his wife, and his heart melted

into unutterable tenderness. A feeling of unworthiness crept over him, and his strong frame trembled as he saw the feebleness of his inner life. He had not revered his mother as he ought ; he had not loved and cherished Emmy enough ; his affection for his kinsfolk had been too selfish. The full harmony of the view around him sounded a discord in his own weak, trifling, incomplete existence. "I too have been nothing but an overgrown boy," thought John, with a sudden flash of self-knowledge and remembering Rufus ; "but from this time I will be a man."

He bowed his uncovered head upon his hands, as if to acknowledge some spiritual presence never felt before. In the unwonted abstraction of his suddenly aroused perceptions, he forgot his perilous footing. The loosened stones of the turret tottered under his weight unheeded, until they yielded altogether ; with one vain effort to catch at the rose-tree above him, John Aspen was flung down from his dangerous height.

Not so far as the stony area of the chapel a hundred feet below him. Not so far as that, he discovered, as his senses feebly fluttered back after the stun of his fall. He was lying upon the moss-grown and grassy roof of one of the cells, with a canopy of ivy and rose-briers overhanging him, and the turret still standing erect and complete above his head, save for the few loose stones that had betrayed his footing. In a few minutes he would be able to crawl down the rest of the staircase into the chapel, and make his way into the house without creating any alarm ; though no doubt he would feel stiff and shaken for a day or two. Hush ! There was Emmy, singing in the filbert-walk on the other side of the wall ; a single call would bring her to his help, but she would be frightened. This pain would be only for a few minutes, though he could hardly restrain the groan rising to his lips as a refrain to his wife's careless song. The leaves above him were very glistening in their green light, and

he would fain have shaded his eyes from the play of their dancing shadows. How was it that he lay there unable to stir hand or foot ?

The voice of Emma singing in the garden died away upon his dulling ear, and he made another effort to move. Not a line ; not a hair's breadth. Where he had fallen he lay. The birds began to warble fearlessly upon the waving branches above him ; the timid mice ventured from their holes, whither they had been scared by his fall. His voice was failing him ; when he tried to shout, in the hope of catching the ear of some of the labourers, whose flails he could hear threshing out last year's corn, only a feeble, ineffectual murmur issued from his parched lips, while the pain of the effort forced large drops of perspiration upon his forehead. He might lie there for hours in the mocking sunshine, and the gay carolling of the birds. He felt that he should soon be unable to utter any sound ; and as another voice spoke in the filbert-walk in the

garden below, he no longer suppressed the heavy groan of unbearable pain.

Mrs. Aspen and Doris stopped abruptly, looking at one another with a blank air of fright. The deep, anguished sound came through the narrow crevices of the high wall beside them, but they could not recognise the voice, and there was no sign of disturbance about the ruins. The goat had climbed the height from whence John Aspen had fallen, and was stretching his horned head, and bleating piteously as he looked down upon the turf of the moss-grown roof. Once more the groan struggled faintly from the choking throat into the sunny atmosphere; and upon both Doris and the mother there dawned a feeble dread of the truth.

“Stay here,” cried Doris, leading Mrs. Aspen to one of the single seats; “stay here till I return. I know where the sound comes from, and I will be back to you directly. It is one of the farm-boys, I daresay.” She did not wait for an answer, but ran swiftly round

to the chapel-entrance. In a minute or two she was bending over John Aspen, just as a film was gathering over his eyes, and his senses were failing him. He attempted to rouse himself when he saw her, and whispered in her ear, as she stooped to catch the words, "Don't alarm my mother or Emmy. I'm glad it is you. It will be all right soon."

"I am here, Doris," said Mrs. Aspen's voice close beside her; and Doris rose from where she was kneeling beside the senseless form, and looked into the face before her. It was suddenly aged with fear; the rare, lingering bloom had vanished; the cheeks were as grey as the blanched hair under the velvet band; while the years that had spared her smooth, high forehead, seemed to have written upon it invisible lines which this calamity brought out clear and manifest. The mother who stood trembling with fear in the bright sunlight, was an aged woman, very feeble, and stricken with years.

"Don't be frightened," cried Doris, in a

tone of soothing reassurance, and with a new-born tenderness towards her; "he has fainted only. He has fallen." She glanced upward involuntarily to the up-rooted rose tree, which hung from the turret, shuddering as she measured the height. "He has fallen, and is hurt, but not killed. He spoke to me before you came. Let us watch him here; you can watch him, and I will send some help to you, while I fetch Paul. We will not move him till he comes."

Doris set the feeble quaking mother to watch her insensible son, as she had seldom watched his cradle; cowering down beside him with her new aspect of nerveless old age, while she covered his death-like face with her many-coloured shawl, and shivered in the autumn sunshine more with dread than cold. Doris paused for an instant in pitying hesitation; but there was no time to be lost. She stooped hurriedly, and kissed Mrs. Aspen's furrowed face; then darting into the house, gave swift and definite directions

to the servants ; and before any other foot could have reached Monk's Ferry, was rowed by the ferry-man across the river, and flying like a lapwing under the hedgerows to Paul's library at Fairfield.

When she was left alone, for the presence of this senseless form gave no feeling of companionship, Mrs. Aspen crept nearer to her son in a dreary, waking day-dream. The old grey ruins surrounded her with the same unshaken stability, but she felt as if they were tottering to their foundations, and would treacherously crush her in their fall. Far away among the reeds and willows, and in the garden close at hand a thousand birds were chirping and singing in concert, just as they were doing a short half-hour ago, when in the filbert walk she was repeating some verses to Doris ; and both song and verse had met with a strange response in an agonised groan. Why did not John groan now ? She would like to clasp his hand in hers, though rare and precious had been her

caresses in times past ; but the large, muscular fingers were cold, and did not answer by the faintest pressure to her touch. Not a fold of the many-coloured shawl stirred, though the light branches over head were full of motions, and their shadows never rested for a moment. Would he hear her voice, to which he had never before turned a deaf ear ? But she dared not speak, though she knelt down, and laid her grey head upon the turf close to his ear. What if her voice proved powerless, and her son could never more listen to the fond words she had so seldom thought of uttering to him ? She had not been a very affectionate mother ; she had often felt dissatisfied with him ; his blunders had irritated her ; but if he could only be restored to her, how different she would be to him !

The few minutes that she was alone ; for the servants soon found out the place where the prostrate figure of their master was lying with the mother watching beside it ; were

spun out into a long period of agonised remembrance. The toddling, laughing baby, hushed into silence by his nurse, when she traversed the chequered sward of the ruins in poetic contemplation ; the shy and awkward school-boy, who had trampled upon the delicate folds of her dress in his rough caresses, leaving muddy marks there which had brought tears to his eyes ; the young lover, ungainly in his transports, and ineloquent in his most treasured confidences ; the clumsy bridegroom, willing to give his heart to be trampled upon by either mother or wife ; the blundering, unskilled, honest, single-hearted man, who had satisfied himself with a happiness found within his own simple, loving nature. They all passed before her, ending in this last scene. The old walls so dear to him, looking on as she was doing, upon a large, strong frame, lying so powerless under a silken shawl, that not one of its soft folds stirred. Let it only move once with the slightest token of life ; let

John's lips groan again a suffering groan ; and the mother's heart will take courage and strength to itself.

She was sitting at his head still, while the servants stood aloof from her attitude of desolation, when Doris returned with Paul and Rufus. She suffered herself to be led away then ; and clinging to the arm of Doris accompanied her to the study they had left scarcely an hour ago. It was a dream still ; some phrenzy ; but all her dreams had been wont to be among the trifles of life. There could be no dalliance with this sorrow ; no pensive playing with doleful fancies. If John died, it would be a hard, naked, inconsolable reality.

Few words passed between her and Doris, while they listened to the heavy tread of the men who carried a careful burden into the house, up the stairs to John's room, which looked upon the ruins. Once in the oppressive pause which followed Rufus stole in with a pitiful look in his dark eyes, and told them

to be comforted for he was not dead, with so much tenderness in his voice and manner that the mother wept for the first time, and set herself to wait for the next report with increased courage. Emma was fetched from Thornbury, whither she was starting when John heard her singing in the garden, but her presence was no consolation. She sat with her feet upon the fender and her face turned sullenly towards the fire, giving vent to querulous complaints against Paul and Mr. Weston, who would not permit her to enter her husband's room. John, she muttered, had fallen scores of times before; he always would be clambering about the ruins like an over-grown boy. Certainly the turret was a great height, but then he had fallen only part of the way, and upon the soft turf. Doctors, she repeated over and over again with empty dulness, always made a dreadful fuss.

Paul came in at last, looking very grave and pale. He spoke in a deliberate and measured tone, bidding them control them-

selves while he gave them his report. Emma's blue eyes dilated and her blanched features worked with sudden terror; but Mrs. Aspen's grey face, pinched and worn with her few hours of suspense, was settled into a fixed calm. Paul said, still speaking deliberately and distinctly, that John was now sensible, and wished to see them both: the injury he had received was fatal, but he might live for an hour or two; their presence, if they could command themselves, would be a support and consolation to him.

Mrs. Aspen rose steadily, leaning upon the arm of Doris; but Emma, after a vehement effort to speak, tossed her arms wildly above her head, with a shriek that resounded through the hushed house. It reached the ears of the doomed man; this scream, so different to the petulant little cries he had thought of when he climbed the turret stairs. Again and again it echoed through the closed doors, mingled with frantic laughter, Emmy's laughter, and the large, heavy head, and

broad face ashy pale with suffering, tossed helplessly to and fro upon the pillow.

In such writhing of blended pain and grief, John Aspen lay in the brilliant sunlight, which streamed in through the uncurtained window, when his mother entered the room. The sun had shone all day with a garish, dazzling glare, over which no brief cloud had cast the thinnest shadow; and now it was going down; a round lurid ball of fire which shot ruddy gleams upon the ruins and the fatal turret, visible through the open casement. Already the massive stones at the base of the tower were shadowy with the coming twilight; the slowly creeping line of darkness was climbing upwards with stealthy and invisible steps, followed by the sorrowful gaze of the dying man. But as his mother, in her new decrepitude and helplessness tottered into his chamber clinging to the young arm of Doris, he smoothed his furrowed forehead, and smiled fondly upon her through his brown eyes.

“It is less pain than you think, dearest mother,” he said, cheerfully. “Paul says I shall not suffer much more. Mother, you have made me very happy all my life ; you and Emmy. I have not deserved it.”

“Oh, my boy! my boy!” sobbed the mother.

“Hush!” he said, the tears starting to his eyes, “don’t make me think you will fret very much. Mother, you’ll take care of my Emmy, my poor girl? I wish she could have come to let me see her for the last time! You’ll be as good a mother to her as you’ve been to me. She’ll take my place with you, dear mother ; you’ll think of me when you think of her?”

“She shall be like my own daughter, John,” said Mrs. Aspen.

“If you’ve never understood one another before,” he continued earnestly, “you will when I am gone. I have been a blunderer between you, but you will love one another more now. Mother, I wish I had been a

different kind of a son ; I wish you could have been proud of me ; I wish I had had talent something like your own. But you'll miss me, mother, though I've been only a poor, stupid kind of son to you."

She laid her head, with its unfastened bands of grey hair, upon the pillow beside him, with reiterated words of sorrow that she should miss him always—always ; until the hour of her own death should come.

"But, mother," he continued, after a brief interval of rest ; for the strong man's strength was failing rapidly, though the features he turned to her were brightening and kindling with a gleam of pride ; "you must not neglect your Selection ! Paul, come here. There, take hold of your Doris's hand. I pray God you two may be as happy as Emmy has made me."

There was no smile of suppressed contempt upon Paul's face as John spoke of his happiness in his weakened tones, and as the smothered shrieks of Emma penetrated into

the quiet room. He took the trembling hand of Doris into his own with a reassuring pressure ; and Rufus left his post beside the open window, and drew near the death-bed.

“Paul,” said John, “I am very glad even now for your sake ; but I must ask a sacrifice from you. Promise me you will not be married until my mother’s poems are published. No one can help her like Doris ; and I’ve so set my mind upon the Selection. They will comfort my mother when I’m gone. And she ought to be better known. I should have been so proud——”

His voice failed him, but his eyes were fastened beseechingly upon Paul and Doris.

“We promise you faithfully,” answered Paul ; and Doris, drawing away her hand from his clasp, laid it gently upon his, and said with a quick, tremulous utterance, “I will never leave her until my work is finished.”

“And Paul,” he said, with another eager effort, “I’m not clever, but I’ve stood between them and the world. You’ll take my place ;

you and Richard Crofton—I've forgiven him, and he is our next of kin. I've no will to make ; but I leave Emmy and my mother to you. You and Richard will take care of them."

"John, my dear fellow, I will regard your mother as my own," said Paul, earnestly.

"I think that's all," he murmured wearily, turning his face towards the open casement, and the ruddy summit of the turret, flushed with the last beams of the sunset. There was no sound except the evening song of the birds that were fluttering about the ruins, and the lowing of the cattle in the green meadows round the Priory. As peaceful a twilight as any that had ever fallen upon field or river, but the only eye that took notice of it, was the one over which the darkness of death was gathering.

"Such a sweet evening!" he whispered, smiling. "Paul, I tried to get a rose from the turret-tree for your Doris ; she will never have one now. Mother, I feel almost as if I

could write a poem ; but you must do it for me. You've made me very happy, mother and Emmy."

His glazed eyes rested upon Doris, as if in the dark he thought her with her fair hair to be his wife, and he stretched out his hand towards her, opening and closing the fingers restlessly. Paul divined his meaning and illusion, and placed Doris's hand within his grasp, which closed over it fondly.

"Take care of them," he muttered, "I'm not clever, but I've taken care of both of them. Oh, mother and Emmy!"

The falling sunset had quite faded from the grey summit of the turret, and only lingered in faint, rosy gleams upon a few light clouds, which had gathered upon the approach of night, and hovered low down upon the horizon. They might have needed a lamp in the darkening room ; but no one stirred. Mrs. Aspen lay still, with her head resting on the same pillow as her son's ; Doris stood motionless with her hand locked in his.

Paul was beside her, looking on with calm and vigilant eyes, which saw every change of the dying face through all the deepening gloom ; while Rufus, kneeling at the foot of the bed, screened his face with his hands, and through the concealing fingers watched the drooping form of Doris.

So in silence they waited till the end came.

CHAPTER XII.



WHEN the first Mr. Aspen died, leaving Mrs. Aspen a widow after rather less than two years' experience of wedded life, she had felt amid all her sincere sorrow a very real though unacknowledged sensation of relief. She had no matrimonial vocation ; though her husband had borne his honours meekly, there had always been a fretting sense of his authority, and her duty to submit to it. Even the perpetuity of the tie of marriage chafed her. She had chosen a lord for herself, but she could not dismiss him at her pleasure ; she could not get rid of him for any length of time. That inelastic step about her house had the indisputable right of invading, day after day, the sacred retirement of her study ; those mild, dull eyes

scanned, without any brightening of sympathy, every line she penned. He was moreover in a position to remind her of her slighted duties, and he did so with a heavy though gentle conscientiousness, against which there could be no reasonable rebellion. She had, too, a lurking suspicion that under all the phlegmatic impassibility of his manner there was hidden a romance to which she was not admitted ; that at some former period, some of those years of early manhood which preceded the sober age at which he married her, he had infused more fire and poetry into his mode of love. But more than everything else was the constant, hourly presence from which there was no escape ; the all-pervading attendance and companionship which she saw running through the whole tissue of life. She pined secretly for her former freedom ; and though she did not confess it to herself, there was a consolatory feeling of restored liberty while her tears were flowing for her departed husband, and her muse was busy with funeral verses to his memory.

Far different was the effect of John's death. First and chiefly the mysterious bond of maternity, the special mother's love, did really exist in her heart for him, though few circumstances had tested it until now. The baby had been a healthy, romping, fatiguing child, which needed the nurse's strong arms, and preferred them to the mother's feebler powers. The lad, in like manner, had grown into a rough, robust boyhood, and a sturdy youth, that had never touched the latent tenderness of his mother's nature. Yet she had been very fond of him after a certain fashion. She could get rid of him at any time by closing her door upon him, or by sending him off to school ; and he exercised no authority or influence over her. Now and then his want of grace and talent irritated her ; but the profound, simple, affectionate pride he felt in her, and the chivalrous deference he paid her in his clumsy way, had not failed to win a greater return of love than he had ever presumed

possible in his gifted mother. She wrote her poems for him ; not a line, but she submitted it to his inspection, listening delightedly as he read them all in pure faith and intense admiration of her intellectual powers. He had been her discriminating critic ; her enthusiastic and applauding public. With a purer and devouter worship than that of a lover, her son had done homage at her shrine ; and she, looking down well-pleased with his single-hearted devotion, had grown to believe herself worthy of it. Now that the worshipper was dead, the worship, the sweet, filial, faithful incense, was quenched also.

Mrs. Aspen refused to rise from the bed to which Paul had carried her on the night of John's death. The wrinkled lines upon her face, which had started into sudden legibility while she watched beside him in the ruins, remained, and the lustre which had sparkled in her eyes undimmed, seemed to have faded for ever. Robert Atcherley's portrait of her

in the forsaken study was no longer a likeness, but a mocking, juvenile resemblance. She was smitten down ruthlessly and helplessly ; and only roused herself from the moody reveries into which she sank, when Emma came into her room with petulant tears and querulous lamentations. The young widow was a very ordinary subject of grief, blending convulsive hysterics with deep anxieties about her mourning apparel ; breaking in upon the bereaved mother's great anguish of spirit with many an ill-timed application upon her taste and decision ; all of which were borne with a touching patience and tenderness towards John's wife.

From the gloom of Mrs. Aspen's darkened room Doris did not stir during the days that intervened before the funeral. The whole scene of John's farewell had moved upon her deepest feelings and sympathies. Like every one else she had tacitly despised John Aspen ; but death had ennobled him, and imparted a binding authority to his brief charges. It

was her hand he had clasped till his own grew cold and nerveless with the idea that she was his own Emmy ; and as Doris sat in the mother's gloomy chamber, the touch of the icy fingers seemed to linger upon her own warm, living hand ; the words of promise she had spoken to him dwelt and echoed in her mind. No daughter could have been more thoughtful and unwearying in her attendance upon the desolate and childless woman, whose grey head she laid to rest upon her bosom, and whose bitter bursts of sorrow she soothed with voiceless but eloquent caresses. Until now she had entertained but a feeble kind of regard for her employer, whose verses she had copied with a scarcely concealed indifference ; but during those long, dark days of genuine grief, she began to feel for her a very real and honest love. Mrs. Aspen herself could bear no other hand about her, would listen to no other voice except Emma's ; and Mrs. Margraf, who would have willingly installed herself as

the chief comforter in the chamber of mourning, found no opportunity for supplanting the gentle voice, and step, and service of Doris.

The morning of the funeral came ; a soft, sunless September morning, with a light mist veiling the sun in the sky, yet making every spot on earth bright with a softened gleam. The long procession passed across the bosky meadow, and over the bridge which spanned the river at a little distance down the banks ; and returning upon the opposite shore, wound slowly along the road in full view of the old home and its oriel windows, until it reached the church at Ryton. When Doris whispered this to Mrs. Aspen, and the quicker tolling of the bell rang hurriedly through the desolate rooms, the mother, in her widow's dress again, cast off more than thirty years ago, but resumed for ever now, descended the oaken staircase, leaning on Doris's arm. Erect, and grave, and stately, with all the old dignity of her step and mien, she left the house, and pro-

ceeded to the ruins. Here was the long area of the chapel, with its many-columned shafts, where, through every circumstance of her life, she had been wont to ramble absorbed in dreams and reveries, while the shadows of the massive pillars had thrown a chequered light and darkness upon her path. She paced it now in silence. Every nook of the old walls was dear to her, associated with some trivial event of her placid life, and she visited them all ; her slow, grave tread, her aged, furrowed face, her black garments and snow white cap, passing along the grassy walks, which she had trodden in all other hours of grief or gladness. But the old pomp of self-complacent musing, the fire of inspiration had faded away from her sorrowful features, and wavering footstep ; when she drew near the place where she had watched her son lying insensible to the sunshine and her own affliction, she knelt down upon the mossy turf, and wringing her hands, cried bitterly, " My boy ! my boy ! "

Doris had followed her patiently and in silence about the ruins, without checking her mood or striving to stay her bitter tears ; but now she raised her from the ground with gentle reproaches. On the opposite bank of the river the funeral procession was already dispersing ; in a few minutes, Paul and Rufus, who had held the office of chief-mourners, with Mr. Vale would reach the Priory, to which Mrs. Aspen had invited them to return. It was necessary, Doris urged, that she should control herself, and prepare to meet them.

The mother looked round her sadly, though submitting to the tender force with which Doris drew her from the spot. The brooding mist hung lightly over all the landscape ; the ruins were wrapped in a soft, dusky shade, with a dreamy indistinctness and with no glare of garish light upon them. Perhaps in that moment there was more true poetry in the heart of the weeping mother, than had ever visited it before ; but she felt no glow,

or fire, no flight of fancy. The present sorrow was all too real for her. Here was the place where her son had died, and no other cry came to her anguished lips than the ancient and bitter cry of the desolate king, "Oh! my son! my son!"

There was no ceremonial to take place of reading a will. The estate had never passed into John's possession; the only bequest he had to make was made to his mother when he left his Emmy to her care. But Mrs. Aspen had begged that Paul and Rufus and Mr. Vale would return to the Priory after the funeral; and they with Emma and Mrs. Margraf had assembled in the study when Mrs. Aspen and Doris entered.

It was a very different group to the joyous parties that had lately met in that room. There stood the scarcely finished portrait upon an easel in one corner, just as it had been left the last time that John lingered behind the others to take another glance at it, while he rubbed his hands in noiseless

exultation. The great volumes of manuscript poems were piled upon Doris's desk, with paper-marks inserted in the numerous pages where he had found some special favourites of his own. Rufus had seated himself at the desk, leaning his drooping head upon his hand, while his eyes rested upon the handwriting of Doris, whom he had not seen since the evening they stood together at John's death-bed, and where, even in that presence, he had been conscious of every change in her face. Paul had seen her ; he, privileged to enter where Rufus was excluded, had seen Doris daily ; but he had been reserved in speaking of her. Paul was standing before Emma's sofa on the hearth, talking in a low tone to her and Mrs. Margraf ; and Mr. Vale was walking nervously and restlessly about the room ; all of them waiting for the entrance of Mrs. Aspen ; but Rufus, with his shaded eyes looking only for the appearance of Doris.

They came in in their deep mourning

robes, the aged woman clinging to the arm of the younger one, as if she could never more relinquish its support. Never had the dear face shone so fair to Rufus, though it was more pale and sorrowful than of old, and she did not look towards him. Emma and Mrs. Margraf started from their seats, and after embracing Mrs. Aspen with convulsive sobs, placed her between themselves upon the sofa, while Paul and Mr. Vale approached her with words of condolence. Doris stood for a moment, her arms falling listlessly to her side, alone and unnoticed ; but before Rufus could move shyly and hesitatingly to place a chair for her, she glided across the room to the window, and sat down beside him. The folds of her dress touched him ; the small, thin hand was laid for an instant in his ; the sweet face was uplifted to him, with a smile flickering through its sorrowfulness. It was a moment of keen rapture. Through all the awful solemnity of John Aspen's sudden death ; and it was the first time that Rufus

had been brought into contact with the mystery of mortality; the image of Doris had blended with all the deep current of thought which the catastrophe had awakened. It was she who had summoned him to his first vision of death; her voice had uttered the terrible tidings; her hand had rested in the hand of the dying man. From henceforth whenever his sensitive spirit brooded over the hidden secrets of the grave, this fair, pale face would float before his gaze, and this low, soft voice would murmur in his ear. Rufus bent his head lower upon the desk before him, and his hand fell as if idly upon the folds of her black dress.

Mrs. Margraf had not felt herself in her right position during the past few days. True she had the full management of all the funeral arrangements; and Emma had been carried through the melancholy duties of a young widow under her control and direction; but Mrs. Aspen's chamber had been closed against her, and her most dulcet tones

through the narrow chink, which was opened to her knock, had failed to procure her admission, where until her error in introducing Miss Arnold to her aunt, she had been most needed, and most confided in. The reflection had not failed to present itself to her mind, that there was no direct heir to Monkmoor Priory ; and that Richard Crofton, the nearest of kin, had incurred Mrs. Aspen's severest displeasure when he betrayed Paul's friendship, and destroyed his happiness. She could not bear to feel her influence on the wane at this crisis ; but now she had her dear aunt in the clasp of her fond arms, and was pouring words of flattering endearment and consolation into her ear. Mrs. Aspen however did not care to have a scene ; her heart was too deeply stricken for her to parade its griefs ; and she freed herself from the arms that embraced her so closely. But still keeping hold of Emma's hand, and looking into her blonde face surrounded by its cap of white crape, she sat up between

her daughter-in-law and her niece, erect and self-possessed.

“I thank you, Mr. Vale; and you also, Paul,” she said, in clear, steady tones, “for your courtesy in complying with my wishes, and returning hither. Mr. Vale, your kind and Christian letters I value greatly, and they have comforted me in my sorrow. I included you in the number of my dear friends, whom I wish to consult with reference to the future.”

She paused with a courtly gesture to Mr. Vale to be seated before she spoke again. He sank down upon a low chair opposite to her sofa, and leaning forward gazed upon her with unwavering eyes, as if the strange aspect of her furrowed features fascinated and absorbed his attention.

“It has been a long week,” she resumed in a voice of simple, heartfelt sorrow, “and I feel greatly aged. There is not much for me to live for now; and perhaps you will think it signifies little where an old woman spends

the residue of her days. But I feel that I cannot remain here. The old Priory is blood-stained ; every time I pass under the shadow of its walls, my eyes will trace the stain upon them. I must leave the Priory."

"Leave the Priory!" was echoed upon every side. Such a thought had entered no mind there. It had been her birth-place, and all her life had been spent within its walls. It seemed like overthrowing the grey ruins ; or uprooting the thousand-fibred oak-trees surrounding them. Mr. Vale clasped his hands round his knees, and fastened his eyes more fixedly upon her furrowed face.

"I must go," she said, waving her hand, as if to stay their remonstrances, "the land is defiled with blood ; my son's blood. I have not resolved rashly. All the week, and every hour of it has seemed a year, I have deliberated about this thing. The place is very dear to me, but my son was killed here. I do not want to go far away from my birth-

place, but I cannot dwell within it. I cannot tread upon his departed footprints."

She neither wept, nor suffered her voice to falter; but Emma burst out into a loud and vehement fit of crying. It was touching to see how the bereaved mother, once so reserved and stately, took her into her arms, and soothed her with fond endearments, such as she had never lavished upon her son. There was something in her tone and touch that conveyed to Emma the conviction of the power her tears had over her, and she would not be pacified. She had no desire to leave the Priory altogether, though a temporary change of scene and air would be all very well. Residence at Monkmoor Priory gave a distinction to its inmates which no other dwelling in the neighbourhood could confer. It had never entered her head that she should occupy any other position than that of young Mrs. Aspen of Monkmoor Priory.

"Oh, I cannot leave the Priory!" she sobbed, "my poor John's house! I don't

want to forget him. I could live here till I die, thinking of him, and mourning for him. I shall die soon. Please don't take me away till I can be buried by poor, dear John."

Mrs. Aspen's face quivered a little, but she laid her hand upon her lips as if to check the rising sobs; and then she caressed Emma again.

"My love," she said, "I will not tear you away from the place if you wish to stay. But we are differently constituted. I cannot breathe here, Emma; the air is tainted. The recollection of that hour never leaves my mind. For your sake I will not quit the neighbourhood; but I cannot remain within these walls. If you choose, my dear daughter, you shall stay here, and keep the old house from being empty; and Paul shall find some home for me in Thornbury; or nearer still, on the other side of the river, where I can attend my own church in which I was christened and married, and where my husband and son rest in their graves. But here I

fancy John's step and voice are still about the house. I must go, Emma ; if it were possible, I would go this day."

"Aunt," said Paul, approaching her, and leaning over with an air of kindly protection, "my home is yours. Let Fairfield receive you at once ; this day if you like. Remember John left you in my charge ; I promised to regard you as my own mother. Come then to my home."

He bent lower still, and raised her hand to his lips, as John had been wont to do in his clumsy homage, and Mrs. Aspen looked up to him with glistening eyes.

"God bless you, Paul," she murmured ; "you are a good man. But I must not let my sorrow make me selfish and regardless of others. I want a home for some months until the Selection is finished. Under other circumstances I would accept your offer gratefully. Perhaps I should feel less bereaved with your step sounding through the house, and your care immediately surrounding me.

I might learn to fancy you my son. But we must think of Doris. No, Paul. It would not be correct for Doris to dwell beneath your roof before your marriage, even though she went there with me."

Paul's face lowered, and he bit his lips angrily. Mrs. Margraf felt a pang of disappointment and dismay. To have had Mrs. Aspen dwelling in their own home, under her constant influence, presented the fairest prospect of success to the newly-born hopes which sprung from John Aspen's death. No chance presented itself of removing the existing obstacle, and she set her teeth fiercely beneath the bland, calm air of grief which sat upon her features.

"No," resumed Mrs. Aspen. "I should have asked you to shelter an old woman's grey hairs; but I cannot part with Doris; and she must not live at Fairfield until she bears the title of your wife. When that takes place, I will ask you to receive me, my children; I will make my old age as happy

as it ever can be. Paul, amidst all my sorrow this week, I have been looking forward to that time. When Doris has been consoling me ; when she has given me a glimpse into her inner heart, true and loving and religious ; I have said through all my wretchedness, 'She will be a treasure to Paul ; and he is worthy of her.' You will let me live with you when you are married. You will not separate me from Doris ? ”

Paul glanced furtively at Doris's averted head, which was turned away from his scrutiny, and so concealed from him by its droop, that he could see the tears only as they rolled down upon her hand. He advanced a step or two towards the window where she sat beside Rufus, but checked himself abruptly, uncertain what to say if he approached them. Mr. Vale's view of his old friend's furrowed face was clear again ; with a nervous effort, he raised himself from his low seat, and occupied the position Paul had just quitted.

“Madam, Clarissa,” he said—her christian name uttered by the only voice that ever pronounced it now—and he repeated it in a grave and pleasant tone; “Clarissa, we two are old people and old friends. Few years remain to either of us, and I long to retain all the old associations that I can until the end comes. The old church would be a changed place to me, if I failed to see your face in it when I mounted my pulpit steps. For forty years I have looked upon it Sunday after Sunday, and noted every change that came across it. Clarissa, I cannot bear to lose sight of the dear, old face now. This day I read my own age in it as in some faithful mirror, which has the power of shadowing out all my past life. You are my last friend, and your face grows dearer to me. Come to my home. We will strengthen one another; we will help one another heavenwards. Doris shall be as a daughter to us. You cannot see the Priory from my house, and that will be well for you: but you will

know that it is there, just across the river, and there will be a kind of pleasure in the thought ; it has often been a pleasure to me. My dear old friend, make your home at my Vicarage."

His voice quavered a little, but he uttered the words through to the end, and stood before her entreatingly, with his nervous fingers interlacing, and his white head trembling with excitement. Mrs. Margraf waited breathlessly for the reply, for to have Mrs. Aspen settled in the Vicarage was only second to her dwelling at Fairfield. Mrs. Aspen paused for some minutes, then held out her hand to him, and drew herself up to her full height, yet with a glance of stately condescension.

"I will accept your kindness, Mr. Vale," she replied. "We are old people as you say, and our friendship is of many years' standing. For the present Doris and I will become inmates of your house, until our work is completed, and she is released from her promise.

When Paul offers me a home again I shall not say no. My daughter," and she stroked Emma's hand fondly, shall remain here if she pleases with the old household, and take my place among them. John will not be forgotten by either of us."

"Oh, never! never!" cried Emma, throwing her arms round Mrs. Aspen's neck. "I wish I could die. I shall die soon; but the time seems so long!"

She broke out suddenly into wild, hysterical sobs, and loud screams which rang through the house. The mother would suffer no one but herself to try to soothe her. Her aching and desolate heart was overflowing with pity and affection for John's Emmy; and it was a relief to pour it out in ineffectual efforts at consolation. She led Emma along the darkened passages, and laid her down to rest upon her own bed. Drawing the curtains around her with the carefulness of a mother's hand, she watched tearfully behind them until her slow and regular

breathing gave evidence that she had sunk into a forgetful slumber.

The mother stole softly to the bedside, and holding back the curtains with a tremulous hand, looked upon the face of John's Emmy, with eyes dimmed with tears. All the paltry pique and sorry jealousy that had festered in her mind were rooted out. She saw her now with John's eyes. A new halo of love and grief shone around her; she marvelled that she had been blind to the grace that John had seen. Very softly and gently she smoothed back a fair lock of hair which had fallen upon her forehead from under the border of her crape cap; and bending over her with a care that would not have disturbed the slumber of an infant, she impressed a farewell kiss upon her lips.

The night had closed in while Mrs. Aspen was thus occupied; but Doris, and the servant who was to accompany them, had made every arrangement for her departure. Mr. Vale had been over to the Vicarage, and

returned with Paul in order to escort her thither. The Priory was enveloped in darkness, and only a light here and there in the windows marked a faint outline of the home she was quitting. The river, to which she had sung so many verses, was no more than a broad boundary of intenser blackness, over which she had to cross by the feeble light of a lantern in the prow of the ferry-boat. A myriad of poetic fancies should have thronged her brain, and shaped themselves into tuneful numbers; but she sat silent amid silent companions. No words or thoughts came to her mind, save the simple sentence that had haunted her ever since John died: "The only son of his mother, and she was a widow."

CHAPTER XIII.



AN Indian summer was gilding the autumn of the Vicar's life. The dream he had scarcely had the boldness to dream forty years earlier was realized at last. Clarissa was sheltered under his roof; was there to bid him good-morning when the church tower cast a western shadow across his lawn, and was there to receive his reverent good-night when the stars peeped down into the hidden enclosure. Everything about him possessed a new interest. The fading roses, which he left to wither after the celebration of his harvest-home, were pruned and tended to preserve their beauty a little longer. The ancient maid servants were warned and bribed, threatened and rewarded in secrecy. Doris was implored daily to suggest some

alteration that would increase the happiness and comfort of his old friend. He broke through his most cherished habits to adapt himself to Clarissa's ways. He rose betimes instead of taking breakfast in bed because she was an early riser, and presented himself scrupulously arrayed in clerical attire, at the breakfast-table, where Doris ministered to him and Mrs. Aspen. It seemed like a halcyon trance to him. The dreariness of the past was blotted out of his memory. Clarissa was dwelling within his secluded home; and the gentle, silvery-voiced girl, who treated him as if he were a father, was as a daughter given to him in his old age. He could scarcely think of John Aspen's death without a subtle sense of complacency.

But Mrs. Aspen could not throw off the effects of the fatal shock she had suffered. There was a passive stateliness about her demeanour still, which received Mr. Vale's devotion with a quiet dignity; but her innocent vocation was at an end as it seemed

for ever. No odes or elegies were written upon her son's death ; the memorial erected next to his father's lofty epitaph upon the church walls bore only the simple inscription from the Gospel, which told his position and her own. She sat for hours together in silent inaction, only moved from her lethargic repose when John's Emma came across the river to pour her exaggerated lamentations into her ear. But Emma was longing for the little change, which had occurred to her as necessary to lighten her heavy affliction. Everybody, she argued, did leave home for a season after there had been a death in the family ; it was cruel, and hard-hearted, and selfish to detain her at the Priory after such a dreadful calamity. Every moment must remind her of the loss she had endured, a loss greater to her of course than to anybody else. She was pining away for the want of sea-breezes. It was rather late in the season for the sea-side, but she did not go for the sake of gaiety ; and if she started at

once the bathing-places would not be quite deserted, and there would be enough society to divert her thoughts a little from the grief that was preying upon her. Did Paul and Mr. Vale, and even Mrs. Margraf, wish to sacrifice her to Mrs. Aspen? Ah! they did not care for John's last charge; he had left her to their care. And upon the mention of John's name, Emma wept unanswerable tears.

It was not long before Emma murmured her complaints to Mrs. Aspen, who caught eagerly at the idea of affording any relief or consolation to the young widow's unmitigated affliction. Mr. Weston's family were yet at the sea-side, with other friends from Thornbury, and she should join them at once. So Paul was commissioned to accompany Emma to the Welsh watering-place, which was fashionable with the Thornbury people for that season, and to leave her there with the Westons until the violence of her mourning should subside under the influence of any

casual society she might meet with. Paul had a good deal upon his hands just now; he hardly knew the comfort and repose of his pleasant library, towards which his thoughts turned longingly many times a day. All the Priory affairs had devolved upon him, together with the management of his own lands, which had hitherto been tacitly ordered by John. There was Rufus also to be entered and to matriculate at Cambridge, and he intended to go up with him; the second journey he felt compelled to take; he, who never cared to travel beyond Thornbury. Besides all this it was positively necessary to make frequent visits, and to give a considerable portion of his valuable time to Mrs. Aspen and Doris. The sudden and painful catastrophe at the Priory had averted much of the jubilation of congratulating, which he dreaded to receive from his friends at Thornbury; but the solemn, earnest good wishes which mingled with their shocked condolences, had been harder to bear

than even the jesting and amazement he had anticipated. The almost mournful felicitations, linked with lamentations for John Aspen's death gave him greater shame and keener self-reproach than any mere mirth at his prolonged bachelorhood, and late betrothal. Yet the end of the deceit seemed further off than ever now.

Mrs. Aspen was quite dependent upon Doris ; she alone could rouse her, after the departure of Emma, to take any interest in anything. Mrs. Margraf chafed vainly at her dear aunt's indifference to her attentions, and the placid purring of her sympathy. The habitual high-breeding and ceremoniousness of the aged gentlewoman she retained ; and now and then in the presence of Mr. Vale, the ineradicable feminine coquetry glimmered through the gloom of her sorrow, and sent a thrill of long buried emotions through the Vicar's heart. But these occasions were rare. Her thoughts were not keeping pace with time ; they were dwelling

still upon the moment when she had drawn near to her son, and seen the film of death clouding his fond and honest gaze. Doris brought the Selection to bear upon her at last. She collected the fifty volumes of manuscript verse, which had been the offspring of her brain, and busied herself with choosing poems for transcription. And this work she would not perform alone. Paul and the Vicar, Rufus and Mrs. Margraf, were formed into a committee of taste ; and discussed the comparative merits of every poem which Doris read to them aloud, with an earnestness before unequalled. It was impossible for the poetess to listen without heeding. The Selection had been one of John's chief thoughts upon his death-bed, and it would be to neglect his wishes if she relinquished the idea of publishing it. A little of the old animation was rekindled ; and Mr. Vale soon proved himself as devout and indiscriminating a believer in the poems as John himself.

The days fled fast to Rufus, for they were days preceding such a separation as he dreaded to think of. His departure was to be no more delayed. The last morning but one his boat was moored at Monk's Ferry, waiting for Paul and Doris to row down the river with him as far as Murivance, where he went to bid farewell to the artist and his blind mother. It was at his own repeated and importunate request; for the calamity at the Priory seemed to him to have destroyed all the ordinary forms of courtship; and as yet he felt as if he could not fully realise the fact that Paul and Doris were betrothed. He wished to see them together, and apart from others. They needed more isolation than had hitherto been possible; with a restless and painful curiosity he longed to see them sit side by side, and smile into one another's eyes, as lovers, even though it should probe his own heart to the quick to witness it. But Paul seized one of the oars, and Doris seated herself at the helm, with

her quiet face opposite to them both, and her eyes more often meeting his own than Paul's. Swiftly and in silence, for Paul plied his oar with all his strength, they shot past the ruins of the Priory, and floating with the current, landed at the water-gate of the garden at Murivance, without either wounding or satisfying Rufus's sensitive nature.

The many-pictured sitting-room remained exactly as it had been seen by Doris when she had spent her only day in the artist's home ; as if he had at last seen his paintings in the best light, and desired no further change. His mother, with her unquiet, straining eyes, was sitting in her usual place near the sunny window ; and rejoiced to hear the voices of Rufus and Doris as they came up the long grass walk from the river to the house. She welcomed them with warm cordiality ; but the presence of Paul distressed her. He passed from picture to picture with sentences of correct admiration and just criticism ; but Mrs. Atcherley could not

speak to him, and could scarcely restrain her tears. It was well that after a time her son came down, with a sullen gloom upon his face, and invited them to accompany him to his studio, as though they came to have his paintings exhibited to them rather than to visit himself. Paul had no eyes for his gloom and thanked him heartily. But when he offered his arm to conduct Doris thither, Mrs. Atcherley detained her, and bade them leave her behind them.

“Oh, my dear! my dear!” she cried, giving way to her tears, as soon as they were gone, “how could you? how could you? Nobody thought of Dr. Lockley and you. We could have given you up to Rufus; even I could have given you up to him, my dear. But not to Dr. Lockley! He is so wrapped up in his books and himself that he will never make you happy. Everybody says he is not a marrying man, and he hates women. My dear, a man who hates women will never make a good husband.”

“He does not hate women,” answered Doris, with a smile that was unseen.

“My dear, you think not,” said the blind woman; “of course you think not. But he sneers at them; he despises them. A man who has had a mother to love him ought never to sneer at women. What if one girl did play him false; could he not have found another and another, instead of waiting till there was one who was so beloved—so beloved, Doris; and then when his hair is grey stepping before younger men, and before his own brother, and winning her from them all? Why did he not get married sooner if he meant to be, instead of waiting till you came, who are so much younger than he is. Oh, my dear! my dear! Our hearts will break.”

The rosy, wrinkled face, and eager eyes, were hidden from Doris for a minute or two; and then Mrs. Atcherley spoke again in a quieter and more plaintive tone.

“My dear, will you please to describe Dr.

Lockley to me. Robert said he could not do so justly."

"He is tall," answered Doris, gravely, "and stoops a little with sitting long at his desk. His hair is dark, just turning to grey. His eyes are grey; his forehead is broad. There is nothing remarkable in his appearance."

Mrs. Atcherley sighed with a discontented air, and mused a little, moving her head restlessly from side to side, and keeping fast hold of the hand of Doris.

"What is my son like?" she asked, impatiently.

"Your son is very handsome," replied Doris, "Dr. Lockley's face is not to be compared with his. There is great beauty and power in Mr. Atcherley's face. Your son is remarkable."

The mother flinched, and she fixed her sightless eyes steadily upon Doris.

"Is it that accident that makes him remarkable?" she said, mournfully. "I know that when he stands beside me his face is not as high as

mine, and I have to stoop to kiss him. He was a little, little child when I let him fall, and I had not been blind long then. Oh, my dear, would you have loved my son, if it had not been for that ?”

She burst into a piteous wailing, which was very low and subdued, lest it should be heard in her son's studio overhead ; she moaned to herself that but for her cruel calamity he would have won Doris ; she wrung her poor hands in bitter regret, and wept sorely. Till at last Doris spoke.

“Dear friend,” she said, soothingly, “you distress yourself for nothing. If Mr. Atcherley had been as well-formed as he is handsome, I should not have loved him. We women do not know why we love. There is Rufus ; you might ask me why I do not love him.”

“What is there in Dr. Lockley to love ?” asked Mrs. Atcherley, in a tone of anger.

“He reminds me of my father,” said Doris. “I am accustomed to men who devote their lives to some pursuit, and put us on one side,

not in scorn or contempt, but because they have given themselves to one study. I am satisfied to occupy the place they assign to me, that of ministering to them and their work. I do not want to be made their first thought, but I am willing to make them mine. I should be happier in copying Dr. Lockley's manuscripts, than in sitting as a passive model for Mr. Atcherley's painting. My life is among books, as is Dr. Lockley's."

Doris spoke rapidly, and with unwonted energy, while her face lost something of its sobriety, and kindled into animation; but there was no eye to witness the brief glow.

"Ah, my dear," said Mrs. Atcherley, "you love him, and he will neglect you. My son says so. You don't know what it is to be neglected by a husband. My son says that neither of you looked happy, even on the first day of your engagement; he looked gloomy and displeased even with you. He is a morose man; one to be feared rather than loved. Are you sure you love him, Doris?"

“You are mistaken about him,” answered Doris, evasively; “he is not at all morose.”

“But do you love him?” she persisted. “He is a good match for you. Dr. Lockley of Fairfield is a greater man than poor Robert Atcherley, the artist. Perhaps you are a little deceived by his position and name. My dear, wealth will be no comfort to a girl like you, if there is little love with it. My son says that you did not look as if you loved one another. Do you really love him, Doris?”

There was no need for Doris to shrink from Mrs. Atcherley's visionless eyes, and conceal her face in her hands, as she did for some minutes, while the blind woman was impatiently silent, in expectation of an answer to her question: a silence which at last compelled Doris to speak, though without raising her head, as she replied in a low, but calm and impassioned voice.

“Dr. Lockley's habits are like my father's,” she said. “When he came home six years

ago from Africa, he was still a young man in heart and spirit ; not so many years older than Dr. Lockley. He was quiet and reserved ; morose, you might have called him ; but I knew him to be the dearest father, the fondest, the tenderest. We used to work together ; and he could not get on unless I was sitting near to him, ready to help him any moment he might want me. I never lived so full a life as those four years that he was at home. And Dr. Lockley reminds me of him. Do you wonder that I should care a little for him. If I were his wife I should sit at his side, as at my father's, ready for any service or pleasure I could render him ; contented whether he spoke to me, or was silent. Do not trouble yourself about my happiness. If I become Paul Lockley's wife, be sure that it is because I love him."

The words fell upon Mrs. Atcherley's ear in tranquil and deliberate tones ; but when Doris ended, and raised her eyes from the carpet to which they had been bent,

she started in sudden consternation and affright, as she met Paul's gaze fixed upon her with an expression of profound astonishment and embarrassed misgiving. The blind woman was conscious of the panic which shook Doris's frame, and with a shuddering, half-suppressed sob she threw her arms round her, and turned her eager face defiantly towards Paul, as she became aware of his presence.

"Miss Arnold," he said, being the first to recover from the shock he had received, and which was possibly lighter than that felt by Doris, "I came to invite you to Mr. Atcherley's studio. Will you allow me to conduct you thither?"

Doris rose swiftly without replying, and declining by a mute gesture his offered arm, swept out of the room before him, with a haughtiness which won a fleeting smile to Paul's grave face as he followed her. She turned round in the lobby, after he had closed the sitting-room door, and confronted

him with flushing cheeks, and eyes glistening through tears ; while in the lowered accents of her voice there rang a very audible tone of petulance and displeasure.

“You compel me to be untrue,” she said, while Paul bent down his head to catch the words. “I am beginning to hate myself, and you, and Mrs. Margraf. This humiliation is too bitter. How long are we to keep up this farce ?”

“But if it could be true ?” murmured Paul, as though some irresistible infatuation forced the words through his teeth. He trembled when they were beyond recal. As far as he could like any woman he liked Doris ; as she stood before him now, ruffled with offended dignity, and shrinking with wounded delicacy, he was willing to say anything to appease her, and to restore her usual tranquillity. He wished gently to intimate that but for certain reasons, the turning of the farce into a reality would be an honour and a happiness to himself, and thus to

pacify her troubled spirit ; but the mad sentence he had uttered in spite of himself filled him with apprehension and terror, and he looked down upon her face with a vivid expression of chagrin upon his own. There was a keen reciprocation of the last sentiment in Doris's flashing eyes.

“You insult me !” she exclaimed, drawing herself to her full height, and throwing back her hands with a pretty gesture of disdain. But before he could speak again, she turned quickly to the staircase, and sped lightly up it ; leaving him to follow to the studio with slower steps, and an aspect of greater gravity than when he had quitted it. The artist was not unobservant ; and when he saw Doris keeping close to Rufus, while Paul with cloudy brow stood aloof, and never glanced towards her, he derived such comfort from the sight, as arose from the conviction that serious and prolonged disagreements already existed between them.

There was a picture to be carried back in

the boat to Fairfield, which was packed up with as much care as if it were to travel with Rufus to Cambridge. So the artist believed when he screwed it securely into its case ; but the boy detected, with a strange pain varying from time to time into a perilous pleasure, that Paul and Doris had some ground of dissatisfaction with each other. A thrill ran through him when Doris laid her hand on his arm instead of Paul's ; and while she neither spoke nor looked at his brother, talked to him confidentially and fluently, in accents of hurried emotion that deepened now and then into tenderness. It was the last time he should see her for some months ; and his heart beat irregularly with uncontrollable agitation. She bade him good-bye at the Vicarage gate just within the walls, while Paul strolled on to Fairfield, and did not shrink from the farewell kiss he ventured to imprint upon her cheek. A thought crossed his mind that after all her betrothal to his brother might be broken off, setting

him free to woo her ; but his conscience smote him for the treachery, and he resolved to atone for the secret fault.

Paul was sitting at his own fireside, and reflecting with some mortification upon the occurrences of the day, when Rufus entered with his unpacked painting. It was a copy of that portrait of Doris, which hung in the sunset light in the artist's home, with the sweet, sad, homeless look upon her features. Atcherley had not chosen to alter its expression by the faintest trace of joy ; he had even deepened the meek reproachfulness in the sorrowful eyes, and the unbending mournfulness of the lips ; but the resemblance to Doris, when she was unconscious of being noticed, was perfect. Paul could not help but sigh as he gazed upon it ; and Rufus turned away with tears in his eyes.

“ Paul,” he said, “ Atcherley painted it for me, but I cannot take it with me to Cambridge. It would be madness. Let it hang here, brother, over your library hearth, where

you can look up, and see her every hour of the day. Some time perhaps I will reclaim it from you."

"Take it with you, Rufus," said Paul, in a choking voice.

"No, no," he answered, earnestly; "you do not know the madness, the desperate temptation. Paul, there are times when I envy you; when I forget that you are my brother. Not an hour ago I was accusing you to myself of loving her less than I do."

"It is your first love, Rufus," said Paul.

"And not yours!" he replied. "I suppose no man loves a second time as he does the first. Oh, my Doris! my Doris! even Paul does not love you, as he might have loved you once!"

He spoke passionately, and stretched out his arms towards the portrait with a yearning, enthusiastic tenderness in his tones and looks. Paul glanced at him, but averted his eyes quickly from the pathetic and forlorn grief of his young face.

“Paul,” he resumed, “promise me you will be very thoughtful of her. Sophia says you are not young enough to play the lover as I should do ; that at times you will be grave and cold even to her. But you will try to make her happy ? You will sacrifice yourself to make her happy ? If she should have little freaks and fancies, as Sophia says all women have, you will bend yourself to them ? You will not punish her for them, if she has any, by being cold, and distant, and reserved with her ? If Doris, being so much younger than you are, should ever need a little patience—and she will never need much—for my sake, Paul, be very gentle with her ; and bind her to you more and more closely by your forbearance. Let me, when I am away at College, think always that no cloud comes across her gladness, and your own.”

“Rufus,” exclaimed Paul, “I cannot divine how it is she does not love you !”

“I understand it,” he said. “I understand perfectly how any woman whom you love

must return your love. What am I compared with you? Paul, by the time I come to be the curate at Ryton, you will be an old married man, and Doris will be to me simply my sister. We shall be very happy together then, when all this storm and tempest are past with me. I shall set up my bachelor lodgings somewhere in the village, and then I will reclaim my picture; but I cannot take it with me. Let me put it up here at once."

He busied himself for some minutes in hanging the portrait over the centre of the chimney-piece, where the slightly bended head appeared to cast a shy, downcast look upon the hearth. Paul suffered him to pursue his purpose unassisted, while he watched regretfully his trembling hands, and eager, quivering face. But Rufus smiled when his task was finished, and stepping backwards across the floor, surveyed the painting critically from various parts of the library.

"I trust her with you," he said, coming

back to the hearth, and grasping Paul's hand ; "it seems to me as if only as you are true and gentle to her—as you ever will be—shall I keep my love and honour for you. You love her very greatly, Paul ? ”

“ My dear boy,” exclaimed Paul, “ you do not know how you torture me.”

“ Forgive me, Paul,” he answered, “ but I will not say much more. You will let me write to her ? I will enclose my letters to her in yours ; and you may read them, if you choose. But Doris herself would show them to you.”

“ Nay, write to her direct,” said Paul, “ write as often as you choose, and I will see none of them. She shall answer them, my boy, if I have any influence with her. There ! good-night, Rufus ; we shall start early in the morning.”

If Mrs. Margraf could have seen Paul after Rufus had left him, lean back in his comfortable chair, and gaze critically and admiringly at the portrait before him, while his retentive

memory repeated the words he had overheard Doris saying to the blind Mrs. Atcherley, with a wavering wish that they could be true, her spirit would have sunk within her, self-convicted of a blunder. As it was, when her eyes fell upon the picture the next day, while Paul and Rufus were journeying towards Cambridge she felt a sudden electric shock of apprehension and displeasure ; and only her awe of Paul prevented her removing it at once, and banishing it to an ignominious retirement in the attics.

CHAPTER XIV.

IT was very dreary for Emma Aspen at the Welsh watering-place, whither she had retreated for change of scene. The season was almost past, and the once thickly crowded sands were sparsely dotted over by the families of farmers, who had hurried to the sea-side as soon as the harvest was gathered in. The long terraces of lodging-houses, with their endless repetitions of bay-windows, and their parallel causeways of flagged pavements were nearly deserted, even by street organ-grinders, and itinerant brass-bands. In almost every window hung a diminutive card, with the word "Apartments" feebly inscribed upon it, as if each proprietor had a forlorn hope of a renewal of the season. The very sea rolled its waves up

to the beach languidly, and retreated to the lowest ebb as if weary of the forsaken and dismal sands. At last it began to rain from morning till night, in shabby, drizzling showers, which never cleared away altogether, but gloomed and lowered over the mist-hidden sea; and wrapped the town in a haze of discomfort and dulness.

A great sorrow; a wild, absorbing, dolorous heartache, might have remained unaffected by all this outer desolation; or might even have gathered a faint consolation from the gloom. Nature should wear the livery of the spirits. But Emma's object was to get rid of the memory of her trouble as speedily as possible. In this strange place, after the Thornbury people had left it, there were no neighbours' eyes to watch her conduct, and neighbours' tongues to praise or condemn the young widow. It was quite safe and expedient to cease from weeping; especially as it made her head ache, and inflamed her eyes. She should not forget

poor dear John one minute the sooner, because she exercised a little self-control, and strove to remember her duty to herself, as he would have wished her to do. Tears were empty things. She was as truly a mourner while seeking distraction and diversion at the sea-side, as if she had stayed at home weeping with Mrs. Aspen. But the weather, and the languid sea, and the deserted sands, and the empty streets, irritated Emma as being very unlucky and disagreeable, and unkind circumstances, such as John would have been dissatisfied with for her; and Mrs. Margraf sank below par in her friendship, because she had not left her preparations for the departure of Rufus, in order to accompany her in her quest after change of scene and thought.

The young widow was in this extremity of comfortless solitude, when one morning, while gazing disconsolately out upon a long line of closed windows, which bent round in a Crescent facing the invisible sea, she descried

upon the pavement below, a lady and gentleman clad in deep mourning making their way along the streets through the rain, as though bent upon visiting the sodden sands. Surely it could not be, and yet it was! That dark, foreign-looking man, with features almost hidden by his black beard and moustache, could be no other than Richard Crofton; and the tall, elegant, handsome woman at his side, who smiled at the rain, and coquetted with the wind, permitting it to display her small foot, and well-turned ankle, was certainly Harriet. No one else could have turned the storm to such advantage; she seemed to delight in the scudding showers; the colour upon her cheeks glowed rosily under her umbrella; the dainty steps with which she tripped over the wet pavement looked as if they might have been set to music.

Emma made frantic efforts to attract their attention, as they drew near to her window; but failing to accomplish her purpose, she

hastened to the house-door in a flutter of anxiety lest they should pass on without learning that she was there. Mrs. Crofton was laughing a satisfied laugh as her eyes met her husband's triumphantly ; but no one could have been more amazed than she was when a voice called to them through a half-open door, and looking round, with a well affected start of surprise, she saw her poor dear Emma from Monkmoor Priory.

From that hour Emma's spirits began to revive. Mrs. Crofton, having brought her husband down to the obscure Welsh sea-town for no other reason than to establish her influence over the young widow, left no stone unturned that could aid in building up her project. John Aspen's death might be of no trivial consequence to Richard Crofton, who was next heir to Monkmoor Priory ; though a long estrangement had banished them from the favour of its owner. No thought of any inheritance had hitherto crossed either of their minds in their most sanguine flights of

anticipation ; but that which they had not dreamed of had come to pass. Mrs. Aspen had no nearer kinsman, and she was known to hold some stringent opinions upon the right of inheritance. But the Lockleys were upon the spot, and the old lady was greatly under the sway of Mrs. Margraf, shrewd, wily, and intriguing, and occupying the post of confidante to the childless widow. Their chance was a remote one, but worth trying in Mrs. Crofton's opinion. Certain unpleasant deficiencies, which had made their creditors unwilling to lose sight of Mr. Crofton, had compelled him to absent himself most reluctantly from the funeral to which he had been bidden ; but Mrs. Crofton had visited Thornbury secretly to make some observations upon their best course of action. There she learned a few circumstances which gave her a good deal of surprise and chagrin ; but she also heard that Emma was gone alone to the seaside, and as soon as her husband's creditors set him at liberty, they followed thither,

secure that they should find her an easy quarry.

The Croftons lived in a chronic state of debt, and were so used to it that it had become a necessary element of excitement in their lives. Occasionally it passed into a more virulent form, and demanded some decisive and extreme treatment; but Mr. Crofton made no secret of his embarrassments. He was in the habit of regretting in a gentlemanly manner his utter inability to make both ends meet; and would now and then lay it to the charge of Harriet's extravagance; but in general he met the demands for money which flowed in upon him as mere matters of course, far less important and serious to himself than to his creditors, to whose consideration he left them. To Mrs. Crofton there was a pleasurable excitement, almost equal to that of gambling, in trying how much cajolery was necessary with her various tradesmen, and with what measure of impudence and flattery she could stave off their

importunate claims. No woman dressed more elegantly and expensively than she did ; and her bright eyes, and pouting, melting lips had not done greater execution in ball-rooms than over shop-counters.

Harriet Crofton could no more live without flirting, than Doris Arnold could live without breathing. Coquetry was her atmosphere. From the road-side pedlar, who looked up with a leer and took off his brimless hat to her, to the eager huntsman who in the full ardour of the chase reined in his panting horse for a more deliberate survey of her face, she could not withstand the desire to attract their notice and admiration. Her beautiful glances and honeyed words were irresistible. The dark, lustrous eyes meeting the gaze of any admirer convinced him that he was the first and only man in the world to her, however she might condescend to trifle with others ; her tones, liquid and confidential, were breathed into his ear, as if no mortal had ever heard the same music from her lips.

To her own natural genius for flirtation, she had added since her marriage the study of it in all the polite capitals on the Continent; and practised it upon every class of character with the most brilliant success. She had at last attained to the perfection of an artless ingenuousness; so light-hearted, so airy, so untroubled, that one was apt to regard her as an innocent and happy child.

The fact that Richard Crofton was never jealous of his wife's coquetries gave immeasurable advantage to them. It would have been impossible to convince him of any unpardonable levity in her conduct, though he might confess that Harriet was incautious at times, from the mere gaiety of her temperament. When she had no other object at hand she was wont to lavish her fascinations upon him; and as this invariably occurred upon the termination of some harmless pastime, he could afford to smile at the disappointment and discomfiture of her admirers, while he hugged himself in the belief that

her heart was his, and that she lived for him alone. Besides, Harriet's attractions were exceedingly useful. In one way or another she had borne him triumphantly through every storm which had threatened their ruin; and now she was employing every charm to rivet the affection of Emma Aspen in their favour.

The weather at the sea-side cleared up for a short time, and the few visitors lingering in the town promenaded perseveringly upon the shore. It was no longer dull. Whenever Harriet Crofton and Emma walked out they were sure of attracting admiration, and meeting with some little adventure. It was a perfect distraction and consolation; and Emma's eyes were very seldom swollen. Her gratitude and attachment to the Croftons were unbounded. When the fogs returned, and the season was hopelessly over, she declared she could not go back to the dreary solitude of Monkmoor Priory without her dear friends.

"You know, Harriet," she urged, "old Mrs. Aspen has given up her place there to

me ; and what is the use of my being the mistress, if I cannot invite any visitors I choose ? I can't help it if Paul Lockley is annoyed. He has kept up the old grudge long enough ; and made poor, dear John keep it up, which was so unchristian of him. Many and many a time I tried to lead John to think of his duty to his nearest relations ; but he always used to say, ' I can't hurt Paul's feelings by asking Harriet Crofton to come here.' It is high time to let bye-gones be bye-gones."

" They are bye-gones," replied Mrs. Crofton, with a dark scowl at some invisible enemy ; " my presence can make no difference to Paul Lockley now that he is engaged. Who is this girl that has taken him captive at last, and where does she come from ?"

" She came to help old Mrs. Aspen with her poems," said Emma. " There was a great fuss and bother made about publishing a selection of poems ; and Sophia Margraf persuaded her to engage an amanuensis, so that

it might be done without very much trouble to any of us. Little she thought," and Emma chuckled with gratification, "that this girl would snap up her grave brother. She is just mad about it; though she smiles and smiles, and calls her dear, and love, and darling. Just like a cat is Sophia Margraf. Then there's Rufus! He does not think gold good enough for her to tread upon. The fuss they all make of the girl, and old Mrs. Aspen is the worst of them, is perfectly disgusting."

"Is she pretty?" asked Mrs. Crofton.

"Well, she has fair hair like mine; and poor, dear John, in his fond way you know, used to say she was something like me. I don't know, I'm sure. Old Mrs. Aspen is just wrapped up in her, and I believe she composes half her poems. But we sha'n't know whether they are real poetry till they are published, and we hear what other people think of them. She had her portrait taken for a frontispiece; poor John was so foolish about his mother, there might not have been

such another woman in the world. So you see he was quite taken up with Miss Arnold as well ; but I don't call her pretty."

"Does Paul seem very fond of her?" inquired Harriet, glancing bewitchingly at a stray man, who was left wandering desolately upon the beach, and who retraced his steps after passing them a few paces, in order to meet that attractive glance again.

"Oh, passionately!" exclaimed Emma, and Harriet's face gloomed again with a sullen frown. "He is rather grand over it, you know, in his ceremonious way, but he has taken to hanging about, and he does not shut himself up in his library as he used to do. Besides, she is gone over the river with Mrs. Aspen to the Vicarage, so she is close at hand for him. Do you know, I should not wonder in the least if old Mrs. Aspen married Mr. Vale after all. What a ridiculous old couple they would make!"

Emma laughed shrilly, and Mrs. Crofton smiled, until her small, even teeth glistened

like pearls between her parted lips ; and the stranger astray on the sands shot an admiring look full into her face.

“ Well, Paul could not be distressed by any visit of mine to the Priory,” said Mrs. Crofton. She had indulged a sentiment of glory and self-gratulation in Paul’s prolonged celibacy for her sake, which fretted her grievously now that he had formed a second attachment ; no scheme more attractive or agreeable to her could have been devised than that of returning to the old scenes, and if possible marring in some way the relationship between him and his betrothed. She had confidence in her own powers of fascination ; and if she could but fling a stone or two into the smooth current of this love, she would feel in some degree pacified.

“ Ah, no ! dear Harriet,” cried Emma, “ he will not care ; and you must come home with me. I was weary of my life before I found you out, I don’t care a straw for Paul or Doris Arnold ; and I can manage my good

mother-in-law now. Why, poor John said upon his death-bed that Richard Crofton was to take care of me as well as Paul; and I think it very strange and very wrong that nobody wrote to tell you so. Yes, you were to take care of me; I'd ten times rather have you than half-a-dozen Paul Lockleys, with their long, grave faces, or a dozen Mrs. Margravs, with her smooth, cat-like ways. You shall come home with me to the Priory."

As soon as Emma and Harriet withdrew from the sands, after bewitching the unknown rambler until he followed them to their lodgings, and spent the rest of the day in inanely passing to and fro along the undisputed pavement below their window, Emma sat down to her desk. Upon a deeply edged sheet of mourning-paper she announced to Mrs. Aspen her intended return to Monkmoor Priory, accompanied by Mr. and Mrs. Crofton, whom poor John had mentioned upon his death-bed, as being delegated by him to take charge of his bereaved Emmy.

CHAPTER XV.

IF any one had told Paul Lockley that the reason of the long banishment of Richard Crofton and his wife from their kinsmen's dwelling was the deep sympathy which both Mrs. Aspen and John had felt for him in the ill-treatment he had received from them, he would have been at once touched and irritated. Long after he had forgotten, or remembered only with a sarcastic laugh at himself, the frantic disappointment and bitterness of his loss, John Aspen had never thought of it without a moisture in his eyes, and a sigh upon his lips. Paul, two or three years older than he was, gifted and handsome, excelling wherever he failed, more worthy to be the son of his poet-mother, had been, unknown to himself, John's hero and model; and the

many years of seclusion and celibacy, which followed upon Harriet's faithlessness, tended to heighten the romantic interest which both mother and son had taken in him. Only upon his death-bed, and relying upon Paul's betrothal to Doris, had John ventured to link the name of his nearest kinsman with that of Paul, as being the friends, who by all ties of blood and friendship should stand between his mother and wife, and the cold world, from which he had shielded them. He had a vague, undefined yearning that there should be peace among them after all this lapse of years ; especially when all ground of alienation and disunion was rapidly dwindling into utter insignificance in comparison with the great separation that was hurrying him from their circle. Paul Lockley, his father's near kinsman, and Richard Crofton, his mother's next heir, would take care of his beloved ones.

Emma's letter reached the hands of Mrs. Aspen at the Vicarage. After a full day of deliberation over its contents, she summoned

Doris to walk to Fairfield with her that it might be submitted to Mrs. Margraf and Paul. There was a tremor upon the old lady's spirits. Doris and Paul had not been going on very well of late ; since Rufus left a positive coldness had sprung up between them. That Doris suffered was evident, for her face grew paler than ever, and there were dark circles under her eyes as if she did not sleep well at night. Indeed she knew now that her dear young friend allowed herself but few hours of rest, for her fire was kept up late in her bedroom, and Mrs. Margraf had informed her that the light in her window was burning long after every other was extinguished. Doris suffered, was pale and sleepless ; but Paul was provokingly unobservant. He had fallen back into his old habits of seclusion, and uninterrupted study, with a few rare intervals of affectionate attendance upon herself when he seemed completely forgetful of Doris. And now this Harriet was coming, this fatal and faithless first love of

his, who was so much more brilliant and charming, and altogether far more irresistibly attractive, than the grave, quiet, retiring, and impassable girl, who had been his second choice. Mrs. Aspen scanned Doris's inexpressive face as they walked together to Fairfield, while she talked of Harriet Crofton, and the impassioned love Paul had once cherished for her ; but the girl's cold manner baffled and perplexed her ; the tremor upon her shaken spirits was by no means lessened, when after a brief interchange of courteous greeting with Paul and Mrs. Margraf, she entered upon the reason of her unexpected visit.

“Sophia,” she said, in a tone of solemnity, “and you too, Paul, I wish to communicate to you the contents of a letter, which I received this morning from Emma, in Wales. I beg most earnestly that you will both give your opinions candidly and frankly. But for recent occurrences affecting Paul's change of feeling, I would never have mentioned it to him ;

groundless. "I hoped that now you have won such a treasure as my Doris, you had altogether ceased to regret a glittering bauble like Harriet Crofton. But if you had not been engaged to her, neither Harriet nor her husband should have crossed any threshold of mine. John and I agreed perfectly about that; and even now, I am not quite sure that he would be willing to receive them at the Priory before your marriage. But poor Emma makes such a point of it."

Emma had made such a point of it, that she had not even hinted at asking Mrs. Aspen's consent, but had plainly stated her intention of bringing the Croftons home with her; and the mother shrank from any contest with her bereaved daughter-in-law. The new tie of mutual grief was strong enough to bear a heavier strain than that; yet she wished to consult the feelings of Paul and Mrs. Margraf. The latter listened to her aunt's announcement with a qualm of dismay

and mortification. The recal of Richard and Harriet Crofton to the Priory, and their interest with Mrs. Aspen as her nearest kinsfolk had long been her dread; and she had skilfully fanned her resentment against them, and her romantic sympathy for Paul's betrayed love. At first this had risen naturally from her own indignation at the treachery practised against her brother; but since the recent death of John, she had sedulously striven to engage Mrs. Aspen's love and interest for Rufus, who might stand a fair chance of inheriting Monkmoor Priory. Her smooth, clear brow contracted into a perceptible furrow as she heard that Paul's betrothal to Doris removed the obstacles which she had carefully strewn in the way of the return of the Croftons to the Priory.

“My dear aunt,” she said, “it will be very painful, at least to me, to see that perfidious woman at home in the Priory. Everybody knew of her conduct. The whole neighbourhood rang with it, and all the world sympa-

thised with Paul. It will be very awkward for them to meet again."

"I'm afraid I made a great fool of myself," said Paul, laughing, though his face coloured upon the recollection of it, "if Thornbury has not forgotten it yet. No woman is worth such a waste of sorrow. By all means let them come. And let the world take notice that I am heart-whole at last."

Mrs. Aspen looked penetratingly at him, and from him to Doris, who had seated herself at some distance in the shadow of the thick crimson curtains, her crape veil completely hiding her features.

"Paul," she said, again speaking tremulously, "and you, Doris, I am going to talk to you as to my own children. If this person comes, it will be needful for you to draw very closely to one another. I will not speak to you of the world, though the world will have its eye upon you; for Paul's sorrow, or folly if he chooses to call it so, has been kept in memory by his prolonged seclusion,

and his professed contempt of our sex. But yourselves, children. Paul, do you suppose Doris can see this beautiful creature, without some natural pangs of jealousy and mis-giving? Doubtless your love now is a better and more enduring sentiment than your phrenzied passion for Harriet; but you should demonstrate it more. Is there any cause of estrangement between you? Get it removed before this coquette come, that you may meet her boldly. Doris is pining; she sleeps and eats little, and yet you take no heed of it, Paul. How is it you are with us so seldom, and for so short a time? If there be any quarrel between you, I beseech you to make it up before Harriet Crofton comes."

"There is no quarrel or estrangement between us," uttered Doris, in clear, decisive tones from behind her veil.

"I assure you, my dear aunt," said Paul, in rather an irritated manner, "that I study Miss Arnold's wishes in all my conduct."

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cally, "this betrothal gave John his last great gladness. All that day, the day before he died, he wore a smile upon his face such as even I had never seen there before. How much he loved you, Paul, you never knew, for my boy failed in making his heart known; but your prospect of happiness made him happy. And thus my heart is set upon it. It is like a gleam of bright light in my darkness. You offered to open your home to me, and I was compelled to decline it for Doris's sake; but I am looking forward to come with her, and dwell with you as my own son and daughter. I have my day-dreams still; now and then I fancy myself living again at the Priory with Paul and Doris, who will not put John out of my mind."

She spoke with a simple and pathetic tenderness, touching the depths of Doris's trembling heart; and bringing a sharper twinge of regret to Paul's conscience. He glanced towards the quiet and shrinking form, whose face was so closely shrouded

from his scrutiny ; and Mrs. Aspen caught the glimmer of irresolution which shone for an instant in his eyes.

“ Ah ! go to her, Paul,” she said, “ beg of her to be reconciled to you. See how pale she grows, while you keep up your reserve. Last night it was long after midnight before she went to bed. We shall have her ill soon.”

“ There is no mystery about that,” answered Doris, throwing back her veil, and showing her face pale and worn, as she crossed the room to Mrs. Aspen’s seat, while Paul watched her carefully. “ I do not wish to make any secret of it. Dr. Lockley has nothing whatever to do with my late hours. No, indeed, I assure you, Mrs. Aspen ! I must tell you now what keeps me up so long at night. My father left his work unfinished. There are a number of loose notes of his, forming a kind of journal, which he intended to publish, and he left them for me to arrange and copy. It is hard work, perhaps ; especially as all my other work is of the

same kind. But I shall have done it presently ; at least as soon as our Selection is finished ; and then I shall sleep and eat as much as you could wish."

Doris had spoken reluctantly at first, as if still unwilling to give up her secret ; but the smile with which she finished was brilliant and hopeful in the pride she took in her occupation. It was her father's journal she was arranging ; and she raised her eyes to Paul with an air of triumph, yet of shy protest, lest he should ascribe her languor and sleeplessness to any influence of his. But the traces of undue exertion were only too evident to him, and his sagacity as a physician was shocked at the wanness and emaciation, which had escaped his observation as a lover.

"My dear girl!" he exclaimed, compassionately, "this will never do. I cannot permit you to work in this way. Why did you never tell us before? Every one of us, and I amongst the rest, - have been taxing

your mental energy in one way or another. Believe me, Doris, we should consider it an honour to have anything to do with any posthumous work of Lieutenant Arnold's. Will you accept help from me? If there be any way in which I can share or lessen your labour, I shall esteem it one of the greatest kindnesses you can show me."

Paul was a good deal excited; and so was Mrs. Aspen. Her Selection faded into insignificance before the journal of the late Lieutenant Arnold, which his daughter had been arranging and transcribing in secrecy under her roof. She was delighted with the thoroughly aroused interest of Paul's manner, and the eagerness with which he addressed Doris; and the original mission which had carried her to Fairfield passed out of her mind.

"Paul," she said, "Doris shall bring all her papers here; you shall assist her with her work in your own library, where you will be at hand to prevent her over-tasking her-

self. The mental exertion required by the Selection of the Monkmoor Roundelays, followed by the revisal of her father's journal, will certainly be too much for her."

It had been too much for her already, if Paul could judge by the thinness of her trembling hand, and the unhealthy hue of her face. She glanced towards him once with her lips compressed as if to stifle an hysterical sob, now that her long-cherished secret had been wrung from her; and he caught the silent appeal in her glance.

"Nay, aunt," he said, promptly, "I will not deprive Doris of any of her pride in the work; she shall complete it, as she has hitherto wrought at it, alone and unassisted. But you must work in the day-time, Doris; and under my direction. Three hours a day, and no more shall I allow you for sitting at your desk."

"But the Selection!" murmured Doris, in a beseeching accent.

"Well!" said Paul, with a grimace

happily unseen by Mrs. Aspen, "here am I, an idle man ; and positively shamed by your industry. I tell you what, aunt, if you will give Doris her own time, I will write for you for three hours every morning. Rufus used to help you, I know ; you must let me take his place. I suppose my assistance will be pretty nearly as good as his."

"My dear nephew!" exclaimed Mrs. Aspen, graciously, "it would be too great a sacrifice of your time. Yet your knowledge of Greek verse would make your assistance invaluable to me. My poems might stand by, and should do, but for your promise to my dear son. Ah! Paul, you have an interest in getting it soon finished ; and therefore I will accept the aid you offer."

Paul made no second grimace, though he looked somewhat crest-fallen at the motive ascribed to his self-sacrifice. A silence of some minutes fell upon them all, while Mrs. Aspen smiled placidly, with a softening of the deep lines that were engraved upon her

face, and tapped Emma's letter with her delicate fingers, until its contents suddenly recurred to her.

“I am very much relieved, my dears,” she said, looking from Paul to Doris. “I was afraid of that dreadful woman coming here, especially while you seemed a little distant with one another. But it will be all right now ; perhaps it was only an old woman's jealous fancy. Sophia, I must get you to superintend the preparations at the Priory for the reception of Richard and Harriet Crofton. I cannot yet go across, though I am getting to feel better, thanks to my Doris, who has made herself ill with humouring me. Paul, if you do not make amends to her for all she has done and borne for me, I will renounce you, upon my honour !”

Having uttered her dainty affirmation in something of the old manner, Mrs. Aspen rose to take her leave, with a relieved and satisfied air, and with a gracious intimation to Paul that he might enter upon his self-

imposed task as soon as his presumed impatience prompted him. To her perfect gratification it proved to be no later than the following morning, when, with the utmost gravity, he applied himself earnestly to the Selection. Mrs. Margraf, plunged in absorbing reflections and unavailing regrets, crossed over the ferry to Monkmoor Priory, and there stirred up the unoccupied domestics. There was a dreary and empty solitariness about the deserted rooms, which for a little while harmonized with her own feelings of depression and uncertainty; but she shook off her unusual dejection. It was quite right that dead men should leave their shoes behind them; the only question which disquieted her was, who should put his feet into those which John had cast off—Paul, Rufus, or Richard Crofton?

CHAPTER XVI.

A SUBTLE and unsuspected feeling of vexation was at work in Paul Lockley's mind connected with the near prospect of meeting Harriet Crofton in the character of Doris Arnold's accepted lover. He would rather, though he never owned a sentiment so paltry, she had found him still maintaining his attitude of profound contempt for her sex, incapable of any further thought of love. He could have worn his celibacy and misanthropy as a crown in her presence ; a crown which she had bound about his brows. Every allurements, if she ventured to try any upon him, he could have repelled by some memory of the past, or by the recollection of his solitary life. But he would have to appear before her, as forgiving her treachery

in the person of Doris. Doris was the representative of womankind, receiving his tardy but full pardon ; and through her his forgiveness extended to Harriet. It was a paltry feeling ; so trivial that his conscience did not accuse him of it, and passed it over as a fault too petty and miserable to be spoken of. Conscience blushed at it, and closed her keen eyes. But it was there nevertheless ; one of the little rankling thorns implanted in his mind by the deception he was carrying on.

There were graver causes of disquietude. Rufus was absent, and so long as he was away the artifice was no longer necessary, had it been kept, as was intended, a secret among themselves. But Mrs. Aspen had seized the idea of his betrothal with the avidity of a deep and concealed commiseration ; and she was now building all her hopes of happiness in the future upon its consummation. More than once she had intimated her desire to dwell with them after

the solemnization of their marriage ; with this she was now blending the idea of returning at some distant time to the Priory, and spoke of their residence there as being the only circumstance which could reconcile her to her old home and birthplace. It was no light thing to cherish schemes like these, and make them the foundation of a more ardent and clinging affection to the objects of them. Mrs. Aspen's love for Doris had grown rapidly since the day that she had first considered her as betrothed to Paul. Though John's death had done much to strengthen it, Paul could not dismiss from his mind the thought that because she was to become allied to herself by marriage, and that the relationship thus formed would be permanent, Mrs. Aspen had yielded to a dependent fondness for Doris.

Mrs. Margraf was exercised in a similar manner. Her innocent stratagem, which had promised to tread at such an even pace, and solely under her guidance, had run away with

her altogether, and refused to submit to her hand or bridle. She could not forget, as she superintended the preparations at the Priory, that Mrs. Aspen had declared nothing but Paul's betrothal to Doris could have prevailed upon her to suffer the Croftons to cross any threshold of hers. This was mortifying enough ; but her subsequent intimation that she intended to regard Paul and Doris as her adopted son and daughter was still more galling. If the contract were a real one the Croftons would have no chance of the inheritance ; but neither would Rufus. Besides, there was always the terrible danger of Doris, in some moment of remorse, betraying the unworthy artifice into which she had been beguiled. If she ever did that, and Mrs. Margraf's spirit quailed at the thought, there would be an end of all hope. With what indignation and unappeasable resentment would Mrs. Aspen regard such a crime against her confidence, her dignity, her lofty self-esteem, her profound sympathy ? Mrs.

Margraf owned that she herself would be wild at such a deception played upon her. But Mrs. Aspen, who never condescended to any subterfuge or falsity; who was open and ingenuous to a fault, displaying every little whim and weakness; how could she pardon a stratagem so full of fraud and imposture? How the Croftons would triumph in the discovery!

Once she sat for a full hour in the oriel window, discussing with herself the advantages and the disadvantages, the possibilities and impossibilities of persuading Paul to make his betrothal a verity. Doris was no longer an ineligible match, if Paul's succession to Monkmoor Priory depended upon his marriage with her. But they were impracticable people, Paul and Doris, and had long since soared away beyond her lure. It was a marvel that she had caught them once in her little trap; and she was ready to gnash her teeth at her success. She could do nothing but sit on one side, and watch

carefully for any critical moment when she might give a turn to the disastrous course events were taking. It seemed very hard that when she was seeking nothing for herself, but only promoting the welfare of her brothers, and especially of Rufus, affairs should prove so contrary and unmanageable.

Neither did Doris see her way out of the dilemma any more clearly. Her self-reproach was becoming morbid as it preyed upon her over-wrought mind. The unrestrained fondness and tender reliance of Mrs. Aspen upon herself weighed heavily upon her accusing conscience. The adoption was so complete. In her sudden bereavement she hung upon Doris as a daughter provided for her against the hour of desolation; every effort to look into the darkened future sprang from the assurance that she was to retain her in close relationship. The idea, brooded over through the long week following John's death, had become an infatuation, and she anticipated the promised marriage with the eagerness of

a doting mother. It was no light element in Doris's punishment that she had to listen to every change rung upon the absorbing subject; that from John's death to her own marriage, and back again to John's death, the conversation swung from hour to hour, with the garrulity of old age. But harder than all to bear was the enforced companionship of Paul, whom Mrs. Aspen persisted in leaving alone with her, in spite of her entreaties, whenever he visited the Vicarage. He was considerate, thoughtful, and scrupulously deferential; but the situation in which they stood to one another was utterly distasteful to her; the lassitude which began to follow upon the undue excitement and exertion of the recent months, made her recoil more petulantly from her false position. Still she saw no remedy, or way of escape, for the present.

But no one suffered as did Rufus. To all the yearning home-sickness, which he, with the delicate sensitiveness of his nature to

social affections, would have endured at any time, upon his first separation from the haunts and circle of his boyhood, there were added the pangs of a passionate and absorbing first love, which he was bound to conquer in honour and gratitude to his elder brother. He set before himself a rule inflexibly straight and true ; every deviation from it, into which his traitor-heart led him, was branded as a crime against Paul. If the language of his inmost thoughts failed to place the title of sister before the ever-recurring name of Doris, he accused himself of secret treachery against his brother's happiness ; a happiness which he reckoned it a sin to envy. The passion of self-conquest arrayed itself against the passion of first love ; and through all the short, initial term of his career at College, they contended for the mastery over his suffering and stricken spirit.

CHAPTER XVII.



To do Richard Crofton justice he felt considerable reluctance in accepting Emma Aspen's reiterated invitations. At first he positively refused to visit Monkmoor Priory without a more distinct assurance of Mrs. Aspen's cordiality towards him and his wife. The flagrant perfidy with which Harriet had encouraged the addresses of the young physician up to the very eve of her clandestine marriage with himself, had met with so definite and protracted a resentment from his kinswoman, that he was unwilling to enter her dwelling without some direct communication from her. A temporary residence at the Priory would be exceedingly well-timed for the state of his own finances, which were at the lowest ebb ; while the wants of Harriet

seemed day by day to multiply. In the course of two or three months some lucky chance would turn up, which would give him a run of good fortune ; but at present he was as poor as the curate of a district church. Yet there was enough of fine, gentlemanly feeling in the debt-starved nature of Richard Crofton to make him somewhat sensitive as to the reception he should meet with from Mrs. Aspen and Paul Lockley.

To overcome his reluctance, which at first took the form of a positive refusal, Harriet wept and sulked for several days. It was a regimen to which he was accustomed, but no amount of experience could reconcile him to it. Nothing could exceed the discomfort of being shut up in the apartments of a sea-side lodging-house with a face that wore a perpetual frown, and a voice that only spoke in tones of complaint and anger ; while the weather outside kept rivalry with the weeping, sulking woman within. The storm beat and sobbed against the window-panes in long

lines of raindrops, and the sea moaned up against the sands in an unceasing monotony of wailing. If he could have cleared up the gloom without by almost any sacrifice he would have done it : it was possible to restore sunshine within ; and upon the fourth day, when he had exhausted every other resource, he gave his consent to accepting Emma's invitation to the Priory.

As soon as the day of her return was fixed, Emma again began to cultivate an interesting grief. It was necessary to observe the code of mourning more strictly at home, than in a strange place, where the recent period of her widowhood was unknown. Originally her code had included death from heart-breaking, and she had promised those about her to die very soon, and be buried beside her poor, dear John. But unfortunately the sea air had had a tendency so opposite to the gradual decay of vital strength, that her cheeks wore more bloom and fulness than they had done before her bereavement befel her. It was

doubly necessary to take a new grasp upon sorrow ; to rub up every remembrance that could be in any degree pungent to her slightly deadened emotions. She grew languid in manner, spoke in hopeless tones, and deepened the double hem of her crape veil until her blooming face was quite hidden by it. These efforts were crowned with success ; and she reached the station at Thornbury in a condition of widowed despair highly creditable to her susceptible nature.

Mrs. Aspen's carriage was waiting for her, and her visitors, and they drove to Monkmoor in comparative silence and meditation. Each of them was anticipating a scene upon their arrival ; and only Richard Crofton, with an Englishman's distaste, shrank from it. Emma was mentally arranging a programme of proceedings when she re-entered the ravaged home of her married life ; Harriet was considering in what manner she would meet Paul, should he be there, with Mrs. Aspen and his betrothed, to give her a wel-

come to the long unvisited Priory. The house was well lighted up, as they drove across the meadow in front of it, and looked cheery through the gathering darkness of the December evening, with a home-like aspect to which all of them had been strangers for some time. Emma remembered, with a genuine sob, how often she had thus approached it, and found John ready to fling open the hall-door at the first sound of the wheels upon the drive, and to lift her fondly from the carriage in his gentle but clumsy arms. But the programme included more than mere sobs; she was fully prepared to faint, or fall into hysterics, upon the first sight of Mrs. Aspen.

It was therefore no small mortification and disappointment when Robinson, the house-keeper and head-servant of the small establishment, appeared alone at the hall-door, curtsying and smiling a welcome, which admitted of no display of feeling. Emma was compelled to reserve her tears; and Harriet's

spirits sank. There was a note from Mrs. Aspen upon the drawing-room table, said Robinson. It was a brief one, stating that Mrs. Aspen could not yet venture upon revisiting the Priory; but Emma must consider it as her own, and welcome Mr. and Mrs. Crofton to it as her guests. If they would so far dispense with ceremony as to go over to the Vicarage to see her, she would be pleased to receive them in a day or two, after they had recovered from the fatigue of their journey.

It was excessively tame and unexciting. Harriet Crofton threw herself upon a sofa in undisguised ill-humour, and was soon fast asleep. But it was better in the morning, when in spite of the frost which glittered about the ruins, she rambled from one familiar spot to another, recalling with sparkling eyes the numberless scenes enacted there, in which she and Paul had been the chief players. It had been her unfledged, hoydenish coquetry she had practised upon him, and he had been enslaved by it to the most abject captivity;

but she was returning with the same weapons polished to the last degree of brightness and power. It would be glorious to triumph over this pale, puny, insignificant rival, whom he had dared to raise to the throne she had abdicated in his heart. To erase all the lurking indignation, which Paul must still feel towards her, though he had at last fancied himself in love with another woman; to make him now and then harmlessly oblivious of her husband's existence; to betray him into some of the old glances and speeches; in short, to have such another exciting game of flirtation as she had practised over and over again to her own intense gratification, was the design which Mrs. Crofton was ripening in her busy brain; while to any casual spectator she appeared to be playfully mimicking the peacock, with pretty, swimming, mincing steps, as he paraded to and fro in the chantrey, with plumes erect, and head bent slightly on one side, as he watched his laughing tormentor.

Paul worked all morning at the Vicarage with a tolerable degree of composure; though Mrs. Aspen was completely unnerved, and incapable of fixing her attention even upon the Selection. Paul was never permitted to turn over the leaves of her manuscripts for himself; for the truth was, that a large share of the poetic genius of his aunt had been expended upon his own story of love and perfidy; but this morning a fatal propensity possessed her to read aloud some of the suppressed effusions, which no mortal eye had seen, save John and Doris. But Paul was not to be disconcerted; though he winced a little when Mrs. Aspen dictated to him the line,

“Oh faithless Chloe, born with marble heart!”

and immediately apologised with an earnestness altogether unsuited to the occasion. Moreover he could see a flickering and provoking smile playing about the serious face of Doris, as she sat in an easy chair by the fire, occupied with some feminine stitching,

stationed there to be in readiness to give her opinion whenever Mrs. Aspen desired it. But the very wanness of the features which wore the vexing smile made him persevere in his work; and he held his pen, as he would have wielded a sword, in chivalric aid of Mrs. Aspen and Doris.

They were thus tranquilly employed when the seclusion of the Vicarage was invaded by the three inmates from the Priory. Mr. Vale saw them on his lawn from the window of his study, and shrank within himself at the sight. Mrs. Aspen started, and caught at Paul's desk for support, as the hall-bell vibrated in loud, unusual clangour through the quiet house, and Doris let her hands fall nervelessly upon her lap as she stole a side-long glance at Paul. In his determination to appear unconcerned he continued writing as though the unaccustomed noise had not reached his ears; but both he and Mrs. Aspen heard the sigh, low and disconsolate, with which Doris resumed her sewing.

Harriet Crofton achieved one of her most signal triumphs. She entered the room behind Emma, who was boisterously afflicted, with a grave, humble, deprecating mien, neither too conscious nor too unconscious of her own wrong-doing. There was a mild lustre in her eye, it might be of penitence, or of sympathy with the two mourners, or of long established, matronly sobriety, which could not fail to disarm all suspicion and misgiving. She rather waited for Mrs. Aspen's notice and kiss than seemed to court them; but when they were bestowed upon her, Esther could not have touched the sceptre of her king with more submission and fearful gladness. Not till then; not until Mrs. Aspen imprinted a cold kiss upon her cheek, and extended her hand royally to Richard Crofton, did Harriet raise her fringed eyelids, and turn her mildly beaming eyes upon Paul, who was standing embarrassed and ill at ease beside the desk at which he had been writing. But she glided slowly towards him, with eye-

lids lowered, and her hand half offered to him, while every motion and feature seemed to plead a speechless petition for forgiveness. Her meekness was so perfect, that Paul was himself again at once.

“I am glad to see you,” he said frankly, taking the half-extended hand in his own; “and you too, Richard.”

Paul felt that his address was a little short and bald; but he could not think of anything more to say. An allusion either to old times, or to their long separation, could be only embarrassing; and it seemed ridiculous to mention their journey from Wales the day before, upon such a meeting as this. He was not a man of ready wit. He could have spoken to them melodious Greek lines of salutation and welcome; but it was beyond his power to utter some small common-place of English greeting, which would have lessened his own awkward confusion; and having said he was glad to see her and Richard, he stood silent with her hand lingering in his clasp, and her meek

face bent down before him, as if listening eagerly to hear his voice again.

“Ah! you’ve come into possession of Fairfield since we saw you, Lockley,” said Richard Crofton. “It’s too late to congratulate you now; but I was very much pleased to hear of it, I assure you.”

“It has been a pleasant refuge to me,” answered Paul, shaking hands with him cordially. But the word refuge was equivocal, and he felt its ambiguity instantly.

“And this is Miss Arnold!” said Harriet, passing on to her rapidly, but as if she were entering upon another ordeal; her whole manner being that of one timorously walking barefoot among heated plough-shares. “Dr. Lockley, will you introduce me to Miss Arnold? Emma has talked much about you,” she continued, in a sweetly modulated tone to Doris. “I have quite hoped against hope to see you some day or other. I have been studying,” and she raised her liquid eyes to Paul, “or rather I have been trying to study

Lieutenant Arnold's works ; but they are far beyond me. I never before felt how dreadfully ignorant I must be."

It really did not signify that such a pretty head, with its massive coils of hair, and wonderfully beautiful features, should be somewhat unfurnished with heavy and masculine scholarship. The only thought excited by her avowal of ignorance was that some delicacy of manner or loveliness might have been injured by the weight of learning. As Paul's regard wandered from her exquisite grace and bloom, to the wan face and grave aspect of Doris, he could not deny the charm that lurked in every gesture and glance of his first love.

"Let me introduce Miss Arnold to you," said Mrs. Aspen, as Paul hesitated and lingered at the table ; "you have the honour, Harriet Crofton, of meeting with one of the best and truest girls I ever knew. My adopted daughter, Doris Arnold, has every quality in which most young women fail."

She spoke warmly, and Harriet was so taken by surprise that she could not resist shrugging her shoulder, with the slightest grimace of disdain ; but she recovered herself in an instant.

“I knew it must be so,” she answered, plaintively, “and I am so glad! Will you try to like me a little ; just a very little at first ? I am older than you are, Miss Arnold, and more worn ; but you may find something to like in me after awhile ; I am prepared to admire you so very much.”

She fixed her eyes upon Doris, with the solicitous air of an elder sister, about to resign her undisputed superiority in her favour, as she clasped her passive hand within both her own. But seeing that Paul was engaged in conversation with her husband, she soon concluded her little by-play with Doris.

“You must come over and see my house,” Paul was saying, “we have made a few alterations, and I shall be glad of your advice

about my land. I am not much of a farmer, you know."

"But, Sophia," suggested Harriet; "she is living with you yet; is she not, Dr. Lockley?"

"Certainly," replied Paul, "but she will be glad to see you."

Harriet shook her head, and turning away with tears in her eyes, sat down beside Doris, with such an air of dejected and penitent humility that Mrs. Aspen forgave her on the spot; Doris, who had neither the jealousy nor apprehensions which Mrs. Aspen ascribed to her, felt such sympathy for her apparent disquietude, as to exert herself to set her at ease with those about her. Harriet revived under her gentle efforts, and gaining confidence by fine degrees, began to ply her charms upon Doris, with a side-long effect upon Paul, who could not keep his eyes from wandering towards the place where they sat. She was rejoicing in her success, when the bell again rang, and Mrs. Margraf entered the room.

Mrs. Margraf had not expected their visit so soon. She had fully intended to be the first on the field that morning, that she might be present when her aunt received her perjured kinsfolk ; but intentionally or unintentionally, the party from the Priory had crossed the river so early, that she had seen their boat moored to the bank, while she was still unprepared for hastening to the Vicarage. She entered now with some stiffness in her manner, as if she meant to keep the Croftons at a distance ; but she found herself too late. Richard Crofton was deep in agricultural discussion with Paul ; Harriet, hand in hand with Doris, was so absorbed in her conversation as to remain unconscious of Mrs. Margraf's presence, until Mrs. Aspen addressed her directly. She met her with a frank and easy cordiality, and taking dear Sophia's hand as she had done Doris's, in both her own, kissed her twice with a show of warm affection ; having come to the shrewd conclusion that no apparent self-

abasement would avail her with a woman, who was at least her equal in artifice and cunning.

In a few minutes, much to her own mortified astonishment, Mrs. Margraf found herself joining in quite an amicable conversation, in which Harriet Crofton took a modest, but interesting part. No covert sneer could irritate her ; no taunt, which Mrs. Margraf was impolitic enough to try until Mrs. Aspen's cheek glowed painfully, could do more than wound her into a piteous silence, accompanied by a deprecating glance. She inquired about the Selection, stealing gracefully across the room to the desk where Paul's copy lay, and looking down upon it, with her long, black eye-lashes quivering as if to shake off the gathering tears. She expressed the utmost confidence in its favourable reception by the critics ; and remembered to ask if an especial favourite of her own, which Aunt Aspen used to sing, was among the poems selected. But her praises were not obtrusive ; she gave

Emma full scope for the display of her widowed grief; and only came in now and then as a kind of interlude, with an irresistible effect. They went away at last, after exhausting Mrs. Margraf's patience. Mrs. Aspen watched Paul escort them across the lawn, down to the Ferry. As she saw how Harriet took her husband's arm, leaving Emma to his care, she breathed a gentle sigh of relief, and turning to Mrs. Margraf, said heartily: "My dear Sophia, I do believe Harriet Crofton is changed at last."

END OF VOL. I.





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