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THE

*St. James Place
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EARL'S DAUGHTER.

BY

THE AUTHOR OF "AMY HERBERT," "GERTRUDE," "THE
CHILD'S FIRST HISTORY OF ROME," ETC.

EDITED BY

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Life, is energy of Love,
Divine or human; exercised in pain,
In strife, and tribulation; and ordained,
If so approved and sanctified, to pass,
Through shades and silent rest, to endless joy.

The Excursion.

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THE EARL'S DAUGHTER.

CHAPTER I.

THERE WAS AN UNUSUAL stir in the old cathedral town of ———. It was neither a market-day, nor the anniversary of a public fête; neither the season of the annual visitation, nor of any public meeting; yet the narrow footways were thronged, and knots of idlers stood inconveniently at the corners of the streets, making their remarks upon the few carriages which enlivened the generally dull town, or noticing with interest the occasional approach of the rows of neatly dressed school children, who, with orderly steps and serious looks, were bending their way to the open square in which stood the great entrance to the cathedral. Gravity, indeed, was the pervading deportment of all the assembling crowd; but a deeper, more reverent, and anxious feeling might be traced upon the features of some, who, fully aware of the difficulties of a Christian life, were about to witness the renewal of those vows by which the ignorant and untried, the weak and the erring, in the midst of a sinful world, and about to enter upon the scene of its temptations, pledge themselves in the sight of an All Holy God, to be His in spirit, in truth, and for ever. It was the day appointed for the Confirmation of all within the diocese of ——— who had attained

the age required by the Bishop, and on few occasions had a more careful preparation been made for the due observance of this important rite. The time had gone by when the verbal repetition of the Church Catechism was alone deemed necessary for the candidates. A more zealous spirit had arisen, and many, who had themselves been allowed to renew their baptismal vows without thought or prayer, now, warned by past experience, endeavoured most earnestly to urge upon others the importance of the period which they had reached, and the real meaning of the words, which from childhood, had been familiar to their lips!

The Confirmation of that day was felt to be a most solemn act of self-dedication; and as the knights of old, when preparing to assume the insignia and encounter the perils of their order, were accustomed to fast, and watch and pray, that they might be enabled to struggle and conquer in the unknown dangers before them; so the young aspirants to the full privileges of Christianity were taught to humble themselves by repentance, and prepare their hearts by prayer, that in the hour of temptation they might not be forgetful of their high calling, and fall short of their eternal reward. The spectacle which the cathedral church of St. Mark exhibited when the choir was filled, before the service of the church began, was one of no common interest. The broad light of the sun, as its rays streamed through the stained windows, fell upon fair young faces chastened by holy thoughts, and boyish features subdued into stillness by the pressure of a strange and hitherto unfelt awe. There were countenances which told of fear and wonder, and some, it might be, of indifference; there were eyes bent upon the page in which the vow to be renewed was recorded; and lips moving in silent prayer that strength might be granted for its fulfilment;

whilst, at times, over those youthful faces there passed the shadow of a dark cloud, the cloud of the memory of sin: the vision of cherished offences, of indulged tempers,—vanity and pride, selfishness and irreverence,—the bitter fruits of an evil nature, now a second time to be publicly renounced for ever. Was it to be marvelled at, if in some then present the weakness of humanity for a moment shrank from the warfare imposed upon it, and would fain have returned to the bondage of Egypt, the indulgence of earthly inclination, rather than brave the battle with those stern enemies—the world, the flesh, and the devil—which throng the borders of the land of promise?

But the wish, if it arose, was founded on error. The candidates for Confirmation were no longer free to choose. Once baptized, once admitted into the fellowship of the Catholic Church, and there could be no drawing back. The members of Christ, the children of God, the inheritors of the kingdom of heaven, could never again “be as the heathen.” They might despise their privileges, and break their vows; but the privileges had still been granted, and they must be answerable for them; the vows were still upon their heads, and so would also be the punishment for neglect. For them it could never be a question, whether they would accept Christianity: but whether, having accepted, they would renounce it; and even the most indifferent amongst the professed followers of Christ would surely have trembled to risk the woe which must inevitably follow an open, deliberate apostacy.

But although no second promise could in reality increase the binding responsibility of the first, yet the public ratification of a covenant with God must ever be regarded with awe. The baptismal vow was now for the first time fully impressed upon the con-

sciences of many by whom it had scarcely before been remembered, and they trembled as the moment approached when they were to seal it with the consent of their own lips.

The peaceful soothing words of the daily service were said, and when they were ended there stood before the altar of God, the high-born inheritors of honour and wealth, and the gentle children nursed in affluence and retirement, and the humble offspring of poverty, united by one creed, one hope, one danger, and summoned to join in one common act of self-dedication.

Together they listened to the earnest supplication which was to bring down upon them from on high the "sevenfold gifts of grace;" and then side by side they knelt, and each in turn bowed beneath a hand of blessing—the blessing of their spiritual Father in Christ.

Once more they were seated as before, to receive from the Bishop's mouth the words of advice, and warning, and consolation, which were to guide them amidst the temptations of life; and when the final benediction was given, and the full tones of the organ pealed through the long aisles, they parted even as they had met, for the greater part unknowing and unregarding, to many a distant home, never to meet together again in one place till they should stand before the judgment-seat of God, to answer for the fulfilment of the vow which had that hour been registered in heaven.

CHAPTER II.

IT was the evening of the same day, a day of unwonted brilliancy and warmth. The sounds of busy life were fading upon the listening ear, the cattle were returning from the pastures, the birds were seeking their nests, the tired workman was slowly wending his way towards his home, and the deep tones of the cathedral clock as it struck the hour of eight fell with a warning voice upon the few who were still engrossed in their round of daily occupation.

The peacefulness of such an hour was felt even amidst the bustle of a crowded town, and the jar of folly and vice; but in the quiet garden of the old grey manor-house of St. Ebbe's there was nothing to disturb the hallowing effect of its influence. The low ivy-covered walls which enclosed it seemed built for the very purpose of excluding all thoughts of the busy world; the long green walks invited to regular exercise and meditation; the neatly-trimmed borders, gay with flowers, spoke of carefulness and simplicity, and appreciation of the loveliness of nature; and the quaint sun-dial, raised upon a circle of rough stone steps in the centre, gave a silent call to the unthinking to note the flight of time, whilst it bade them, in the words of Holy Writ, which were graven upon its pedestal, "watch and pray, that they might not enter into temptation." The building itself, with its weather-stained walls, and mullioned windows and deep porch, accorded perfectly with the quaint style of the garden. It was

not large, and boasted few architectural ornaments; but it was the existing symbol of bygone years, and insensibly carried back the mind to times far removed from the present, when if mankind were not wiser and better they were at least less restless, and when the lords of the manor of St. Ebbe's were willing to "dwell amongst their own people," and knew no higher interest in life than that of providing for their welfare. So it was not now; the house, and the garden, and the lands, which once were deemed indissolubly attached, had been divided into separate lots: the manor-house had become a farm-house, the farm-house had been neglected; and, ruined and dilapidated, would have fallen into almost hopeless decay, but for a succession of fortunate events which placed it in the hands of those who were willing to expend some money and much taste in restoring it, though not to its original beauty, yet to a condition in which it might be inhabited with comfort.

The inmates of the manor-house, in its present state, were widely different from its early occupants; and if the first Sir Ralph de Bretonville, whom tradition asserted to have been the founder of the family, could have looked upon the youthful figures standing upon the dial-steps, and watching the gradual fading of the gorgeous sunset, he might have deemed them beings of another race, so little could they have resembled the uncouth train of revellers, huntsmen, and serving men, with whom his own halls must have been filled.

They were two girls, who appeared to have scarcely passed the age of sixteen—unlike in dress, height, and figure; but showing, by an unrestrained ease of manner, that the tie between them, if not of blood, was one of familiar intimacy.

The taller—and, seemingly, the elder—of the two was finely formed, and dignified, almost commanding

in manner. Her dark hair was braided, with studied neatness, across a high forehead, and one long ringlet fell on either side upon the well-turned neck, over which a shawl had been hastily thrown to protect her from the evening air. Her complexion was clear, and brilliant with the hues of youth and health; and none, probably, could have turned an indifferent gaze upon the perfect contour of her features;—the deep-set hazel eye—the Grecian nose—the full expressive mouth, which bespoke intellect and energy, and natural elevation of character;—and as she stood, with one hand pointing to the glowing sky, and the other resting upon the dial-plate, whilst the dazzling hues of sunset fell upon her graceful figure, she might have been fitly deemed the representative of the Sibyl, or the Pythoness, exulting in the first enthusiasm of inspiration.

Her companion it will be less easy to pourtray; for Lady Blanche Evelyn was not regularly beautiful. She was slight in figure, and rather below the usual height;—her complexion was naturally pale, though, at that moment, tinged by the faint crimson-flush of interest and agitation;—her eyes, dark and exquisitely soft, were not striking in their brilliancy, like those of her friend. There was less of a marked outline in the contour of her face, even of the long-chiselled nose and peculiarly sweet mouth; and the clustering ringlets of glossy chestnut hair, which shaded her features, gave an air of greater youthfulness to her general appearance. The forehead—high, open, and intellectual—bore, indeed, some resemblance to her companion's, but the expression of the whole countenance was but little affected by it.

It was not intellect which could have been uppermost in the thoughts of any person, looking, for the first time, upon Lady Blanche Evelyn. The sparkle in her eye, the smile upon her lips, the light eager

animation of manner, chastened by refinement and simplicity, were the tokens of a heart delighting in the first freshness of life;—remembering the past without regret, and painting visions of the future with innocent enjoyment; and if, for a moment, a transient shade of thought passed over the sunshine of her fair young features, it was the thought, not of foreboding or discontent, but of a mind to which the mysterious realities of the unseen world were presenting themselves with all their overwhelming power.

Graceful, gentle, and childlike as she was, she might have been deemed by many unfitted to cope with the trials of the world; but, whether it were from the natural dignity of one upon whom the honours of a long line of ancestry were destined to descend, or from a strength of character unknown only because untried,—an under current of firmness ran through her words and actions; scarcely indeed perceived, except by minute observation, but then displaying itself even in the intonations of her musical voice, and the increasing earnestness of her gestures, as she pursued her conversation.

“To-morrow,” she said, as she threw her arm affectionately around her companion, “to-morrow, Eleanor, by this time I may have seen him, and you may have seen him too; our plans will not seem dreamy then.”

“They will to me,” was the reply; “till I can see how they may be carried out: and I dread to-morrow, lest it should make me forget to-day.”

“Sometimes, it seems impossible to forget,” replied Blanche, as she gazed intently upon the golden sky. “Now, it seems so; and then again,—oh! Eleanor, I feel it will be very hard:—when my thoughts are given to earthly things my heart will follow: and yet at this time how can I help it?”

"Then, it cannot be wrong," said Eleanor, soothingly.

"If I could but think so! But, after this morning, no one who had really fixed principles would be as changeable as I am."

"No one thinks you changeable, except yourself," answered Eleanor.

"I know myself better than others know me, then," said Blanche. "Even, after all I have promised—all those prayers, and the charge, and all my resolutions, I cannot keep my mind fixed as I ought. I have such dreams of home, and of papa; and when I shut myself up this afternoon, and tried to do what Mr. Howard advised, I was wandering to things gone by,—all that has happened since we have been here. I wonder whether others have the same difficulties."

Eleanor thought for a few moments, and then said, rather abruptly, "Did you notice that sickly girl who sat to the right of us, at the head of the charity-school?"

"Yes," exclaimed Blanche; "her eyes never seemed to move except when the chanting began, and then she looked up amongst the arches of the cathedral with such intense awe. I was vexed with myself for thinking about her, and yet it did me good."

"She was blind," continued Eleanor; "one of her companions led her up to the altar as we left it. Mr. Howard says she comes from Rutherford; and I mean to ask papa if he knows her."

"I think I could bear to be blind," observed Blanche, "if I could only feel, as I am sure she did. But the world is so beautiful, and it is so pleasant to live and to be loved!"

"Yes," said Eleanor; "for you, especially, who have everything else that the world can give."

“Why should I have so much?” exclaimed Blanche. “It is very strange; and when I looked at that poor girl it frightened me. And yet, Eleanor,” she continued, and a shade, almost of sadness, passed over her face, “it may all be marred. I shall be like a stranger in my home, and papa may have lost his English tastes, and be vexed that I am not what he pictured.”

“You are fanciful,” replied Eleanor, with an air of authority; “you should remember what Mrs. Howard says about not creating evils.”

“But he will be my all,” said Blanche, humbly; “If his love fails me, what shall I have to look to?” Eleanor’s countenance expressed surprise, and Blanche instantly corrected herself; “on earth, I mean,” she said; “but that is an instance of what I mentioned just now about forgetting. I know that I ought to be calm and trusting, thinking of to-day instead of to-morrow. Do you remember the Bishop’s saying it was part of our duty?”

“Yes,” replied Eleanor; “I was looking at the blind girl at the instant, and her face brightened when she heard it, as little Clara’s does when she first gains a new idea.”

Blanche was silent for several minutes. “I must not think,” she exclaimed, at length; “the time is coming so near. When the sun goes down again, I may be watching it from the terrace at Rutherford.”

“And I from the rectory,” said Eleanor. “We shall be separated then.”

The words sounded reproachfully; and Blanche eagerly exclaimed, “Only for a few hours; our homes will be almost the same. You do not think, Eleanor, that I could be happy if it were not so.”

“Not now. But, Blanche, the path of your life

will lead you away from me into the world, and, amongst gay friends; you will have many other ties."

"But *the* one," said Blanche; "where can I find that? The blessing which was given us to-day together will never be repeated again;—ours can never be a common love."

Eleanor grew very thoughtful. "Promise to love me always," she said. "Doubt comes over me sadly at times."

Blanche did not promise; but she looked at Eleanor with wonder, as if not comprehending the meaning of her words, and before she could reply, some one was heard to repeat her name; and a little girl, about ten years of age, ran up to them, exclaiming, "You must come directly,—this moment; you must not wait a minute: Mrs. Howard wants you in her room. Pray, Eleanor, don't keep her."

"Is it for me? Did Mrs. Howard send for me, Clara?" and the colour faded from Blanche's cheek.

"Yes, Mrs. Howard; and"—the child stopped, put her finger upon her lip, and smiled archly.

"Who? What? Who is here?" asked Eleanor.

"Never mind; don't ask questions. Mrs. Howard told me I was to make haste."

Lady Blanche said nothing; she leant against the sun-dial, and every limb trembled.

"You are ill, dearest," said Eleanor, affectionately; "and this suspense is dreadful for you. Clara, you must tell us—Is Lord Rutherford arrived?"

Clara was delighted at her own power, and turning away, exclaimed, "For once Eleanor Wentworth cannot have her will."

"But Blanche Evelyn can;" and Blanche drew the little girl towards her, and said in a faint voice, "If you love me, Clara—"

The appeal was successful. Clara's arm was put within hers; and, looking up in Blanche's face to watch the effect of her information, she whispered, "I have not seen him; but Mary and Agnes have."

Blanche scarcely waited to hear the last word, before she had flown towards the house; but as she reached the porch she stopped—her courage had failed.

Eleanor was at her side immediately. "He must love you—dote upon you, Blanche; and his letters—you do him injustice by being afraid."

Blanche put her hand before her eyes; and holier thoughts came to her aid. One Father, she had, who knew the weakness of His child, and could strengthen her as well against the infirmity of nature, as against the temptations of sin. She placed her icy fingers within Eleanor's, and clasped them with the energy of nervous resolution; and then, with a firm step, turned away to seek for the first time, since she had been conscious of existence, the presence of her father.

CHAPTER III.

THE Earl of Rutherford was a man, the ruling principle of whose character was generally supposed to be easily discovered from his expressive countenance : conscious nobility, a love of command, an impetuous temper, and a powerful intellect, were plainly inscribed upon it. He was born to honour, accustomed from infancy to rule, and the world had decided that pride was the governing motive of his actions. So at least it was said, when, fifteen years before, he had suddenly left his ancestral home, upon the death of a wife, whom, if he had not loved, he had at least treated with the outward marks of respect ; and confiding his infant daughter to the care of a lady, the personal friend of the countess, left England with the avowed determination of remaining abroad for some years. The step, strange though it appeared, was declared not incompatible with his character. The grief preying upon his heart was said to be less the death of his wife, than the failure of a male heir ; and the Lady Blanche Evelyn, although born to inherit both the title and its annexed estates, was considered to be an object of compassion rather than of love to her haughty father, from the feeling that it was impossible for a woman fitly to support the dignity of the family, and the dread lest the event of her marriage with some yet more distinguished individual should sink his own noble house into comparative insignificance. All this the world said. The Earl of Rutherford was pitied, but censured ; his sorrow it was imagined would be tran-

sitory, and his journey was considered merely the impulse of a hasty moment. That he would return again, it might be with a foreign bride, or at least to seek another in England, was considered a matter of certainty; and yet, year after year went by, and the Castle of Rutherford was still left unoccupied. Political engagements it was known were in a great measure the cause of the earl's absence, but they would not account for an exile of such length; and the rumours which were at first circulated regarding a second marriage at length ceased. Tidings of him were heard—sometimes at Rome, sometimes at Vienna, once at Constantinople; but all gave the same impression. If Lord Rutherford had been considered proud at home, he was thought to be yet more so in the careless ease of continental society. The noblest and fairest ornaments of European courts passed before him, but all were alike unnoticed; and, at the expiration of fifteen years, he was returning to his native land, with the same impenetrable manner, the same cold reserve of tone, for which he had been remarkable on leaving it. And in the mean time his child grew up in retirement, under the care of a lady every way calculated for such a charge. Mrs. Howard was a widow, who, at the age of thirty, found herself suddenly reduced from a situation of affluence and happiness, as the wife of a beneficed clergyman, to one of almost hopeless poverty. The death of her husband, which had been so sudden as to prevent him from making any satisfactory arrangement of his property, joined with other circumstances perfectly unforeseen, had combined to produce this great misfortune; and, but for the long-tryed friendship of the Countess of Rutherford, Mrs. Howard's prospects would indeed have been dark. Through her exertions, however, the manor-house of St. Ebbe's was purchased, and fitted up so as to

accommodate Mrs. Howard and the few pupils whose education she was able to undertake; and when, in the prospect of approaching death, the countess gazed in sadness upon her child, her chief earthly consolation was derived from the hope that the earl would consent to place the infant Lady Blanche under the care of the only person in whose affection and principle she was able implicitly to confide. Lord Rutherford was not present to receive the dying injunction of his wife, but her wishes were received with an attention nearly amounting to superstition. Lady Blanche was removed to St. Ebbe's, and the sole charge of her education trusted to Mrs. Howard, with but one stipulation—that she should have no companion. For a few years this agreement was easily kept. During the child's infancy she was perfectly satisfied with Mrs. Howard as her nurse, instructress, and playfellow; but new wants were discovered with increasing years, and Mrs. Howard, believing that such a solitary education might operate unfavourably upon her character, at length prevailed upon the earl to allow her to receive into her family Eleanor Wentworth, the daughter of the rector of Rutherford. Blanche was at this time about seven years of age, and fully able to appreciate the charms of companionship. Eleanor was clever, generous, and affectionate; and the progress made by both the children from the period of their being placed together convinced Mrs. Howard that she had judged wisely in the advice which she had given: and when, in the course of events, the care of three little orphan nieces devolved upon her, she had no difficulty in persuading Lord Rutherford to allow them also to share her attention at St. Ebbe's.

The charm of society was felt chiefly by Blanche. Eleanor returned to her home at stated times, and mixed with other friends, and enjoyed the novelty of

other scenes ; but to Blanche the occupations of the manor house, the interest of the village of St. Ebbe's, and the dull liveliness of the old cathedral town, were the only excitements of life. Even the Castle of Rutherford, her destined home, was but like a beautiful dream, associated with visions of the mother who had been described as the most lovely and perfect of earthly beings, and the father, whose supposed virtues and talents formed the great romance of her childhood.

And the Earl of Rutherford, if judged by his letters, was indeed formed to excite admiration, if not respect. They were the letters of a refined, highly cultivated, affectionate mind ;—keenly alive to the charms of grace and luxury, yet mourning over the unreality of all earthly enjoyments ;—joining in the pursuits of the world, yet sighing for the sympathy of the few who were alone deemed worthy of friendship ; and seeing too deeply into life to be satisfied with aught that earth could give. One thing alone seemed to give him real pleasure, the hope of returning to England and devoting himself to his child ;—and yet year after year went by, and still he lingered in a foreign land. Blanche learnt by degrees to attach but little meaning to his expressions of dissatisfaction with continental habits, and of desire to revisit his own country. He might be—no doubt he was—sincere ; but the circumstances or the feelings which detained him abroad appeared as binding as ever ; and a shade of discontent was just beginning to dim the brightness of her hitherto happy life, when the intelligence that her father was actually on his way to England, and would probably arrive in the course of a few weeks, brought back all her early enthusiasm and delight. Yet the satisfaction, after the first moment, was by no means unalloyed. Her own departure from St. Ebbe's would be the inevi-

table consequence of the earl's return, and with this was involved separation from the friend who had supplied a mother's place, and claimed all but a mother's affection; and as Blanche recalled the fondness which had been lavished upon her from infancy, she wept in bitterness of heart for the ingratitude which could for an instant rejoice in such a prospect.

As regarded Eleanor, the case would be very different. She was to return to her parents at the same time, and the near vicinity of the rectory and the castle formed, at least in the simple mind of Lady Blanche, a reason for believing that the change of life would be merely nominal;—that they would share the same interests, and partake of the same pleasures, and be to each other, what they had hitherto called themselves,—sisters in affection, if not in relationship.

She could not contemplate the possibility of change,—and the fears which Eleanor sometimes expressed, were to her merely the fancies of an excitable, over-anxious mind.

But, as the season approached for the earl's arrival, the struggle in the mind of Blanche between hope and regret—the future and the past—became mixed with other thoughts, which served to calm her spirits by diverting her feelings into a different channel. The period of her Confirmation had been unavoidably fixed for the time when Lord Rutherford was expected;—and though Mrs. Howard would at first willingly have either hastened or deferred it, so as to give a more favourable opportunity for due preparation, she soon saw reason to be thankful that events had been so ordered as to leave no possibility of choice. The gay, gentle, confiding spirit of Lady Blanche, open to every impression, and apparently incapable of the possibility of concealment, yet retained within it a depth of reflection and principle

which Mrs. Howard had never penetrated. Unknown to herself, Blanche was timid, and reserved. She could speak openly upon all ordinary subjects,—confess her faults, and laugh at her mistakes, and lament her ignorance, till even a very keen observer of human nature—and such Mrs. Howard was—might imagine that she had told all that was in her mind. But there were occasions when the deepening colour of her cheek, or the hesitation of her voice, gave indications that in the hidden world within there lay feelings far loftier and purer than any which she ventured to express. Her words were the words of a humble, candid, light-hearted, simple child; but her thoughts—who may tell the earnestness, and reverence, and trustfulness, with which the young heart devotes itself to its Maker before the evil influence of the world has chilled the warmth of its early affections? What Lady Blanche really was, Mrs. Howard never knew, till in the intimacy of serious intercourse which preceded her Confirmation, the anguish of repentance for youthful sins overcame her natural reserve; and hopes, and fears, and doubts, and the bitter conflict of the soul, which all—even the most outwardly innocent—must endure, in the work of bringing back the heart to God, were confessed without a thought of concealment. From that moment the tie between them was one which earth has no power to break.

To Blanche this newly-acquired sympathy was an unspeakable blessing; it soothed her in the moments of self-reproach, when the delight of her father's anticipated return distracted her thoughts from the solemn subject of her approaching Confirmation; and enabled her to view clearly the life which was opening before her, and to arrange definite plans for her future conduct, instead of doubling and vacillating in the desire of doing everything, and the dread of suc-

ceeding in nothing. If Mrs. Howard had been dear to her before, as her truest and wisest friend, her mother's chosen representative, much more was she dear now ; and, even when trembling before the door which was to admit her into her father's presence, a sudden pang of sorrow shot through her heart as she caught the tones of Mrs. Howard's voice, and thought how soon she might listen for them in vain. Mrs. Howard herself opened the door as Blanche placed her hand upon the lock. She did not speak ; but her silent kiss told more than the most eloquent words ; and, as she walked slowly away, Blanche allowed herself to hesitate no longer, and entered the room. The earl was standing by the window—his eye fixed upon the travelling-carriage which had brought him that evening from London ; but his thoughts wandering to years, now so long passed away, that they seemed but as indistinct, yet painful, visions. He was recalling the day when, in the company of his wife, he had paid his first visit to St. Ebbe's ; and the associations awakened by the remembrance were so absorbing, that the sound of his daughter's footsteps was unheeded. Blanche remained irresolute—afraid to intrude herself upon him, yet faint from the effort to restrain her agitation. A few moments elapsed, but to her they seemed like hours ; and then the carriage drove off, and the earl, heaving a deep sigh, turned suddenly round, and became aware that he was not alone.

It was a strange meeting ! He did not move or smile ; but the colour forsook his cheeks, and his lips quivered ; and as Blanche drew near, he gazed upon her steadfastly, and sinking into a chair, the name of his wife escaped his lips. Blanche stood before him motionless. The earl's head was averted as if he dreaded to look again ; but, when at length the simple word, " Papa," fell upon his ear, he started,

passed his hand across his forehead like one awakening from a dream, and, clasping his child to his heart, he blessed her fervently, and poured forth the fullness of his contentment; and, at that moment, the fondest hope of affection which Blanche had ever ventured to indulge appeared about to be fully realized.

“My visit, to-night, must be but short, my child,” said the earl, when the excitement of feeling had in a measure subsided, and Blanche ventured to inquire how long he could stay with her. “I have business in the town, and must leave you almost immediately; but to-morrow we will start early, and reach Rutherford in time for you to see it in its beauty.”

“And for the first time,” said Blanche: “it seemed hard, papa, never to have been allowed to go there before; but I am glad of it now. I would much rather see it first with you.”

The earl smiled.

“And with Miss Wentworth? We are to take her with us, I believe.”

“Will you really?” and Blanche’s eye sparkled with delight. “We hoped it might be so; but Dr. Wentworth was afraid you might not like it.”

“Shall you like it?—that is the question, Blanche.”

Lord Rutherford spoke shortly, and Blanche was a little awed.

“I shall like everything that you like, dear papa,” she said; “and Eleanor and I have not set our hearts upon it.”

“But you would prefer it, my love; only say so, and it shall be.”

Blanche had penetration enough to see that her father really wished her to choose; and, as she warmly expressed her pleasure at the proposal, the earl’s gentleness of manner returned.

“My engagement is pressing,” he said, as he rose

to depart, whilst Blanche hung upon his arm, "and a night's rest will be desirable for us both; but we will meet at eight to-morrow, if, as Mrs. Howard assures me, you are quite prepared for such a sudden move."

The mention of Mrs. Howard brought back Blanche's sad thoughts.

"You will let her come and see me sometimes, dear papa, won't you?" she said, timidly.

"Let her come!" replied the earl; "rather, ask her if she will be kind enough to take the trouble: she may not think as little of a long journey as you do."

Blanche looked grave; for she could not bear, even in jest, the idea of any obstacle to a continued intercourse with her best friend. The earl no sooner perceived it, than he began to assure her that if the distance were ten times as great, it should not interfere. She need not have a thought upon the subject; and if Blanche had not herself stopped him, he would have insisted upon seeing Mrs. Howard again at once, and inducing her to name a certain time for a visit to Rutherford.

Blanche scarcely understood this instantaneous attention to her wishes. Mrs. Howard's object had been to guard her against the peculiar dangers of her position in life, by accustoming her to yield her own will even on the most trifling occasions. She often saw others preferred before her, and her natural disposition led her to obey rather than to command; and this, added to the influence of Eleanor Wentworth's apparent decision of character, made her insensible to her own powers. Perhaps too much so; Mrs. Howard at least began to fear lest, in fostering gentleness and consideration, she had kept her too much in ignorance of the influence which her rank and fortune would naturally give her; and lest the sudden consciousness of superiority might prove

more injurious to her character than if she had been accustomed to it from childhood. But it was too late to remedy the mistake. Blanche was about to enter upon the world, unknowing of its snares, and guarded only by the simple piety of a humble spirit, which has learned to distrust itself, and to lean only upon God. As she was then, there was nothing to fear; but how long her simplicity would remain untainted, her heart uncorrupted by the flattering homage which awaited her, was a question which only the most unhesitating faith could have borne to ask.

CHAPTER IV.

MRS. HOWARD sat in her dressing-room that evening long after her usual hour of rest. She was too anxious, her mind was too preoccupied, to hope for sleep. She could only think over the past, and pray for the future; whilst she dwelt upon the dispositions of her two young charges, and the trials to which they might be exposed in their journey through life.

It would have been difficult to tell which excited the greater interest; perhaps the one for whom she feared the most seemed then the nearer to her heart; yet Eleanor Wentworth's character was, in itself, much more open to temptation than that of Lady Blanche. Nothing but the certainty that, at the rectory of Rutherford, Eleanor would be as carefully guarded from evil as at the manor-house of St. Ebbe's, would have relieved the load of apprehension which pressed upon Mrs. Howard's spirits as she thought upon the fickleness of purpose, the pride and jealousy, the hasty, though generous temper, which were continually marring the influence of her talents and high principles.

But Eleanor was not, like Blanche, to return to a home where she would be the cherished idol of every heart. She would be loved, indeed, deeply and tenderly; but it would be with a Christian love, which would watch over her faults, and tell her truth without reserve. She would have quiet occupations; duties to her parents and her sister; duties in her father's parish; amusements in her garden and her

books; and society in the castle and its neighbourhood.

Mrs. Howard almost smiled at the feeling of dread which she had allowed to disturb her, as she owned to herself that Eleanor's situation in life seemed peculiarly free from temptation; whilst, again, she sadly reverted to Blanche—noble, beautiful, and rich, but deprived of a mother's care, and with no one to be her daily guide and counsellor, but the father, whom there was reason to fear might be little fitted for such an office.

The position was undoubtedly one of peril, and self-accusations mingled with Mrs. Howard's forebodings. Memory went back to the hour when, as an innocent, unconscious infant, the child of her early friend had been committed to her care; when, after the lapse of but a few weeks from the death of the Countess of Rutherford, the earl had placed his daughter in her arms, and bade her love and guard her for her mother's sake. To love her was indeed easy; but to guard, to teach, to educate her—how had the task been performed? It was a sad array of errors and neglects, which conscience brought before the mind of one whom the world rightly judged to have discharged her duty faithfully and unshrinkingly; so much seemed to have been left unsaid, undone; so much higher an example might have been set; so many warnings and instructions given. As the painful reflections crowded upon her mind, a gentle tap at the door was heard, and Blanche entered the room. She was looking pale and ill, and her eyes were dimmed with tears; and Mrs. Howard, startled at her sudden appearance, inquired, in alarm, the cause. Blanche tried to smile, whilst she assured her that it was merely a whim—a freak;—she was restless, and could not sleep, and the light was shining underneath the dressing-room

door ; and—but her voice failed her, and hiding her face upon Mrs. Howard's neck, she said, "To-morrow !— I cannot leave you."

"It will not be leaving me, my dearest child," replied Mrs. Howard. "We shall still be one in affection, and your father promises that we shall meet frequently."

"But that will not make things as they have been," replied Blanche. "I shall only have you for a short time, and I shall want you every hour in the day."

"Perhaps that is the very reason why it is good for me not to be with you," said Mrs. Howard ; "we must not depend too much upon our fellow-creatures, however we may love them."

"If I were not so ignorant," said Blanche, "and if I knew what sort of life I was going to lead, it would not seem so bad ; but seeing papa has upset all my ideas. I don't mean that he is different exactly in appearance from what I thought, but his manner is. He put me forward when I talked to him, and seemed to make me settle things ; and I would much rather he would not."

"You will be used to that in time, my love," replied Mrs. Howard, smiling ; "and you must recollect you are no longer a child."

"No, indeed," exclaimed Blanche, "after to-day I could not be ; but that, again, makes me unhappy. How shall I know what is right or wrong in trifles ? I cannot ask papa ;—at least I think I cannot ;—and I may decide badly, and do what I ought not ; and perhaps all my resolutions may fail. You know it is so sometimes, when people have felt a great deal more than I have."

"You can apply to me always," replied Mrs. Howard, "in cases in which you really have no one else to consult ; but it is not advice which can keep you right."

“No,” said Blanche; “but if—if I should grow careless, and not pray properly—”

“Fear for yourself, my love,” replied Mrs. Howard, “and then no other friend need fear for you; but if you can attend carefully to the few rules I gave you the other day, I think you will find your duties less difficult than you imagine.”

“I always now have some time to myself in the middle of the day,” said Blanche; “but here I can do as I choose.”

“And you will do as you choose at home, my dear,” replied Mrs. Howard. “I have no doubt of it. The best thing, however, to say to yourself, is: not that you will, if you can, but that you *must*;—that everything must, to a certain degree, give way to it; that if you cannot be alone at one hour, you will be at another. We require not long prayers but frequent ones, to keep up our watchfulness.”

“And then self-examination,” said Blanche; “it is so difficult.”

“Yes, most difficult; and the only way to make it easy is to practise it frequently; to carry it on from one part of the day to another, at the times we fix for our private devotions.”

“The difficulty to me,” said Blanche, “is, that all this makes one think so constantly of oneself!”

“So it may, at first; but the mind must be educated like the body. How is it, for instance, that you are able to walk without stumbling? If you are in a dangerous road, you observe where you are going; but, generally speaking, you are kept in safety, not by thinking of yourself, but of the objects around you.”

“That is what I want to do with my mind,” said Blanche.

“And it will come by-and-by, my love; but you must be contented to walk carefully in the dangerous

road first ; and, after a time, you will find yourself instinctively shrinking from evil, and able to pursue the right path—not so much by watching yourself as by keeping your heart fixed upon God.”

“It will be very long before that time comes,” said Blanche.

“Yes, because it is the perfection of a Christian life ; but we must be patient. In your case, I confess it is likely to be particularly difficult, because you will have so many temptations.”

“Not more than others, I suppose,” said Blanche ; “and yet it seems that I shall never be as good as some whom I have read of.”

“But I am afraid you will have many more temptations than people in general,” continued Mrs. Howard ; “and I should be happier if I felt that you understood this. God has given you rank and wealth, and no one in your home to share the attention which will be paid you ; and your papa is very likely to be over-indulgent and blind to your faults.”

Blanche leant her head upon the mantelpiece, and in a low voice said, “You will pray for me.”

“Pray for you daily and hourly,” replied Mrs. Howard, earnestly. “God only knows how precious you are to me. Perhaps I am over-anxious ; but luxury and flattery are very insidious.”

“I need not indulge myself in luxuries, even if I possess them,” said Blanche.

“No ; though I am afraid the temptation will be greater than you are aware of. If your mind is corrupted, dearest Blanche, the commencement will almost inevitably be self-indulgence in trifles.”

“I don't think I quite know what you would call trifles,” said Blanche.

“Such as a little indolence in rising,” replied Mrs. Howard ; “a little waste of time in light reading ; a slight carelessness in conversation, saying things

which are not strictly right for the sake of amusement; or spending money thoughtlessly; or even consulting your own ease by making yourself too comfortable, and so rendering yourself indisposed to exertion for other people. All these things are considered allowable by the world: you may do them, and no one will notice them; and your conscience may, perhaps, scarcely reproach you for them; but they are the beginnings of evil—the first steps towards that love of self-gratification which is the peculiar snare of the rich.”

“I like ease and comfort now,” said Blanche.

“I think you do, my love,” replied Mrs. Howard; “and I am not saying that the liking them is wrong, but dangerous; and against the danger I know only one safeguard, as far as our own endeavours are concerned. There are times, you know, when we are bound to deny ourselves the use even of lawful pleasures;—one day at least in every week we should do so. If we check our inclinations then, we may hope they will not gain the mastery over us at other times.”

“I shall not know what to do when I am at home,” said Blanche.

“And I cannot tell you exactly,” replied Mrs. Howard; “because, of course, you must be governed in a great degree by the habits of your father’s house. Only when we have determined to do something, half our difficulty is over. A sincere will must soon find out the way, without being singular or acting in any way to attract notice.”

“But I wish so much—so very, very much—that I could have some rules,” said Blanche.

Mrs. Howard half-smiled as she kissed her, and said,—“And I wish so very much that I could give them, because I know it would make you happier; but I can only repeat in a general way what I have

said to you before ; little details must be left to yourself : it is impossible to shake off the burden of responsibility, Blanche, though I know you would willingly do it if you could."

"But if I make my rules and keep to them," said Blanche, "still I may attend to them only as a matter of form, and then they will be of no use."

Mrs. Howard was silent for a few moments ; the most earnest-minded often feel bitterly the contrast between the advice which they give to others, and the practice which they are conscious of in themselves.

"It is very hard," she said, at length, "to feel, even in a remote degree, as we ought ; but, dearest Blanche, if you follow the plan you have had marked out for these days ;—begin them, for instance, earlier than usual, if possible, and give up your first thoughts to self-examination and meditation upon those chapters in the Gospels which describe our Lord's sufferings ; using special solemn confessions, and also arranging your prayers for the rest of the day, with a particular view to these subjects of meditation ;—I think you will scarcely fail to have some deeper gratitude—some more sincere penitence ; you will at least feel that the day is not like other days."

"I will try," said Blanche ; but she sighed as if distrusting herself.

"And you must hope, too," continued Mrs. Howard ; "hope is a great instrument of good with us all. The work of a Christian is the work of a whole life, and we must not despair because we are not perfect at once ; especially when we have such aid promised and given. In a very short time, my love, you will, I trust, be fully admitted into the communion of the Church."

Blanche looked distressed, and for a few moments did not attempt to speak : at last she said, "I thought you would have been with me."

“And I thought so too, and hoped more earnestly than I can say; but it has been otherwise ordered, and it may—it must be better for us both. Yet we cannot really be separated; my prayers and my heart will follow you, and we shall surely be united in one spirit as members of the body of Christ—more closely even than at this moment.”

Again, there was a pause; the struggle of over-excited feelings overcame Blanche's efforts to restrain them, and bursting into tears, she exclaimed, “I am not worthy.”

“No,” replied Mrs. Howard, and she placed her hand fondly on Blanche's head, “you are not worthy; no one can be, not even an angel from heaven. But if the blessing is greater than words can tell, so also is the love. Blanche, it is a Father's voice which calls you; perhaps now, for the first time, you can understand what a father's affection must mean.” The allusion had the effect which Mrs. Howard desired.

Blanche raised her head, and a smile gleamed through her tears as she said, “I will try to think of it, and not be afraid.”

“And you will be assisted and accepted, dearest; you must not doubt it. There is much that I could say to you even now upon the subject, though we have so often talked of it before; but I do not think you will allow anything to interfere with such a duty. I do not think you will ever make false excuses, or turn away with coldness, whatever examples may be set you. In time,” and Mrs. Howard's voice involuntarily became more subdued in its earnestness, “you will cease to look upon it as a *duty*—it will be your *all* in religion.”

“Papa will be with me to help me, and teach me,” said Blanche; “that is one great comfort.”

Mrs. Howard sighed, and made no direct answer; but, rising from her seat, unlocked a cabinet, and taking

from it a locket attached to a hair chain, she hung it round Blanche's neck, saying, "Will you wear it, not only in remembrance of me, but of the day on which it was given you? The date has been engraved on it, that when you look at it you may be reminded of the vow by which you have bound yourself.—And now, dear child, we must part."

Mrs. Howard's usually calm voice became low and tremulous. Blanche held the locket in her hand, and gazed on it long and tearfully; and then, placing it within the folds of her dress, she once more received Mrs. Howard's fervent blessing, and glided silently from the room.

CHAPTER V.

THE sun was still high in the horizon, when on the following day a travelling carriage was seen standing at the bottom of the steep ascent on the summit of which was built the old baronial castle of Rutherford. There was apparently some discussion as to its movements, for a servant was engaged in carrying messages from his master to the postilions, and the eager tones of a young girl's voice were heard endeavouring to win some compliance with her wishes contrary to the will of her companions.

"It will be a pleasure to me to walk, I assure you," she said; "the distance is but a few hundred yards, and really I deserve some trouble for having been so foolish as not to watch which way the carriage turned. It will make a considerable difference now to go by the road."

Lord Rutherford listened politely, and quietly remarking that Miss Wentworth was under his protection, and that he could on no account leave her till he had seen her safely under her father's care, sent an angry reproof to the postilions for their stupidity, and ordered them to drive round to the rectory. Eleanor looked annoyed, and Blanche raised her eyes to her father's face, to see if it would do to interfere; but there was an expression in it which was not encouraging. The cheerful smile which had brightened it during the first part of their journey was gone, and, leaning out of the window, he kept his eyes riveted upon the old grey walls appearing in the distance above the trees.

“My father!” exclaimed Eleanor, as the carriage turned.

Lord Rutherford withdrew his head, and sank back upon his seat. His mouth grew more stern, his brow was more gloomy than before; yet it might have been only from the effort to repress some rising agitation, for, as Dr. Wentworth approached, a smile of recognition again lighted up his features, and with a cordial voice, and a warm pressure of the hand, he returned a greeting which might have been termed affectionate.

“I have much to thank you for,” he said; “but you shall not be detained now: we have a fellow-feeling for our children.”

Dr. Wentworth's mild but strikingly sensible countenance betrayed some painful thoughts, even as he assisted his daughter to alight, and welcomed her eagerly; but they were momentary only, and again drawing near the carriage, he said, “Lady Blanche is almost a stranger; we have not met I think for two years.”

Blanche bent forward and gave him her hand. Lord Rutherford was evidently interested in watching the meeting, yet he looked annoyed rather than pleased with Dr. Wentworth's kind expressions of satisfaction.

“I am not parting from Eleanor,” said Blanche, in answer to Dr. Wentworth's regret that his daughter's return home should be necessarily alloyed by a separation from her friend. “I wish you would not talk of it: we shall meet, as we have done, every day.”

Dr. Wentworth smiled doubtfully.

“To-morrow Eleanor will be with me the first moment she can be spared,” continued Blanche, gaily; “and if that should not be early, I must be with her, and then we will arrange for the future.”

There was a silent assent, and Eleanor, who had been standing apart, went round to the other side of the carriage to say good-b'ye.

"It is good-b'ye, really,—for long, for ever in some ways, Blanche," she whispered.

Blanche was distressed.

"Eleanor, it is cruel to say so; but time will show."

"Yes, time will show;" and, trying to appear indifferent, Eleanor once more said, "good-b'ye," and, putting her arm within her father's, turned away.

Blanche watched them, as they stayed to give some directions to a man who was to follow with the luggage; and, when at last they were lost to her sight, felt as if Eleanor's words were prophetic.

But the painful foreboding was soon forgotten. The earl's voice recalled her to happiness; for, delighted at being freed from all restraint, he now gave free vent to his affection, and pointing to the range of richly-wooded hills, the green meadows, and neat clustering cottages, he told her that all she could see was her own; that earth for him had but one treasure; and that, whilst she was spared to him, nothing would add to his enjoyment, except by ministering to hers.

"Now," he said, when the winding road brought them full in front of the castle, "look, once more; there is no view of it like this."

Blanche looked, and her heart throbbed within her as she realized for the first time the grandeur of her future home. Rutherford Castle stood upon a high promontory, which rose almost perpendicularly from the banks of a deep-flowing stream. The most ancient part of what had once been a fortress of considerable strength was built upon the solid rock, and the huge blocks of masonry could scarcely be distinguished from the impregnable walls of nature's

formation: but the advance of civilization had induced the Lords of Rutherford, from time to time, to add to the original stronghold, at first a lower tower and massive wings, then gateways, and turrets, and quadrangles, till the castle, stretching over the crest of the hill, formed a pile of building which, although irregular in outline, was still as a whole singularly imposing. Immediately in front of the castle was a broad space of smooth turf, and from this the ground to the left fell in a bank thickly planted with trees, which, as it neared the river, was broken by grey moss-grown rocks. But the most striking points of scenery were not discoverable from below; and when Blanche clasped her hands in ecstasy, and declared that she had never imagined any thing half so beautiful, the earl smiled contentedly, and, bidding the postilions hasten, he sat in silence listening to her exclamations, as every step in advance brought them some fresh object of beauty.

The high battlemented gateway was passed, and the carriage entered the park; and, after a drive of about half a mile, slowly ascended the hill. As they approached nearer and nearer to the castle, Lord Rutherford roused himself from his leaning posture, and, gazing from the window, seemed endeavouring to recall the long-past scenes which were associated with nearly every object that met his eye. Blanche, with an instinctive delicacy of sympathy, did not attempt to interrupt him: her pleasure was no longer openly expressed, and it was not till the carriage stopped before the heavy portal, and a glorious landscape, with a foreground of rock and river, and a distance of far-spreading woods and pastures, and fields ripening with the golden corn, was disclosed before her, that she exclaimed, "Papa, it does not seem like earth!"

At the sound of her sweet voice, the earl awoke

from his reverie. "It shall be paradise to you," he said "if mortal power can make it so;" and, alighting from the carriage, he hurried her forward into the hall.

The servants were assembled to receive them; and the earl presented Lady Blanche to them as their mistress. "Your mistress now," he said emphatically, "as much as she must be in years to come;" and as he spoke many eyes of admiration and respect were turned to the gentle girl, who so gracefully and meekly returned the reverential salutations of her dependants.

Lord Rutherford's impatience scarcely waited till the necessary introduction was over. Proudly and firmly he passed on through the splendid apartments; yet, if Blanche had watched his countenance, she might have seen that all was not equally firm within. It was but the outline of a marble bust which caught his attention, but he quickened his steps, and compressed his lips, whilst he turned to see whether the bright fair features of his child did indeed resemble the cold but matchless beauty which the hand of art had so exquisitely sculptured.

Blanche followed him, bewildered by the novelty of her situation and the strangeness of all she saw; so different from St. Ebbe's, with its few simple rooms and modern furniture. The dark oaken panellings and grotesque carvings, the rich yet cumbersome cabinets, the heavy gilded cornices, and faded tapestries, were of the fashions of centuries past; and Blanche, though delighted to behold what she had so often in imagination pictured, yet felt something of awe steal over her, as they traversed the empty chambers which for years had been disused; and which, even when the castle was filled with guests, had been considered more as a necessary incumbrance than as at all conducing to its convenience.

Lord Rutherford read what was passing in her mind.

“These are but the vestibules,” he said; “the ante-rooms—endurable for appearance, but not habitable. You shall have something different for your own enjoyment;” and, pushing aside some massive folding doors, he led the way into a hall paved with marble, and partly filled with rare plants. “They have attended to my orders well,” he observed, as he looked around him with a pleased air; “and here are your rooms, Blanche. Look at them, and tell me what more they require.” As he said this, Lord Rutherford entered a small but lofty and very prettily shaped apartment, which though harmonizing with the rest of the castle in its general style, was fitted up with many of the refinements of modern luxury. The choice pictures, the piano and harp, the sofas, couches, work-table, and books; and, especially, the flowers with which the vases on the tables were filled, gave Blanche, in an instant, the idea of forethought, and care, and affection; though, when she tried to express her gratitude, she could find no words to satisfy her feelings.

The earl, however, did not need words; he looked at her for a moment with proud delight, whilst in her grace and beauty she stood in the centre of the room, the fitting mistress of all that wealth and love could bestow; and, after pointing to a small study opening from the outer room, he said, carelessly, “We will see the view from this side now, Blanche; it is different from the other.”

Blanche followed him through the hall into the garden; but when she leant over the parapet, which bordered the terrace in front of the window, she started almost with alarm upon discovering the giddy height at which she stood above the deep river that flowed round the castle.

To the right, the walls of the keep shut out the view over the distant country ; but immediately before her the ground sank almost perpendicularly, and far, far below gleamed the clear waters of the rapid stream, as it forced its way between the rocky foundations of the castle and the lofty wooded hill which formed its opposite bank. For about the space of a quarter of a mile it was inclosed in a narrow ravine ; but a sharp projecting point of land then opposing its further progress, its course was suddenly diverted in a different direction ; and the eye, no longer able to follow its windings, turned rather to the long vista of hills, locked into each other, and capped by the rugged outline of a mountain-peak, which formed the termination of the valley.

The scene was striking even to the earl, accustomed though he was to the varied beauties of other lands ; but to Blanche, as she beheld it for the first time under the dark shadows and brilliant lights of a soft yet not cloudless sky, its effect was magical.

“It is your home, Blanche,” said the earl, as he stood beside her, watching the feelings that were plainly working in her countenance.

“And yours, too, papa,” said Blanche, striving at length to give her father some idea that she appreciated his affection. “It can never be my paradise without you.”

“Then we will make our agreement to-night, my child,” replied the earl ; “our happiness shall be in each other,—and, whilst we are together, the world shall never intrude upon us with its cares.”

Blanche smiled sweetly, yet the words so full of hope and happiness fell with something of a discordant sound upon her ear. The serpent had entered into Eden, and how could she dare to anticipate immunity from evil ? The earl, however, seemed at that moment to have no forebodings ;—every trace

of sadness had passed from his brow, and his voice was more cheerful than Blanche had yet heard it. He would not however allow her to linger longer on the terrace, fearing lest she would be fatigued after the journey ; and, summoning her maid, insisted that she should retire to her room for a short time to rest before she rejoined him for the evening. Blanche, however, did not rest : she retired indeed, but it was to kneel humbly before her God ; to acknowledge his mercies, and pray that the blessings which He had vouchsafed to grant her might never lead her heart astray.

CHAPTER VI.

IF the first waking to a sense of sorrow is bitter almost beyond any other moment of suffering, so the first dawning of happiness, at least upon the young, is bright beyond the power of description. Blanche dreamt that she was in the old manor-house of St. Ebbe's, grieving over a letter from her father, which, as had so often been the case, gave her no prospect of seeing him. She opened her eyes, and the sun was shining into a spacious, gorgeously furnished chamber, fitted rather it might seem for the palace of a queen than for her own simple tastes.

For an instant, she scarcely understood the reality of her senses; but, as she hastily rose and gazed from the window, a full consciousness of her happiness came over her. There were the old grey castle walls, the silvery stream, the woods and hills, now bathed in morning light, and the distant mountain-peak wreathed with a vapoury mist,—all which she had beheld the previous evening, and which she felt must be for ever associated with the thought of her father's love. It was then very early, but Blanche did not consider the hour, and had no remembrance of the preceding day's exertion; and, long before the earl had left his room, she was wandering through the garden and the park, exploring overgrown paths, and mounting hillocks, to gain a clearer idea of the beauties of her new home. Lord Rutherford gently found fault with her, when she appeared at breakfast, for having given herself so much unnecessary fatigue; but when Blanche gaily declared

that she did not feel it, and that she could bear more than many who appeared much stronger, he seemed quite satisfied that she should follow her own fancy, and began to make arrangements for what was to be done during the day.

“You will find it but a short walk to the rectory,” he said; “and I suppose you will wish to go there the first thing, unless Miss Wentworth should be here soon, which, from what I remember of the family habits, is not very likely. I never could induce Dr. Wentworth to leave his books till after luncheon.”

“But Eleanor’s habits are the habits of St. Ebbe’s, not of the rectory,” replied Blanche, “and she will do whatever she thinks will please me. I should like to go to her, though, extremely. I want so much to see more of her family—her sister and her brother—and especially her mother.”

“Her sister must be a mere child,” replied the earl; “and her brother, I suspect, is away; and as for Mrs. Wentworth, she is not a person to get on with, as it is called. She is very good, and all that ladies always are; but I never could understand that she was anything more.”

“Eleanor is very fond of her mother,” said Blanche.

“Yes, my love, very likely she may be; but I don’t want you to be disappointed, and I have no idea that you will be fond of Mrs. Wentworth.”

Blanche however was disappointed. She had set her heart upon finding in Mrs. Wentworth a second Mrs. Howard.

“Eleanor used to show me some of her letters,” she said; “and they made me think she must be almost perfect.”

Something like a contemptuous smile crossed the earl’s face.

“You will have different notions of perfection,

Blanche," he said, "as you grow older. It is not so often to be met with as some people think."

Blanche made no reply. That peculiar smile was one to which she was unaccustomed, and Lord Rutherford not continuing the subject, nothing more was said about Mrs. Wentworth.

"I shall make Eleanor come back with me, and assist in all I have to do," said Blanche, as her father suggested that there would be ample employment for her in choosing how she would have everything placed in her rooms, and making herself at home in them. "She promised me she would ; so I had better go to her at once."

"Then we will walk together," said the earl. "I must see Wentworth myself, and thank him for the care he has taken in seeing your apartments prepared for your reception."

The path to the rectory was much shorter than Blanche had anticipated, leading down the steep hill upon which the castle stood, and then following the course of the river for a little distance, till it terminated at a wicket-gate, which opened into the shrubbery adjoining the house. Blanche was delighted with the neatness and beauty of the small pleasure-ground through which they passed, and the comfortable appearance of the parsonage, with its trelliced verandah covered with creepers. She would not have exchanged her own magnificent home for it ; but she felt that there was nothing to give rise in Eleanor's mind to any feelings of envy or discontent. It was the home of affluence, if not of riches.

The drawing-room was empty when they were shown into it, and Blanche had time to recognise many things which Eleanor had described before ; and to study with much interest a likeness which she was certain must be that of Mrs. Wentworth, before any one appeared.

The first interruption was from a huge Newfoundland dog, which sprang through the open window in bold defiance of the warning voice of his master, who immediately followed. He was a young man, apparently about three or four-and-twenty, tall and rather striking in his appearance, and with a countenance which would have been termed extremely handsome; but Blanche, as startled by the intrusion she turned from the examination of Mrs. Wentworth's picture, was less aware that his features were regular, and his manners polished, than that he was not entirely the person she had expected to meet in Eleanor's brother. Such it was evident, from the strong resemblance, he must be. There was cleverness certainly in his bright blue eye, and the high forehead round which his dark hair was carefully arranged; and his mouth was good-tempered, though perhaps a little sarcastic; but a self-satisfaction betrayed itself in his look and general deportment, which almost from the first glance Blanche felt to be repugnant to her taste. Yet there was little said that could show anything of his disposition. A few apologies were made for his sudden entrance, and a little regret expressed that they should have been kept waiting; and then Mr. Wentworth bowed, and retired, with the intention of seeking his mother and sister, whom he believed were to be found in the garden.

"I should have known him anywhere," exclaimed the earl, when he was gone; "and you would, too, I am sure, Blanche. Did you ever see such a likeness?"

"It is striking, certainly," replied Blanche, with some hesitation; "but——"

"Well," said the earl, laughing, "what is your but? I should have thought it impossible to criticise anything so regularly handsome."

"I did not mean to criticise, papa," said Blanche,

blushing ; “but I don't think it would please me if Eleanor were exactly——”

The sentence was not concluded, for Eleanor at that instant appeared, her face bright with pleasure and excitement.

“It is so kind, so very kind in you, Blanche,” she said. “I did not in the least expect you ; for I am sure you must have as much to do as I have.”

“I have left it all,” replied Blanche, “till you were with me. You know I am never able to please myself ; and you must go back to the castle presently, and help me to arrange my rooms, and then we will settle all sorts of things. But I wanted so much, first, to see your mother and little Susan.”

“And Charles !” exclaimed Eleanor, eagerly. “He told us you were here : he came only last night, and he is going away again to-morrow.”

“So soon !” observed the earl ; “we shall scarcely have time to make his acquaintance.”

“I don't know why he should go,” replied Eleanor ; “but I don't think he finds as much amusement here as he does elsewhere. Home is rather dull for a young man.”

Blanche believed this because she was told it, but it seemed strange. She could not imagine what society any one could want beyond such a sister as Eleanor, such parents as she believed Dr. and Mrs. Wentworth to be, and such a home as Rutherford Rectory.

“Mamma will be here instantly ; she is longing to see you, Blanche,” continued Eleanor.

“I think I hear Mrs. Wentworth's voice,” said Lord Rutherford ; and he went a few paces into the garden to meet her ; but though his words were cordial and easy, his tone was not ; and but for Mrs. Wentworth's perfect calmness of manner, there might have been something awkward in the meeting.

Blanche did feel as her father had expected, when Mrs. Wentworth advanced towards her, and simply took her hand as she would have done that of an indifferent person. She had expected some show of feeling, at least for Eleanor's sake ; but Mrs. Wentworth's soft, quiet voice underwent no change in its intonation, even when she looked at the earl, and said, " Lord Rutherford's return will now be doubly welcome to us all."

A few trifling observations passed, and Lord Rutherford, with a slight accent of impatience, inquired if there was no hope of seeing Dr. Wentworth.

" He has been called into the village unexpectedly," replied Mrs. Wentworth : " but we expect him to return immediately. Can I deliver any message for him ?"

" Perhaps I might be allowed to leave a note in his study," replied the earl. " I think I know where to find it," and he left the room.

Blanche in the meantime had been interested in observing Mrs. Wentworth more minutely. She resembled Eleanor's description, in her tall, slight figure, and delicate, though rather harassed-looking countenance ; but there were no traces of the feelings which had been so vividly portrayed in her letters. That she was Eleanor's mother, Blanche could scarcely believe, as she watched the eager impetuosity of the one, and the marble frigidity of the other ; still less could she believe that Eleanor could ever dare to unburden her heart to such a mother. And yet the love which she had been told existed between them had been her " beau ideal" of what the tie between a parent and a child might and ought to be. When Lord Rutherford was gone, however, there was a little change in Mrs. Wentworth's manner. The questions which she asked were marked by consideration, and a desire to understand something of

Blanche's feelings, at this her first visit to her home ; and though the tone in which they were put was cold, it still betrayed something more of real sympathy than before ; and when Blanche began to express her pleasure in the taste and care which had been shown in furnishing her rooms, a quiet smile even stole over Mrs. Wentworth's features, and her eye brightened, though she immediately afterwards turned from the subject. But Blanche had not much time for any further remarks. Eleanor insisted upon taking her to the school-room, and the garden and shrubbery, and, as she said, making her at home at once ; and Blanche, only too glad of an excuse to be alone with her, readily followed. It did not require much time to see the whole, but Blanche lingered with pleasure to listen to all that Eleanor had to say of past enjoyments and future hopes associated with the place in which she had been born, as well as to make acquaintance with her sister Susan, an intelligent-looking child, about eight years of age, who was now to be Eleanor's pupil.

"I think you must be happy, Eleanor," she exclaimed, as they seated themselves at length on a garden-seat, in a retired part of the shrubbery. "I do not see one thing that is wanting. And you will lead such a useful life."

"I have been talking to papa already about what I am to do," replied Eleanor. "I am to teach Susan in the mornings, and to go in the afternoons to see some of the poor people ; and sometimes I am to ride with him, and he is going to read with me some part of the day."

"And your music and drawing?" said Blanche.

"Oh! I must contrive to have some time before breakfast. You know I cannot arrange for every hour exactly till I have tried ; but that will be the sort of life."

“And what is to become of me?” said Blanche.

“That is what I wished to talk to you about. We must manage to go to the poor people together; and, when Susan has a holiday, I can come up to you in the morning, and we can ride together; and then, these nice summer evenings, there will be no difficulty in meeting.”

Eleanor spoke eagerly and confidently, and Blanche did not stop to analyse possibilities; nor did she remark how much her friend had changed since they had parted the preceding evening. She was too much accustomed to Eleanor's varying moods to inquire their cause.

“I am longing to begin,” continued Eleanor; “but to-day you know is no day, and Charles being here makes such a difference. It is impossible to do anything but idle away one's time with him.”

Blanche smiled, but she did not wish the subject to be pursued; for she was afraid lest Eleanor might discover that Mr. Wentworth, notwithstanding his handsome face and his agreeable manners, did not entirely answer her preconceived expectations.

“And now I have talked all about myself,” said Eleanor, “I should like to hear something about yourself:—the castle, and your father, and your own rooms. They must be exquisite, I am sure. Mamma had the whole choosing of the furniture, and everything, and she has such taste!”

“Yes, indeed she has,” exclaimed Blanche; but I wish I had known it, I should have thanked her so much more.”

“Oh! mamma is not a person to require thanks; she only requires to know that you like it: and I saw by her smile just now that she was satisfied. That is her unselfish smile. I believe she would have it if she was in the greatest suffering, if she thought another person was happy.”

“I did not know what it meant,” said Blanche; “but I suppose I shall understand you all by-and-by, when I don’t feel so shy.”

Eleanor laughed.

“As to that, Blanche,” she said, “you have no right to complain. The joint wisdom and gravity of my whole family—uncles, aunts, and cousins included, and I have an interminable number, could never be half as awful as Lord Rutherford’s politeness, I don’t know what I shall do at the castle.”

“I think I rather like being afraid of him,” said Blanche. “Do you remember, Eleanor, how we used to walk up and down the garden at St. Ebbe’s, and discuss the different kinds of affection?”

“And how we always differed,” said Eleanor. “You with your fondness for looking up; and I with my perverse inclination to look down; no, not down exactly, but quite on a level.”

“And then our appeals to Mrs. Howard,” said Blanche. “That will be the one great thing wanting to my happiness. If she were but here!”

“Yes,” replied Eleanor, “but she will be with us soon, and then it will be such great, such very great pleasure; and now, without her, I have more hope of making you think as I do in all sorts of ways; for she always supported you.”

“But,” said Blanche, “before Mrs. Howard talked to us, I never could see anything in your arguments to convince me that love is greatest when persons are on an equality; and there is one thing, you know entirely against it, devotion—which is the highest and purest love.”

“I can’t follow you in an argument, Blanche, to-day,” exclaimed Eleanor; “my mind is not up to it, as it is sometimes.”

Blanche looked disappointed. “I thought,” she said, “that you would let me talk of these things always.”

“Yes, so you shall ; but I don't think I am in that sort of sober mood to-day ; I am too happy.”

“I am happy, too,” said Blanche ; “but my extacies went away with my walk this morning, and I don't wish them to last.”

“Mine never do,” replied Eleanor, laughing ; “so I am in no fear. I shall pay dearly for all my enjoyment before night comes, I dare say. It would be much better to be like you, Blanche ; your extacies never go quite away, I am sure, though you say they do.”

“I don't know,” said Blanche ; “certainly, I don't feel much of them at this moment ; and some feelings you have which are much more lasting than mine.”

Blanche spoke as she thought, truly ; yet it was only her own humility, and a natural respect for Eleanor's talents and decided opinions, which could have blinded her to the fact, that Eleanor was in reality swayed by every passing impulse ; that she expressed herself strongly, but that she acted weakly. And, if Blanche had been quicker in discerning, Eleanor would have felt greater hesitation in owning her faults. But it required no effort to lament changeableness and hastiness, and the defects of an enthusiastic temperament, when she was sure to be met with a quick refutation of her self accusations, and to hear instances adduced which apparently proved her to be the very reverse of what she acknowledged. It was one of the weaknesses of Blanche's character that where she loved she could not or would not see anything amiss. “I must try and be regular in my habits,” she said, “pursuing the conversation ; “but I am afraid it will be very difficult. I should like especially to know something of the poor people, if your papa will put me in the way.”

“Papa hopes you will take a great interest in

them," said Eleanor; "he told me this morning that it was of immense consequence to you and to them; and he talked a great deal about the vast power, either for good or evil, which had been placed in your hands."

"In mine!" exclaimed Blanche; "now when I am so young."

"But you are not going to remain young always," replied Eleanor; "and, besides, whether young or old, you are still Lady Blanche Evelyn, the heiress of Rutherford."

"Yes," answered Blanche, with a deep sigh, which made Eleanor laugh heartily.

"You are the very strangest person, Blanche! Just think how many thousands there are in the world who would envy you."

"And I am to be envied," exclaimed Blanche, "for my friends,—for papa, and Mrs. Howard, and you;—and for my health too, and my education, and innumerable things; but not because I was born to have power."

"Yes, if you exercise it properly," said Eleanor. "If! but there is a doubt. Mrs. Howard is afraid of me; she thinks I shall be spoilt, and that papa will not tell me of my faults. Oh! Eleanor, it might be very different if I had a mother."

"You may have one, if you choose," replied Eleanor, "Mamma is already inclined to feel for you as her child."

Blanche did not receive the comfort which was expected from this assurance: her notion of a mother's affection was of something widely different from Mrs. Wentworth's cold shake of the hand. "Your mamma is very kind," she said; "I am sure she will do everything she can to help me. But still I must be left very much to myself; and, even during the few hours I have been at home, I have understood more

of what Mrs. Howard meant. The castle is so grand, and the servants seem almost to bow before me ; and as for papa, he watches my every look, that I may not have a wish ungratified ; and when I awoke this morning, and saw my beautiful room, I did not feel as I used to do at St. Ebbe's ; I thought that I could order more and have my own will ; and then I remembered what Mrs. Howard said, and I was frightened."

Eleanor was touched by this simple confession. That which caused alarm to Blanche, would, she well knew, have passed unnoticed by herself. " You will be used to it all, dear Blanche, by-and-by," she said ; " and then you will not think so much about it, and worry yourself ; and I dare say we shall both be able to go on steadily ; and, if you want to know the poor people, we can go to them together. The first person we must find out is the blind girl who was confirmed with us. Papa says he knows who she is very well ; it was her aunt, who is the mistress of the Charity School, that she was staying with ; but she is coming back directly. We will go and see her the first day we can, won't we ?"

" Even this shadow of a duty was some relief to poor Blanche, whose conscience had a natural tendency to become morbidly sensitive, and Eleanor saw that she had struck upon the right chord. Anxious to make Blanche feel as light-hearted as herself, she continued to plan a scheme of duties and occupations, so cleverly and earnestly, that before the conversation was interrupted both were equally satisfied. Eleanor having talked herself into the belief that she was certainly devoted to a useful life ; and Blanche, having listened, till she was persuaded that with such a friend, constantly at hand to remind her of neglects, she could never go far astray.

The afternoon was spent at the castle, where Blanche

found sufficient to occupy and interest both herself and Eleanor in the arrangement of her rooms; and when they parted it was with the agreement that, if the earl had no other plan for the ensuing day, they were to walk together into the village. "And if he wishes me to ride with him, instead," said Blanche; "I must ask him to let me come to you for an hour in the evening."

Eleanor willingly agreed, delighted to find that as yet there was no cause for jealousy, since even the society of Lord Rutherford did not make Blanche forget her.

CHAPTER VII.

AND so passed the first day of Blanche's residence at Rutherford Castle ; and so passed several days ; varied, indeed, by drives, and rides, and books, and visits, both to rich and poor ; but all, equally bright and unalloyed, for the petty disappointments and trifling vexations from which no care and no affection can guard us, were little felt by one who carried in her own breast a shield against them. Each morning, long before the Earl was awake, Blanche knelt in the solitude of her own chamber to pray for guidance during the day ; and then, with her Bible in her hand, paced the broad terrace overhanging the river, that she might study the will of her Maker, amid the scenes which brought His power and goodness most clearly to her view. Each day she planned her occupations with a view to her own improvement, her father's happiness, and the comfort of those who were in a measure entrusted to her care ; and not the most busy hour nor the most absorbing pursuit could lead her to forget that it was needful to withdraw some moments from this world to devote to the contemplation of another. Mrs. Howard had early implanted in her mind habits of order and punctuality ; and, duly as the time came, which she had fixed upon as the most free from interruption, Blanche retired to her own chamber to consider what she had done since last engaged in the same duty ; or, if prevented at the exact minute, the first leisure opportunity was eagerly seized upon, without any regard to the plausible excuses, which might easily have been made from

weariness or a pre-occupied mind. Blanche never forgot Mrs. Howard's words, "Not, I will if I can, but I must." And one especial reason she now had for allowing nothing to interfere with her religious duties, in the hope of being so soon admitted to the full communion of the Church, and the anxiety fitly to prepare herself.

On the second Sunday after Blanche appeared in the old village church of Rutherford, the accustomed invitation was given to all "such as should be religiously and devoutly disposed," and as Blanche listened to the words a feeling of loneliness stole over her. Eleanor was near, with the mother, who could share every thought and feeling; and the father, whose voice faltered, as his eye rested upon the countenance of the child he so dearly loved, and to whom for the first time the exhortation was addressed. And Blanche stood in that sacred building, with but one exception, the noblest and wealthiest of all; and with her was the proud earl whose sternest will would have yielded to her wishes, as the humblest of his servants would have submitted to his; but the one great blessing which she then desired, a parent's sympathy and advice on the subject most deeply concerning her happiness, was denied her.

Upon this topic alone no word had passed between them—they met in the morning and the world was the theme of their conversation; they parted at night and no words of prayer were uttered to call for a blessing upon the midnight hour. Poetry, and painting, and music, and literature, and even the deeper subjects of science and philosophy, were all at times introduced, and Blanche with her natural refinement and superiority of mind was fascinated by the earl's eloquent language and exquisite taste. His words were as the words of enchantment; for, as he spoke of Italy and Greece, and the sunny islands of

the south, even Blanche forgot for the moment that earth was but the stepping stone to heaven; its beauty, but a type of that which shall be hereafter; its genius and its learning, but the faint and misused relics of that perfect creation which only when it issued taintless from the hands of its Creator, was pronounced to be "very good." But the earl ceased, and Blanche was left to her own meditations, and then as she retraced the conversation and sought for something which should be treasured in her memory, a vague sense of unsatisfactoriness filled her mind. A glittering pageant seemed to have passed before her; but it was gone. And of what avail was it to her to have vividly realised the solemn beauty of Genoa, and the dazzling lustre of Naples; to have wandered in fancy beneath the vast dome of St. Peter's; or stood amidst the giant ruins of the Coliseum; to have floated in the dark gondolas of Venice, or gazed upon the blue waters of the Mediterranean; or how could it content her to hear of Raphael, and Michael Angelo, and Guido;—of Dante and Ariosto, and Tasso and Petrarch, and the names which associate Italy with all that is most precious in poetry and art, if all were but for the amusement of the hour, bearing no voice of warning from the past, no lesson of instruction for the future? But Blanche did not yet understand all she had to fear. She marvelled indeed at her father's apparent neglect of the subject most interesting to herself; she thought it strange that not even an allusion was made to it: but she was captivated by the brilliancy of his conversation, and accounted for his silence by remembering her own reluctance to converse upon serious subjects, except at peculiar times and under certain circumstances. She had been told that her own manner gave no true impression of her mind, and so she supposed it must be with him. A faint cloud

was stealing over the sunlight of her joy, but she saw it not.

And the day drew near to which Blanche so earnestly looked forward with mingled hope and awe. It was the evening before, and having returned from a long ride with her father over one of the most beautiful portions of his property, she sat down on a bank which overlooked the windings of the river, and the opening into the country beyond.

There was nothing to disturb the repose of the scene, except the distant lowing of cattle in the pastures, and the dashing of a mountain torrent, which, escaping from a woody dell on the opposite side, fell sparkling and frothing over a steep broken cliff, and wound its way amidst stones and mosses till it was lost in the deep current of the larger stream.

Blanche rested her head against the trunk of a tree, and gave way to one of those delicious reveries of feeling rather than of thought ; which, when the fancy is free, and the heart unburdened by care, are amongst the most perfect enjoyments of our early years.

The loveliness of the landscape was in accordance with the tone of mind which she had been endeavouring to attain during the day ; and when, at length yielding to fatigue, she fell asleep, the images which haunted her dreams were pure and holy as her waking thoughts.

A few minutes afterwards there was the sound of an approaching footstep ; and, advancing from the shade of the shrubbery, the earl stood by her side.

What could he have seen in a countenance so fair in its youthful purity, to make him start and sigh—and then gaze long and steadfastly with a frowning brow, and a mouth quivering with agitation ? Was it that in those features he saw a resemblance which recalled the tale of his by-gone life ; or did he read the visions which were passing before the eye of his

sleeping child, and shrink from the conviction that the hopes which to her were all in all, were to him scarcely more than the superstitions of an age of darkness?

Yet, Lord Rutherford was no sceptic. He was but what thousands have been before him; in name, the follower of Christ—in heart, the slave of the world. Whatever might be his own indifference to religion he had no desire that it should be shared by his daughter, and the character of Lady Blanche often derived a peculiar though painful interest from the simple ardent piety which occasionally broke forth through her natural reserve; and which, to the earl's refined but hackneyed taste, gave her the appearance rather of a being from another sphere than of one born to participate in the vain heartlessness of fashionable society. He could admire, though he could not imitate; and now, as he watched her, so calm, and peaceful, and tranquilly happy, a pang of envy crossed his mind. Such peace as hers, even were it delusive, would be cheaply purchased at the sacrifice of all that he had hitherto valued. Yet, it was envy, not self-reproach; and the next moment he pictured her such as he intended she should be—the star of a glittering assemblage—flattered, courted, idolized; gathering around her all that was most attractive in grace and intellect; herself, the centre to which every eye would be directed in homage.

But the earl's countenance changed. In imagination there rose up before him the still, shrouded form of one, who in by-gone years had realized much that he desired to see in Blanche, but upon whose brow the sorrow of unrequited affection had set its indelible stamp; and when his eye again dwelt upon the living image of the wife whose love he had despised, he shuddered, and stooped to kiss his daughter's forehead with superstitious awe; and

a passing dread, lest the features which bore the impress of life might but chill him with the mocking beauty of death. The kiss awoke Blanche from her short sleep ; and the earl, hastily recovering himself, began to blame her imprudence. Blanche endeavoured to laugh away his fears, but proposed to return to the castle, as she had an engagement to keep.

“ And not spare me a few minutes ? ” said the earl, with a slight tone of pique ; “ the sun will have set soon, and then we shall have no temptation to stay.”

Blanche gathered up the folds of her riding habit, and taking her father's arm they pursued their walk by the path which led along the side of the hill. For some time both were silent. Blanche could never thoroughly overcome a certain sense of restraint in her father's presence ; and Lord Rutherford, wrapt in his own thoughts, was contented to know that she was with him without seeking for conversation. Blanche was the first to speak.

“ I never knew, till now,” she said, “ what it was, thoroughly to enjoy beautiful scenery. At St. Ebbe's, there was so little to see ; but, even then, I used to fancy there must be an exquisite charm in it.”

“ You are young,” replied the earl ; “ you have no painful associations. When you have reached my age you will feel very differently about all beauty.”

“ Yet some feelings of pleasure must increase,” replied Blanche, more gravely than usual ; “ the best and highest.”

“ From being able to appreciate beauty better, you mean ; from learning to look at it with an artist's eye ? But that is a mistake ; our greatest enjoyments are those which we never pause to analyse.”

“ I was not thinking of that exactly,” said Blanche, with hesitation.

“ Of what then, my love ? What do you call the best and highest pleasure ? ”

Blanche hesitated, and then replied, timidly, as if doubtful of the manner in which the observation would be received, "I suppose, if we were very good, we should be grateful for beauty, as people are for favours and presents."

Lord Rutherford became suddenly thoughtful. "You are a metaphysician, Blanche," he said, after a pause; "that was not one of the accomplishments I expected from Mrs. Howard."

"If I am," replied Blanche, laughing; "it is certainly without knowing it."

"You are one, though. I have discovered a lurking taste in you before; and if you really have a fancy for the subject, we will study a few books together on the subject. I should be sorry for you to have prejudiced notions. Though you are a woman, a little deep reading will do you no harm."

Blanche promised to read anything he wished; though she still disclaimed any love for metaphysics; and the earl began to enumerate a list of authors, ending with—

"But, my dear Blanche, until you have read a little, I advise you not to trouble yourself with too much thinking. You will only be puzzled, and it can lead to no good. Take up your music and drawing, study history if you will, and we will have Italian and German lessons together; but don't attempt to dwell upon subjects beyond human comprehension."

Poor Blanche could not at all understand the reason of this speech; and began to fancy that she had done or said something wrong.

The earl instantly remarked her change of manner, and said kindly, "I would not for the world find fault with you, my dear; you must not imagine it; but I have seen the mischief of too much thought with some minds, and you have been unusually silent the last two days!"

“It was not that kind of thought which made me silent,” exclaimed Blanche, eagerly; “I was thinking of—”

“Of what?—there can be no thought, which you would not wish me to know.”

Blanche blushed deeply; she would willingly have sheltered herself under her former reserve, though at the same time longing to break down the barrier, and receive the sympathy which even then she could not doubt of obtaining. The earl evidently expected a reply.

Blanche felt herself forced to speak, and began; “I have been thinking; that is, I have been trying to think;—one ought to prepare oneself for to-morrow. My first Communion,” she added, in a tone which scarcely caught the earl’s ear.

He stopped suddenly in his walk. “Ah! yes; quite right. But you are very young, my dear.”

“Not too young; am I?” said Blanche, anxiously; “I have been confirmed.”

“No, not if you wish it; still, it is not right to force any one. Mrs. Howard was always rather overstrained in her ideas.”

“Indeed, indeed, it was not Mrs. Howard only; but the rector, and the bishop, and every one said it. I thought it was always so,” replied Blanche. “Is there really any reason against it?”

The earl smiled. “No possible reason, my dear child; but you know very little of the world, and I don’t want you to tie yourself down; and in fact, my love, these things are best left to every one’s own feelings. If you like it, do it by all means; only don’t let me see your bright face clouded again; it makes me uneasy.”

Poor Blanche felt chilled to the very heart.

But her father had no idea of the effect of his speech, and continued, “It might have been more

pleasant for you to have waited a little. I am expecting your aunt, Lady Charlton, shortly ; and Sir Hugh and your two cousins. You will like to become acquainted with them, as they are some of your nearest connections."

"Yes, indeed," exclaimed Blanche, relieved at finding something to say. "Dear mamma's sister! I am sure I must be fond of her."

Lord Rutherford's tone was constrained, as he answered, "Only her half-sister ; there is no resemblance ;" and then he stopped suddenly, and there was a long pause.

The thoughts of Blanche reverted to the former subject. The visit of one person or of hundreds—of relations or of strangers—seemed equally indifferent to her at that moment.

They had reached the termination of the path ; and the earl, leaning over a fence, which protected the edge of the precipice, riveted his eyes upon the stream, and appeared lost in a reverie.

"It is like the current of human life, is it not, Blanche?" he said, at length. "See how it whirls its rapid course ; and how the light froth, and the fragments of the bank, are borne along by it ; like the frothy hopes and the fleeting pleasures of the world. And think, too, how little we know of the end to which it is hastening."

"Is it not travelling towards the ocean," said Blanche, timidly ; "as we are all travelling towards eternity?"

Lord Rutherford raised himself, and put his hand suddenly upon her shoulder—"What is eternity, Blanche?" he said. "We use words without meaning, when we speak of it."

"But," replied Blanche, and notwithstanding the softness of her voice, it sounded tremulous in its

earnestness ; “ we are told to think of it, and it must be for our happiness ; for this world, they say, is full of disappointment.”

“ They say !” repeated the earl ; “ then you have never found it so yourself.”

“ I have been very happy,” said Blanche, whilst she looked at her father with a smile of affection ; but it was followed by a sigh. She could not say, “ I am happy.”

“ Yes,” continued the earl, thoughtfully, “ you are standing, as I once stood, upon a spot from which you can view the past without regret, and the future without fear. For you it may be a resting-place for years ; though for me it was but a point, quitted as soon as reached, and to which I could never return. Value your peace, my child, whilst you have it ; for it is vain to hope that any thoughts of eternity will restore it to you when it is once gone.”

“ But, papa,” answered Blanche, firmly, whilst something within her own mind seemed urging her to overcome her reserve and speak more directly, “ even now I can feel comfort from such thoughts. I have been happy, because I have always had some one to love ; but though I know that the happiness cannot last, I can bear to think so, and even to look forward to a time when I may be left quite alone ; because true love does not seem to belong to earth, but to eternity. Is it not true, then, that these ideas do help us to bear trials ?”

Lord Rutherford made no answer ; he withdrew his arm, threw himself upon a bench, and relapsed into silence. Blanche was frightened at her own temerity, and a sense of indescribable wretchedness oppressed her. Her father's principles, she thought, could not be the principles of a Christian. The earl perceived he had distressed her, and starting up

and again drawing her arm within his, said, as he pursued his walk :—

“ I have vexed you, my dear child. Heaven knows how unwillingly ! But you have been educated in retirement, and your life has been made up of dreams. It is impossible that you should understand the view which a stern, worn man, who has borne the struggle of years, takes of those subjects, which to you are everything. When you have heard them discussed and argued upon, and when you have known something of men's actions as well as of their creeds, you will see the value of your favourite notions more truly. They may be important to you, but they will not bear contact with the world.”

“ And must I know the world, papa ? ” inquired Blanche, with difficulty summoning courage to answer. “ I would much rather live here alone with you.”

Lord Rutherford laughed.

“ Mrs. Howard has certainly performed her duty strictly,” he said. “ She promised to educate you in seclusion, and she has kept her word. But have you no wish for gaiety, Blanche ; for such an introduction into the world as your station in life offers you ? ”

“ I should like it, dear papa,” replied Blanche ; “ and I think of it very often. But I would rather stay here and keep my own notions, because I believe they will make me better than any others.”

“ Well ! ” exclaimed the earl, carelessly, “ cherish them as long as you can ; they will do no one any harm but yourself ; only, when your aunt and cousins come, I prophesy that you will think less about them.”

Poor Blanche was not comforted by this prospect.

“ Then I shall be happier, to-morrow, with you, alone, papa,” she said pointedly ; anxious, if possible,

to solve, by some allusion to the first topic of the conversation, the painful doubt whether her father intended to join with her in the service of the next day. Lord Rutherford did not, at first, see that she had any particular meaning in her words; for the subject referred to was not one likely long to remain in his thoughts. When however it occurred to him, he answered hastily:—

“You must talk to Mrs. Wentworth, my dear; she will understand you in all these things better than I do.”

“I don't know Mrs. Wentworth well,” replied Blanche, whilst tears rushed to her eyes; “and there is no one I love like you.”

Lord Rutherford played with his stick, but said nothing more; and, at length, when he saw that Blanche was again about to speak, he turned suddenly into another walk and left her. And then Blanche was indeed miserable. The sky and the woods, the rocks and the river, the beauties which had before entranced her with delight—all were changed. Their brightness was gone; the spell by which they had charmed her was destroyed. She was alone; and there lived not the being upon earth who could fill the void which that one conversation had caused in her heart. Who could recall the reverence and holy affection which had, till then, formed her dream of happiness in her splendid home? Who could restore the delusion which hitherto she had cherished, even against her own secret convictions?

But the spirit of youth is too buoyant to sink at once under any disappointment, however severe. It is the succession of griefs, the wearisome days, and the restless nights and the bitterness of long deferred hope, which at length will bow us to the dust; and Blanche had, as yet, known nothing of these. Her elastic, sanguine spirit again suggested the thought

from which she had before found comfort. Her father's manner, and even his words, might be no true index to his mind. He had not said that he should not be with her; he had fully allowed that it would be right for her to attend the service, though he seemed to fear that she was too young. Persons had different opinions upon these subjects; perhaps, after all, she had misunderstood him; and, soothed by the idea, Blanche's countenance resumed, in some degree its former serenity. The suspense, however, still rested as a weight upon her heart. She met her father at dinner, and found herself almost unconsciously watching his looks, and weighing his words in the faint hope of learning from them something more of that inner world of principles and motives upon which all her happiness seemed to depend. But she learnt nothing. The earl was silent and pre-occupied, and she dared not ask him the cause. When the castle clock struck ten, Blanche, as was her custom, rose to retire to rest. Then, more than ever, she missed the prayers which had closed the evenings at St. Ebbe's. Hitherto she had accounted for the omission by supposing, either that her father had some reason for delay until they had been longer settled at home; or that it was not a foreign custom, and therefore he might not think of it till some other person suggested it: but now it appeared too truly an indication of the neglect of all religious forms, except that which the world has thought fit to honour with respect, the outward observance of the day of rest.

Blanche leant over her father's chair, and kissed his forehead again and again, as was her wont. Her love was not chilled, but it was altered. Doubt was mingled with it, and dread, and the fond clinging of the heart to happiness, which seems about to pass away. The earl looked up from his book, and as he took her trembling hand in his, he said,—

“We have been bad companions, to-night, Blanche : are you tired of me ?”

A fear of losing self-command, made Blanche pause before answering. Lord Rutherford moved his chair, that he might discover the reason ; but she had turned her head aside.

“You shall have other amusements soon,” continued the earl, and an accent of annoyance marked his words.

“Oh, no, papa ! I want nothing—no amusements.”

“But what then ? What do you want ?”

Blanche was pained at her own weakness ; she could only distress her father by showing her feelings, since to explain them was impossible.

“I wish for one thing, papa,” she said, in a light, gay tone, whilst her lip quivered with agitation, “that you should kiss me and say good-night.”

The earl pressed her to his heart, and whispered, “God bless you now and ever, my own precious child ;” and Blanche retreated to her room, once more happy. Her father did then consider the blessing of God the one first object of desire. Surely, therefore, he must intend to seek it where especially it is bestowed.

CHAPTER VIII.

WE close our eyes in peace, and we re-open them to sorrow and care. It is the lot, sooner or later, of all; the fulfilment of the earthly curse denounced upon our first parents, and from it there is no escape. We may, perhaps, have felt, upon lying down to rest,—the anxieties of the day at an end, the weariness of exhausted nature inviting us to repose, and the heart calmed by repentance, and the blessed trust in forgiveness and protection,—that if it were then permitted for the Angel of Death to call us to our long, last sleep; the summons, awful though it must ever be, would be hailed rather as a visitation of mercy, than as an event to be shrunk from in alarm. But God “seeth not as man seeth.” He views the sins dormant but not destroyed; the passions lulled but not extinguished. He beholds us unfit for the kingdom of His holiness, and knows the warfare which must be endured, before the powers of a regenerate nature can fully triumph over the temptations of Satan. And if, at times, He does in mercy make us “to lie down in green pastures, and lead us beside the still waters,” it is only that by such seasons of refreshment we may gather strength for the battle, which is to “bring every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.”

When Blanche entered Rutherford church, the ensuing day, she felt but little of the peace which had been with her when she lay down to rest at night. A breakfast *tête-à-tête* with the earl, and a few remarks during their short walk from the castle to the

village, had again aroused her distrust. Many such remarks had been made before, but they had fallen on an unheeding ear, or rather on one which did not understand, because it would not suspect evil. Now, the petty indications of motives and feeling, which it is not in the power of the most practised art to conceal, were as daggers to her heart, for they struck upon the points on which alone her earthly happiness was then vulnerable.

At any time a doubt which affected her father's principles must have been poignantly felt; but on no other occasion could it have caused so much suffering. For Blanche had striven humbly and earnestly to realise the awfulness of that most holy service in which she was then, for the first time, to be permitted to join. She had prayed and watched against the entrance of every unhallowed or worldly thought, and had dedicated herself to her Saviour with all the warmth and sincerity of youthful devotedness. At such a moment, even the purest of earthly affections might have been deemed intrusive; and yet, when she knelt in the temple of God, and bowed her head in reverence, and opened her lips in prayer, there arose in her heart, not feelings of faith and hope, but of sadness and fear. The words of confession were repeated, but the earl's voice at her side pronounced the same language in a tone of proud indifference, and Blanche forgot the repentance necessary for her own sins, in anguish lest he should be insensible to his. And praises, and thanksgivings, and intercessions, were uttered with a wandering mind; and the solemn declarations of Scripture received but a half attention; whilst she caught, as if by fascination, her father's restless eye and listless posture, and then turned in wretchedness to herself, to discover that she also, though not in like manner, was sinning against God. There was

a painful struggle in her heart whilst going through the usual service. To be distracted then, seemed a miserable evidence of weakness and insincerity; and to present herself before God with thoughts clinging to earth, a fearful presumption. Once it seemed easier and better to delay,—to wait for another opportunity,—to risk anything rather than offer a divided heart; but at that moment the voice of the preacher spoke of Him, who “in that He Himself hath suffered, being tempted, is able to succour them that are tempted;” and, instead of giving way to despondency, Blanche prayed the more fervently to be pardoned and assisted, whilst she strove again to recall her scattered thoughts. The last words of the sermon were ended; the concluding prayers were said; there was a solemn stillness in the church, followed by the rush of movement and departing footsteps. No tones of joy or praise were heard whilst one by one they, who were unwilling or unable to remain, left the congregation; but silently and hastily they poured forth into the open air,—some, it might be, to grieve for the blessing of which they felt themselves unfitted to partake; but too many to stifle the reproaches of conscience in the cares and follies of the world.

Blanche looked at her father, as he seated himself by her side, and her heart bounded with joy; but, as the church became more empty, the earl rose, and stood for a few instants with his hat in his hand, and when the way of retreat was at last opened without fear of mixing himself with the crowd, he, too, followed the common example.

And the door was closed.

It was a moment of bitter, most bitter sorrow;—beyond it we may not look; but when Blanche left the church she no longer felt that she was alone.

CHAPTER IX.

“LADY BLANCHE is late in coming to you this morning; is she not, Eleanor?” said Mrs. Wentworth, as the luncheon-bell rang, and little Susan ran away to prepare for what was to be her dinner.

“Rather, I think,” was the reply; “but Blanche is never quite mistress of her own time. Her father is so uncertain, and will make her do the very things she has determined not to do. He may have taken her for a ride, as likely as not.”

“Strange, certainly,” said Mrs. Wentworth, musingly, “that when a man like Lord Rutherford devotes himself to the happiness of his daughter, he should manage to do just the very things she does not like.”

“Oh! indeed, mamma!” exclaimed Eleanor; “I do think you are wrong there. Blanche does like most things which her father proposes; the only worry is, that they come at the wrong time.”

“And does she like, then, the prospect of having the castle filled with visitors, and of gaieties going on continually?” inquired Mrs. Wentworth, with a slight tone of asperity, which suited but little with her usual gentleness.

“Yes, very much,” replied Eleanor. “Lady Charlton is a delightful person, so every one declares. And it will be very nice for me, too.”

Mrs. Wentworth seemed rather discomposed. “You must remember, my dear,” she said, “that what suits Lady Blanche will not suit you. Your line of duties will be totally different.”

“Oh! yes, of course, mamma,” and Eleanor coloured, and endeavoured to assume an indifferent air; “but you know there is no one whom Blanche loves as she does me; and she never will enjoy anything if I am not with her.”

“Then I am afraid she will pass a very unhappy life; for you can be with her but seldom at the best.”

“It is not exactly the being together, but the feeling that we are near, and understand each other, and can compare opinions, which is the pleasure;—and—”

“Well,” interrupted Mrs. Wentworth, “compare opinions if you like it, and sympathise with and love each other; I should be very sorry if you did not: but that does not imply the necessity of meeting every day, especially now.”

“You are afraid for me, mamma,” said Eleanor, laughing. “You think I shall become dissipated, and forget Susan, and the school, and old Nanny Marshall, and the almshouse women.”

“I have no cause to doubt you, my love,” replied Mrs. Wentworth affectionately; “but it is scarcely strange that I should have some misgivings about every society of which Lord Rutherford is the head.”

Mrs. Wentworth spoke quickly, and Eleanor looked up in surprise. But her mother's face betrayed no particular feeling; it was even more placid than before, as she added, “You can scarcely have failed to discover that he is not the most fitting person for the guardianship of a young, enthusiastic, interesting girl like Lady Blanche.”

“He would spoil her, if she could be spoilt,” said Eleanor carelessly.

“Yes; he would spoil her,” repeated Mrs. Wentworth. “He would infuse into her mind low worldly

notions; and make her think much of fashion and ultra-refinement, and the admiration of his own peculiar circle; and if she pleases him he will idolise her, and if not—”

“He can never cease to love her,” said Eleanor.

Mrs. Wentworth was silent. The sudden burst of feeling was over, and she had relapsed into her former indifference.

“Blanche is very like her mother's picture,” observed Eleanor.

“Yes, very,” replied Mrs. Wentworth; “but it is not of her that I am thinking now, Eleanor. No one can see her indeed without feeling most deeply for her; but it is you who are my charge, my delight.”

Eleanor smiled, and as she drew near her mother's chair, and bent over it to kiss her, she said, “And I shall be so always.”

Mrs. Wentworth shook her head. “Ah! Eleanor, that is your stumbling-block; confidence in yourself.”

“But I have begun well; have I not, mamma? Just remember how steady and regular I have been ever since I came home; and how much you say yourself that Susan is improved. And the old almshouse women, you should have heard yesterday all the civil things they said! You must not distrust me more than anyone else. Please, don't look so grave, and conjure up such a castle spectre.”

“Ah! if it were only a spectre! But, Eleanor, I can look back many years. I know what the tone of society used to be at Rutherford, and I see no possible reason for supposing that it will be different now.”

“You were not injured by it, mamma,” said Eleanor; “and why should I be?”

Mrs. Wentworth sighed. “I had many safeguards,” she said; “yet, I will not say that I was not injured.

There was only one over whom evil seemed to have no power."

"The countess," said Eleanor, inquiringly.

"Yes; she was indeed too heavenly-minded to be approached by any ordinary influence; and"—but Mrs. Wentworth stopped, as if unwilling to continue the subject.

"Mamma," said Eleanor, "Lord Rutherford is very fond of Blanche; was he very fond of his wife?"

The consciousness that luncheon was ready appeared suddenly to have crossed Mrs. Wentworth's mind, for she did not give a direct reply; but merely saying, that Susan would be tired of waiting for her dinner, she went away, and Eleanor was left to answer for herself as best she might the question which had lately become one of considerable interest. Before, however, she had satisfied herself, her meditations were broken in upon by the entrance of her father and Lady Blanche.

"Reposing from the fatigues of instruction, I suspect, Eleanor," exclaimed Blanche, gaily. "Has Susan been a very naughty child?"

"Reposing from the weariness of disappointment rather," replied Eleanor. "You were to have been here an hour ago."

"So I was; but it is papa's fault. He would come and sit with me; and he read to me part of the time, and then we talked, and at last the post came in, and I had to write in a great hurry to my aunt, who is to be here the day after to-morrow."

"Indeed! Is Lady Charlton coming so soon?" inquired Dr. Wentworth.

"Yes," so she says, "if Sir Hugh feels himself equal to the journey; but she writes as if he was very much out of health. But do you know my aunt?"

"I can't tell," said Dr. Wentworth, rather bluntly.

Blanche and Eleanor laughed, and begged for an explanation.

“Why, it is rather the case of the Irishman and his tin-kettle ; which he declared could not be lost, because he knew where it was,—at the bottom of the sea. My knowledge of Lady Charlton is about as valuable. Know her I do ; inasmuch as I have spoken to her often, and even dined in company with her some sixteen or eighteen years ago ; but time is very like the sea ; you can see through it, but you cannot grasp what you are looking at. After all, it may only be Lady Charlton's shadow, which I think I know.”

“I know exactly what she is like in appearance,” said Blanche ; “tall and thin, dark hair and eyes, very elegant and —”

“Fascinating,” added Dr. Wentworth.

“Yes, fascinating ; that is precisely the word papa used.”

“And your cousins, I suppose, are fascinating too ?” said Eleanor, in a constrained voice.

“No one knows anything about them, except that poor Maude is an invalid, and that they have been educated abroad.”

“Oh! I remember,” exclaimed Eleanor ; “Charles knew them, I am sure ; he said he had made acquaintance with some relations of yours at Florence. It was at a ball, I think, they met, and then they were at a great many gay parties together.”

“A great many too many,” muttered Dr. Wentworth in an under-tone.

“That was a twelvemonth ago, papa,” said Eleanor. “It is not quite fair upon Charles, is it Blanche ; to quarrel with him for last year's follies ?”

“I quarrel with no one, Eleanor,” replied Dr. Wentworth, very gravely ; “but we will not keep Lady Blanche waiting ;” and he led the way to the dining-room. Blanche followed, with the feeling that

her original distaste to Mr. Wentworth had received some increase ; yet she blamed herself for it, and in order to conquer her prejudice, paid particular attention when other allusions were made to him in the course of her visit, in the hope of receiving more satisfactory answers. But to her surprise, she found that Dr. Wentworth, who, even in his most courteous moods was short and straight-forward in manner, was when this subject was approached, so abrupt as instantly to stop the conversation. It was clear that his son was not at that moment perfectly in his favour.

This afternoon was to be devoted to the village, for Lord Rutherford was obliged to be absent the greater part of the day, and Blanche generally arranged her duties in such a way as to give him always the first place in her attention. Under Dr. Wentworth's guidance she had taken into her special charge a certain number of the poor, principally the aged and infirm, to whom her presence was almost as an angel's visit ; so new and strange did it seem that one so young and so far removed from themselves, should take a personal interest in their comfort. A few there were, indeed, who remembered the time when the countess had occupied herself in a similar manner, and who regarded Lady Blanche with a degree of compassionate affection, which mingled with their respect as they noticed the resemblance to her mother. From them it was that Blanche heard many little traits of the countess's character, which she could have learnt from no other source ; and they were treasured in her memory, and fondly dwelt upon as the touches which were to mark more vividly the outline of her mother's image. Yet, when all had been repeated, and she believed that she had gained a clear knowledge of what the countess must have been, there still remained an undefined doubt of something un-

told. Reverence and love were ever associated with her name by all who spoke of her; but pity was added also; and why, Blanche could not understand. For it was not the pity which is bestowed so lavishly and unthinkingly, by the living who are toiling through this weary world upon the dead who have entered upon their rest, but rather that which must ever be felt for those whom neither high station nor wealth, nor even goodness, have shielded from severe trial. Blanche was sure that her mother ought to have been happy, but she could not believe that she had been so. As she listened to the cottagers' oft-told tales, she fancied that it was only a natural interest which made her listen so intently for all they could tell; but, if she had been as careful an anatomist of her feelings as she was of her faults, she might have perceived that this longing desire to know more of the history of the countess's daily life was almost always aroused after conversations with her father, which were now very frequent.

It is the gift of a superior mind to bring out the latent powers of others; and Lord Rutherford's constant intercourse with his daughter had done more than the most unwearied study towards maturing her judgment, and enlarging her ideas upon all worldly subjects. Blanche had lived in reality months instead of weeks at the castle, and every day brought some fresh evidence to the earl's mind of her quick intellect and refined taste. He delighted in engaging her in an argument, and seeing the ease with which she would pursue her own train of thought, whilst fully comprehending his; and the graceful candour with which, when once convinced of error, she yielded her point and begged for further instruction. He was more and more satisfied, more and more convinced that Mrs. Howard had educated her well. And Blanche? Alas! how

little can we read of the secrets of the heart! How selfish and blind are we, even in our love!

If Lord Rutherford had been asked whether he had succeeded in rendering his daughter happy, he would have answered, without a moment's hesitation, perfectly. She had employments, amusements, interests, luxuries, friends; and, to crown the whole, himself: and though free from the petty conceit of an inferior intellect, which believes that it is all which it desires to be, Lord Rutherford could not but be conscious that the powers of entertainment which had excited the admiration of the first circles, both in England and on the continent, must be more than equal to the task of whiling away the leisure hours of a young girl, whose knowledge of the world was confined to the immediate neighbourhood of the place of her education. And he thought correctly. Blanche was amused, excited, interested still—but the arrow had entered into her heart; and when she left her father's presence, her smiles too often vanished, whilst she sought the solitude of her own chamber, to grieve over the bitterness of her disappointment.

It was then that she most thought of her mother. Had it been the same with her? Had she also loved, and revered, and dreamt a dream of perfection; and awoke to find it but delusion? Or had she, like the earl, been gifted with the highest of earthly gifts, while destitute of that "pearl of great price," which alone could be her ornament in Heaven? This, Blanche could not think. All that she heard and saw—the letters, the favourite books, the kind acts which were so thankfully remembered, showed plainly that the Countess of Rutherford had been in her inmost heart a Christian; and then, how great must have been the pang at finding herself united to one whose heart was centred in the world!

Blanche thought upon the subject till it haunted her as a spectral form, mixing with her imaginations by day and night; and, if forgotten for a time, recalled by some accidental occurrence as painfully as if it had never passed away. Yet the fear could not be named,—certainly not to Eleanor, and scarcely even to Mrs. Howard, who had been much separated from the countess both before and after her marriage, and had never hinted a doubt of her happiness. The mention of it would have involved an acknowledgment of disappointment in her father, which Blanche shrank from allowing to herself, and could not have borne to embody in words; though she often reproached herself for a want of sincerity in withholding the confidence which she knew was expected. There was one person, indeed, from whom much might be learnt; but how was the inquiry to be made? Mrs. Wentworth, she had reason to believe, knew all the circumstances of her mother's history; but Blanche had already asked all the questions which she dared, and had learnt the principal events, and many additional traits of habit and character; and Mrs. Wentworth was not a person from whom to seek further confidence. There was a great deal of sincerity, but no openness in her disposition: she seldom encouraged conversation, and when she did, it was confined to facts,—serious and important, and often placed in a new and striking light,—but still merely facts. Her own feelings she left to be discovered by inference; and Blanche, accustomed to Mrs. Howard's warmth of expression, felt chilled even by her kindness, and would frequently have preferred silence to a succession of details, which might have aroused the intensest interest, but for the cold way in which they were narrated. There was one hope, however, still to rest upon; Lady Charlton was described by every one to be a

most charming person, something like the countess in appearance, and with a manner so winning that no one could withstand it. Even Mrs. Wentworth had once been roused into a momentary enthusiasm when speaking of her qualifications as an agreeable companion, and Blanche already clung to the idea, that in her aunt she might find a friend who would throw light upon the subject which distressed her mind, without requiring her to state the fears which she would willingly have hidden from her own heart.

CHAPTER X.

LORD RUTHERFORD perceived, with great satisfaction, the pleasure with which Blanche looked forward to her aunt's visit. He had resolved that his sister-in-law should be surprised and charmed by his daughter's elegance and beauty; and he well knew the effect which Blanche's simple, eager cordiality would have upon one who had so long been accustomed to the sparkling frigidity of the fashionable world. Blanche was always courteous, always attentive; but, when her feelings were interested, she was attractive far beyond any person whom he had ever seen. He remained at home the whole of the day on which Lady Charlton was expected, under the pretence—perhaps even the belief—that it would be a great mark of neglect if he were to run the least risk of not being ready to receive his guests. “Sir Hugh was so unwell, and they had not met since they parted last year in Italy; and Blanche would feel awkward in probably having to receive her cousins alone. True, they could not possibly arrive before five o'clock, and he had an engagement, at two, in a neighbouring village; but there might be some mistake; they might come before,—at any rate it was safe, and he would send an excuse; and then the earl's eye wandered to Blanche, who was seated at her drawing-frame, and he begged her to give him one air upon the harp—his favourite. Blanche's face lit up with a smile of pleasure,—and the earl felt the time only too short, as he leant back upon the sofa, his eye delighting in his child's grace, and his ear drinking in the sweet

sounds which her talent was producing. It was perfect human enjoyment; for at that moment no memories awoke to mar it.

"We will walk down the carriage drive, if you like it, my love," he said, as the timepiece struck the quarter before five: "these spare minutes are always very tedious."

Blanche disappeared as soon as the suggestion was made; her father's marked attention to her wishes, had made her scrupulously mindful of his. Lord Rutherford's careful inspection when she returned, was not perceived; but it was bestowed with the wish to decide whether she would be less likely to appear to advantage in her walking than in her morning dress. Lady Charlton's eye was fastidiously correct in dress, and it was possible that she might be struck by some deficiency of which Blanche was unconscious. But the straw bonnet and shawl disarmed criticism, and Lord Rutherford smiled at his own doubts. The afternoon was very still, but the atmosphere was clear, and the sky blue and cloudless. Blanche felt the softening, soothing influence of nature's purity and beauty; and the over interest, and even agitation, which she had experienced in the expectation of the meeting, were calmed. But she was silent, and so was the earl.

"We shall see them from this point," he said, at length, as he led his daughter to a bench upon the summit of a steep knoll. "It was an old boyish habit of mine, to stand here and watch for arrivals."

Blanche looked towards the winding road which passed over the village green. "There is something,—a carriage;—yes, a carriage, I am sure. Don't you see it, papa?"

"Eyes of sixteen against eyes of fifty, Blanche," said the earl, smiling. "Are you certain that you don't hear the rumbling of the wheels?"

“Oh! papa, you won't believe; but I do see it, though. It is coming nearer; it has just passed the first turning, and it is very quick too. There must be four horses; so it must be them.”

“Well, then, we will return; but look once more: are you sure?”

“Yes, quite; it is by the blacksmith's shop. I can see the horses now distinctly.”

Lord Rutherford quickened his pace towards the house. He looked thoughtful and uneasy.

They stood upon the steps together. The earl leant moodily against the castle wall; he saw no external objects. His eye was turned inwards to his own heart, and the images of the years that were past away. He started, however, as the sound of wheels became more distinct; and, when the leaders appeared on the crest of the hill, he drew Blanche forward to meet the carriage. Blanche thought that it was the impulse of hospitality and affection; but it was merely restlessness: he felt himself compelled to move.

Lady Charlton was the first to perceive them, and the carriage was instantly stopped.

“Kind!—like yourself, always,” was her salutation, as she extended her hand, which the earl took with something of trembling cordiality. “And my dear Blanche, too! but I must walk.”

The carriage-door was opened, and Lady Charlton alighted.

“We are not in public,” she said, as she kissed Blanche's forehead, and again gave her hand to the earl.

Blanche's smile was very sweet, and her few words—few from repressed feeling—were all that her aunt could desire.

“You don't want introductions,” continued Lady Charlton. “Maude, Adelaide; you know your cousin, of course.”

There was another warm greeting, and Blanche was recovering her momentary shyness and agitation. She remained at the carriage-door, bending forwards and speaking eagerly, whilst her eye sparkled with pleasure, and a bright colour flushed her usually pale cheek. Lady Charlton watched her for a few moments, and the seemingly involuntary exclamation escaped her,—“Yes, she is just what I could have imagined; I must have known her in any place.”

The earl turned away.

“Don't distress yourself, my dear,” continued Lady Charlton, as Blanche was about to address some person, or apparently thing, which bore a resemblance rather to a bundle of shawls than a human being. “Poor Sir Hugh! he is miserably tired—half dead with opiates;—he has been suffering fearfully the last week, but he would come: he will be himself by-and-by: they had better drive on” and the carriage proceeded.

Blanche walked leisurely to the castle with her father and aunt. She was confused; there had scarcely been time to recognise any one, but the general impression was agreeable. Lady Charlton was undoubtedly an elegant, distinguished looking person; her voice too was musical, and her manner very winning from its ease and kindness. And her cousins—she thought she knew them apart: one had a sallow complexion and light hair, a plain but very clever face, rather severe and grave in its expression—that must be Maude, the invalid: and the other was a brunette, with dark hair, braided; dressed handsomely and carefully, lively in manner, and altogether pleasing from youth and gaiety, and the quickness of a pair of very bright eyes, rather than from any regular beauty. The earl said little; but Lady Charlton had words upon every subject at command. No one could be in the least restrained with her. Even

in those few minutes, she seemed to take exactly that position which Blanche had felt must be filled before she could be quite at ease with her father. Lady Charlton was affectionate and interested, but she was not timid. Blanche could scarcely understand the boldness with which she rallied the earl upon his long absence, his present love of seclusion; and prophesied that he was yet to prove himself as distinguished a person in England as he had been abroad. Lord Rutherford was at first grave, but not annoyed; and, after a few minutes, he appeared to have caught himself something of Lady Charlton's vivacity, and answered her remarks in a tone almost as full of cheerfulness as her own. It was a new phase of character which Blanche had not before perceived.

"And Sir Hugh has been very ill, then," said Lord Rutherford, as he saw the carriage stop at the castle, and two servants assist in helping a seemingly decrepit old man to alight.

"Yes," and Lady Charlton sighed; "it is very sad: one can never be prepared for these attacks. He was at a great dinner only a fortnight ago, and quite the life of the party; made a speech, and proposed toasts, and kept up the whole thing till after twelve o'clock; was quite himself, in fact: and now, you see what he is."

"I suppose the dinner was the root of the evil," observed the earl.

"Well! yes; I suppose it might have been so: but the complaint is constitutional, hereditary. Blanche, my dear, you may think yourself happy in being descended from another family. The Evelyns never were a gouty race."

"I should hope not," said the earl, quietly.

Lady Charlton laughed. "Now, my dear Rutherford, that is one of your old exclusive fancies. I

really flattered myself that fifteen years' experience of continental liberalism would have done something towards destroying them; but you are just the same, I see: just the same spirit of the Spanish hidalgo in you—"This comes of walking on the earth."

"And the Spanish hidalgo was right," said Blanche, archly.

Lady Charlton smiled, and answered, "Quite right, my dear; but I don't know how it is—the older one grows, the less inclined one is to hang, like Mahomet's coffin, between heaven and earth: there is something very solitary and uncongenial in the position; and therefore, since one cannot yet have the higher, I am willing to rest satisfied with the lower, and to be very happy upon earth, in spite of the Spanish hidalgo."

"And the gout," said Lord Rutherford. "Sir Hugh, I suspect, would tell a different tale."

"Oh! poor Sir Hugh! you will see him very unlike himself, Blanche; or rather you will not see him at all. He and Pearson go their own way when he is in this state. A first-rate servant Pearson is; and such a nurse!"

By this time they had reached the castle. As they entered it, Blanche again repeated her welcome to her aunt, and Lady Charlton's manner in an instant changed. She was no longer the cheerful, amusing woman of the world; but the thoughtful, warm-hearted, sympathising friend. She took Blanche's hand in both hers, and thanked her with a warmth of affection which Blanche fully appreciated. Dr. Wentworth's description recurred to her mind. Fascinating!—Yes, that was the right word.

Blanche was alone till nearly dinner-time. Her cousins were engaged in dressing for dinner, or perhaps in resting after their journey. She did not see

anything of them after showing them to their rooms. Her aunt she supposed was with Sir Hugh; her father, she knew, had business to transact. The solitude was very precious to her; it gave her leisure for thought, for examining her own impressions. Blanche trusted very much to first impressions, for as yet she had never known deception. All seemed bright and hopeful—not from any particular cause that she could fix upon—the sensation of relief and satisfaction was indefinable; the castle was the castle still—her own position was the same—her one great grief was as real as it had ever been; but her heart was lighter.

The earl was waiting for her as she left her room. He had come on purpose to take her himself to the drawing-room, that she might not be shy; so he said: but his survey of Blanche's dress and general appearance betrayed his true motive. A smile of intense pleasure passed over his face as he looked at her: the simple white dress was the symbol of the pure, spotless mind.

CHAPTER XI.

“ELEANOR,” said Mr. Wentworth to his sister, as he entered the school-room the day after the arrival of Lady Charlton at the castle, “you must leave those never-ending lessons, and come out; I want you.”

“I beg your pardon, Charles, you must wait: if you have returned to stay here for several months, you must learn to amuse yourself.”

“More easily said than done,” was the reply; and the young man threw himself into the first arm-chair which presented itself, and continued: “Four months! it is a terribly long time. What on earth shall I do with myself?”

“Read,” replied Eleanor, still occupying herself with an exercise, which she was correcting.

“Read!” my dear Eleanor,” replied her brother, with a sigh of languid weariness. “But I have read; I do read. It is nothing else but reading from morning till night.”

“But it will only last a little longer,” said Eleanor, soothingly; “and then——”

“And then comes ordination,” added Charles.

There was an accent of bitterness in his voice. Eleanor looked up, and put her finger to her lips, as she glanced at her little sister.

“Susan, child, run into the garden, and find Brown,” exclaimed Charles impatiently. “Tell him he must have my horse ready for me by three o’clock.”

Susan ran away, only too glad of the excuse to change her employment.

“You forget Susan’s age,” said Eleanor, in a reproachful tone, when she found herself alone with her brother.

“Yes, I did at the moment; but there would have been no harm done.”

“Only that she is very likely to repeat to papa all that you say to me, and you would not like that.”

“I don’t know; he must hear it some day or other.”

“Oh! no, Charles: you intend to change your views, and look at the matter differently.”

“My dear Eleanor,” was the answer, spoken coolly and rather satirically, “it is exceedingly easy for you to talk; but, begging your pardon, you know nothing whatever of the subject. Ordained I must be—I intend to be; but not to be my father’s curate; not to vegetate upon a hundred a year in a country village, with no one but my own family to speak to. I was not born for such a life, and I can never endure it.”

“Would you not be just as badly off in any other place?” inquired Eleanor. “You will have the castle, and the society there, for a change.”

“Lord Rutherford and Lady Blanche?” said Charles, doubtfully.

“Yes; and I think you will scarcely require more. You will go far before you meet any one the equal of Blanche, at least.”

“Equal! no; to watch her is like looking up at a star; but confess, Eleanor, notwithstanding all your romance, it is awfully out of one’s reach.”

“Yet Blanche is the most warm-hearted, enthusiastic, poetical person imaginable,” exclaimed Eleanor.

“Very likely; you young ladies are extremely warm-hearted to each other, and no doubt very poetical in your private journals; but that does

not help us poor men. Lady Blanche makes a most lovely picture ; but pictures are not society."

"Then you will have others besides Blanche," continued Eleanor. "Lady Charlton, and"—

"The Charltons? Are they here? When did they come? You never told me anything about them."

Mr. Wentworth grew evidently excited at the information.

Eleanor could not forbear laughing. "Why, my dear Charles, I was not quite prepared for such a burst. They are here—Lady Charlton, and Sir Hugh."

"And Adelaide?" interrupted Charles.

"Christian names!" exclaimed Eleanor. "Really Charles, that is rather surprising. Do papa and mamma know of this great intimacy?"

"My dear Eleanor, you are a mere baby. Christian names are nothing at all; it entirely depends upon the people. I should never think of calling Lady Blanche Evelyn, Blanche."

"No, because she is Lady Blanche."

"But if she were Miss; I could not. Don't you understand? Some persons are to be regarded at a distance. They never give one the opportunity of approaching nearer; they are never off their guard."

"Which, I presume then, that the Miss Charltons are," observed Eleanor, in a tone of amusement.

"They are very quick—very agreeable. I should not exactly choose to see you like them; but they will be great acquisitions. When I say them, however, I really only mean Adelaide. The other is clever enough—a very phoenix in learning and accomplishments; but she is anything but agreeable, if you happen to take her in the wrong mood."

"She is an invalid, I believe," said Eleanor.

"Yes, she thinks herself so, and she looks hide-

ously ugly ; people say, from ill health. It was the fashion abroad, to admire her forehead and eyes, and call them intellectual ; but I never could get over the complexion."

"I don't see that she is likely to be much of an acquisition," continued Eleanor.

"Yes ; in her way, she will be : she plays marvelously, and sings ! I never heard any amateur voice in the least equal to hers. Upon the whole, I am immensely glad they are here."

"I must ask you to go, now," said Eleanor, gravely. "Susan must come to her lessons ; don't you hear her in the passage?"

"Run away, child, we are not ready for you yet," exclaimed Charles, rising from his chair with some effort ; and going to the door, in spite of his sister's evident annoyance, he sent Susan on another message, and then returning said, "These four months !—they will be a great trial."

"I should not find them so, if I were in your place," observed Eleanor, whilst the colour mounted to her cheeks. "I should be glad to be with you anywhere, especially at home."

"Charles seemed a little surprised at her manner. "I don't understand," he replied. "Of course, I am glad to be with you ; but just think for a minute ;" and his voice became quite energetic ; "I have passed through the university, and made rather a noise there ; since then I have been travelling for two years, seeing most enchanting places, enjoying first-rate society—and now I am told that I am to sit down for life—it is the life which frightens me !—in an old country parsonage, with not a single person to speak to beyond my own family, and the chance visitors at Rutherford Castle. Doubtless, there are persons for whom such prospects might do very well ; good, quiet, humdrum men, who, exactly the reverse

of Charles the Second, may be warranted never to do a foolish thing, and never say a wise one;—but I am not one of them. If my father wishes me to do anything he must give me a sphere: he ought to do so; for I have never caused him any trouble. I have never been wild, or extravagant; and yet he looks as grave as if I was a complete scapegrace.”

“The notion of your ordination makes him do that,” said Eleanor.

“And whose fault is the ordination?” exclaimed Mr. Wentworth. “He has dinned into my ears, ever since I was a baby in arms, that I was to be a clergyman, and what possible right has he to find fault with me now because I intend to be one?”

“Papa looks at the profession more seriously than you do,” observed Eleanor.

“Serious; it is serious enough, no one doubts that; but all the more reason why I should have a little life and enjoyment beforehand.”

“Papa thinks that is not the right sort of preparation,” said Eleanor, in a tone of mild suggestion, rather than of reproof.

“I don’t mean it as preparation—and yet call it so, if you will. When I am ordained, things will be different. I shall be a clergyman; and I shall conduct myself like one. My father cannot suppose I mean to disgrace myself by being a vulgar, fox-hunting, drinking, negligent, country parson.”

“The race is happily becoming extinct,” said Eleanor; “but my father will not be satisfied with your merely escaping disgrace.”

“He wishes to see me honoured; and he shall do so. Once let me have the opportunity; place me in London; give me, as I said before, a sphere; and, before he dies, he shall see me a bishop.”

Eleanor shook her head, and said more courageously “That is not the tone to please papa, Charles.

He does not understand it. He does not know what it is to wish to be a bishop."

"Neither do I wish it, Eleanor; if I could be any thing else. But I am all but shut out from every other profession. I am not educated, and not inclined for the army; I am not at all fitted for a physician; and utterly without interest at the bar—if I could bring myself to submit to the drudgery of studying for it. I know I must take orders; and all I ask is, that my father should try to place me where my talents—for you know, Eleanor, it is impossible to deny that I have some talents," and Mr. Wentworth laughed faintly, and settling his cravat, glanced at himself in the looking-glass—"should have scope."

Eleanor's reply showed an evident wish to put an end to a disagreeable subject. She was quite sure, she said, that her father would do everything in his power to promote her brother's views, by-and-by; but that she could not herself see what steps were to be taken at once.

"One, very simple," exclaimed Charles, eagerly. "Let him consent that I should have a curacy in London; or, at least, that I should try for one; instead of insisting upon my drudging on a weary existence here, with nothing to rouse energy."

"You had better resign yourself, my dear Charles," and Eleanor tried to laugh. "When papa once has made a decision, he is very resolute."

"And he will find that his son can be resolute too," exclaimed Mr. Wentworth. "I have made up my mind what I will do, I will be off—off to Australia; no power on earth shall stop me, if I am thwarted."

"You, in Australia! a settler!" and Eleanor laughed: no, papa feels he is perfectly safe there. But, my dear Charles, there is a much surer way of bringing

him round to look at things in your own way. Stay here quietly, and do as he wishes; study, and visit the poor people, and then he will be satisfied; and will see himself, by degrees, that you are not likely to gain any harm by ultimately settling in London. You must own," she added, with some hesitation, "that papa's anxiety is natural enough, considering the way you talk."

"But I don't talk so to him," exclaimed Mr. Wentworth. "Neither he nor my mother know half I really feel."

"Poor mamma!" said Eleanor, speaking seriously, yet not without some satisfaction at her brother's implied confidence in herself; "with her high views, her very exalted notions of a clergyman's office, I certainly should not like her to hear you rattle on in this random way. I don't approve of it, you know, myself; only I am sure you don't mean it."

"I do mean it, though," exclaimed Charles, petulantly; "and what is more, I am convinced that there are not half a dozen men in England who would not say precisely the same. Of course, I shall do my duty; but it must be in the right place—not here."

"Not even with Lady Charlton and her family, at the castle?" said Eleanor, pointedly.

"Oh! nonsense, they would make a difference; but it would only be for a time; they can't stay."

"Blanche expects them for a very long visit," replied Eleanor.

"Lord Rutherford and Adelaide Charlton!" said Charles, musingly. "A very incongruous mixture. Adelaide's high spirits will never stand the castle proprieties."

"Charles, dear; promise me one thing, please," said Eleanor, laying her hand upon his arm. "Don't speak of Miss Charlton in that way before mamma; it is just the sort of thing to annoy her."

Mr. Wentworth laughed. "My dear Eleanor, you really are more childish than I imagined; but anything you like: only, when you know Adelaide, you will see that it is impossible to call her anything else. And, remember, if I am to stay here and be well behaved, I must have full leave to go to the castle as often as I choose."

"Leave from me as much as you wish," replied Eleanor; "if you will only be cautious. I could not bear you to vex mamma, and she is rather suspicious of you already."

Mr. Wentworth put on an air of mock gravity; and folding his hands, and casting his eyes to the ground, promised to be as demure as Susan, if only his sister would help to provide him with amusement. "And suggest to my father that I shall not be fitted for his curate," were his last words, as he went out of the room, leaving Eleanor in a state of mind by no means to be envied.

He was scarcely gone, when Mrs. Wentworth came through the garden to the school-room window. She held a note in her hand, which she put into Eleanor's silently, and then stood by apparently engaged in twisting the straggling tendrils of the clematis which darkened the apartment. Eleanor returned the note with thanks; her colour was heightened, and her eyes sparkled with pleasure. "Shall I write an answer, mamma; or will you?"

Mrs. Wentworth paused for a moment before she said, in a tone of annoyance, "I was afraid it would be so. I was sure you would be vexed, my love."

"Vexed! dear mamma."

"Yes. It is nothing very grievous; but your father and I think it best to decline. He wished me not to show you the invitation; but I could not agree. I have too much confidence in your good sense, and your love for me."

“Oh, mamma! the first day! and an express invitation to us all; and Blanche so extremely urgent!”

“The very reason, my love, why it may be more desirable to decline.” Eleanor bit her lip, and made no reply.

“You will understand some of our objections,” continued Mrs. Wentworth. “As an acquaintance begins, so it may be supposed to continue. We do not wish to be dining at the castle perpetually, now.”

“Because of Lady Charlton and her party, I suppose,” replied Eleanor, trying to be good humoured. “But, dear mamma, she is a very charming person.”

“I don't know what she is,” was Mrs. Wentworth's reply, spoken more quickly than was her wont: “only you will be contented at home, my child.”

“Contented with you, mamma? oh! yes, always; but”—

“But you must try and think as I think; try, and not dream of the castle by night and by day.” Eleanor smiled, though without cheerfulness. “Consider what it would be to me,” continued Mrs. Wentworth, “to see you restless and excited; or to find you longing for different society, and know that you were neglecting your own simple duties.”

“I should never neglect my duties by being with Blanche,” exclaimed Eleanor eagerly; “she would always keep me right.”

“My love, indeed you are mistaken. Lady Blanche is a very sweet girl, most amiable and winning; but, when you are together, her spirit cannot be the ruling one.”

Eleanor's head was raised proudly, as she replied, “It should be, if I were Blanche. Rank, wealth, beauty, talent! Mamma, Blanche ought to rule a kingdom.”

“Let her learn to rule the kingdom of her own heart,” replied Mrs. Wentworth; “that will be the

most needful lesson. Poor child! hers is a position of great temptation."

"Mamma," said Eleanor thoughtfully, "you might help her."

Mrs. Wentworth paused. "I might possibly, if circumstances were different; if the opportunity should occur; but your affection, I think, a little deceives you, Eleanor. Lady Blanche is not likely to give me the opportunity; she is too gentle and yielding to profit by the sort of help I should give. She would require something less severe. Mrs. Howard is more likely to be of use to her than I am."

"Mrs. Howard is so far off," replied Eleanor.

"Yes; but they can write. Though, of course, my love," continued Mrs. Wentworth, assuming a tone of greater unconstraint, "I do not mean that I would not do everything for her that I possibly could; only there are some dispositions so easily moulded that they take impressions from everything; and, if it should be so with Lady Blanche, you will find that the daily life at the castle with her relations will really form her character. And, besides," and Mrs. Wentworth's voice sank, as it sometimes did, into a tone so low that it scarcely seemed intended for conversation, "there are different atmospheres, different circles—the castle and the rectory—no, never again."

Eleanor made no comment upon this speech; yet the thought crossed her mind, with wonder, why, if the circles were so different, and the atmospheres so uncongenial, she should have been allowed to grow up from childhood in unrestrained intimacy with Blanche.

"And you will be satisfied then, my dear, not to dine at the castle to-day," said Mrs. Wentworth in her natural manner; "we have an engagement which will do very well as an excuse for us all. Your father talked, this morning, of asking Mr. Moulton, of Enfield to stay; as he is going to ride with him

to see the workhouse; and though we might leave them at home, it will be better not."

Eleanor sighed at the prospect of exchanging a cheerful evening at the castle for the society of an elderly gentleman, whose only interest in life seemed to be the faults of the poor-laws. The sigh was not utterly selfish; it was as much for her brother as herself; and she ventured to add a petition for him: but Mrs. Wentworth negatived the idea instantly.

"Charles! oh dear! no. He was much too great a stranger to go by himself; he would be quite a burden to Lord Rutherford; and, moreover"—but this time Mrs. Wentworth's thoughts were not betrayed by an undertone; and Eleanor could only conjecture that the "moreover" might have some reference to Miss Charlton. She was not forbidden, however, to go to the castle in the morning—that was some satisfaction; and she might see Blanche; she might just have a glimpse of Adelaide Charlton; and, without hesitation, she expressed her intention to her mother.

They had not met the preceding day, she said; and Blanche would think it unkind if she were not to go near her.

"Lady Blanche will call upon you, my dear; if she is anxious about it," said Mrs. Wentworth, quietly and coldly.

Eleanor changed colour. "Anxious about it, dear mamma; what can you mean?"

"Nothing, my dear; only I think you might as well leave the castle for to-day."

A torrent of eager words seemed about to rush forth, for Eleanor's eyes flashed with anger and vexation. Mrs. Wentworth stopped her before the first word was spoken. "My love, you have trusted me always; do you doubt now that I would make you happy in your own way if it were right?"

The haughty spirit was subdued in an instant, and Eleanor's arm was thrown round her mother's neck.

"Mamma, you are always right; yet you cannot love Blanche as I do."

"I loved her mother," was Mrs. Wentworth's calm reply; and, as she walked slowly away, Eleanor threw herself upon a chair, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XII.

"HERE, Pearson! stop a minute, can't you? What in the world are you going away for, Idiot?" growled Sir Hugh Charlton, helplessly stretching out his hand to reach a small hand-bell, which had unfortunately been placed just beyond his reach.

"I beg your pardon, sir; very sorry, quite forgot," muttered the stout, obsequious, black-haired, black-whiskered, and most shrewd-looking individual, whose character was constantly summed-up by Lady Charlton, in the emphatic description of "the best creature in the world."

"The medicine, the drops! where are they? why don't you fetch them?" continued Sir Hugh, as Pearson remained by his side, pretending to adjust the pillows at his head, and eyeing with great apparent solicitude the arrangements of the gouty stool, which supported his master's feet. Pearson did not say, that he had been on the point of departure when he was brought back; he placed the hand-bell more conveniently than before, gave an additional touch to the pillows, brought the newspaper within reach, and then, as he was leaving the room, remarked, that the earl had invited some friends to dinner, so he had been told by Mr. Hilyard, the butler.

"People to dinner, did you say? Here, Pearson, where are you going? why, in the name of wonder, don't you speak out?"

"Dr. Wentworth's family from the rectory are com-

ing, so Mr. Hilyard informed me, Sir Hugh; but, perhaps, you would wish me to inquire. When you have taken the medicine, if I might be allowed, I would ask." Pearson returned almost in an instant. The drops were properly measured and administered, and Sir Hugh's next order was, not to fidget about the room like a mouse, but to go and hear who was coming; an order fully expected by the ingenious Pearson, who immediately departed to gossip, for at least a quarter of an hour, in the housekeeper's room.

He was gone, but Sir Hugh murmured still, "Wentworths! who were the Wentworths? People he had never heard of! Wentworth!" He stopped and rubbed his chin, and thought, and muttered again, "Wentworth! yes, he did know the name, he remembered it. That intolerable fool, Pearson, where was he gone? he knew every one. Heaps of Wentworths there were everywhere—England—France—Italy." He seized the hand-bell, but, without ringing it, called for Pearson at the highest pitch of his voice.

The call was answered by Lady Charlton. "My dear, Sir Hugh, such a noise! it quite frightens one."

"Well! madam, and I intended it should. Here am I—Pearson gone—you away—left by my daughters—it is too bad."

"Oh! but my dear Sir Hugh, you must not be exacting. Poor children! they are only having a little music with Blanche."

"No; not with me," said a very sweet voice; and Blanche, who had just entered the room, came up to Sir Hugh's chair. "You know, Aunt Charlton, you promised I should be of use. Can I do anything for Sir Hugh? Might I not sit a little while with him?"

“Oh! my dear Blanche, this is too good of you,” and Sir Hugh grew calm directly. “Really you must excuse me—a gouty man must make a great many apologies; but that fool—my man, I mean,—a very good servant—a capital servant, Pearson—but forgetful. Lady Charlton, pray place a chair; it distresses me quite.” Blanche brought a chair for herself, and placed it by Sir Hugh; her work-basket was in her hand, and again she hoped that she was not intruding.

Lady Charlton smiled, and said, “Sir Hugh would be only too happy; and, for herself, she had letters to write, very important ones; but Blanche must not fatigue herself. You can read, if you like it, my love, for a little while. Sir Hugh is a great reader, and a writer too sometimes, only I shall be in disgrace if I mention it.” She looked meaningly at Sir Hugh.

“My dear Lady Charlton—Frances—you are really too bad. Blanche will be shocked; it is nothing; nothing at all, I assure you. Just a pamphlet, nothing at all to speak of. There is one—Frances, my dear—on the side table; I think you will find one. But, never mind;” seeing that Lady Charlton cast an unsearching, and unseeing eye round the room. “Never mind, Pearson will find it. I can ring.”

“Pearson is going to dinner,” replied Lady Charlton, rather quickly, “but Blanche, I dare say, will read to you. Let me see, that book on geology I think it was you began. My dear Blanche, I really am ashamed of myself for allowing you to have such a task. I dare say, if the truth were told, you know no more of the ‘ologies’ than I do; but you will learn something—names, at least. I quite marvel at myself for not being wiser, considering Sir Hugh’s tastes. We had not very much science in Italy; and a great drawback it was for him. Good-

b'ye, my love. Maude and Ady will be in despair when they hear you are not coming back."

"As much in despair as I shall be in delight," said Sir Hugh, twisting his sallow and worn features into what he believed to be an irresistible smile.

"But I shall have mercy upon you, Blanche," said Lady Charlton, returning to look into the room again. "Remember we are to have a riding party this afternoon; and your friends, the Wentworths, I hear, are to dine with us."

Lady Charlton was gone before she heard, or at least, before she appeared to hear Sir Hugh's impatient exclamation of "Wentworth! that was the very thing! that fool Pearson! why did he not come back? Who are the Wentworths?"

"Friends of ours at the rectory," said Blanche; and her voice acted with a magical effect upon the irritable Sir Hugh, who immediately composed himself to the semblance of a deferential listener. "Eleanor Wentworth and I were educated together," continued Blanche. "She is my very great friend."

"Ah, yes, very true—very nice; no doubt she is charming. But I thought—you must excuse a little impatience, my dear—the gout is trying, especially trying,—for a man of active habits, in the prime of life. I spoke rather eagerly, just now; but I thought I remembered the name of Wentworth abroad."

"It might have been Dr. Wentworth's son; he has been travelling," said Blanche.

Sir Hugh put his finger to his lip, and presently, with a sudden start of recollection, exclaimed:—

"Yes, I have it. I remember. Pearson knows;—idiot!" and the voice sank again into an angry growl, "what a time he is at dinner!"

Before Blanche could answer, a furious peal summoned Pearson from his repast. Blanche could

scarcely help smiling at the insinuating tone of the servant, when compared with the gesticulation of the master. Sir Hugh burst forth without preparation, requiring Pearson to recollect all he had ever heard or known of any one of the name of Wentworth ; and Pearson, with the utmost composure, began a quiet and rather interesting account of Sir Hugh's first acquaintance with Mr. Wentworth ; how they had met in Italy, and he believed Sir Hugh had told him that Lady Charlton had been acquainted with his family ; and,—no doubt, Sir Hugh would recollect him perfectly—a tall gentleman, very handsome ; he used to sing with Miss Adelaide ; and, as Pearson glanced doubtingly at Sir Hugh, and saw a pleased smile on his face, he ventured to add, “ People had remarked—at least he had heard it said—how well Mr. Wentworth and Miss Adelaide danced.”

“ Yes, yes, I know. You may go now ; you won't be wanted yet. Lady Blanche will do me the honour of sitting with me. Go ; can't you ? ” and Pearson hastened to escape Sir Hugh's lightning glance. “ Such gossips these people are, my dear,” continued Sir Hugh in his mildest voice. “ Such intolerable gossips ! One would think I was an old man with no memory ; telling me all those facts ! Of course, I recollect ! Mr. Wentworth was a handsome young man, certainly ; he danced attendance upon Adelaide. Lady Charlton grew frightened ; but it was all nonsense ; Adelaide is a great deal too sensible—a shrewd girl you will find out—not equal to Maude. Maude is a genius—plays, sings, draws—there was a copy of hers, of a Guido, as good as the original. I should not have known the difference ; and I am a very good judge, as good as the earl, I flatter myself ; and he has the reputation of being a first-rate connoisseur. Had, that is, some years ago ;—years you can't remember, my dear Blanche, for a very good

reason—there was no Lady Blanche then; no such bright star in the dark firmament;” and he bowed with the most studied politeness; “except, if there must be an exception,—you will not quarrel with mine—the countess, your mother. A charming woman—a very charming woman.” Sir Hugh paused to take breath; he saw that Blanche had laid down her work at his last words, and was listening eagerly for the rest. “Poor thing! Ah! years gone by! poor thing! Yes, I remember perfectly. Mrs. Wentworth was here a good deal in those days; she must have been this young man’s mother.”

“Mrs. Wentworth was a great friend of dear mamma’s,” said Blanche, speaking with an effort; yet determined, if possible, to keep him for a few minutes to the point.

“Yes, my dear—yes, I remember. Mrs. Wentworth and the countess, poor thing!” and the sigh which accompanied the words evidently came from the heart. Blanche’s fingers moved quickly at her work; but it was from nervousness, not industry. Was the sigh for her mother’s death or for her life? “Poor thing!” again began Sir Hugh. “Your father is altered, my dear; a great blow that was—sudden to him. She was a lovely creature! I had a great regard for her.”

“It must have been so sad for papa, being away when she was ill,” observed Blanche.

“Yes, I suppose so; one can’t tell. One can never say! it was a very lonely life. But people were mistaken. A proud man, Lord Rutherford;—very natural pride, my dear; don’t think I find fault with it. A very proud man! Nobody knows him thoroughly that has not lived with him for years. Lady Charlton and I, of course, are intimately acquainted with his character; but other people talked great nonsense. However, I always understood him.

We had tastes in common. He was devoted to geology. I gave him introductions when he went abroad, and they were of great use to him. I wanted him to take notes, and write. I told him I would assist. If he would have given the facts, I would have dressed them—adopted them and clothed them; they should have been my ‘*enfants trouvés* ;’” and Sir Hugh laughed so long and heartily at his own wit, that he did not perceive how little his companion sympathised with his mirth.

“That is the luncheon-bell, I think,” said Blanche, rising, and collecting her work.

“Luncheon! so late is it? But time passes so rapidly ‘*With thee conversing*’—you know the rest.”

“I am afraid it is easier to forget times and seasons than luncheon,” said Blanche; “but I cannot leave you alone. May I ring for Pearson?”

“Ah! thoughtful as you are! it is quite reversing the natural order. A sad enemy is the gout; very sad, indeed, to an active man in the prime of life;—a sad enemy!”

Sir Hugh shook his head long and dolefully, but would not allow Blanche to do anything for him. “It would distress him too much,” he said; “it was unnatural, improper—her society, that was all he required—he had been so flattered, so honoured;” and, with the words still ringing in her ears, Blanche at last contrived to escape to the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XIII.

“AND so the Wentworths will not come, Blanche,” said Lord Rutherford, as his daughter seated herself at the luncheon-table. “Dr. Wentworth has a prior engagement.”

“Not come! How very disappointing! May I see the note?”

It was from Mrs. Wentworth, polite and chilling. Blanche said nothing, but looked very vexed.

“I grieve for the failure of my first attempts for society, Adelaide,” said the earl, addressing his niece. “Only, remember, it really is not my fault.”

Blanche took up the note again to examine it. “A prior engagement is so odd. Eleanor must have known that I should want her; and they are not going out I am nearly sure, unless it may be Mr. Wentworth. He returned yesterday, I believe.”

Adelaide Charlton looked up eagerly; but her mother's eye was fixed upon her, and the eagerness vented itself in a quick demand for some bread.

“That must be our Mr. Wentworth,” said Maude, speaking in a deep, but peculiarly mellow voice, which was yet disagreeably abrupt. “He said he came from Rutherford.”

“I thought he was living away,” observed Lady Charlton.

Her tone struck Blanche directly: it was new to her; there was more gravity and sternness in it than she was prepared for.

“Young Wentworth is a handsome man,” said

the earl, carelessly; "but he is too much of a coxcomb to be a gentleman."

"Those travelled young men very often are," observed Lady Charlton. "It is 'We and the world' with them; and really, at last, one is disgusted in spite of oneself."

"But Mr. Wentworth must be superior to that class, I think," said Blanche; "his sister is so fond of him."

"And you swear by his sister then?" asked Maude, sharply.

Blanche was rather startled, and did not know what to reply.

"Maude, my dear; you really must be careful in your expressions. Lord Rutherford will think you a complete Goth," said Lady Charlton.

"Give me a better word," answered Maude, "and I will use it."

"Maude's favourite theory," said Lady Charlton, addressing the earl. "I must tell you of it, to prepare you for anything strange you may hear. She says—what is it, my dear Maude? Explain your own notions; you will do it much better than I shall."

Lord Rutherford assumed a listening attitude; but it was clear that he was perfectly indifferent, and Maude raised her piercing grey eyes to his face, and said:

"My notions are, that I should like a piece of cake; if my uncle will be good enough to cut it."

Lord Rutherford complied with the request, and did not trouble himself to ask for any further explanation of Maude's notions. Blanche was still silent, pondering upon Eleanor Wentworth's refusal, and a sudden check seemed to have been put to Adelaide's usual vivacity. The party was becoming dull; and Lady Charlton, who dreaded dulness as an enemy, endeavoured to infuse a little spirit into it by in-

quiring what were the afternoon plans. Blanche observed that the refusal had rather disturbed them; for Eleanor Wentworth, she had hoped, would have formed one of a riding party with them: at least, with Adelaide and herself. Maude, she understood, very seldom rode.

"No, never; except by myself," was Maude's ungracious answer.

"Papa talked of taking you and my aunt for a drive," continued Blanche, with a slight air of restraint, caused insensibly by her cousin's manner; "and Sir Hugh"—

"Oh! never mind Sir Hugh, my love," exclaimed Lady Charlton. "Pearson will take care of him. He will not be in a condition to move for the next week. But he is quite happy; don't distress yourself about him: he wants nothing except his new book on geology. A great blessing it is," she added more gravely, "that he can occupy himself: he is devoted to science."

"Blanche," said the earl, rising suddenly, "can you come with me and look at the shrubs they have been planting this morning on the bank? We will prepare for the driving and riding afterwards, if your aunt and your cousins will arrange together what they wish to do."

He threw open the window, and walked out upon the terrace. Blanche followed him with a sensation of freedom and pleasure. The earl drew her arm within his: he did not take her to see the shrubs; but, when they reached the end of the terrace, he turned again, and continued to walk without speaking; though once he passed his hand caressingly over hers, and looked in her face and smiled: and Blanche had learnt to value such a look. Lord Rutherford's laugh was for the world; his smiles were almost exclusively for her. He stopped at

length and drew a long breath, and in a light tone exclaimed, "Well, Blanche! we are alone again: shall we remain so?"

Blanche hesitated. "I have not made up my mind, papa:—it is such a very early day. I like them."

"Like them,—yes, I suppose you do. But it is not duty, is it? I never wish you to like any one from duty."

Blanche laughed faintly; she had already learnt that duty was not in her father's catalogue of allowable motives. "No: I suppose it is not from duty; but feelings are such mixed things, it is hard to analyze them. I am not sure that I shall love them," she added, more boldly; "except, that is, my aunt."

"Lady Charlton is a very sensible woman," said the earl. "I never knew her do but one foolish thing in her life. That scatter-brained piece of pomposity, Sir Hugh! how could she marry him?"

"Yes; it is strange, very strange," said Blanche, thoughtfully; "she is so superior,—she could never have loved him."

"Blanche, my child, you must learn to put aside your romance," said the earl gently, but seriously. "There are more marriages in the world without love than you, in your simplicity, can imagine. I do not wonder at Lady Charlton's marrying without love—no one who has had any experience of life could do so—but it is marvellous that, when she was resolved upon a sacrifice, she should have devoted herself for nothing,—absolutely nothing," he added, angrily.

"Yet she must have loved him, too, I suppose," said Blanche, musingly. "If there was nothing else, it must have been love; I should not like to think it was not."

“Not like it!” said the earl. “Why, what could it signify to you?”

“Because,” replied Blanche, and the colour deepened on her cheek, and she spoke hurriedly—“because it seems a false thing to do to marry without it; it is an untruth; it cannot really bring a blessing: at least, I think not,—it seems so to me,” she added, timidly, as if ashamed of her own eagerness.

The earl paused; his voice was altered when he spoke again; it was low and tremulous. “And you believe that love must bring a blessing; that it must be happiness?” he said.

“Yes, real, true, holy love,” replied Blanche: “surely it must be so.”

“It may be,—one cannot tell,” answered the earl; and then, in an under tone, he added, “Yet it is a dream,—an unreality.”

“That is not what people generally think it; is it?” said Blanche, quickly, for she was struck by the peculiarity of his manner.

“They call it happiness,” said the earl; “but they do not know their own meaning. Happiness!” he repeated, bitterly; “no, happiness is for the cold and calculating; for those who can trust themselves, who know their own weakness, and can foresee the consequences of their own actions. Love is impulse, feeling, excitement.”

“But there is something in it besides, calmer and deeper,” replied Blanche; “or it could never last: and marriage would be miserable, most miserable,” she added, earnestly.

Lord Rutherford stopped suddenly in his walk. “Did you ever hear of a miserable marriage, Blanche?” he said, quickly.

“In books, people have said it;—there are such things,” replied Blanche, almost frightened by his manner.

He laughed sarcastically. "Yes, in another sphere,—in the world, the dreamy world: not in the real Utopia of St. Ebbe's." He was going to turn again on the terrace; but, checking himself, added, in his usual tone, "This is but idle talking. Go to your aunt, Blanche, and settle what you will. I will ride with you, if you wish it." He did not wait for question or reply, but strode down the walk which led to the river's bank, and was soon lost to sight amongst the thick trees.

"You are not going out with Adelaide, merely to please her, my love?" said Lady Charlton, as Blanche, about half an hour afterwards, came into the room dressed in her riding-habit, and looking rather grave.

Blanche brightened in an instant, and said that riding was her favourite exercise: but her aunt did not seem satisfied.

"We shall not stay with you, my dear, if you allow us to interrupt your usual habits. You are very busy, I am sure. No one could have been educated by Mrs. Howard without being so."

"Mrs. Howard is so good with her business," exclaimed Blanche; "she is so really useful: what I have to do is very little. I am sure, if she could be here, she would put me in the way of doing a great deal more."

"But she is coming to you, is she not?" inquired Lady Charlton. "I am sure I heard your father say something about it."

"She was to have come; but she has been obliged to delay: one of her nieces is ill," said Blanche. "I am longing for her, to help me in every thing; to make me methodical and energetic, and like herself, if she could," she added, laughing.

Lady Charlton began the first words of a compliment, but stopped. "I won't say what I was going to say, my dear; I don't think it would be in your

way, though it would be true; and I will not offer to take Mrs. Howard's place,—that would be out of the question; but you must let me know if I can ever be of any use to you. I dare say you go about amongst the poor people. Your dear mother always did," she said, with a change of tone which made Blanche's heart thrill, though she could not trust herself at that moment to answer the allusion.

"I go sometimes," was all she replied,

Lady Charlton drew near and kissed her tenderly. "You shall let me go with you; I shall like it. It will seem that the old times are come back—quite—when I look at you," she added, gazing in Blanche's face with a sad smile.

Blanche returned the kiss, and, unfastening a brooch which she always wore, showed a miniature, exquisitely painted. "Will you tell me if it is like?" she said. "I have been afraid to ask papa."

Lady Charlton took the brooch in her hand, and turned to the light. She was looking at it attentively, and Blanche, leaning over her, was waiting with great interest for her opinion. Lord Rutherford came to the window. Blanche, by a kind of instinct, took the brooch hastily from her aunt; but not before the earl had remarked it.

"A new trinket, Blanche?" he exclaimed, cheerfully. "Let me see."

Blanche's hand shook, and the brooch fell to the ground. The earl stooped to pick it up. There was a silence of some moments.

Lady Charlton said, "It is very like," and held out her hand for it.

"The carriage is waiting," was all Lord Rutherford's reply.

He walked away, and Lady Charlton, as she returned the brooch to Blanche, said, "You shall talk to me, my love: it is not a subject for him."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE first determination which Blanche formed the next day was that she would go to the parsonage early. The disappointment of the preceding afternoon had vexed her considerably, and she was resolved not to run the risk of another refusal. She would go herself and make the request, and then it could not, she hoped, be denied.

The subject was mentioned casually at breakfast. Blanche began to feel herself sufficiently at home with her aunt and cousins to leave them to themselves, and said she should go to the rectory the first thing, and engage Eleanor for the day; "and we will walk, if you like it, in the afternoon," she added, addressing Lady Charlton. "I must go into the village."

"Must! my love," exclaimed the earl quickly. "Who says must to you?"

"I say it to myself," replied Blanche, smiling: "it is not an imperative must; only my aunt said she would like to go with me sometimes; and——"

"Yes, my dear, certainly," interposed Lady Charlton; "of all things I shall like to accompany you; but to-day, I rather think, I have an engagement. A great friend of mine, Mrs. Cuthbert Grey, is staying in this neighbourhood, and I promised to go and see her when I came here. She is on a visit to the Donningtons. I think I had better take advantage of the fair weather. Ady, what do you say?"

Adelaide answered carelessly that, if it must be, she supposed it had better be; but that Maude would

do just as well as herself. "I shall go with Blanche this morning, if I may," she continued. "Blanche, you will take me to the rectory; I delight in walking the first thing after breakfast."

"Immensely intimate," said Maude, in her cold sepulchral tone; "the civility must be for Mr. Wentworth: you don't know any one else."

"You will stay at home, Ady," interrupted Lady Charlton, glancing quickly at the earl; but he was now engrossed in the newspaper, and knew nothing that was passing.

Blanche was puzzled for an instant, but took the matter simply, and assured them that ceremony with the Wentworths would be quite unnecessary. They met every day. If Adelaide liked to go, she might do so easily.

"She will stay at home, my dear," repeated Lady Charlton, decidedly; and of course the question was supposed to be settled.

But Blanche stood at the green gate of the rectory, and was trying to open it, when she heard some one behind her say, laughingly, "Where there is a will there is a way, Blanche. Did you never hear that before? An exceedingly romantic spot this for a parsouage, I must say."

Blanche was silent from surprise.

"I can open the gate, I dare say," continued Adelaide; "or—look, there is Mr. Wentworth."

Blanche was excessively annoyed, and answered coolly, that she would not trouble Mr. Wentworth; she should leave a message for Eleanor, and go back.

"When you have come on purpose to see her? I am sure you will not do anything of the kind: you could not be so capricious. Mr. Wentworth——" and as the gentleman drew near, Adelaide held out her hand with the ease of an old acquaintance. "How very strange! Where did you drop from?"

Mr. Wentworth reciprocated the surprise, expressed a due amount of pleasure, and threw open the gate.

Adelaide waited for her cousin to go forward; but Blanche paused resolutely. "Thank you," she said, addressing Mr. Wentworth, "but I am afraid I must return now. Since we have met you, perhaps you will do me the favour to deliver a message to Eleanor. I want her very much to spend the day with me, and to come as early as possible. Mrs. Wentworth is quite well, I hope?"

"Quite, thank you; but surely,—indeed, Lady Blanche, you must not go back without seeing my mother; she will be vexed if you don't; you have given yourself so much trouble."

"Only a pleasant walk," replied Blanche. "Pray say to Mrs. Wentworth how sorry we were she could not dine with us yesterday. Good morning." She bowed, and turned away; but Adelaide was already within the gate. Such a bewitching rose she had seen!—amongst the briars,—nearly hidden it was,—Mr. Wentworth must give it her.

Mr. Wentworth plunged into the thicket, and Adelaide still advanced. Blanche could not let her go on alone, for the next moment she would be in front of the house: and so she was; and not only before the house, but before the whole family party, who were talking together on the lawn. Blanche had nothing to do but to go up to them, and introduce her cousin and apologize; though the apology was a difficulty, for her gentle spirit was very considerably roused.

Setting aside the neglect of Lady Charlton's wishes, Adelaide was unquestionably rude to herself, and Blanche had never experienced rudeness before. Mrs. Wentworth received the excuse for the intrusion politely, but without any cordiality; and even Elea-

nor's warm kiss and exclamation of delight, could not take away the general awkwardness. Adelaide alone was quite at her ease, and admired the house and garden in a tone of easy familiarity, not unmixed with patronage, which made Mrs. Wentworth's civility freeze into a stiffness nearly amounting to haughtiness.

The restraint however was at an end, when both Dr. and Mrs. Wentworth were called away. Then Eleanor and Blanche strolled to a distance by themselves; and Adelaide, declaring that the walk had tired her, and therefore she would wait till they returned, threw herself upon a garden-bench, and began a quick, laughing conversation of reminiscences with Mr. Wentworth.

"You are worried, Blanche," was Eleanor's first observation, when they were beyond hearing. "You have never looked as you do now since the days when we used to puzzle over Dante together."

"I wish it was a Dante worry now," replied Blanche: "I could understand that; but really to be angry and uncomfortable without knowing why, is rather trying."

"Are things going wrong at the castle?" inquired Eleanor.

"Oh, no! not in the least,—that is, I suppose they are not; but new people fret me and puzzle me. I don't know what they mean; and Adelaide Charlton is so persevering,—so wilful, I suppose Mrs. Howard would say; and her manner is—I can't tell what to call it—but excessively disagreeable."

Eleanor laughed heartily. "Now, that really is delightful, Blanche, to find that you can be severe like the rest of the world."

"It is not for myself," continued Blanche; "really I should not care what she did or said with me; we are cousins, and it does not signify: but it must look

very strange to your mother. By Adelaide's tone, I should have fancied her to have been your intimate friend for years."

"Knowing Charles well, makes her at home with us, I suppose," replied Eleanor: "he said to me yesterday that he knew her in Italy. But do forget her oddity, Blanche, if you can, and tell me how you are going on altogether."

Blanche sighed, and then laughed. "I can't tell, and I don't know anything; I believe I am quite cross this morning. The castle seems in a complete bustle. My aunt has brought such innumerable servants, I stumble upon a new face in every corner. And it is so noisy to what it was: even when I am alone, the atmosphere of bustle seems to be around me. Moreover, I suspect I shall see exceedingly little of papa; for you know it is not really seeing him, talking in a common way, when other people are present: and Sir Hugh has taken possession of the library, so that I can't get the books I want; and Adelaide sings snatches of songs to the piano, and will not practise a single thing steadily with me; and Maude reads and says nothing, but looks as if she was not at all happy. In fact, Eleanor, I suspect I am immensely selfish;—I mean it in earnest!"

Again Eleanor laughed, and expressed herself charmed to find that Blanche could descend to the level of humanity, and be tormented by trifles. "Put out; actually put out," she exclaimed; "as I am when Susan says her lessons badly."

Blanche was silent for a few moments. She was full of thought. "There is a way of taking things, I am sure," she said; "a right way and a wrong. Just as when one begins to wind a skein of silk; if one can find the right end, it all runs smoothly; and if one begins with the wrong, it must be entangled. When I can understand them all better, perhaps I

may be able to find the right end. Just now there seems an entanglement;—wills and ways mixing. They never mixed at St. Ebbe's."

"My dear Blanche, how exceedingly amusing!" exclaimed Eleanor; "but you never were in a home before,—I forgot. You don't understand what it is for grown-up people to live together. Why that sort of mixing of wills and ways, as you call it, goes on perpetually here."

"Does it?" said Blanche. "But how do you manage?"

"I go my own way, and let other people go theirs," said Eleanor lightly; "and things come round again."

"But I don't see exactly how it can be here," observed Blanche. "Your father and mother are so good, and your brother —"

"Ah!" interrupted Eleanor, "that is the point. Charles is delightful, exceedingly clever, and he can talk amusingly, and sketch, and sing duets, and rave about Italy; there is no one like him. But it does not quite do; it does not suit papa and mamma: they think a clergyman ought to be graver, and they don't know what Charles is really like; and so they are vexed with him; and he is provoked, and complains to me, and takes up my time in listening to him: and then Susan is idle because I don't attend to her, and mamma is angry with me because she says I neglect my duties; and there is a history of my home, Blanche; so now choose between the two." Blanche did not attempt to choose. A shadow of the deeper anxiety which was for ever corroding her peace, crossed her mind: and the lighter evils of which they had both been complaining, melted into nothing. Adelaide Charlton's laugh just then reached them. Eleanor stopped and listened.

"She is happy," said Blanche, gravely.

Eleanor looked round in wonder. "That from

you, Blanche! One would suppose you envied her."

"Oh! no, never; but I suppose it is natural to some people not to think. However, I did not come here to moralize; we must settle what we will do to-day. You will come to the castle as soon as you possibly can; and then we will walk, if you like it, in the afternoon. My aunt is going to pay visits, and I thought you and I might go together to see poor Susannah Dyer."

Eleanor hesitated for an instant. "You are going to walk?" she repeated in a musing tone.

"Yes; do you see any objection; would you rather not? I thought, as it was our settled day, we had better not put it off."

"Is it our day? I had forgotten," said Eleanor.

"Yes, on Thursdays we agreed to go; and as my aunt will probably be here a long time, it seemed desirable not to give up one's usual duties, if it could be helped. My aunt does not wish it; she told me so yesterday; and she half offered to go with me herself."

"Lady Charlton!" exclaimed Eleanor.

"Yes; she is not at all what I know you fancied her; she is not in the least a fine lady. I put her out of my catalogue of worries, for she is delightful."

"But she will not go with us," observed Eleanor.

"No, because of the visit; we shall have the afternoon to ourselves. Dear Eleanor! I shall enjoy it so very much."

Eleanor could not help being pleased. The tone of Blanche's voice was in itself sufficiently animating to dispel the feeling of distrust which was continually lurking, though unperceived, in her mind. She agreed that it would be very pleasant, and very right; and began to discover decided reasons why it was necessary they should go—the chief being, that as they had promised it would be necessary to keep

the engagement, and that poor Susannah Dyer being blind, and helpless, and ill, had a particular claim upon them.

“And now I must go back,” said Blanche, when the point was settled. “Back to my duties. Such strange ones they are, Eleanor; so unfitted for me; at least, so unlike all that I should have formed for myself.”

“To stay in the drawing-room, and play the agreeable, and be referred to as the lady of the house,” said Eleanor. “I shall like to come and see how you behave.”

“No, you would not like it,” exclaimed Blanche, energetically. “One never does like to see people out of their sphere; mine most decidedly is not to rule. You must see my aunt, Eleanor; she is the person to be at the head of affairs; you would say at once, that she could decide every question brought before her, and could tell precisely how, and why, and when, everything should be done. Papa says she has immense tact, and I think I can see it. There is an indescribable something about her which is very charming; her walk, the turn of her head, her smile—and very handsome she is too! handsome for her age; she must have been beautiful.”

“I shall be afraid of her,” said Eleanor, coldly and proudly.

“Oh! indeed, I don't think you will; though one or two things make me think she might be alarming if she chose it. I doubt whether Maude or Adelaide get on with her; she seems very short with them; and Maude shuts herself up the moment her mother comes into the room. As for Adelaide, she rattles on always; but there is a difference even in her.”

“And Sir Hugh,” inquired Eleanor; “what is he like?”

Blanche appeared uncertain how to reply, and after

waiting some seconds, laughed and said, "I don't think it is fair to question me in this manner about my relations; you shall come and judge for yourself. But I must go now, I have been very rude in leaving Adelaide such a time."

"I don't imagine Miss Charlton thinks you rude," said Eleanor, looking towards her brother and Adelaide. "I doubt whether she is tired of her companion."

Blanche stood still, and watched them. Adelaide, sitting upright, was speaking quickly; and Mr. Wentworth, standing before her and playing with a walking-stick, was listening with an expression—which, to Blanche, seemed that of attentive deference.

"He is very handsome, Blanche; is he not?" said Eleanor.

Blanche smiled thoughtfully. "Yes, very; extremely handsome. I am glad Adelaide has some one to talk to that she likes." She walked on quickly. Eleanor would not make another observation, for she was disappointed. They heard Mr. Wentworth say, as they drew near, "The charm is not in the place, but in the people." He spoke with feeling; but Adelaide only laughed, and, rallied him for his old-fashioned sentimentality; and as Blanche approached, thanked her for having interrupted their tête-à-tête, which she declared was becoming tiresome as they had said all they could think of. Mr. Wentworth turned from her, and addressed a few words to Blanche; but, after a short interval, Adelaide again dexterously engaged his attention, and kept up a series of bantering repartees till they reached the shrubbery-gate.

CHAPTER XV.

BLANCHE returned home dissatisfied. It was provoking to have spent half her morning without pleasure or profit; for her conversation with Eleanor had brought her neither. It was unconnected, desultory, and not free from petulance and irritation. She found Lady Charlton and Maude in the morning-room; one working, the other reading. Blanche took out her drawing materials. She was determined to employ herself in something which would tone her mind, and the drawing was one which her father particularly wished her to copy. Lady Charlton no sooner observed what she was doing than she left her worsted frame, and stood by watching her, and called to Maude to come and admire; but Maude only turned round languidly, and contriving to peep at the drawing without giving herself trouble said nothing, and returned to her reading. Lady Charlton laughed at her as sadly uncouth in manner, but assured Blanche that it was always her way; she was such a first-rate connoisseur; she would admire nothing, except Raphael and Guido and the old Italian masters: and then, saying that she must inquire if Sir Hugh was dressed, she left the room.

Blanche went on drawing and thinking, in a tranquil undisturbed state, which was very soothing. She was copying a Holy Family from an engraving, colouring it according to her own taste; and, as the first soft hue brought out the beautiful outline of the group, her attention was more and more fixed upon it. She had no wish for conversation; silence was natural to her, especially since she had lately spent many

hours alone; and Maude, leaning back in her easy-chair, turned the leaves of her book so quietly that Blanche soon lost all consciousness of her presence. She finished the first tint, and, laying down her brush, took up the print to examine it more closely. The expression of the different faces was wonderful; pure, simple, almost severe, in their high spiritual beauty. Blanche forgot that she was an artist; she forgot to criticise or admire, and, resting her head upon her hand, she bent over it wrapt in thought.

“Are you dreaming?” was the question which woke her from her reverie; spoken in Maude’s deep voice of melody. She was standing at a little distance with a closed book in her hand; a smile was upon her lips, but it had nothing of gentleness in it. Blanche started as she was addressed.

“You were dreaming,” repeated Maude. “Was it of the colour of Joseph’s robe?” and she laughed.

Blanche took up her pencil and replied, “It is difficult not to dream a little with such a beautiful subject before one.”

“It is beautiful, is it?” continued Maude, in the same careless way. She drew nearer to the table.

Blanche moved her own drawing, and placed the engraving in a good light, and then was going away.

“Don’t go,” said Maude, putting her hand upon her shoulder; “tell me why you like it?”

“Why?” and Blanche’s eye flashed with enthusiasm; “because it is unearthly, pure;—because it raises one’s mind to look at it;—because,” she added, her voice unconsciously sinking; “it brings before one the only reality.”

She was again going, but Maude a second time detained her. “Then you don’t like it because it is a good drawing?” she said, abruptly.

“In a measure I do; but that is a different kind of admiration—it is an artist’s, and I am no artist.”

Maude took the engraving in her hand, and turned to the light. "That finger is out of proportion," she said, pointing to the extended hand of the Virgin. She laid the print on the table, and gazing from the window, allowed Blanche to resume her drawing without further comment.

Blanche began her work in a different spirit. She was no longer unconscious that Maude was in the room, her presence oppressed her, and she could not succeed. Maude came behind her, and hummed a light French air; and Blanche, in despair, laid down her pencil, and looking round, said simply, "If you don't mind very much—if you would not think me odd—I should be so glad if you would go away."

Maude did not move. "Which do you like least," she said: "my presence, or my song?"

"I like neither," replied Blanche, laughing.

"Don't you? But listen! I will try something else."

She leant against Blanche's chair and paused for a second; and then, as if a voice sounded in the far distance, the melody of a German hymn fell upon Blanche's ear, soft at first, and liquid in its sweetness, but gradually swelling and deepening, till the full burst of praise seemed to fill the spacious room. It ceased suddenly as it had begun, and there was silence.

A tear rolled down Blanche's cheek.

Maude pretended not to notice it, but in her natural quick manner exclaimed, "You have not told me a word about your visit this morning. Did Adelaide carry on her flirtation successfully? I knew she would go."

"I should like to hear it again," said Blanche, unheeding the question; and looking up at her cousin with a peculiar smile—half of melancholy, and half of eager delight.

“You like music, do you?” said Maude. She seated herself at the piano, and touched a few chords, whilst Blanche returned to her drawing. Maude suffered her fingers to wander over the keys, slowly at the commencement, and as it were thoughtfully; but increasing in power and force till they moved with a rapidity which was electrifying. But again they sank into a low prelude, and the same clear flute-like notes, which before had seemed to Blanche as scarcely belonging to a human voice, were blended with them. The words were distinct as the music.

“ Il passato non è
 Ma se lo pinge
 La viva remembranza.
 Il futuro non è,
 Ma se lo finge
 La credula speranza.
 Il presente sol è,
 Che in un baleno
 Passa del nulla in seno.
 Dunque la vita è appunto
 Una memoria, una speranza, un punto.”

As the song proceeded, Blanche's pencil dropped from her hand. So surpassingly sweet it was; so thrilling in its mournful melody; so real in its expression: it seemed the true language in which the vanity of human life should be told. Maude repeated the last lines to herself, whilst she carelessly turned the leaves of a music-book which was open before her.

Blanche left her seat, and stood beside her.

“ ‘ Una memoria, una speranza, un punto ;’

and that is all !” exclaimed Maude, looking round.

Blanche's colour deepened, and then it faded quite away, as she said, whilst her voice faltered; “ Oh ! Maude ! Could you bear to think so ? ”

"It is truth," answered Maude. "There needs no ghost come from the grave to tell us of it." And she sang the two last lines again, with an intensity of feeling which she did not attempt to check.

Blanche stood with her eyes riveted upon her,—drinking in the sounds which at each repetition seemed more and more perfect.

"Tell me," exclaimed Maude, with an air of triumph, as she ended, "What is it, if it is not so? Where is the past? In what part of the world will you dig till you can find it?"

"But how can that which has been cease to be?" said Blanche, raising her eyes timidly to her cousin's face.

Maude paused; and regarding her steadily, said, "Are you a child, Blanche, or a woman?"

"A child, I believe," replied Blanche, laughing. "Papa tells me so."

"Yet you have notions; what are they?" The question was put with such an air of command, that Blanche, for a moment, felt herself bound to obey it; but it was only for a moment, and she answered with reserve, that it was hard to explain them: perhaps when they had been together longer, it would be less difficult.

"But I like notions; I like theories;" persisted Maude; her large grey eyes lighted up with what might almost have been termed a fierce eagerness. "I must know," she added, laying her hand upon Blanche's wrist.

Blanche drew back. A very slight accent of hauteur might have been perceptible in the tone in which she said, "Another time; not now."

Maude's brow was clouded; she rose from the piano, threw herself into a chair, took a book from the table, and tossed it down with an air of contempt; and, after some time, began walking about the room.

Blanche was annoyed with herself for being annoyed. She scarcely knew why she had been ; and she sat at her drawing-table, busied in discovering the state of her own mind, and wishing that Maude would speak again and give her the opportunity of making something like an apology.

The silence was long and awkward, and disturbed at length by the dull, slow, heavy sound of crutches.

“ Sir Hugh is drest, I suppose,” said Blanche, glad to find something to say.

Maude did not reply.

The sound grew louder, and the complaining voice of Sir Hugh was heard, telling Pearson, as usual, that he was a desperate idiot.

Maude laughed sarcastically at the mild, deprecatory intonation which followed. She took up her book and disappeared through the window, whilst Blanche went to the door.

“ Ah! my dear Blanche! I thought I should find you here ; my first walk, you see. I was determined to pay my respects to you. A delightful room this!—infinitely improved!—What in the name of wonder are you doing, Pearson? Why don't you keep behind me?—Infinitely improved, my dear. That window I remember quite well. It was a plan of my own ; I saw how things ought to be long ago ; but your father—a very first-rate man is the earl ; don't imagine that I have not the highest appreciation of his talents. Excuse me, will you? may I be allowed to rest?” And Sir Hugh was assisted into an arm-chair ; and, to the consternation of Blanche, wheeled to a comfortable convenient position, which he evidently intended should, at least for the present, be a permanent one. “ I was telling you,” began Sir Hugh again ; but he was interrupted by an exclamation—

“Sir Hugh! this really is too bad! It is far too great an exertion for him, Blanche; but he would come; he was so charmed with your half-hour’s conversation yesterday. It won’t do though.—Pearson, you must help your master back to the study.”

“Lady Charlton! Frances, my dear! I insist;—you must not interfere. I was telling you, my dear Blanche—”

Lady Charlton broke in again. “My dear Sir Hugh;—indeed, I must have my own way. Hark! really there are visitors; and the earl—that is his footstep, I am certain. I assure you, Sir Hugh, you make me quite anxious. It is too much, a great deal too much for you,” she added, her tone becoming gradually but perceptibly irritable; and taking the crutch from Pearson’s hand she put it near her husband.

“Pshaw! Lady Charlton,” and with an impatient jerk, the crutch was thrown to the ground, to the imminent peril of Pearson’s toes. “My dear Blanche, I was telling you—”

The sparkle of Lady Charlton’s eye alone told what was passing in her thoughts. When the door immediately afterwards opened, and the earl introduced Mr. and Miss Wentworth, her manner was that of the most bland goodhumour.

“So distressed, I am! so exceedingly distressed!” began Sir Hugh, attempting to rise as Eleanor came up to him.

Lady Charlton stood close beside him. “Poor Sir Hugh! He has been suffering fearfully: he is not fit to be here; but his spirits carry him beyond his strength. Your brother is an old acquaintance, Miss Wentworth. We met last year at Florence.”

Mr. Wentworth was upon the point of holding out his hand to receive a cordial greeting; but the extreme civility of Lady Charlton’s reception made him

exchange the proposed shake of the hand for a bow, and a hope that Lady Charlton had been well since he last had the honour of seeing her.

"Quite well, thank you. You were in Italy, I believe, long after us."

"Only a few weeks; Florence became very dull."

"Indeed! I was not aware of it. We saw little general society. Rumours reached us of gaieties, but as you know," appealing to the earl, "general society is not very inviting abroad."

Lord Rutherford carelessly assented.

"We had a splendid summer at Florence, Mr. Wentworth," said Sir Hugh; "I don't know whether you ever recollect such another. I don't, except the year —. Lord Rutherford can tell the date, I dare say; we were travellers together, taking a scientific tour on the Rhine. If you remember," he continued, addressing the earl, "you were developing your sketching powers, and I flatter myself you made considerable progress, by the help of a few occasional hints; the few hints, Mr. Wentworth, which a man engrossed in a great object could afford to give. Geology was my study: I gave up everything for it."

"Twenty years ago," said the earl coolly.— "Blanche, my love, how has your drawing advanced this morning?"

Blanche brought it forward to be criticised.

Mr. Wentworth had recovered from the slight shock of Lady Charlton's reception, and now, with a very quiet and rather dignified air, joined in the remarks which the engraving and the copy called forth. Sir Hugh looked on from a distance, stretching his head, and constantly endeavouring to interpose observations of his own, which were as constantly taken up by Lady Charlton, and repeated in a new form, and, to judge from Mr. Wentworth's manner, an in-

teresting one, for his marked attention was given to whatever she uttered ; and, as Lord Rutherford was about to replace the drawing in its former position, he begged permission to bring it nearer for her inspection and Sir Hugh's.

Blanche liked him better as she watched what was passing ; she had not thought before that he could be so easy and agreeable, and yet so respectful.

“A very pleasant thing it is to meet a travelled friend again, Mr. Wentworth,” said Sir Hugh, quite excited by the patience with which a disquisition upon the comparative merits of two of the early Italian masters had been listened to ; “quite a gratification, I assure you. Lady Charlton and myself shall have great pleasure in renewing past recollections ; and my daughters—Maude ! where is Maude ? My dear Blanche, surely she has been with you this morning ?”

“Maude is walking on the terrace,” said Lady Charlton quickly, “and Adelaide is rambling over the grounds, I suppose ; she went out directly after breakfast.”

Blanche did not think it well to throw more light than was necessary upon the movements of either. There was a certain intonation in her aunt's voice which she was just beginning to interpret.

“Ah, well, you will meet at luncheon ; but I forgot—really—Lord Rutherford—Lady Blanche, I ought to apologize.” Lady Charlton bit her lip, and gave an apparently involuntary push to Sir Hugh's chair, which made him stop short, with an exclamation of pain.

Lord Rutherford was talking to Eleanor at the window, and did not hear what was said, and the burden of hospitality fell upon Blanche. Gracefully but timidly she repeated the request that Mr. Went-

worth would remain, and the invitation was soon seconded by the earl, with that perfect though distant politeness which leaves no room for complaint. Mr. Wentworth was therefore established on a comparatively familiar footing; and Blanche, feeling herself no longer bound to entertain him, left the room with Eleanor.

CHAPTER XVI.

IMPORTANT consequences, it is well known, often follow from very slight beginnings. Mr. Wentworth's first introduction at Rutherford Castle was marked by no circumstances but those incidental to morning visits ; yet it gave the tone to the intercourse which was to follow.

The earl's reserve and pride would have induced him to hesitate long before he allowed any persons in the neighbourhood, except his own peculiar friends, to be on such terms as to call early, and lounge away an hour and remain to luncheon, and perhaps join the riding and walking parties in the afternoon ; but what had been done once came rather naturally a second time, and certainly Lord Rutherford had no cause to suppose that Mr. Wentworth's presence or absence had the slightest effect upon the only individual with whom he chose to concern himself. Even as Eleanor's brother, Blanche could only partially like Mr. Wentworth. His talents, his versatility of manner and ease of conversation, and the right principle and good sense which he always put forth when conversing with her could not blind her to his faults ; and Blanche could only feel interest where she felt respect. It was perfectly indifferent to herself whether Mr. Wentworth formed one of the circle or not ; but childlike though she was, and simple in many of her ideas, Blanche could not fail to perceive that it was not so to others. Yet, even when the fact was acknowledged, Blanche scarcely thought of it. She noticed that Adelaide Charlton liked to

talk and laugh with Mr. Wentworth ; and she observed that for some reason or other Lady Charlton frowned and looked vexed ; and she discovered that Mr. Wentworth contrived to ingratiate himself with Sir Hugh, and was rather disliked by Maude. But the little incidents, which would have afforded matter for sarcasm and ridicule to a more experienced eye, passed before her as the scenes of a theatre before a preoccupied, abstracted spectator. For Blanche lived in a world of her own ; or rather she lived in the world of her friends and relations, seeing the same sights, hearing the same sounds, and performing the same actions ; yet often deriving impressions totally contrary to theirs, from all that was passing around.

So probably it must often be when religion becomes the predominant feeling of the heart very early in life : it is all-powerful then, for it has no master passion to oppose it. Adopted later in life, it must struggle with past evil recollections, and be frequently crushed and overborne by what we falsely term the realities of the world. We try to think that earth is nothing, that heaven is all ; but when we have toiled for years in the pursuit of wealth, or pleasure, or fame, how shall we in a moment persuade ourselves, that they are worthless ? Like the fisherman in the eastern tale, we have voluntarily opened the casket in which the mighty spirit of delusion was encased, and that which seemed at first but a faint mist of evil has gathered itself up into a giant form, and made itself our lord ; and, when we would fain command it back to its original nothingness, we find that our will is powerless to enforce obedience. That Blanche retained her earnestness and sincerity of purpose was not owing to any particularly advantageous circumstances ; life at Rutherford Castle was, in its exterior, what life is in almost all places where there is no one great business or

occupation to mould it into some definite form : there were rather late breakfasts, mornings seemingly frittered away in light reading, music, letter-writing, and not very profitable conversation ; afternoons devoted to some drive or ride ; seven o'clock dinners and idle, talking, musical evenings. What was the purport of all that was said or done no one seemed to inquire. Lord Rutherford, indeed, spent much of his time in his study, and busied himself in managing his estates. His object was a definite one ; yet he was the only person, except Blanche, who appeared dissatisfied with it. After the first excitement of his sister-in-law's arrival was over he seemed inclined to sink back into the reserved and even contemptuous mood, which had occasionally shown itself before when he was alone with Blanche. Lady Charlton's vivacity indeed often roused him, and brought out flashes of brilliant wit and quick observation ; but he soon relapsed again into silence,—in Sir Hugh's presence especially ; though, fortunately for his temper and his peace, the gout lingered much longer than was expected, and kept Sir Hugh in a great measure a prisoner to his room. When he was absent the earl would occasionally read aloud, or enter into conversations with Lady Charlton, which, as they seemed to possess a power to engage his attention and give him pleasure, were eagerly listened to by Blanche.

They were certainly very agreeable, full of anecdote and information. Blanche's opinion of her aunt's talents and power of mind, and even of her principles, increased daily. For Lady Charlton never gave way to the earl's implied doubts of goodness, or clever sarcasm upon things and people whom Blanche had learned to reverence. She spoke openly, and in a measure earnestly upon all serious topics ; blamed what was wrong, and approved of what was right, and when left alone with Blanche sympathized with

any indication of her deeper feelings, more particularly when they were in any way connected with her mother. Blanche was beginning to lean upon and trust her, at times even to think that she might partly supply Mrs. Howard's place as a guide in her daily actions. They were very different, different in a way which Blanche felt better than she could describe; but their ideas seemed the same. Lady Charlton was more cheerful, more full of life and hope; she had more interest in passing events than Mrs. Howard; but they liked the same people, approved of the same books, professed the same motives. Blanche could not have spoken to her aunt upon anything which immediately involved her own most sacred thoughts, for such confidence can scarcely be given except to one person, and Lady Charlton was too recent a friend, and too lively and light-hearted, to offer occasions for alluding to them; but in all minor points she seemed a safe counsellor, and one whom the earl was particularly pleased that Blanche should apply to.

"I wish you knew her," wrote Blanche to Mrs. Howard, in one of the weekly letters, which no occupation was ever allowed to stop. "I should feel more certain then of my own opinion about her. Perhaps you will think it is not right to sit in judgment upon one who is so much my superior in age, and so nearly related to me; but I do not know how to help it. I think you can scarcely imagine how entirely I am forced to form my own decisions, and act upon my own will. The last few months, since we parted, have worked a marvellous change. I am mistress of the castle, and forced to order and arrange, and treated with a deference which at first completely puzzled me. Papa seems to delight that it should be so. He will never allow the least opposition; he calls me queen in jest, and when I beg

him to tell me what he wishes for himself, a cloud comes over him, and he insists that he has no will but mine : and yet to others he is so different. This is not what ought to be, is it? It frightens me : I long for some one to remind me of my duties ; to scold me, and tell me when I do wrong—which indeed is every hour in the day. I wish my aunt would do it. She has such very high principles, such good notions about everything. I am sure she must perpetually see that I am not acting rightly, but she never hints at its being possible. I do make her give me advice in common things, receiving visitors, arranging for dinner-parties, and so on ; but it is all done laughingly, with a half apology, as if she had no reason to suppose I did not know all that she does. What I most wish just now is to have some plan for the arrangement of my time. I have thought a good deal about it lately ; for the kind of life I lead at present is exceedingly unsatisfactory, and yet I cannot tell how to alter it. If we have visitors, I must attend to them ; and really that takes up more time than any one not on the spot would imagine. My aunt constantly says that she will not interrupt me, if she thinks I have anything to do : but then she begins talking, and I am bound in courtesy to listen ; and very willingly, I must own, for she is the most agreeable person I ever met with. Anecdotes she has to bring forward on every occasion, and they are never wearying, they are told so quickly, and with such spirit. She quite understands giving one resting-places, and entering into anything one says in reply. Really the hours pass by, and I have not the least idea that they are gone. Yet they are not satisfactory to look back upon. Then, if my aunt is not with me, Adelaide and Maude are ; and Adelaide is like a butterfly, flying from one pursuit to another, and calling upon me to

follow her and Maude—I meant to have written a great deal about her, but I must not to-day: if I once begin I shall certainly not leave off in time. She interests me though, that I must say; and frightens me too. We had a little quarrel the other day, a very tiny one, but still sufficient to make me feel what she might be if she were offended. I am afraid I am very proud: she rather ordered me, and my spirit rebelled, and I showed that I was annoyed. I thought perhaps she would have been angry with me a long time; but instead of that she came up to me afterwards, the first moment we were alone, and gave me a kiss, so kind! it made me ten times more vexed with myself than I was before. Yet the next moment she was just like her old self, and I do not feel I have advanced in the least with her. All this is sadly wandering from my first subject, but when I write to you I always do wander: so many things come to my mind which I long to say. You will understand though that I lead a very unsettled, idle life, and that Eleanor leads a very useful, busy one; and when we meet to compare notes I become discontented with myself, and long to do better, but do not know how to set about it. My aunt said she would go with me to visit the poor people, and I know she would, if she could find a leisure day; but there is always some engagement. Poor Susannah has been very much neglected in consequence. Eleanor has promised to go when she can, but Dr. Wentworth trusted her particularly to me. She sent me a message the other day, asking to see me. You see I tell you all my faults, as I used to do in the happy old times: sometimes—is it wrong to say so?—I fancy they were happier than these. At any rate, I know that I never went to bed then with the same burden of unfulfilled duties upon my conscience. Some rules however I can keep, and some things I

hope I do not forget. I can never be sufficiently thankful that I was confirmed when I was. Preparation would have been so much more difficult here, and I think I might have gone on in an unsettled way, fancying that confirmation would be a new starting-point, and work some great change in itself. Whereas, now I feel that all has been done for me which I could expect, and that if I do not advance steadily, I must go back without any prospect of being roused and warned again. Still I am uncomfortable and anxious. The very fact of bringing my present mode of life into a definite form, by writing about it, makes it assume a more serious aspect. I am sure it must be very faulty in some way ; and what will it be when I go to London ?”

CHAPTER XVII.

THE answer to this letter brought a sad disappointment to Blanche. The continued illness of Mrs. Howard's niece made her anticipate the probability of going abroad, and would at any rate interfere with the visit to Rutherford, which had so long been promised. Blanche had not realized before how much she had lived upon the thought of this visit,—how entirely she had looked forward to it as the means of making Mrs. Howard acquainted with the fears and uncertainties which she had never yet found courage to mention openly. A week spent together would have sufficed to show the loneliness of mind,—the absence of sympathy,—the uncongeniality between herself and her father upon the one most important point, which caused her daily grief. There would have been no need of words: Mrs. Howard would have felt and understood all. Now that sinking, decaying isolation of heart must still remain, unless she could explain. But what was there to explain? What had she to say?—the loved, petted, idolized daughter of a man in whom the world agreed to see no fault except pride,—why was she not happy?

“Read it, Eleanor,” she said, putting the letter into her friend's hand, as they met that same afternoon at the parsonage, whilst tears, in spite of herself, rose to her eyes. “There is not a shadow of hope for months,—probably not before next year.”

Eleanor glanced at the full sheet. “Am I to read it all?”

“If you will: it is in answer to mine. But I have scarcely thought of the advice in it yet.”

Eleanor took the letter, and Blanche walked up and down the gravel path, and very soon afterwards Mrs. Wentworth joined her. Blanche could not conceal that she was out of spirits, and there was real kindness in the tone in which Mrs. Wentworth addressed her, with a regret for the unpleasant news which she had only just heard. Poor Blanche was always very alive to sympathy. The tears, which had only glistened before, fell fast, and Mrs. Wentworth was touched by her distress; and opening the French window of a small room, which fronted the flower-garden, begged her to go in, and seat herself, and be alone if she liked it. “It was her own little room,” she said; “and no one would come near to disturb her.”

Blanche was only too willing to hide herself from observation. She expected Mrs. Wentworth to follow her; but she did not; and Blanche leant back on the sofa, and for a time indulged her own sad, disappointed fancies. When she at last raised her eyes, it was to rest them upon an object which at once withdrew her thoughts from the present trial, and sent them far back into the past. On one side of the fireplace hung a small painting, the subject of which she recognised in an instant. It was her mother's likeness; but how different from the subdued, sorrow-stricken countenance which dwelt in her memory as the only true resemblance of the lovely Countess of Rutherford. The picture before her represented a young lady, who could scarcely, so it seemed, have passed the age of twenty, standing on the steps of the castle, dressed in a riding-habit, and caressing a splendid horse, which she was evidently prepared to mount. The face was bright, even mirthful; the

eyes sparkling with expectation ; the mouth joyous in its expression of happiness. There was no striving for effect in the picture ; nothing but the simple representation of what must actually have been witnessed. Blanche felt, as she looked upon it, that the artist who could so have portrayed her mother must have drawn her as she actually stood, without forethought or design. Five years afterwards, that fair, young creature had become the pale, serious, care-worn woman, whose beauty was overshadowed by a fixed, it might almost have been called, a stern melancholy ; and whose fascination was the influence of that purity of mind which grief has prepared for heaven.

The picture, and the thoughts that it called forth, struck a chord in the mind of Lady Blanche, which at that moment was peculiarly though painfully sensitive. If her mother had been spared, not even Mrs. Howard's friendship would have been needed. And again an undefined doubt, followed by a longing for a truer insight into that mother's history, arose within her. Her attention was so engrossed, that Mrs. Wentworth knocked at the door without being answered, and Blanche started when she came in, as if the privacy of her own apartment had been intruded upon. The attitude in which she was standing, leaning upon the mantelpiece and gazing upon the picture, told at once the subject of her thoughts.

"I did not know you had it," she said, in a tone of gentle reproach, as Mrs. Wentworth came up to her. Mrs. Wentworth appeared at a loss for a reply. "And it must be like her," continued Blanche, still with the same manner, as if she was vexed at having long been deprived of a great pleasure.

"It was like her once,—for a short time," said Mrs. Wentworth, her voice sinking at the last words,

as it so often did when referring to persons and events connected with other days.

“I feel it must have been like,” repeated Blanche; “more like than the bust at the castle; more like than this,” and she unfastened her brooch.

“It is not the face by which she was most known,” said Mrs. Wentworth, rather indifferently. “I am sorry you have seen it; it will only disturb your ideas.”

“No, no!” exclaimed Blanche. “I should be so glad if I could know her as she was always; as a child,—as a woman,—as what I am now,” she added, with a faint smile.

A slight contraction was visible in Mrs. Wentworth's forehead, the effect, perhaps, of some sudden pain; but she answered in her usual, undisturbed manner:—“There is no picture of Lady Rutherford as she was at your age, my dear Lady Blanche. This was taken three weeks after her marriage.”

“And for you?—was it her gift to you?” inquired Blanche, with eagerness.

“No, not her gift. It was—” Mrs. Wentworth paused, coughed, and then added quickly, “it was the earl's once.”

“And he parted with it?” exclaimed Blanche. “Oh, Mrs. Wentworth! even to you!”

“I loved her,” was the reply, uttered sharply and bitterly; and Blanche in an instant reproached herself for her words.

“Yes, indeed, I know you did. I know you were her great friend. Forgive me: you had of course a claim. But is there no copy,—no other picture like it, taken at that time? Three weeks after her marriage! How happy she looks!—my own sweet mother!” and Blanche drew near with the impulse to press her lips to the cold, lifeless figure. She

checked herself however. Mrs. Wentworth's calmness seemed a reproof for indulging anything like excited feeling. "Perhaps," she said, turning to Mrs. Wentworth, with a smile of singular attraction, so full it was of subdued eagerness, and softness, and hope,—“perhaps, some day, if I might be permitted, I would ask to have it copied. It would be a great treasure. You will understand,” she added; and in her earnestness she took Mrs. Wentworth's hand, as if to entreat by action as well as by word.

To her surprise, Mrs. Wentworth hesitated. “She would, if it were possible;—anything which could be done should be, Lady Blanche might be certain of that. Artists were very rarely in the neighbourhood; but it might be possible, just possible.”

Blanche drew back her hand,—she began her reply proudly, and it was an apology; she had not known that she was asking such a favour:—then conscience reproached her for pride shown to her mother's early friend, and she tried to alter her manner. Mrs. Wentworth stood passively by her, listening politely. An unpleasant silence followed what Blanche said,—a stiffness and restraint on both sides; but it was broken in upon by Mrs. Wentworth.

“The original is so invaluable to me,” she began.

Blanche interrupted her:—“You do not think I could wish for that? No, I assure you, not for a moment.”

“There are associations connected with it,” pursued Mrs. Wentworth, quietly: “no copy would possess them. I was present when the picture was taken. I watched its progress from the commencement. The first sketch was made on the countess's

birthday,—she was just twenty. It was done by an amateur, a friend of Lord Rutherford's, who was staying at the castle. The countess had no idea of his intention; but I was aware of it, and assisted him. I kept her, that is, in conversation."

"And it was my father's?" said Blanche, musingly.

"Yes:" and again Mrs. Wentworth's manner grew very constrained; and, after a short pause, she said, awkwardly, "I do not think the earl would like to see it; it might remind him—" Blanche waited some moments for the continuation of the sentence; when it came, it was so hurried that she could scarcely comprehend it:—"It might remind him," repeated Mrs. Wentworth, "that is, it would certainly bring to his recollection:—I think it might annoy him to be spoken to about it," were the concluding words.

Annoy! what a strange, cold expression! But Mrs. Wentworth was incomprehensible; and so different on this day to what she generally was, so frightened apparently out of her usual self-possession! Blanche felt quite bewildered. She turned from the picture, and saying that she was now quite rested, and would rejoin Eleanor, was preparing to go, when Mrs. Wentworth detained her.

"It is not pleasant to me to part in this way," she said, more freely; "to appear unkind, as I must do. Might I hope that you would excuse it; that you would make allowance for painful recollections? I think you will," she added, looking kindly at Blanche; "for your mother's sake I think you will excuse any unintentional awkwardness in one who loved her very dearly."

Blanche's displeasure vanished in an instant. "My mother's friend must always be privileged,"

she said, putting her hand into that of Mrs. Wentworth; "even if there were anything to excuse; but, indeed,—of course, I can understand." The mutual pressure of the hand was affectionate; but Blanche was relieved when she stepped into the open air: and she had not forgotten,—there had been no second offer of procuring a copy of the picture.

CHAPTER XVIII.

"VISITORS in the drawing-room, my lady," were the words which greeted Blanche, when she and Eleanor reached the castle, with the hope of making some arrangements for spending the afternoon more profitably than had seemed possible of late.

"Friends of my aunt's, I suppose," said Blanche, speaking to Eleanor in an under tone. "Is Lady Charlton there?" she inquired, aloud.

"Yes, my lady: Lady Charlton and Miss Adelaide. The carriage has been ordered away."

Blanche went into the house. "We need not appear, I imagine," she said to Eleanor. "I am supposed to be out; and if we once put ourselves in the way, there is an end to all our plans for poor Susannah." Eleanor agreed that there was no absolute necessity; but she stopped at the foot of the staircase, and wondered who the visitors could be.

"We shall be waylaid, undoubtedly," said Blanche, trying to hasten her.

"Hush! who is that speaking?" asked Eleanor, listening.

"Sir Hugh scolding Pearson, or Pearson scolding Sir Hugh," said Blanche laughing. "Really, Eleanor, you are determined to be caught." Blanche spoke in jest, but her words might possibly have been true, for just then the drawing-room door opened and a number of voices were heard.

"We shall be seen, if we attempt to go up-stairs now," said Eleanor decidedly; but she had no one to hear her observation, for Blanche had already

escaped to her room. She sat there for some little time very patiently. Eleanor, of course, had waited the one moment too long and been detained ; it was provoking, but there was no help for it, and Blanche took out Mrs. Howard's letter, in order to occupy the intervening time. It was curiously appropriate to that precise moment. So much of it was upon the subject of daily duties, daily interruptions, and the spirit in which they should be borne.

“I am not in the least surprised at your complaints of desultoriness, my dear child,” began Mrs. Howard. “All persons situated as you are must in a certain way be desultory, or, more correctly, they must I suppose appear to be so ; for it does not follow that you should be so really. When you laid down your strict rules, before you went away, I was convinced in my own mind that you would find a difficulty in carrying them out, but I did not like to dishearten you, since a plan of life is in itself good, even necessary, if we wish to discipline our minds properly. The great mischief of such plans is when the fulfilment of them is too rigidly insisted upon, and is raised into a virtue in itself, instead of being considered as merely a stepping-stone. However I need not descant upon the danger of too much regularity ; your difficulty seems to lie quite in the other direction. Naturally it would be so, for you cannot possibly be entirely mistress of your own time, and you certainly are bound in duty to consider the comfort of your guests before your own. But there must be a limit to every duty, humanly speaking, or it will encroach upon another, and become a fault. And this limit, I think, is to be found by having a true sense of our position, not only in life but in our families. As a daughter, you are of course bound to obey ; but, as the mistress of a household, you are equally bound to take the lead, and to set an exam-

ple of order and strictness. I doubt if you are likely to remember this sufficiently. Your mode of life must in a great measure give the tone to your whole household, and one of the most important features in all families, especially in one which like your own possesses influence from rank and wealth, is that it should be under subservience to a law of duty and not of pleasure. I do not mean that it is possible to make laws for every hour, or every individual; but it should never be left in doubt that there are claims which *must* be attended to; employments which are *never* to be neglected except for some very obvious reason. If your mother had been spared, these responsibilities would not have been yours as yet; but you are peculiarly circumstanced, and there are duties incumbent upon you which seldom fall to the lot of persons of your age. I wish I could give you my ideas more in detail, for I am afraid I shall not satisfy you; but what I mean is something of this kind—I suppose you breakfast late, but that need not prevent you from rising early. If you set the example, the servants must in a measure follow it, so one great temptation in an easy life will be checked. I think you would find it useful not to shut yourself up entirely in your room, but to let your servants see what your habits are—as example is better than reproof, and indeed reproof can scarcely, I imagine, be in the catalogue of your duties at present. Then with regard to your mornings—you intended, I know, to study regularly; and certainly it seems to me that you ought to do so. Could you not manage to give a certain fixed time to your aunt and cousins, and any other guests, directly after breakfast, and then let it be understood that you wish to have an hour or two to yourself? I hardly think you would give offence, and your absence would by degrees be taken as a matter of course. Perhaps, also, you might be

able to arrange to practise with your cousins, as you say they are both musical; but then, my dear Blanche, you must take the lead. If your cousin Adelaide likes, what you call, a butterfly life, it does not at all follow that you are to humour her: and though she may be some years older than yourself, that will not prevent your being of great use in keeping her steadily to one object, if you show you are determined to be steady yourself. So, again, I would beg of you if possible to decide upon seeing the poor people on fixed days; and, when these days come, say you have an engagement, and make any plans for drives, visits, &c., for your friends, independent of yourself. Your reading also may be a great help to you as regards system and regularity, if you can avoid the temptation of beginning every new book that is thrown in your way—a temptation which, I assure you, I can quite sympathise with. We cannot always be studying history and metaphysics, but when we do indulge ourselves in light reading it should be for some specified reason—at certain times, and under certain limitations. I really believe that half the mischief of novels, those I mean which are innocent, arises from their being so enticing that we are induced to read them at wrong times. It may seem a very slight fault to skim half a dozen pages more when duty calls us another way; but I am sure it injures the conscience and untunes the mind. If we can read a very interesting book up to a certain moment, and then resolutely close it because we have something else to do, the relaxation can scarcely have done us harm. I am saying nothing about higher rules and motives, because we have talked of them so often before, and I am sure from your letter that you have not forgotten them.

“This constant self-discipline, no doubt, requires energy and watchfulness, but what is to be done

without them? Especially what can be done by persons situated as you are, having scarcely any external restraints upon their inclinations? You must be a law to yourself if you wish to avoid that wretched frittering away of life which is the misery of hundreds of persons of your age at the present moment.

“All I have said is of course subject to one proviso—that your father should not object. If he were to insist, or even evidently to desire, that you should give yourself up entirely to your aunt and cousins, you can but submit: only here again you would find a law, and therefore a satisfaction. It is not *what* we do, but *why* we do it, that is of consequence. How often we say to ourselves, speaking of things of this world, ‘It does not signify, it is all in the day’s work?’—and so, neither, does it signify in the concerns of another world, whether we are called upon to rule a kingdom or pick up stones from the road, if only what we do is *work*: work that shall turn to account in the reckoning of the long day of life; work for Him to whom nothing is great and therefore nothing can be little.”

Blanche refolded her letter and sat for sometime thinking over it. She could not at once fully enter into Mrs. Howard’s views; or, at least, she could not at once see that they were practicable. Yet they had given her an idea, a principle which might materially assist her in the little difficulties that often perplexed her. Blanche’s mind was resolute and decisive. This was not generally supposed; but those who were in the habit of interpreting her conduct, too often did so without the least knowledge of the real clue to it. Lady Charlton saw her amiable, agreeable, and attractive, and called her “a sweet girl;” and Mrs. Wentworth understood, from conversation with Eleanor, that she was very much fascinated by Lady Charlton, and accustomed to follow out

her cousins' wishes, and, in consequence, was likely to lead a desultory objectless life ; and supposed therefore that she was too gentle to be strong-minded. Lord Rutherford indeed understood her better ; perhaps, if he had not done so ; he never could have given her his full affection ; for, like her, he required respect to bring out his feelings, though it was respect for the intellect, not for the heart ; and one of the most satisfactory discoveries he had made in the progress of their intercourse was that she could have an opinion and a will of her own. But, even to him, it would have been a matter of surprise to witness the immediate effect of Mrs. Howard's advice. He could not have understood the working of a mind which obeyed conscience as it were instinctively, and to which the bare possibility of a duty suggested an instant endeavour for its performance. Blanche required only to perceive that Mrs. Howard was right in her views, and of this a very little consideration convinced her, and then her thoughts turned to the practical mode of carrying them out, quickly, sincerely, without delay, or reservation, or excuse, and in perfect simplicity : not at all considering it necessary to guard against observation, or to hide anything which she intended to do ; but supposing other persons would regard her duties as she did herself, as matters of course. She had already solved several difficult questions, when Eleaor's quick step was heard in the gallery, and scarcely pausing to knock at the door she entered the room with the exclamation :—

“ My dear Blanche ! I am so—so sorry ; I really am vexed to have kept you ; but —”

“ But if people will put themselves in the way they must expect to be caught,” said Blanche laughing ; “ however, we can go now.”

“ No, I beg your pardon, that was what I came to

say," continued Eleanor, hurriedly. "I am afraid we can't go this afternoon. Lady Charlton wishes me so very much to stay: they are going out,—a large party: she quite pressed my joining them. I am to drive with your cousin Adelaide."

Blanche could not conceal her vexation. "And does my aunt expect me to go, too?" she inquired.

"Oh! no, I assure you, I was very careful. I did not mention your name. No one thinks you are in the house. They suppose I had come to the castle to look for you; and now I have left them with the excuse, that I must write a note to mamma to tell her what I intend doing."

"And shall you write?" asked Blanche.

"Why no, upon second thoughts, I don't see there is a necessity. I was to spend the afternoon with you, but whether I go for a walk or a drive must be a question of indifference." The latter part of the sentence was spoken in that tone of decision which is sometimes used to conceal a doubt. Blanche, without making any observation in reply, put aside the writing materials which she was placing for Eleanor's use.

"Why will you not go with us, Blanche?" continued Eleanor. "Why can you not wait till to-morrow?"

"Because to-morrow will be like to-day," said Blanche: "it will have its own duties."

"But I could walk with you then; I promise that I will not put myself in the way of temptation again."

"Then it was temptation," said Blanche, a little reproachfully.

"Perhaps so; it might have been: but I see no harm in it. Whether you go alone to Susannah, or whether I am with you, cannot make much difference to her."

“But it does to me,” said Blanche, unable to repress a feeling of vexation that Eleanor should prefer a drive with a party of comparative strangers to a walk with herself.

Eleanor laughed, and declared that Blanche must be jealous of her cousin Adelaide; but there was self-dissatisfaction beneath her assumed indifference, and she brought forward a number of excuses for her determination. “Lady Charlton pressed it so much,” she said, “it was almost impossible to refuse; in fact, I suspect she wants me as a chaperone. They had not settled how it was all to be arranged. Charles was there, striving hard for the honour of driving your cousin, himself; but Lady Charlton had evidently set her face against it. So, you see, I may be useful.”

Blanche did her best to enter into Eleanor's gaiety, but she could not succeed very well; for, as she began to think of what was to be done, she saw that all her plans were disarranged; and Eleanor soon perceived it, also.

At the moment of accepting the invitation to join Lady Charlton's party, she had not remembered that Blanche could not well walk as far as Susannah's cottage alone. “However the next day would do just as well,” she said, “and Blanche had better make up her mind to give up duty for that afternoon, and go with the rest.”

This Blanche declined; since she was not wanted, she preferred having the time to herself. “I suppose you could not send an excuse to my aunt,” she suggested.

But Eleanor negatived the idea instantly, and after again begging Blanche to forgive her, and promising to behave better for the future, hastened away.

CHAPTER XIX.

BLANCHE stood at the window, watching the party, which was collecting in front of the castle. She saw Eleanor join them, and converse a little with Adelaide ; and, after some delay, they both seated themselves in the pony carriage, and drove off—closely followed by Mr. Wentworth on horseback. Blanche could almost have repented having refused to accompany them ; since there was no apparent obstacle in the way. But she felt that she had done what was best for her own mind, and there was great pleasure in the quietness and solitude now so unusual ; and when the rumbling of the wheels and the echo of the horses' hoofs died away in the distance, she lingered still by the open window to enjoy the unbroken silence within the house ; and the low, soothing, mingled sounds of nature without. They are rare and precious moments, which are thus snatched from the whirl of life and spent in stillness and alone. Even when they are not devoted to direct meditation, and appear too fleeting to be productive of good, they yet tend to give us a knowledge of the realities which encompass us. By the depth of their solemnity and repose, they remind us that beneath the surface of this weary, working existence, there is another world—another, and an enduring life ;—imaged in the unchanging sky and the returning sun, and the ever renewed beauty of the trees and flowers, and the steadfastness of the everlasting hills ; and, if our hearts are open to the truth, they may sometimes teach us to remember, that as in far-off years

the glorious temple rose silently in the city of Jerusalem, neither axe nor hammer nor tool giving warning or notice of the work, so the more glorious temple—the Church of the Living God,—is at this moment rising unperceived in the midst of a tumultuous world; each stone quarried and fashioned by the sharp edge of sorrow and the keen stroke of adversity, until perfected and prepared, it is fitted for that destined position which shall be the place of its rest for eternity.

Thoughts something like these filled the mind of Blanche as she sat alone, enjoying the unwonted quietness of the summer's afternoon. She had early learnt to look upon what is, not what seems to be; but, during the last few weeks, the truth had been at times overlooked. Notwithstanding the dissatisfaction expressed to Mrs. Howard, she had found much enjoyment in the society of Lady Charlton and her cousins; perhaps too much, for it had unconsciously relaxed the strict, watchful tone of her character. She perceived this now. Mrs. Howard's letter had given the first warning; and this short interval of reflection repeated it. Again she reverted to the question of duty, but less practically than before. There is a close connection between the mystery of what we see and the mystery of what we are; and when Blanche looked upon the glorious landscape beneath her, and the immensity of the sky above her, she was carried away far beyond the immediate consideration of daily pursuits into thoughts and speculations for which no answer could be found. Metaphysical difficulties suggested themselves; questions upon the origin of duty—its binding power—the irremediable consequences of its neglect—the very fact of its existence, involving the possibility of evil; and this again opening a new path for the reason to travel, till it stood upon the brink of a pre-

cipice, and recoiled shuddering from its own presumption. There are many amongst the young whom such thoughts harass when it is little suspected;—many, who are armed with no shield of faith for their protection. We may well pray for them, for their peril is great!

“Is that you, Blanche?” exclaimed a voice from below, as Blanche still stood at the window.

Blanche started. “Maude! alone! I thought I saw you with the rest.”

“No, thank you; I am not a gregarious animal. And such a set too, as they were!—just fitted for Adelaide. But come down, I want you.”

Blanche delayed. She had not settled what she was going to do; but, certainly, she had no intention of spending the afternoon with Maude.

“Come, you must come,” repeated Maude, impatiently; “we will have a German lesson. I promised you one. We will sit upon the south terrace; it is deliciously warm.”

Blanche went to another window, from which the terrace could be seen. It certainly was a most inviting spot, with the bright slanting rays of the sun upon it, and the flowers bordering it radiant in beauty; whilst, below, were contrasted the deep shadows of the trees on the bank, and the glittering lines of light which flickered on the sides of the distant hills. She paused for a moment to consider; and it seemed right to go;—right, since her afternoon was interrupted, to take advantage of Maude’s offer.

“We will read,” said Maude, holding up a book; “only make haste.”

Blanche threw a shawl round her and ran down stairs. Maude met her at the hall-door. She looked quite satisfied,—an unusual thing for her,—and Blanche was glad that she had assented.

“I fancied I was quite alone,” observed Maude,

as she sat down on a bench in the shade. "Why did you not go with the rest?"

"I was not asked," replied Blanche; "that is," observing Maude's look of surprise, "I did not put myself in the way of being asked. I meant to have gone out with Eleanor."

"Charity visiting, I suppose?" said Maude, with a slight sneer. "Well! you are very good, Blanche; but, depend upon it, it will be better for you to spend the afternoon in reading 'Egmont' with me."

"Egmont! Goethe's Egmont!" exclaimed Blanche hastily, and with doubt.

"Yes. Why not?"

"Goethe!" again repeated Blanche.

"Well!" and Maude looked up almost angrily. "What is the harm of Goethe?"

"I don't know, myself. I have never read anything of his."

"Only the name frightens you. Now, my dear Blanche, do for once have an opinion of your own. Don't be a Quixote and convert a windmill into a giant, and then set to work to fight it."

"But the world is the Quixote," said Blanche, laughing; "not I. I only go by what I hear."

"The world! that is some few bigoted individuals who condemn every creed which is not cut and squared after their own pattern. Your father does not say so, I am sure."

"No; he has often promised to read part of Goethe with me. Only part," she added, laying her hand upon the book, as Maude with a triumphant smile opened it. "Egmont is a part—a very grand part, perfectly unexceptionable."

"Are you sure?" said Blanche. "I think"—and she raised her eyes to her cousin's face with an expression of child-like confidence;—"I think I might trust you."

The sneer which still rested upon Maude's lips vanished directly. She turned to Blanche, and said eagerly, "Thank you; yes, of course you may trust. Whatever I might read myself, I could never ask you to listen to a word which might offend you."

"But Goethe," said Blanche, as if speaking aloud her own thoughts; "there is such a prejudice against him—there must be something wrong—something dangerous."

"Dangerous! absurd folly!" and Maude turned the leaves quickly in her irritation, exclaiming—as she went on, "The fear of weak, narrow-minded cowards—false to their own conviction—envious of a great mind. Blanche, you must not be one of them."

"I hope I should be always true to my own convictions," answered Blanche; "but it is very possible that you may call them narrow-minded. I think you would," she added, boldly.

Maude fixed upon her a steady, penetrating gaze, and said slowly, "I like that; better be narrow-minded and firm, than narrow-minded and weak. You shall read Egmont."

"Tell me its faults, first," said Blanche.

"Faults! it has none. It is the most wonderfully true, noble, inspiriting—but, you are a coward, after all;" and she threw down the book and stood gazing over the edge of the terrace.

Blanche went up to her. "I hope I am not a coward, Maude; but we all know the weak points of our own minds. Goethe's works must have something in them which does harm to some persons—I may possibly be one. Tell me if there is anything in Egmont which is generally objected too."

"By whom?" said Maude, sarcastically. "By Mrs. Smith—Brown—White—Green—Black?"

"By persons whose opinions I am bound to respect."

“By yourself, rather,” exclaimed Maude, impatiently. “Do forget such folly, Blanche, and judge for yourself. As for the story, it is matter of history; though with Goethe, it is not history, but actual, breathing, reality. It is Egmont as he was, as he lived, and talked, and thought; with his gallant, chivalric bearing—his openness, generosity, disinterestedness, love of freedom, fearlessness of the world’s censure. One must have loved him,—one must have been Clärchen, who died with him.”

Blanche repeated quickly, “Died with him?”

“Yes; for him—with him; she loved him too well to survive him.”

The next words were uttered by Blanche hurriedly, with an effort; “Who committed suicide, do you mean?”

“Pshaw! yet I might have known it,—it is all education. Suicide! Yes, what people call suicide. She kills herself. You are shocked. What a mistake to have told you! It is all spoilt now; but you shall read it still; and tell me whether Goethe cannot ennoble such a death.”

Maude put her arm round her cousin to draw her back to the seat, but Blanche resisted. “I am not afraid to read it,” she said; “but it will give me pain.”

“Yes; that pain which is pleasure,—the pain of sympathy and admiration.”

“That was not what I meant. I am sure I should admire it, but I could not sympathize with it.”

“Not with Egmont?—not with Clärchen?”

“Not with suicide,” said Blanche, quietly.

“Pooh!—nonsense! Why will you harp upon the same subject? Of course, I do not admire suicide. I allow that it is a crime, *per se*; a great crime if you will; but I do say, and I will always say, that Goethe sanctifies it by the power of his genius; that such

love as Clärchen's, is the love of a noble, self-devoting spirit; that it is beautiful, and true love."

"No; no!" exclaimed Blanche, eagerly.

"Not beautiful! Not true! Then what is so?" and Maude's eyes flashed with irritation.

"Love which lives through sorrow," said Blanche, her voice slightly trembling. "Not love which dies to escape it."

Maude laid down the book which she held in her hand, whilst waiting for a further explanation of her cousin's ideas, and fixed upon her a cool, patient gaze, which was peculiarly repelling.

Blanche turned away her eyes and went on; "You asked me once about my notions and theories," she said, "and I did not like to tell you; I am afraid I was wrong, but you must forgive me. I don't think I have what you would call theories; but I have principles. And, since you are kind enough to read with me, and talk to me, I should like you to know them, because then we shall understand each other better. And, another reason—they are true principles to me; and when you talk, it seems as if you were trying to uproot them. But it would be unkind to do so," she added, very earnestly, as she remembered the maze of perplexities in which but a short time before she had been involved, when suffering her thoughts to wander without check or guidance. "Even, if you could succeed, you would only be making me wretched, for they are my hope and comfort—my happiness." And, in her energy, Blanche clasped her hands, and drew up her slender, graceful figure in an attitude of strength and power, which made the half sneer upon Maude's face melt into a smile of admiration.

"And these thoughts and principles are what?" asked Maude, patronizingly.

Blanche pressed her hands more closely together, and still averting her eyes from her cousin, answered,

“They are what you may call narrow-minded prejudices—they are religion.”

“Religion!—yes; certainly;—extremely right,” said Maude, still in the same manner. “I hope I am religious too.”

Blanche was for an instant distressed and perplexed.

“My dear child!” said Maude, speaking in a light playful way, which made Blanche shrink at the recollection of her own enthusiasm; “my poor Blanche! what an excitement you have worked yourself into! I declare you look quite ill.”

Blanche with difficulty resisted the temptation to run away. “Thank you,” she said, “I am not ill. I did not mean to be excited. I merely wished to say to you why I never could agree in your admiration of Egmont.”

“Because of that naughty Clärchen,” observed Maude; “but we will forget her; we will choose Schiller, if you like it, and give up Goethe for the present. By-and-by, when you have seen a little of the world besides St. Ebbe’s, and this grim old castle, you will not be so much shocked at him.”

Blanche drew back from the caress with which these words were about to be accompanied. “I never can wish that time to come,” she said. “If it did, I should have learnt to bear with that which my reason, as well as my faith, tells me is utterly false.”

There was a silence of some moments.

Maude appeared struck with the firmness of her cousin’s tone. She dropped the patronizing air which she had assumed, and said, “Goethe’s principles cannot be false, for they will find an echo in the heart of every one who can admire generosity and devotedness, and an undying, unchanging affection.”

“I have not read his works,” was all the answer

which Blanche made. She seemed weary of the argument.

Maude again had recourse to the volume by her side. Opening it towards the end, she read a few sentences to herself. "I cannot let you have such notions, Blanche," she exclaimed, after a short pause; "they are beneath you. You must read,—you must admire."

"As I should admire a dream or a fairy tale," said Blanche, smiling.

"That is what I don't understand; it is the only thing I can't understand in you," said Maude. "What do you mean by a dream? Patriotism, the love of liberty, generosity, love, are realities: you can feel them yourself; I know, I am sure you can."

"I hope I can," replied Blanche. "I think them very real, very lovely, and admirable."

"And therefore true," continued Maude; "true, that is the point,—that is the object to be sought after, desired, striven, prayed for!" She spoke earnestly, her dark grey eyes kindling, and her colour heightened.

"Yes, truth; it is the one thing needful," replied Blanche: "but Mrs. Howard says that a half truth must be the greatest of falsehoods."

"What? say it again," exclaimed Maude.

Blanche repeated the words.

"Goethe's truths are half truths, you mean," continued Maude.

"I think they must be; like the half truths of heathenism, which led men to idolatry."

"But a whole truth, who can find it?—who can be certain of it?" said Maude, in a musing tone.

"God is truth," replied Blanche, timidly and reverently.

"Yes," and Maude's manner became reverent

also ; “but men also are divine—in their noblest feelings, their highest desires.”

“We were made in the image of God,” observed Blanche ; “but the image is defaced.”

“Granted, of course. Defaced ; but not utterly ruined—not lost.”

“No, indeed not,” exclaimed Blanche, enthusiastically ; “not lost,—still to be restored, renewed again ; but it must be after the perfect original.”

“I am tired of symbols,” said Maude, hastily.

“Still, may I tell you, will you not think me very presumptuous if I say what such notions as I believe Goethe’s to be appear to me to resemble?” continued Blanche : “those I mean which make persons interesting, and in a certain way good, without being Christians. I must use an illustration ; I cannot explain myself else. It is as if he had accidentally met with separate fragments of what had once been the copy of a perfect statue ; and because he admired each portion separately, supposed that by uniting them all together the whole would be beautiful.”

“Of course, of course,” interrupted Maude ; “they could not be less beautiful when put together than they were before, supposing they were all the work of the same hand.”

“But if parts were wanting,” continued Blanche : “or if Goethe had never seen the perfect original, and therefore, instead of combining them according to the first design, formed a figure after the imagination of his own heart—distorted and deficient,—there would be no beauty in the whole, though every separate member might be perfect.”

“Well!” was all Maude would say.

“I think,—it seems to me,” continued Blanche, hesitating, “that this is something like such principles as you tell me are to be found in Egmont. The feelings described may be good and true sepa-

rately ; but they can scarcely be so when they are put together, because love and obedience to God are wanting."

"No," exclaimed Maude ; "Goethe, in Egmont at least, would make men obedient to the principles implanted in them by nature and conscience. You would not wish for a better guide than conscience."

"It must be the conscience of the Bible, then," said Blanche ; "not the conscience of a fallen nature. This is setting myself up as being able to decide very weighty questions," she added, blushing ; "but I have gained all my ideas from Mrs. Howard. Thoughts used to come into my head and puzzle me, and I used to talk to her about them ; and she made them clearer."

"I should like to argue her into admiring Goethe," said Maude, "that would be a triumph."

"Impossible !" exclaimed Blanche ; "that is, to make her approve would be impossible ; or admire either, in one sense ; because she never admires what is not true."

"True ! true !" repeated Maude to herself. "If one could only find what is true !"

"We are not true ourselves," said Blanche, "because of our evil nature ; so that if there is truth anywhere, it must be in something distinct from ourselves."

"Yes ; I suppose it may be so," replied Maude, doubtfully.

"In the Bible, then ?" continued Blanche ; and finding that Maude did not contradict her, she added, "Goethe and the Bible would not agree ; therefore Goethe's principles must be untrue. Am I very obstinate ?"

"You are very provoking," replied Maude, tossing the book from her. "I will never ask you to read Egmont again ; you may be quite certain of that."

She spoke with irritation, but Blanche fancied that some portion of it was assumed. "I did not say that I would not read it, and admire it too," she said; "but you must let me try and think that Clärchen was a heathen."

Maude looked sullen. She went forward, picked up the book, and turned towards the house. Just then Lord Rutherford came upon the terrace; he had been riding, and had returned earlier than he expected. Maude's countenance struck him as he passed her, and, when he joined Blanche, he began to inquire what was the matter.

Blanche did not venture to tell him the whole. She had an intuitive perception of the points upon which they might differ, and avoided them carefully. Difference with him was very unlike difference with her cousin; it involved so much more. And then she was afraid of him; afraid of his cool, keen sarcasm; especially afraid, because she could not feel, as she did when conversing with Maude, that however at variance their sentiments might be, both were earnestly seeking after truth.

CHAPTER XX.

“AND you were not inclined to be of your aunt's party, then?” began the earl, after Blanche had briefly told him that she had just finished an argument with Maude, which left them apparently both where they had begun.

“The party was formed before I came back from the parsonage,” replied Blanche; “and I meant to have gone for a walk with Eleanor.”

“You are wonderfully fond of the parsonage, Blanche. Are you in love with Mrs. Wentworth yet?”

A remembrance of the morning interview came to Blanche's mind, and she answered quickly, “Oh, no! not at all in love.” Adding, to soften her words, “she requires, I think, to be known well.”

“Better than I ever knew her,” observed the earl, with asperity. “She is one of those chill pieces of propriety whose very presence freezes one's blood. Marvellous it is to me that she should have such children. Miss Wentworth is superior in every way; and her brother is a very handsome, agreeable man.”

“They are a handsome family,” observed Blanche. “Dr. Wentworth——”

The earl interrupted her: “My dear, you were going out; into the village, I suppose.”

“Yes, some distance; but I could not go alone, and the pony-carriage was given up for my aunt.”

“Well! I will go with you; you are not tired, I suppose?”

Blanche thought of Maude. She fancied that it was unkind to leave her.

Her father drew near the steps which led down the bank. "You are going,—which way? Can I help you?"

Blanche mentioned her cousin's name; but the earl quickly negatived the idea of asking her to join them, ending however with, "unless you particularly wish it, my love. I would have you do whatever you like."

Blanche did not make a second proposal. She ran lightly down the steps, and taking her father's arm, they followed the path which led them through the underwood, and amongst the scattered trees, down to the edge of the stream. A rough bridge was thrown over it, and Blanche, leading the way, without thinking it necessary to explain where she was going, crossed it, and pursued the path over a green field to the foot of the steep, broken ground which bordered it. Lord Rutherford walked on in silence, till Blanche began to ascend the bank, when he stopped, and ralying her upon her forgetfulness of his age, asked where she intended to carry him.

"Only a little way—quite a little way by this bad road," replied Blanche: "we shall be in a straight-forward lane, when we are at the top of the bank. But, papa, I will not go on if you had rather not. I was going to see Susannah Dyer."

"Susannah who? Oh! a poor woman, I suppose."

"A blind girl," said Blanche.

"Blind! poor thing!—extremely sad. Blanche, my darling, you will sit down, and rest first."

The afternoon was passing rapidly, and Blanche's hopes of visiting Susannah Dyer were becoming very slight; but she sat down obediently.

"Susannah was confirmed when I was," she commenced again.

“Oh, yes; I recollect you told me before. There is no harm in your going to see her: you like it, I suppose; and you have not much amusement.”

Blanche smiled to herself at the word amusement, for it was not what she generally associated with her visits to the poor.

“Your aunt has been talking to me,” continued the earl, following, as he always did, the train of his own ideas. “She says I bury you here: it is not the season for London, or she would make me take you there directly.”

“Me! London! Oh! papa, I am quite happy where I am.”

“Happy in your ignorance, my love! I am glad you are: but ignorance will not do all one's life; and you must be condemned to London, by-and-by, I am afraid. Condemned to a gay life,—balls, fêtes, concerts.”

“They sound pleasant,” said Blanche. “I suppose I shall like them; but Mrs. Wentworth tells Eleanor that she should not like her to be placed within reach of them.”

“Mrs. Wentworth is not your guide, my love. I mean, you are not at all called upon to take her views. I don't wish you to do so. I like you to form your own.”

Blanche was checked, and afraid to say how much she was inclined to respect Mrs. Wentworth's views. It was always the case when conversing with her father. With all his partiality—his devotion, it might be called—his eagerness to gain her confidence—insensibly, he repelled her. She was always choosing subjects for conversation, thinking whether he would be pleased. There is no real freedom where this feeling exists.

“Your aunt,” again began the earl, “is very different from Mrs. Wentworth. She is a person

of large, comprehensive mind, and very unprejudiced. You must find the difference in talking to them."

"My aunt is much the more agreeable," said Blanche.

"And her opinions are much the more valuable," continued the earl. "You could not find a safer friend to introduce you into the world. She understands the thing so well; you cannot possibly make mistakes if you follow her advice. She has an intuitive perception of right and wrong in all cases."

"I think she has very good, high notions," said Blanche.

"Yes; very good, very high: what all persons should have," said the earl quickly. "But I was thinking of society. I have perfect confidence in your good taste, my child; yet you might, in ignorance, offend against the customs of the world, if you had no one to direct you. And it is a woman's direction which is required: no man could understand what is wanted. I should be quite satisfied if I thought your first introduction into society would be under your aunt's chaperonage."

"And will it not be?" inquired Blanche, in a tone of surprise.

"There is a doubt. Sir Hugh has odd whims, and sometimes fancies he can only live abroad. I think it possible he will not remain in England more than a twelvemonth; if so, it would be my great wish to give you a little insight into life soon. You will be more than seventeen in the spring."

"Yes: but that seems a long time off," said Blanche.

"You might enjoy a season in town, then," continued the earl, and your aunt might be with us; "and, in the mean time, I think it would be desirable to show you something more than the routine

of our present life. Your cousins would like it, so would your aunt, and it might induce her to remain with us longer. She had an idea the other day of persuading Sir Hugh to go down to his own place: and I had some difficulty in talking her out of it. It would be an absurdity. Sir Hugh never rests there: he no sooner feels himself tied down to a place, than he is in an agony to leave it."

"But is it not right for persons to live on their own property," inquired Blanche; "and take care of it and of the people, as you do?"

"Right, if they like it, my dear: but Sir Hugh's steward does infinitely more good at Senilhurst than Sir Hugh himself. However, the question now is not about him. What shall you say, Blanche, to an importation of visitors?"

Blanche laughed and blushed, and thought it might be pleasant, quite pleasant, if only her aunt could be the lady of the castle instead of herself.

"There we must differ," replied the earl, turning upon her a look of fond admiration. "There is but one who can fitly fill that station,—only one," he repeated, in a lower tone. Then, after a short pause, he resumed, "And will you like it, Blanche? that was my doubt. Tell me,—let me know," he continued, seeing that she was uncertain what to reply.

Blanche was obliged to speak; she never dared to delay an answer when her father's manner was impetuous; but she could only repeat that it might be pleasant. This she saw did not satisfy him, and making an effort to be candid, she added, "I cannot be sure till I have tried; and I do not like to say that I wish it, because I think it might do me harm."

"Harm?" the earl turned to her hastily.

"I might like it too well," continued Blanche,

her voice faltering a little, as, with an instinctive feeling that it would be better not to provoke any discussion upon duty; she added, "To-day I do not seem to care about it, because I have been disappointed about Mrs. Howard. I looked forward to her visit so much, that now I do not seem to have an interest in other people. I dare say I shall enjoy it though, dear papa," she said, perceiving that he looked disappointed; "and you will not scold me for being fond of Mrs. Howard." She looked up into his face with a smile, though a tear glistened in her eye. It was a smile of bright, heavenly beauty; but it brought proud visions of earth to the worldly mind of the Earl of Rutherford.

"No," he exclaimed; "I would have you love, venerate, delight in her. Whatever my Blanche loves must be most worthy. But there are affections—feelings to be brought forth under other circumstances. Scenes more fitted for you. You do not think, Blanche, that I could consent to see you wear out the best years of your existence here; when I have but to speak the word, and you may be the centre of attraction, the star, the guiding light of hundreds. No," he added, as Blanche's colour deepened, till her forehead was dyed of a crimson hue; "I would not pain you, my child, with your own praises. I speak selfishly, for my own happiness. To see you wasted at Rutherford would be wretchedness. For my sake, you must forget the dreams of your childhood, and look forward to the prospect opening before you."

"It will not be very difficult, I dare say," said Blanche, trying to throw her own mind into harmony with her father's. "I dare say I have a taste for gaiety, only I have never had any opportunity of indulging it."

"Then you shall have it now," exclaimed the

earl, his face brightening. "I have been remiss, certainly, in my attentions to the people about us; but we will have a few persons in the house to help us to entertain them, and then we can collect them *en masse*, and make it agreeable."

"Soon?" inquired Blanche, with a timidity which she could not hide.

Lord Rutherford laughed. "The execution-day is not fixed: but, my love,"—and his lightness of manner in a moment changed into seriousness—"you must not deceive me as to your wishes. Neither for your aunt, nor for myself, nor for any human being, will I consent to do what you do not like. You have only to say the word, and Rutherford shall be as quiet and monotonous for the next six months as it has been up to this moment."

The word monotonous gave Blanche a quick insight into her father's feelings. Though he would not own it, the desire for society was as much for his own sake as for hers. She could not disappoint him; and, besides, she was not in her heart inclined to do so. Blanche was young and naturally cheerful. She enjoyed change, and amusement, and excitement; and, though she dreaded them as possible evils, she had never experienced any harm from them. Eleanor, too, she knew would enjoy the novelty, and Adelaide Charlton would be delighted; and, with all these mingled inducements to bias her inclinations, she at length answered, as heartily as the earl desired, that "she should certainly like it, provided only that her aunt would undertake the management of every thing;" and then, hoping that her father would be satisfied, she stood up and proposed to continue their walk.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHEN Blanche reached the blind girl's cottage, she was not quite in the mood for such a visit. Her fancy had been wandering,—yielding to the gay ideas which her father had suggested. Lord Rutherford went with her till they were within sight of the house, and then he took out his watch and said that it was late, and hoped that Blanche would not stay too long. “It was a strange fancy to like coming to such an ugly place.” Blanche was vexed that she had brought him; and blamed herself for not understanding him better, at least for not consulting his wishes more. This was one of the many trifling incidents which were continually reminding her of the little true sympathy there was between them. He did not really care for the things for which she cared, notwithstanding his desire of making her happy. She opened a wicket-gate, and walked up a narrow slip of garden to a square, red brick house, the only ornament of which was a straggling monthly rose. She was almost resolved not to go in: there was a sound of voices in the house, and she said to herself that perhaps it was another visitor, and she should be in the way. Good reasons, or such as are apparently good, always rise up to the aid of inclination. Her father was leaning over the palings, and she feared he was growing impatient, and her knock at the door was hasty in consequence. In answer to her first inquiry, she was told that Susannah was not well, and was only just dressed and coming out of her bedroom. Blanche

was about to find an excuse, and say that she would call another day; but conscience reproached her, and she never turned away from that warning. After Mrs. Howard's advice, she certainly ought not to postpone any duty which presented itself, and, conquering the disinclination, she said that she could wait till Susannah was ready.

A delay of some minutes took place before she was admitted. Susannah was to be brought into the room, and seated in her proper chair; and a bustling neighbour was to be dismissed at a back door; and two children sent out in a hurry, with some broken playthings, which made the room look untidy: but the smile that brightened up the blind girl's intelligent face, when at last Blanche entered, quite rewarded her for her patience.

"And you are not well, Susannah, I hear?" said Blanche, sitting down by her side, and taking her hand; whilst Susannah turned to her with a look of gratitude, which did not need the light of the eyes to give it expression.

"I have not been very well this week, my lady; I believe I go out rather too much. But I have had a little nephew staying here till yesterday, my sister's child, who lives near your ladyship's aunt, at Senilhurst. That tempted me to go about with him and the other children; for he is a sweet little fellow, and I never liked to have him out of the way. We went over the hill to the village one day, and it was too far; but there is not much the matter."

"I wish I had known you were not well," said Blanche: "I certainly would have managed to see you before; but the days pass by, and there are so many things to do. I should have liked, too, to see your little nephew. How old is he?"

Blanche had touched the right chord to show her sympathy. The blind girl forgot her trials, whilst

in the pride and delight which she felt in her sister's child, she expatiated upon his goodness, and affection, and his beauty too; for he was beautiful, she declared. She quite knew what he was like; but a heavy sigh followed.

"Poor Susannah!" said Blanche, kindly; "it must be a great trial."

The blind girl recovered herself in an instant. "I am not going to complain, my lady. It's all best, I know; and I am cheerful enough most times."

"Only out of spirits to-day, from not being well, I am afraid," said Blanche. "I wish I could stay with you and read to you."

"Ah! if you could! some of the hymns out of the book Miss Wentworth brought, I should like. They seem to be work for me afterwards; because when I sit knitting, I can remember them. It must be a glorious thing to make verses!"

Blanche smiled and said, "You told me one day you had tried to make verses yourself, Susannah. I dare say it amuses you."

"Yes, sometimes, in my poor way; it makes the time pass to see how the words fit."

"And verses suit some thoughts better than plain words, do;" continued Blanche.

"Yes, than some plain words; but not the Bible words."

"Many of them are really verses also, though not quite like ours," replied Blanche. "Just listen to these," and taking up a Bible, she turned to the passage in Isaiah which bears us, in thought, from this evil world to behold "the land which is very far off."

Susannah listened in the attitude of fixed attention, and when Blanche's voice ceased, she entreated for more. "It was so lovely," she said; "it

was like rest—not rest* though, quite; but moving on without feeling it.”

Blanche could not refuse, and was beginning to read the fifty-fifth chapter, when the earl, unperceived, came within sight of the door. “That first verse is a verse for illness, Susannah; is it not?” said Blanche, pausing; “for the hot, weary days, when our lips are parched and dry; and a verse also for our sad days, when it seems that we have no pleasure; when we sit for hours still and lonely, and seem not to have any friends, or comforts, and long and thirst for them?”

“But that can never be your case, my lady,” said Susannah.

Blanche answered quietly: “The lonely feeling comes to us all alike, at times, and so does the comfort. But I know it must be worse for you than for me; God has given me a great many blessings.”

“Yes, so many to love you,” continued Susannah. “I can fancy that better than all the grandeur.”

Blanche could not repress a sigh as she replied, “I hope there are some in the world who love me, certainly—love me very dearly; but that love is not enough alone.”

“No, not alone; I know it is not. I can feel it is not sometimes;” and the expression of the poor girl’s face spoke deep awe and devotion; “but it comes for a time; and then it goes, and it is all dark—quite dark,” she repeated, in a voice of melancholy, as if the privation from which she suffered had given her a keener insight into the meaning of the darkness of the soul.

Blanche paused for a few instants before she replied. She turned the pages of the Bible, and as she did so repeated, in an under tone, the first words of the evening prayer, beginning, “Lighten our darkness, we beseech Thee.”

Susannah caught the words and said eagerly, "Does it mean darkness in our hearts?"

"Yes, in one sense it must," answered Blanche; "and night must mean the night of this life. It is a beautiful prayer."

"Lighten our darkness," repeated Susannah, thoughtfully. "Ah! my lady; that can never be for me."

"Not in this world perhaps," continued Blanche; "but the night will pass, Susannah, and the day will come—the glorious day. It is worth waiting for, worth suffering and striving for, worth patience."

Susannah's face lighted up with interest, as she folded her hands together with an air of devotion, and suffered a flower which she had been picking to pieces to fall from her grasp.

"Just think," pursued Blanche, "what it will be like; it will be light with no shadow, no cloud, no power of fading away—perfect light both for the body and the soul. And it must come; though the hours seem ever so long, ever so dreary, it must come. Oh! Susannah, it will be light for us both, and we both promised together to strive for it."

Susannah did not reply; the sympathy was beyond her comprehension. Since that one day which had united them in the same act of self-dedication, their paths had parted to the world's sight far asunder; and, whilst poverty and privation were her lot, it seemed that both life and death must be light to the envied heiress of Rutherford.

Blanche read her thoughts with wonderful quickness, and as her voice sank and faltered, she added, "You will not think it; but I have my moments of darkness too—sadness, loneliness, and disappointment. Even for me earth would be often dreary if it were my all."

The earl's cough at that instant warned her that

he was within hearing. She looked up and caught his eye. His look startled her. It was stern; but the sternness of suffering rather than of anger. He asked only if she was ready, took no notice of Susannah, and scarcely allowing Blanche to bid a hearty good-b'ye, led her from the cottage.

They walked on in silence for some distance. Blanche was nervous and uncomfortable. She dreaded she knew not what. As they stood again upon the brow of the steep bank they had ascended after crossing the river, and which commanded a splendid view of the castle and park of Rutherford, the earl stopped her suddenly, and whilst he pointed to the domain which was one day to be her own, said in a calm tone, the more bitter from its effort to be indifferent: "Then I have failed, Blanche, to make you happy. I give you all and you are disappointed."

For a moment Blanche was quite unable to answer. The restraint which she always felt when with her father now amounted to dread; yet she summoned resolution, and replied, "We must all be disappointed sometimes, I suppose, dear papa; but I have a great deal to make me happy; and I am very happy generally. I would not vex you for the world," she added, laying her hand affectionately upon his arm.

The earl took no notice of the caress, and after continuing his walk for some little distance, exclaimed, as if giving vent to a train of secret reflections, "You are right, Blanche; it must be so. I was a fool to think it might be otherwise. But a last hope, a last wish," he added, in a lower tone. "Folly though it may be to cherish it, it is hard to give it up."

"If it is a wish for me, papa," said Blanche, gaining courage as she spoke, "I think you may be satisfied; for I desire no change outwardly."

"Then what would you have? Why do you speak of disappointment?" he inquired, quickly.

Blanche evaded a direct reply, and replied, "Our sad feelings generally come from our own minds. There would be none, I suppose, if we were perfect."

A cloud gathered upon Lord Rutherford's face. "You must be careful," he said. "That morbid tenderness of conscience may lead you, you know not where."

"I hope it is not morbid," exclaimed Blanche; "for Mrs. Howard did not call it so: she understood it, and gave me sympathy."

"Sympathy!" said the earl, in an under tone; and Blanche repeated the word with an unconscious earnestness, for it expressed the true extent of her needs. They had crossed the bridge, which was divided by a little gate from the castle grounds. The earl opened the gate for Blanche to pass, but he did not follow her, and when she turned to look for him, she saw him leaning over it with his face buried in his hands. She walked on slowly; her heart was full of anxious, unhappy thoughts, and the sound of voices on the terrace above jarred painfully upon her. The idea of possibly meeting strangers made her hesitate to ascend the bank, and whilst waiting undecidedly, the earl rejoined her.

"Not that way," he said, as he heard Adelaide's laugh; and he went on before her, so that she had only a momentary glimpse of his countenance; yet, even in that instant, she fancied it looked paler than usual. They turned into a walk at the foot of the bank and reached the castle by a more circuitous path, which led to one of the side wings. A low door at the foot of a turret presented itself at the termination. The earl stopped before it.

"You know this way, of course," he said.

“Yes; I have explored it once or twice,” replied Blanche.

“You think you know it,” he continued, and a ghastly smile overspread his features. “But I doubt if you do. It is a private entrance to your mother’s apartments.” They passed on and ascended a winding staircase, which Blanche had only noticed before as leading, she supposed, to the servants’ rooms; and in a few seconds reached a small lobby, into which several doors opened. The earl took a key from his pocket, unlocked the nearest door, and putting another key into Blanche’s hand, said, “This room opens behind the bed-room which you have seen. You will find letters and papers in the cabinet. Read them at your leisure, if you will.” He did not wait for a reply, but turned into a passage communicating with the other part of the castle.

Blanche scarcely noticed that he was gone. She stood in her mother’s apartment, her place of solitude and retirement, and all consciousness of the present was absorbed in feeling for her who slumbered with the dead. The room was small, and furnished very simply; the chairs were without carving or ornament; the curtains of the plainest pattern; the carpet worn and colourless from age. But a reading-stand was placed in the oriel window, and upon it lay a large open Bible; and a low hassock, bearing the marks of long use, was before it; and near, upon a little table, was a Prayer Book blotted with tears, and open at the service for the Burial of the Dead; and Blanche, with but one thought in her mind, cast a hasty glance around, and clasping her hands together, threw herself upon her knees to pray, where her mother must have prayed, for pardon, and strength, and acceptance at the Last Great Day.

A few moments calmed her mind, and she was able to examine the room more closely. It had evidently been left untouched since her mother's death, for the walls were discoloured and the paper was damp; and a sense of desolation came over Blanche as she tried to unlock a large inlaid cabinet filling a recess at the lower end, which at first resisted her strongest efforts from the length of time it had remained unopened. It was the only mark of peculiar refinement or expense in the room, with the exception of two small pictures upon sacred subjects, exquisite in design, but fast losing their beauty from the damp that had gathered over them. Blanche succeeded in unlocking the cabinet after some further efforts, and began a hurried inspection of its contents. Stray articles of various kinds were collected in it, of little value in themselves, yet put aside carefully and marked. Remembrances they were of absent friends; ornaments associated with happy days; things which once must have had a voice and language for the heart; now, like their possessor, silent in spirit and association. And there were other trifles, more painful perhaps to look upon as recalling the daily life which had since become but a dream: pens, sealing wax, scraps of paper, and memoranda, the items which form part of our ordinary existence, and which could tell a truer tale of life than the most valued relics. Blanche lingered over these unconsciously. They brought her very near her mother. It was as if but a few hours had passed since she had been seated at her desk, using the pen encrusted with ink, sealing, perhaps, the last letter which she ever wrote; or—the fancy flashed across Blanche's mind, with an overpowering rush of regret, as she caught sight of an infant's coral and rattle—amusing herself with the child who was destined only to learn the value of her care by its

loss. But time was passing rapidly. Blanche had but a few minutes more to spare, and, shutting the drawer quickly, she opened another division of the cabinet. Manuscript books, letters, and papers filled it, and days would be required in order to examine them thoroughly. Blanche took the book which lay nearest. It was full of old accounts; she threw it aside, and opened another, it was the same; another, and still another, and the gong sounded for dinner; but Blanche could not go. Paper after paper, book after book, was examined; but nothing was found which could throw any light upon her mother's personal history; until, quite underneath the pile, she laid her hand upon a packet of letters and a journal book, marked "Not to be opened till after my death." The second gong sounded as she hastily unfastened the string which bound them; and, closing the cabinet, she took up the packet, locked the door of the chamber, and hurried to her own room to dress as quickly as she might, and appear at the dinner table, if possible, as gay and light-hearted as was her wont.

CHAPTER XXII.

"YOU were a complete truant this afternoon, my love," said Lady Charlton, addressing Blanche, as she threw herself into an arm-chair after dinner, professing to be too tired either to read, write, or work. "We had a charming drive, and I should have liked to introduce you to my friends the Cuthbert Greys. Very nice people they are in their way; a little too fashionable, perhaps, for your taste; but kind-hearted and extremely clever. I quite thought, when Miss Wentworth joined us, that you would be found somewhere."

Blanche did not exactly like to own that she had absented herself on purpose, and endeavoured to change the subject, by asking where they had been and what they had seen.

"The carriage party went round by Staplehurst Common, and over the hill to the old monument in Lord Hervey's grounds," said Eleanor; but Miss Adelaide Charlton and I drove through the copse."

"Miss Adelaide did not go with you anywhere by her own consent," exclaimed Adelaide, coming forward from the window where she had been standing.

Eleanor laughed, and promised to be less formal another time; "Though it is an error on the right side," she added.

"You must come with me to my room. I want to show you that sketch we were speaking of," continued Adelaide.

"What sketch?" asked Maude, haughtily and quickly.

Adelaide's blush was not perceived in the twilight ; but she did blush as she answered, in a tone of affected indifference, " Oh ! only one that was taken for me abroad,—I dare say you don't remember."

" There was one which I took," said Maude : " is that it ?"

" No, no, Maude ! What can it signify to you ?" and, calling to Eleanor, Adelaide hastened out of the room.

Blanche watched this little scene with surprise, and a feeling of annoyance which she could not account for. She stood in silence for some moments, when Maude's hand was laid upon her shoulder, and Maude's deep voice of satire whispered in her ear, " Jealous, Blanche ?" Blanche started ; but, before she could reply, Maude had glided past her, and she was left alone with her aunt. She could not go then, although she longed to do so ; but it would have been unkind, when they had scarcely met all day ; and as Lady Charlton drew a chair towards her, and beckoning to Blanche to seat herself in it, said, in her most winning tone, " Now, my child, we will have a few minutes of pleasure," Blanche would have been well contented, but for one reason, to remain.

" You were grave at dinner, my love, and you are grave now," began Lady Charlton. " What is there to make you so ? must I not know ?"

" I did not mean to show that I was grave," replied Blanche.

" But you cannot hide it, dear child,—not, at least, from me. You are graver than you ought to be, Blanche, for your years."

" It is my disposition, I suppose," said Blanche.

" No, my love, I assure you it is not your disposition. You are naturally light-hearted ; but you

suffer yourself to brood too much upon serious subjects."

"That cannot be, surely?" exclaimed Blanche.

"Yes, indeed, it can. You would say so, if you had had my experience. You are very like your mother, Blanche."

"You would not wish to see me different, then, would you?" asked Blanche, almost reproachfully.

"Not in many things; but, in that one, perhaps I might. Much more of your happiness may depend upon it than you are at all aware of."

Lady Charlton spoke so energetically, that Blanche looked at her with astonishment. "Was not my mother happy?" was the question which trembled on her lips; but then, as often before, she dreaded to ask it.

"I should like to have my own way with you," continued Lady Charlton, in a lighter tone. "You should not be buried at Rutherford much longer if I had."

"Papa means to make Rutherford very gay," said Blanche.

"Ah! my love, he means—I quite give him credit for his meaning. But can he do it? I know him better than you do, Blanche. There is not a man of greater natural talent, or greater powers of pleasing, in England, than your father,—but not at Rutherford; there is a weight upon him here."

"What! how?" asked Blanche, quickly.

Lady Charlton hesitated, "A weight I called it,—well! it is one: the weight of the place; the old walls, and the old furniture; it even makes me melancholy. Now at Senilhurst, where I would take you if I could, you would find everything different; a cheerful house, lovely grounds, open and bright, a very pretty pasture country, not overpowering in beauty: you know; or, at least you

will know by-and-by, that nothing is more fatiguing than being always on the mental tiptoe of admiration;—everything in fact to enliven you. It would be a new phase of existence, and a good introduction to a season in London.”

Blanche liked the description, and said so; and Lady Charlton was excited too, and gave a yet more glowing picture of the enjoyments she would find at Senilhurst.

“I should recommend it far more than remaining here,” she said. “There is nothing to be done in a place like Rutherford. Entertainments—young people’s entertainments I mean—are out of character. And you would not have the change—I see that is what you want—complete change of scene.”

“When I have been here only a few months?”

“That does not signify, my love,” replied Lady Charlton; “it is the effect of the place which is pressing you down. If your father had consulted me, he never would have brought you here. There is nothing so desirable for young persons as cheerfulness. Grave thoughts and anxieties come quite soon enough,” she added, with that sudden transition to a tone of sorrowful feeling, which always gave a peculiar interest to her conversation.

“I should have no village at Senilhurst; no poor people, or school,” said Blanche: “that I should regret.”

“Yes; but, my dear, you would have them. You should see what we are doing there, and help us. Sir Hugh is a great man for education, and gives me *carte blanche* to do as I like when we are at home; and you shall help me. My own girls, unfortunately, have never taken to that sort of thing, and it has been a great vexation to me. Ady is too giddy, and Maude is so wrapt up in German metaphysics. I assure you, Blanche, you could be of the greatest possible use to me.”

“And poor Eleanor,” said Blanche, unconsciously giving utterance to her own train of thought.

“Yes, she would miss you ; but, my dear, you cannot be always together.”

“We have been so till now,” said Blanche. “I could not bear to think of our being really separated.”

“No, indeed, I can quite understand that ; you must be just like sisters : but the being parted for a time will only make you enjoy being together the more afterwards.”

“It will be such a very long parting,” observed Blanche, “if I am to go to London in the spring ; unless—I wonder whether Mrs. Wentworth would let her go with me there.”

“We had better not look forward, my dear child ; take the day as it comes. Go to Senilhurst with me now, and leave the spring to itself.”

“Mrs. Wentworth would not allow it, I am afraid,” said Blanche, unheeding the warning ; “and I could never make up my mind to ask her, if I thought she would say No.”

“Mrs. Wentworth’s strictness would come in the way, I suppose,” said Lady Charlton : “but never mind, my love ; leave it, as I said, and remember you will get on better in London than you would elsewhere, without Miss Wentworth. There will be so much to amuse and interest you. It pleases me immensely, Blanche,” she added, bending forward to kiss her niece’s forehead, “to find you take to the idea so kindly, as the poor people say ; and I shall tell your father we have settled it.”

“Oh ! no, no,” began Blanche ; but Lady Charlton stopped her—“My dear, you don’t know your own power, and you must be taught it. Believe me, you have but to say the word, and horses would be ordered for Senilhurst to-night. And now you have quite

cheered me, and I must exert myself, and go and see after Sir Hugh. Shall we have tea soon? I am tired, and must go to bed early to-night; so, if you can, don't let that Mr. Wentworth keep us till midnight singing glees and trios."

Blanche rang for tea, and thought it might be possible to snatch a few moments for solitude and a cursory inspection of her precious packet of papers, before it was brought in. Eleanor and Adelaide were crossing the gallery as she went up stairs. She heard Eleanor say, in a laughing voice, "I shall certainly tell how carefully you have kept your treasure;" whilst Adelaide replied, by a faint "Oh! no, no! indeed you must not!" which, of course, meant pray do. But Blanche did not stop to interpret words, or search into hidden meanings; only she thought it strange that Eleanor should have found so much to occupy her with Adelaide Charlton as to leave no time for her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IT was nearly midnight before Blanche went to her room for the night. Notwithstanding Lady Charlton's injunctions, music had been the order of the evening; and music is, perhaps, of all amusements the most enticing. Lord Rutherford was particularly silent, and seemed quite in the mood for enjoying a gratification which could be obtained without effort; and Sir Hugh, who generally joined the party for an hour or two before he went to bed, was charmed with the opportunity of displaying his scientific knowledge. Duets, trios, glees, and quartettes, succeeded each other rapidly; or rather the quartettes were the beginning, and the trios the finale: for, after a short time, Maude, whose voice was of the greatest consequence, professed her determination not to sing another note, and the piano was left to the possession of Adelaide, Eleanor, and Mr. Wentworth; Blanche only joining them occasionally. Blanche was much occupied with her own thoughts; but not sufficiently so to render her unobservant of what was going on around. Music was a delight to her, and in general such an evening would have been a great treat; but when at length the piano was closed, and Eleanor and her brother departed, she felt relieved; as if something which had annoyed and offended her was removed. Yet it was hard to say what that something was. There had been nothing to find fault with in the singing. Nothing in the manner or behaviour of any one of the party to herself. Eleanor had seemed anxious to make

amends for any apparent neglect; and Maude, as if wishing to show that she had quite forgotten their difference of opinion, was particularly gentle, and pointed out a beautiful passage of Egmont, which she assured her she had marked because it was so entirely unobjectionable. Every one had been kind to her; yet Blanche was fretted. It was so strange, she said to herself, that she should be so; so odd that she could not bear to watch Adelaide; that she quite disliked hearing her speak to Mr. Wentworth. She was really very good-natured and sang nicely, and with a good deal of spirit and taste of a certain kind. But it must be the taste, Blanche thought, which jarred upon her. It was too marked—too personal—and there was a system of amiable quarrelling and bantering kept up between Adelaide and Mr. Wentworth in the intervals between the different songs, which was especially disagreeable to her. She could not help hoping that, if this style of intercourse was to go on, Mr. Wentworth would discontinue his visits.

Thoughts of Adelaide, however, were soon dispelled when the door of Blanche's apartment was closed against interruption, and she was at length left at liberty fully to examine her mother's papers. Late though it was, she could not rest satisfied with the slight glance which was all she had before given them, and seizing upon the journal, as being the most likely to afford her the information she desired, she began to read it.

But disappointment was destined to follow. There was no record of passing events to tell the secret history of the Countess of Rutherford, although there was sufficient to show that she had been singularly gifted with refined taste and powers of observation, chastened by deep piety. The journal was not exactly what its name implied. It was rather a book of remarks, thoughts, extracts, and prayers. To the writer it must have been full of memories and

suggestions ; for there were dates and private marks, bearing reference, apparently, to the seasons at which the observations had been made ; and there was also a visible change in the style of writing from the commencement to the end. The first pages showed more imagination than reflection ; more of hope than contentment. The last were almost entirely short extracts from devotional writers, expressive of great mental sufferings, and an endeavour to be resigned under affliction. They were unconnected, and sometimes abruptly terminated. The handwriting was often illegible, and a few sentences were introduced, apparently without meaning ; but the concluding words, written several months before death had summoned the Countess of Rutherford to her rest, were the declaration of the Psalmist : “ I will patiently abide alway, and will praise Thee more and more.”

Blanche repeated the verse to herself again and again, for it seemed sent as her mother's legacy—her last accents of advice and encouragement. But there was nothing strictly personal in all this ; and she turned to the letters. They also were, for the most part, unsatisfactory, being chiefly written by Lady Rutherford's friends, with the exception of a few from the earl, dated in the first year of his married life, and preserved most carefully in a little silk case. These were kind and considerate ; but implied frequent long absences, and gave few indications of any wish to be at Rutherford. Engagements, it was said, kept him in London. He hoped to be in the country soon, but could not promise certainly ; he trusted that the countess was amusing herself, begged her to deny herself no gratification ; was glad to hear that Mrs. Wentworth was with her. These, and many similar wishes, came in every letter. But Blanche was chilled as she perused them ; for it was

not the love which would have been shown to herself.

Surely, she thought, there must have been something more. This could not have been the affection for the sake of which her mother had left home, and friends, and early ties, and pledged herself, by the most solemn and binding engagement, to love, and honour, and obey, until death. One letter of the packet was still unread, and, with a sickening feeling of doubt and disappointment, Blanche unfolded it. It was without a direction, and in her mother's handwriting, addressed to a dear friend.

The first sentence attracted her attention by a painful fascination. "You tell me I must struggle against my misery; but do you know what you require? You would not be willingly unkind; yet by such words you raise a barrier between us, which leaves me doubly desolate. Weary and heartsick I have been so long, that sorrow is my natural element, and hitherto I have borne it in silence. But if the captive sinks under the burden of captivity, who shall blame him? I wander, day after day, seeking for I know not what—longing for rest which never comes; listening for—I am listening now—but you will find fault with me. God hears me; I turn to Him. He will hear my child. I give her to Him. —If my husband comes—I am dreaming—too late." And those few sentences, the half-collected, half-unconscious outpourings of a broken heart, were the only indications granted to Blanche of the cause of that grief which had preyed upon her mother's health, and it seemed too evident, at length, crushed the powers of her mind.

The morning dawned brilliantly and cloudlessly upon Rutherford Castle, and as Blanche roused herself from a short slumber, the last words of her mother's letter flashed upon her memory before she

could recall where she had heard them, or why they should be accompanied by a pang.

The recollection came but too soon, and with it the conviction that her most painful suspicions were verified—that her mother's life had been rendered miserable by neglect. For, in the clear thoughts of the morning, Blanche could put together words, and incidents, and trifling remarks, which had fixed themselves in her memory from the very pain they had caused, and by their aid find a clue to many circumstances hitherto mysterious. Long before the household had risen she sat up in her bed, gazing upon the straggling, nearly illegible, characters which showed the wretchedness of her mother's feelings, almost as much as the words themselves; whilst indignation and fear were succeeded by bitter self-reproach, as she allowed herself to pity one parent at the expense of her affection for another. Her mother had been lonely and heartsick, and no one had been near to comfort her. She had been left to breathe her anxious wishes, and no one had been at hand to gratify them. She was ill in body and in mind, and there was no one to administer to her needs or calm her distracted spirit. Whose fault could it have been? Blanche rested her forehead on her hand to still the beating, throbbing pain, which was settling there. It was no new thought that her father was proud and worldly, and had no sympathy with her highest hopes. Day by day the assurance had become "doubly sure;" and the gulf between them more widely marked. But could he also be cold and neglectful; he, who was so devoted to his child's happiness, whose every thought was centred in her gratification, whose eagerness to indulge, was even painful and burdensome? Alas! for that most bitter of all doubts, which bids us look with suspicion on those whom duty bids us reverence.

When the party assembled at the breakfast-table the pale face of Lady Blanche excited general notice. The earl looked at her with uneasy interest, but only asked if she had slept well ; whilst Lady Charlton took occasion to remark that it was evident the place did not agree with her ; she had thought so for a long time but did not like to say so. " Senilhurst would do her a great deal of good, if you would but think so," she added, addressing Lord Rutherford.

" Senilhurst will do very well, if Blanche likes it," he replied ; " but I very much doubt if she does."

Blanche smiled faintly, and said she should miss many things at Rutherford extremely.

" But, my love," and Lady Charlton turned round with a sparkling eye ; " it was only last night you entirely entered into my views, and quite enjoyed the idea ; you really are very incomprehensible."

" I don't much care," began Blanche ; but she stopped, for she knew that indifference would vex every one.

" You don't care, my dear ? I wish I could understand you. I wish I knew what you were aiming at."

" She is not aiming at anything," said the earl, coolly. " She likes staying at Rutherford ; and, if so, at Rutherford we will stay."

Lady Charlton compressed her lips and went on with her breakfast. Soon after Adelaide came into the room. Lady Charlton looked up, and said, " You are very late. Is your father dressed ?"

" I don't know," was Adelaide's careless reply, as if the question did not at all concern her.

" I must know. I wonder what Pearson has been about ; pray inquire," continued Lady Charlton to one of the servants. " Pearson has grown extremely absurd of late," she added to herself ; " he never can be in time ; and Sir Hugh won't bear it."

Pearson made his appearance, and was immediately

accosted with, "Sir Hugh is not at breakfast, I suppose?"

"Yes, my lady; at breakfast, and quite enjoying it. He hopes to see your ladyship as soon as is convenient."

"Oh!" and as Pearson withdrew, Lady Charlton gave a slight push to her plate, and declared she had no appetite, and really felt quite unwell. As it was such a beautiful morning, she thought she should like a little stroll on the terrace for the sake of the air.

Blanche half rose to accompany her, or at least to ask if she could be of any assistance; but Lady Charlton motioned to her to remain, and murmuring a few thanks went away. Silence followed. Lord Rutherford took up a newspaper, and Adelaide began reading a letter; whilst Maude occupied herself in studying a large historical picture that hung opposite to her; and Blanche tried to finish a breakfast for which she had not any appetite. Maude looked at her from time to time with an expression of greater gentleness in her features than they seemed naturally formed to wear; and as Adelaide lingered, according to her custom, tasting first one thing and then another, sighing because the tea was cold, and ordering coffee which, when it came, she did not wish for, Maude declared herself ashamed of wasting so much time, and proposed to Blanche to leave her.

"Yes, do go; never mind me," exclaimed Adelaide, good naturedly; "I have quantities of amusement—the most charming letter you ever read, Maude, from Caroline Grey. She is so sorry not to be in the neighbourhood, with her mother and sister, now we are here." Maude's lip curled. "I leave you to your friend very willingly," she said, "so long as I am not required to undergo the penance of reading what she writes."

“Ah well! you don't like her; but that I can't help. Blanche, Caroline Grey would just suit you; you shall know her some day.”

“And hate her, as I do,” whispered Maude, putting her arm within that of Blanche, and drawing her out of the room. “Caroline Grey is Adelaide's dearest weakness,” she added, laughing, as she led Blanche to the library. “Almost more silly than herself, if that were possible. But we wont talk about her. What have you done, Blanche, to put my mother in such a ferment?”

“I!” exclaimed Blanche. “Is my aunt vexed?”

“My dear child, what a perfect innocent you are! Vexed?—She is angry, furious.”

“Oh! no, surely.”

“Hark! Here she comes!” said Maude, and Lady Charlton walked into the room, inquired for some sealing-wax—asked Maude where Adelaide was, and, after a formal “Better, thank you,” in reply to Blanche's inquiry of how she felt, again departed.

“I am afraid she is annoyed,” said Blanche, much perplexed.

“Only annoyed!” said Maude. “Well, we must hope it may be nothing more. But what concerns me most, Blanche, is yourself. You look wofully pale this morning, and I must know the reason why?”

“I slept badly,” said Blanche.

“But why? Sleeping badly is never an ultimate cause, and my mind cannot rest till it has reached one.”

“I did sleep badly: but I cannot tell you the reason why,” said Blanche, quietly.

“But I must know. I must insist upon knowing. Had it anything to do with our stupid afternoon, yesterday? Did I bore you by my German nonsense?”

"Oh! no, no; I scarcely thought about it."

"Not complimentary; one would rather be hated than forgotten. Still I forgive you. But the pale looks and the bad night,—I shall go backwards, like the wonderful history of the House that Jack built, till I find the cause."

Blanche's eyes filled with tears, and Maude's manner altered directly.

"There is something more in this than a little fever, or a fit of worry," she exclaimed. "Blanche! I wish I could make you believe that I am not quite such a heathenish savage as I appear."

"Only yourself would call you so," said Blanche, half laughing.

"No. But a great many would think me so.—And yet, I think, yes; I am sure," she continued, more seriously; "that I could be a friend—a true friend—a better friend to you than most people. Blanche, why do you feel yourself so lonely?"

Blanche regarded her with a smile of surprise; and Maude went on. "You are lonely, though you may not choose to own it; you have no one to sympathize with you, though so many love you; and you have fancies, and worries, and brooding thoughts.—I see it constantly."

"Are you sure you are not speaking of yourself?" asked Blanche.

"Never mind me; I am used to it. I am older, have seen more of the world, and have learnt to live in it by myself. But you have not. And you are not formed to battle with it alone, as I am."

"It may be the lesson I am to learn," said Blanche, gravely.

"No, no," exclaimed Maude; "that is one of your narrow views. We choose our own lessons, and shape our own lives. They do so, at least, who are

worth anything. Determine that you will not be lonely,—that you will have companionship and sympathy, and you will find it.”

“Have you done so?” asked Blanche.

“No; but it is because I do not need it—because I would rather stem the torrent of life's troubles by my own unassisted power; but you are formed to lean upon others and cling to them. Why must you condemn yourself to reserve and solitude?”

“I do not condemn myself,” replied Blanche. “I enjoy sympathy when I can have it; but I do not need it as much as you imagine: or rather,” and her colour slightly deepened as she spoke, “I have more than I can explain.”

Maude turned away as if annoyed.

“Am I unkind?” said Blanche, following her.

“Incomprehensible, merely,” was Maude's cold reply; “but I have no wish whatever to force your confidence. I might have known, from our conversation yesterday, how little our ideas accord.” And yet, as she said this, Maude lingered in the room, evidently unwilling to break off the conversation.

“You are very kind to me, dear Maude,” said Blanche, gently. “I wish I could make you believe that I really am obliged; perhaps, by-and-by, you will, when we understand each other; for, in some things, I think we agree more than we know. But, as regards confidence, I have none that I should feel it right to give to any one, except Mrs. Howard; or, perhaps, my aunt.”

“Mamma!” exclaimed Maude. “Confidence to her!”

“I don't mean confidence, exactly,” replied Blanche. “But there are some things which she could tell me, which would be a comfort to me; though I could not ask her about them just now.”

“No ;—certainly,” answered Maude, with a satirical laugh. “Fond though she is of you, I would not advise you to put yourself in her way again, for some hours at least.”

Blanche looked distressed, and said she was scarcely aware what she had done, though she supposed it was being so foolishly changeable, as to going to Senilhurst.

“I suppose it was that : but leave her to herself ; she will come round again ; and she will bear a great deal from you.”

“I am glad she is fond of me,” said Blanche ; though she said it with an uncomfortable feeling of distrust and disappointment.

“Yes ! mamma is always fond of persons she is proud of.”

Blanche's face showed that she was puzzled ; and Maude continued, laughingly, “Now, my dear Blanche, there is a certain limit to simplicity, beyond which it becomes silliness. You really are much too sensible not to know that you possess a great deal of which the world is proud—rank, wealth, beauty. Nay ; don't shrink from the truth,” she added, as Blanche suffered an expression of distaste to escape her lips. “I am not flattering you ; I am not a man paying court to you ; if I were, I should be wiser than to praise you to your face. But I long to see you make the most of yourself ; and I am sure no one can ever do that who has not a thorough appreciation of his or her peculiar advantages. So you must understand that mamma is proud of you ; and, as a consequence, fond of you ; and if you choose to go and confide your griefs to her, don't let me prevent you. Only, I should have imagined—”

“What ?”

Maude thought for a moment, and then answered, "I should have thought that your taste might have led you in a different direction."

"It is not a question of taste," replied Blanche. "If I did not love my aunt, she would still be the only person to help me now; unless, perhaps, Mrs. Wentworth could."

"Then go to Mrs. Wentworth," exclaimed Maude, hastily. "Cold, though she is, stiff, unbending,—go to her, Blanche. You wonder at me, and I shock you; but I am not thinking of my mother, as my mother—only as suiting you. Mrs. Wentworth will tell you more of what you wish to know than mamma will," she added, fixing her large piercing eyes upon Blanche, as if she knew her inmost heart.

"But I cannot go to Mrs. Wentworth; I cannot learn from one who is not a member of my family—"

"The secrets of that family," added Maude, quietly. "Suppose I could tell them, Blanche?"

"Do you know? Can you tell?" exclaimed Blanche, and the faint shade of colour in her cheeks went and came rapidly.

"If I cannot tell myself, I might learn," pursued Maude.

Blanche shook her head in disappointment. "No; you are very kind, very good; but it will not do."

"And there is to be no confidence between us, then?" said Maude.

Blanche did not answer. They had been standing together at the window, and as she was about to turn away from it, Maude laid a detaining hand upon her arm, and pointing to a bird which was winging its flight far into the blue sky, said, "I had a dream of two minds soaring together, leaving the delusions of this paltry world behind them, and seeking a higher life in the glorious light of truth."

Blanche sighed.

“Must it be a dream?” said Maude, almost tenderly.

Blanche raised her eyes timidly to her cousin's face, as she replied unhesitatingly, “There is a false light as well as a true one. Before we soar together, Maude, we must know which we are seeking.”

“Truth,” answered Maude. “In other words, spiritual, intellectual beauty, which is another name for truth.”

Blanche passed her hand over her eyes, and said, with a faint smile, “I cannot talk as we did yesterday—my head aches too much; I cannot fix my thoughts.”

There was a tone of indescribable depression and weariness in her voice. Maude looked at her compassionately and kissed her, and said she would not tease her; and the sympathy overcame the self-command which Blanche had been exercising, and large tears filled her eyes, and rolled down her cheeks.

Maude made her sit down. “Can't I help you?” she said. “Are you quite sure?”

“Quite sure; unless you know.” She thought for a few moments, and then added, “Does my aunt ever talk to you about herself?”

“About past days?” said Maude. “Yes, sometimes; but not often.”

“Not of interesting things; things which would interest me?” and Blanche looked up imploringly.

“I don't know,” said Maude doubtfully; “that is, they would interest you in a way.”

“But does she ever mention my mother?” The last words were uttered with painful unwillingness, and when they were spoken Blanche sat with her hands tightly clasped together, as with an effort to conceal the working of some keen emotion.

The perplexed expression of Maude's face increased as she looked at her. “What is it that

troubles you, Blanche?" she said. "Surely nothing connected with days so long gone by; sorrows that have so long ceased?"

"Then she was sorrowful; she was miserable," exclaimed Blanche, rising impetuously. "Oh, Maude, in pity tell me what you know."

"Sorrowful, miserable," repeated Maude slowly. "One must always fear it in such cases; but it may have been better than we think."

Blanche grasped her cousin's hand, and the brightness of her eye was terrible in its eagerness.

"There are sadder moments of sanity than of delusion," continued Maude, gently; and Blanche's fingers relaxed their grasp, and she fell back in her chair nearly fainting. Maude was not in the least hurried out of her usual steadiness of manner; she sprinkled some water on her cousin's forehead from a flower-glass near, and when Blanche a little revived, and uttered mournfully the word "delusion," answered, without any reference to her transient weakness, "I thought you knew it, dear."

"No, no; they kept it from me. But tell me now, quickly."

"Only delusion," answered Maude; "nothing more. Nothing to distress you, Blanche. Pray believe me," she added, as Blanche's eyes again filled with tears.

"But what delusion? of what kind?" asked Blanche, faintly.

"Quiet melancholy; only that, I assure you; nothing really hereditary to frighten you."

Blanche scarcely seemed to hear this comfort; she only said in reply, "Was she alone?"

"Yes, sometimes, when it could not be helped," replied Maude, with evident hesitation.

"Quite alone; sorrowful, miserable," murmured

Blanche, and she leant her head upon her hand, and cried bitterly.

“ I will tell you all I know,” said Maude. “ She was not strong naturally, mamma says ; and she was a great deal by herself ; and she must have been like you, Blanche, fond of brooding over her own fancies, for they never could persuade her to see people and go out, except occasionally, when Lord Rutherford was here.”

“ And she went out then ? she was happy then ?” exclaimed Blanche, raising her head quickly.

“ Yes, she went out a little to please him,” continued Maude. “ But you know he was absent a great deal, especially at last.”

Blanche's head sunk despondingly. Maude's quick eye remarked the change, but she went on—“ I do not think there was really anything to distress you so much ; of course, she had every comfort, and her mind”—she stopped, considering how to approach the subject in the way least likely to give pain ; but Blanche made a slight motion of the hand, and said, “ I can bear it,” and Maude continued, in a rather hurried voice, “ It was not so very dreadful ; not common insanity. She was very quiet, and gentle, and good. Mamma used to come and see her very often, and for a long time people said it was only melancholy, it came on so gradually. She used to write a great deal, I believe ; but almost all her papers were destroyed when Lord Rutherford came back from abroad.”

“ But he was with her ; quite at the last ?” said Blanche, in a low voice.

“ No ; he was not here in time. It was very unfortunate ; for the longing to see him was so great, it was worse than anything. But Blanche, my dear, I am doing you harm,” she said, observing her cousin's look of intense suffering.

“No, no ; go on ;” was all that Blanche ventured to utter.

“There is not much besides to tell,” answered Maude. “But indeed, Blanche, I am very anxious you should not think it at all worse than it really was. She was ill and depressed very long before it was thought necessary to have any one with her ; a companion,” she added, as Blanche slightly shuddered. “And, even to the very last, there were intervals when she knew everything and everybody quite well ; and the only way in which they discovered when the attacks were coming on worse, was that she would then kneel for hours together in her room, repeating portions of the Burial Service.”

Blanche put her hand before her eyes to hide the light of the glorious sun. Many moments elapsed before she spoke. Then she rose from her seat, and kissed Maude, and said, “Thank you ; you have been very kind ; you must not say that you have told me,” and walked slowly out of the room.

CHAPTER XXIV.

MRS. WENTWORTH was sitting alone in her little room: the post was just come in, and she was busied in answering her letters. She looked particularly old that morning; perhaps her dress was unbecoming—perhaps her letters had been annoying; at any rate, her care-worn expression was sufficient to attract observation; and as Dr. Wentworth passed the window, and stopped to say a few cheerful words, it made him delay the business he was bent upon, and re-enter the house. “There is nothing amiss in them; is there, my love?” he inquired, taking up the letters on the table. “I did not read them through.”

“Oh, no! nothing: they are mere chit-chat; not of any consequence. Why should you ask?”

“You seemed uncomfortable—that is all; but if there is nothing the matter, well and good. It must be the cap, I think, which makes you look different. I think I told you I was going to the Union this morning.”

“Yes: you will be back to dinner, I suppose, at six o'clock.”

“Say half-past; we shall be more punctual. Good-b'ye;” and Dr. Wentworth departed.

Mrs. Wentworth leant back in her chair, in a reverie, a strange and painful one. It carried her back many years, to that early romance of first love—that entire sympathy of thought and feeling, which she had imagined was to last undiminished for ever. Dr. Wentworth was a good man, an earnest man: his heart was given to his duties, first; his

family afterwards. His wife did not wish it should be otherwise; but she did not resemble him. The romance of her early years had not, like his, been extinguished by the constant pressure of parochial cares. She was poetical, enthusiastic still, in secret. She had, as it were, two characters—the one of great imagination, the other of strong common sense. Her husband's affections had been won by the former; they were retained by the latter. Imagination, with him, had been the amusement of boyhood; with her, it was the present beauty of life: and if Mrs. Wentworth had been endued with a less portion of right feeling and self-command, the discovery of this essential difference in their characters might have been made at the risk of the happiness of both. As it was, it only served to throw her back into herself, to chill the outward show of enthusiasm, and to concentrate all the intensity of her hopes and interests upon her children. Perfect respect, and a true, though unimpassioned, love, were still her husband's; but she had learnt to live her inward life without him: and whilst sharing his pleasures, and sympathising in his sorrows, she concealed, as by a natural instinct, those keener, more sensitive feelings, which he would not have understood. There were times when this sense of uncongeniality was very oppressive. When Mrs. Wentworth thought of her children, she most felt the absence of that perfect sympathy, which would have supported and soothed her under the anxieties they occasioned. It was a fear for them which was now pressing heavily upon her spirits; that boding, shadowy fear which cannot be combated, because it assumes no tangible form. She indulged the reverie of the past for a few moments only. It was dangerous to her peace, and contrary to her strict conscientiousness; but, as it faded away, there rose up the long vista of futurity, and who can blame

a mother's momentary longing to pierce into its secrets? It is so hard to persuade ourselves that the children whom we love so fondly, and guard so tenderly, must one day bear, as we do, the burden of this evil world. When we are sinking ourselves beneath pressing cares, we can least endure the thought that they must sink likewise. When we are struggling with the claims of conflicting duties, or worn with exertions for their happiness, we can least look forward to the same conflict for them. We watch them in their hours of mirth, and listen to their joyful expectations, and in pity suffer the delusion to last whilst yet it may; and at length we ourselves become sharers in it, and, closing our eyes to reality, whisper to our own hearts, "To-morrow shall be as this day, and much more abundant." Happy is it that a truer love and a wiser forethought is steadily, unshrinkingly, yet most mercifully, preparing for them the cup of trial which we would so weakly withhold.

A knock at the door disturbed the train of Mrs. Wentworth's thoughts. "Come in," was the order, spoken quickly and nervously; but Mrs. Wentworth did not look round.

"Did you want me, mamma?" asked Eleanor, standing as if unwilling to enter.

"Yes; if you are not engaged. Is Susan at her lessons?"

"She was just going to say them; but she can do something by herself, if you wish it, mamma," and Eleanor retired.

Several minutes passed before her return, more, it seemed, than were necessary, and Mrs. Wentworth had a hasty word on her lips in consequence; but it was not uttered, and served only to give a sadder tone to her voice, as she said, "I would not have

interrupted you, my dear, if there had not been a necessity."

A little awkwardness was perceptible in Eleanor's manner as she approached her mother; and a certain consciousness that the necessity alluded to was not an agreeable one.

"You were very late returning from the castle last night, my love," continued Mrs. Wentworth. "I did not like to vex you by saying anything about it at the time; but I was sorry. I did not expect, indeed, that you would have stayed to dine."

"I did not mean to do it," replied Eleanor; "but we went out driving and riding, and came back late; and then Lady Charlton and Adelaide persuaded me, and I thought you would not be angry."

"Adelaide," repeated Mrs. Wentworth in a musing tone; but she made no other comment upon the familiarity. "I am not angry, my dear child," she added; "and, perhaps, I should not even be vexed if you were alone."

"You are afraid for Charles," replied Eleanor; "but, mamma, it is his only amusement."

"Yes, I know it; but it makes me very anxious."

Eleanor looked steadily in her mother's face, whilst a smile, which she vainly strove to repress, stole over her features, as she said, "You are afraid of his falling in love, mamma?"

"Falling in love, my dear! No!" and Mrs. Wentworth's lips curled in disgust. "I could never fear that Charles would fall in love with anything so vain and frivolous as Miss Charlton; but I am afraid of his being led on to say and do foolish things; to flatter and talk nonsense, and go further than he knows; to flirt, in fact: and I am afraid of your seeing it, and perhaps being induced to join in it in a certain way. I could not bear that sort of thing,

Eleanor; it would be so utterly against my taste, not to put it upon higher grounds."

"Charles likes Miss Charlton very well," said Eleanor; "but he does not really care for her."

"I do not see that it makes much difference whether he does or does not," replied Mrs. Wentworth; "for a young man just preparing for ordination to waste his time and lower his character by dancing attendance upon a silly girl, whom he does not care for, merely because he wants amusement, is, to say the least, unworthy."

"The Charltons will be going soon," said Eleanor. "Lady Charlton talks of spending the winter at Senilhurst, and taking Blanche with her."

"Indeed!" Mrs. Wentworth's face brightened instantly.

"Yes; it is nearly settled;" but Eleanor looked as much vexed as her mother was relieved.

Mrs. Wentworth observed the expression of her face: "My dear child, you must forgive me for being glad; I do feel for you."

Eleanor only drew up with an air of reserve, and said, "I am not disappointed; I have known that it must be so from the beginning."

"It will smooth every difficulty if they go," continued Mrs. Wentworth, evidently trying to be frank and unconstrained; "that was why I sent for you, Eleanor, to know if you could tell me anything of their movements. If they were to remain, I must urge your father to make some other arrangement for Charles. I have such a great dread of the intimacy. Can you not understand me?" she added, watching Eleanor's countenance narrowly. "I think you must see yourself how bad it is."

"Certainly," replied Eleanor, flattered by her mother's confidence, "Adelaide Charlton is not the

person to improve him ; but, there is more in her, mamma, than you would give her credit for."

"That may be ; but Charles must have a superior wife, if he is ever to do anything in life. He must marry a woman whom he respects."

"And loves, too," said Eleanor.

"Yes, assuredly ; but the love in which there is no respect is but a broken reed to rest upon. However, I need not take up your time any longer, my love. If Lady Charlton goes soon, all my trouble will be at an end ; and, in the mean time, I must trust to you not to do more than you can help in bringing them together."

"I will not do anything you dislike, dear mamma," was Eleanor's reply ; "if you will only look less anxious than you did when I came in."

"Anxious, did I ? My face is not generally a tell-tale."

"I understand it 'always,'" answered Eleanor. "You have been uncomfortable very often lately."

Mrs. Wentworth did not contradict the assertion.

"I think you would be happier," added Eleanor, "if the castle was far off ; and yet, mamma," and she hesitated, "you suffered me to be brought up with Blanche."

"Yes, I did ; possibly it was a mistake." Mrs. Wentworth thought for a few moments, and then continued, "Yet I acted for the best at the time. When you first went to Mrs. Howard I was very ill ; I could not take proper care of you myself. Mrs. Howard urged me to let you go for the sake of Lady Blanche, and for her mother's sake. At that time there seemed little probability that Lord Rutherford would ever settle permanently in England ; or, if he did, that he would choose to reside at Rutherford. The circumstances under which he left it were such that I

myself could not have contemplated his return. He has another place in the north ; I imagined that he would have preferred it. Yet it might have been an error, a want of due forethought. Oh ! Eleanor, you will not make me regret it !”

Eleanor's feelings were touched by the earnestness with which her mother spoke. “Mamma !” she exclaimed, “I have been foolish, I know, of late ; but, indeed, you may trust me. I can only learn good from Blanche, and I cannot really be led away by a person like Adelaide Charlton.”

“God forbid you ever should be, my love,” replied Mrs. Wentworth. “You do not know all that such an influence brings ; how it lowers, wastes, vitiates the whole tone of the character ; how its effects are felt for years and years. Such a mind as yours, Eleanor, if it is not bent upon the highest objects destroys itself ; it cannot rest in mean pursuits, and it turns inward and gnaws at the root of its own happiness. And you may be—shall I tell you what you may be?—what I have sometimes pleased myself by imagining you to be ?”

“Something much better than I can ever imagine myself, I am sure,” said Eleanor.

“Yet nothing beyond your power,” continued her mother. “A woman with all a woman's tastes, and gentleness, and modesty ; yet earnest, untiring, exalted in your aims, enlarged in your views, sufficient for your own happiness, from having fixed it where alone it may be safely centred, whilst living in the happiness of others, because your whole life is devoted to the promotion of their welfare ; and having a power over their minds, because you have kept such a strict watch over your own. That is what you may be.”

“And what shall I be, mamma ?” The question was put in a tone of great thoughtfulness.

“Mrs. Wentworth paused,” and her voice sank again into its quiet stillness, as she said, “One only knows.”

“But tell me ; help me, if you can,” said Eleanor ; “tell me what I must be if I am not what you describe. Mamma, it may do me more good than you can think.”

“Would you wish to hear ?” replied Mrs. Wentworth. “You will think me exaggerating, yet I have watched the downward progress of many characters like yours, and the general outline is alike in all. First, self-dissatisfaction and a longing for the respect which might be deserved, and then an endeavour to be satisfied with mere admiration instead ; admiration becoming necessary, and sinking gradually into the craving of a miserable vanity ; and this changing in old age into a sharp, cynical narrowness of mind, which is wretchedness to itself and others. I am not speaking in the least too strongly, Eleanor. I have seen it, and grieved over it ; and the first symptom has always been that fickleness of action, though not of intention, in little things, which you are always regretting.”

“And never amending,” said Eleanor. “Mamma, I must do so, I will.” The house-bell rang at that moment ; Eleanor coloured deeply. “It is Adelaide Charlton,” she said. “I did very wrong ; I asked her to come.”

“Mrs. Wentworth strove hard not to show her real annoyance.”

“She shall stay but a few minutes,” continued Eleanor. “She has only to look over some music, and she knows I shall be busy.”

Miss Charlton was announced in the drawing-room.

Mrs. Wentworth rose and said she would receive her, and, collecting her letters, was preparing to go, when Dr. Wentworth's voice was heard. The meet-

ing at the Union was deferred; he was returned unexpectedly, and he came to the window to say so.

“I want you, my dear, particularly. I must have you for a few minutes to go into the village with me.”

“Is it really necessary? There are visitors in the drawing-room.”

“What visitors? Only Miss Charlton. Charles and Eleanor will entertain her.”

Mrs. Wentworth's conscience smote her for the pride which had made her shut up from her husband the anxieties which she imagined he could not sympathise with. Now, when she wanted his assistance, he was working unknowingly against her.

“Indeed, I must have you, my dear,” he continued. “I am in a hurry.”

Mrs. Wentworth could say no more; but she looked at Eleanor as she joined him, and Eleanor answered the look with, “Adelaide will only stay a few minutes. I shall not let her do so.”

CHAPTER XXV.

"I HOPE I am not interrupting you," began Adelaide Charlton, as Eleanor welcomed her with a gravity of manner which she could not hide.

"Oh! pray don't name it. I shall find the music I mentioned almost immediately," and Eleanor began searching for it hurriedly; inquiring at the same time for every one at the castle.

Adelaide rattled on in her usual style. They must have had a bad night, she supposed, for they all seemed cross; but she made a point of never inquiring what was the matter. She had left Maude and Blanche in close conversation; but, of course, she did not know what it was about: they were becoming such desperate friends, it would not do to pry into their secrets.

Eleanor bent over the music-stand, and regretted that the lost piece of music was not forthcoming; but promised to look for it, and send it to the castle in the course of the day.

"Oh! it does not signify;" was Adelaide's indifferent reply. "One never really cares for any particular piece; I dare say you have a good many that I don't know. May I look?" She took up a piece of music, hummed a few notes, thought it seemed pretty, and seated herself at the piano to try it. "Awfully difficult all this style of music is, and not in good taste, people say; at least, Maude says so, and she is the oracle. After all, instrumental music is worth nothing compared with vocal. How badly your brother and I sang last night! We really

must practise before we exhibit again. Don't you think it would be a good thing to have practising days?"

"If one had time, it might be," said Eleanor.

"Oh, but we must make time. I have no notion of persons not finding sufficient time for anything they wish. I protest, there is that enchanting trio we were talking of; you must try it."

"A trio for two persons!" said Eleanor, laughing; "that will not quite do."

"Never mind; just try your part."

She struck the first few chords; Eleanor grew hopeless of escape. Adelaide's visit was from her own invitation, and she could not summon courage to shorten it by confessing her engagements.

"You very good people are so methodical," continued Adelaide; "you quite put one to the blush. I declare, to see the way Blanche goes on is enough to convert one into an automaton. I must have some music this morning to put me in good humour."

"Can that ever be needed?" asked a voice from behind her; and, to Eleanor's extreme annoyance, her brother joined them.

Adelaide Charlton's manner showed instantaneously the working of her mind. There was a little blushing, a little bantering, a good many quick upward glances, interspersed with a few downcast modest ones; some pretty nonsense about music and flowers, and a pretence at shyness, when Mr. Wentworth asked her to sing, with an evident disinclination to leave off when she had begun. It was vanity, unmistakeable; and Eleanor stood by and compared Adelaide's flirting with her own dignity; and, in the pleasure of self-satisfaction, forgot her mother's caution and her own promises. And so the minutes went by, and Eleanor satisfied herself that the waste of time could not be

avoided, and therefore it could not be wrong to enjoy it. And she did enjoy it in a measure.

There is generally something agreeable in that sort of light, quick conversation which accompanies music, and Adelaide Charlton was not deficient in talent of a certain kind. She had travelled and could relate amusing adventures herself, and assist Mr. Wentworth in remembering his; and she had seen more of the world than Eleanor, and laughed at many of her simple notions; she was older also, and had been presented at court, and was acquainted with people of rank and fashion. These were all ingredients of influence, especially when mingled with them was the thought "Notwithstanding all these advantages, I am the superior."

"And now, Charles, we really must be steady," was at length Eleanor's faint endeavour to stop the flow of the conversation. "I am doing very wrong in staying here, and you are doing very wrong too, Adelaide. I must be rude and send you away, or we shall both get into disgrace."

Adelaide started from her seat; "Go, must I? Well, I suppose I have been here an immense time. I did not mean to stay a quarter of an hour. Mr. Wentworth, I must trouble you to return my glove: you seem bent upon keeping possession of it; but I am afraid it will not be quite as useful to you as to me." She held out her hand, and to her surprise, the glove was given as a matter of course, and Mr. Wentworth, turning suddenly to his sister, said, in a tone of quiet politeness, "Eleanor, you do not see—Lady Blanche Evelyn."

Blanche was at the window, and Mr. Wentworth stepped forward to open it. His manner was quite different; thoughtful and respectful, as if some sudden spell had been cast over him. Yet Blanche

was thoroughly at her ease, smiled and shook hands, and rallied him upon his musical mania. Perhaps he saw that the words were words of course, spoken to smoothe the little stiffness of the party, for there was no real gaiety in what she said. She looked ill and harassed, and when Adelaide declared her intention to return to the castle, Blanche made no remark, and allowed her to say "Good b'ye," without asking her to wait. So Adelaide, after a little more lingering and sighing, and laughing, departed, taking care when she had gone a few steps to attract attention, by an "Oh! Mr. Wentworth, I forgot;" which drew him after her, and induced him to accompany her more than half-way home.

Eleanor stood watching them until they were fairly out of sight, and then going up to Blanche, said, as she stooped to kiss her, "Blanche, I am thankful you are not your cousin Adelaide."

Blanche smiled, and replied, "Perhaps, I am glad too; and yet that is wrong," she added, correcting herself; though one may be glad one is not forced to lead the same life. But, Eleanor, I was not prepared for your having any one here; and I thought Susan's lesson would be over by this time. If Adelaide has been with you that of course is impossible."

Eleanor had seldom felt less inclined to attend to lessons, and, as an excuse to herself, said, that Susan could do very well without her for the present; she wished first to know what had brought Blanche to the rectory.

"Business that can wait very well," replied Blanche, "so please go, if you have anything to do, and I will sit here and write a letter till you are ready."

"But you look fagged and worried, Blanche; what has been going wrong?"

The eyes of Blanche filled with tears, but not one

was suffered to escape, and, avoiding a direct reply, she said, "I came here partly to tell you that we shall all probably go to Senilhurst immediately."

Eleanor's countenance betokened blank disappointment; she was not prepared for such a sudden move.

"Yes," continued Blanche quickly, as if anxious to avoid questions; "it is my aunt's wish, and I shall vex her if I refuse, and I don't think papa will dislike it. My aunt says it is the best thing for me; and, and I don't much care myself what ——" her voice failed her, and she burst into tears.

Eleanor was at her side in an instant, soothing and caressing her, and entreating to be told what was the cause of her grief. Blanche seemed distressed at her own weakness, but had no power of controlling it when she had once given way.

"Oh, Eleanor!" she exclaimed, "if they had only told me; if they had not brought me up in ignorance!"

"Ignorance, dearest Blanche! Of what?"

"Of everything; of what I ought to have known; what all the world knows except myself," replied Blanche, impetuously; a feeling of pride mingling unperceived with her sorrow.

"All the world! what? how?" inquired Eleanor, frightened at her unusual vehemence.

"You know," continued Blanche, and she grasped her friend's arm nervously, until Eleanor said, "I can know nothing which you will not tell me;" and then Blanche dropped her hand, and leaning her forehead upon the table, murmured, "I am unkind too! and I thought I had self-command!"

"You must not have self-command with me, dearest," said Eleanor. "If you cannot talk openly to me, whom can you go to?"

"No one; no one;" was the mournful answer. "But I think I could bear it better if I knew all. Oh, Eleanor! are you sure? did your mother never

talk to you? did she never tell you of—of my own mother—my sweet mother?”—she paused, and her voice sank almost to a whisper; but it was a whisper clear and thrilling, and Eleanor's cheek turned pale, and a shudder passed through her frame as she heard, “Eleanor; she was insane.”

There followed a long pause, until Eleanor said very gently, “Mamma, if it is true, would tell you all.”

Blanche shook her head: “I could not ask her. I had a thought—a foolish one—that you might know.”

“No, never. Could I have hidden it from you?”

“Perhaps so; they all did. They thought it right: it was a cruel kindness.”

“Are you quite certain it is true?” asked Eleanor.

“Maude says so; and I feel it. I understand things now. Oh! if I could have comforted her but for one hour!” and Blanche groaned in agony for the past, whilst Eleanor trembled at the horrible train of thought which in those few moments had been conjured up for the future.

Blanche recovered herself by degrees. She related what had passed with Maude, and showed Eleanor how the fact was confirmed by her mother's papers, and the strange silence and mystery in which everything connected with her was involved. She seemed to shrink from any attempt to persuade her into disbelief. “It was better,” she said, “to face the truth at once; that was what she was now longing to do entirely. A few days ago she could have gone to her aunt; but there had been an unhappy misunderstanding; she scarcely knew how it had arisen; from some foolish changeableness of her own, she believed. It had worried Lady Charlton extremely, and she had not recovered it. There is no one besides her, except your mother,” continued Blanche, and Eleanor assented. She did not ven-

ture to ask why Lord Rutherford's name was not mentioned.

"And why should you not go to mamma?" she said, as Blanche again repeated her longing wish to hear the particulars of her mother's history.

The answer was given with some reluctance: "Because I am afraid of her."

"Afraid of her! so good, and gentle, and charitable, as she is. Oh, Blanche!"

"Yet still I am afraid. Do you know what it is to have an intuitive perception of being misunderstood—misjudged? Her interest in you absorbs her; and well it may. It is a mother's love." Blanche turned away her head to hide her unbidden tears. "I am very wrong to regret," she added, "only sometimes I think that, if my mother had lived, I might have been better; but then ——."

It was an awful thought which suggested itself to both, and Eleanor, willing to divert it, said, "Even a mother's love, Blanche, cannot always be our safeguard."

"It seems so, as if it must be," replied Blanche musingly. "Your home, and its quietness and peace; all your time marked out, and your duties fixed, and a friend to go to always;—it must be safer than mine."

Eleanor made no direct answer. "When do you go to Senilhurst?" she said abruptly.

"Directly, I think; but the day is not fixed."

This was said with an air of such melancholy indifference as to recall Eleanor from all thoughts of herself.

"You must be made happier before you go, Blanche," she exclaimed.

"That cannot be. I must try and bear it, and the pain may lessen."

"But not the ignorance and mystery; and if you chose, there would be nothing easier than to learn everything. Mamma would tell you every little de-

tail, if she thought you were aware of the truth ; and you would feel her value then."

Blanche recollected the request for her mother's picture, and was silent.

Just then Mrs. Wentworth came into the room, accompanied by Susan. Blanche looked nervous and agitated. Mrs. Wentworth spoke to her, but seemed to have an instant perception that all was not right ; and addressing Eleanor, reminded her that the morning was fast passing away, and that Susan's lessons could not possibly be finished in time if she was left to herself. "I make no apology to Lady Blanche," she added ; "she will not require it. I am glad you have been detained by her." A meaning stress was laid upon the pronoun, and Eleanor's sincere conscience would not suffer her to misunderstand it.

"Blanche has been here but a short time," she said. "Adelaide Charlton stayed longer than I thought she would, and Charles came in, and they sang."

"Oh !"

There was no further remark or comment. Eleanor kissed her mother, and the kiss was returned warmly ; but the sigh which accompanied it spoke volumes of disappointment. Mrs. Wentworth sat down when she was gone ; her manner was less self-possessed than usual. She asked a few unconnected questions, and when Blanche mentioned the plan of going to Senilhurst directly, she did not appear to take in the idea ; her mind was wandering to another subject. At length, Blanche asked if she might stay and write a letter, and occupy herself till Eleanor was at leisure again ; and this seemed to put Mrs. Wentworth at ease, and she placed the portfolio for her, and laughed at the bad pens which she had to offer, and afterwards, saying she would leave her at liberty, went away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

“YOUR master is much better this morning, Pearson,” said Lady Charlton, addressing the civil manservant, as he stood aside, condensing himself into the smallest possible compass, whilst she passed.

“Rather better, my lady. I am afraid he has been in a good deal of pain the last half-hour.”

“But he is better, Pearson; a good deal. Mr. Stone said so yesterday. He will be able to go to Senilhurst soon.”

“Certainly, my lady; certainly, if you wish it. Did you say soon?”

“Yes; very soon; next week. Your master will be quite ready for the journey by that time.”

“Certainly, my lady;” and a faint smile played upon the lips of the well-instructed Pearson. “The change is to do him good, I imagine, my lady.”

“Of course; and this weather will do very well for travelling; later in the season might be running a risk.”

“Certainly, my lady; and it might be bad for your ladyship and the young ladies.”

“Yes; in fact, we must be at Senilhurst next week. Lord Rutherford and Lady Blanche will accompany us.” Pearson bowed low. “I shall see your master presently, Pearson.” Another bow.

Lady Charlton went to the drawing-room, and Pearson repaired to the library, to see if the fire was getting low. The glance with which Sir Hugh repaid his attention was discouraging; so were his words. As usual, they were a reproach for the length

of time he had been left, and, as usual, Pearson made no attempt at explanation, and only answered, "Very sorry, Sir Hugh; extremely sorry; might I be allowed?—I think I could put your pillow more comfortable."

"Not at all; I don't want to be comfortable. Left alone two full hours! it's unbearable."

"I was certainly forgetful," began Pearson.

"Forgetful! idiot, you forget everything! Where's my medicine?"

Pearson poured it out, and as he handed it to his master, ventured to observe that the day was so fine, he hoped it might do for a drive.

"Where is the good of driving?" muttered Sir Hugh, "the hills stop one at every half-mile."

"Exactly what I was saying to the bailiff just now, Sir Hugh. Mr. Denham, said I, this place is very different from Senilhurst. There we have a fine open country, where my master can drive about and get plenty of fresh air; beautiful soft in the valleys, bracing upon the downs. Trust me, if you could come to Senilhurst, you would never wish to go back to Rutherford."

"Then you talked nonsense, Pearson," exclaimed Sir Hugh more mildly than before.

Pearson did not seem to notice the interruption, but went on, "Mr. Denham is hard of belief; a very narrow mind; never has travelled at all, Sir Hugh. He wouldn't credit a word I told him of your crop of turnips the year before last." Sir Hugh leaned his head upon his hand in a soothed attitude. "Wonderful, those turnips were!" continued Pearson; "but, as I told Mr. Denham,—my master, said I, understands these things; he's an experiencing gentleman; he takes nothing upon trust."

"And Denham wouldn't believe you, eh?" said Sir Hugh.

“Wouldn't believe a word,” said Pearson; “said there never was such a crop known, and he couldn't understand it. But, said I, Mr. Denham, it's not for you and me to try and understand these things. My master is a man of science, and what he does he does upon principle—strict principle; the turnips, d'ye see, grew upon principle.”

“Hem, nonsense,” muttered Sir Hugh, whilst the frown upon his forehead gradually subsided, and a pleased smile stole over his features. “Why don't you bring him to Senilhurst, Pearson, instead of trying to talk him over here?”

“Undoubtedly, Sir Hugh; it's the only thing to be done; but, as I said, if we are to stay the winter at Rutherford, there is no good in thinking of Senilhurst.”

“And who said we were to spend the winter at Rutherford?” inquired Sir Hugh sharply.

“I understood from my lady,” began Pearson; but Sir Hugh broke in, “I have told you fifty times before, Pearson, that you are to understand from me; your lady knows nothing about the matter.”

“I imagined it was my lady's wish,” began Pearson again.

“And what did you think then was my wish? Did you suppose that I meant to be cooped up here for the next six months, with nothing to do but to follow your lady's beck and call?”

“My lady seemed to think it was fixed,” continued Pearson, “and of course it was not my place to say anything; though I could see, like every one else, Sir Hugh, that it would be better for you to be at home.”

“And what is to hinder me from going home?” inquired Sir Hugh.

“Nothing, sir, nothing; if you desire it: only my lady——”

“Don't talk to me of your lady; my will is her will.”

“Unquestionably, Sir Hugh; and no doubt my lady's health, and that of the young ladies, would be materially benefited. As I said to Mr. Denham, Senilhurst air is quite renovating.”

“And what did Denham say to that?”

“He was amazed, Sir Hugh; never saw a man more so. Mr. Pearson, said he, Senilhurst must be a paradise. Mr. Denham, said I, it is.”

“Hem!” muttered Sir Hugh; “Denham's got more sense than I gave him credit for. To see how he manages the estate here, one would think him an ignorant booby. Young Wentworth knows much more about farming than he does.”

“Mr. Wentworth has had great advantages,” observed Pearson, “going about with a gentleman of such experience as yourself, Sir Hugh.”

“Wentworth's a sensible fellow,” continued Sir Hugh; “he has his eyes about him, and he's not conceited. He has my geology pamphlet by heart; in fact, he's quite the life of the place.”

“Mr. Wentworth would take a great interest in the farming at Senilhurst,” said Pearson insinuatingly.

“Yes, he might; he would, I think. There would be a good deal for him to learn there;” and Sir Hugh fell into a short reverie, which was apparently caused by some difficulty in the contemplated return home, as he tapped his finger on the table and began reckoning—“Lady Charlton, one; Maude and Ady, three; young Wentworth, four; it's one too many.”

“The earl and Lady Blanche will have a great loss in your absence, Sir Hugh,” began Pearson, a little alarmed at not hearing their names mentioned.

“Well, yes; I suppose they will,” said Sir Hugh,

stroking his chin; "the earl and I have pursuits in common, we are both literary men."

"There's a thought of his lordship and Lady Blanche remaining here through the winter, I suppose," said Pearson; "at least my lady seemed to say so the other day."

"What should your lady know about it?" exclaimed Sir Hugh; "the earl has no fixed plans, he told me so confidentially. If I were to ask him to Senilhurst he would go."

"And be delighted, no doubt," replied Pearson; "he has not been looking at all well lately."

"No wonder, living at this place. He and young Wentworth together."—Sir Hugh mused again, but whether upon the travelling plans, or the probable indignation of Lady Charlton if he presumed to give Mr. Wentworth an invitation to Senilhurst, it is impossible to say. The difficulty which perplexed him, whatever it was, seemed, however, to be insurmountable, for after the silence of a few minutes, he exclaimed, "It won't do; no, it won't do; and after all, spring is the best time for seeing a place. If we stay here a few weeks longer we shall help them on into the winter, and they can come to us early in the spring."

Pearson was in dismay; but he was a man of singular patience, and having reached the point from which he had started, he steadily set forth to traverse the same ground again; pulling Sir Hugh one way, in the conviction that he would be sure to go the other, until at length he had once more brought him to face the possibility of removing to Senilhurst immediately, taking Lord Rutherford and Lady Blanche with them, and giving an indirect invitation to Mr. Wentworth to follow at his earliest convenience. This last resolution, however, Sir Hugh did not fail to qualify by repeating, "I shan't invite him; I hate

regular invitations. Only if he likes it of course he will be welcome. Mind, Pearson, I have no intention of inviting him."

Pearson assented both to the letter and the spirit of this declaration, and having arranged his master's pillows for about the twentieth time since the conversation began, ventured to suggest that Lady Charlton might be glad to know of Sir Hugh's definite plan. A gracious permission was given, and Sir Hugh raised himself in his arm-chair to look imposing, and spreading a blank sheet of paper before him, chose a new pen that he might make a legible list of imperative orders for the journey.

"Sir Hugh would be glad to speak with you, my lady," said Pearson, as he met Lady Charlton at the foot of the stairs. His face was impenetrable, but his self-satisfied tone showed that all difficulties had been smoothed away.

"I will be with him directly," was Lady Charlton's soft reply; and Pearson went off to the servant's hall, charmed at his own cleverness, in having ruled his master, pleased his mistress, and been instrumental in suggesting an idea, which he had good reason to think would gratify one at least of the young ladies; and all without committing himself.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IT was not a long interview between Sir Hugh and Lady Charlton ; no interviews of this kind ever were long ; for Lady Charlton, when she had once gained a point, took care not to dwell sufficiently upon it to give time for a change of feeling. The determination of returning to Senilhurst was especially important to her at this moment, as the neighbourhood of the Rectory was, in her eyes, becoming every day more undesirable. Even if the earl and Blanche persisted in remaining at Rutherford, she had resolved to go ; but independently of her own pleasure, their society would, she knew, be a great inducement to Sir Hugh to consent to her wishes. His vanity would be flattered by the idea of showing Blanche his own place and his own plans ; and, as she had calculated upon this as the easy mode of obtaining her point, she was the more provoked at the indecision which Blanche had evinced. Still she did not doubt of gaining her object eventually. Pearson's skill was almost always successful in winning Sir Hugh's consent, even against his favourite wishes ; and Blanche was too gentle not to be easily brought round. Yet Lady Charlton allowed no surprise or satisfaction to be visible when she entered the library. She was quietly indifferent, and even put a few obstacles in the way of a sudden removal ; obstacles which, of course, only strengthened Sir Hugh's resolution, and gave him a sense of power in showing the clever way in which he could surmount them.

“ Lord Rutherford and Blanche must be talked

over," he said; and Lady Charlton agreed; not even a smile betraying that the suggestion had been made to them previously.

The day of departure was next to be fixed. Sir Hugh named it—determined the hour of starting—wrote down the names of the few villages through which they were to pass before they reached a railway station, and the time which the distance might be expected to take; and then proceeded to copy out the after details of the journey from a railway guide, Lady Charlton assisting him by reading out 11·25, 12·50, &c., in due succession.

When, at length, the word Senilhurst was written, in legible characters, at the bottom of the paper, announcing the termination of the journey, Sir Hugh threw himself back in his chair and exclaimed, "There, my dear; now I think I have done my part. I have saved you all the trouble of arrangement, and you will have nothing in the world to do but just to obey orders—the easiest thing of all—just to obey orders—nothing more. We leave this place at half-past eight precisely; we reach Senilhurst at twenty minutes past six. Don't trouble yourself; don't distress yourself about anything: you see when a man is once accustomed to this sort of thing it becomes quite easy. You may tell Maude and Ady, if you like it; but it will be as well to leave Rutherford to me. Gentlemen always manage these things best with each other. I shall hint my wishes gently, and bring him round by degrees."

"Perhaps it might be the best way," said Lady Charlton, and she rose to leave the room.

"Stop, my dear Frances; Lady Charlton, you are in such a hurry. Sit down, will you. One thing we have forgotten—dinner. Let me see; we start at half-past eight; we reach Walton at 10; Ditchley, 12·35; Hoxley Road, 2·40; Sunbridge, 5·15;

reckoning a quarter of an hour for delay ; Senilhurst, 6·20 ; that leaves us forty minutes—one hour and forty minutes till eight o'clock. Will one hour and forty minutes be sufficient ? Consider now—to settle yourselves—dress—be, in fact, quite ready for dinner ! Can you promise to be in the drawing-room by eight ?”

Lady Charlton thought there would be no difficulty.

“ Very well, then, that is another point decided. You may write to Mrs. Corrie, and tell her to have dinner ready at eight precisely. And, stay, don't I hear Lord Rutherford's voice ?” The earl opened the door. “ The very person I wanted to see. I must have a few words with you ; I must consult you.”

But Lord Rutherford interrupted him. “ I beg your pardon ; I will return to you, but, at this moment, I have pressing business. Lady Charlton, can you give me a few moments of your leisure ?” The tone was unusually haughty, and before Lady Charlton had time to answer he was gone.

Lady Charlton followed him instantly, in spite of Sir Hugh's entreaties, that she would wait and consider what further arrangements were to be made.

Lord Rutherford went before her till he reached his private study, the door of which he opened, and motioned to her to enter it, and then closing and bolting it carefully, he sat down opposite to her. Lady Charlton turned pale. There was something in his countenance which would, in itself, have been sufficient to alarm her ; a look of hardly repressed indignation, reproach, and over-excited feeling : a curling lip—a frowning brow—a fire in his flashing eye, only softened by the indescribable expression of mental anguish that pervaded his whole countenance. He did not speak for some moments, but sat resting his forehead upon his hand. Lady

Charlton tried to shake off her fear. She went up to him, laid her hand upon his shoulder, and said in a light, unconstrained tone, "You must not treat me in this way. I must know at once what is the matter."

He looked up and said sternly, "You can tell."

Lady Charlton's tone was unchanged as she replied, "You are mistaken. I know nothing that has happened to put you into this strange mood."

"Not that you have deceived me—betrayed me—broken your most solemn promise?"

A momentary indignation clouded Lady Charlton's face, but she subdued the rising feeling, and said gravely but calmly, "My dear Rutherford, this is not language which I ought to hear. I have not betrayed, or deceived you, or broken any solemn promise; and I have not the most remote idea what it is you refer to. I must insist upon your explaining yourself more clearly."

"You have told her," he said, "you have done the very thing which"—he stopped, and Lady Charlton said eagerly, "Blanche? do you mean that she knows?"

"All that I would have kept from her at any sacrifice. Frances, I thought I could have trusted you better."

Lady Charlton looked extremely pained, and the colour rushed to her cheeks as she said hesitatingly, "It was not I who told her."

"No," exclaimed the earl, "it was not you; it was Maude. But from whom did Maude learn such facts? and who put it into my darling's head to inquire?"

Lady Charlton recovered from her embarrassment when this question was asked reproachfully.

"You are still speaking mysteries," she said; "if you will say clearly what you refer to, I will give you the best explanation I can."

“They are simple facts,” replied the earl, sarcastically; “Blanche was missing this morning when I wanted her; I went to her room, and found her in an agony of grief. When I would have forced her to tell me what distressed her, she said—you know what she said. She knew it. Her whole life is embittered—her happiness is blighted—her love for me—but I will not think of that—I dare not.”

“And Maude told her?” inquired Lady Charlton.

“Yes, Maude told her.”

“And what? how much does Blanche know?”

“Do you think I could bear to ask?” exclaimed the earl, bitterly, “Was it a story that I could endure to have the details repeated; that I could listen patiently whilst my child described her own misery?”

“It might have been as well,” said Lady Charlton, coldly; “you might have spared me much pain, and yourself much after-reproach for injustice. Maude has heard from me little beyond what all the world is acquainted with. What she may have guessed or learnt from other sources I cannot answer for. She is of an inquisitive disposition; from a child she was strangely interested in the fate of my most unhappy sister. To satisfy her, I told her the bare fact of her melancholy depression of spirits; but of other sufferings,”—and Lady Charlton’s voice became eager, and her eye kindled as she went on—“of neglect, loneliness, disappointed affection; trials which crushed her intellect, and brought her to an early grave, I said nothing.”

Lord Rutherford sank upon a chair and groaned.

“It may seem cruel to upbraid you now with an error of judgment,” continued Lady Charlton; “but, in my own justification, I must remind you that you were long since warned against the mistake of keeping from Blanche the secret of her mother’s history.”

“ I did not wish to keep it from her,” exclaimed the earl, starting from his seat; “ but I would have prepared her for it gradually. I would, yes,” he added, his voice sinking from its tone of proud excitement into an accent of the most mournful tenderness, “ I would have won her to myself,—I would have made myself her all, and then I would have appealed to her love,—her reverence,—her devotion,—for pardon.”

“ You must have had sympathies in common first,” said Lady Charlton, with a quiet sarcasm which escaped her almost involuntarily.

The earl writhed under the censure which he knew was intended, yet he answered firmly, “ We have many,—art, and taste, and refinement.”

“ And religion!” added Lady Charlton.

Lord Rutherford bit his lip, and was silent.

“ That is the key to her affections,” continued Lady Charlton; “ without it I fear you may find the barrier between you greater than you are aware of.”

The earl regarded her steadily as if he would have said, Do not try me too far,—but Lady Charlton knew her own power—the power which almost necessarily accompanies the knowledge of a strong mind’s weakness—and she went on, “ If it were possible to humour her upon the point;—if you could, at whatever sacrifice, bring yourself even to appear”—but the earl broke in upon the observation.

“ Appear!—to Blanche!—to my own child!—appear to be what I am not? Oh! Frances, how little you understand us both!”

“ Blanche, at least, I understand,” said Lady Charlton calmly—“ she is like her mother.”

The name acted like an electric shock upon Lord Rutherford. “ Yes,” he exclaimed shuddering, “ like her in form—in feature—in mind—in fate.” The last word sank into a whisper.

“There is little fear of it,” replied Lady Charlton, “except in your own imagination, and in possible circumstances, which are entirely under your control. Loneliness and want of sympathy preyed upon poor Emily’s mind. There was no positive hereditary disease. Her case might be the case of any one in the same situation. Loneliness, Blanche will never feel; want of sympathy she may not, if——”

“If,” repeated the earl, bitterly. “I tell you, Frances, I have not the power, even if I had the will, to deceive my sweet child. Pure-minded, simple, transparent and true as she is; the very earnestness of her own feelings must make her alive to hypocrisy in others. Would not the tone of my voice—the turn of my sentences,—would not every action of my life betray me? No, better far that she should see me as I am—admire me for what I am—even hate me,—hate me, if it were possible, for what I am not—than be the dupe of professions which must, sooner or later, be discovered, and bring wretchedness upon us both.”

“As you will,” replied Lady Charlton. “It would be useless to try and persuade you, that I do not wish you either to deceive, or make a profession. All that I desire is, that you should not shock her—prejudices, as you call them—principles, as I call them.” She paused, but the earl was silent. “You make the same sacrifice to the world continually,” pursued Lady Charlton: “you mix with persons whom you dislike; you join in amusements which do not interest you.”

“Yes,” interrupted the earl vehemently; “I make a sacrifice to the world, which the world sanctions and understands. I speak its own language, and take advantage of its permitted customs. It is not deceived by civilities and professions. But religion—Frances, I was never a hypocrite. If I had

been, I might have spared myself the bitterness of this hour."

"I think you are unnecessarily anxious," replied Lady Charlton.

The Earl did not notice the remark. He was engaged in his own reflections, and in an under tone he said, "Poor child! one could almost be inclined to envy her."

"Can you envy what you consider error?" replied Lady Charlton.

"Error!" repeated the earl, musingly.

"You think it so," said Lady Charlton.

He looked up quickly: "Have you never, Frances, watched a sunset, and seen mountains, and islands, and glittering lakes amongst the clouds, and looked till you believed—till you almost knew them to be real? So have I watched Blanche—daily, hourly, since my return. She has been to me a vision of beauty and purity beyond all that I have known, or could have dreamt; and I have gazed upon her until almost I could persuade myself that her enthusiasm was reality."

"It is real, doubtless, to a certain extent," replied Lady Charlton. "Blanche is young, and a little carried away by feeling; but her principles are unquestionably sound and high; and we ought to be most grateful to Mrs. Howard for having made her what she is."

A sudden check seemed to have been given to Lord Rutherford's earnestness. He drew himself up coldly, and said, "We have wandered very far from our first subject. I should be glad to be quite assured that you have not disobeyed my wishes."

"You are really provoking," replied Lady Charlton, petulantly. "I could never have taken upon myself such a responsibility. Blanche must have had her suspicions previously raised, and then exag-

gerated what Maude told her." Lady Charlton stopped and after considering for a moment added—"You told me you had given her her mother's papers."

"Yesterday : it was an impulse, after a conversation, a few words only which passed between us. I felt they might interest her, for I saw she longed for sympathy, and I thought they might be something of a bond of closer union between us. But I had long before determined upon doing so when I could summon resolution."

"They must have betrayed the secret," said Lady Charlton.

"Impossible! There were a few letters of my own, including some written years ago, and a journal; you must remember it. I thought it might please Blanche, but there was little in it beyond extracts."

"Are you sure that was all?" inquired Lady Charlton.

"Certain. I destroyed every paper which was in any way painful before I left England."

"Then it must have been Blanche's own fancy," said Lady Charlton, "or —"

The earl turned to her hastily; "Or whom?—what?"

"Or Mrs. Wentworth!"

"Yes," exclaimed Lord Rutherford, as if the idea had in an instant brought conviction to his mind; "yes, it must have been her. How could I have been so blind? But I thought she knew my wishes through you."

"I wrote to her," said Lady Charlton, "when you first thought of returning to Rutherford, impressing upon her the necessity of caution. Her reply was stiff and unsatisfactory, like everything she does or says; but I certainly could not have imagined her capable of telling Blanche what you wanted to keep from her."

“She supposed it her duty, perhaps,” said Lord Rutherford, with a sneer. “She is very much bent upon duty.”

“Her own, and other persons too, in this case,” observed Lady Charlton; “but you must not be hard upon her. Remember, we have as yet only suspicion.”

“It shall be certainty, one way or the other, soon,” exclaimed the earl; and without adding another word, he seized his hat, opened the window, and the next minute was walking at a rapid pace down the steep path which led to the rectory.

Lady Charlton looked after him for a few seconds, and then murmuring to herself, “Impetucus as ever! but I have diverted his thoughts for the present,” she went to seek Maude, and give her a maternal and not very gentle reproof, for the extreme imprudence which had led her to divulge facts, only a portion of which had as yet been intended to reach the ears of Blanche.

Lord Rutherford and Mrs. Wentworth disliked each other, as persons must do who, without mutual sympathy or respect, have been compelled by circumstances to learn the secrets of each other's lives, without caring to know the secrets of the heart. Years before, when Lord Rutherford had brought his bride to her stately home, and offered her luxury and gaiety, she had turned from all to seek the companionship of Mrs. Wentworth. The earl was not jealous—he did not love sufficiently to care where his wife found happiness, as long as he was not called upon to give up his own wishes to contribute to it; but he chafed at the strictness of Mrs. Wentworth's principles, dreaded her influence, and was repulsed by the coldness of her manner—and the aversion was quickly reciprocal. If Mrs. Wentworth revered the Countess of Rutherford for her piety, and pitied her for her lonely position; she could scarcely feel

cordial towards the selfish, worldly husband, who by civil unkindness blighted her hopes and mocked her affections. And, as years went on, and absence and neglect did their fatal work in wrecking not only the peace, but the mind of the unhappy countess, the first feeling of dislike almost necessarily deepened into intensity.

But that time was long gone by. The Countess of Rutherford was resting in her quiet grave, safe from the weariness of disappointment and the bitterness of unrequited love; and the earl was returned to his home, to begin, as it were, a new life, and repay the debt which he owed to the memory of his wife by the devoted affection which he lavished upon her child. The past was forgotten;—so it seemed to many but himself; forgotten by the countess's relations; forgotten, if it had ever been remembered, by the world. Yet, was it so?—does the tide of life indeed sweep by and bear away all traces of the joys and griefs, the good and evil, of our vanished years; or is there, even upon earth, a record of the deeds of former days, written upon the memories of our friends and companions, and bearing a witness which few can recollect and feel towards us as if such things had never been?

But Lord Rutherford did Mrs. Wentworth great injustice, when he considered her capable of biassing the mind of his daughter in any way against himself; or even of endeavouring to fix her affections upon her mother's memory at his expense. Even if Mrs. Wentworth had felt for Blanche as she had once felt for the countess, she would have shrunk from such an act as worse than cruelty. But, in truth, she was not sufficiently attracted by the gentle girl, who seemed to have no will but her father's, to attempt to gain an influence over her. She was interested in Blanche for her mother's sake and for Eleanor's; but

being a person of strong impulse and prepossessions, and peculiarly alive to the impression which she made upon others, she could not help seeing, from the very beginning of their acquaintance, that Blanche was not likely to seek her confidence. This was an offence which Mrs. Wentworth was not inclined easily to overlook. It awoke a sense of injustice, as if something was denied her which she had a right to claim. Her natural stiffness and reserve also made her seek for the opposite qualities in others; and symptoms of shyness, especially in young people, were generally attributed to some instinctive difference of feeling, caused possibly by her own defect of manner, which it would be useless to endeavour to overcome. Thus it was that, when Mrs. Wentworth was met with more than her own cordiality, she could love, and love intensely; but when she did not love, she was indifferent, and not unfrequently prejudiced.

Lord Rutherford knew nothing of all this. He was not an observer of human nature in general; and seldom took the trouble to think what people were like, or why they pleased or displeased him. A spoilt child from infancy, he only knew what offended his taste, or shocked his self-esteem, and avoided it. It was always an effort to him to be with Mrs. Wentworth, and he would have shunned, instead of seeking, an interview, if he had not been carried forward by indignation and something like revenge. For it is pleasant to our unchecked natural instincts to have a clear cause of complaint against a person whom we dislike, and yet respect; and, by the time the earl had reached the parsonage, he had worked himself up into the persuasion, not only that the accusation against Mrs. Wentworth was true, but that no extenuation could be offered.

Blanche saw him pass the drawing-room window as she sat writing her letter and waiting for Eleanor,

but she did not go to meet him. His look of anguish as he turned away from her, when in their short morning interview she told him the cause of her distress, was still present to her recollection, and she dreaded to encounter it again. In her simplicity, she could not read its entire meaning; but it had warned her that the subject must never again be alluded to, unless by him. The earl was shown into Mrs. Wentworth's morning-room; and through the thin partition Blanche could hear his voice, as the conversation began—first formal, and subdued, then gradually rising into energy and excitement; whilst Mrs. Wentworth's answers seemed only rather more decided than usual. The interview was soon over; Blanche heard, as she supposed, the parting words, and a pause followed. She thought her father was gone; but as she drew near the window to see, she again caught Mrs. Wentworth's voice. The words were distinctly audible—"Your lordship must forgive me, if I earnestly warn you to be cautious. No one knows better than myself the many reasons for being so; and, in pity to your child, you must remember, that the germ of the evil, at least, may be hereditary."

There was a faint, sharp cry of exceeding misery, and Blanche fell senseless to the ground.

END OF VOL. I.



