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THE CO-HEIRESS.



VOL. III.

THE CO-HEIRESS.

A Novel.

BY THE

AUTHOR OF "CHARLEY NUGENT," AND

"ST. AUBYN'S OF ST. AUBYN."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON :

TINSLEY BROTHERS, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1866.

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LONDON :
SAVILL AND EDWARDS, PRINTERS, CHANDOS STREET,
COVENT GARDEN.

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THE CO-HEIRESS.

CHAPTER I.

“NOBLESSE OBLIGE.”

SIR CHARLES BELLINGHAM was in luck for warnings this morning; for after meditatively pursuing his way homewards, he found his mother awaiting his return in her own special sitting-room, and from the rather grave and anxious expression of her countenance, he perceived that something more than usual was occasioning her perplexity.

“There is every appearance of rain,” he observed, as he threw himself carelessly on a sofa, and began to fondle a little Italian greyhound that sprang to his knee; “I am afraid, my dear mother, your chance of a drive is very slender.”

“It does not signify,” replied Lady Agnes; who according to custom had her

knitting in her hand, though it evidently did not absorb much of her attention. “I shall be quite contented to remain at home; and indeed, Charles, I rather want to speak to you this afternoon.”

“What is the momentous subject?” inquired Sir Charles, with a smile undeniably languid and affected; for he had not quite recovered from the onslaught of his fair Irish counsellor, and felt some trepidation at the prospect of another engagement immediately to follow.

Lady Agnes knitted for a few moments in silence, and then she remarked quietly—

“I know you have arranged that we shall go to Naples at the same time as Sir John de Burgh and his party. Are you very much set upon doing this?—would it disappoint you greatly were I to propose that we should relinquish this plan and return to England instead?”

Sir Charles was thoroughly roused from his partly assumed air of apathy. He pushed Leila gently from his knee and sat upright on the sofa.

“My dear mother—” he replied, after an instant of reflection, “I hope I should never hesitate to yield my own wishes to yours; but—unless you have a very strong reason for proposing this change of plan, I own I have a great desire to see Naples; and the present occasion seems a peculiarly favourable one.”

“You are likely to have many other opportunities of visiting it,” said Lady Agnes, gently; “after your marriage you will probably travel occasionally. Augusta has been so accustomed to a wandering life that she will not all at once relinquish the taste; and in her you will have a much more active and congenial companion than an old woman like me, who ought by rights to be glued to her own chimney-corner.”

A rapid and almost imperceptible frown crossed the brow of the young baronet when his mother made the allusion to his marriage and future life; but Lady Agnes had bent her eyes on her knitting, and it passed without remark.

“‘A bird in the hand is worth two in the

bush, 'mother mine,' he replied laughing; "one should never trust to future contingencies. Besides, however often one might visit Naples, it would be difficult to do it under pleasanter auspices than in company with so large a party of agreeable friends, the De Burghs, Talbots, and Mrs. Greville and her sister."

Lady Agnes smiled in rather a sly manner.

"Mr. and Mrs. Talbot are the kindest and most worthy couple that ever breathed; but I don't exactly imagine they will add much to the hilarity of your excursion. In an expedition to the summit of Vesuvius, for instance, I fancy you would find them, as well as myself, a little *de trop*."

"I like the good old couple very much," replied Sir Charles, with good-natured pertinacity. "They are excellent company on table land, (no pun intended, my dear mother); and we shall not climb Vesuvius every day. Besides, I included them in my list of 'desirables' more on your account than my own, if the truth must be told. I

fancied you and Mrs. Talbot were very great friends.”

Lady Agnes laughed.

“So you think all the old birds should flock together, and let the young ones wing their flight undisturbed? Well, my dear Charles, I fear I have not persuaded you to consent to my little scheme of returning at once to England.”

“Don’t call it a little scheme,” replied her son; “the entire subverting of all my most cherished ideas; and without a hint on your part of any especial motive for the change.”

He spoke jestingly, but there was an under-current of seriousness in his tone.

“Several motives urge me to propose it,” said Lady Agnes; while a faint colour tinged for a moment her faded but still delicate cheek. “One of them is the fact that your presence, and indeed mine too, is now imperatively required at Bellingham. You forget that no great time will elapse before your marriage, and many preparations must be made before you can bring your

bride to her future home. And I, Charles —I should wish to be in my own house before that event takes place; and the cottage is not yet nearly ready for my reception."

"I can't bear the thought of your going to live at the cottage, mother," replied Sir Charles, hotly, as he rose from his seat and paced the small apartment. "You! my mother! an earl's daughter! all through your life accustomed to every comfort and luxury, to spacious rooms and a retinue of domestics ready at your call; and now in your old age I am to feel that you are boxed up in a pitiful dwelling, the former residence of a steward on the property! It is perfectly intolerable, mother; and must not—shall not be!"

"Hush! Charles," said Lady Agnes, softly; "you know this point was all arranged long ago, and with your perfect concurrence. You foolish boy!" and the old lady smiled very sweetly through the mist of tears that dimmed for a moment her still brilliant eyes; "do you really imagine that

large rooms and a host of servants could have the very slightest effect on my happiness? do you think I shall ever miss or regret them for a single instant? Believe me, Charles, that I never shall. To see and know you happy is now my happiness; I seek for no other in this world. I shall have the satisfaction of being near you; of seeing you when you are at Bellingham, I trust, every day. I shall feel a sincere regard and affection for your wife, which I hope will be reciprocal; and if, as I earnestly pray may be the case, God grants you the blessing of a family, my cup of joy will then be very full, and my old age will be cheered by the music of dear little voices and the touch of loving little hands, that will sweetly recal the days when the old halls rang with the glad tones of young voices long since gathered into the sacred band that sing the eternal songs of their Heavenly home.”

Large tears were falling from her eyes now, and she raised her handkerchief and gently wiped them away; the memory of

her dead children was always a touching recollection for the fond mother, who had yet submissively resigned them in all their early bloom and beauty to the cold hand of the Angel of Death!

Sir Charles Bellingham was much affected; his mother was very dear to him, and to see her weep was always a great distress to the warm-hearted son. He came beside her, and softly raised her disengaged hand to his lips; then bending down on one knee he laid his head on her lap, and said in a low and hoarse tone of extreme dejection—

“Oh! mother, mother! would that I had chosen to keep you always with me! No wife will ever love me with a love like yours; and by my own act I have put this true and loving mother from me—for I feel that you are right—you and—she—may not be with me together! And oh! how different it might have been—if—if——” he paused suddenly, and the sentence remained unfinished.

“My dear Charles,” said Lady Agnes, as she fondly stroked the thick brown locks

that clustered beneath her motherly touch, “you distress me by speaking in this manner: you do indeed! Ever since you arrived at man’s estate it has been the most earnest desire of my heart to see you married; and though you and I have passed many pleasant years together at Bellingham, believe me it will increase rather than decrease my happiness to see my place in your home occupied as it more fittingly should be by a fair young wife, who will, I trust, aid and encourage you in discharging the many duties incumbent on one in your position. In selecting Miss de Burgh for your bride, your choice has fallen on one richly gifted with the qualities more peculiarly adapted to enable her worthily to fill the distinguished position that the mistress of Bellingham has always maintained in the county. Her beauty is remarkable; her style and manner that of a perfect gentlewoman; her rank and family equal to your own; while in addition she is heiress to a very large fortune; and though I know how truly that formed no part of her attraction in your

eyes, it will yet materially add to her value in the estimation of people generally. You have seen the universal admiration accorded to her here; and you cannot doubt the eager reception she will meet with in your own neighbourhood——”

“Mother, I can hear no more,” said the young baronet, suddenly rising and standing in front of Lady Agnes; “each word that you utter is a more hollow mockery than the last; and too surely do you know and feel this yourself. When we used to talk of the new daughter I was to bring home to you in those happy days long ago, was it in language such as you have just employed that you then spoke of her? Did you speak of my future wife as a noted beauty and a great heiress; a woman eminently fitted to shine in society, and probably well qualified to lead the fashions of the neighbourhood! I think, my dear mother, that she presented herself in somewhat of a different guise from this stately lady, this queen of the drawing-room! If I remember rightly she was to be

gentle and loving, more inclined to shrink from the glare of fashionable publicity than to court it; a sweet modest flower that would be happier in the quiet retirement of domestic life than shining forth as the leading lady of the neighbourhood: a fond wife, a tender mother, a good and dutiful daughter, whose presence you would not have wished to avoid.” He paused for a moment, and then continued; “And such an one we have seen, mother; you know her, and I know her too. But woe it is for me, mother; for I have seen her too late—too late!”

Lady Agnes pressed her hands tightly together, and for some minutes she did not attempt to reply; her son walked slowly and dejectedly up and down the room, never once raising his eyes from the ground.

“Charles!” observed the old lady at length, and her voice sounded very strange and solemn, “this is a subject on which you and I may not, must not speak; and yet my very heart bleeds for you, my son! my own dear son! But, dear as your happiness has

ever been and will ever be to me, your honour is still dearer, still more precious. Sooner than know a stain upon that, I would willingly see my own life—yours too—the sacrifice. The unblemished honour of an ancient lineage rests on you, and I feel that it is in no unworthy keeping. I do not seek to penetrate the difficulties that surround you, they are not for the ear of your mother: but my true and earnest counsel to you is this—set the plain path of honour and duty before you, and manfully follow it; avoid every temptation that would lead you astray; and leave the result in the hands of God! No blessing can ever accompany an unjust or dishonourable action; nor do I believe that any lasting sorrow will be the result of a line of conduct that is founded on the true principles of a gentleman and a Christian. And now, Charles, we must quit this topic; but do, my dear son, be guided by me in this instance, and do not go to Naples."

"I understand your reluctance to doing so now, mother," replied Sir Charles, gloomily.

“It will be better that we do not accompany the De Burghs on this occasion,” said Lady Agnes, rather avoiding his gaze. “It has sometimes occurred to me that Augusta and Marian might possibly assimilate more entirely than they do, were they more closely thrown together than has hitherto been the case. They are seldom if ever alone; the sisters have scarcely any unrestrained intercourse; and I do not think the circumstances of their first reunion have been attended with a very beneficial result in consequence. At Naples they are not likely to live so much in society as they have done here; and a better and more sisterly understanding may possibly arise between them. Sincerely do I trust such may indeed prove the case; it will be for the happiness of all parties.”

“Well, mother, this shall be as you wish; I yield myself to your wise guidance; never have I found it to fail me, and never yet have I repented following it. For the present we shall dismiss this dreary topic from our conversation, and, if possible, from our

minds. I shall now leave you to rest a little after this long discussion; I find there are letters requiring my immediate attention."

And so the mother and son parted for the time.

CHAPTER II.

DOWN THE STREAM.

SEVERAL days passed over his head, and still the young baronet had in no way arrived at any definite conclusion as to the course which it was most advisable he should pursue. To be sure there was some slight excuse for him in the fact that he had been living in all the bustle of the Holy Week; and with his undeniable tendency towards procrastination, and shirking whatever was unpleasant, he had but too readily availed himself of this very plausible plea.

He had accompanied Sir John de Burgh's party to most of the spectacles, and they had generally been also joined by Lady Agnes, and by Mrs. Greville and her sister. Under the surveillance of so many watchful eyes, Sir Charles felt that extra caution was

imperatively demanded of him: and though he did not seek any resumption of his recent discussion with Miss Crewe, and indeed rather avoided opportunities of confidential conversation with that young lady, he yet conducted himself in such a manner as to convince her that her energetic representations had not been wasted on empty air, though she felt considerable doubt as to the final consequences of her well-meant advice. For the present all seemed to be going on smoothly enough; and yet, had the attention of a very acute observer been specially directed to some of the members of this apparently cheerful party, he might have perceived symptoms that would have warned him how deceitful was this placid but treacherous calm; he would have detected slight but sufficiently marked indications of the storm brooding in the atmosphere, indications such as speak of danger to the wary mariner, when to perceptions less acute the smiling sky and hushed breezes give the fairest prognostic of fine and favouring weather. For never since the

night of their ill-fated engagement had Sir Charles been more pointedly attentive and even devoted in his bearing towards Augusta than he now showed himself. He was ever beside her, ready and willing to answer any little call she might make on his services; though to any one who had looked beyond the surface this marked attention would have stood revealed as a mere hollow mockery; for there was no reality in the simulated interest, no life in the cold semblance of affection that was forced to do duty for the absence of the true feeling. How far otherwise was it as regarded Marian. Though he was able to put so strong an outward constraint on himself as to treat her with apparent composure, and even with indifference, there were times when he felt so maddened by his position and all that he was enduring, that it seemed as if he could no longer retain the mask he had himself assumed, but must dash it rudely from him and avow the truth whatever might be the consequences to himself or others.

When one glance of Marian's soft blue

eyes, or a look of concern or anxiety on her sweet countenance, filled him with the wildest emotions of pleasure or distress, it was indeed no easy task to school his manner to the tranquil composure of mere brotherly interest; and yet for the present this difficult undertaking must be essayed, if he would save that innocent heart from pain and trials such as he well knew would otherwise be its weary portion.

It had more than once dawned on the young baronet's mind, that, but for his unfortunate entanglement (for so he now considered it), with her sister, it would have been no very difficult matter to have won the gentle and loving Marian to look upon him in another light than that of a mere brother, pleasant as this new tie had seemed to him in those early days when the frank little English girl had made her first appearance in Italy. She had been so fond of him then, so artless and confiding in her innocent unconsciousness of all possible ill; he had seen that she trusted in him and depended on him more than she did on any one

else, that she valued his friendship and enjoyed his society with a frankness as guileless as it was natural and unconcealed.

And now this pleasant intercourse was entirely changed. If he avoided Marian, still more rigidly did she keep herself aloof from him, and shun the faintest chance of ever being alone with him—a thing she appeared to dread with unmistakable alarm. Still, with the eager anxiety felt by both that nothing unusual should be remarked in their behaviour, they also strove as much as possible to observe the same outward indications of a good understanding as had always existed between them; and they were so far successful as completely to blind Sir John de Burgh and Mr. and Mrs. Talbot to the real state of the case.

Not the others, however—not Lady Agnes, Miss Crewe, nor Augusta! The two former were too far behind the scenes not to be aware how hollow was the scene now enacted before their eyes.

With Augusta it was a time of terrible and deadly ordeal; her bitterest enemy

must have compassionated the wretched girl, whose fevered brain was racked by the violence of the contending emotions that often made her feel as though reason itself must become unseated did the agonizing conflict continue much longer to torture alike mind and body. Whole nights would sometimes pass without her closing an eye; and the weary, restless hours would be intensified in their gloom by thoughts and wishes so frightful, that she shuddered in her darkened solitude as they over and over again recurred to her morbid imagination.

But she could not shake them off; and still, while all this misery raged in her heart, she too could act the part that was expected from her, so well that Sir Charles and her sister were both deceived, and never once suspected that she saw through them both, and that their every thought and action lay open and unveiled before her.

One course alone Augusta felt to be open to her consistent with honour and self-respect, and that was to nerve herself resolutely for the sacrifice womanly pride de-

manded from her, and restore to Sir Charles Bellingham the liberty which he had, half-involuntarily, renounced, from a noble consideration for her wounded and mortified feelings.

When he had so unselfishly striven to soothe and heal her lacerated heart, and give back to her the peace of mind and self-esteem she had lost, could she now basely consent to forget all this, and still permit him to maintain an allegiance that had at length become a forced and reluctant one?

In her better and more renouncing moods Augusta would mournfully ponder this view of the question; and sometimes a gleam of a sentiment akin to resignation would dawn on her distracted mind, and she could even believe that the mighty victory once achieved, the worst of the struggle would be over. But too generally her mind was a prey to the worst and most degrading passions, and filled with vindictive hatred and self-torturing jealousy.

Therefore, she too, tossed in an ocean of doubts and perplexities, yielded to procrastination.

tion, and strove to put from her the evil hour when all those doubts must be solved, those perplexities unravelled; and from day to day the stream of time rolled on, bearing on its bosom the hopes and fears of so many throbbing hearts, and none could tell whether its current would cast them on the destroying breakers or gently bear them to a sure and peaceful haven; for to every one of them the unknown future was dark, very, very dark.

CHAPTER III.

WHAT A DAY MAY BRING FORTH.

THE Holy Week was ended; and a general dispersion of the visitors to the Roman capital was now on the eve of taking place. Among those who had arranged to depart was Sir John de Burgh, who, with his daughters and Mr. and Mrs. Talbot, had decided on passing a few weeks at Naples, where many of their especial intimates were also about to re-assemble.

Sir Charles had yielded to his mother's strong desire of immediately returning to England, and had informed Augusta and her father of their intentions; asserting, what was an undoubted fact, that his presence at Bellingham was very much required, to ensure promptitude in the completion of all the necessary arrangements.

Augusta received the intelligence with emotions of satisfaction by no means easy to conceal; and Sir Charles was, to say the least of it, considerably surprised at the total absence of all opposition or even objection to his plan on the part of one who might very naturally have been expected to exhibit some slight reluctance to the loss of his society.

“We shall miss you very much,” was her reply, when he had entered at some length on his explanations. “We had quite reckoned on all travelling home together; but I suppose business must be attended to before everything else.”

She was engaged in some ornamental manufacture of silk and beads; and while she spoke she bent her head low over her work—not to hide a sudden pallor or a rising tear, but in order that he should not perceive the joy that sparkled in her eyes and illumined her whole countenance as she thought of the vista of hope and happiness opened out to her by this unlooked-for alteration in their circumstances.

For, once removed from the sphere of her sister's insidious influence, the spell that seemed to have lighted upon him might be broken, and in a protracted absence it might fall away altogether. It would then be her own province to avert all opportunity of its renewal; and faithfully did she promise herself that, were a separation once effected between Marian and Sir Charles, she would take care to preclude them from every chance of meeting until the period when it should no longer be in the power of either to work her any effectual injury.

Sir Charles, as we have already said, was surprised, and also displeased, at what he naturally enough regarded as a far from flattering display of *nonchalance* on the part of his future wife.

“Do you really think I shall be missed?” he rejoined, in a decidedly sarcastic tone; “no doubt I might have been found useful now and then; but you have a first-rate *courier*, whose services must rank far before mine in practical efficiency.”

“Nonsense,” replied Augusta, now venturing to raise her eyes, and smiling on him all the more brightly, that it gratified her to discover she had still power to pique him. “You know quite well what I mean, Charles.”

“I know what you said,” he retorted; “and only a very vivid imagination could have detected anything beyond a very mild expression of regret in it. You never hinted the faintest wish that I should stay.”

“I declare you are perfectly unreasonable,” continued Augusta, even more gaily than before. “You come and tell me with profound gravity that imperative business compels you to return to England; and because I submissively defer to your sovereign will, you are actually indignant with me! May it not be possible that I have arrived at the wise conclusion that the sooner we part now the sooner we shall meet again?” And now she really did blush very becomingly, and the long lashes once more drooped over the dark brilliant eyes. Her attitude was very graceful as she bent

slightly forward, and her small white hands, sparkling with costly rings, were well displayed by the nature of her occupation. Sir Charles could not avoid remarking her extreme beauty and the elegance of her movements; and he recalled to mind his mother's observation regarding the admiration she was certain to excite in England, and the important position she might be expected to hold in her own county.

Without replying to her last question, he permitted himself to fall into a reverie as to what kind of life he might anticipate in the future, if matters remained in their present position, and Augusta became his wife and the mistress of Bellingham. Would she then wish to continue her present existence of constant excitement and profitless pleasure; to be the brilliant leader of fashion, the most striking ornament of gay circles in England as had so long been the case abroad?—or would the new situation and new duties tend to develop in her qualities of a higher order—a disposition more likely to contribute to the happiness

of a husband, and those with whom she was more immediately brought in contact? He by no means felt sure how she might relish the tranquil existence that, for at least a considerable portion of the year, awaited her at Bellingham; where gaiety was a thing unknown, and sober dinner-parties, with an occasional dance or archery meeting, were the utmost ever dreamt of in the way of entertainment.

“A penny for your thoughts!” observed Augusta, suddenly, with a smiling but somewhat narrow scrutiny of his countenance.

He hesitated for a few moments.

“Should you really like to know of what I was thinking?” he at length replied, rather gravely.

“I should,” said Augusta.

“Well, then, I was wondering whether your future life will be sufficient for your happiness, Augusta. Have you no fear that the calm routine of a country existence will soon pall on one accustomed to so much of glitter and excitement? It is so

very different from anything you have as yet experienced."

The light faded out of Augusta's eye, though the warm colour deepened in her cheek; and she bit her lips to restrain the movement of impatience that would have curled them in haughty displeasure.

"It is rather late in the day to ask me that question now," she replied, with apparent composure. "The life you describe awaited me at the Abbey, to which we must sooner or later have returned; besides, I am not aware of ever having said anything to give you the impression that I was unable to exist without gaiety. Bellingham Court is not in the desert of Sahara: I suppose the society of one's fellow-creatures is practicable at times?"

"Quite," rejoined Sir Charles; "but I may as well warn you that you will find your fellow-creatures of a very different stamp from the generality of those with whom you are in the habit of associating on the Continent."

"Eminently stupid and respectable, no

doubt," said Miss de Burgh, with a scarcely concealed sneer. "I know the kind of thing perfectly from books, though I have never actually tried it for myself. It will be an entirely new field for my fascinations; for I am resolved to captivate all the worthy old squires in the neighbourhood. I must pick up some leading ideas on high farming, and the proper drainage of land. Those are the staple bucolic topics, are they not? I shall get Marian to put me through a course of training; no doubt she is a first-class authority on such matters." She had thrown out the inuendo on purpose, and it had the effect which she anticipated.

Sir Charles rose from his chair with considerable perturbation, and strolled about the room for some moments in an uneasy manner, closely watched by his *fiancée*, though she was apparently entirely engrossed by her work.

"There are many things in which you may very advantageously receive hints from

your sister," he at length observed, scarcely knowing what he said.

"Indeed!" said Augusta, bitterly; "it used formerly, I believe, to be part of the code of good breeding that a lover should esteem his mistress to be perfect; but now-a-days it seems *nous avons changé tout cela*. On the whole, I prefer the old system; such very remarkable sharp-sightedness in a lover makes one tremble for the faults that will be present to the husband."

An angry retort rose to the lips of Sir Charles, fortunately nipped in the bud by the opportune entrance of Mrs. Talbot; and he and Augusta had no further time for indulgence in recrimination, which might have proceeded to a very uncomfortable height in their then decidedly irritable frame of mind. He was quitting the house a short time afterwards, when he encountered Marian, who had just returned from riding with her father.

Sir John had remained outside to give some directions to the groom; and in an

angle of the wide staircase Sir Charles Bellingham suddenly found himself face to face with Marian, no other person near them—a circumstance of very unusual occurrence now.

She glanced up as he descended, and the air she was softly humming ceased instantly, while a colour deeper than that induced by exercise rose to her cheek, and her manner became timid and uncertain.

“Augusta is upstairs, I suppose?” she inquired, hurriedly; at the same time gathering up the habit which she had dropped, and endeavouring to pass him on the stairs.

“Yes, she is,” he replied; “I have just left her. But, Marian, speak to me for one moment; why do you always avoid me now? Are you afraid of me?”

“I do not avoid you; I see you every day,” said Marian, not daring to lift her eyes.

“Oh, yes; you see me, and I see you,” replied Sir Charles, bitterly. “I allow that we do meet, Marian; but ah! how dif-

ferently now from formerly. I feel the change, if you do not; it has caused me many an hour of sorrow to know that my little sister no longer loves me."

"Charles! you know it is not that," said poor Marian, for her, almost angrily. "You know that, as a brother, you are as dear to me as ever; but I cannot stay here talking to you now. I must go upstairs; do let me pass."

She raised her soft appealing eyes to his face; for he had placed himself before her on the staircase so as completely to obstruct her progress.

"You shall go," he replied, dejectedly, though still retaining his position; "but listen to me for one moment, Marian. It may be the last time I shall ever speak to you alone—as we are now."

A slightly wondering look came into her features; she held her riding-skirt firmly in her grasp, but she did not insist on passing onwards.

"What do you mean?" she gently inquired.

“I mean that I have just been with your sister ; communicating to her a small piece of intelligence which she received with great equanimity, and which will probably interest you even less !”

“What is it, Charles ? I trust you have no bad news ?” and the expression in Marian’s countenance was by no means deficient in concern.

“Do you care to know ?” said Sir Charles, gloomily.

“If I may,” replied Marian, in a low tone, which she vainly endeavoured to render steady and indifferent.

“Oh, yes ; you may know ; the information is simple, and easily told. It is only that I find I cannot remain and travel to England with your party, as I at first intended. I must return to Bellingham.”

He spoke with some asperity, but he eagerly watched the expression of her face, hoping to trace in it an evidence of the regret which perhaps she might refuse to declare in any other way. Nor was he disappointed.

The light died out of Marian's eye, and the colour faded from her cheek. Once more the folds of her riding-habit fell from her trembling grasp; but she perceived it not, and laid her hand heavily on the banister, as if for support. Still her self-possession did not forsake her: she would not yield to the feeling of heart sickness that seemed to be stealing over her, but summoning all her resolution to her aid, she put a strong constraint on herself, and said, in a voice low indeed, but yet calm and distinct—

“Surely this is very unexpected. I—I did not know there was any prospect of your having to leave sooner than ourselves.”

“Once I did not think there was; but now, Marian, I begin to feel it may be the best plan.”

She shivered slightly, and clung more firmly to the banister.

“Then, are you not going to Naples with us?”

“No, Marian; I shall bid you farewell here, where I feel that I have already

lingered too long—for my happiness, at least. We shall meet no more till the day that—that will make us the brother and sister we have hitherto, though I much fear falsely, imagined ourselves; till my wedding-day, Marian!”

Her head had sunk very low during his words, and both hands were tightly clasping the carved balustrade; for a mist seemed floating before her eyes, and strange sounds were ringing in her ears, and in the last few moments a veil appeared to have been rudely torn away, and Marian de Burgh felt that the speech of Sir Charles had been to her as the voice of a death-warrant, and knew that her love for him was not that of a sister for a brother.

He saw that she was moved, though he did not guess how strongly, for her hat shaded her features, and he stood a step higher on the staircase than she did.

“You are sorry I must go?” he softly whispered; “*you* will miss me, Marian!”

“Indeed I shall; we shall all miss you, Charles,” she replied, as she struggled hard

for composure; "but if you think you had better go, it is right you should. You are the best judge."

"I would fain stay, Marian; but I dare not, I dare not; and you know why. But I think *you* are sorry to lose me, Marian; Augusta did not seem to mind it in the least. She never expressed the slightest wish that it might be otherwise. Should you be glad if I remained after all? Will you ask me to stay, Marian? I will do it if you bid me—gladly, gladly."

"No, no! I cannot—I will not," she murmured, faintly, again making an effort to pass him, for he was now leaning on the banister beside her, striving to read the countenance she so determinedly kept averted from him.

Could they but have glanced upwards, and seen the pale livid features, distorted by wild emotions of rage and jealousy, that glared on them from the landing above, they had surely fled from each other on the instant. But they were engrossed by themselves and each other, and never thought of looking up.

“Marian!” he urged again, trying at the same time to possess himself of her hand; “you know why it is that I am leaving in this way. It is entirely on your account; because I cannot trust myself longer in your presence. If I am ever to become the husband of your sister, I must shun your society till we are really linked in the bonds of near relationship. It may be safe then; it is not so now.”

“Go, Charles! Oh! go now, and leave me!” exclaimed poor Marian, whose powers of endurance were rapidly failing her; “do not speak to me in this cruel way! You make me feel so fearfully wicked.”

“I do not mean to be cruel, Marian,” said Sir Charles, gently; “God knows you are far too dear to me for that. I go to save you sorrow as well as myself; but I carry my grief along with me. Sometimes I am almost doubtful whether I am acting wisely—nay, even rightly. A loveless marriage is a terrible prospect for any man: and when to that is added the bitter recollection that it might possibly have been

otherwise—ah! Marian, then indeed life may come to be felt a burden most intolerable! I cannot believe your sister really cares for me; she has given me but small reason to think so lately. If I thought that she did not love me and you did! Marian! Marian! one little word from you might end all our difficulties and perplexities—happiness might be in store for us yet!”

“It cannot be, Charles; do not name such horrible treachery to me. Not for worlds—not though you were dearer to me than my own soul, would I act so base a part. Such conduct would bring with it a curse instead of a blessing; no happiness would be in store for us, but never-ceasing and richly-merited misery. Never breathe such a proposal to me again if you wish me to remain your friend. As regards your behaviour to Augusta, I do not presume to offer any opinion; but I will warn you only of this. If you were to break off your engagement to her to-morrow, it would make not the slightest difference with respect to me.

I would never marry the man who had brought suffering and humiliation on my own, only sister; never, Charles, never. You may believe me when I say so."

Eagerness and excitement had lent her temporary strength; she had relinquished her hold of the banister, and stood resolutely facing him with kindling eye and glowing cheek, and her voice never for a moment trembled or faltered.

Just as she finished speaking, and before Sir Charles had uttered a single word in reply, they were startled by sudden sounds of confusion in the court outside the house: wild cries, a loud mingling of several excited voices, and the quick, sharp gallop of a horse on the pavement, which died away as they held their breaths to listen.

Pale as death Marian ran down the steps and out into the inner court where she had left her father, and was closely followed by Sir Charles. On their gaining the open air, Sir John de Burgh was nowhere to be seen; nor, indeed, any one, except a little Italian stable helper, who was lustily clutching at

the reins of Marian's horse, which, pawing the ground and snorting violently, seemed in a state of intense excitement.

From the street beyond the court came a confused murmur of some great commotion, and Sir Charles at once divined that an accident had taken place; while Marian, releasing his arm, which she had nervously clasped, dragged her skirt hastily round her, and fled to the entrance that opened on the Corso.

"Stop, Marian, don't go out—I fear it is an accident to your father," said Sir Charles, as he kept pace with her rapid steps, and watched anxiously lest in her haste she should trip and fall.

"His horse must have run away with him," gasped Marian; "and oh! Charles, it may be dragging him along the ground!" And Marian wildly wrung her hands together, and leant for an instant against one of the entrance pillars.

"Stay here," he said, "and I will go and see after Sir John. Don't come into the street, Marian; I will return immediately."

“No, no,” replied Marian, again starting forward; “I cannot stay, I must go and find him. Oh! Charles, Charles, we cannot tell what may not have happened! Papa! my own dear papa!”

They were now in the Corso, where a large and excited crowd of people were lining the road, all talking and gesticulating forcibly, a perfect Babel of tongues and confusion.

“Ah! the signorina!” exclaimed a few, who knew the young English girl by sight; and something like a stillness fell on the part of the crowd nearest to them, while many sad and anxious faces testified to their sympathy.

“My father—where is he?” inquired Marian of an elderly man, with whose appearance she was familiar. “Was he on the ground? was he being dragged along?” Her glittering eyes seemed to read his very soul; no evasion of the truth was possible before a gaze like that.

They spoke in Italian; the bye-standers listened attentively, as though they would

confirm or deny any statement he should make.

“Ah! yes, my dear young lady,” replied the man, pitifully shaking his grey head; “the worthy gentleman was dragged along by the horse; the blessed Virgin be merciful to him and keep him from harm.”

“He will be killed! Oh! Charles, he will be killed!” And overcome by the intensity of her emotion, the poor girl fell almost unconscious into Sir Charles’s extended arms.

Now, in the distance, were heard fresh cries of excitement; and the nearer uproar was for a moment stilled till it should be known what caused this new disturbance.

The horse had been caught, and was being led back; but even before this result occurred, the foot of Sir John de Burgh had become disengaged from the stirrup, and his senseless, and as it was feared inanimate body had been left lying in the middle of the road.

This news travelled fast; and when Sir Charles heard it, he committed the care of

Marian for a few minutes to some kind female spectators, and hastened forward himself to meet the group who were bringing back the motionless body. He soon encountered them; two or three of Sir John's own servants and numerous friendly assistants bearing gently on a softly carpeted shutter the still, pale form, the first glance at which thrilled Sir Charles through with sick horror, for not a trace of life seemed remaining in it.

"This is dreadful," said Sir Charles, in a low voice to a servant; "I fear he is dangerously hurt. Stay, has a doctor been sent for? That must be done at once. Fetch the one who is nearest instantly."

Having done all that he could for Sir John, the young baronet's next thought was for Marian, whom he trusted to save if possible from the horror and shock that awaited her, until at least she was placed in the shelter of her home, and in the tender care of her affectionate grandmother.

But, unfortunately, his anxious solicitude to effect this desirable result was frustrated

by the benevolent attentions of the good Samaritans with whom he had left her. By the judicious application of cold water and strong smelling salts Marian had already been restored to consciousness; and she was just beginning to rally from her faint, when the silence and subdued manner of those about her attracted her notice, and looking in the direction to which all eyes were turned, she perceived in a moment what was taking place.

Bursting from the feeble grasp of the friendly hands that strove to detain her, she wildly pushed aside all who stood in her way, and speedily reached the mournful little group that were softly bearing her father to his home.

Vainly did Sir Charles Bellingham try to hold her back. One look she cast on the pale rigid features! Then with a scream which none who heard it ever again forgot, she fell forward on the motionless body, and insensibility once more came mercifully to her relief.

All this occurred almost opposite their

own entrance; so, raising Marian rapidly in his arms, Sir Charles went on before with her, and had just reached the open door when he encountered Augusta coming out in quest of intelligence.

She too had heard the first sounds of alarm; and had gathered from the little Italian groom that an accident had happened to her father. Summoning the rest of the household to be in readiness in case of need, she was just issuing from the doorway when Sir Charles came hastily forward, carrying her sister in his arms, her long habit tripping him at every step, and her fair hair all dishevelled and streaming about his shoulders.

“What has happened?” she inquired, deadly pale with terror and anger, for the sight she looked on seemed to chill her heart; “where is my father?”

“Come back, Augusta; he will be here directly,” said Sir Charles, wishful to spare her the shock, for he knew her strong attachment to her father. “Sir John has met with an injury, and they are bringing him home. Marian has fainted from terror;

if you will just see to her while I return to your father."

Scarcely deigning a glance at her sister, whom Sir Charles now relinquished to the care of some of the servants, Augusta replied with icy coldness, and a scarce concealed sneer, "I have no doubt my sister will be well attended to; I shall go and meet my father."

Sir Charles glanced at the bitter, stony countenance, listened to the hard, unfeeling tones, and he felt in that moment when he stood there, that in his inmost heart he hated the woman who was his promised wife. He did not dream of all she had witnessed on the stair, nor of the harsh construction she had perhaps not unnaturally placed on it. What he did think was that he had vowed to love and cherish this heartless girl, who never uttered a word of pity, or cast even one look of regret on the young sister who was carried fainting past her, and who left her to the care of servants, without one sympathizing direction on her behalf.

But he was a man, and a man, too, of a

kindly nature ; and he felt deep compassion for Augusta in her approaching trial, and wished if possible to spare her as far as it lay in his power to do so.

“You had better return to the house, Augusta,” he observed, gently, as he took her by the hand and tried to prevent her further advance. “It will be better for you to do so, you may believe me. Sir John is unable to move, and is being carried here. Do come in doors, Augusta;” for he heard the measured tramp of footsteps close at hand. But Augusta heard the sound also, and she became suddenly hushed and trembling ; and she too would have fallen, but that Sir Charles supported her with his firm grasp.

“Oh! Charles, is he dead?” she faintly exclaimed, as she beheld the sad procession enter the court. “Let me know the worst—I can bear it better than suspense. Is he dead?” And with wildly straining eyes she strove to read the truth in his countenance.

“I hope not, Augusta ; I trust not, indeed. I have sent for a doctor—ah! here he comes.

Now, dear, let me entreat you to come into the house. When the doctor has made an examination I will instantly bring you his report."

And she offered no further resistance as he gently led her away.

Meanwhile Sir John de Burgh had been carried to his own apartment, and the doctor was proceeding to examine into the nature of his injuries. His shoulder had been severely dislocated; and there were many serious wounds and bruises, which had been caused by the rapid manner in which he had been dragged along the road. But the gravest injury of all was to the head; it had come into violent contact with the ground, and the doctor much feared there was a concussion of the brain, the final result of which it was impossible to determine.

One sole consolation his investigation afforded: Sir John de Burgh was not dead. A faint glimmer of vitality still lingered in his frame; but so faint, so almost imperceptible, that no vision, save

the acute one of the doctor, could detect its existence.

The most skilful physicians in Rome were hastily summoned; and in the interval preceding their arrival Sir Charles Bellingham and Mr. Talbot, who had also remained in Sir John's apartment pending the doctor's examination, quitted it to communicate his opinion to the anxious group who awaited the solemn verdict of life or death.

They were all together: Mrs. Talbot and the two daughters of the wounded man, all very pale and trembling. Marian partially recovered from her long swoon; but, in addition to her fear for the safety of her father, filled with a new anxiety in witnessing the unmistakable *hauteur* and disdain of her sister's manner—a circumstance all the more unaccountable to her that she had no suspicion her interview with Sir Charles Bellingham had been observed, while of late Augusta and she had, outwardly at least, been on decidedly better terms than usual. But now, even in the midst of her deep affliction, there was a chilling contempt in her

sister's every look and tone in addressing her that could not fail to strike the keenly sensitive Marian. So they sat for many long hours; while physicians came and went in solemn consultation, and Sir Charles and Mr. Talbot received their decisions, and conveyed them to the watchers in the drawing-room.

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CHAPTER IV.

THE WIND CHANGES.

THE result was favourable : Sir John de Burgh's life was spared.

For many days it hung trembling in the balance ; but a good constitution, and the skill and unwearied attention of the physicians, won the victory. His pulse began to beat more strongly, the deathly pallor left his countenance ; and on the morning of the fourth day after the accident he unclosed his eyes for a moment, and faintly murmured the name of Marian.

She was standing near the bed, along with Augusta and Mr. and Mrs. Talbot ; for they had been warned that the crisis was at hand, and that Sir John would then either recover partial consciousness or gradually succumb to the weakness against

which the efforts of the medical men had been so untiringly directed.

When she heard her name breathed in the low and tremulous but well-loved tones, Marian sprang quickly forward, and kneeling by her father's side, she took his weak hand very gently in hers, and pressed on it a kiss of love and earnest gratitude.

Her unceasing prayers for mercy had been heard; he was once more restored to her: and the heart of the devoted daughter was too full for her to do more than kiss the feeble fingers over and over again.

With a silent but bitter pang, Augusta witnessed this little scene: the first thought of her father was not for *her*, but was bestowed on this long alien sister, who had come among them to wile from her all that she most prized.

But her strong affection for her father, as well as a jealous desire to excite his attention to herself too, prevented Augusta from remaining a merely passive spectator of Sir John's fast returning consciousness; she likewise softly approached the bed, and

bending over it, said in tones, which, from the painful effort to render them steady, sounded cold and harsh. "I am glad you are better, papa."

Sir John had already become aware that his younger daughter was beside him; and Marian was now nestling within the arm he had stretched out when her eager kisses were showered on his hand. It was fondly clasped round her slight girlish form; but on hearing the voice of Augusta he extended to her the other one, which she also took and pressed warmly to her lips. But it was a more formal action on both sides than the impulsive gush of feeling displayed by Marian, and the spontaneous evidence of vivid affection manifested by her father; Augusta, with her naturally clear perception sharpened by jealous observation, easily detected the unmistakable difference in Sir John's manner towards her sister and herself, and it helped materially to heighten the sentiments of bitter envy and enmity already raging in her heart.

No further communication, however, was

at present permitted between the re-united father and daughters; for the watchful physician interdicted another syllable of conversation, declaring that Sir John's condition still required the most absolute repose for a few days at the least. That interval safely passed, the restriction was gradually removed; the members of the family circle were admitted freely to the chamber of the invalid, and Marian especially was enabled to enjoy her father's society to her heart's content; while Sir John, on his side, was manifestly never happier than when reclining against a pile of cushions, with her on a low stool beside him, eagerly watching him as he enjoyed some little delicacy she had herself conveyed to him, or with sparkling eyes detailing any interesting piece of news she had managed to acquire for his amusement. They formed a pretty picture, the father and daughter, as they sat thus: Sir John, in his crimson brocaded dressing-gown, extended on the old tapestried sofa, his patrician features paler and more clearly

defined from the effects of his accident; Marian, in a delicate robe of lustrous silk, leaning up against her father as she raised her beaming eyes to his face, while her golden curls flowed loosely over her shoulders, the style in which her mother used to wear her hair, and which Sir John had especially requested Marian to adopt, so as to complete the already wonderful resemblance she bore to his dead wife.

For many a long hour Sir Charles Bellingham drank in the silent charm of this graceful picture. Years afterwards he had but to summon it to his faithful memory, and it arose before him in all its vivid life and beauty, when those who formed it were—but the veil of the impenetrable future must not be rashly lifted. Surely the poet who sang—

“A thing of beauty is a joy for ever,”

had never had it in his power to recall a vision like this; and then with sadly aching heart to remember that, alas! it was only a vision—a bright dream of the never-to-be-forgotten past!

No particular day had been fixed for the departure of Sir Charles and Lady Agnes; and after Sir John de Burgh's accident all idea of such decision was for the present laid aside. But he still adhered to his resolution of returning to England whenever the state of his future father-in-law's health should permit of his doing so with propriety. Every hour, every moment that he passed in the society of the invalid convinced him only the more strongly of the necessity of this prudential course: Sir John was uneasy when Marian was absent, and firmly resisted the various attempts she made at first to quit his apartment soon after the entrance of Sir Charles Bellingham. He liked to have her beside him, to watch her as she sat on her stool at his feet; he was more at home, more unrestrained with her, than with Augusta; long and closely as he had been associated with his elder daughter, he had never beheld in her the playful fondness that characterized the behaviour of Marian, never received from her the thousand and one endearing

little attentions and caresses that made his heart beat with almost irrepressible affection when the fair-haired image of his idolized wife lightly traversed his chamber, or bent over his couch on some graceful mission of ministering love.

It happened one day that Augusta entered the room shortly after Sir Charles Bellingham arrived to pay his diurnal visit to the invalid. Marian had previously been sitting with her father; and he had urged her so strongly to remain, that she could not easily fulfil her original intention of quitting the apartment and leaving the two gentlemen together.

Sir Charles was the bearer of several *morceaux* of amusing intelligence; Sir John was entertained by their recital, Marian interested in spite of herself. Gradually the assumed calmness of her manner disappeared, gay remarks and merry laughter rang through the room; when the door opened, Augusta joined the circle with cold bearing and scrutinizing eye, and on her entrance an immediate and profound silence

prevailed—as it were, a sudden hush seemed to fall on the spirits of the group; where cheerful conversation and mirth had been but the moment before, all was now formality and constraint.

She could not avoid perceiving it, and she remarked, stiffly, “I fear I am an intruder; pray do not let me interrupt the pleasant conversation that seemed to be going on.”

This was not exactly a speech calculated to encourage its resumption; Sir Charles and Marian remained silent, but Sir John observed, cheerfully, “We have been hearing a few of the latest *cancans* from Sir Charles, who is quite *au fait* in the most recent Roman gossip. He must repeat them himself, however; my talent does not lie in that direction.”

“Neither does mine,” replied Augusta, coldly, “nor my tastes either; so I shall willingly dispense with the information, whatever it may be. I came to inquire whether this charming day will not tempt you to undertake a short drive.”

“What does Dr. Marian say?” inquired Sir John, smilingly addressing his younger daughter. “Am I strong enough to venture out, do you think?”

A dark frown overspread the countenance of Augusta, but she quietly awaited her father’s decision, avoiding at the same time even a glance in the direction of her sister.

“It is certainly a lovely day,” said Marian, doubtfully, “and a drive might do you good if the exertion were not too great. But, papa, you are so very weak still; you have never even walked up and down the room. Do you think you could undertake the fatigue of driving? It would be such a pity to run the risk of being thrown back again.”

“It would,” replied Sir John, promptly; “we shall be prudent, Marian, and if we err, it shall be on the safe side. I shall not drive to-day, Augusta; but I shall have a short promenade in my room instead. You will lend me your arm, my dear Charles?”

“Willingly,” said the young baronet; “and I daresay after all it is the wisest plan.”

“ I should fancy the fatigue and exertion of walking must be greater than merely leaning back in your own easy carriage,” observed Augusta, composedly; “ besides the loss of the invigorating influence of the fresh air. But of course if Marian disapproves of it I shall not add another word on the subject. I suppose you will scarcely care to accompany me, Marian; so I shall ask Mrs. Talbot if she is disposed for a drive.”

She turned away and slowly quitted the apartment, annoyance and displeasure marking every tone and gesture.

For a few moments there was an awkward silence; Marian made some unnecessary alteration in the position of the sofa cushions; Sir Charles examined his nails; Sir John alone preserved the same attitude, and seemed absorbed in a fit of meditation.

“ Poor Augusta!” he exclaimed at length, in a reflective manner, “ she was a little vexed at my refusal of her well-meant offer. It is a fine day,” and he glanced out of the

window; "perhaps I might have ventured after all."

"Oh! papa," said Marian, hastily, "you should not think of going out till it is quite prudent. Augusta would never wish you to run the slightest risk."

"No doubt of that, little one," replied her father, softly patting the white hand that rested on the sofa beside him; "but I am afraid Augusta thought I was following your counsel in opposition to hers, and that rather annoyed her. You forget that she has been with me all her life, Marian, while you, I grieve to say it, are, comparatively speaking, a stranger; and perhaps Augusta has some cause to feel a little set aside at present. You have been, somehow or other, fully more with me than she has."

"Augusta must not grudge me your society now, papa," said Marian, pleadingly; "she has had you always—I have had you only such a very short time."

"But that is all going to be altered now," replied her father; "you will have me entirely to yourself when this ogre here carries

off Augusta. So you may cry quits; unless you take it into your head to run off and leave me too, no very unlikely thing either. I shall live in mortal terror of all the young fellows in the neighbourhood. I don't think I shall admit them within the grounds: but will shut you up in the Abbey, and guard you like an enchanted princess."

He looked at her very lovingly as he spoke thus: and Marian raised her blue eyes to his face and answered in a low voice, "I should wish no better fate than to stay with you always, papa. We shall be very happy at the Abbey, you and I."

"Yes," said Sir John, archly, "till you come and tell me some fine morning as Augusta did, that somebody has fallen in love with you and wants to marry you right out of hand. So it will be, little one, take my word for it; and I promise you I will not say you nay if you bring me just such another son-in-law as Sir Charles there. I am not sure but that I have sometimes wished——" here he glanced at the two unlucky young people before him, and

wisely allowed his remark to remain incomplete.

Just as well that he did so, for Marian was in a burning glow of pain and confusion; while Sir Charles bit his lips, knitted his brows, and felt on the very verge of saying or doing something extremely imprudent. Sir John saw that his observation had been a little of a mistake; and without precisely divining why, he sensibly set himself to work to retrieve his position.

“By-the-by, my dear Charles,” he continued, “I have a great and special favour to ask of you. Can you guess what it is?”

“I cannot,” replied the young baronet; “but even before I hear what it is I promise you it is granted.”

“We’ll hold him to his word, Marian,” said her father, with a smiling glance at the still trembling girl; “he has committed himself in the fullest manner. Well, Charles, I wish you to relinquish this whim of yours, for it is nothing else, of starting for England before us, and afford me your valuable aid

on the homeward journey. I hope you will consent to do this."

"Ah! Sir John, I had not thought of this;" replied Sir Charles, with a hesitation that was perfectly evident. "My going to England at once was no whim, I do assure you; but a strong necessity."

"If this be really the case," said Sir John, "I shall instantly cease to press you on the point; but I own I cannot see what absolute necessity there can possibly be. You, perhaps, have not calculated that, owing to this unlucky accident, we are a good deal thrown out of our bearings. A longer stay at Naples may be advisable; and I fear I must also intimate a little further probation for you and Augusta. If this, however, should be excessively repugnant to your inclinations, I shall not refuse to have the wedding celebrated here; otherwise I do not deny that my great desire is to have it postponed till our arrival at the Abbey."

"Oh! that point is quite settled," said Sir Charles, hurriedly. "When you are

settled at the Abbey will be the best time."

Sir John glanced at him curiously for a moment, and then remarked—

"Then if all those arrangements are satisfactory, I really cannot understand your hurry to return to Bellingham; and you will really confer an immense obligation on me if you will remain, and act as our *chargé d'affaires* on our journey to Naples."

"Say no more, Sir John," replied Sir Charles, decidedly, feeling that fate herself had conspired against him; "the thing is settled. A request of that nature so made by you could never be refused by me. You may rely on my acting as your escort."

CHAPTER V.

PATIENCE AND PERSEVERANCE.

SIR JOHN now recovered rapidly, and the journey to Naples was successfully performed.

A friend had placed his house at their disposal—a lovely villa situated on the heights overlooking the bay.

Sir Charles and Lady Agnes occupied apartments in one of the hotels, where Mrs. Greville and her sister were also located. The season was cooler than usual, and people had not yet been compelled to fly from the place on account of the intense heat; through the widely-opened windows came a delicious waft of freshness from the sparkling waters of the bay, and the light breeze stirred the long curls floating on Marian's shoulder, as she stood in the

verandah and feasted her eyes on the glorious beauty of the scene before her.

“Very lovely, is it not?” said her father, to whom the view was familiar, as he joined her, and saw the admiration beaming in her countenance.

“Oh, papa, it is so very beautiful!” replied Marian, with enthusiasm. “I am so glad you were able to come to Naples; this is far nicer than Rome.”

“Fickle and inconstant, like all your sex,” said Sir John, smiling. “All the ancient glory of the Eternal City fading away before the charms of this blue sea and sky! But I honestly allow it is very bewitching. Nothing like this at Summer-ton or the Abbey, eh, Miss Marian?”

“No Bay, papa, and not quite so brilliant a sky; but dear old Summerton has its own peculiar beauties, and I love it far, far better than Italy.” And Marian softly hummed the words of the old ballad—

“A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there,
Which search thro’ the world ne’er is met with else-
where :”

and as she sung her eyes were fixed on the azure waters of the broad bay before her; but her heart was far away among the green hedgerows and bright blossoms of her native county.

Her father looked at her seriously, but kindly.

“ You must try now, my love, to give up speaking or thinking of Summerton as ‘home;’ it is true that it has been so—more shame to me for allowing it—but the Abbey will be your home now, Marian, and for my sake, you will endeavour to feel that it is so; and please God that we are all spared to get there, we will make a cheery home of the old house yet.”

They were alone in the verandah, no one even within hearing of their conversation.

Marian’s eyes filled with soft tears as she glanced tenderly at her father; and taking his hand, she laid it gently on her cheek, and whispered, “ Wherever you are is now ‘home’ to me, papa; it does not matter where it is, so long as I am with you.”

For some days after their arrival, Sir John attempted very little in the way of active exertion; but the rest of the party were more enterprising, and the usual lions of Naples and its vicinity received all due attention; and as Sir John was now rapidly regaining his ordinary health, the journey to England once more came on the *tapis*, and began to be discussed as a thing very near at hand.

Among other visitors, Count Salvi had also found his way to Naples; and once more he was a daily and privileged *habitué* of the Villa Stradella.

Wily and crafty as ever, perfect master of his every word and action, nay, almost of his very looks, the young Italian had apparently entirely recovered his old position in the abode of the friendly English baronet, and in the good graces of his even more exclusive daughter. So carefully had he studied his opportunities, so cautiously had he timed his wary advances, that Augusta had scarcely perceived the slow, but, nevertheless, sure pace, by which he had arrived

at the unchecked resumption of all his ancient privileges. And even had Augusta felt inclined to assert herself, and contest his position, there seemed no particular reason why she should do so. For though *apparently* on the same footing as formerly, Augusta felt that the Count's manner was greatly changed, to herself, at least; in fact, it was precisely what she wished it to be—no alteration or improvement could possibly be desired.

But never for one moment had the remembrance of one bitter hour of stinging mortification faded from the tenacious memory of the man who had then felt himself a scorned and insulted suppliant. The deadly vow of future vengeance which he had then mentally recorded, had been carefully treasured up till the fitting time and opportunity should arrive for paying off the debt with interest.

That he seemed outwardly smooth and smiling was not the slightest criterion of his real feelings; they were entirely unchanged. His scheme of revenge was not forgotten.

Count Salvi joined their family party at the Villa Stradella nearly every evening; but this privilege was also accorded to Mrs. Greville and Miss Crewe; and Sir Charles Bellingham, and generally his mother likewise, were in the habit of repairing to pass their evenings with their future relatives; so the little *réunions* were sociable and lively, while at the same time perfectly easy and unceremonious. With his former antipathy to the Count only partially dormant, Sir Charles was yet unable to object to the presence of the young Italian, or even in any degree to find fault with his manner to Augusta; yet he much disliked to see Count Salvi lounging about the house, with his negligently *habitué*, "tame cat" kind of air; and greatly would he have rejoiced had any occasion arisen when his dismissal from his present post of confidential intimate could have been requested as a personal favour to himself. But this was a result evidently perfectly unattainable while matters remained in their existing position, and no loophole for any such proposal was afforded

by the Count, who was all the while a closely observant watcher of the progress of events; and it seemed to his judgment that the day was not far distant when he should have the long-anticipated satisfaction of witnessing the discomfiture and humiliation of the proud girl who had so mercilessly wounded him; and so he patiently abided his time.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CONVENT OF SANTA LUCIA.

AMONG other objects, Marian had expressed a keen desire to see the interior of a convent and have some intercourse with its inmates.

They were all gathered in the verandah one evening when she again seriously broached the subject.

“Are you thinking of taking the veil, little one?” said Mr. Talbot, laughing; “I did not imagine you were tired of this wicked world already.”

She was sitting beside him on the balcony, and he playfully raised one of her long, fair curls, remarking as he did so—

“All those must come off, you know; no such vanities permitted in convents.”

“I am not going to sacrifice my curls, grandpapa, and I am not at all tired of the

world, of which I have not, as yet, seen a great deal," replied Marian, saucily; "but I should like to see how people look who *are* tired of it, and what kind of lives they appear to lead. How can we get into a nunnery, I wonder?"

As she spoke Count Salvi joined the party; and hearing the words, at once offered, in the most obliging manner, to procure an order of admission to the Convent of Santa Lucia, near Naples.

"I am fortunately enabled to secure for you some important privileges in this case," remarked the Count, politely; "a great friend of mine is now one of the leading priests connected with the convent, and through his intervention I hope I may also obtain an order of admission for gentlemen as well as for ladies, supposing that any of the masculine members of the party desire to avail themselves of the permission."

"I, for one, should like it of all things," said Sir Charles Bellingham, with a cordiality so unusual that the Count bowed with an air of smooth gratification.

Count Salvi was as good as his word; the desired order of admission arrived, and an early day was arranged for a visit to the Convent of Santa Lucia. It was beautifully situated on a promontory overlooking the bay: the trimly-kept gardens commanded a varied and extensive prospect of olive and orange-clad slopes, green vineyards, and dazzlingly white villas glancing in the brilliant sunlight; while the interior of the building was cool and fresh, hushed and quiet in its seclusion, conveying an idea of peace and tranquillity that must have had a soothing effect on spirits jarred by the fierce commotions of the restless world without the convent gates.

The superior of the community, a stately and noble-looking woman of fifty, received them with much graciousness of manner; and willingly acceded to their desire of being introduced to some of the internal arrangements of the establishment.

She sent for one of the sisters to escort them through the convent, and in the interval that elapsed before her arrival she con-

versed very freely with Sir John de Burgh. Miss de Burgh and Emily Crewe occupied themselves in studying a few rare old prints that graced the whitewashed walls of the apartment, while Marian was engaged in admiring the exquisite view of Naples and the bay visible from one of the widely-open windows. While thus engrossed, she was interrupted by Sir Charles Bellingham, who approached her post of observation and smilingly asked her opinion of the lady-superior.

“Oh! she exactly fulfils my idea of what a nun should be,” replied Marian, glancing once more at her stately bearing and finely-cut features. “She must have been very beautiful when she was young. I wonder how she came to take the veil?”

“Count Salvi has just told me,” said Sir Charles; “she was engaged to be married to a young man of rank, who caught small-pox and died a few weeks before the day fixed for their wedding. It was a dreadful blow to her; and though she was young and handsome, and also very wealthy, she

chose to retire for ever from a world that had lost its chief attraction in her eyes. So she really has a history, and a very sad one indeed."

"Poor woman!" said Marian, gently, her eyes filling with tears, as she again turned them in the direction of the subject of their conversation. "Ah! in such a case as that, one can fancy a convent seeming to be a very haven of peaceful refuge."

"She seems in better spirits now, fortunately," observed Sir Charles, "and is really a very kind and accommodating old lady. She has sent for a sister to conduct us round the premises. I'll lay you half a dozen pair of gloves to one that she is fat and jolly; an individual of that sort is probably kept on hand for the purpose."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when the door of the apartment was opened, and the sister who had been summoned made her appearance. Marian's eyes involuntarily sought those of Sir Charles Bellingham, and she smilingly shook her head at the young man in token of triumph

at his failure. For the nun was a tall, slender woman, long past the period of youth certainly, but with a fair, pale face, lighted up with an earnest expression of goodness and gentleness that irresistibly moved the hearts of those who looked on her to feelings of pity and admiration. She wanted the stately dignity of the lady superior, and very possibly might not have been an equally efficient ruler of the establishment; but in her soft, dove-like eyes there shone a spirit of purity and love that pointed her out as one to whom the weary heart might safely trust for the tenderest sympathy. No hard lines of condemnatory harshness were there, but worn furrows that spoke of bygone sufferings, and dewy eyes that looked as though they had shed many a heavy and bitter tear. *Had* shed; for consolation seemed to have reached her now; and her air of pensive serenity gave convincing proof that for her the storms of this weary world were over—a haven of peace and security had been reached at last.

She silently received the directions of the

superior, and bent gracefully in reply to the salutations of the party of visitors. Meanwhile Augusta and Miss Crewe had joined the general circle, and Marian and the young baronet had also returned from the window; so all were in readiness to follow "Sister Agnes," for so the gentle nun was called. Towards the younger ladies of the party her attention was chiefly directed. So many lovely and interesting young faces seemed to strike her with evident admiration; and one or other of them constantly found her soft grey eyes gently resting on her with a look not so much of mere curiosity and pleasure as of tender and anxious solicitude.

Marian, especially, seemed to awaken in her feelings of unmistakeable interest and regard. She frequently addressed her conversation to her, and took evident pains to ingratiate herself with the young girl, who, on her part, gratefully reciprocated her kind attentions, and showed by her manner she was very much pleased with the society and friendly notice of Sister Agnes.

They visited the chapel, a small but beautiful building, lighted with richly-stained windows, that cast a solemn and mellow gleam on the carved pillars and rare old paintings that decorated the interior. Here they perceived several of the sisters engaged in prayer at the various shrines and altars within the chapel. Some never moved or seemed to notice them in any way; a few rose as they entered, and as they moved gracefully past the visitors, bent slowly and gravely in return for their silent salutation. Everything was very hushed and subdued; the "dim religious light" that shone through the darkly-tinted glass, the faint traces of incense lingering in the atmosphere, the dark, speechless figures fitting noiselessly about; and when as they were treading cautiously, and with bated breath, across one of the marble aisles, a little silver bell tinkled in the distance, and was immediately succeeded by a low plaintive chaunt from many sweet young voices, the singers themselves being invisible, the effect was

Revised edition of the text of the book of the convent of Santa Lucia

very thrilling and impressive; and tears stood in the eyes of many of the party, who might yet have been puzzled to explain the condition of mind that had induced this evidence of emotion.

Marian de Burgh felt completely overpowered; and more than one heavy and convulsive sob burst from her full heart as she listened to the touching music of the unseen choir, and found herself at the same time penetrated by an influence that seemed to enter into every fibre of her being, and which was as new as it was unaccountable; for scenes like the present were perfectly unfamiliar to her; her quiet routine at Summerton had left her a total stranger to all the vivid excitements of life, and she could not understand why what was affording her such exquisite enjoyment should at the same time awaken feelings of profound sorrow and melancholy.

Sir Charles Bellingham chanced to be standing near her, and he was much distressed by her evident emotion. He feared she might become hysterical, and looked

round to see who was at hand in case of assistance being necessary. He found Sister Agnes gazing tenderly at the weeping girl; her own soft eyes wearing a still more compassionate expression as she watched the slight figure, that every now and then shook with the violence of her ill-restrained agitation.

“It is nothing,” said the nun, kindly; showing by her manner that she understood his anxiety. “It is a mere impulse of excited feeling: the heart is full, and tears will relieve it; the young lady will be better presently. Ah, signor, it is well when tears can rise and fall as lightly as that soft shower: *there* beats a heart to which weeping will come in no such gentle fashion.”

She slightly indicated Augusta, who stood at a little distance, and had but a moment before ceased to regard with a chilling and disdainful air the lively emotion of her sister.

“Are those young ladies related to each other?” inquired the nun; “they are both very beautiful, and at the same time so very

different in appearance. I fancied I heard them both speak to that elderly gentleman as if he were their father; and yet it is difficult to think so when one looks at them."

"They are sisters," replied Sir Charles; "but, as you remark, they are indeed very different."

Something in his tone made Sister Agnes glance at him for an instant; but whatever her surmises may have been, they were incorrect ones, as we shall presently perceive.

Marian's sudden ebullition was soon over; she wiped her eyes, which were but little dimmed by her transient distress, and speedily rejoined her companions, who were now proceeding in another direction. Presently they emerged upon a broad terrace that overhung the vine-clad slopes of the hill, and commanded a noble prospect of the adjacent shores. The glad sea breeze floated freely towards them, and cooled their brows and cheeks, which were flushed with the close atmosphere of the scented chapel.

"Ah! this is charming!" remarked

Marian, gaily, as she held up her burning face to catch as much as possible of the refreshing wind. "Somehow or other, while we were in the chapel listening to that delicious chaunt, I felt for a few moments as if a nun's life were a very beautiful one; now, out here, I feel that I should just be like a bird in a cage, breaking my heart against the bars only for a breath of liberty."

Sister Agnes turned and looked at her gently; and when Marian perceived that the nun had overheard and understood her observation, she coloured, and was beginning to murmur some indistinct words of apology for what she felt to have been extreme want of consideration towards one who had shown her so much kindness. But the sister stopped her at once, by saying, pleasantly—

"Pray do not imagine your remark requires any excuse, signorina; it was one most natural at your age and in your position. A convent would indeed seem like a prison to one situated as you are;" and

Sister Agnes gave a half smile as she looked at the young face, and then for only a moment she glanced at the handsome features of Sir Charles Bellingham, who was also listening to the little discussion.

“I have always been accustomed to such a very unfettered kind of life,” pleaded Marian, anxious, if possible, to atone for her breach of politeness, “that the rules and regulations of a convent would seem very irksome to me.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Mr. Talbot, laughing, and shaking his head at her, “that empty curly little box of yours never could manage to remember anything like rules and regulations. I think we shall hand you over to this good lady here for six months or a year; it would be the best thing possible for you, I believe. Eh, Sir John, shall we leave her behind us to-day?”

“I don’t think I can spare my little Marian,” replied Sir John, laying his hand affectionately on her shoulder; “and all those golden curls too. No, I could never consent to their being cut off!”

“This young lady is not the kind of nature out of which nuns are made,” continued Sister Agnes; “she is too like the daisies of her native land—trodden on, nay, even sadly bruised for a while, a fair wind and bright sunshine will revive and restore them, and they will smile again as gaily as ever. Hope has generally died for ever in the heart when it turns to this calm monotony for relief, and feels only grateful to know that peace, at least, if only that, may be its portion within those walls.”

There was a sad earnestness in her tones that touched them all; clearly gentle Sister Agnes had passed through the fierce furnace of affliction, though now she looked like one who even in this life had found freedom from care.

For a short interval they were silent; then the beauty of the view tempted some of the party to stroll along the terrace; and so it chanced that Sister Agnes and Miss de Burgh remained alone near the doorway by which they had quitted the convent.

A_mysterious influence seemed to draw

Augusta towards this kindly sister. Augusta sat on the low stone coping, and looked curiously at the nun in her dark, funereal garb, as she stood in the opening of the doorway, her earnest eyes following the movements of one of the party of visitors, but which of them Augusta could not determine without changing her position and looking round.

“Do you never weary of the monotonous existence here?” she inquired of sister Agnes.

“Not now,” replied the nun, in a low tone; “I am quite contented now—I am even happy. This condition of mind did not come on me all at once; like your pretty little sister, there were many days when the convent seemed to me a dreary prison. But this is all changed now, and truly glad I am that it is so.”

She ceased speaking, and her lips moved as though in silent prayer.

“Those restless hours are over now,” she resumed, after a pause; “life and all merely worldly concerns are as nothing to me. I have found the pearl of great price,

and with it the peace that passes all understanding. May you some day know this peace too, young lady; I can frame no better wish for you, and something about you interests me deeply. You will not think me indelicate or presumptuous if I venture to say to you that I can read in those speaking eyes that your heart is ill at ease; peace of mind is not yet your portion."

Augusta slightly frowned, and a paler shade overspread her beautiful countenance. She did not immediately reply, and Sister Agnes continued—

"You are young and lovely, and the world must lie very bright before you, and yet I have known prospects as brilliant fade away from the sight. And ah! such gloomy shadows of darkness arise in their place. Shall I tell you how it happened that I became an inmate of the Convent of Santa Lucia?"

"If it will not pain you to recal sorrowful memories, I confess to a strong desire to hear the motives that induced you to take the veil," replied Augusta, eagerly.

“ You shall know them,” said the sister, gently ; “ the history may be of service to you. You are formed in another mould from the ordinary run of young ladies ; no especial discernment is needed to tell me that, it shines out in your every look and gesture. Beware of what the future contains for you, signorina ; your life lies all before you yet, but I fear it will be stormy and eventful. The serene home joys of gentle wife and tender mother that will form the portion of your sweet little sister and her chosen lover do not equally certainly await you !”

Not observing the dark look of anger that flashed from the eyes of her companion, not noticing the fierce clenching of the small hand, the pressure of the white teeth against the ruby lip till all colour fled and left it of ashy paleness, the earnest gaze of the nun followed the progress of some object in the garden below the terrace, and something like a faint smile played for a moment over her wan features, as a light ringing laugh, a sound very unusual in those

hushed and sacred precincts, floated towards them across the trim parterres and lines of fragrant orange trees.

“Happy young creature!” she murmured, gently; “she is at the golden time of life, when but to breathe the glad air and look on the countless glories of this beautiful world are in themselves sufficient and never-ceasing enjoyment. For her the bright sun has never been darkened; clouds have not gathered round her horizon till all seemed one veil of impenetrable blackness! God in his mercy grant that no heavy sorrow may ever light on that sweet young head; a double portion of love and tenderness must ever fall to her share. She has taken me back to the days of my own early youth, when I knew and loved deeply one who very strongly resembled her.”

“Do you speak of my sister?” inquired Augusta, who had now partly regained her usual self-command, at the same time she turned round and glanced in the direction of the garden.

A little fountain filled with gold and silver fish formed the centre of a grass-plot, and round it were gathered Marian, Emily Crewe, and Sir Charles Bellingham. The gambols of the fish as they swam about in the crystal basin had been amusing them, and had occasioned Marian's mirthful outbreak.

The group was a gay and graceful one, and it filled the kind heart of the nun with gentle interest and admiration. Not such were the feelings of the pale and silent girl by her side, over whose countenance there came again that dark blighting shadow, while her soul was tortured almost beyond endurance as she listened to the unconscious remarks of her companion, and watched Marian's light figure bending over the fountain, while Sir Charles playfully held back the strings of her bonnet, which were in momentary danger of immersion.

"Yes, I alluded to your sister," at length replied Sister Agnes, who had for some moments permitted Augusta's remark to pass unheeded, so absorbed had she been

in contemplating the group round the fountain.

“At first, signorina, I scarcely believed you held that relation to one another, the appearance of both is so opposite; but the young English gentleman, your sister’s *promesso sposo*, as we call it in Italy, he told me you were sisters.”

“Did he also tell you that such was his position as regarded herself?” inquired Augusta, with stern compressed lips, but wildly beating heart.

“Oh! no; he said nothing of that,” replied the nun, her eyes still watching her youthful favourite in the garden below; “but, of course, that fact was not difficult to discover. No one could watch them together for a minute without perceiving that she is the very light of his eyes—that he lives only in her smile. Ah! signorina, too well do I know the difference between the look of heartfelt love and the careless glance of mere friendly interest. Surely you can tell it for yourself! The young signor has a very different expression when

he speaks to the other fair signorina and you from that which he assumes in addressing your sister! I am in the right in supposing it is so, am I not? Those young people will be husband and wife some day?"

Augusta in vain endeavoured to reply: her clammy lips refused to frame the words that would have spoken of dissent—a mist seemed floating before her eyes—her brain was in a whirl, her mind in a despairing fever.

Surprised at her silence, the nun looked round; and a startled exclamation burst from her as she saw the deathly pallor and unmistakable agitation of her companion.

“Signorina! you are ill—you are faint!” and she would have risen hastily and gone in search of restoratives, but Augusta restrained her by the firm pressure of her hand, though it was several moments before she could utter the request that Sister Agnes would remain where she was, and permit her gradually to recover from what she said was merely an attack of giddiness.

“Giddiness, signorina! it is surely more than that. Are you subject to such attacks? You look so very ill.”

Augusta pressed her hand tightly against her hot brow, as though by that act she would have calmed its fevered throbbing. She raised her dark languid eyes, and they met the earnest gaze of Sister Agnes, who was anxiously watching her. Something in their speaking depths seemed to penetrate to the inmost soul of the friendly nun; she clasped her worn fingers tremulously together, and directed a long earnest gaze, as of tender appeal, to the blue vault above their heads. There was perfect silence between them for a while; and when she murmured, in a soft voice, half-broken by keen emotion—

“Ah! signorina, God pity you! God be very merciful to you! It is, then, *you* who should be the wife of the young English signor?”

With ashy cheeks and downcast eyes, Augusta faintly inclined her head, but attempted no other reply.

The nun took one cold unresisting hand between both her own, and strove by a sympathetic pressure to convey the assurance of her deep interest and commiseration.

“I will say no more of this, signorina. Your secret burst on me suddenly; but in my heart it shall be buried as in the grave. And now you shall hear the story of my youth—of the trials and sorrows that led me to seek peace within the walls of Santa Lucia.”

And while they sat there together, Sister Agnes told Augusta the story of her life—a story of early love and early disappointment—of supplanted affection and withered hopes, that had long since died out and given place to a purer love, and a diviner hope, in the heart of the pious nun.

“And now, signorina,” said she, as she closed her tale, “I see your friends hastening to rejoin us; they must have wondered at our lengthened conversation. You will think of what I have told you; and believe me, that for the future you shall be remembered in my prayers; it is all I can do for

you, signorina. Would that I were better able to be your friend; but such small consolation and assistance as I can give you are now and always at your command."

Augusta said nothing; but she held out her hand to gentle Sister Agnes, and a long sympathetic pressure was exchanged between them, which spoke more than many words.

The rest of the party were now close at hand. Augusta rose from her seat and approached them, with some careless observations on their extended absence in the garden, and her fear that they had already trespassed unwarrantably on the time of their obliging conductress. All expressed themselves quite ready to quit the convent; and, with many polite speeches on both sides, they took their departure.

As they returned to the Villa Stradella their conversation naturally fell on the scene they had just quitted, and on conventual life, which almost the whole party united in condemning as "weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable."

“I think Augusta is less harshly inclined towards it,” said Marian, in a gay tone. “That charming Sister Agnes has evidently fascinated her; she has looked so grave ever since we quitted the convent. I hope she was not trying to lure you into following her example, Augusta?” and the young girl smiled brightly on her somewhat lugubrious-looking sister.

Augusta was leaning back in the carriage, apparently attending but little to what was said—her serious countenance, and the sad expression of her eyes, unmistakable tokens that she had been the recipient of what had not lightly affected her. She recalled her gaze from some far away object in the bay, and looked for a moment steadily and meaningly at her sister.

“Sister Agnes told me all her history while we were sitting on the terrace, and it was a very sad one. She was not luring me into following her example, Marian; for she said a convent was only a living grave to a young and happy heart. She took the veil, not exactly from convenience—for her

friends strove eagerly to dissuade her from it—but because it seemed to her that no other alternative was left. She felt herself in the way; and in such a case even a convent might occasionally be found a welcome refuge. I could perfectly sympathise with her.”

She said no more; but to the ears of at least two of those who listened to her, her meaning was sufficiently plain. Marian's cheek was suffused with a burning blush; and for the remainder of the drive her merry accents were scarcely to be heard; while Sir Charles Bellingham sat silent also, and marvelled greatly as to how much Augusta knew or suspected; and more than ever he wondered to himself how this strange and complicated state of matters was likely to end.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ROSE-BUSH ON THE SOUTH BORDER.

MARIAN'S seventeenth birthday was close at hand; and her father had kindly informed her that he wished to celebrate this, the first anniversary of it that she had ever passed under his roof, in some very special manner: the nature of the festivity he left entirely to her own selection.

After various discussions on the important subject, Marian finally decided on an excursion to the island of Capri, of whose famous grotto she had often heard.

A few of their more intimate friends received an invitation to be of the party, including, as a matter of course, Sir Charles Bellingham and his mother, Mrs. Greville and her sister, and Count Salvi, the latter of whom had now successfully established

himself in his ardently coveted position of *ami de la maison*.

Lady Agnes Bellingham could not be persuaded to undertake the necessary voyage; but she promised to await their return to the Villa Stradella, and pass the remainder of the evening in their society.

Marian's natal morning dawned on land, sea, and sky—all apparently vying with each other to do her honour, and put forth their most exquisite charms for her gratification.

The azure vault, calm and serene, breathed only of peace and sunshine; light ripples played on the broad bosom of the glancing bay, where lingered just sufficient of the soft sea-breeze to ensure them a smooth and not too protracted passage; on shore every hill, creek, and swelling headland lay bathed in the glorious sunlight, each rustling leaf, fragrant blossom, and snowy sail lending a fresh enchantment to the loveliness of the scene, and causing the young heart of Marian de Burgh to throb with rapture as she threw open her

lattice and gazed on the wondrous beauty of this unrivalled panorama.

For Marian was yet at the age when the buoyant nature of the youthful spirit has still a mighty power of self-assertion and vitality. Depressed, sorely cast down as she had often been of late, from the destruction of many cherished ideas, and the failure of many a golden desire, life was yet a very beautiful and excellent thing in her sight; and a bright sun, a dancing breeze, and a charming prospect could yet bid every pulse quicken with keen enjoyment, and bring the tears of silent ecstasy and gratitude to her eyes.

So she felt now as she gazed on this fairest of earth's fair landscapes; and the impress of the gladness that filled her soul still rested on her sweet countenance as she descended to the breakfast-room and received the congratulations that were awaiting her.

Her father folded her tenderly in his arms, saying as he did so—

“All blessings be upon you, my dearest

child, in whom the image of my angel wife has once more been restored to me." And a kiss of warm fatherly love and confidence was imprinted on his young daughter's forehead.

He clasped a costly necklet of rubies and diamonds round her graceful throat; and the little difficulty he experienced in fastening it, as well as the admiration excited by the splendid ornament, luckily withdrew all observation from Augusta, whose cheek had visibly grown paler, and the light in her dark eyes more fierce and lowering as she listened to Sir John's fond words to her sister, and witnessed the tenderness of his manner towards her.

"He called her his dearest child!" she muttered to herself. "Once I held that place in his affection; now I am nothing as compared to her!" A keen pang of bitter sorrow and disappointment was in her heart; but again she summoned her iron resolution to her aid, and was ready in her turn to congratulate her sister and offer for her acceptance a graceful souvenir of the day.

Marian smiled and blushed with youthful pleasure as she received so many charming tokens of love and interest; and she was still looking at them admiringly, when the door was suddenly opened and Sir Charles Bellingham stood on the threshold, holding a small basket very carefully in his hand, and with a half-smile of consciousness lighting up his handsome features.

“Well, Bellingham, don’t you mean to come and have some breakfast?” said Sir John, gaily. “Come in, my dear fellow, and wish us all joy on this beautiful morning. My little girl is in capital luck to-day.”

He then perceived the little basket, which Sir Charles still retained in his hold as he made the round of the family circle.

“What have you got there?” he inquired, laughing. “A live rabbit, eh? or some especial contribution to our *déjeûner à la fourchette*? We are to run the risk of rheumatism by sitting on the grass, are not we, Marian? That, I believe, is the especial order of the day?”

“Yes, papa,” replied his younger daughter. “No tables or chairs; that would be a dreadful idea at a pic-nic!”

Meanwhile Sir Charles had retired to a side-table with his basket, and had been busily engaged in extracting its contents. He presently produced a fresh and charming bouquet of lovely blush-roses, of a peculiarly rare and exquisite shade, and of a perfume so delicious, that its fragrance speedily extended itself through the entire apartment. They were retained in a graceful holder of silver filagree, richly studded with turquoises; and advancing to the spot where Marian was seated, he presented them to her with a look in his eyes that expressed far more than did his polite and carefully-chosen language.

“Oh! Charles, how lovely!—how very lovely!” exclaimed Marian, eagerly, as she took the sweet flowers in her hand and inhaled their exquisite fragrance. “Do you remember, grandmamma, how good old Willis always brought me a nosegay of blush-roses on my birthday from that one

particular bush on the south border? He told me they were a very uncommon kind; and he always paid me an especially delicate compliment as to my resemblance to the roses, when he gave me them, 'with his best respects and dooty;' that was his invariable conclusion. Worthy old Willis! Only that he and the bush on the south border are very far away at this moment, I could almost imagine these roses were gathered from that very tree!"

"Well, Marian," said Sir Charles, after an instant of hesitation, and with a smile of peculiar meaning, "if you wont assure me that I remind you of old Willis, I don't mind telling you that the strong resemblance of those roses to the ones that grew on the bush at Summerton is not entirely accidental."

"What do you mean, Charles?" asked Marian, raising her head suddenly, and looking full in his face; while Augusta felt her heart grow sick within her. She guessed too truly what his words meant.

"Have you no idea of my meaning?"

said Sir Charles, as he watched the rising blush overspread Marian's speaking features. "Can you not guess where those roses were gathered?"

"Oh, Charles! not at Summerton!—not surely at Summerton!" and now a torrent of brilliant crimson dyed Marian's face and throat; and it was with the greatest difficulty she restrained herself from bursting into a passion of tears. His smiling glance convinced her of the correctness of her supposition; and again she began confusedly to murmur forth her pleasure and thanks.

"Don't talk to me of thanks, Marian," said the young baronet, warmly; "if I have given you only an instant of happiness, I am far more than amply repaid."

"Quite romantic, I declare," remarked Sir John; who wished, if possible, to restore Marian's composure, which he perceived to be on the point of giving way. "It has a regular smack of the chivalry of the middle ages; reminds one of Beauty and the Beast, and all kinds of pretty things."

“Very doubtful compliments are falling to my share,” said Sir Charles, laughing; “you have cast me for the *rôle* of Beast, Sir John; and I have a strong conviction that Marian connects me very powerfully with old Willis.”

“Who is a very excellent character in his own line,” observed Mr. Talbot; “and has, I imagine, been somewhat in league with you on this occasion.”

“He has, indeed, proved a very valuable co-operator,” replied Sir Charles. “I had often heard Marian speak of him, and I knew he was the proper person to apply to for assistance in carrying out this little scheme. How well he has acquitted himself of his part of the affair, the roses are the best proof; I received them early this morning, packed in the most artistic manner.”

“I can only say that it was a very capital idea very capitally carried out,” remarked Sir John, in a tone of hearty approval; “and, under all the circumstances, I think Marian might reward you for such a delicate attention rather more

warmly than merely by making you a few pretty speeches. We have had a kiss all round for our birthday tokens and good wishes. I think, Bellingham, you must insist on your right to be included in the family circle, and claim one on your own account."

Had a thunderbolt fallen among the group assembled round the breakfast-table, it could not have produced a much stronger sensation than was excited by Sir John's harmless and innocent little observation.

Marian's fair cheek glowed with a tint that would have supported her claim to be called a damask rather than a blush rose; and she bent her dewy eyes on the table with feelings of such intense confusion and distress, that they were absolutely painful to endure. Augusta's sensations were such as to tax to the very utmost her powers of self-restraint. The glow that quickly flushed her hitherto pale cheek was of a hue almost as vivid as her sister's; while the lurid light that shone in her carefully-averted eye had a baleful significance that told how keenly

she writhed under this unconsciously cruel ordeal.

Of the three who were each and all so deeply affected by this apparently harmless suggestion of Sir John de Burgh's, perhaps the one who most deserved sympathy on the occasion was Sir Charles Bellingham; for the *rôle* so unexpectedly assigned to him was one which, tempting and delightful as it was, was undoubtedly surrounded with dangers and difficulties.

He felt that the proceeding now expected of him was one that he feared would be unpleasant to Marian herself, while he was perfectly well aware that in the sight of her sister it would be excessively annoying and objectionable.

Still, he had no resource but submission to the half-jocular suggestion of his future father-in-law — submission! — when the faintest contemplation of the enchanting privilege thus temptingly accorded to him, caused the blood to course like lightning through his veins, and pervaded his whole frame with a sensation of wild rapture, that

rendered it very difficult for him to maintain a demeanour of outward composure and self-possession. One moment only dare he linger and permit those ideas to float bewilderingly through his brain; the next he had crossed over beside Marian, and bending his own face to a level with her fair blushing countenance, he imprinted on her lips a kiss that seemed to link his very soul to hers, and to rivet with an adamantine force the chains that bound him in their irresistible coil. Marian too, felt a thrill of ecstasy pervade her, as this the first pure kiss of sacred love was pressed upon her trembling lip; her cheek burned even more hotly than before, and had she been alone with the young baronet, she would have risen from her seat and passionately cast herself into his arms, to conceal against his heart her love and her agitation. As it was she sat still, quivering from head to foot; and only by the greatest effort could she maintain the indifferent demeanour that was expected of her, and which she trusted might effectually veil the

excessive perturbation of mind which she felt. Neither of them dare even glance in the direction of Augusta, knowing as they both did how much she must be annoyed; Marian could not bring herself to look at her sister, feeling that in the expression of her countenance she should inevitably read an intensity of indignation that would go far to upset her little remaining composure; while Sir Charles mentally shrank from the angry glare he could so well imagine in the dark eyes of his *fiancée*, the glare he had first detected in their lustrous depths on the day of her sister's arrival in Rome, and which had on that fated occasion produced an impression that had never afterwards been effaced. So, when the little ceremony was over, the young baronet returned silently to his seat; and the meal proceeded to its close without any particular outward demonstration of the violent emotions that had agitated the minds of the trio.

CHAPTER VIII.

MARIAN'S BIRTHDAY FÊTE.

FOR all the earlier portion of the day everything went well. The weather was perfect; and the voyage was accomplished in even a shorter time than their most sanguine anticipations had calculated upon.

They landed at the island; and after a short ramble procured a boat, and proceeded to the famous Blue Grotto; and after duly admiring its magical splendour, and the fairy-like effect of its exquisite proportions and vivid colouring, they proceeded to the spot that had been selected for their *al fresco* entertainment.

The long snowy table-cloth extended on the grass was covered with the most *recherché* viands; and tastefully arranged piles of luscious fruits, mingled with bril-

liant and fragrant flowers, cast around a sweet and tempting perfume. In the background long rows of champagne and hock bottles stood imbedded in clear ice ; nothing in short, had been neglected to do full honour to the occasion ; and the party assumed their positions round the improvised board in the highest spirits and with every appearance of satisfaction.

For some time all progressed in a most gratifying manner ; perfect external cordiality prevailed, every countenance, even those whose hearts were least in accordance with such an expression, looked serene and smiling. Sir Charles Bellingham, with a lingering emotion of pity for Augusta, and a desire in some measure to atone to her for her trying ordeal in the morning, had been unusually attentive to his indignant *fiancée* ; and undeterred by the chilling manner with which she received his various *petits soins*, had done his best to restore her to equanimity. At times it seemed to him that he still felt Marian's kiss thrilling on his lips ; but he hastily

dismissed the tantalizing remembrance, and by way of penance for his failure in allegiance, redoubled his devotion to the recognised mistress of his affections.

But it was all in vain; and he gradually perceived that it was so. While under surveillance, Miss de Burgh put a strong constraint on the outward manifestation of her feelings. But when less closely observed, and during the rare occasions when it chanced that her lover and herself were for a few moments unnoticed by the others, her gloomy look and stern manner immediately convinced him how fatally he had incurred her displeasure, and how deeply she felt herself offended. Not by the mere kiss alone, he understood perfectly that that was not the sole cause of her anger; the bouquet of roses, which at such immense cost and trouble he had procured for Marian, was far more seriously a source of indignation to Augusta, than the half-playful familiarity which had been sanctioned, nay, entirely suggested by her father; and which, annoying though it may

have been at the moment, was a proceeding that in other circumstances would speedily have been forgotten. But the tender interest, the loving forethought evinced by the difficult achievement of bringing over those flowers from her sister's English home; these constituted the chief crime of Sir Charles, these were the sins of crimson dye that Augusta felt it impossible to forgive. And her betrothed read the lowering expression of her countenance, and felt how irretrievably he had sinned in her eyes.

Marian, too, could not long remain in ignorance that Augusta looked upon her as equally, if not far more, guilty in the matter; and the one cloud that rested on her birthday rejoicings was caused by the cruel glances that she encountered when she happened to meet her sister's gaze.

One little circumstance that occurred proved to her how implacable was Augusta's animosity, and how morbid a view she had taken of the conduct of Sir Charles Bellingham and herself. In ascending some slight

rocky eminence, it so happened that the two sisters found themselves on one occasion in close companionship, none of the rest of the party being near them at the moment. Marian was resting for an instant on a projecting portion of rock; and while she did so, she raised the bouquet of roses which she was carrying in her hand and inhaled their delicious fragrance.

Looking up she perceived that Augusta was at hand, regarding her with no very amiable expression; and a vivid blush rose to Marian's cheek as she observed the unmistakable repugnance displayed by her sister. Partly from confusion of mind, partly from a wish to propitiate, if possible, Augusta's forbearance, Marian hastily disengaged half the roses from her bouquet and held them pleadingly to her sister, saying, as she did so, "They are Summerton roses, Augusta; do take some of them for the sake of the dear old place!"

With a withering look of contempt Augusta grasped the innocent blossoms extended to her, and throwing them from

her with a gesture of intense disgust, they fell far over the edge of the cliff, and found a cold grave in the blue and glassy waters beneath.

Marian's eyes filled with tears as she beheld the fate of her cherished flowers.

"Poor little roses!" she softly murmured, "you might have spared them, Augusta; they at least had not injured you."

"I hate them!" said Augusta, bitterly; then lowering her face till it all but touched that of her sister, she approached her lips to her ear, and almost hissed out the words, "I hate them! and I hate you! and sister of mine though you be, were you now lying where those flowers have fallen, I would not stretch out a finger to save you from your fate!"

She moved back from her position and struggled to subdue her countenance, for she heard voices and footsteps nearing them; and Marian, pale and trembling from head to foot, saw with keen thankfulness her father's head appearing round the corner, for she had felt she could scarcely de-

fine what of mortal fear and horror, so terrible was the expression of her sister's face, so wild a glare, almost like that of insanity, had gleamed for a moment from her fierce and widely-distended eyes.

For a few seconds Marian almost gasped for breath; over her mind came the dread recollection of that never-to-be-forgotten dream, when she had seemed to struggle for life in the angry torrent, and Augusta, with just such a voice and expression as had been hers only a minute before, had calmly looked on from the bank, and refused to assist her.

Marian shivered as this memory now recurred to her; and a sensation of fear which she could scarcely define took possession of her mind, and caused her to shrink from her sister as though she might really be the instrument of some deadly vengeance, and the fate of the cluster of blush-roses might yet be her own. But some of the party had now rejoined them; and Marian's pale face and anxious expression could not hope to escape observation.

“Why, Marian! you look as if you had seen a ghost!” exclaimed Miss Crewe, who came up at the moment. “Have any spirits from the ‘vasty deep’ been paying you a visit?”

Marian smiled faintly, but it was a very wintry lighting up of her countenance; and the shrewd Emily, who had noticed that the sisters were alone before their arrival, cast one glance at the rigid face of Augusta, and immediately divined that some little passage of arms had taken place between them, which might fairly enough account for Marian's evident discomposure.

She therefore kindly devoted herself to restoring cheerfulness to her little favourite, on whose youthful features it pained her warm heart to trace even the faintest reflection of a cloud.

It would have been a difficult matter for even the most desponding nature to resist the contagion of Emily's mirth-inspiring disposition; something in her smile and cheery laugh tempted even the most woe-begone to forget their sorrow for the time,

and in her genial society poor little Marian felt her former happy light-heartedness rapidly return.

There was no trace on Augusta's impassive countenance of the ebullition of hate and fury that had so recently distorted those beautiful features. So Marian strove to imitate her sister's example, and also to wear a mask of smiling indifference; and she so far succeeded, that only the clear-sighted Emily Crewe guessed how much of the careless manner was assumed; only Emily heard the half-smothered sigh which every now and then almost involuntarily escaped from the sorely-tried young heart.

Time sped on in a variety of occupations and pleasures, and they were all so completely engrossed by amusement as apparently to have forgotten that there existed any necessity for their return. But one of the boatmen attached to their little vessel at length approached Sir John de Burgh, and made some observations to him in a low tone, to which Sir John listened with evident interest, and even a slight shade of anxiety.

“Nothing amiss, I hope?” inquired Mr. Talbot, who was sitting near him.

“Oh! no,” said Sir John, cheerfully; “but I fear I must be under the necessity of putting a stop to our festivities; for the commander of our little craft has just sent me a message to say that he thinks a slight change of weather is impending; and that the sooner we embark the better.”

The preparations were speedily made; and ere half-an-hour had passed they had all re-entered the vessel, and were rapidly leaving the rocky coast of Capri far behind.

For some little time all went on smoothly enough, and there was no particular excuse for uneasiness. It was, however, but for a short time.

The weather during the latter portion of the afternoon had gradually become almost suffocating in its oppressive sultriness; not a leaf or a blade of grass had stirred on land; not the faintest ripple broke the glassy surface of the water. Latterly this had in some measure changed; and it was the peculiar nature of the light breeze that

now danced across the bay that had suddenly roused the anxiety of the skipper, and made him urgent for the immediate re-embarkation of the party.

One of those short but terribly violent squalls, so dreaded by the crews of Mediterranean vessels, was now distinctly gathering on the horizon; it looked far enough off at present, but those experienced boatmen knew only too well with what amazing rapidity those storms travel; and they strained every nerve to the utmost to accelerate their speed, and gain the shelter of the opposite shore. All too late! Ere long the sails and cordage began to strain and creak; and the little craft bent before the now rattling breeze, and struggled gallantly to maintain her course. White hissing waves dashed against her sides—lashed into fury by the ungovernable violence of the squall; the spray breaking high over their heads, and falling back upon them in blinding showers.

A great fear was in all their hearts; but though white faces and quivering lips on

the part of a few of the ladies betrayed how they were moved by the contemplation of their possible fate, all behaved nobly, and not a scream was to be heard.

Augusta alone looked calmly unmoved; no other countenance among the whole party wore that expression of indifference, and almost, it might be called, of triumph. Brave men were those in that little craft, and yet their faces were pale and concerned; but Augusta sat with radiant eyes and unruffled brow—each moment of increasing danger seemed only to inspire her with a more lofty composure. From her regal look and commanding presence, she might have been the presiding deity of the storm—the wild spirit who had invoked the dread powers of the elements to aid her in carrying out some scheme of fatal vengeance.

Far otherwise was it with poor little Marian! Never very courageous at the best of times, her gentler spirit had been much tried and depressed by her recent severe ordeal; and her nerves were on this

occasion in a more than usually shaken condition.

The storm and its attendant terrors put the finishing stroke to her enforced attempt at maintaining composure; and the young girl shivered as the vessel trembled beneath the force of the angry waves, and she grew momentarily paler and paler; while her eyes gleamed with an expression of agonized fear that showed how utterly she had lost all hope of safety.

At last the crisis came!

One towering wave struck the little vessel, which quivered and groaned as though it had received a fatal blow. The wind howled with an intensity of fury that rendered all other sounds inaudible; the smothered scream that burst from nearly every one was lost in the general uproar of the elements.

All thought their last moment had arrived; and nearly every member of the party started forward, and clasped their hands wildly together, as they awaited the conclusion of the struggle. But Marian

could no longer endure the strain of agony under which she had so long been suffering; her overtaxed powers gave way, and during the few moments of this last alarming crash she first buried her head in her hands, and then, her clasp relaxing, she fell helplessly forward, and would have dropped right into the bottom of the boat, only Sir Charles Bellingham, who had long been watching her with an eager gaze, bending quickly towards her, caught her in his arms and restored her to an upright position. It was, however, immediately evident that she was unable to maintain herself in this attitude. She was in a deathlike faint; and the moment she was released from his sustaining hold her head drooped, and Sir Charles again found it necessary to support her.

“Better hold her steady till this gust is over,” shouted Sir John de Burgh. “I see that it is less violent now; that was probably the crisis, and now it will abate.”

His experience had enabled him to arrive at this conclusion, and he soon found he

was right. The worst of the squall was over; and not many minutes had passed before the most timid could perceive that the storm was gone, and they were saved; and not a few thankful and rejoicing hearts beat among that little party, only lately so terrified and despairing.

One gloomy spirit alone did not share in the general rejoicing; nay, was almost disappointed that their deadly peril was now ended. Augusta sat coldly silent, with her eyes darkly fixed on vacancy, unless when they furtively rested for a moment on the *tableau* presented by her still unconscious sister, who had not yet recovered from her swoon, and lay extended in the supporting arms of Sir Charles Bellingham.

Marian's eyes were firmly closed, and the long lashes drooped on her pale cheek; while her fair clustering ringlets, all damp and dishevelled, fell in disorder over her own neck and shoulders, and streamed over the arms of the young baronet, who felt an electrical thrill from their soft golden contact, and would have given untold wealth

only for the privilege of pressing them tenderly to his lips. This he dared not do—but he could still support her with his loving clasp; for her father, perceiving that at present nothing could be done in the way of attempting to restore her to consciousness, begged him to hold her as she was until they should effect a landing, which he now became anxious to do as speedily as possible.

They were rapidly nearing a part of the coast not very distant from Naples; and Sir John, observing that a long range of low rocks appeared to promise an easy landing-place, urged the boatmen to make for that point without further loss of time. The wind also favoured this suggestion, and blew them swiftly towards the spot. Soon they had gained the shelter of the far-projecting ledge; and the little vessel was skilfully steered for the exact position denoted by Sir John. Her keel grated on the rough shingle; and presently she had floated alongside of a long rocky point that jutted out into the sea.

Scarcely had she touched the shore, when Sir Charles Bellingham, who had been eagerly waiting for this moment, leaped lightly from the vessel, still bearing the senseless form of Marian in his powerful arms ; and with no thought in his mind save her, and her only, he proceeded quickly along the rocks in search of some place of shelter for his beloved charge.

Almost immediately they gained the protection of a kind of natural sea-wall, where the violence of the yet high wind was broken ; and for the first moment Sir Charles paused to take breath, and to contemplate the sweet pale face still lying insensible on his shoulder.

She looked so innocent, so helpless, so like a broken lily, as she lay there, that he felt the moisture stealing into his eyes, and a mighty throb, as of suffocation, at his heart, as he gazed on those beloved features, so pale and immovable, looking almost as though fixed for ever in the sleep of death. Yielding to an irresistible impulse of love and tenderness, he bent over the uncon-

scious countenance, and imprinted on the soft pallid lips a long lingering kiss, that, he felt, might be the very last he should ever place there.

Immediately there was a faint quiver of the closed eyelids, a tremulous movement of the corners of her mouth, and Marian, with a long deep sigh, slowly opened her eyes, and for an instant fixed them on Sir Charles Bellingham, with a bewildered expression, half-terror, half-surprise.

Suddenly some slight feeling of distant comprehension seemed to come over her; and with a deep and increasing blush she partly raised her head from his shoulder and strove to disengage herself from his hold.

“Oh! Charles,” she feebly murmured, “where am I?—what is the matter?”

“You are with me, my own darling,” replied Sir Charles, whose powers of self-control had entirely deserted him; “with me, Marian, who love you so dearly—so dearly!”

Once more he bent his glowing eyes on

her fair countenance; they encountered hers, which were raised at the moment in sweet and timid confusion. One thrilling and electric shock passed between the two fondly-beating hearts, and Marian buried her face on his shoulder and felt that her secret was no longer in her own power: Sir Charles Bellingham knew that she loved him.

“Marian—my own Marian!” he wildly exclaimed; “you must—you shall be mine now. No power on earth shall separate us, for you love me!”

“Oh, Charles! what have I said—what have I done?” said poor Marian, now quite restored to a perception of her position, and terrified to reflect how far she had betrayed herself. “Let me down, please; I am quite well now—I remember everything—the storm, and that terrible, terrible crash.”

She struggled so hard that he had no resource but to release her; and he placed her gently against a ledge of rock till she should be sufficiently restored to stand without support. Occupied in this manner,

neither of them was aware of hastily-approaching footsteps; and only when she was close upon them did they look round and behold the panting form and glowing cheeks of Emily Crewe.

She was nearly breathless from the exertion she had used to overtake them; but she contrived to gasp out, in accents almost of indignation—

“I do really think you are mad, Sir Charles! How can you act in this dreadfully inconsiderate manner?”

“What *do* you mean, Miss Crewe?” inquired Sir Charles, in an accent of much amazement. “What on earth have I done that is so appalling?”

“You know perfectly well what I mean,” replied Emily, hastily; “and you know equally well what you have *done* and what you have *not* done. There, now, leave dear little Marian to me, the poor frightened little pet; and go back this very moment to the boat, which you ought never to have quitted. You wont meet with too warm a reception there, I can promise you; but,

anyhow, 'better late than never'—only, if any man ever put his foot thoroughly and completely in it this day, you are that man, Sir Charles Bellingham."

The unlucky young baronet knew he was guilty, felt irresolute, and had not a word to offer in self-defence. Miss Crewe was already petting and caressing Marian, and beginning to arrange the long, disordered masses of wet curls. There was no time for explanation, or, indeed, for any further colloquy; he felt he must go, and that without longer hesitation. So, casting one impassioned glance on Marian, whose eyes were now studiously averted, he set off on his return to the vessel; but met, ere he reached it, as was naturally to be expected, the whole of the party, also on their way to the shore.

The storm of indignation that burned in the soul of his fair *fiancée* admitted not of the very slightest compromise; he saw from the first look that all attempts at apology or conciliation would be utterly unavailing.

One glance of haughty disdain she cast

upon him as he approached her and would have proffered his assistance in guiding her along the rocky path; the next moment she turned coldly away and pursued some remarks she had previously been making to Count Salvi, who was acting as her escort.

Sir Charles clearly perceived that it was needless to persevere in what would only tend to lower him in the eyes of the sharp-sighted Italian; so he made no further advances to Augusta, but proceeded to offer some better-received attentions to the other ladies of the party, who, now that all peril was left behind them, were gradually beginning to recover their accustomed equanimity.

On his first appearance he had informed them of Marian's complete restoration, and mentioned that he had left her in the kind guardianship of Miss Crewe. Augusta made not the slightest comment on his information, and did not originate a single inquiry as to the condition of her sister; but Sir Charles pretty well guessed the nature of her feelings, and on this occasion he was inclined to admit that she had a

tolerably fair pretext for resentment; and this considerably modified his indignation at her heartless display of indifference.

Presently they arrived at the spot where he had left Marian and Emily. They were both there, resting on some loose masses of stone; and Marian was restored to an appearance of composure, partly by the friendly offices of Miss Crewe, but chiefly by her resolute determination to restrain all manifestation of her emotions, and especially to ignore completely what had recently occurred between Sir Charles Bellingham and herself.

Augusta watched them narrowly, she could distinctly see that, and it all the more fixed her in her decision.

That a great mistake had been committed, Marian felt and knew; but it might not yet be too late to retrieve it, and retrieved it should be, so far at least as her own conduct was concerned.

Therefore she kept carefully aloof from the young baronet, and most cautiously avoided his numerous anxious glances, and above all every chance of being, even for

a moment, alone with him. Thus only could she hope to repress his importunities—thus did she earnestly trust speedily to convince him that he must never again return to the forbidden theme of his unfortunate attachment. True, that in a moment of deep agitation and surprise, he had become the master of her carefully-hidden secret; but this knowledge, she was determined, should give him no real hold on her—the discovery he had so unexpectedly made must remain for him as though it were yet unrevealed.

Thus disturbed by various and conflicting emotions, the party regained the shore, and once more thankfully found a shelter in a human habitation. Cold, wet, and generally discomposed, they much required rest and refreshment. A good fire speedily restored them to comfortable warmth, and wine and food ere long entirely recruited their exhausted energies, and enabled them to undertake the long drive that still awaited them before they could reach the Villa Stradella.

CHAPTER IX.

THE LAST LINKS ARE BROKEN.

VERY quiet and pale, but not less composed in manner than usual, Augusta joined the family circle on the following morning. All were assembled except Marian, who, Mrs. Talbot informed them, had passed a restless night, and was still rather nervous.

“Poor little girl! she was sadly alarmed yesterday,” remarked Sir John, kindly; “she is all unused to the perils of the sea.”

Very few and far between were Augusta’s observations that morning; but she busied herself with the duties of her post, and her silence was not particularly remarked.

On rising from table, she addressed one of the men-servants as he was crossing the hall; and taking a note from her pocket, she calmly desired the man to see that it was

immediately conveyed to the hotel where Sir Charles Bellingham resided. She then proceeded to the broad verandah that extended along the outside of the villa, which, with its trellis festooned with fragrant creepers, and the magnificent panorama it commanded of the bay, was at all times a favourite rendezvous of the family circle.

Ere long a quick active step was audible on the gravel path that approached the house, and Sir Charles Bellingham approached the verandah, which from its position commanded the entrance to the villa; and he could quite easily distinguish by whom it was occupied.

“Ah! Bellingham, you are there, are you?” said Sir John, who was sitting near Augusta with his newspaper, as he cordially extended his hand to greet the young baronet. “Come to inquire how we all are after our adventures of yesterday? Not much damage done, I fancy, unless to poor little Marian. She is a good deal upset still, and Mrs. Talbot has her under lock and key. How is Lady Agnes this morn-

ing? I daresay she was mightily glad to see you back safe and sound."

"My mother is very well," replied Sir Charles, hurriedly; and after an instant of hesitation, he added, "I hope there is not very much the matter with Marian?"

"Oh! no; merely a little nervousness, the result of her terror."

"I am glad to see you have not suffered at all, Augusta," said Sir Charles, half-turning in the direction of his *fiancée*, with whom he had exchanged a formal greeting on his first appearance.

"I am very well, thank you," replied the young lady, politely, without deigning even a glance in his direction. "I am not very easily upset," she added, with perfect composure.

"No, you have a good deal of courage," observed Sir Charles; who really had not an idea what to say, and therefore expressed himself as curtly and cautiously as possible.

"Some remarkable debates here," said Sir John, tapping the paper in his hand; "if you wont mind me, Bellingham, I shall

just go on with them;" and suiting the action to the word, he resumed his perusal of the *Times*.

Sir Charles now felt rather undecided as to what should be his next proceeding; when Augusta cut the matter short by asking, in a tone of perfect indifference—

"Are you inclined for a stroll round the garden? It is rather airless here; it will be cooler in the shrubbery."

"You are cool enough," mentally reflected the unlucky young baronet, who perceived that a crisis of some sort was now rapidly impending. He thought, however, that the sooner it was got over the better; and therefore intimated his perfect willingness to accompany her.

Miss de Burgh laid aside her book, assumed a broad-brimmed Leghorn hat that hung on a peg in the verandah, and with a manner of the most perfect composure, prepared to set forth on her stroll, silently followed by Sir Charles.

As if by accident, Augusta selected a path which led to a secluded portion of the

garden, where surveillance from the villa was impossible, and where they were tolerably sure to be free from all interruption. Here an arbour had been raised as a protection from the rays of the sun, formed of close trellis-work, and rendered even more impervious by the thick clusters of creepers that surrounded it on every side: a better retreat for a private interview could not easily be found. They were not long in reaching it; but on their way not a word passed between the young couple: Miss de Burgh preserving a cool and disdainful silence, while Sir Charles followed her lead in abstaining from all attempts at conversation; his uncomfortable and certainly rather guilty sensations being intermingled with a faint perception of the decidedly ludicrous nature of the situation, and the appearance he must inevitably present of a naughty schoolboy summoned to receive condign punishment for some misdeed. In some remote corner of his heart there lurked, too, a shadowy and almost indefinable feeling of hope, the precise nature of which he

would have been puzzled to determine; but it was there, nevertheless, like a feeble spark of light, ready either to be finally extinguished, or fanned into a flame, according as circumstances should influence it.

Arrived at the harbour, Augusta entered and composedly seated herself, at the same time signing to Sir Charles that he should follow her example. He obeyed in silence, leaving it to her to open the conversation; and after a short pause she spoke.

“ You cannot, of course, be in ignorance, Sir Charles, of the motives that have led me to desire this interview with you to-day?”

“ I am certainly aware that you are indignant with me, Augusta; your manner last evening showed that plainly enough.”

“ And you are, therefore, probably well prepared for the statement I am about to make to you, that from this moment I desire that our most unfortunate engagement should be cancelled?”

Putting an enormous constraint on himself, the young baronet was luckily able to

conceal all outward manifestation of the inward rapture with which his soul was filled; and he carefully averted his eyes from Augusta, lest she should read in them the satisfaction he could not doubt they only too visibly expressed.

He made no reply for a minute or two; and grateful for his release, as he undoubtedly was, in his secret heart there was a deep feeling of contrition, and of compassion for the unhappy girl, on whom he knew he had half-unconsciously inflicted the deadliest wound one human being could inflict on another.

Too well he knew that much, if not all, of the callous indifference of Augusta's manner was only assumed: it was not difficult for him to realize the bitter agony, the stinging humiliation from which a woman of her proud though undemonstrative nature must at that moment be suffering; and sorely he pitied her for her fearful ordeal, while, at the same time, he keenly reproached himself for the undeniable share he could not but assume to himself in

bringing on her this severe mortification and distress.

Presently he said, in a low tone of evident feeling—

“Is this really your desire, Augusta? Do you really wish everything to be at an end between us?”

“I do, Sir Charles,” replied Miss de Burgh, coldly. “It would be strange, indeed, were it otherwise, after all I have for some time witnessed and known. My only regret is that I did not adopt this course long ago: it would have been both wiser and better. But I was a poor weak fool!”

As she spoke those last words, she stamped her foot angrily on the ground, and clenched her hands with an impulse of indignation it was utterly beyond her power to restrain.

Sir Charles hesitated, and then remarked, gently—

“Do not be so severe on yourself, Augusta; if you were weak, I was far more so. The blame, if there be any, in

this truly unhappy business, rests entirely on my shoulders."

"I do not see why you should say that," replied Augusta, bitterly; "I suppose you could not exactly help yourself. You have been merely a passive agent in the entire affair: it is I who have been the chief actor, with deep shame do I acknowledge it: and it is but fitting that I should be the chief, nay, the only sufferer!"

"Do not think that you suffer alone, Augusta," said Sir Charles, mournfully. "God knows that my sorrow has been very great for all the pain I know too well that I have caused you. I would gladly bear far more than my share of the burden, could I only take some part of it from you!"

His tone and manner betokened unmistakable sincerity; and for a moment Augusta was touched in spite of herself.

"On that fatal night from which all this misery chiefly dates," she remarked, after a pause, "I remember telling you that no punishment could be too heavy for the woman who so far forgot herself and

lowered the dignity of her sex as to permit her affections to be engaged by a man who had never spoken to her of love, or in any way given her reason to suppose he cared for her more than for others. I thought this then, and felt it to be only the truth; but, ah, Charles! you may believe me when I tell you that I little understood the real meaning of my words—not then did I anticipate or dream of ever realizing the frightful torture I have since that day, for many a long and weary hour, silently endured.”

She was weeping now, convulsively: her bowed head resting on her clasped hands. Deeply affected himself, Sir Charles approached nearer to her, and taking one hand gently in his, he murmured, in a hesitating tone—

“Do you then still love me, Augusta? I have often thought this doubtful lately; sometimes even fancied it impossible, your manner to me was so chilling, so full of restraint. I imagined that perhaps the tie had become as irksome——”

He suddenly stopped, for, in his eagerness, he felt he was going further than he intended.

“As irksome to me as it was to yourself!” said Augusta, raising her head, and concluding the unfinished sentence. “Thank you, Sir Charles, for your candour; though it did not need that to confirm me in my resolution. You might have spared me this insult!”

She looked at the young baronet scornfully and unflinchingly, and her voice was once more firm and cold.

“A thousand pardons, Augusta!” exclaimed Sir Charles, impulsively; “the word slipped from me unawares; I deeply regret having used it, and meant it in no sense of insult; do not pain me by saying that. What I meant was—what you know and will allow yourself—that latterly we were not very happy, not even comfortable together. There was an air of coldness, of constraint, in our intercourse, which made me think that—that—somehow or other—we did not seem to get on very well, you know, Augusta——”

Here the unlucky and much-confused young baronet stopped, in extreme perturbation of mind, not knowing what to say next, and feeling much afraid of committing himself to any further expression of his sentiments. Augusta interrupted him with a scornful laugh.

“You really amuse me, Sir Charles,” she remarked, icily; “you thought we did not seem to get on very well together! Did you expect a woman to look pleased and smiling when she saw her betrothed husband making love before her very eyes? And to her own sister too, to make the thing a little more easy to bear! I am sorry that my conduct under the circumstances did not quite come up to your expectations; but I confess that I found it a little difficult now and then to wear a mask of perfect indifference, when I felt certainly a good deal provoked at some of the little scenes that frequently occurred.”

“I am very sorry, Augusta,” replied Sir Charles, entirely ignoring her display of contempt; “it has been a very unfortunate

business from beginning to end; but I can only repeat what I said before, that I would give much to be able to spare you and take all the suffering upon myself. It would be but just and fitting that I should."

"We will waive all discussion on that point, if you please," observed Augusta, calmly; "it is too late to consider it now. Such suffering and mortification as I have endured, as well as that which still lies before me, I have brought on myself; and I must bear the penalty of my own wretched folly. My pain in this miserable affair can be borne by no one but myself; and I *have* endured a good deal,—that I will not attempt to deny. But there are limits to everything; for some time past my feelings have been deeply tried—now I feel that this suspense and trial can be stood no longer, and must be ended, now and for ever. I will not again brook such humiliation as I underwent yesterday. Fallen and degraded as I indeed am in my own opinion and in yours—nay, hear me out, I will not detain

you much longer—I have still, Sir Charles, though you may not think it, some remnant of self-respect left—pride, and the natural feelings of a woman, are not yet utterly dead within me!”

“Augusta! Augusta!” pleaded Sir Charles, resolutely interrupting her, “why will you pain yourself and me by using such language as this?”

“Hush!” said Augusta, waving her hand as if to silence him; “for this once hear me to the end. All this is not very pleasant for me to say; but I mean it, every word of it. And now, listen to what I require at your hands—as—as the last favour I shall ever ask from you. From this moment all is for ever ended between you and me. Whether in the future it may happen that we may yet again be friends, is a question on which I will not at present attempt to pronounce an opinion. Of course, I am perfectly aware of the use to which you will naturally put your newly-gained freedom—and it is on this point that I claim some small concession from you. It is that for one

year from the present time you will not appear as the acknowledged lover of my sister. It may seem hard to you that I should ask this—selfish that I should seek to delay the realization of your happiness—but I do ask it; and I feel sure, Sir Charles, that you will not refuse this my last request.”

She paused for a moment, and looked at him in a questioning manner; and the young baronet eagerly replied, “I promise you faithfully, Augusta, that this shall be as you wish. A longer period shall elapse if you desire it.”

“That will be sufficient,” she resumed, with composure. “In a year you are entirely at liberty to act as you please. Nay,” she observed, “I can be generous too. I do not forbid you to tell my sister of this change in our various relations: you may make it known to her at any time you choose—but to her only—and she must understand that for the present to no one human being is she at liberty to reveal it. This brings me to the second point on which

I wish to speak to you. I shall myself tell my father of this change in our future arrangements; but at my own time and choice of opportunity, and that will not be before our departure from Italy. While we remain at Naples, and until we reach the Abbey, if I desire it, the alteration in our circumstances is in no visible manner to be acted upon. Of course, you cannot now be our escort to England. On this point there must be no indecision; if I find it absolutely requisite to acquaint my father with the strict necessity for this proceeding, I shall myself apprise him. One word will be sufficient for him, and that word shall be spoken."

"In all this I will act exactly as you wish, Augusta," replied Sir Charles.

"Then I need detain you no longer," said Miss de Burgh, rising from her seat; "this is not a conversation one would willingly seek to protract. All I wished to say to you I have now said." She was apparently about to take her immediate departure, when Sir Charles stepped hastily forward,

and taking one reluctant hand in his, he said in a tone of deep feeling—

“I have heard you to the end, Augusta; now let me beg of you to listen to me for only a few minutes. I too have something that I wish to say to you.”

“I will listen to you, as you wish it,” replied Miss de Burgh, coldly, as she stayed her movement towards the door of the arbour; “but I must beg of you to be brief.”

He looked hurt at her manner, but proceeded.

“What I have to say to you, Augusta, will not occupy your attention very long. For some time past you and I have held a position as regards one another that I cannot see thus calmly and irreparably broken without feeling something deeper than mere common regret. I will not pretend to say that I wish it were otherwise, or that I desire the continuance of the tie that has bound us; such a declaration on my part would be an absolute falsehood; and you yourself, Augusta, would be the very first

to detect and scorn it. Of the causes that led to the formation of this tie, I will not now speak."

Here Augusta made a movement as of impatience, and struggled to withdraw her hand; but he held it fast, and continued—

"When on that night to which you alluded a short time ago, we pledged our solemn faith to each other, we both hoped and trusted it was for the best, Augusta; and I, for one, can honestly declare that my affection was then very true and warm, and I fondly believed that a happy future lay before us both, in which we should be bound together by the links of a sincere and lasting attachment. This was not to be, Augusta."

Here Sir Charles lowered his voice, and hesitated.

"I too, had my hours of suffering," he continued, presently. "I, too, had many and keen seasons of self-reproach. Do not think I yielded to the overpowering influence I felt gradually creeping over me without a severe and protracted struggle. I tried

long and anxiously to overcome the temptation."

Here he experienced a sudden thrill from the hand that he clasped; and he felt that this was a dangerous and unwelcome subject, and must not be further pursued.

"All this I say, not to justify myself, Augusta, but to prove to you that I did not coldly and indifferently neglect all consideration of you. If you have at any time formed this opinion of me, then let me honestly assure you that you were wrong. There never was a moment in which I forgot you, or ceased to remember what was due to your feelings, as well as to the position in which we stood pledged to one another. And now let me, in parting with you, plead that we may still remain friends—that you will cease to think of me unkindly—that you will believe in my very true and warm regard for you, and in my sincere hope that a day may come, and that not a very distant one, when this most painful passage shall be obliterated from both our hearts, or remembered only as a cause

why we are still more deeply interested in each other—still more trusting and faithful friends than might otherwise have been the case.”

He spoke with much emotion; and, in spite of herself, Augusta was touched.

“I am not your enemy, Sir Charles,” she replied, less coldly than before. “In time I may perhaps be even more your friend than at present. Partial oblivion of all that has passed will doubtless come to me by-and-by, as it does to others. In the meantime, as I own your presence increases my pain, let us not meet, or as rarely as possible, before your departure for England.”

She held out her other hand to him, and he took it also, and warmly pressed it; raised the other to his lips, and held it there firmly for a minute; and then, with a last lingering gaze of tenderness and regret, Augusta de Burgh released herself from his grasp, and turning hurriedly towards the entrance of the arbour, she immediately quitted it, and her light footsteps died away on the narrow path.

CHAPTER X.

ON THE BALCONY AT NAPLES.

AT luncheon neither Sir Charles Bellingham nor Augusta was of the party; but they were supposed to be somewhere in the grounds, and their absence was not especially remarked. Marian, however, was there, looking very white and exhausted—nothing of her usual bright and buoyant light-heartedness to be traced in her appearance or manner, and with dark circles round her heavy eyes that called forth many anxious lamentations from Mrs. Talbot.

Sir John spoke to her with his accustomed tenderness, and tried to rally her from her evident depression.

“There must be no more cruising for you, my little Marian, till your nerves are stronger than they are at present. I am

quite distressed to look at that pale face and those lustreless eyes; it is not like my own little girl at all!"

"I shall soon be better, papa," replied Marian, gently; and the effort brought a faint colour to her cheek, greatly counteracted, however, in its cheerful effect by the large tears that rose unbidden to her eyes.

"You are nervous, my darling," said her father, kindly; "we wont talk about it any more just now."

And luncheon proceeded without any further allusion to the forbidden theme.

Marian took a book, and retreated to the verandah afterwards, as her sister had done in the morning; and passed nearly the whole afternoon there, sometimes reading a little, oftener musing long and uninterruptedly. The quiet interval and the pure fresh air revived her; and by dinner-time the roses had in part returned to her cheeks.

Augusta had remained entirely invisible: shut up in her own apartment, she had spent the long solitary hours in a paroxysm of mental torture, that had rendered her

utterly incapable of joining the family circle.

Cast on her couch in an agony of grief and shame, she pressed her damp fingers on her throbbing eye-balls, and buried her aching head in the cushions, that no outward sight or sound should reach her senses. How the time speeded she knew not; all was a blank, till a faint sound of tapping was heard at her door, and in answer to her inquiry, she was informed by her maid that it was time to prepare for dinner.

“Say I have a headache, and cannot go down,” replied Augusta, faintly, through the closed door; “and do not again disturb me.”

Her injunctions were strictly attended to, and she was not again interrupted, till, on the conclusion of dinner, a light step ascended the stair, and a knock even more gentle than that of Pauline broke on her ear. She guessed who it was instantly, and a dark look of hate and vengeance settled on her gloomy countenance; but she merely inquired, without opening the door, “Who is there?”

“It is I, Augusta,” replied the soft tones of Marian; “may I not stay with you for a little? I am so sorry to hear you have a headache?”

“I do not wish to see any one,” said Augusta, coldly, though she wrung her hands together to subdue the rage that filled her heart almost to bursting; “I am unable to speak, and I prefer to be alone.”

“You will send for me, then, if you wish me,” urged Marian, tenderly; “promise me this, Augusta.”

“Oh, certainly I will send for you if I wish you,” replied Augusta, bitterly.

Could poor Marian have seen the look of aversion with which her sister glanced towards the door that separated them, it might have accounted for the sad expression that stole over her sweet countenance; but she heard the tone in which she was addressed, and with a heavy sigh she checked what she felt to be her useless pleading, and turned away.

And Augusta remained extended as we have described her; not sleeping, for this

merciful boon is seldom at the call of the wretched; but plunged into a condition of the keenest mental and bodily prostration, harrowing images constantly presenting themselves to her imagination, and suggesting fresh subjects of torture to her miserable soul.

At length, a sound as of subdued and murmuring voices fell on her ear; it seemed to proceed from that portion of the verandah directly below her window, and as she listened, she recognised the tones of the speakers, and knew they were Sir Charles Bellingham and her sister Marian.

Stung to agony by this thought, she sat up and strained every nerve to satisfy herself that she was not in error; but there was no possibility of any mistake on her part.

Hastily rising, she silently approached the window; it was open, and as she neared it the voices became still more distinct. Sir Charles and Marian had gone beyond the shelter of the verandah, and were leaning on the balustrade; Augusta could see them quite plainly from where she stood, but the

conversation was carried on in a low tone, and she could not overhear what was said. Easily could she guess its subject, however; but little doubt remained on her mind as to the confession Sir Charles Bellingham was so eagerly pouring into the too-willing ear of the bending figure by his side.

Too true it was that Sir Charles Bellingham was even then telling Marian of what had passed between her sister and himself that morning; and well could poor Marian comprehend the meaning of the tone she had listened to through the closed door of Augusta's room. Her headache was now sufficiently accounted for; and Marian's warm heart bled as she thought of her suffering sister, and a still keener pang was added to her distress when she reflected on her own large, even if innocent, share in inducing this bitter trouble.

For she did not attempt to deny that she returned Sir Charles Bellingham's love; she had herself for some time been well aware that she did so, and at their last hurried interview after landing from Capri, he had

also become possessed of the fact. His rejection by Augusta had now severed the tie between them; and though Marian felt severe self-reproach when she reflected on the means by which his freedom had been obtained, and though she would have firmly persisted in her refusal to become his wife had the sunderance of the engagement proceeded from Sir Charles himself, yet, now that he was free, now that Augusta had herself broken the tie that had previously bound them together, Marian felt that she would scarcely be justified in again resisting his entreaties, and that she might now permit herself to look forward to the time when she might be his bride.

Augusta's stipulation of a year's delay was perfectly in accordance with her own feelings on the subject: a shorter period of probation would have seemed in bad taste, and heartless in her eyes.

Another argument of greater weight was added to the many influential ones that already existed. Marian had never been fully persuaded in her own mind that her

sister's attachment to Sir Charles Bellingham partook very decidedly of the true nature of love. Augusta's deportment to her affianced husband had not been according to Marian's standard of the tenderness and devotion implied by such a relationship; and though this conviction on her part contained very much of error, it was not at all an unnatural mistake; for Augusta, knowing how matters stood in reality between Sir Charles and herself, and feeling that her position was a false one, was more reticent of even playfully affectionate language, and especially of all outward demonstration of regard, than might perhaps have been the case had their recognised attachment been undeniably a mutual one.

But Marian did not know and could not guess this; she merely judged from the visible evidence afforded by the daily intercourse of her sister and Sir Charles, and her own conclusion was very soon arrived at by the young and inexperienced girl.

For Sir Charles Bellingham had honour-

ably preserved Augusta's secret, and not even to Marian, in this their first hour of unchecked tenderness, did he dream of revealing it; faithfully he had hitherto guarded the mystery of that wretched night—faithfully to the end of his life would he retain the confidence she had placed in his honour and gentlemanly feeling.

Therefore Marian had at first regarded the engagement of her sister with the young baronet as one, according to her ideas, altogether unaccountable; and she concluded that, owing to their intimacy and apparent external suitability, they had pledged themselves to one another without much serious consideration.

When, however, a new and most unexpected feature suddenly appeared to complicate matters, in the guise of the young baronet's unlooked-for attachment to herself, poor Marian felt that the affair had assumed a complexion very grave and disastrous indeed. She could not conscientiously attribute any blame whatever

to herself, for had a thunderbolt fallen at her feet it could not more utterly have astounded her than did the undreamt-of revelation of this rash passion of which she was the object.

To think that she should be the unfortunate means of inflicting so cruel an injury on her sister had weighed heavily on the tender feelings of Marian; and most earnestly did she wish that her departure from England had been delayed till such an untoward event had been altogether impossible.

In the meantime she had done all that lay in her power to check the half-avowed affection of the young baronet, and to avert the miserable consequences that must naturally have resulted from its continuance or discovery.

Now, of course, the aspect of matters was completely changed—all doubts and misgivings were at an end. With her own hand Augusta had severed the Gordian knot that bound them all in its perplexing intricacies. And as Marian bent forward

on the 'marble balustrade and felt her lover's arm round her waist, his breath stirring her floating curls as he poured into her ear the story of his long-restrained attachment, was it to be wondered at that her heart seemed to burn within her and every beating pulse to thrill with ecstasy? But all the time, only a few yards above her in that hushed and star-lit balcony, watched and waited a pale and stern-featured Nemesis, who gazed with unshrinking eyes, but deeply lacerated heart, on the whispering pair beneath, as the one breathed forth his tale of long-hopeless passion, and the other listened to it with a joy that seemed as though it could never weary or grow old.

"They might have waited a little!" she murmured, as her trembling fingers interlaced themselves, and large drops of cold perspiration gathered on her brow; "surely—surely they might have waited, if only for a few short days. This is his regard — his consideration for me! What are my feelings now to him! One

fluttering hair of those curls hanging there in the moonlight is far more precious to him than my peace of mind, nay, than my very life itself. I know it—I feel it—here in this wildly-beating heart!” She clasped her bosom convulsively with her hands as though she would silence its eager throbbings, and an awful expression of deadly aversion and loathing once more rested on the pale but beautiful features. “Why cannot I hate him as I hate her?” she bitterly reflected; “why cannot I tear his perjured image from my soul, and crush it under my feet and trample it into atoms?” She pressed her small foot on the ground, and a cruel, hungry look shone out of her dark, lustrous eyes, as she rushed back into her room and threw herself again upon her couch.

While Augusta thus bitterly mused, Sir Charles Bellingham and Marian had concluded their interview and re-entered the house.

After a short interval there came the sound of voices and of the opening and

shutting of doors; then one dull, heavy clang from the outer door, and Augusta knew that Sir Charles had finally taken his departure, and that presently all the inmates of the villa would prepare to retire for the night.

Rousing herself to the effort that she knew was now imperatively required of her, she unfastened the lock of her apartment; and then seated herself on the sofa with a book beside her, as though she had passed some portion of the evening in reading. What she anticipated was not very long in taking place. There was a knock at the door of her room, and in a tone of kindly interest the voice of Mrs. Talbot was heard inquiring whether she might be admitted. Augusta rose instantly and advanced to the door, which she opened herself to allow of the entrance of her visitor.

“Come in, grandmamma,” she said, in what she strove to make an accent of cheerfulness and indifference. “I am better now; but not feeling particularly sociable

this evening, I thought my absence more advisable than my presence."

She suddenly ceased speaking; for on the threshold of the room stood her sister Marian.

"I hope," she observed, timidly, "you are really better now, Augusta? I was so sorry you were not able to come downstairs."

"Were you really?" was her sister's inward thought, as she directed an unseen but withering glance of scorn at the unconscious girl. "False! hypocritical!" was her further comment on poor Marian; but she only said, in a careless manner, "I daresay you all contrived to get on very well without me. My headache would not have rendered me very good company."

Mrs. Talbot perceived that Augusta seemed out of sorts still, and not at all disposed for conversation; so she thought there was little use in lingering in her granddaughter's apartment. Therefore, taking up her bedroom candlestick, she kissed Augusta affectionately, and added,

“I wont disturb you any longer now, dear; but shall say good night. Come, Marian.”

“In a moment, grandmamma,” replied Marian, in a hesitating tone. “I just wish to speak to Augusta for a minute first.”

Mrs. Talbot looked rather surprised, but only nodded her head as she turned to quit the room; and the two sisters remained alone.

Augusta was the first to speak.

“I do not know what you can have to say to me,” she observed, in a tone of icy coldness; “but if you do wish to offer any remarks, I must beg that they may be very brief.”

“Augusta!” pleaded Marian, earnestly, as she advanced a step towards her sister; “you must know what it is that I wish to say to you; but you cannot tell how very deeply I feel all that has occurred to-day.”

“On that subject, I should imagine, the less said the better;” replied Miss de Burgh, scornfully. “You have obtained your desire: you have accomplished your design: and having done so, I think you might rest contented with your nobly-won laurels.”

“Augusta!” exclaimed poor Marian, clasping her hands together, piteously, “do not look at me—do not speak to me like that! At your lightest word I will send him from me to-morrow; I will bid him never see me again, if only you wish me to do so. But do not—oh! do not speak to me so cruelly!”

“And, pray, to what end would be this mighty sacrifice?” inquired Augusta, sneeringly. “What good could you possibly hope to achieve by it?”

“Oh! Augusta, if you dislike—if it pains you to—to know what he wishes—what he proposes; I would make any sacrifice on earth for you, if you only tell me you wish it!”

Miss de Burgh laughed a laugh of bitter and mocking derision.

“You are wonderfully ready to sacrifice yourself on the altar of sisterly affection now—when, as you are perfectly well aware, the self-immolation—the heroic offer of your life’s happiness—is utterly unnecessary and unavailing. Mark me, Marian!

I know you—I know you well! Of my opinion of you, I think you must have a tolerably shrewd guess; so I feel that I need not particularize the various little points of admiration. But you are cleverer than I thought you; and you have won the day. It is your turn to triumph now; but it may be mine by-and-by. I have warned you—so beware! And now I must ask you to be good enough to leave me. I wish to have no further conversation with you.”

“Only one word, Augusta!” pleaded Marian. “He—he told me that you had given him up—that you had yourself wished your engagement to be broken off. Is this true?”

“Quite true,” replied Augusta, decidedly; “I wished everything to be at an end between us. The prize you have so triumphantly secured has lost all value in my eyes. He told you nothing but the truth when he said I had myself released him from his promise. He is entirely free to dispose of himself in any way that he sees fit. And now, again, I must ask you to go.”

Very reluctantly Marian obeyed this renewed injunction.

“Good night, Augusta,” she said, very gently. “In time you will, perhaps, view my actions more charitably than you do now. I am very, very sorry for all the pain I fear I must have caused you. Will you not kiss me before I go?”

Miss de Burgh bent slightly forward, and laid her cold lips on her sister’s forehead.

“Good night,” she quietly remarked, as she closed the door on Marian’s departure. Then she added to herself, “You may possibly realize what that means; there is but small chance of it for me.”

CHAPTER XI.

NEMESIS.

MORNING dawned on the Villa Stradella, and on its various inmates, with their strangely conflicting schemes and sentiments.

Miss de Burgh had apparently recovered from her headache; she made her customary appearance at the morning meal; and, in her calm demeanour and determined struggle to maintain a composed and even cheerful bearing, there was no perceptible token of all she had felt and suffered during the past twenty-four hours; for an iron will was that of Augusta de Burgh—few women could have endured as she did.

Young as she still undoubtedly was, it was long since the epithet of “a girl” would have seemed applicable to the stately heiress of the De Burghs; but a very noble and

graceful woman she looked as she took her position at the head of her father's table, and dispensed its hospitalities with gay words and smiles.

Marian was again an absentee ; her gentler spirit had been unable to resist the pressure of so great a weight of mental suffering as had been her portion since the last trying interview with her sister ; and, after a restless night, she found herself in the morning utterly unfit to leave her own apartment.

Sir John was greatly concerned at her continued indisposition, which he and the rest of the party naturally attributed to the protracted bad effects of their unfortunate expedition to Capri.

“Possibly, if she had kept herself quiet all yesterday, she might have been quite well to-day,” observed Mrs. Talbot. “I must go and see how she is.”

She went upstairs, and found her still far from well ; restless, with alternate attacks of chilliness and heat, and utterly unable to quit her room. She had risen,

however, and was sitting on the sofa, wrapped in a loose *robe-de-chambre*, with flushed cheeks and feverish-looking eyes; but she declared that nothing was really the matter, and she strenuously opposed Mrs. Talbot's proposal of consulting a doctor, insisting that such an idea would only increase her illness, and do her no possible good.

Miss de Burgh made some coldly-polite inquiries respecting the health of the invalid, but she carefully refrained from any personal communication with her; and poor Marian far too distinctly remembered the cruel repulse of the evening before to dream of venturing unbidden into the presence of her indignant sister.

In the course of the afternoon Sir Charles Bellingham made his appearance at the villa. Augusta was not in the room on his arrival, and was not aware of his being in the house. She had gone into the garden for a short saunter, as she could there more unreservedly indulge her meditations than anywhere else; and it was on

her return that she accidentally encountered him. He looked rather confused on meeting her; and, after a hurried greeting, said, in a hesitating manner—

“I came this morning, Augusta, to do as you wished me—to break to your father the impossibility of my remaining here to act as the escort of the party. But I find your sister is very unwell, and Sir John anxious about her. I felt, therefore, that I could not on the present occasion add to his vexation by announcing my intention of again disappointing him. To-morrow will do equally well; by that time Marian may be better, and he will receive the communication with less annoyance.”

“As you please,” replied Augusta, with a cold inclination of the head; and her manner betraying very plainly that she desired the interview should terminate, Sir Charles at once took the hint and departed.

The day passed wearily and languidly. Augusta mixed little with the general circle, except at meals, preferring her own com-

pany and the solitude of her own apartment; never once entering that of her sister, and merely putting a formal question or two to Mrs. Talbot when they met.

Towards evening Marian seemed better; and she told her grandmother that a good night's rest would put her all to rights, and she should be quite well again to-morrow.

To-morrow! Who is there that may venture to reckon on to-morrow? How true it is that in this fleeting and uncertain world we cannot tell what one day may bring forth! But poor little Marian dreamt not of this; and to-morrow seemed so very, very near! Evening came. Its darkening shades fell over earth and sea; the deep tinted olive groves grew more gloomy in the twilight; the ripples on the water looked like distant flecks of silver; all sights and sounds were gradually hushed to rest; the heavy mantle of night fell over the golden sunset; one more day had passed away from the grasp of men, never, never to return. Everything in and around the

Villa Stradella seemed buried in profound repose.

Sir John de Burgh and Mr. and Mrs. Talbot had paid a good-night visit to the chamber of their darling ; had tenderly kissed the sweet, pleading face, that still bore the impress of all the pain and agitation which had so sorely tried the innocent spirit ; had pressed her fondly to their loving hearts, and ardently wished her the soft slumber that was to prove to her as a healing medicine.

“ You are hot still, my dear,” said Mrs. Talbot, feeling the little feverish hand. “ I think I was foolish to let you have your own way about the doctor. He might have given you something that would have done you good.”

“ I really need nothing, grandmamma,” replied Marian, coaxingly. “ Only a little while ago I was quite cool, almost cold ; it is the flurry of seeing you all that has made me a little warm. I am going to have such a sound sleep ; and that is exactly what I require.”

And so she kissed them all, and bade them good-night in her sweet, child-like tones; and one by one they took their departure, and she was left alone.

Augusta was the only one who held aloof; she had no kind, pitying words to bestow on her suffering sister, and she felt no desire even to look on the face of one by whom she considered she had been so cruelly injured and betrayed. So Marian had no cordial wishes, no warm, sisterly kiss from her; and though, perhaps, she had scarcely expected them, the chilling omission pained the little affectionate heart; and when she knew that Augusta had probably retired for the night, and a visit from her might, therefore, no longer be anticipated, the small golden head turned dejectedly on the pillow, and hot tears of bitter sorrow and disappointment coursed each other down the fair, flushed countenance.

Her faithful attendant lingered to the very last, and would fain have been permitted to sit up and watch the slumber

of her young mistress ; but this Marian would not hear of for a moment. A bell of communication from the chamber occupied by Marian rang in that in which Marshall slept ; and the young girl promised to ring directly if she wanted anything ; and with this determination she was compelled to remain satisfied.

And so commenced this fatal and momentous night.

Augusta was in her room, but she had not yet retired to rest. Sweet and refreshing sleep very rarely visited her now ; it was long since an unbroken slumber had been her portion. She was sitting at an *escritoire*, with a little pile of letters and notes beside her ; and the tears stood in her large dark eyes as she silently examined them, and, in some cases, carefully perused their contents. They were all the written communications she had ever received from Sir Charles Bellingham ; some of them merely polite, friendly notes ; others, penned since the date of their luckless engagement, were tender, and, in a few cases, passionate

outpourings of the affection he had then really believed he felt for her. As she read some of these, the colour mounted to Augusta's cheek, and a bright light flashed from her before mournful eyes.

“He loved me then—ah! yes, he really loved me then!” she bitterly murmured; “and he might have loved me still but for her, with her false face and her treacherous ways! Sister of mine, but you have played me a cruel trick!” and she crushed the flimsy paper in her nervous hands, as though by so doing she could crush out the memory of her fancied wrongs.

Suddenly she checked herself and seemed to recollect something.

“His portrait!” she muttered to herself; “it is in my desk downstairs, but it shall go with the rest! They shall all be destroyed together—no one thing shall be left to recall him and the memory of what has been.”

It was late, for her occupation had been a lengthened one; and she paused for a moment to deliberate before she determined

on returning to the *salon* which she had quitted some hours previously. But no feeling of nervous timidity for a moment deterred her from encountering the dark solitude of the stairs and empty corridors; fear was an emotion unknown to Augusta, she would have laughed to scorn the idea that darkness and silence could have any terrors for her, and she prepared to quit her chamber with a heart that beat not one throb the quicker because of the total desertion and hushed repose that reigned in this portion of the villa.

As she passed cautiously through the house, it struck her for a moment that the atmosphere seemed close and oppressive. The evening had been rather a chilly one, and in consequence of this doors and windows had been closed at an hour considerably earlier than usual. On reflecting for an instant, Augusta arrived at the conclusion that this must be the cause of an airless sensation which she could not avoid remarking; but on entering the room in which her desk was placed, the door of which had been previously shut, nothing there ap-

peared to be amiss, and the idea was as quickly dispelled from her mind as it had arisen in it. Some time she spent in examining the contents of her writing desk. There were other letters there, which she also condemned to destruction; and there was the portrait, the pictured lineaments of him she had loved so well and faithfully, and whose image from henceforth would only be associated in her mind with bitter feelings of shame and humiliation.

One last lingering gaze of passionate love and tenderness she bestowed on the senseless ivory; and then she calmly unclasped a small penknife, and scored the miniature across and across, till not one feature remained distinguishable.

“So perish all Queen Elizabeth’s enemies!” she scornfully exclaimed, as with one hand she held up the defaced portrait, and cast on it a glance of mingled regret and defiance. “Would that I could destroy the image that is stamped upon my heart as easily as I have destroyed that which was painted here!”

She tossed the little case into her desk,

closed it hastily, and prepared to regain her own room.

As she recrossed the vestibule, she again perceived the singular change of atmosphere; it was now apparent beyond all possibility of doubt. Augusta hesitated for an instant, and the thought of fire occurred to her; but this was not a smell of burning, and she dismissed that idea almost as soon as it was formed. Gradually she gained the top of the wide staircase, pausing every now and then to consider what might have produced the closeness that appeared to her to be increasing in intensity; but she could arrive at no rational solution of her perplexity, and she went slowly towards her own door. As she neared that of Marian, she saw what she had not previously observed, that a faint light was shining from beneath it; and it at once occurred to her that some accident might have happened, and the mysterious odour might proceed from something amiss in the apartment of her sister.

Reluctantly acting upon this impression,

she knocked softly, being unwilling to disturb the various sleepers around her, whose surprise would naturally be excited by finding her still up and dressed, at an hour when all except herself were buried in profound repose.

Her gentle tap receiving no reply, she knocked again, rather louder; but not the slightest notice was taken of it, and she concluded that Marian was in a deep slumber, from which it might be difficult to rouse her.

“Ah! she can sleep!” reflected Augusta, bitterly; “she can lay her head on her pillow, and sleep will come at her bidding; while I must watch and wait, for there is no repose for me!” And she clenched her hands and ground her teeth together in the intensity of her hatred and unchecked indignation.

Once more she paused for an instant; and then she softly turned the handle of the lock, which yielded to her touch, gently pushed the door open, and glanced into the interior of the dimly-lighted chamber. As she did so she immediately became con-

scious of a decided increase in volume of that close peculiar air she had before observed; it evidently proceeded from something in this room, and yet she could not at first distinguish any apparent cause for it.

A night-light was burning very dimly on a table near the door, and this had caused the faint gleam Augusta had remarked. She glanced towards the little vessel in which it stood, but all was as it should be there. As her eyes became gradually accustomed to the half-light of the apartment, she saw Marian lying in bed, buried apparently in a tranquil slumber; the lace curtains that fell round her were partially pushed aside, and one arm hung over the side of the couch, while the other was thrown across the pillow and her head was resting upon it.

One other instant of doubt and hesitation, and then all at once the truth flashed on the mind of Augusta de Burgh. A small stove stood partly open in one corner of the apartment occupied by Marian, not very far from the head of her bed: some one

had kindled the heap of charcoal which it contained, and it was the fumes of this escaping into the room that had caused the strange smell for which she had been unable to account. The windows and door being carefully closed had prevented the entrance of a free current of air; and the apartment was rapidly becoming filled with the noxious vapour, which Augusta was perfectly well aware no living creature could long inhale with impunity.

To cross over to the bed and rouse her sleeping sister was her first impulse, and she traversed the room for this purpose. As she approached the bed and glanced at the recumbent form extended on it, she distinctly perceived that the deleterious fumes had already commenced their fatal work. Marian's repose was not natural, but was evidently a heavy stupor, the result of the deadly influence beneath which she was gradually succumbing. Her breathing was hard and laboured, and large veins stood out perceptibly swollen on the fair forehead and throat. Augusta's hand was out-

stretched to rouse her, when Marian's arm, that had been supporting her head, slipped forward, and her sister saw a fast-withering spray from the cluster of roses that had grown in the distant home garden at Summerton drop from her nerveless hand. As she beheld them, all the mortifying incidents of the last few days crowded into her mind, an evil spirit seemed to enter and take possession of her soul, and her heart suddenly turned to stone. The power of the tempter rushed strongly upon her—and half involuntarily she withheld her hand, refrained from the touch that would have been recovery and life—held aloof, scarce consciously realizing in the tumult of her brain, that by so doing she pronounced a sentence and a doom—and that doom was, death!

And still she stood there; a feeling as of fascination came over her, and her eyes remained rivetted on the form which seemed to be passing from life into death beneath the horror-stricken gaze she felt unable to withdraw from it, when sud-

denly the vision of her own peril flashed upon her mind. She had closed the door behind her on her first entrance, and ever since then she too had been inhaling the fatal vapour—nay, she felt that its insidious influence was telling on herself. A tight and oppressive sensation was causing her brain to burn and throb; and she almost tottered as she attempted to cross the floor. She passed over to where she had placed her taper on entering the room, and as she raised it from the little table, she fancied she heard a slight kind of metallic chink; but she was too much oppressed and alarmed by the stifling atmosphere to dream for a moment of investigating its cause. Without daring to cast another glance in the direction of the bed, she hastily made for the door: she opened it, and the fresh air from the corridor outside partially revived her; softly she closed it again behind her—one other instant of wild and terrible irresolution—and she turned away from the fatal spot, and staggered slowly and heavily in the direction of

her own apartment. For she had decided—the awful die had been cast—and the result was death to Marian!

We hear of the horrors of the condemned-cell—we read of the long, weary, terrible hours passed by the unhappy wretch doomed to expiate his crimes on the morrow—we think of his fearful emotions as the dread sound of erecting the scaffold falls on his ears—and we own that such moments are indeed full of a bitterness of agony before which even a shameful death itself must sink into a mere secondary rank of torture! But what were even such hours as those when compared with the night that now awaited Augusta de Burgh? what the ordeal of the wretch whose very instants are numbered, when placed beside hers who sat counting each stroke of the clock, marveling if the morning would ever, ever come—that morning which she well knew would dawn on a house of death!

Sleep! the very thought of it was mockery; would there ever again be sleep for her? She paced her apartment with wild

steps—she threw herself exhausted on her bed, only to spring up the next moment with a fierce gesture of horror; finally, she cowered down in a low, deep chair, and pressed her fingers convulsively over her eyes, as though she would force back the maddening spectacle that would not be driven away.

Once, as the cold morning light began gradually to steal through the closed shutters, a ray fell on one lock of her long tangled hair, which had become unfastened in her excessive agitation, and streamed in wild profusion over her shoulders. Suddenly an idea flashed into her mind; and with a face even paler than before, and a look of deep anxiety and alarm, she rose hastily and approached the mirror. Black as midnight shone her luxuriant tresses; not one white hair flecked their dark and glossy surface.

“They tell of hair turned white in a single night,” she faintly murmured, as she passed the heavy masses through her trembling fingers; “ah! surely such a thing cannot be, or mine would be white as

snow!" and she returned to her seat in the arm-chair, and again she shrank and shivered in its deep shelter.

Too well she knew the deadly nature of the fumes her sister had for several hours been inhaling; and she felt that her fate was for ever sealed in this world.

And now she felt that she would have given worlds, had she possessed them, only to undo the consequences of her own deed—only to know for a certainty that Marian was alive and unharmed—that the past night, with its terrible guilt and horror, was a dream, even though a very fearful one—that the stain of blood was not on her soul—that she might raise her head and look all men in the face, and dare any one to taunt her with the crime of—of— her head fell heavily on her hands, and she groaned aloud in the agony of her spirit. She could not shape the fearful accusation into words; but she knew that in thought and act she was a Murderess!

Soon the distant household sounds began to fall on her expectant ears; and she

trembled as she sat there—oh! so ghastly pale and so cold!—for the first intimation that should prove to her that the fate of Marian had been discovered.

It came. A long, wild, piercing scream broke the rest of every inmate of the villa, quickly succeeded by others scarcely less thrilling, and accompanied by sounds that told of a general dismay and confusion. Augusta rose from the chair in which she had been cowering, and for a few moments stood fearful and irresolute in the middle of the room, not daring to face the dread revelation that she knew was awaiting her, and yet feeling that each instant of delay but increased her reluctance to go, and also added to the strangeness of her non-appearance when such a tumult of agitation was reigning in the house. She felt she must hesitate no longer; and setting her teeth, and compressing her lips more firmly, she steeled herself for the awful encounter; then drawing her *robe-de-chambre* more closely around her, she dragged her unwilling steps towards the door, and opening it,

gazed with ghastly countenance and glaring eyes into the vestibule on which her apartment opened.

They were all there, she saw that at a glance—her father, the aged and wailing grandfather and grandmother, all the domestics that comprised their large establishment—not one among them all was wanting; there remained only herself to complete the amazed and horror-stricken group, and now she stood among them.

“What — what has happened?” she tremblingly gasped forth, as with tottering step she forced herself along, not daring to cast even a look in the direction of *something* that lay white and motionless on the floor, and around which the weeping and mourning assemblage were gathered.

Old Mr. Talbot was supporting the head, his wife and the faithful Marshall were trying to chafe the cold hands; Sir John de Burgh was kneeling, with fingers clasped wildly over his bowed forehead, and deep groans of anguish bursting from his trembling lips.

“Oh, Marian! my child—my darling

child!" As he said this he took hold of Augusta and drew her forward to the centre of the group, while at the same time he pointed with his hand in the direction of the recumbent figure; and Augusta desperately strove to collect all the strength of mind she possessed, and ventured one glance at what she truly felt was the dead body of her only sister.

She knew what she should see—the pale, rigid face, the closed eyes; she had pictured them to herself in those long, silent hours of watching, and had thought she could look unflinchingly on the fearful reality; but her careful preparation had been entirely in vain.

One glance at the still, white features, and Augusta's long and terribly overtaxed powers of endurance suddenly gave way. She swayed heavily backwards and forwards for an instant, threw her arms upwards with a piercing scream, and the next moment would have fallen prone by the side of her dead sister, had not one of the domestics promptly caught her in his arms.

No details of the supposed accident could ever now be known; all that might be imagined was that Marian had felt her chilliness increase—that chilliness which had alternated with fits of burning fever—and that the idea had entered her mind of lighting the charcoal-stove.

To describe the emotions of Sir Charles Bellingham when the fate of his idolized Marian reached his ears, were a task utterly beyond the power of the mere pen: he was thoroughly stunned, and for some moments could only gasp forth half-articulate inquiries as to the truth of the harrowing report, for at first he could not credit a statement apparently so wild and monstrous as this one naturally enough appeared to him to be.

He rushed to the Villa Stradella; and there the pale, distressed faces he encountered sent a cold chill to his heart. Soon there was no longer room for even the faintest doubt; for he had gazed on the still features, even yet so strangely sweet and lovely, and he had kissed the wan lips that only a few short hours before he

had felt softly and warmly glowing against his own.

On the gnawing misery of the hours now passed by Augusta it were indeed vain to dwell. More than ever she shunned all observation; and for a day or two she remained entirely secluded in her own apartment, a prey to the most agonizing reflections. Meanwhile preparations went rapidly on in the Villa Stradella for the return of the whole party to England; Sir John de Burgh having decided that his younger daughter should rest by the side of her mother in the family vault of the De Burghs.

No word was now spoken of any separation during the journey. In a short interview which Augusta had with Sir Charles Bellingham, he told her that he had never even broached such a proposal to her father, and that he could not now do so; and Augusta gravely replied that she should not press the point, as her father must, as much as possible, be spared from even the slightest cause of annoyance. And there accordingly, the matter rested.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CAMEO BRACELET.

“I AM very sorry to disturb you, ma’am,” remarked Augusta’s maid to her young mistress, a day or two after the events recorded in the last chapter; “but I cannot find your cameo bracelet anywhere. Do you know where it is?”

“My cameo bracelet!” she replied, meditatively; “I know nothing of it. It must be lying about somewhere.”

“I cannot find it,” repeated Pauline; “and I have looked everywhere. The case is in the drawer, where I usually keep it; but it is empty. You have worn that bracelet so much lately that it was scarcely ever placed in the case; and, only a few days ago, I am sure I saw it on your arm.”

“Of course,” said Augusta, making an

effort to rouse herself; "I have been wearing it constantly. I had it on the night that——"

She paused suddenly, and her head once more fell back heavily on the pillow; for she had just then recollected that the night on which she last had worn the cameo bracelet was the terrible night whose gloomy shadow must for evermore darken the remainder of her existence.

The maid understood her meaning perfectly; and she was silent for a few moments. Then she continued, in a lower tone—

"Yes, mademoiselle; you wore it that evening. I remember seeing you clasp it on the last thing before you went down to dinner; but I have never, so far as I know, seen it since. But as you know nothing of it, I shall look again still more carefully."

And Pauline then took her departure from the room, and immediately recommenced her search for the missing trinket.

Now this cameo bracelet was one especially prized by Augusta; and of this fact

Pauline was very well aware. It was the first gift she had ever received from Sir Charles Bellingham. She lay there for some time meditating as to what could possibly have become of it; and then she went upstairs to inquire whether or not it had been found.

As she gained the vestibule on the upper floor she encountered one of the Italian servants, a housemaid, who instantly stood aside, that her mistress might have more room to pass.

Augusta gravely inclined her head towards the woman, glancing at her momentarily as she did so. Rather to her surprise, she met the large black eyes of Luisa, calmly fixed on her with a singularly penetrating and sinister expression, apparently scrutinizing her with what Miss de Burgh considered a highly presumptuous familiarity. Luisa instantly turned away her head, and Augusta walked haughtily on with an air of coldness and severity meant to check such behaviour for the future; though she assumed it to be mere curiosity

on the part of the woman, who now saw her for the first time since the death of her sister.

Luisa stood humbly aside till her young lady had gone by, and then she once more looked after her with that same peculiar and disagreeable expression ; and when Miss de Burgh had disappeared, the Italian gave a scornful toss to her head, with its crown of heavy black braids, and her olive countenance and dark glittering eyes were lighted up by a smile that was very far from being either mirthful or pleasant. But Augusta saw and guessed nothing of all this ; she had re-entered her own apartment, and was listening to Pauline's exclamations of astonishment as to what could possibly have become of the cameo bracelet.

For it could not be found. Pauline declared that she had searched for it in every direction ; but the search had proved utterly unavailing : the bracelet had apparently vanished.

Augusta was exceedingly annoyed ; the ornament was a valuable one, and she was

vexed that it should be lost; but her more especial reason for regretting its disappearance was, that it was her intention to return to Sir Charles every gift she had ever received from him, in as short a time after their return to England as would enable her to announce to her father the breaking-off of her engagement. If the bracelet were never found, she could not possibly send it back with her other trinkets; and it would be no slight mortification to her haughty spirit to be compelled to acknowledge that she could not tell what had become of it. Therefore she was much displeased when Pauline announced her total failure; and she desired her to give notice in the establishment that she considered the loss of the bracelet a very extraordinary one, as she was perfectly well aware that she had never quitted the house since the last time she had worn it.

But still Pauline was never able to discover any clue to the restoration of the missing ornament.

The last evening of their residence in Italy had come; and Sir John de Burgh and Augusta, together with Mr. and Mrs. Talbot, were all assembled in the large and silent *salon*, where never now was a voice heard unless in subdued and sorrowful tones; for all their minds were engrossed with one melancholy subject, and conversation on topics of an indifferent nature was what no one of them was at all equal to undertaking.

Sir John de Burgh and Mr. Talbot were both seemingly absorbed in their newspapers; but it was more an excuse to avert the necessity of speaking than anything else. Mrs. Talbot had some small piece of work in her hand; she, too, feigned occupation. Augusta alone reclined, silent and unemployed, on a distant sofa, attempting no conversation—immersed in the dread reflections that were her constant companions by day and night.

Not a word had crossed any of their lips for nearly an hour; when the door was suddenly and noiselessly opened, and an atten-

dant entered the room, and softly crossed over to the corner where Miss de Burgh was indulging in her mournful meditations.

“There is a person here who wishes to speak to you, ma’am. I said that I did not think you would see any one at present; but he said his business was of importance, and he would take no denial.”

“He must,” replied Miss de Burgh, decidedly. “There is no possible business on which any one can have occasion to speak to me; and I will see no stranger now, or at any other time. Did he not mention the nature of this important business?”

“He would not do so, ma’am, for I asked him what it was. He said he would tell it to no one but yourself.”

“Highly impertinent,” said Augusta, in an indignant tone. “I know no person who can require to speak to me on business; and you may tell him that I decline to see him unless he chooses to state the nature of his errand.”

The servant retired; but in a few

minutes returned again, and once more sought the sofa where his young mistress was reposing.

“I gave the man your message, ma'am; and he bade me inform you that he has a communication to make to you about the bracelet you have lately lost.”

“Could he not have said so at once?” replied Augusta, angrily; “I suppose he is some one connected with the police: I conclude he may come in here for a minute, papa?”

“Certainly, my dear,” said Sir John; “I hope he brings you some intelligence of your missing bracelet.”

A short pause ensued, and then the domestic re-appeared, ushering into the room the supposed emissary of police. A thick-set, sallow-faced man, in whose perfectly imperturbable countenance not an expression conveying the slightest meaning was to be discovered; and who held his hat in his hand, and bowed low and deferentially when he found himself in the presence of the lady he sought. Miss de Burgh raised herself

from her reclining position on the sofa and rather imperiously demanded his business; while her father and Mr. and Mrs. Talbot suspended their employments for the moment, and looking up, also awaited whatever communication the man might be about to make.

“You have something to tell me about my lost bracelet, I believe?” said Miss de Burgh; “has it been found?”

“I know nothing about it, signorina,” replied the man; “but I have a note here, which will probably tell you what you wish to be informed of.”

“A note!” observed Augusta; “from whom?”

“I cannot tell you that either, signorina; it was given to me by a stranger who desired me to deliver it only into your own hands; and he said it was about a bracelet you had lost.”

“Then you do not belong to the police?” inquired Sir John, who thought the whole proceeding somewhat peculiar.

“Oh! no, milor; I am a poor *facchino*, very much at your service.”

“Then who gave you this note?”

“It was dark, milor; the man was a total stranger to me; I could only see that he wore a large cloak and a slouched hat.”

“Where is this note?” said Augusta, hurriedly: “let me see it.”

The Italian took a folded and sealed billet from his pocket, and approaching a step nearer to the young lady, he handed it to her with an air of humble deference. But had any one been particularly observing the behaviour of the supposed *facchino*, they would have seen that as he delivered the note to Miss de Burgh he fixed his gleaming dark eyes on her countenance, and never for one moment removed them from it; while she, all unconscious of his scrutiny, hastily tore open the paper and rapidly ran her eye over its contents.

It seemed to contain only a few lines; but the effect they produced on Augusta was very singular and alarming. As she read, the colour faded away from cheek and lip, leaving them of a ghastly paleness; her respiration became laboured and gasping,

and her hands trembled so violently that the letter almost fell from her grasp.

“Good heavens! Augusta—what is the matter?” exclaimed Sir John de Burgh, as he rose quickly and came to his daughter’s side; “what does that note contain to agitate you so dreadfully?”

It was a moment of fearful agony to Augusta—but the strong will that had so often stood her in good need, did not desert her now.

Suddenly and resolutely subduing her almost overpowering agitation, she succeeded in making her features at least obey her desperate determination. With a cold glitter in her eye, and a smile such as the Spartan boy might have worn when the fox was gnawing at his vitals, she hurriedly tore the mysterious note into the smallest possible fragments, shreds so minute as to defy the most careful efforts to decipher them, saying in a calm passionless voice as she did so—

“Some unknown person has chosen to be excessively impertinent. You may go,

sir; as I conclude your nameless employer paid you well for undertaking his insolent commission."

"I was paid for my work, signorina," replied the man, with affected humility. "Have you not received the information you wished?"

Miss de Burgh looked at him for a moment with an air of haughty sternness, and it seemed as though she were about to speak; the next instant her senses suddenly forsook her; her brain reeled and became confused; and, with a low cry, her head sunk forward on her breast, and she relapsed into a condition of total unconsciousness.

Her father and grandparents rushed eagerly to her assistance, dreadfully alarmed at the state in which they beheld her. Restoratives were quickly applied, and were speedily effectual in reviving her from her deathlike swoon; but she was evidently far too thoroughly exhausted to be able to afford them the slightest information as to the cause of her extraordinary agitation. Nor could they hope to receive any aid

from the mysterious *facchino*; for, during the confusion that had ensued when Miss de Burgh became insensible, he had taken the opportunity to effect his retreat; and none of the domestics had either seen him leave the villa, or had the slightest idea who he was or what had become of him.

And there, for the present, the matter rested.

On her perfect restoration, Augusta positively declined to say one word on the subject, merely repeating her declaration that she had been insulted by an unknown and insolent correspondent; but it was remarked that she never again issued the slightest inquiry as to the recovery of her bracelet; indeed, from the date of the *facchino's* visit, not a syllable regarding it ever once crossed her lips.

For the note she had so instantaneously destroyed contained these mysterious words—

“On the morning succeeding your sister's death, the cameo bracelet was discovered in her chamber. You know best how it

came there! It will be retained for the present; but at the right time and place it will be delivered to you, and a reward claimed for its restoration.”

From the moment in which she read those fatal words, the miserable Augusta knew that some human being had arrived at the knowledge of her terrible secret; and she felt that from that hour henceforward her existence was like that of the unfortunate wretch who sat at the festal board, with the glittering and destructive blade suspended by only a hair above his devoted head! Truly her sin had found her out! When would the recompence be exacted?

CHAPTER XIII.

HOME AT LAST.

MORE than a year has elapsed since the occurrence of the events narrated in our last chapter; a year marked by little outward change in the condition of any of the personages who figure in this history.

Sir John de Burgh and Augusta now reside entirely at the Abbey; Mr. and Mrs. Talbot are at Summerton; while Sir Charles Bellingham and his mother are again living quietly at Bellingham Court.

We must go back for a little, and describe more in detail all that has taken place since the occurrence that clouded with its gloomy shadow the latter passages of our story.

The day following the mysterious fainting-fit that attacked Miss de Burgh, the whole of the mourning family-party set out

from Naples on their return journey to England.

How different a journey it was from that which they had previously looked forward to with such bright and joyous anticipations! The pale, sad countenances—the scarcely attempted conversation—the heavy black garments of affliction—and, oh! the silent, awful burden that travelled in their company, and which, wherever they moved, proved a speechless but fearful reminder of the calamity that had so lately overtaken them!

For the first few weeks of their residence in England, Summerton became their temporary home; and it was to the beloved old house, of which she had so long been the chief joy and ornament, that the silent remains of the lately gay and blooming Marian were in the first place conveyed. The coffin containing all that was now left of her on earth was carried into her own little chamber—the one she had occupied almost ever since she had lived at Summerton: they thought she would have wished it to

be so, and the faintest memory of anything that had ever appeared as a fancy or desire of hers was now a sacred law to their hearts.

So, with the clusters of roses and jessamine she had loved so well dancing gleefully round her casement, and tapping softly at its little diamond-shaped panes—with the rich music of the birds warbling among the old woods that surrounded the house—and the lulling murmur of the bees, as they found their way in and out of the darkened room—Marian de Burgh rested on the white curtained bed in which she had slumbered from childhood, and slept the dreamless sleep of death.

The funeral was to take place at the Abbey.

Sir Charles Bellingham was, of course, present on the occasion; and there were many who wondered at the almost overpowering distress and agitation of the handsome young baronet, whom rumour had already accredited with the position of accepted suitor to the only daughter and heiress of Sir John de Burgh. But to the immediate relatives of the dead girl it did

not seem so extraordinary that he should deeply feel the loss of one for whom they well knew he entertained no common regard, and who had always evinced for him the affection of a sister. He had quitted the Abbey directly after the funeral, without seeing either Miss de Burgh or her father; and as he had merely arrived in time to take his place in the melancholy procession, no verbal communication had passed between them since the day they had reached the shores of England. If Sir John thought this behaviour a little strange, he made no comment upon it; indeed, his mind was at present given to other and more engrossing subjects than Augusta's love affairs; and he was quite as well satisfied that he was not required to enter on a discussion so painful as anything relating to her marriage would have been under existing circumstances.

But as time rolled on it began to strike him as odd that neither she nor Sir Charles ever either directly or indirectly alluded to the matter.

A few weeks after the funeral of poor

Marian, Sir John and his only remaining daughter took formal possession of the Abbey. But it was a subdued and melancholy taking possession; very different to their former anticipations of balls and banquets—of bells ringing, and flags flying—of hospitality to rich and poor—of bright smiles on every countenance, and tones of glad welcome in every voice. The stately carriage, with its black-garbed attendants, containing the dejected-looking father and daughter, drove slowly up to the door without the faintest demonstration of rejoicing from any one. Sir John had especially requested that not the slightest notice should be taken of their arrival, and his orders had been implicitly obeyed. The venerable butler and his grave satellites threw open the long unused doors; and with a silent inclination of the head Miss de Burgh descended from the carriage, and crossed the marble hall of the Abbey.

When old Barton and the footmen returned to the lower regions, the domestic curiosity was greatly on the *qui vive*

as to the respective merits of the new master and mistress. Reports of the marvellous beauty of the heiress had reached their ears; and all were very anxious to know whether this rumour had been exaggerated or not. And in the consideration of the worthy butler and his coadjutors it had—very much so, indeed.

As she entered the house, Miss de Burgh had thrown aside the heavy crape veil that had hitherto concealed her features, and revealed to the cautious inspection of the attendants a countenance so deathly pale, so remarkably sad and careworn in its expression, that they were almost startled out of their self-possession; the old butler especially, who remembered his young mistress as a child, very nearly giving vent to his feelings by an exclamation of profound astonishment. Gravity and dejection they were quite prepared to see in the bearing of one who was mourning the recent loss of her only sister—but not those sunken hollow eyes surrounded by dark circles—not those white lips, with every line so stern and

rigid, as if all the softer emotions had died out of the desolate heart: not that calm, passionless face, which looked as if no ray of hope or joy could ever lighten it up with even the most transitory gleam. No, they were not prepared for evidences of a sorrow such as this! and for a few moments the sight struck a chill into their hearts.

“Dear o’ me! dear o’ me!” ejaculated old Barton, as with an air of extreme despondency he seated himself in his leathern easy chair in the servants’ hall; “who could ever have expected to see a change like that! I feel as if I was bewitched somehow, and don’t see rightly. Why, little Miss Augusta as was had a colour like a rose, and eyes like two shining diamonds, and was as fine a sperrity little creature as you would wish to see, with a will of her own, and a right good one too, that she had. I can remember her stamping her little foot when she was contradicted, and being all over in such a passion! But this poor young lady looks as broken spirited as if every bit of life had gone out of her; it

don't seem to me as if she can rightly be the same. Dear o' me! how time do change us all to be sure!"

"I must say, if this is your great beauty, it ain't a style at all to my mind," remarked one of the footmen; "pale faces may be very interesting, and all that; but for my part I much prefers a fine colour. However, in coorse it's all a matter of taste." And John Thomas complacently ran his fingers through his bushy whiskers, and carefully adjusted his stiffly-starched shirt-collar.

"John Thomas, be good enough to keep your opinions on ladies' looks to yourself till they are asked for," observed old Barton solemnly. "Miss de Burgh may be very much cast down by her sorrow at the present time, as is only natural," he continued, sententiously; "but I am very much mistaken if she does not hold her head up again before long, and let us all know that she is one as has been accustomed both to command and to be obeyed; and so you will find, John Thomas, and that I can tell you."

“But that ain’t a look of natural sorrow; quite the reverse,” replied the subordinate, resolved not to be so easily put down; “Miss de Burgh has a look in her eyes for all the world as if she had seen a ghost.”

“And wasn’t it enough,” rejoined old Barton, indignantly, “to turn her half crazed, to think of such a dreadful death as befel that pretty young creature her sister? Now that I think of it, I am not at all surprised at her look; and it just shows what a good heart she has, that it does.”

“Well,” observed the other footman, who had not yet spoken; “I can only say that if Sir John doesn’t look sharp he’ll soon be laying this daughter alongside of the other one. There’s something very far wrong with the young lady upstairs, or I’m very much mistaken.”

Such were the comments passed on Augusta in the servants’ hall; such the impression produced on the household by the first arrival among them of their new and previously highly-lauded young mistress. And the weeks rolled slowly and sadly on;

bringing with them but little change either to the still and gloomy mansion, or to the grave and depressed-looking heiress of all those broad lands. Pale and serious she still remained; her large dark eyes yet looked out with that wild terrified expression, and the livid circles gave a still greater intensity of sadness to their hollow depths. The symptoms of a mind ill at ease were clearly betrayed in every line of that down-cast countenance, in every curve of that drooping form; for the stately bearing of the de Burghs was for ever gone from the mien of their once beautiful and haughty representative; and few who had known the radiant Augusta in those days when she queened it among the most courtly circles, would have believed that she could be one and the same with this heartbroken-looking woman, who shrank from the observation of strangers, and generally remained almost completely shut up in her own apartments.

After the lapse of some months Sir John, as might reasonably be expected, began somewhat to shake off the numbing effects

of this fresh sorrow; and he commenced, gradually at first, but steadily and increasingly, to interest himself in affairs relating to his property, and in preparations for again resuming his proper position in the county. But he soon discovered that he had no longer in Augusta the able and willing coadjutrix he had always hitherto found her; she took but a lukewarm interest in his concerns, and evinced a most decided reluctance to emerge from the total seclusion in which it seemed it was now her chief wish to dwell. Sir John was perplexed by conduct so unlike what he might have expected from his formerly high-spirited daughter; and after several long and perplexing meditations on the subject, he arrived at a conclusion by no means agreeable or satisfactory. In short, he made up his mind that Augusta's evident illness and depression of spirits were caused, not entirely by sorrow for the premature fate of her sister, but by the fact that something had gone amiss between Sir Charles Bellingham and herself. For a long time he had been

by no means faintly persuaded that for a couple of acknowledged lovers they were the coolest and least demonstrative he had ever encountered; and more than once the idea had dawned upon him that the affection was decidedly stronger on the side of Augusta than of Sir Charles; and that if the young baronet had been free from all entanglement, Marian would have been much more likely to have been the object of his choice than her colder and more stately sister. That something was utterly wrong, however, he was now most firmly convinced; and he determined to sift the matter to the bottom without further loss of time. He resolved also to make no inquiry of Augusta herself, as he did not think her in a condition to be distressed or agitated. But he wrote to Lady Agnes Bellingham. He had a very high opinion of her good sense and discretion, and above all of those nobler qualities of head and heart which he felt would in this difficult matter constitute her so able and right-feeling a judge. He told her of his extreme anxiety about his only

remaining child, whose health and spirits were evidently in a condition calculated to excite the gravest uneasiness: and he stated candidly that although sorrow for the death of her sister might in part be the occasion of her painful depression, he thought it must have a still deeper and more personal source. He then explained what he imagined this might be; and begged her to do him the very great favour of discovering, without in the least compromising his daughter or himself, whether there were in reality any foundation for his most uncomfortable suspicions. If there were not, he must then strenuously set to work to rouse Augusta from her dejection and despondency; but if his fears proved correct, then something must quickly be decided one way or another, before his daughter fell into a state of mental prostration which might prove most serious.

This letter he despatched to Bellingham Court, and eagerly awaited the reply that the next few days might bring him.

When Lady Agnes had fully mastered

the contents of Sir John's somewhat lengthy epistle, the warm-hearted old lady found herself in no inconsiderable dilemma. Behind the scenes, as she had so long been, it was not difficult for her to arrive at a partly similar conclusion to that which Sir John had already reached. But then she knew more than he did, and this very knowledge was the cause of a great misconception on her side. She imagined that the shadow of the old jealousy of her sister might yet be hanging over Augusta; and that a doubt how to act, under the circumstances, was in great part the source of her dejection. Sir John's account of his daughter moved her motherly heart to deep emotions of interest and compassion; and she truly mourned for the bereaved and desolate girl, so solitary and sad amid all her grandeur. She endeavoured very carefully to sound her son on the subject of his engagement; but here again she was baffled by his strict adherence to the promise that had been extracted from him by Augusta. Not the slightest information would he give her;

and when apprised by Lady Agnes of the distressing account she had received of Miss de Burgh, his sympathy and concern were so perfectly unmistakable as entirely to mislead his mother, and induce her to arrive at the conclusion that no misunderstanding of any importance existed between the young couple.

She concluded, however, that it might be advisable to pursue some more decided course of action than merely to leave matters in their present unsatisfactory position, and that on her son's account equally with Augusta de Burgh's. She longed to see him settled in a sphere of life that should rouse the many dormant good qualities of which she knew him to be possessed; and which, it seemed to her warm but clear maternal judgment, were in danger of being wasted by the aimless and inert existence into which he had again fallen back.

Filled, therefore, with all these perplexing reflections, she resolved to take some more active measures to rid herself of her doubts; and she thought no scheme could be more

conducive to that end than to effect a meeting between all parties, when she should be better able to judge for herself how matters really stood.

Acting on this determination she wrote to Sir John, saying, that if perfectly agreeable, she and her son would volunteer a short visit to the Abbey; when by personal intercourse with Augusta, she should more easily arrive at a correct opinion of the causes that had induced her present unsatisfactory condition.

When apprised of this arrangement by his mother, the young baronet felt undoubtedly a little perplexed; but he did not attempt in any way to seek to alter her resolution. Indeed, it struck him that, perhaps, on the whole, the idea was not such a bad one. For his present position was one so undeniably constrained and ambiguous, that he felt a strong desire the matter should now be definitely settled; a result that must undoubtedly be achieved by a visit to the Abbey, when Augusta would probably inform her father that their engage-

ment was completely at an end. It might be that the maintenance of their original friendship was a thing by no means impossible; indeed, Sir Charles would have been much grieved to think that on this occasion their intercourse must finally terminate. But this he knew would depend entirely upon circumstances: so for the present he resolved to leave this an open question, to be ultimately decided by influences entirely beyond his control.

Somewhat similar were the reflections that passed through the mind of Augusta when her father informed her of the proffered visit of Lady Agnes and Sir Charles. She offered no objection of any kind to the proposal; and an early day was named for the arrival of the young master of Bellingham Court and his mother at the stately abode of the lady who was universally supposed to occupy the position of his future bride.

CHAPTER XIV.

OLD VOWS RENEWED.

THE travellers arrived at the Abbey. With ceremonious courtesy Sir John de Burgh and Augusta met them at the door; Sir John offering them a stately welcome, while Augusta strove to call up to her pale countenance a smile of greeting, and forced her lips to utter strained words of pleasure that had yet a hollow ring in their tones which would not have deceived even the most careless of listeners. Lady Agnes almost started back as she looked on Miss de Burgh. A great change she had, indeed, expected to see: but oh! not such a terrible one as this! more extraordinary to her unaccustomed sight than even to that of the anxious father, who had seen the gradual alteration silently going on day by day.

Large tears started into her eyes ; and when she folded her arms round Augusta, and clasped her tenderly to her heart, in that moment of speechless compassion she cast out every cold and uncharitable suspicion she had hitherto entertained against the unhappy girl ; nay, she even reproached herself bitterly for having felt inclined to deny the existence of true womanly tenderness in one whose appearance so clearly denoted a depth of affliction far beyond what might even naturally have been expected from her.

The genial warmth of Lady Agnes's embrace penetrated to the partially benumbed heart of Augusta. She threw her arms affectionately round her guest ; and the first natural tears that had risen to her eyes for many a weary day, filled them now.

The old lady again embraced her cordially, and once more arrived at the conclusion that she had done her young hostess injustice, and that warmer feelings dwelt under that passionless exterior than she had hitherto had reason to suspect.

Sir Charles, too, was greatly shocked by

the terrible alteration that had taken place in Augusta since their last meeting; and something of the old sensations of interest and pity was awakened in his mind by her drooping fragile appearance, and the melancholy light that shone in those dark eyes, which he could remember so radiant with joy and triumph.

But he, too, like his mother, attributed the too evident change to other and very different causes from those which had really brought it about; and he not unnaturally felt a considerable twinge of remorse when he reflected that in addition to the shock inflicted on Augusta by the death of her sister under such peculiarly distressing circumstances, she had also for a very long time probably been struggling against the depression produced by the various unfortunate incidents connected with their unhappy engagement and its most untoward termination.

Therefore his manner to Augusta was full of gentleness and concern; he was deeply moved by this his first meeting with

her in her own home and under such trying circumstances, and he felt a sincere compassion for the forlorn girl, who, but for the position in which they now stood towards each other, might have looked to him for consolation in her time of heavy sorrow.

“You think me very much changed?” observed Augusta, gravely, as she and Sir Charles followed her father, who was conducting Lady Agnes across the hall. She had observed the expression plainly written in the countenance of the young baronet, and was at no loss to account for its meaning.

“Very much, indeed, Augusta—very sadly changed,” replied Sir Charles, in a tone of extreme concern; “it grieves me much to find you like this.”

As he named her once more in the old familiar way, a faint colour flitted over Augusta’s pale cheek, and there was a strong throb at the heart she had so long considered dead to all outward influences.

“You will find my mother a very skilful nurse,” he continued, for Miss de Burgh made no reply to his last observation, and

walked by his side in perfect silence; “you must allow her to take you in hand and have her own way with you, and I trust it will not be long before we shall have you looking more like your old self again.”

Augusta raised her mournful eyes and fixed them steadily on his face. “My old self is dead, Sir Charles—utterly dead—and can never be revived. You think me changed outwardly—and so I am: but it is nothing, nothing to the change *here*.” She pressed her hand convulsively over her heart as she spoke these words: next moment she was again silent and composed; for they had entered the library, where were her father and Lady Agnes.

Sir Charles experienced a considerable inward pang when Augusta spoke these words; for well he knew that to himself, and his own unfortunate vacillation of mind, she owed no trifling portion of the sorrow which he believed had wrought the change. He was much touched, too, by the unmistakable traces of grief visible in her countenance; and when they met again in the

evening his manner was more tender and conciliating than had been the case for a long time, for he sincerely wished to obliterate from her memory all remembrance of the painful past, and to bury in the grave of poor Marian all thought of the wrongs and vexations she had so silently endured.

There were no other visitors in the house, and in consequence Sir Charles and Augusta were very much thrown together. In the pale silent girl, who moved so pensively among them, and whose air of fixed depression told of the presence of a lasting sorrow, there was little to recall the proud and stately Augusta, whose chilling coldness and disdainful sneers had done so much to alienate from her the affection of the man who was then her plighted lover. She was far more attractive to him now than she had ever been at that time: her fragile appearance moved his compassion, and more than once he caught himself wondering how much of the marvellous change was to be attributed to distress for the loss of her sister, how much to the pain and mortification

produced by the alienation of his affection for herself.

And so it came to pass that much of his old regard for and interest in her gradually revived; their intercourse once more became friendly and even confidential: and one summer afternoon, when they had been seated together for a long time under the shade of a spreading beech-tree in the shrubbery, Sir Charles broke the ice, and after one or two preliminary observations, remarked in a somewhat hesitating manner—

“Augusta—have you ever told your father—does he know anything of—of what passed between you and me before we quitted Naples last year?”

“No,” said Augusta, quietly; “I have never yet approached the subject; in fact, neither he nor I had much inclination for discussions of that nature. I fancy, however, that it will not be altogether a surprise to him; his very silence convinces me that I shall find him in some measure prepared for the communication.”

“Augusta——” and Sir Charles again

hesitated, and the tones of his voice became low and faltering, "since I have come to the Abbey, I have thought much over the position in which you and I stand towards each other. Will you think me strangely vacillating—do you feel that you could place any confidence in me for the future—if I ask you to refrain from making that communication to your father?"

"What do you mean, Sir Charles?" said Augusta, raising her eyes steadily to his face. "Why should I not tell my father that all has been long over between us? He cannot much longer be kept in ignorance of it."

"He may, Augusta—if you will consent to let things remain as they are; or rather, if you can bring yourself to believe that I most truly desire a renewal of the old links that bound us to each other. None but ourselves are aware that they are severed—none need ever know it if you will agree that they should be revived."

A deep flush spread rapidly over the marble face and throat, making her look for a few brief moments like the brilliant

Augusta of former days ; but her dark eyes sparkled indignantly, and there were strong symptoms of the old haughtiness in her voice, as she answered him in a tone of unshrinking firmness—

“ Never, Sir Charles ; you yourself know that this must be utterly impossible. I am not quite so lost to all sense of decency that I can calmly submit to be tossed about like a shuttlecock, as you apparently would propose.”

“ I merit all the severity that you can use towards me,” replied Sir Charles ; “ very deeply I have sinned against you, Augusta— it is perhaps too much to expect that you could forgive, or even overlook, so great a dereliction against the faith I had pledged to yourself. But unless you have very strangely altered, and nothing is left of the tenderness I had once the good fortune to have awakened in your heart, I think you will at least listen to me when I tell you of what I have been thinking during the last few days, the result of which has been my determination to speak to you as I am now doing.”

He paused, but she made him no reply, and sat with her eyes fixed immovably on the ground.

“That I loved your sister Marian, as I believe I shall never again love, I do not attempt to deny,” continued Sir Charles, seeing that she had no intention of speaking; “all the first freshness of my heart lies for ever buried in her grave. Such feelings can never return again; nor would you believe me if I said that they could. But I can still love you very dearly, Augusta, both as her sister and for your own sake; and I would cherish you truly as my wife if you can but bring yourself to overlook the past, and dismiss from your memory the unhappiness of the last year. I own that I have no right to ask you to do so; but knowing that you loved me once, I have dared to hazard a proposal that would otherwise be unwarrantable. You will have no new announcement of any kind to make; your father and my mother know nothing definite regarding our position, whatever they may have chanced to suspect; and, in

the eyes of the world, our engagement has never ceased to exist."

"I should have told it at the time," replied Augusta, in a low tone; "concealing it was an act of foolish cowardice on my part. It was partly to shield my father from any fresh distress, and partly to preserve myself from comments that would have mortified and annoyed me; but it was a false step, and, as such, I now regret it."

"Do not say so, Augusta," urged Sir Charles, warmly; "but let me persuade you to listen to my entreaties—they are very sincere ones, believe me. If you will once again trust your happiness in my hands, I think I may venture to say that you shall not find it misplaced. It shall be my most earnest endeavour to make your future life a happy one."

Much more he said, and Augusta heard him; but it was long before she allowed herself to be persuaded to a course that had at first struck her as being so utterly opposed to every principle of reason or propriety.

But Sir Charles was resolute and persevering; and Augusta was a woman, and weak, and in her secret heart she held arguments even more potent than any the young baronet could call to his aid.

When their interview was ended, and they quitted the favouring shadow of the old beech-tree, they had once more pledged their faith to each other, and Augusta had consented at no distant date to become the wife of Sir Charles Bellingham.

CHAPTER XV.

THE WEDDING GUEST.

THERE wanted scarcely a week to the marriage; and many of those who had received invitations to attend, it had already arrived at the Abbey.

Mr. and Mrs. Talbot were the guests of their son-in-law; and not the least welcome of the visitors, in Sir John's opinion at least, were Mrs. Greville and her sister, who had received a special invitation to be present at the approaching ceremony, at which Emily Crewe was to officiate in the capacity of a bridesmaid. Lady Agnes Bellingham was also staying at the Abbey; and Sir Charles came and went as suited his convenience.

Sir John de Burgh had gone to London to transact some business, and he had named

a particular day and hour for his return. The afternoon on which he was expected had arrived; and his daughter was anxiously awaiting his appearance, and had despatched the carriage to convey him to the Abbey.

The season was once more summer; the undulating and richly wooded park lay bathed in the full radiance of the declining sunshine; the voice of the cuckoo and wood-pigeon sounded soft from the old trees round the mansion; long shadows fell on the closely shaven turf, and herds of deer wandered to and fro upon the greensward.

It was late in the afternoon, and Augusta had for some little time been strolling in the garden with Lady Agnes Bellingham, when they heard voices approaching them, and rounding the corner of a walk, they perceived Sir John de Burgh advancing to meet them; but not alone, or with any of the guests then staying at the Abbey. He was accompanied by the very last person Augusta would either have expected or desired to see—their former acquaintance, Count Salvi. A deep flush rose to the cheek of Miss de

Burgh, and an expression of great annoyance for a moment overspread her countenance; but the Count and her father were still at some little distance, and she had sufficient time to recollect herself, and to subdue all outward manifestation of displeasure.

“I have brought an old friend to see you, Augusta,” observed Sir John, as he greeted his daughter and Lady Agnes; “it was a source of much gratification to me that I met him so unexpectedly, and was able to persuade him to return with me and share our coming festivities.” A glance of peculiar import shot from the dark eyes of Count Salvi; but it instantly gave way to a carefully studied smile, as he advanced to reciprocate the polite welcome of the two ladies. Lady Agnes had no reason to do otherwise than receive him with cordiality; and though Augusta viewed his unlooked-for appearance with emotions very far from pleasurable, she was too completely mistress of herself to permit her feelings to be visible. So the young Italian had no cause to com-

plain of any want of warmth in the reception accorded to him; and he returned to the house in company with his fair hostess, who conversed with him with much apparent ease.

Still, with all his suavity and vivacity, there was a something in the manner of Count Salvi which grated rather disagreeably on the keen perceptions of Augusta. She could not describe or analyse the sensation, but it was there; a fine and almost impalpable vein of irritation to one so fully alive to all minor sources of annoyance as she now was. He assumed a little too much confidence and familiarity, she thought; and yet it was difficult to say in what it consisted, for he was *empresé* and deferential as ever, and certainly the intimacy that formerly existed between them gave him some right to feel himself very much at his ease under the roof of Sir John de Burgh.

As a stranger, and indeed the man of highest rank among the guests, he led Miss de Burgh in to dinner; and before that meal was ended, in spite of her vigorous efforts.

at resistance, Augusta had the mortification of perceiving very plainly that the Count had once more firmly reinstated himself in the position of the privileged friend of the house, and apparently with the fullest approbation on the part of her father.

Sir Charles was at this time absent; but Augusta knew well how much he would dislike the idea of this man, for whom he had always entertained a strong antipathy, being again established in familiar communication with herself. And the result amply justified her anticipations.

A day or two afterwards Sir Charles returned to the Abbey; and from the gloomy look that overspread his features when he entered the room where they were all assembled, Augusta could easily divine the dissatisfaction with which he regarded this unexpected addition to their party.

“Pray, how long has this fellow been here, and what brought him?” he inquired discontentedly of his mother when they were alone.

“He arrived a few days ago,” replied

Lady Agnes. "Sir John met him accidentally on his last visit to town, and invited him to come back here for the wedding."

"I sincerely wish he had just left it alone," said Sir Charles. "How or why, I cannot exactly explain, but I have always had a very strong objection to that fawning parasitical Count Salvi. I hate to see him slinking in and out of the room in that silent, tame-catlike manner. Can't he hold up his head, and look one boldly in the face, like an honest man?"

His mother smiled.

"I don't think Augusta is much more gratified by his arrival than yourself," she remarked, placidly; "you have certainly no cause for jealousy."

"I never imagined I had," replied the young baronet, rather indignantly; "but that is just one of the things that puzzles me about the fellow. There is no doubt he had at one time designs in that quarter; but Augusta rejected him decidedly, and rather harshly, so far as I have understood;

and yet he appears to nourish not the slightest malice in consequence."

"So far, he must undoubtedly possess a forgiving disposition," observed Lady Agnes.

"I don't know," replied her son, with a dubious shake of the head. "Still waters run deep. I am half afraid of the fellow, with his catlike ways and his oily tongue; and I wish the wind had blown him in any other direction than England at this particular juncture. However, here he is, and here he clearly means to stay; so we must e'en make the best of it."

His intention of looking at the matter in this philosophical light was, however, very far from being visible in his manner, which was unmistakably dry and distant to the Count, while he avoided his society as much as was practicable towards any one resident under the same roof.

It was utterly impossible that such marked conduct should escape the observation of Count Salvi; he perceived it perfectly: but so far from resenting it in any open and direct manner, he allowed it to

pass without the faintest sign of annoyance. Nay, on one or two occasions, when Sir Charles had permitted his feelings of antipathy to carry him almost beyond the limits of courtesy, there was an air of studied forbearance and even of subdued triumph in the bearing of the Count that was inexpressibly irritating to Sir Charles, and exercised his patience far more severely than the sharpest retort would have done.

Once or twice he confided his ideas on this point to Augusta, who was somewhat inclined to sympathise with him on this score, and frankly regretted her father's unlucky encounter with Count Salvi and his consequent invitation to the Abbey.

"I cannot think what Sir John sees in the fellow," he observed one day, when he was peculiarly indignant with the Count.

"He was very civil to papa in Italy," replied Augusta; "I fancy that is the principal link between them."

"I am sure any little attention on his part was a thousand times repaid by your father," continued Sir Charles, hotly; "he

was as much at home in your house in Rome as if it had been his own; and he seems inclined to pursue exactly the same course of behaviour here. It really provokes me beyond all endurance: one would think that the fellow had us all in his power, and was in possession of some fatal secret affecting our credit and safety."

Only that he was so absorbed in his strong denunciation of Count Salvi as not to be observant of everything else, or he must have remarked the very evident agitation of Augusta as he uttered the concluding portion of his sentence. She shuddered and became frightfully pale, while the embroidery on which she was engaged shook in her trembling grasp. Some terrible dread seemed to oppress her; and the violent twitching of the corners of her mouth showed how fierce was the constraint she had put on herself.

But Sir Charles heeded none of these signs of internal perturbation, for he was pacing up and down the apartment, and Count Salvi, and not Augusta, was the object uppermost in his mind.

Miss de Burgh presently recovered her composure; and the conversation went on as if nothing unusual had occurred. But when her lover had quitted the apartment, and Augusta was once more alone, she laid her head wearily back on her chair, and pressed her hand over her eyes, as if to shut out some haunting image that floated before them; while heavy sighs burst from her aching bosom, and a look came over her beautiful features, very sad to see on the face of one so young, above all, on the very eve of her wedding, when life for her should have worn its brightest and most hopeful colours.

“How little he guessed the full import of his words!” she murmured sadly to herself; “how little he knew what a terrible truth they contained! The end—the end—ah! when will it come? When will this fatal and overwhelming blow descend on me, and crush me with its remorseless vengeance?”

CHAPTER XVI.

COUNT SALVI'S REVENGE.

To one proceeding on the part of Count Salvi, Sir Charles Bellingham made very strong and special objections ; and this was his former privilege of singing duets with Augusta, which had formed so agreeable a feature of their intercourse in Italy.

There were times when he was reluctantly compelled to give an enforced consent to the arrangement ; as in the evening Sir John de Burgh occasionally requested the performance of some particular favourite.

But all morning practisings were strictly prohibited by Sir Charles ; indeed, Augusta had no wish to undertake them herself, and always had some good excuse ready when Count Salvi hinted at a wish to resume this favourite amusement.

Time had progressed rapidly ; and it was now the day before that fixed for the wedding.

Miss de Burgh sat in the morning room ; she had been arranging some music, and, her task concluded, she still remained at the piano, her eyes fixed dreamily on the keys, while her fingers wandered listlessly over them, now and then falling into the chords of some old familiar melody.

Suddenly she started violently, and a deep blush overspread her features. Unheard by her, Count Salvi had entered the room ; and when she became aware of his presence he was leaning over the back of a chair, looking at her with a strange expression, which did not in the least alter when he perceived that his proximity was discovered.

Augusta had been softly humming the air of a favourite Italian duet, while her fingers lightly struck the well-remembered chords.

It was the beautiful *scena* which she had performed with Count Salvi on the eventful evening of their first meeting after his rejection ; and it was the singing of this

fervid and impassioned duet that had induced her first serious misunderstanding with Sir Charles Bellingham.

She instantly ceased humming her part of the aria: but it was taken up and continued by Count Salvi, who calmly advanced towards the shelf where Miss de Burgh's music books were lying, and selecting from thence a particular volume, he opened it at the duet, and placed it on the desk in front of the now thoroughly aroused Augusta.

"I cannot sing this morning, Count Salvi," she remarked, hastily; at the same time attempting to remove the book from its position.

But the Count held it fast, while he replied, composedly, "Why not? You were singing perfectly well just now. For the sake of the old times, let us sing this duet once more. When you are Miladi Bellingham, I fear I shall not often enjoy that privilege."

There was a slight suspicion of a sneer in the tones of his voice as he made this

remark, and it roused Augusta to a faint display of her old spirit.

“I do not intend to sing that duet this morning,” she said, decidedly: “so you must excuse my attempting it.”

She rose from the piano as she spoke, and looked Count Salvi full in the face.

“Ah! you do not intend to do so,” he replied, with a calmly defiant expression, and a cold glittering smile that showed all his white teeth gleaming under his dark silky moustache: “I wonder if I have any power to induce you to rescind that resolution. Once you were willing enough to sing at my request; now, I suppose, the fortunate possessor of your affection forbids you to indulge my wishes in this respect. Truly, Cupid is a mighty magician, when he has so utterly transformed the once proud Augusta de Burgh.”

Language like this Augusta had never before listened to from the lips of Count Salvi; and it stung her haughty soul to a transport of indignation.

“You forget yourself, Count, when you

dare to speak to me like this!" she exclaimed, indignantly; at the same time drawing up her stately form to its full height.

"I forget nothing, signorina," replied the Italian, with a smile of covert triumph; "I have a good memory, as I shall presently convince you. Injuries, especially, I remember well; and you shall find me an honest debtor as regards repayment."

Something in his look struck a cold chill to the heart of the miserable girl before him; but by a prodigious effort she restrained all demonstration of her fast rising dread, and forced herself to answer calmly—

"Such observations are painful and useless, Count Salvi; I must beg you to spare me their repetition. I understood one important part of our compact of renewed friendship was an entire oblivion of the past."

"You might so understand it, signorina; I never did. At the conclusion of one never-to-be-forgotten interview that took place between us, I distinctly remember informing you that the time would come

when the insults should be repaid which then you heaped on me."

Before Augusta had time to utter a syllable in reply, the door was hastily opened, and Sir Charles Bellingham made his appearance.

"So you are here, Augusta," he remarked, rather sharply; for he was anything but pleased at discovering her alone, and, apparently, in close conversation with the man he disliked above all others: "I have been looking for you everywhere."

"I am sorry for that," replied Miss de Burgh, in rather a confused manner; "I have been here for some time."

"We have been indulging in a few old Italian reminiscences," remarked Count Salvi. "Those were very pleasant days we passed together in Rome and Naples, though they came to a sad and disastrous termination."

He glanced at Augusta as he said this; and his look thrilled her with a new and undefined emotion of fear. She turned very pale, and sank into the seat before which she had hitherto been standing.

Count Salvi perceived the effect of his words, and continued—

“Something very mysterious occurred at that time about the loss of a cameo bracelet. I had often admired it on your arm; and I notice that you never wear it now. Did you never learn any particulars of its fate?”

Miss de Burgh's cheeks were now as burning crimson, as, the moment before, they had been deathly pale. Her trembling lips attempted some gasping reply, but the effort was vain; she could not utter a sound. Her emotion was evident to Sir Charles; but he mistook its cause, and concluded it arose from the memory of her lost sister being thus recalled to her.

“Such conversation is very trying to Miss de Burgh,” he remarked, coldly, addressing Count Salvi; “in future, I trust, you will avoid subjects calculated to awaken very sorrowful recollections.”

“Miss de Burgh's recollections of her sister's unhappy fate must indeed be very trying,” rejoined the Count, with a peculiar look and expression.

“Then I hope you will remember this, and refrain from painful allusions,” observed Sir Charles, rather haughtily.

Count Salvi glanced at him for a moment, and seemed as though he were about to say something; but, apparently, thinking better of it, he turned silently away, a satirical smile lighting up his dark and sinister features.

“A turn in the garden will do you good, Augusta,” observed Sir Charles, addressing his still unnerved *fiancée*; “you are looking very pale and out of sorts; those Italian reminiscences have been too much for you,” and a very unmistakable scowl overspread his handsome countenance. Augusta rose to comply with his suggestion; but her eyes rested for an instant on the figure of Count Salvi, who stood with his back towards them, feigning to be absorbed in the contemplation of a painting that hung on the wall. She would have given much to be able to read the expression of his features, but they were averted from her; and as Sir Charles looked impatient to be gone, and

had already advanced to open the door for her egress, she was reluctantly compelled to retire without the possibility of any farther explanation with the Count.

“That is the most intolerably presuming and impertinent fellow I ever encountered,” exclaimed Sir Charles, indignantly, when they had reached the terraced garden that surrounded the house. “I really wish, Augusta, that you would not encourage him so much as you do. You know my excessive dislike to him.”

“Oh! Charles, I am sure I never encourage him in the least,” said Augusta, faintly.

“Then you don’t discourage him; and it comes to the same thing in the end,” replied Sir Charles. “A fellow like that ought to be kept in his proper position, and never suffered to forget himself for a moment. One comfort is, it will soon be over now.”

“You have never liked Count Salvi,” observed Augusta, in a low tone.

“Never,” said Sir Charles, firmly, “and I never shall. The fellow irritates me till

I am all but forgetting what is due to your father and yourself. Of course, Augusta, you understand that I can never receive him at Bellingham Court. He may expect to be on the same easy terms there that he is here. If so, the sooner he is disabused of that notion the better."

"I do not think he anticipates anything of the kind," replied Augusta, in a tone of deprecation. "I, for one, should certainly not desire it."

Some little incident occurred at this moment which attracted the attention of Sir Charles; and she adroitly took advantage of it to divert the conversation into another channel, and put an end to a discussion both awkward and unpleasant to her.

When once more alone, her thoughts reverted with intense anxiety and alarm to the various strangely ambiguous expressions which had escaped the lips of Count Salvi. That something lay beneath them she dared not for a moment disbelieve. Some suspicion of the fearful position in which she stood had evidently crossed his mind; but

how was it possible that he had become acquainted with it? and if he really knew some of the circumstances connected with her fatal secret, how much did he know?

No opportunity occurred in which she had any chance of solving her miserable doubts; for she saw clearly that for the remainder of the afternoon the Count took especial pains to avoid a *tête-à-tête*.

But when she proceeded to her own room to dress for dinner, she perceived lying on the toilet-table a note addressed to her in his familiar handwriting, which Pauline informed her she had received from the Count himself, who had requested her to deliver it to Miss de Burgh. Augusta beheld it with the keenest terror and dismay. She glared at it with widely-distended eyes, and in the presence of her maid dared not have laid a finger on it; for in that harmless looking billet might be contained a revelation that would overpower her guilty soul with consternation, that fragile envelope might conceal a secret, the discovery of

which would for ever blast all her fairest prospects of honour and happiness.

The suspense was almost more than she could bear; feelings of sickening torture and terror possessed her soul; she could have screamed aloud in the intensity of her wretchedness! And yet she submitted to be gaily attired by the hands of the unconscious Pauline, to have flowers placed in her hair, and jewels in her bosom; and so long as her attendant continued in the room she preserved an exterior so utterly unmoved as completely to mislead even the sharp-witted Frenchwoman, who had been rather disposed to surmise some mystery, owing to Count Salvi's particular anxiety regarding the safe delivery of his note.

But when her *toilette* was concluded, Augusta dismissed Pauline; and after listening cautiously till the retreating footsteps of the maid could no longer be distinguished, she bolted the door, and prepared, with fast throbbing heart and trembling fingers, to make herself acquainted

with the contents of the note that had lain all this time unopened on her table.

It was a very short one, and contained only the following words:—

“ Your cameo bracelet shall be delivered to you to-night at twelve o'clock beside the waterfall in the shrubbery, and a reward claimed for its restoration. It will be at your peril if you refuse the appointment.”

Augusta sank shivering into a chair, and covered her face with her hands.

All was then known to Count Salvi! He must indeed feel that he had her entirely in his power, when he had the audacity to propose to her, the betrothed wife of another man, that on the very eve of her wedding she should venture on the extraordinary step of meeting him at night, and alone, in a secluded portion of her father's grounds! Her womanly pride rebelled against a proceeding so liable to misconception; and yet, how dare she refuse the Count's demand? What alternative was there left to her but to comply with it? Better a thousand

times that she should know her fate, whatever that fate might be, than continue longer in this miserable condition of suspense and constant dread of indefinable calamity, which followed her whithersoever she went. Yes, she felt that she had no choice but to accede to the request; and her very heart seemed to die within her when she reflected on all that might result from this hateful and eventful interview.

Resolved, however, to face the danger, whatever it might prove, she descended to the drawing-room and joined her guests.

On the announcement of dinner, Count Salvi advanced to offer her his arm; and though Augusta inwardly shrank from contact with him as though his touch were poison, she forced herself to accept the proffered escort, and her fingers did not even tremble as she placed them on his arm. She had feared some covert allusion on his part to the note which she had received, but nothing of the kind occurred; Count Salvi restricting his conversation to the most commonplace topics, and appearing totally

oblivious of the serious points at issue between them.

Augusta scorned to be out-done in composure, and by one whom she chose to consider so greatly her inferior; so she too strove to veil her anxiety under a studied assumption of indifference: and not one of those assembled round the glittering table of Sir John de Burgh could have surmised how deadly a stake at that moment occupied the attention of the smiling hostess and her courteous Italian guest.

When they were assembled in the drawing-room after dinner, Sir John de Burgh begged his daughter to let him hear again several of his favourite songs.

“It will be some time before I shall have a similar pleasure,” he observed, with an affectionate glance at Augusta, as she rose to obey his request.

“You must not sing much to-night, Augusta,” whispered Sir Charles, who was hovering about the instrument; “I can see you are not equal to it.”

She smiled faintly in reply to his anxious

solicitude; and then she summoned all her resolution to her aid, and sang with exquisite taste and feeling one or two of her father's especial favourites.

"You are in beautiful voice, my dear," said Sir John, who had been eagerly listening to her rich, liquid tones; "I shall owe you a grudge, Sir Charles, for robbing my cage of its singing-bird."

"You must come all the more frequently and listen to her in her new cage," replied the young baronet, laughing. "I trust the notes will suffer no deterioration in the transition."

"I also have a petition to offer, which I trust will not be refused," said Count Salvi, advancing to the piano; and there was a slight but sufficiently marked emphasis on the word *trust*. "My favourite duet, of which I was disappointed in the morning, may I venture to hope you will sing it with me now?"

Fearing alike both to refuse and to comply, Augusta remained for a few moments in a state of wretched indecision, not daring to

look at Count Salvi, who stood awaiting her reply to his request.

“ Shall I look for it?” inquired the Count, politely, as he made a step towards the pile of music-books.

“ Miss de Burgh will not trouble you, Count Salvi,” observed Sir Charles Bellingham, resolutely; “ she has sung quite enough for this evening.”

“ Oh! certainly—if you would rather not;” said the Count, addressing himself pointedly to Miss de Burgh, and utterly ignoring the interruption of her irate lover.

“ I am not tired, Charles. I should like to sing that duet once more,” pleaded poor Augusta, who dreaded above all things irritating Count Salvi.

“ On this point you must allow me to decide for you, Augusta,” replied the young baronet, more peremptorily than before. “ I prefer that you do not exert yourself to sing again; and you will oblige me by not attempting it.”

“ After that I dare not solicit you further,” remarked Count Salvi, still with imper-

turbable suavity; and bowing deferentially to Augusta, who never ventured to raise her eyes, he turned away from the instrument with one lightning glance of rage and scorn directed towards Sir Charles, at the same time muttering between his clenched teeth—so that only Augusta could hear him, those words to her of such terrible significance—*“Tu me lo pagherai!”*

All that passed afterwards was to her as the phantasmagoria of a fevered dream. She saw and knew all that was going on around her, but it seemed to convey no impression to her bewildered brain. One thing alone she felt to be a vivid and fearful reality, and that was the gradual but certain lapse of time, and the nearer approach of the dreaded hour named in Count Salvi's note, as the one in which he relied on her holding midnight tryst with him by the waterfall in the shrubbery.

Miss Crewe and others had sung, but the harmony had fallen unheeded on her ears; conversation had been carried on in which she could not have told whether she had

joined or not; then had come a moment when parting words had been spoken and affectionate adieux interchanged, when she had felt her father's hand placed lovingly on her shoulder, and his good-night kiss pressed warmly on her forehead—when her lover had tenderly clasped her trembling fingers, and looked with honest affection and confidence into her eyes—and she had eagerly and longingly responded to that look, and sadly marvelled in her inmost heart whether his gaze would ever so rest upon her again. For ah! what might not that eventful midnight interview produce for them all! She shuddered to think of what she might then have to listen to—of the reward that should be exacted as the miserable price of Count Salvi's forbearance and silence regarding her fatal secret.

She permitted Pauline to remove her dinner dress and its glittering appendages, and then she dismissed her with the statement that she should probably be late in retiring to rest, and should need no further assistance that night. Her room was strewed

with packing boxes and gay paraphernalia laid out in readiness for the important ceremony of the following day; countless jewel cases were scattered about the tables, containing gems of great value, marriage offerings from friends and relatives; and carefully arranged on a distant sofa was her wedding dress, its lustrous satin relieved by draperies of lace that a princess might have coveted; while a wreath of orange blossoms, the emblems of purity and innocence, was softly reposing on the snowy robes, till the hour should arrive for them to grace the brow of one who felt, as she wistfully gazed on them, how little fitted she was to bear their buds of golden promise.

She glanced anxiously at a clock that stood in the apartment, and saw that it wanted but a quarter of an hour to midnight; so with a deep groan she rose to attempt some slight preparation for the dreaded interview.

Eager above everything to avert every risk of discovery, she attired herself in a black dress and shawl, and wrapped a large

veil closely round her head, so that not even the most rigid scrutiny could have enabled any one to distinguish her features. Twelve o'clock was just striking when she quitted her room and cautiously descended the broad staircase leading to the hall.

All was silent as the grave, except the measured ticking of the large clock, which sounded loudly in the profound stillness. She dared not attempt to open the hall door, with its massive locks and bolts; so she directed her steps to the library, which had long French windows easily unfastened. One of these she softly unclosed, and the next moment stood on the terrace. Listening for an instant to ascertain that no one was about, she heard the rapid and painful beating of her heart, and the gasping breathing that told how fearfully she was agitated; and while she still stood trembling and irresolute, the deep reverberating tones of the great tower clock broke with a mighty resonance on the hushed midnight air, and as its solemn strokes fell one by one on her ear, she knew that the fated hour had arrived.

It was a gloomy night; the moon was almost constantly obscured by masses of drifting clouds, the wind sighed drearily among the trees; and Augusta shuddered, and drew her shawl more closely round her as she stole through the secluded walks, keeping well under the shade of the concealing branches.

Presently the silvery murmur of the waterfall could be heard distinctly; and Augusta laid her hand on her heart to stifle its agonized throbbings as she gradually neared the place where she expected to encounter Count Salvi. On her first arrival no one was visible, but the next moment a dark form silently emerged from behind a clump of bushes, and the faint moonlight struggling from a cloud showed her the sinister countenance of the Italian, his finely cut features lighted up with a smile of scornful triumph.

“For a lady your punctuality is highly commendable,” he remarked, in a mocking tone. “I was prepared for a small amount of procrastination, but I felt certain you would not refuse the appointment.”

“Now that I am here, Count Salvi, I trust you will fulfil your promise, and give me back my bracelet,” replied Augusta, in as steady a voice as was possible under the circumstances. “You can understand that I naturally wish my absence should be very brief.”

The Count laughed softly to himself.

“Signorina,” he continued after a short pause, “I am a man of the world, you are a woman of the world; there is no need for us to beat about the bush and waste time in preliminaries that after all can mean nothing.”

“I have no desire to beat about the bush,” replied Augusta; “nor do I wish to remain a moment longer than can be avoided. What you wish to say to me, say now, and quickly.”

“Gently, gently, signorina,” observed the Count, still with that unpleasant sneer; “I fear our interview cannot be quite so short a one as you seem to anticipate.”

“You have but to restore me my bracelet,” replied Augusta, trying to speak with

something of her old haughtiness, "and then I can return to the house."

"What! is that all?" exclaimed Count Salvi, sarcastically; "no anxiety to learn its fate since the night you lost it—no curiosity to know how it fell into my hands? You are very unlike the generality of your sex, signorina, if you have no wish for those explanations."

"I should prefer to be spared them," replied Augusta; "they are not of much importance now."

"There I differ from you entirely, signorina," said Count Salvi, decidedly; "to me they are of very great importance, and I think they will eventually prove to be the same to yourself."

"Those explanations can come another time," observed Augusta.

"No time like the present," said the Count, gently; "therefore I must trouble you to hear me patiently to the end, while I relate the incidents connected with the recovery of your bracelet. Will you seat yourself on this bench? I brought it to this spot on purpose for you."

Augusta had no alternative but to comply ; and she placed herself on the bench, while Count Salvi composedly took a position by her side.

“ As I said before, signorina,” continued the Count, “ we need not waste time by entering into preliminary details. I have reason to believe that you are well aware how many of your most secret feelings are known to me—how closely I have been able to follow the workings of your heart, as developed by the various incidents that have marked your career since I have had the honour of your acquaintance. Your jealousy of, and ill concealed dislike to, your sister, I may have discovered more fully than the world in general ; but sufficient evidence of your total want of affection for her was at times plainly visible ; indeed, I have repeatedly heard comments on it. You will undoubtedly prefer that I touch very lightly on the circumstances connected with your engagement to Sir Charles Bellingham.” Here Augusta winced sharply, and half-started from her seat.

“Pardon, signorina!” observed the Count; “I shall say no more on this subject: I can well believe it is a sore one. One little remark I must make, however. Having at last succeeded in bringing the *volage* Englishman to your feet, and your union with him appearing to be a matter of perfect certainty, it was naturally exceedingly annoying to discover, as you speedily did, that the charms of your pretty little sister had again succeeded in luring his attentions from you; in short, that he loved not you, but her. Repeated insults of this kind must have soured the nature of any woman; and your disposition is not, I should say, the most forbearing in the world. Reasonably enough, you felt extremely indignant; and your previous aversion for your sister became strengthened till it assumed the form of an intense hatred, only to be satisfied by some very complete and special act of vengeance.”

Augusta felt her very soul die within her as she listened: the crafty Italian had read her most secret feelings like a book;

no one single point seemed to have escaped his watchful *surveillance*.

“ All circumstances, therefore, signorina, were fully ripe for the development of your lurking desire for revenge: and then occurred the truly sad and remarkable catastrophe by which your craving for retribution on her who had so cruelly injured you was deeply sated, and a dangerous and successful rival for ever removed from your path. That catastrophe, taking place when it did, was a singular interposition of good fortune: as I imagine, I am not far wrong in concluding that if it had not happened at that time, a rupture of the engagement between Sir Charles Bellingham and yourself could scarcely have been avoided.”

He paused, as if expecting some reply; but Augusta never uttered a word. Only she thought within herself, “ He does not, at least, know everything.”

“ Now, signorina,” continued Count Salvi, seeing that no answer came from Augusta; “ now comes the most important part of my

communication. Must I detail, step by step, all the occurrences of that eventful night as they were related to me by one who had good reason to speak as she did? Must I describe how you stealthily entered your sister's room, when all but yourself were hushed in slumber"?

Here Augusta, unable longer to restrain her feelings of horror and agony, sprang wildly from her seat, and would have fled from the presence of her tormentor, but that he laid a firm grasp on her wrist, and forced her to remain and listen.

"In the dead of night you stole on your sleeping sister; and while she lay before you buried in a slumber too profound to be roused by your cautious movements, you consummated your fearful act of vengeance, and perpetrated a deed——"

"It is false!" almost shrieked the wretched girl, as she writhed in his powerful hold; "it is utterly false, Count Salvi: I did nothing—nothing!"

"Do you wish to be overheard, and bring some strolling keeper as a witness

to this scene?" hoarsely whispered the Italian, as he still clasped his madly struggling victim. "Listen to me, Augusta de Burgh. The cameo bracelet which you are known to have worn that evening was found in your sister's room by Luisa, the housemaid, who chanced to be passing in that direction late at night, and saw you retiring from the chamber of death. She was struck by your wild and horrified look: but not till the following morning did she know what had brought that expression on your countenance. I may tell you that she is the sister of my confidential valet; and owing to some incidents known only to themselves and me, I hold them both completely in my power, and can command their secret services on any occasion that I may happen to require them. She brought me the bracelet, at the same time informing me of the facts I have just disclosed to you; to the truth of which she is, at any moment, ready to swear. You can, therefore, perceive, signorina, that I have you in a net from which you can only escape with my assistance."

“I care not!” murmured Augusta, faintly, as she sank back into her seat; “do your worst, Count Salvi; I can but die, and my wretchedness will be over.”

“Die, signorina!” said the Count, composedly; “no, you will not die just yet—you will live—and for my sake, most charming Augusta!”

“Silence!” exclaimed Augusta, haughtily; “spare me a repetition of such insults, Count Salvi. You say you have me in your power: use, then, that power as you choose. I can only submit to my wretched fate; but I will not remain here to listen to words like these.”

“This is all nonsense, Augusta,” said the Count, decidedly. “I own that I possess a mighty power over you, and one that I will not scruple to use to the utmost. You have exhibited a thorough appreciation of the gratification attendant on vengeance for injuries; and this feeling is one which commands my unhesitating sympathy. You will, therefore, understand the pleasure I feel in knowing that this privilege is mine

as regards yourself. The time was when you scorned and insulted me; but the tables are now turned, and it is for me to dictate to you the terms on which you may purchase immunity for the past, and silence for the future."

"And what are your terms, if I may inquire?" said Augusta, coldly.

"Not such very hard ones, after all," replied the Count; "though, perhaps, just at first they may appear a little unpleasant in the particular circumstances of the case."

The moon was just then shining brightly, and Augusta could see the triumphant smile on his countenance, as he paused for a moment and withdrew from his pocket a small parcel carefully rolled up in paper. Slowly and deliberately he unfolded it, and displayed to the eyes of his trembling companion her long lost cameo bracelet, the absence of which had occasioned her so much perplexity and uneasiness.

"This little bauble," he continued, holding it towards the light, "is one very dear and precious in my eyes. It is the mighty

talisman to which I trust to owe all my future happiness! for in spite of the harshness and scorn with which you treated me, I love you still, Augusta; and it may be that in the time to come you will view my conduct with less repugnance than you probably do at present. The terms, therefore, on which I restore this bracelet to your keeping, and secure the silence of Luisa and her brother are, that you quit the Abbey with me within two hours from this time; and to-morrow, or as soon afterwards as can possibly be arranged, you consent to accept me as your husband. This is my ultimatum: on no other condition whatsoever will I agree to remain silent as to the events of that fatal night."

He ceased speaking; and only that he felt the irrepressible start of horror with which Augusta listened to his proposal, he might have imagined that she had not heard a word he had said, so utterly unbroken remained the silence on her part.

As with a flash of intuition she saw that her future destiny was sealed so far as re-

garded her marriage with Sir Charles Bellingham; but she resolved that not even her present extremity of despair should ever induce her to accept a position so odious and intolerable as that of the wife of Count Salvi. Death itself were a thousand times preferable in her eyes. Death! ah! in that alone appeared her sole means of escape; and once more she shivered as the dark and hopeless future stretched out before her despairing sight.

“I can but die!” she softly murmured, in too low a voice to be heard by the Count. “Oh! yes, I can but die! This is what it has all come to—and this was to have been my wedding-day!”

Some little time had now elapsed, and Count Salvi had never once attempted to interrupt her meditations. But the heavy sigh with which the wretched Augusta concluded her final reflections fell on his sharply attentive ear, and led him to the conclusion that her decision was formed, and she had resolved to yield to a fate she plainly saw to be inevitable.

“You have decided in my favour, I trust?” he ventured to observe. “Every difficulty is then for ever swept away, and the past completely obliterated from our minds.”

Augusta with difficulty restrained the words of loathing that rose to her lips, but she felt that her only chance of escape lay in evasion of a direct answer to his question, and with a sigh that came from the very bottom of her heart she replied—

“You may succeed in this, Count Salvi; but the past can never be obliterated from my memory.”

“Time will do much for you, believe me, Augusta; but we shall say no more on this subject now. It is then settled that you accept my conditions?”

He bent towards her and seemed as though he would have taken her hand; but this was more than the haughty though despairing woman could endure. His words, the familiarity of his tones, his calling her by her name, filled her with an inexpressible repugnance; and but for the perilous position

in which she stood she would have spurned him from her side.

She knew, however, that subterfuge alone could avail her now; and she strove to answer the Count in a voice of studied calmness.

“My marriage to Sir Charles Bellingham being now an impossibility; I conclude I must for the future look on you as the arbiter of my destiny. No other course seems open to me.”

Count Salvi frowned and bit his lips, for the language was anything but complimentary. But he could make allowance for the circumstances in which she was placed, and he replied composedly—

“You have judged wisely, Augusta; no other course was open to you. Anticipating this termination to our interview, I have made all the necessary arrangements for our flight. A post-chaise will be awaiting us at a given time; we shall join the railway at A——, and proceed at once to London.”

She shuddered as she listened, and felt almost as if her reason must give way under

the pressure of so terrible an ordeal; but she clearly perceived that if she would preserve her mind in a fit condition for carrying out the design she had in view, she must struggle to control herself.

Steeling herself therefore to a semblance of resignation, she replied in a voice almost as calm as that of the Count—"You have indeed felt certain of my inability to escape from the conditions you have imposed. But if, as I may conclude from your remark, our departure must take place within two hours from the commencement of our interview, very little more than an hour remains to me now; it will be necessary that I return to the house at once and make some slight preparation for the journey."

"You shall do so," said Count Salvi; "but on one condition only. Before you leave me, you must give me your solemn word of honour that you will return before an hour shall have elapsed."

"You have small reason to feel doubtful of my return," replied Augusta, bitterly. "To what end should I decline to rejoin you?"

“That may be true,” observed the Count; “nevertheless you must pass me your sacred word that you will do so.”

“I promise that I will return,” said Augusta, firmly; “within an hour I shall rejoin you here. But before I quit you, Count Salvi, give me an assurance that you will never betray me—that if I consent to this sacrifice of every hope and prospect of my life—if I leave my father’s house with you to-night—no word of the awful secret that links us together shall ever pass your lips. Swear this.”

“I do,” replied the Count, eagerly. “I solemnly swear by everything that I hold sacred, that no syllable relating to the past shall ever be breathed by me to any human being.”

“That will do,” said Augusta. “I rely on your firm observance of this oath. I shall now return to the house; in one hour I shall again be here.”

CHAPTER XVII.

“ ANYWHERE, ANYWHERE, OUT OF THE
WORLD.”

IN the same silent manner that she had quitted her room, Augusta once more regained it.

She glanced round the luxurious chamber, she looked at her wedding-dress—cruel mockery of an hour which could now never arrive for her. She thought of all that was to have been hers on this now rapidly dawning morning ; and overcome by the harrowing images presented to her mind, the miserable girl cast herself on her bed in an agony of the wildest despair, and the groans of a heart tortured almost to bursting broke in stifled anguish from her lips.

Then she started vehemently to her feet, for the fatal moments were swiftly passing,

and her word was pledged to meet Count Salvi within an hour. Preparation she needed not, for was not that day to witness the close of her burdened life? but to avert all suspicion on his part, she must appear to have made some little arrangement for a journey. So she hastily placed a few things in a small travelling-bag, once more assumed her large shawl, and selected a dark bonnet and thick veil; and those few preliminaries completed, there remained nothing more to be done. Again the fearful contrast between what was to have been and what *was* rose forcibly to her imagination. This day she was to have quitted her home as a bride—envied and honoured—followed by loving good wishes and eager congratulations—while now she was slinking from beneath her father’s roof like a criminal escaping from justice—terror and misery in her heart, despair and death alone looming in her future. Ah! it was indeed a fearful and a righteous retribution.

Still one other bitter pang remained to add a keener sharpness to her agony. She felt

that she could not quit the house and sever herself for ever from every tie and association of her life without one last silent gaze on the features of the parent she had so fondly loved and yet so cruelly injured. She knew that Sir John usually slept with his door partly open, and she trusted to be able to indulge in one last look without much risk of rousing him from slumber.

His bed-room door stood slightly ajar; and with light and cautious tread Augusta stole into the apartment, and advanced softly in the direction of the bed. Buried in profound repose, Sir John lay back on the pillow; his noble features fully exposed to view, and easily distinguishable in the now fast breaking dawn.

His hand lay outside the coverlet, but she dared not touch it with her lips lest she should disturb his slumber; so she bent softly forward and pressed a long suffocating kiss on the pillow; then clasping her hand over her lips to repress the bitter cry that had almost escaped them, she rose from her knees, and not venturing on another glance,

she gently recrossed the apartment, and next moment was descending the staircase on her return to the shrubbery.

Count Salvi was again awaiting her. He began some slight observation when she approached, but she raised her hand as if to implore silence; and the Count perceiving that she was in no mood for conversation, respected her wishes and did not speak for some time. He took from her the bag that she carried, and walking silently by her side, for she hastily declined his proffered arm, he guided her for some distance along the path, and then struck into a little bye-way that led across the wood to the high road. Augusta asked no question but followed him. A small gate in the park wall had apparently been opened in expectation of their arrival; through this they passed, and then Augusta observed a post-chaise, which was drawn up at the side of the road at a very short distance from the gate.

Two men were seated on the box, but immediately on perceiving them one man descended, and held open the door of the

carriage. One glance sufficed to tell Augusta that this was the Count's Italian valet, who knew her history and his master's triumph, and was no doubt fully in the secret of all that was apparently in store for the victim of his crafty machinations.

She shuddered as the thought of all this occurred to her, but by no other sign did she betray the agony she was suffering; and refusing all assistance, she entered the carriage and threw herself wearily into the furthest corner. Count Salvi instantly followed her; the door was shut, and next moment the carriage was being rapidly driven along the deserted high road, in the direction that Augusta was aware led to the town of A——. Some time passed; and no word had yet crossed the lips of either Count Salvi or his unhappy companion. The Count looked carelessly through the window, or else sat absorbed in meditation; Augusta leant back in her corner, her veil drawn closely over her face, her hands rigidly clasped together on her lap.

Count Salvi at length broke the silence.

"We are approaching A——, Augusta," he said; "so it is necessary that I give you some faint outline of my plans. Fearing that you might possibly be recognised, I have given directions to be driven to an inn in a remote part of the town. Here breakfast will be awaiting us; and you can have a short period of repose before the first train starts for London."

He stopped, and Augusta silently bowed her head, seeing that he awaited a reply.

"About mid-day we shall reach London, and in the course of an hour or two all will be in readiness for the ceremony that is to unite us; after which I trust that you will no longer maintain this cold and forbidding demeanour, which can answer no good purpose, but will simply tend to irritate me, and in consequence to increase the unpleasantness of your position."

She pressed her hands convulsively together, and a kind of choking sigh burst from her quivering lips; then by a mighty effort she controlled herself, and answered

him quietly—“ You shall have no cause of complaint in this respect, Count Salvi.”

“ I am glad to hear you say so,” he replied; and once more they were silent till they arrived at the town of A——.

The carriage proceeded through several streets, and finally stopped at a small inn, not much better than a tavern, and situated in a dark and uninviting-looking quarter.

They were evidently expected, for a person, apparently the landlord, instantly emerged from the house, and opening the door of the post-chaise, requested them to alight, informing them that breakfast would be ready directly.

Augusta rose at once and quitted the carriage; the landlord preceding her to the lobby of the inn, and ushering Count Salvi and herself into a shabby and dirty parlour, where a table was already laid for breakfast.

“ I am fatigued,” said Augusta, “ and should like to rest for some time before starting.”

An adjoining door was immediately

thrown open, and an equally unpleasant-looking bed-room displayed to view.

"But you will surely have something to eat first?" urged Count Salvi; "you must be very much exhausted."

"I could eat nothing," replied the miserable girl; "I wish only for rest." Rest! rest! the long calm rest of the grave,—ah! how eagerly, how wildly she was thirsting for it!

"You will have fully an hour for repose," said the Count, glancing at his watch; "then we must set off so as to catch the train."

"An hour will do very well," replied Augusta; who was resolved that long before that time had elapsed she should have passed for ever beyond the detested control of Count Salvi.

She entered the room and closed the door behind her, at the same time cautiously locking it. Then she turned round and hastily surveyed the position of the apartment; when to her unutterable dismay she perceived that it had no other entrance but that through which she had just come,

the one leading to the parlour at present occupied by Count Salvi. Escape was therefore perfectly impossible in that direction. The window was her next consideration; and on approaching it Augusta perceived that in this quarter circumstances were much more favourable. It opened nearly to the ground, and looked on a kind of half-court, half-passage, which it was more than probable led to the main street.

Resolved to risk everything rather than fall a helpless victim into the hands of the Count, Augusta made up her mind to attempt an exit by this window.

Fate befriended the trembling girl. While she stood by the window, her nervous fingers unsteadily grasping the shaking frame, she heard the sound of some one entering the parlour; and presently a clattering and rattling sound ensued, under cover of which she was enabled to lift the sash to a height which would perfectly admit of her passing through it, and gaining the court outside. All was therefore in readiness for her flight; but before essaying it, she took from her

bag a sheet of paper which she had placed there for the purpose, and seated herself to address a few hurried lines to Count Salvi.

It was well she had done so; for scarcely had she commenced writing when a knock came to the door of her room, and the voice of Count Salvi was heard informing her that breakfast was on the table; at the same time inquiring whether she would not partake of something before setting out for London.

"I wish nothing," replied Augusta, faintly, "but only to be left undisturbed till the hour for starting arrives."

"As you like," said the Count, shortly; and he retreated from the door, and immediately afterwards Augusta heard him seat himself at table, and begin to help himself to the breakfast she had so decidedly rejected.

She now felt pretty sure of not being again disturbed for a considerable time; and she resolved that not another moment must be lost in putting her design into execution.

She hastily traced the following words on the paper, and then placed them in an envelope directed to Count Salvi:—

“I have chosen death in preference to the existence you proposed for me; but I do not blame you for having hastened a fate that is the richly-merited penalty of my sin. By the terms of your oath you swore faithfully to preserve my unhappy secret, *if I quitted my father's house with you.* This I did, and I now rely on your performance of your solemn promise; as I would fain save my soon to be childless parent from the agony of knowing the guilt and shame of his last remaining daughter.”

Laying the note on the toilet-table, she softly drew it back some little distance from the window; and then, after a moment's pause to feel certain that all was secure, she slipped noiselessly across the sill, and gained the small court beyond, which opened, as she had imagined, directly on the street. No living creature was visible; she passed rapidly through the court, and found her-

self immediately afterwards in front of the inn, almost close to the door by which they had entered it. Looking neither to the right nor to the left she walked swiftly along the narrow pavement ; and coming presently to an intersecting lane, she turned into it, and reached, after a short interval, a much larger street than the one she had recently quitted. The shops were only beginning to be opened, and she eagerly scanned the various signboards in search of a chemist's or druggist's. She soon espied one in which the shutters were just being taken down; entering it, she informed its sole attendant, a lad of fifteen or sixteen, that she wished to purchase a small phial of prussic acid.

Her voice and manner, those of one accustomed to command and be obeyed, awed the youth for a moment; and he turned round as if to comply with her request. But he immediately halted and looked irresolute; and then hastily proceeding to a room behind the shop, he spoke a few words to some unseen person.

The master himself then made his appear-

ance—a grave, elderly man, who closely scrutinized the veiled lady who desired to make this dangerous purchase.

“ Prussic acid is a very deadly poison, you are aware, madam; we are not in the habit of selling it, especially to strangers, without a doctor’s order. Have you brought one?”

“ No,” replied Augusta, with affected calmness; “ I did not know that it was necessary.”

“ You cannot have it otherwise, madam,” said the chemist; and without venturing on any further parley, Augusta turned quickly from him, and quitting the shop, once more proceeded along the street.

Baffled for the present, Augusta again quitted the open street, and turned down a narrow one that led from it. She knew herself to be now a considerable distance from the inn where she had left Count Salvi; but she had no certainty that he might not at any moment discover her absence, and then she knew that his search for her would be hot and unwearied, and that by no pos-

sible chance would she again be permitted to effect her escape.

The long, sleepless night she had passed, with all its variety of exciting and agitating incidents, had now begun to exercise a serious influence on her overtaxed energies. Her temples were throbbing, her brain seemed on fire; no power of self-possession or calm reflection was left to her. She walked as one in a dream through the streets, scarcely knowing where she was going, or what she was doing; inspired only by one burning and ungovernable desire, that she might find some speedy means of ending her miserable life.

The streets were becoming busier and more crowded now; artisans were hurrying to their daily work, shopmen opening their places of business, women cleaning their door steps, and indulging in a social gossip with their neighbours; and many of those turned to gaze and wonder at the dark figure that flitted rapidly past, and bore so little of the stamp of the ordinary denizens of that locality. But Augusta heeded them

not; indeed, she scarcely noticed them; her mind was intent on very different matters, and she had no thought to bestow on the passers-by, nor on any other subject than the one that had now obtained exclusive possession of her imagination. So she saw not a dark-robed form that emerged from a doorway at the moment she happened to be passing; still less did she observe the violent start of surprise, the glance of recognition, then the anxious and watchful scrutiny with which she was now regarded by one, who could hardly believe it credible that the proud girl, still so distinctly remembered, was traversing alone, and on foot, the lowest and most squalid portion of the large manufacturing town of A——; and that, too, at an hour when people of her position were ordinarily still indulging in slumber.

Puzzled and perplexed, she first gazed eagerly for some moments after the fast retreating figure of Augusta; and then, as if struck by a sudden thought, she turned her steps in the same direction. The dingy street they were now traversing was situated

close to the outskirts of the town, and not very far from its further extremity rolled a deep and sluggish river.

When she came in sight of it, Augusta uttered a low cry of thankfulness, and clasped her hands convulsively together in an ecstasy of relief. She would follow its course to some quieter spot, and there seek in its cold depths the sole refuge from her unbearable torments that, to her morbid and strongly excited imagination, seemed now to be left to her.

And still the dark figure came on behind, and never once lost sight of her; for though not near enough to hear the low exclamation that burst from her at the first view of the river, she noted the momentary start, the instant acceleration of pace, and a grave misgiving that something was sorely amiss came over her mind; for she was one who could well appreciate the depth of despair to which an outraged and abandoned spirit could be driven when goaded to the last point of human endurance.

They were approaching the suburbs of

the town. The wished-for end was almost at hand; and once more Augusta quickened her weary steps, and looked eagerly forward to a part of the bank where no house was near, and where a clump of smoke-begrimed trees still survived, and overhung the stream. Reaching the spot, she glanced hastily round, as if even there dreading some hateful presence; but she saw no one, for the vigilant watcher was hidden by a tree, only waiting for the moment when she might exercise her merciful intervention. She saw the veil raised, the dark concealing bonnet thrown aside; and once more she beheld that classic head with its crown of glorious black hair, that pale exquisitely chiselled face, those radiant and yet melancholy eyes, the memory of which had remained deeply graven in her heart since the eventful hour when her gentle intelligence had led her to discover the life-secret of her beautiful English visitor, and she had told her that should a day ever come when she might need a faithful friend, she should find one in the sympathizing recluse of Santa Lucia.

Knowing nothing, however, of the tender and compassionate gaze bent on her, the wretched Augusta felt that her last hour was come; that for her the weary struggle was ended: that life, with all its variety of trials and sorrows, was fast fading from her sight; and eternity, with its dark and unknown mysteries, was opening wide its portals to receive her. The past, thickly crowded with images of happiness and unhappiness, rushed wildly into her memory; once more she felt her brain beginning to swim, her temples to burn; nay, her very reason itself seemed tottering on its throne; and dreading that her powers might even yet fail her before her final purpose should be accomplished, she resolved to lose not another instant in carrying it into execution.

Folding her trembling hands together, and raising her eyes to heaven, as if to breathe a petition for mercy and forgiveness for her desperate deed, she had steeled herself resolutely to its commission, and had taken her first unshrinking step towards the river's brink, when a light but firm grasp

was laid on her arm: and turning round, in terrified dismay and fierce determination to be free at all hazards, she beheld—not as she had feared, the dark countenance and malignant scowl of Count Salvi—but a soft, loving face, with sweet dove-like eyes raining on her their dew of sorrow and compassion—and the next moment she was encircled in the arms, and held tenderly to the heart of Sister Agnes!

CHAPTER XVIII.

AFTERWARDS.

THERE was a wild scene of confusion at the Abbey, when, at an early hour on the morning succeeding Augusta's flight, her absence was discovered by the bewildered Pauline, who had vainly knocked at Miss de Burgh's door for admission, and had at length entered the room and become aware of the departure of her mistress.

At first her representations were disregarded and even laughed at; and Sir John angrily desired the woman to be silent. But when, a short time afterwards, it transpired that Count Salvi and his Italian valet had also unaccountably disappeared, then, indeed, a low and suspicious murmur broke from the assembled household, and dark grew the haughty brow of Sir John de Burgh.

And then the sharply silenced Pauline ventured to state what she knew: how on the previous evening her mistress had dismissed her without requiring her usual attendance, saying she should probably not retire early to rest, as she had much to occupy her. Then also she proceeded to tell of the note which Count Salvi had instructed her to deliver to Miss de Burgh, and of that young lady's evident agitation at the sight of it; and how she had never opened it so long as Pauline remained in the room.

And when time passed on, and no tidings came of the missing girl, doubt and misgiving gradually changed into a fatal conviction that the true root of the matter had been arrived at; and the proud heiress of the Abbey had left the dignified protection of her home to share the destiny of the needy Italian noble, who had managed to outwit them all; and for whom, strange to say, she had been so far from displaying the remotest shadow of preference, that the generally received opinion had been that he held a very low position indeed in her esteem.

The guests assembled for the wedding dispersed quickly from the Abbey ; there remained to solace the afflicted father only the few more immediate relations and intimate friends, the Talbots, Bellinghams, and Mrs. Greville and her sister.

Grieved and astounded as Sir Charles Bellingham undoubtedly was, it yet cannot be denied that there was an absence of the overpowering disappointment that might naturally have been anticipated from an expectant bridegroom, who had been robbed of his bride. Naturally enough, the circumstances attendant on Augusta's flight had something to do with this ; as it was scarcely possible for him to avoid a feeling of strong indignation when he reflected on the manner in which he had been treated. Ignorant of the real facts of the case, it seemed to him that he had been deceived all along by Augusta ; and that she had been perfectly aware of the projected arrival of Count Salvi, and in concert with him had concocted the scheme by which he had been so completely betrayed and outwitted.

Therefore, after the first shock of the discovery, he speedily regained his ordinary composure; and on his first private interview with his mother, he assured her, with almost a smiling countenance, that he must now abandon matrimony as a speculation in which he was doomed to be unsuccessful; and that she must make up her mind to remain the mistress of Bellingham Court to the end of the chapter.

Lady Agnes shook her head gravely. "Hush! Charles," she said, "do not speak lightly of what is so very distressing and also so inexplicable; for my mind much misgives me that there is some hidden mystery at the bottom of all this."

"What do you mean, my dear mother?" said Sir Charles, in a tone of surprise. "What mystery can possibly be involved in it? The facts of the case are palpable enough."

"They do not satisfy me," replied his mother. "I am perfectly positive that not only had Augusta no feeling of regard for Count Salvi, but that she disliked him, and

at all times endeavoured to avoid his society. During his visit here I especially remarked this."

"A mere *ruse*," said Sir Charles, decidedly. "If she did not care for the fellow, why on earth should she run away with him?"

"It seems strange, certainly," replied Lady Agnes.

"Strange, indeed!" said her son, with a faint sneer; "no, no, my dear mother, to me there is no such great mystery in the affair. You do not, perhaps, thoroughly understand the whole bearings of the case. Augusta was a girl of very violent feelings, proud and implacable; and I will not deny that during our intercourse things occurred calculated to irritate a nature such as hers. I believe now that she had retained those resentful emotions when I thought she had laid them aside; and that, knowing my strong aversion to Count Salvi, she selected him as an instrument to assist her in carrying out a scheme which had for its ultimate object my annoyance and mortification."

"It may be so, Charles; and if it is, then

more than ever must I compassionate this unhappy girl, who, to gratify a trifling pique, has committed herself for the remainder of her life to the keeping of a man so utterly unsuited to her as I believe Count Salvi to be. She will never be happy with him, never; and a long life of misery and repentance may yet be in store for her."

"A little touch of repentance will do her no harm, mother," replied Sir Charles. "I think you must allow that she rather merits some such experience."

"Poor girl! poor girl! I fear it will be no little touch," said Lady Agnes, mournfully. "Let us not judge her too harshly; for in her short life she has known much sorrow, and her cup of trial is not yet empty."

And she was glad that she had so charitably judged her, when, shortly afterwards, a letter in Augusta's well-known handwriting arrived for Sir John de Burgh; and their minds were relieved from the feeling that she had acted with intentional duplicity, only to be plunged into equally painful

bewilderment as to the real nature of her motives.

The letter merely bore the post-mark of London, and contained no date or direction by which to determine the exact whereabouts of the writer. Its contents were as follows:—

“MY DEAREST FATHER,—When this letter reaches you I shall be far away from a home which can never again be home for me. I have looked my last on it, and on every scene of my childhood; and it may be even on the beloved parent, to part from whom caused me the bitterest struggle of all; and whose image, as I last fondly gazed on it, shall remain graven on my heart as long as its pulses beat. A cruel, though richly-merited fate compels me to fly; and the cup of happiness has been dashed from my lips at the very instant they seemed about to taste the draught so eagerly longed for, but so little deserved. I was in the power of a remorseless enemy, who had only waited to satiate his long-delayed vengeance by crush-

ing me utterly, till an hour when he knew the blow would descend with double violence, the anguish he invested with a still keener pang. At his instigation—rather by his command—I have quitted my home, never again to return to it; but further than this his influence does not extend. He had it in his power to put a stop to my marriage, and to hurl me from the position I occupied as your daughter and the future wife of the man to whom I was betrothed: but from that moment our paths diverged; my destiny was in no way linked with that of Count Salvi beyond the fact that he had become the possessor of a terrible secret, the revelation of which would have plunged *us all* into an abyss of misery. This fatal secret need never be revealed to you or to any member of my family. I have taken steps by which I trust you will be spared the pain of such a discovery. While I live I must bear the heavy burden for ever on my heart: only in the grave can its dark memory be blotted out. And now, my beloved father, I must bid you a long, and

I much fear, a last farewell. Our paths in this world must lie separate, though a haven has been provided for me beyond what I might have dared to anticipate; and now the kindest wish I can frame for you is that you may cease to remember one who has caused you more sorrow than you know of, or that she can ever think of without the deepest anguish and remorse. To him who was to have been my husband, I would only say that he has no cause to regret the stroke that sundered us; and my prayer for him and for his good kind mother is, that brighter days may soon dawn for them, and that in the love of some fair and innocent girl he may forget all he has suffered through me, and yet enjoy that happiness he so well deserves. To each and all of those near and dear to me I now send a last tender farewell, for in this world we shall never look on each other again; and little as I merit pity and forgiveness, I would fain ask that both may be extended to

“Your sorrowing and repentant daughter,

“AUGUSTA.”

And this was all the intelligence they received of her for many a weary day. Vainly did Sir John de Burgh offer large rewards for even the slightest information relating to the fugitive; vainly did he place detectives on her track, and follow the faintest clue that seemed to point to her as its object. He never gained any more definite tidings of her than she had herself given him in her letter. He was never able to trace her movements beyond the hour when she had fled from the hated presence of Count Salvi, and wandered a reckless and despairing outcast through the squalid purlieus of the busy town of A——. Up to this point discovery had not been difficult; the postilion in charge of the carriage, the landlord and waiter of the inn, nay, the very chemist who had refused to supply the deadly draught that would have terminated her life, had all of them come forward with their quota of information, and furnished the links that bound together the circumstances attendant on the earlier hours of her flight. But beyond this every trace of her

was utterly lost; and in time her sorrowful father was reluctantly compelled to relinquish his search, and to own that all reasonable endeavours to trace her had proved a failure, and nothing more remained to be done.

He did not, however, abandon his home on the occurrence of this second and even more terrible uprooting of all its ties. He remained there, for long a sad and a solitary man, on whom, though sorrow had heavily laid her chastening hand, she had not entirely dried up the well-spring of human interests and occupation, and who strove to divert his grief into new and more wholesome channels, by the faithful performance of duties which he felt had already been far too long and too seriously neglected.

And with time came alleviation of his sorrow; and though the memory of his lost daughter never faded from his heart, her name ceased to be mentioned among them; for all felt the sure though unspoken conviction that her life lay shrouded in

some dark and fearful mystery, the knowledge of which would only bring shame and misery to all in any way connected with her.

For Count Salvi, though he felt he had been deceived with respect to the spirit of the oath he had sworn to Augusta, had yet observed it: he had never breathed a hint of her guilt to any human being—the fatal secret of which he was the master had remained firmly buried in his own bosom. It may have been that he was impelled to this course partly by a superstitious regard for the oath he had taken, partly by some dim feeling of gratitude to Sir John de Burgh for the unvarying kindness he had received from him. His revenge was complete: the rival who had scorned and supplanted him had been foiled and frustrated in his schemes at the very moment of their anticipated success; and the haughty woman who had insulted his pride, and despised his affection, was a wanderer and an exile from home and family; and though she had escaped one portion of the fate he designed

for her, he knew enough of her fiery nature to be well satisfied with the measure of retribution he had inflicted on her. And so we dismiss Count Salvi from the course of this history; his presence will not again occur in our pages.

CHAPTER XIX.

SISTER MADALENA.

MORE than a year had passed, and a certain measure of tranquillity had returned to the Abbey and to its master. The old times of cheerful and open-handed hospitality had never revisited it: for trials, such as had been the portion of Sir John de Burgh, leave effects behind them that cannot easily be effaced; and he cared not now for the pomp and luxury with which it had once been his delight to surround himself, nor for those magnificent entertainments which had caused his name to be celebrated in almost every capital in Europe.

But valued friends gathered round him at intervals, and helped him to pass the hours that might otherwise have been sad

and solitary: and both at Summerton and Bellingham Court he was a frequent visitor.

No further tidings of the lost one had ever reached their ears, when one morning a foreign letter, with the Naples postmark, was delivered to Sir John de Burgh.

The direction outside was in an unknown handwriting; but on unfolding the sheet inclosed, he discovered a few almost illegible lines traced by the trembling fingers of his unhappy daughter.

“I am dying, my father,” she wrote; “my days in this world are numbered; but before I go, I would fain look on your beloved face once more, and hear from your lips that I am forgiven for all the sorrow I have caused you.”

Below this was written by the same person who had addressed the envelope—

“Since her departure from England your daughter has been a nun in the Convent of Santa Lucia, and is known by the name of Sister Madalena. Her health has been gradually failing during the whole time of her residence here, accelerated by the pressure

of keen mental suffering; and it is evident to all who see her that she has now only a very short time to live. Not an hour must be lost by those who would behold her again alive.

“SISTER AGNES.”

The bell was rung, the carriage ordered, and in little more than half an hour after the perusal of the letter, Sir John de Burgh had taken his departure from the Abbey, on his way to visit his dying daughter.

Bellingham Court lay almost directly in his route to town; and he went there, in the first instance, to communicate the intelligence he had received to one who might be expected to feel an almost equally strong interest in it with himself. Nor was he deceived in this supposition. Sir Charles Bellingham was deeply moved by the sad tidings; and without a moment's hesitation, decided on accompanying Sir John to Naples.

They travelled night and day till they reached their destination, the gates of the lonely and tranquil convent.

The circumstances of their last visit were forcibly recalled to the minds of both Sir John de Burgh and Sir Charles, as each little incident was repeated, which they recollected so well on the former occasion.

The white-washed reception room looked exactly as it did on that memorable day; the prints of sacred subjects hung in the same places on the walls; and there was the latticed window through which Marian and Sir Charles had looked out on the rippling waters of the azure bay.

Thither; too, came the stately superior of the convent, with serious countenance and pitying eyes; and she told them that they were only just in time, for the physician's verdict had gone forth, and ere the sun now shining so brilliantly above their heads had tinged with departing glow the golden shores and the green olive slopes, one weary heart should have found her rest, one burdened soul escaped to the silent land.

She sent for Sister Agnes, who, she informed them, had been the tender com-

panion and nurse of the dying girl; and who had, in the first instance, been the instrument of inducing her to claim the shelter of the convent. And Sister Agnes entered at her summons, with her gentle step, and soft, low-toned voice; and the tears came into her dove-like eyes, as she told them how near to death lay one whom she had loved and tended as a sister.

From her they learnt all that she could tell them respecting the disappearance and long absence of Augusta; how she had been on the very eve of self-destruction, when saved from it by the intervention of the watchful nun. Sister Agnes explained her presence in England by stating that the religious order to which she belonged had a branch in the town of A——; and at that particular time it so chanced that business connected with its interests had required that she should personally visit the establishment.

When she discovered, as she speedily did, that the proud English heiress was an enforced wanderer from her home, and that

never again could it open its doors to receive her, she conducted her, in the first place to the convent of her order that already existed in A——; and there for a short interval the unfortunate girl was sheltered from all risk of pursuit, till she should make up her mind as to the course she intended ultimately to follow. That course was soon resolved on: rest and peace were all that the aching heart pined to obtain, and a calm retreat where her distracted thoughts might gradually be weaned from the sinful and unhappy past, and enabled to dwell solely on penitence and prayer.

So she accompanied Sister Agnes on her return to Italy, and became an inmate of the convent of Santa Lucia, for the short period that remained to her of life—for it soon became only too plainly evident that the beautiful English nun, Sister Madalena (as she was now called), would be but a temporary sojourner among them—she was clearly fast hastening to that dark and mournful¹ bourne from whence no traveller returns.⁷

Why not acknowledge the
quotation

And there was sorrow in the peaceful convent when they learnt that such was too truly the case; for short as had been her residence among them, she had made herself both respected and loved. None knew the motives that had led her to embrace the vocation of a nun; that secret had been confided to the priest alone, and the confidence had been sacredly preserved by him.

They knew she had been a great sinner; for this she openly avowed, when her gentle companions had proffered her deeds of sisterly love and sympathy, and she told them how utterly unworthy she was of their lightest regard. But if her sin had been great, great also had been her repentance; the proud, resentful spirit was now humble and teachable as that of a little child, the haughtiness was gone from her manner, the bitter light from her eye; she moved among them as one filled with the deepest sorrow and humility, and not one of that kindly and compassionate band would have dreamt of being the first to cast a stone at her.

By the couch of suffering—in the cell where raged the deadliest fever,—wherever peril was to be encountered, or anguish to be assuaged—there lingered Sister Madalena; and even when disease had fastened on her own enfeebled frame, and repose was rendered almost imperatively necessary, she still prayed to be permitted to devote her fast-failing energies to doing good to others. “For the little time I have left!” she pleaded; and none could withstand that appealing glance, or forbid her to pursue an occupation which seemed to be the one thing that ever yielded her a moment of heartfelt gratification.

And now she lay among them dying—her own summons had come at last; and the narrow cell for which she had abandoned her stately and luxurious home was soon to be exchanged for the still narrower limits of the simple coffin in which the sisterhood of Santa Lucia found their final resting-place when the Angel of Death waved his dark pinions over the tranquil convent.

Her short history finished, Sister Agnes

led the way to the cell where Augusta was lying.

She had already been apprised of the arrival of those whom she expected; and her eager eyes were fixed on the door through which she would obtain her first look of their beloved countenances. Her head was supported by a mass of pillows, for she could not now hold it upright; and the laboured breath came thick and heavy from her sunken chest. The speedy approach of death was visible in every pinched and pallid feature; and when Sir John entered the cell he could with difficulty repress a groan of horror at the fearful alteration that had taken place in the beautiful face, which was now scarcely to be recognised as that of the once lovely and radiant Augusta de Burgh. The next instant she was clasped in his arms and strained tenderly to his heart; and once again her feeble head was pillowed on his fatherly bosom, and warm kisses were pressed on the wan and emaciated forehead, where the dews of death were gathering fast and thickly.

Still another greeting awaited her; and even in this her last hour of life, a faint colour tinged her marble cheeks as she raised her eyes in speechless welcome to Sir Charles Bellingham, and felt him lift one trembling hand from her bed, and hold it for a few moments gently to his lips.

They were with her again, those dear ones whom she had so bitterly wronged; and as the rapidly dying girl lay back on her pillow, she felt an emotion of gratitude too profound for utterance, as her eyes fell on the loved countenances of the two she had most cherished upon earth, and who had come to her in time to soothe her last hours and smooth her lonely passage to the grave.

“She has told you all?” she gasped, pointing feebly to Sister Agnes, who still lingered in the cell: “I begged her to do so.”

“All that relates to her first meeting with you, and to your final resolution of coming to Santa Lucia, she has told us,”

replied Sir John; "but I know nothing of the motives that compelled you to act as you did. You will surely confide them to me now, Augusta?"

"Never, my dearest father; and believe me when I say it is best that it should be so. The knowledge would only pain you, and add a still severer pang to those I have already caused you. It is a secret affecting myself alone; no other human being is in any way implicated in it besides my unhappy self."

"Count Salvi," suggested her father, in a low tone; "you yourself named him—"

"As having accidentally become acquainted with my fatal secret," replied Augusta; "but not as having in the slightest degree participated in it. I may tell you now, what I never did before, that Count Salvi was at one time a suitor for my hand. I rejected him, it may be more harshly than was prudent, for from that moment he became my bitter foe; but he used language and employed arguments that irritated me beyond endurance, and in

my turn I said things for which I was never forgiven. When circumstances placed me within his power, he exercised that power remorselessly; choosing his time with pitiless forethought, so as to dash the cup of happiness from my lips at the moment when it was nearest and sweetest. His intention was to compel me to become his wife; but to a destiny so hateful I was resolved never to submit, though death seemed the only way left me of escaping from it. I knew, Charles, that I could never be your wife;" here she turned her languid eyes on the young baronet, who, with saddened countenance, was standing by her bed; "but I was firmly determined that the faith which had been pledged to you should never be pledged to any other man. Great and terrible has been my sin, richly merited all the suffering it has brought upon me; but you may believe me, Charles, when I swear to you, on the word of a dying woman, that against my sacred truth and honour, so far as it regarded yourself, I never for one moment offended in thought, word, or

deed. Nothing ever passed between Count Salvi and myself that I need shrink from revealing to you, beyond his knowledge of my unhappy secret, and the irresistible power he had thereby acquired over the disposal of my future life."

Sir Charles Bellingham was deeply moved. "Ah! Augusta," he remarked, sorrowfully, "I feel only too clearly that I never was worthy of all the love you have lavished upon me; but I had looked forward to our marriage with an ardent hope that we should be happier in the future than we had been in the past. You had suffered much through me, and I had intended to atone for it by every means in my power. But it was otherwise ordered."

"It was, Charles; and well for you that it was so. I was no fitting wife for you; believe me when I tell you this. It is an inexpressible consolation to me now to feel that no loved one can be affected by my guilt; that I leave behind me no husband or child on whose name I should have fixed an ineffaceable stain. I trust that the memory

of my most unhappy secret will perish with me in the grave. Seek not to know what would make the remembrance of me a dark and hateful thing; think of me now as a great sinner, but as one who has mourned for her sin with no light sorrow and repentance. A very heavy measure of remorse has been my portion, but it has not been heavier than I have deserved."

Her voice had latterly become almost inaudible from weakness; only by very close attention could they catch each whispered sentence as it fell from her pallid lips.

Sister Agnes gently approached her, and laved her brow with a fragrant essence.

"She is exhausted with the effort of speaking," said the kind nun; "still, it is well that she was enabled to say what was on her mind. I know she was very anxious to do so. God be merciful to her, and give her rest both of body and soul. Whatever her sin may have been, she has mourned for it deeply and sincerely."

For two or three hours they watched by her dying pillow, and saw her growing

gradually weaker and weaker. She knew them to the very last, and once or twice she breathed a few low words of love and gratitude, and of trembling hope that her great sin might yet be forgiven her. One feeble hand was held by her sorrowing father, the other by the man she had loved so truly; her languid eyes turned fondly from one beloved countenance to another, till they were dimmed by the blinding mist of approaching death; and when the last rays of the setting sun gleamed among the dark olive groves and lingered on the convent spires of Santa Lucia, they fell on the humble pallet bed and on the marble form that lay there—all that now remained on earth of the once beautiful and haughty Augusta de Burgh.

CHAPTER XX.

TEN YEARS AFTER.

ONE last scene before some of those who have figured in this narrative disappear for ever from its pages.

The time is a lovely summer afternoon ; the scene a sweet cottage home on the outskirts of a broad park in one of our most beautiful English counties. The cottage, or cottage *ornée* as it would more generally be designated, is a long low house, almost buried in a profusion of bright roses and other climbing plants ; while the trimly kept lawn is studded with graceful shrubs, and variously shaped flower beds, all dazzling with many-tinted blossoms.

A large oriel window opens on this lawn ; round it the richest of the roses cluster thickly, and murmuring bees wander at will

in and out of the pretty drawing-room beyond, where rare exotics are skilfully arranged in old china vases, diffusing a fragrance that rivals that of their humbler, though not less beautiful companions outside.

By the open window an old lady is sitting; old we must, indeed, call her now, for more than ten years have passed over the snowy locks of Lady Agnes Bellingham since the day that we first made her acquaintance in her son's drawing-room at the Court. Her silvery tresses are less abundant than at that time, and something is gone from the piercing keenness of her dark expressive eyes; but she is a beautiful old woman still, and the slightly bent form has lost none of its former stately grace, nor the venerable countenance its air of sweet and dignified refinement.

She holds her knitting in her hand now as she did then; but it is often laid aside that her eyes may feast themselves on the mingled attractions of her blooming parterres and the waving forest trees beyond,

from whose tangled depths come the soft notes of the wood-pigeon and the gay music of countless birds ; and through which she can often distinguish the still sweeter music of childish voices, as her youthful grandchildren disport themselves in the pleasant glades, or search for wild flowers in the mossy carpet spread on all sides around them.

Some such welcome music she is probably listening to now ; for her eyes are brightening, and the lines of her mouth are breaking into a happy smile, and her knitting is placed on the table beside her, while she eagerly watches a particular corner of the path that leads from her cottage in the direction of Bellingham Court.

And presently a little band of merry juveniles come trooping round this corner, escorted by their more sober nurses ; and Lady Agnes steps through the window and advances along the velvet lawn to receive her young visitors, who are indeed the very joy and pride of her declining years.

Six little ones there are in all ; but only

four of them bear the name of Bellingham; the other two are guests who have just arrived that morning, the youthful son and heir of Sir John de Burgh, and his blue-eyed little sister Nora, or "Nonie," as she is more generally called, to distinguish her from her mamma, whose name is the same as that of this fairy-like little lady.

"Mamma sends her love to you," said little Jack de Burgh, "and she is coming to see you this very minute. Aunt Emily is going to take her a drive in the pony carriage."

Lady Agnes smiled, and summoning the little group into the drawing-room, she seated herself in her easy chair, and proceeded to open a certain very well-known and much-admired casket; and from it she extracted a judicious supply of *bon-bons*, with which she regaled her guests.

If it must be known, her very especial pet and weakness is her curly-haired grandson Charley, a noble boy of five, who holds by the hands his twin sisters Augusta and Marian, two exquisite little creatures a year and a half younger; while nurse

stands approvingly in the back-ground with a tiny crowing mite called "Baby," but which was christened by the name of Agnes, after "grandmamma."

While all were thus busily engaged, the drawing-room door was suddenly opened, and a frank manly voice exclaimed—

"Oho! we have caught you all very nicely indeed! I knew some mischief was in hand from the ominous quiet that prevailed. What deadly poison is this that grandmamma is giving you now?"

"It isn't poison, papa," said Charley, indignantly; "it's chocolate, and it is very nice indeed. Grandmamma wouldn't give us poison."

"You have a staunch champion in your grandson, Lady Agnes;" observed the elderly gentleman who had accompanied Sir Charles, and who was no other than our old acquaintance, Sir John de Burgh. "Charley has been sounding your praises ever since our arrival this morning."

The old lady looked much gratified as she rose to shake hands with her visitors.

“Charley and I are very good friends,” she observed, with a look of affectionate pride at the handsome boy by her side; “and he knows very well that I would not give any of them what would be injurious to them. Your little Jack and Nonie have been partaking, too, Sir John; I hope you have no objection.”

“None whatever,” replied Sir John, heartily; “indeed Nora often accuses me of doing very wrong things in that line myself. She and her sister will be here immediately; in fact I hear the carriage stopping now.”

He walked to the window, and perceived the two ladies crossing the lawn in the direction of the house. Next moment they too had entered the room, and were exchanging warm greetings with “Grandmamma;” a name which young and old seemed universally to have adopted.

As the reader has already suspected, they are no other than our former friends, Mrs. Greville and Miss Crewe; now advanced to the dignity of Lady de Burgh, of the Abbey, and Lady Bellingham, of Bellingham Court.

Sir John had always entertained rather a *penchant* for the handsome and easytempered young widow, with whom he had enjoyed so many hours of pleasant intercourse in Rome; and chancing to meet her one Christmas at Summerton, where she and her sister had been invited to pass a few weeks with Mr. and Mrs. Talbot, his old predilection for her revived; and before the termination of the visit he had succeeded in obtaining her promise to become his wife.

The Abbey, in consequence, became the home of Emily Crewe; till, within a year after the marriage of her sister, she exchanged it for the more stately position of the wife of Sir Charles Bellingham, and the mistress of Bellingham Court.

The strong regard which she and the young baronet had always felt for each other was not difficult to convert into a still tenderer sentiment; indeed, Emily had long ago discovered that her feelings towards Sir Charles were in great danger of overstepping the bounds of friendly interest. Neither of them had been the object of the

first affection of the other; both had out-lived the season of eager passion and romance; but both had loving natures and warm and generous hearts. So when Sir Charles asked Emily to be his wife, and she gave him her frank though blushing consent, each felt that their choice was fixed on no unworthy object, and that a fresh well-spring of happiness had that day been opened to them, which in time might obliterate all the painful memories of the past.

And time had dealt kindly with both happy couples. It was difficult to believe that fully ten years had rolled over their heads since that gay winter in Italy which had paved the way for such a succession of strange and mournful incidents.

Undoubtedly, Sir John de Burgh was a man now far advanced in life; but though his forehead was more bald, and his grey locks more scanty than when we last looked on him, his form was still upright and commanding, and there were few signs of age in his yet strikingly handsome countenance. The society of his cheerful and sweet-

tempered wife, and the innocent prattle of his two lovely children had, in a great measure, dispelled the cloud that for long had weighed heavily on his spirits. The Abbey had lost its air of mournful gloom, and was now a bright and pleasant abode, gay with the music of childish voices, and glad with the tranquil happiness of hearts sincerely interested in and attached to each other.

The present Lady de Burgh had not the sweet and delicate beauty of his still fondly remembered Marian, but was a large fair woman of gracious presence, with a calm motherly look in her frank face, and a gentle expression in her honest blue eyes. Every one liked her, and it gave her pleasure to know that this was the case; but in her tender care for her husband and children the excellent Nora found her best and truest enjoyment.

Of Sir Charles Bellingham we must also say a few words. Little altered in outward appearance, he is the same warm-hearted, unaffected fellow as ever; but his character

is strengthened and improved, and the influence of his bright Irish wife has been steadily and discreetly exercised on the nobler points in his character, and in inducing him to take up the position both in private and in public to which by nature and education he is so amply entitled.

And last, but by no means least, our old favourite Emily. As she stands before us now, in the full meridian of her womanly beauty, nodding and laughing merrily to the delighted infant dancing and struggling in the nurse's arms, we do not wonder at the proud look with which her husband openly regards her, nor at the glance of tender affection with which Lady Agnes responds to her comments on "Baby's" marvellous infantine attractions and precocity. Her magnificent hair still crowns a brow perfectly white and unmarked by lines of care; her bright eyes have still their old twinkle of fun and mischief; and if the graceful figure is a trifle fuller than when we remember her waltzing in the gay *salons* of Rome, who would quarrel with the rich

contour of the well-developed bust and shoulders?—certainly, no true admirer of the beautiful.

She is the joy and delight of her husband's heart, the crowning pride and sunshine of his home; in her are amply realized all his fondest anticipations of the wife who was to be his gentle guide and companion, of the daughter who was to tend with dutiful and affectionate care the declining years of his venerable and beloved mother. No mean or jealous feelings can find place for a moment in the generous heart of the young mistress of Bellingham Court. Certain sad associations, she well knows, must ever be connected with the past, both to her husband and herself. Were he capable of chasing them entirely from his mind, she would not love him half so dearly as she does; and on the recurrence of various well-remembered days, when the image of his fair and youthful first love presents itself more vividly than on other occasions, and the brow of Sir Charles Bellingham is clouded with the shadow of a still unforgotten sorrow,

the true-hearted Emily is ever ready with her warm and unselfish sympathy, and husband and wife retrace together those memorable incidents still so fresh in the recollection of both.

The names of Augusta and Marian, given to their infant daughters, form a living proof of the kindness with which the two familiar memories are cherished; but many a prayer is breathed by the fond parents that the lives of their innocent children may be differently ordered from those of their unfortunate prototypes, and that they may prove a blessing to the home where they are so carefully and lovingly tended.

When first the reader made the acquaintance of the master of Bellingham Court and his venerable mother, in their conversation they both eagerly alluded to the golden future which is a breathing and joyful reality now. The declining years of Lady Agnes are tranquilly passing away, as she had herself hoped they might do, in the peaceful seclusion of her lovely cottage home; cheered by the daily society of her

beloved son, and his scarcely less cherished wife, and gladdened by the presence of her merry little grand-children, who are never happier than when visiting "grandmamma," and who have a pretty good idea that the pleasure is, to say the least of it, perfectly mutual.

Thus let us leave her, the kind and gentle old lady; rich in many of earth's brightest blessings, and not insensible to the value of even her worldly portion; but rich, above all, in her prospect of some day entering on that better and still happier life, where no sorrow, loss, or disappointment can ever come near her; where many loved and lost ones are already awaiting her,—fair infant blossoms that were early transplanted to the undecaying garden of Heaven, and the much-loved and faithfully-lamented husband, whose premature death had truly caused the light of her eyes to be taken away at a stroke.

She knows that ere many years have passed she will be for ever reunited to their happy circle; and she is contented to wait

the hour of her final summons. When that summons shall come, let the time be when it may, it will not find her unprepared to obey it. Like the wise servant, she has set her house in order, and is even now watching and waiting.

THE END.

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