GERTRUDE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"AMY HERBERT," AND "STORIES ILLUSTRATIVE OF THE LORD'S PRAYER."

EDITED BY

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"Turn to private life
And social neighbourhood; look we to ourselves
A light of duty shines on every day
For all." *The Excursion*

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CHAPTER XXVI.

Day after day glided on swiftly and silently, each bringing hopes and fears, pleasures and pains; to the careless eye all light and momentary, and in such rapid succession as scarcely to lay claim to remembrance. Yet under the most unruffled surface of domestic life flows a deep under-current either of joy or sorrow, which, gathering strength from every trifling action and event, bursts at last suddenly, and often overwhelmingly, upon hearts that have not learnt to watch the bubbles which indicate its existence. Perhaps it is well that it should be so. It may be in mercy to many that their eyes are blinded, and their ears closed, and, like the victim about to be sacrificed, they are able to advance gaily and unhesitatingly to the scene of their trial. If it were otherwise, might not existence to them be a burden wearisome and intolerable?—haunted by spectres of coming evils, the sight of which can only be braved by those who have learnt at their first entrance into the world that lesson of unshrinking faith which the experience of a long life so frequently fails to impart? It was but a gradual change that was passing over the inmates of Allingham. No one could tell the

exact moment when Edward's countenance grew more gloomy, and Laura's smiles were deepened into sighs. No one could look back to the precise time when care first invaded a happy home; but few could fail to perceive its withering effects, in the hasty word, and the moodie reverie, and the silent and daily increasing reserve, which had sprung up where once there had been only open unsuspicious confidence. The original fault lay with Edward—in the weakness which had induced him to conceal from his wife the encumbered state of his property. From that error followed, as a necessary consequence, innumerable others, and amongst them many in which Laura was by no means free from participation. Even had her husband's fortune been all that she imagined, it could not have sufficed for the gratification of every idle wish—still less for the fearful extravagances of London dissipation; and this she well knew: but, unaccustomed to self-control, and led by Miss Forester's persuasive flatteries, she had set no bounds to her expenses; and whilst Edward brought himself into notice by making splendid speeches in public, followed up by splendid dinners in private, Laura gained equal notoriety by the magnificence of her frequent entertainments. Edward murmured, remonstrated, and paid his bills—the last being a conclusive evidence to Laura's mind that she had done no wrong. But the moment at length arrived when he was compelled to interpose his authority. At the commencement of a third season of thoughtless frivolity, a discussion, the first of an angry nature which had yet arisen, was ended by a peremptory enforcement of strict economy, and Laura soon afterwards returned to Allingham, in the beginning of the London season, with no hope of solace or amusement beyond the few hours which Edward was able occasionally to devote to her—the society of a country neighbourhood when half its

members are absent—and the friendship of Miss Forester. But notwithstanding her life of indulgence, Laura bore the sacrifice with temper and patience.

The follies of fashionable life had not as yet weakened the force of that strong attachment to her husband upon which so many virtues might have been grafted. He was still the object of her love and reverence, and his will, when once openly expressed, was a law which, however she might dispute, she would not venture to disobey. It was not regret for the morning breakfasts and the evening fêtes, the gay acquaintances and insidious flatteries, from which she was thus suddenly snatched, that caused her melancholy. Past pleasures were remembered and longed for, but the loss of them would have had no lasting power to mar her happiness. If Allingham had been what it was in the first days of her married life; if Edward had been still the companion of her walks and drives, the promoter of her daily amusements, and the sharer of her every feeling; above all, if there had been no thought which she dared not communicate, no action which she dreaded to confess, a spring spent in the country might have proved a season of enjoyment rather than *ennui*.

But the case was far otherwise. Edward's engagements were numerous, his absence was frequent, and his attention pre-occupied. Affection indeed he still gave her, deep and sincere, but shown only in fleeting moments, and upon passing impulses. If Laura had her causes for reserve, he had his also; and more painful, more enduring, since they involved not merely the prosperity of all he most loved, but the sacrifice of those firm principles of right upon which, in his parliamentary career, he had hitherto constantly acted. His talents were by this time known and appreciated; his character was respected, his opinions were received with deference; but for the purposes of a party he

was too independent; and whilst he persisted in carrying out his own views in opposition to his influential friends, there seemed no prospect of his obtaining, under any circumstances, the position of prominence for which so many had declared him calculated. The knowledge of this fact had, at first, only stimulated Edward more openly to prove himself free and unbiassed. There was a satisfaction in the consciousness of self-sacrifice, which nerved him against ridicule, and gave him something of a martyr's pride in his devotion to the public good. Every suggestion of flattery was repelled; every thought of a compromise rejected; and, for a time, the task was comparatively easy. But when at length there seemed a prospect of his own friends being in power, the trial assumed a different shape. In the excitement of public life he felt equal to any resistance, but then came quiet hours and seasons of comparative retirement—moments when a present pressure and a future dread weighed down his spirits, and bewildered his judgment; and when the prospect of escape from impending evil seemed a blessing to be purchased at any price. The hope of bribing him to abandon his principles was one which no person who knew him would have ventured to entertain; but there were other forms in which the proposal could more delicately be made; and when it was whispered in his ear that some concession upon two or three important points might soon be the means of placing him in a situation, which, by increasing his influence, would also increase his usefulness, it seemed scarcely right at once to refuse the idea without consideration. As on other occasions, Edward listened to the temptation, thought upon it, and rejected it, and then carried its remembrance in his heart, to be dwelt upon and coveted. It was at this time that a temporary cessation of parliamentary business allowed him to return with Laura to Allingham; and with

the growing conviction in his mind that on the success of his public career depended his prosperity or his ruin, the evident symptoms of distrust which he discovered amongst his former supporters were naturally regarded with considerable alarm. Officious friends were constantly on the watch to remind him of danger, and to retail speeches and anecdotes, some half true, others wholly false, but all tending to show that unless he could consent to give up the opinions he had hitherto most strenuously asserted, his success, upon the event of a new election, would be most doubtful. General Forester, in particular, shook his head with looks of surprise and reproach, upon finding that the member he had himself proposed—the man for whom such sacrifices had been made—was resolved to follow the guidance of his own judgment, and stedfastly set his face against many of the most approved measures of the day.

It was a perversion of reason attributed to ignorance, and argued against accordingly; but as weeks went on, and no impression was made upon Edward's prejudices, the General's zeal in his behalf sensibly diminished; and nothing but respect for his talents, and the certainty that, if Mr Courtenay ceased to be member, he himself would cease to be a person of any importance, induced him still to range himself amongst the number of his political adherents. Since Edward's return to Allingham, however, General Forester's hopes of his conversion had considerably revived. With such a spy as his daughter upon the family secrets, he could not be entirely ignorant of the position of Mr Courtenay's affairs; and his own knowledge of Edward's character made him easily believe that no compromise need be despaired of whilst it was possible to hold out to him the prospect of relieving himself from his difficulties; and that this might be done, if he remained in Parliament, the General had

good reason to imagine. He had indeed no idea to what extent Edward was embarrassed. It was a secret only in the possession of his lawyers; but Miss Forester had gained, by observation and questions, an insight into his hidden subjects of care, which years of intimacy would have failed to impart to Laura. And this knowledge she felt no scruple in imparting to her father.

And there was yet another person, who watched the onward course of events with deep untiring interest. The four years which had glided over Mr Dacre's head had been unmarked by any incidents of importance, but each as it passed had borne with it some portion of strength from the body, and added some impress of heaven to the soul. Calm he was still, and thoughtful, and dignified, and self-possessed; but it was the calmness rather of a spirit escaped from earthly cares than, as it once had been, of a heart too heavily oppressed to be conscious of them. None but himself knew the toil and watchfulness, the careful examination and earnest prayer, by which alone the last clinging to bygone recollections had been subdued; and few could understand the fulness of peace, which seems granted as the foretaste of eternal rest, when the spirit, after its weary struggle with sin and sorrow, has at length been permitted to attain that high point of human excellence from which heaven in its purity is seen unclouded above, while the mists and shadows of the world float unheeded beneath. Yet it was this very elevation of character which caused Mr Dacre's unwearied care for the welfare of those whom he saw still battling with the trials of life. They who have escaped from danger can best understand the difficulties of others when plunged into it; and although Edward's reserve and secrecy had latterly induced Mr Dacre to believe, as Edith had said, that he must be in expectation of some sources

of affluence unknown to his friends, and thus in some degree diminished his anxiety, yet it was impossible to watch without deep regret the gradual deterioration of a naturally noble mind, gifted with a clear perception of the path of duty, but weakly turning aside at every step. He had failed, too, in obtaining that intimacy with Edward, of which he had once hoped to avail himself. Allingham was open to him at all hours, and his welcome gave him no cause to consider himself an intruder; but the day of confidence was over; for, having once rejected Mr Dacre's advice, Edward was unwilling to confess the consequences which his own wilfulness had brought upon him; and guardedly abstained from all allusions to his personal feelings or his private affairs. And at the Priory it was equally hopeless to obtain any information as to his true position. Edith, who knew most, now daily lamented her estrangement and ignorance; but there was a pleasure in feeling that it was in his power to be a comfort to her, which induced Mr Dacre to take frequent advantage of Mrs Courtenay's hearty assurances, that "it was quite a relief to see him frequently, for really she began to think sometimes he would go out of his senses with melancholy if he kept so much to himself." Perhaps, if he had known the effect of his visits, they might even have been more frequent: but the most pure and holy are also the most humble-minded; and Mr Dacre would have been the first to feel surprise at being told that his presence was a check upon Charlotte's satire, and a stimulus to Jane's energy; while Mrs Courtenay often wondered "what there was in Mr Dacre which made things seem different when he was there; every body was so quiet, and all went on so much more smoothly; she thought it must be because he was such an invalid that people were afraid of talking out before him, for fear of distressing him."

"Mr Dacre has forgotten us for three days," said Charlotte, as she lingered one morning in the breakfast-room, a practice which, since Gertrude's return, had become more enticing than formerly.

"Not forgotten, my dear," said Mrs Courtenay; "but you all tire him out when he is here. I thought he never would have done walking up and down the terrace the last time. Poor man! and the night air is so bad for him."

"He is rather a romantic person for an old one," observed Jane: "I am sure he likes moonlight a great deal better than I do."

"We were matter-of-fact enough that evening," said Edith. "He was talking about the poor man who shot Edward's keeper, and settling what was to be done with the wife and children."

"Ah, yes!" exclaimed Mrs Courtenay; "to be sure that must be it. I daresay he is gone to see after them now. What a good thing it is to be so kind!"

"Yes," said Jane, more earnestly than usual; "if one were but to equal it. I can fancy a great deal of pleasure in being able to do what he does."

"Mr Dacre is a miserable invalid," said Edith shortly. Jane's colour rose, and she was about to make an angry reply; when Gertrude, turning to her mother, inquired if she were not intending to go for a drive in the middle of the day.

"Why, yes, my dear, I did think of it, and Jane too; but why did you ask?"

"Because, if you were, I thought perhaps you would not mind going by Torrington Heath, and taking Susan Philips a little bundle of clothes we have been looking out for her, that is to say, if it is ready; but I must work hard to finish making up the baby's frock."

"Leave it for to-day," said Edith, "and come with

me to the school; we shall meet Mr Dacre there, perhaps, and then he will tell us what he has been doing, and you will be able to say any thing you wish."

The last words were spoken in a tone which implied that a conversation with Mr Dacre was an all-powerful temptation; but Gertrude resolutely resisted it.

"If you would wait till the afternoon," she replied, "it would be more convenient, because I really should be glad to finish my work, and I want rather to help Charlotte to put in her seeds."

"But you don't mean to say you would stay at home for such a trifle as that?" exclaimed Edith; "I thought you were very anxious about poor Philips, and I am nearly certain we shall hear something from Mrs Grantley, if we don't meet Mr Dacre."

"We should not be delayed very long," said Gertrude; "and it is such an exquisite morning for gardening, and Charlotte and I have been looking forward to it. You must remember the work, too."

"We would take it up ourselves to-morrow," persisted Edith, "and it would do just as well, and better, because we should be able to talk to Susan."

"I thought," said Gertrude, "that if mamma took it, perhaps she would not mind telling Susan how to doctor her baby. I am sure she knows a great deal about it, and we could not help her at all in that way."

"If mamma would," said Edith; "but she dislikes getting in and out of a carriage."

"Perhaps Susan would be able to tell her about the child without giving her that trouble," said Gertrude. "Don't call me wilful, Edith; I really do hope to go out with you in the course of the day."

"What is that you want me to do, my dear?" inquired Mrs Courtenay; "you must not ask me to

go amongst any of your people: it makes me so very nervous—it upsets me quite."

"I did not mean you to be worried about it, dear mamma," said Gertrude; "but you know so much about children, that perhaps, if Susan Philips came to the carriage door you could just tell her something that might be good for her baby."

Mrs Courtenay hesitated, thought, and at last acquiesced. Prescribing for babies was the point on which she peculiarly piqued herself, and this Gertrude had lately discovered.

"Well, then, it is settled, I suppose," said Charlotte; "and we will go to our gardening, Gertrude, and leave the others to their own devices."

"Only if you could spare me a little time to finish my work first," said Gertrude, "I should be very grateful."

Charlotte looked disappointed; and Jane, following the example set her of assisting others, offered to undertake the task. Gertrude was obliged, but not too much so. She did not appear to consider that Jane had made an unusual effort, which would have implied that she was generally selfish; and thanked her more for the favour conferred on herself than for the kindness done to the poor woman. And Edith looked on in surprise: that her mother should take any trouble for a sick child, and Jane put herself out of the way to work for it, she would an hour before have considered perfectly unnatural. Now, both actions came as a matter of course, while Gertrude seemed to have cast aside her own duties, and to devote herself merely to a trifling amusement—why, Edith, notwithstanding her late conversation, had yet to learn.

The morning wore quickly away, and Gertrude talked, and laughed, and gardened, and discussed the merits of a new club book, and assisted her mother

out of the intricacies of her knitting, as if her whole thoughts were devoted to the present hour. No one would have imagined that she had any one engrossing subject of thought, or that any other motive than mere curiosity caused her to listen so frequently to the hall bell, and wonder whether Mr Dacre would come to luncheon. Yet at that very time Gertrude was longing to indulge the day-dream, which for years had been floating before her, and which nothing but a firm habit of self-control had kept from occupying her mind, to the exclusion of her daily duties. It was a dream, not of fame and honour, not of luxury and earthly splendour, but of riches dedicated to the God who had conferred them. And at length the period seemed arrived when she might be permitted to realise it. Even before Gertrude had been made aware of her aunt's intentions in her favour, her naturally generous temper had led her to form plans for giving pleasure to others; and all that could be spared from her personal allowance was bestowed freely, sometimes even profusely and extravagantly, upon her friends. It was the family defect. The luxury of making presents was too great to be resisted, and poor Gertrude had often brought herself into difficulty by the thoughtless kindness which had induced her to lavish her last sovereign upon a knick-knack for a companion, when she was in want of absolute necessaries herself. But, with more steady principles, came the corrective of this error. The first check which she received was from the knowledge that she could not throw her money away upon idle fancies, and also have enough to bestow upon the poor; and although it was not so agreeable, at first, to relinquish a purchase for which she was certain to receive warm thanks and caresses, in order to buy a hundred of coals, or a few yards of flannel, with scarcely any prospect of gratitude in return;

yet the lesson was learnt at last, and Gertrude was contented to be thought prudent and economical by the world, so that she could be generous in the eye of God. Her natural disposition, however, though diverted into another channel, still remained in full force. The visions of the future which came the most frequently, and were the most difficult to subdue, were of some time when she should be able to build churches, and found hospitals, and endow almshouses, and give up every thing to religion. They constituted to her the romance of life; for they were associated with all those feelings of reverence, and self-devotion, and dedication to the service of another Being, which, even when turned upon earthly objects, are among the highest and purest of which our nature is capable. And since her return home, the occasion seemed afforded of gratifying her most cherished wish. She had wealth beyond any others of her family, since she shared her father's fortune equally with her sisters; there were no pressing claims upon her charity, and if, with the sanction of her friends, she might take upon herself the duty which had been exclusively her brother's, and sacrifice her fortune for the church so much needed at Torrington, she could scarcely be accused of going beyond her appointed sphere of action. The first thought upon the subject was one of exquisite delight—the next, of deep humiliation. In by-gone ages there had been a monarch "in whose heart it was to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and for the footstool of his God; and who had made ready for the building. But God said unto him, Thou shalt not build an house for my name." And after the rejection of David, the man after God's own heart, Gertrude trembled, lest it might be presumptuous in one so young, and frail, and untried as herself, to venture upon a similar undertaking. Her spirit sank as she

dwelt upon the greatness of the work, and her own weakness and sinfulness; she longed to find some person who would enter into her feelings, and advise her rightly, whilst she shrank from confessing her secret wishes and hearing her ideas discussed and argued upon, and, it might be, ridiculed, by those who would consider it a deed of merit, rather than an infinite privilege, to make an offering of worldly wealth for the benefit of the church of Christ. Delicacy naturally prevented her from speaking to Edward, and reserve formed an equal barrier to applying to Mr Grantley, of whom she had seen but little; next to him her mind turned to Mr Dacre, whose intimacy with the family made him appear an old friend. Once or twice, in their late conversations, she had endeavoured to introduce subjects of the kind uppermost in her thoughts, in order to gain an insight into his opinions, and discover whether she might dare to acknowledge her wishes and her own self-distrust, without fear of being considered weak and enthusiastic; for Gertrude, like all persons of a warm and earnest temperament, could better have brooked open opposition, than a matter-of-fact, uninterested inquiry into the reasonableness of her views. Edith had, as yet, been her only confidante; and even she, though delighted at the prospect, seemed to consider principally the sacrifice her sister was about to make, and spoke of it as an act of munificence, which she desired might be known to every one; and poor Gertrude, humbled by praise more than by censure, dreaded lest after all she should be mistaken in Mr Dacre's character, and receive flattering commendations, where she desired only sympathy and advice. It was with a beating heart, therefore, that on this morning, when she had resolved, if possible, to speak to him unreservedly, she heard his now well-known ring, followed by the inquiry for Mrs Courtenay and

the young ladies. Objections to her plan started up instantaneously. Mr Dacre might consider it premature — an infringement upon Edward's peculiar province; he might think it hasty, and counsel delay; or he might see other and less interesting claims upon her fortune; or, still worse, he might be pre-occupied, and so might give her only a half attention. And at the instant Gertrude felt as if the least check would throw her back upon herself, and make her bury her wishes in her own bosom for ever. Mr Dacre appeared in due time, was chided for his long absence, invited to take luncheon as usual, and then pressed to give every particular about the unfortunate poacher and his family. It was a hard trial for Gertrude; yet she forced herself to attention, by remembering how much of happiness or misery to a fellow-creature was involved in the subject; and no one, in listening to her considerate questions, would have imagined how great was the effort of making them. All was, however, at length told; and Gertrude waited for a pause, as an excuse for breaking up the party; but Mrs Courtenay was too delighted at finding a new topic of conversation to relinquish it willingly, and continued asking questions till the carriage had been twice announced; when, to Gertrude's disappointment, it was insisted that Mr Dacre should go for a drive with them. He was to return, however, to dinner; and again Gertrude meekly submitted to the delay, and strove to turn her mind to other subjects.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"I CANNOT imagine, Gertrude, how you contrive to be so calm about every thing," said Edith, putting her arm within her sister's, as they left the dining-room, and leading her into the garden: "I watched you during the whole of dinner, and never once saw you look absent."

"I saw myself, though," said Gertrude, smiling; "but indeed, Edith, you are enough to prevent any one from being calm—half my worries now are for you. I am sure you will be grievously vexed if objections are made."

"Naturally enough," said Edith; "and angry too, perhaps; for, after all, who is to hinder you from doing as you like with your own money?"

"No one, legally," replied Gertrude; "and if I were some twenty or thirty years older, and had experience and judgment, I don't think any one would; but it is the old story of times and circumstances pointing out duty. I should feel I was presumptuous in determining upon it, if such a man as Mr Dacre seriously objected; for I sometimes think, Edith," and Gertrude's voice involuntarily assumed a deeper tone, "that holy works should only be undertaken by holy persons."

"And who is holy if you ——" began Edith, but the sentence was unfinished.

"Who is holy, indeed?" said Gertrude, not perceiving her sister's meaning—"holy as one should be who desires such a privilege as I am seeking. Does it never seem to you, Edith, when you look

upon beautiful scenery, that nature is the only temple fit for the worship of God?"

"Yes," replied Edith, "and I suppose, if our minds were in a right state, devotion would be the natural result of all keen perception of beauty; but as it is, we can so seldom view it without some lower associations. It constantly appears to me like a stranger, —as if I could see only the outward form, and the spirit was hidden. I have looked upon this view, for instance, day after day, and gained no real pleasure or benefit from it."

"I can understand that," replied Gertrude, "and it is humbling and disappointing to have nothing but mean or common ideas suggested by what we admire so much. That is the reason, I suppose, why the solemnity of a church is generally necessary to raise our minds. The natural temple is profaned."

"Yes," continued Edith, "the earth may be a temple for angels, but it can never be for us."

"Only as we become more like them," replied Gertrude; "and then," she added with greater earnestness, "can you not fancy, Edith, the infinite charm of being able to read the spirit of nature truly; of being so thoroughly religious, as never to look coldly upon the meanest flower, because God made it, and really to feel that His voice was in the thunder, and His glory upon the seas?"

The tears were in Edith's eyes, and she paused before replying. "Oh, Gertrude," she exclaimed at length, "if it were only possible to be what we know we ought to be! But how is it possible? If we lived alone in deserts there might be a hope; but there can be none for us, when we are constantly in contact with our fellow-creatures, and so have our worst feelings brought into play at every instant."

"I have thought lately," replied Gertrude, "that the difficulty might be less, but for our way of looking

at people, and thinking of them. If we could constantly realise the fact that we are baptized members of the Church of Christ, to live with our fellow-creatures would be not merely an intercourse with human beings, but with souls training for eternity."

"One is so apt to forget the very existence of a church," said Edith.

"Yes, and yet I am sure that no mind can be raised to its highest tone without a remembrance of it; because there is much involved in it: it tells in a wonderful way upon daily life."

"I don't see that," replied Edith: "of course it is a truth, and a great one; but there seems nothing very practical in it."

"So I should have said once," replied Gertrude, "but I think, when a person begins to act up to the rules of the Church, however imperfectly, they must be felt to be a great assistance in keeping the mind in a right state; even though their meaning and spirit are not thoroughly understood."

"You are speaking of yourself, Gertrude," said Edith. "I always felt there was some great difference between us."

"Yes," replied Gertrude, "I was speaking of myself, because we must be better judges of the effect of certain principles from our own experience than from hearsay. My notions about the Church began from practice. A friend talked to me of the duty of observing certain days, and attending daily services, which were just introduced at Farleigh; she was not at all a clever person, and understood nothing of controversy, but she was most entirely in earnest, and never, that I could find out, knowingly omitted a duty; and all her argument was, that fasts and festivals were ordered, and that there was a form of daily service in the prayer-book, which the clergyman of the parish intended to use; and she asked me whether

I thought we were at liberty to follow our notions of right, rather than obey the rules of the Church."

"It is a strong way of putting the case," said Edith: "the reasoning I have generally heard has been upon a question of expediency."

"Perhaps I might have been inclined to reason with any one else," said Gertrude, "but it was impossible in that instance. I do not think she would have understood it; and when she saw me pause and consider, she merely said, 'Don't you think it would be safer to do what we are told?'"

"And did that convince you?" exclaimed Edith.

"Not as to the theory, but it did as to the practice."

"Yet you must have felt yourself immensely superior to her all the time," began Edith; but Gertrude stopped her before the completion of the sentence.

"Oh, Edith!" she said, "you do not know of whom you are speaking. Even then I felt she was meet for happiness, and three months afterwards she died. How could I be her superior?"

"In intellect, surely you were, from your own account," said Edith.

"But what is intellect?" replied Gertrude. "How can it weigh for one instant in the balance against an honest and good heart, which she possessed in a greater degree than any other person I ever knew?"

"I am afraid," said Edith, with a sigh, "that I should not feel as you do. I could scarcely have brought myself to listen to the suggestion of one whose judgment I thought lightly of."

"I did not think lightly of it," replied her sister. "Consider, Edith, from whom all good comes. Her knowledge of duty was clearly not the result of human reasoning, and therefore seemed to claim the more reverence."

"But about the Church," said Edith. "I don't see how thinking of it will act upon daily conduct."

"Try," said Gertrude. "The next time a morning visitor comes, and you are worried at being interrupted, just think of her as a member of the Church, and therefore as having the same blessings and the same prospects as yourself, and see whether you will not feel an interest in her, and be much more inclined to be kind and attentive to her."

Edith laughed, in spite of the seriousness of the subject. "Don't be shocked at me, Gertrude," she said, "but you know morning visitors are allowed to be the greatest torments in life. Every one says it; and it seems absurd to talk gravely about them."

"That is rather what I said just now," replied Gertrude: "we create difficulties for ourselves. Look at a morning visitor merely as a morning visitor, and the tone of your mind is lowered directly;—you cannot help it. She very frequently breaks in upon your time, and tries your temper, and you cannot help wishing to be alone again; and when you once have this feeling, your style of conversation will be lowered too; and as a mere mode of passing a few minutes, you will naturally speak of your neighbours."

"Yes," said Edith, "I have felt that many times. I don't think really I am fond of gossip, but persons would think I was who heard me talk, merely because, as you say, I want to pass away a few minutes."

"And yet morning visits are not trifles," said Gertrude. "Even those which are most hurried and uninteresting must make some impression upon our minds—they must tell in some degree upon our destiny for Eternity."

"It is a fearful way of viewing things," said Edith.

"But if it is true, dearest, why should we shrink from it? Will it not be better to pass through life with awe and trembling, watching our every step, and so learning to lean the more stedfastly upon God,

than to wake up, when it is too late, to the knowledge that what we called trifles were the only opportunities afforded us of fitting ourselves for heaven?"

"There would be but little merriment on earth if all thought as you do, Gertrude," said Edith.

"No," replied Gertrude: "there would be care, and prudence, and at times anxiety; but when we once set ourselves earnestly to the work, we should be cheerful, as children are cheerful, who can play in the midst of danger, because they have faith in a father's power to protect them."

There was a short pause, which Edith was the first to break. "I can fancy," she said, "that dwelling much upon our position as belonging to the Church would make things appear more serious, if we could only remember it at the right time."

"It would become a habit by degrees," said Gertrude, "and then it would influence every action; and for this reason,—that it is to the Christian what the consciousness of noble birth is to the man of the world. It gives a feeling of dignity and importance, though without any admixture of pride. When we know ourselves to be what the Bible says—'heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ,'—I think we shall hardly be tempted to act lightly, and the fear of falling away will be constantly before us, to make us watch against sin. Do, dear Edith, read over St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians, carefully, and see whether the whole argument does not rest upon this foundation; and then think what a calm, contented, humble tone of mind must be the result of it."

"I am not sure that I do see it," replied Edith.

"You will own," replied Gertrude, "that as members of the Church, there can be no rivalry, or selfishness, or wish to attract notice beyond others. Think of the feeling there is in a family when any one is distinguished beyond the rest. The gratification is

felt by all, because the honour belongs to all; and so it is in the Church." Edith still looked doubtful, and Gertrude continued:—"What I mean," she said, "is, that if we labour for the prosperity of a body, not for our own benefit, we strike at the root of all selfishness; and if we are poor, or have no talents, or no opportunity of exercising them, we shall still be satisfied, because the object we have at heart—the good of the Church of Christ—will surely be attained, though not through our means."

"And would that satisfy you?" said Edith. "Could you, for instance, bear to be told that the church at Torrington was to be built by another person?"

Gertrude was silent, and when her sister turned to look at her, the expression of her countenance showed that the question had excited some painful feeling.

"You have misunderstood me, dearest," she said at length, in her usual quiet manner; "I could not dare to speak to you of myself, or of what I should feel under any circumstances. To see the height one longs to attain, is far different from setting out on the weary journey to reach it."

"Yes," said Edith, and she sighed deeply; "it is a weary journey. And if you find it so, Gertrude, what must it be to me?"

Gertrude was about to answer, when the appearance of Mr Dacre at the farther end of the walk stopped her.

"The hour is come at last," said Edith, with a smile, which was checked as she saw the colour fade from her sister's cheek, and felt her arm tremble.

"Who would think I could be so absurd?" said Gertrude: "yet if he should bring forward any objections I have not seen, it would be such a bitter disappointment."

Edith was inclined to remind her of her own principles, but she felt it would be almost a reproach. Gertrude, however, needed no suggestions. "I know what you would say," she continued, observing that Edith was going to speak; "if it is not my duty, it will still be performed by the person whom God sees fitted for it; and then, Edith, you must teach me to submit."

Edith pressed her sister's hand, without venturing upon a reply; and, turning into another path, left Gertrude to open the subject of her wishes to Mr Dacre.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"We thought you would have been tempted out before this," was Gertrude's first observation, as she walked by Mr Dacre's side, not knowing how to introduce the desired topic.

"Ten years ago I should have been," was the answer; "but illness makes an old man think more of the charms of repose than of a beautiful evening; besides, you were so fully engaged, I should only have been an interruption."

"Not that, indeed," exclaimed Gertrude, in an eager, trembling voice: "I was wishing for you so much—I thought—I wanted——"

"Anything that I can give?" said Mr Dacre, struck by the hesitation so foreign to her usual manner.

"I do not know," replied Gertrude, struggling to regain self-possession; "and yet I do know.—If you would listen to me—I think that is what I want most."

"You are looking upon me as a stranger," said Mr Dacre, in a tone of gentle reproof, "and it does me injustice. I was a father once, and I have not forgotten a father's feelings."

Gertrude tried to answer, but her words came with difficulty. "I will tell you," she said at length, "but indeed I do not think of you as a stranger; if I did, I could not let you know what is in my thoughts." She stopped again; and Mr Dacre looked at her inquiringly,—

"Do not keep me in suspense," he said; "if I can be of any service, you have only to name it."

"I don't know why I should trouble you," replied Gertrude; and then, unheeding the appearance of abruptness, she continued, rapidly, "I have a wish—a great wish: it has been in my mind for years—and I think it is right, but I am not sure. It is such an important thing; so very serious; it does not seem as if it could be intended for me to do it;—only I have the means. I—I wish,—I should like,"—and with evident effort the words at last were spoken,—"I should be so glad to build a church at Torrington." She paused, and finding that Mr Dacre did not immediately answer, continued, as if anxious to relieve herself of a burden weighing upon her heart,—"You must know, I think, that I am richer than my sisters. My aunt's fortune is mine now; I have five hundred a year at my own disposal, and there are no claims upon me yet; and if there were, this would seem almost the greatest, because the place belongs to Edward, and he cannot do anything for it himself,—he has said so several times. If it were a common thing, I should not hesitate; but I think you will understand; it would give me such pleasure, I am afraid I may not see whether it is my duty; and if I am presumptuous, and do not undertake it rightly, God's blessing may not go with it; and I think about it sometimes till I am frightened, and fancy that perhaps I ought to give away my money differently now, upon things which would be greater sacrifices, and wait for this till I have lived longer, and suffered more, and learnt to be better, only the case seems so urgent; but then again I long to be able to do it so much that perhaps I am not a good judge. It may not be my duty, though I fancy it is—if you would only give me your opinion."

Mr Dacre still hesitated, and Gertrude, looking at him anxiously, said, "I have tried to prepare myself for objections and disappointment."

"Needlessly, I hope," said Mr Dacre, recovering from the feeling of surprise at a request for advice so different from any he could have expected; "I will tell you first, that I fully understand your feelings. An offering of this kind is a most solemn duty, and must not be undertaken lightly. It may be that the spirit in which it is commenced will prove a blessing or a curse upon generations to come."

"Thank you," exclaimed Gertrude; "I thought you would understand me. It has always appeared to me very sad that worldly motives should be mixed with works of religion: and occasionally, when I have seen the ruins of old churches and abbeys, I have thought that there might have been something wanting in the spirit in which they were begun, and therefore they were suffered to decay; and it seemed impossible then that it could ever be my duty to attempt such things."

"Yet," replied Mr Dacre, "we must be careful that self-distrust does not lead us into a morbid fear of being presumptuous. The most fervent piety could not prevent our offerings from being marred by some earthly alloy; and it would be rather a doubt of God's mercy than of our own worthiness, which would lead us to fold our hands and do nothing, because what we did was not perfect."

"Then you think that I might—you do not see any objections?" inquired Gertrude.

"Not at this moment," was the reply; but Mr Dacre's tone was less certain than Gertrude had expected. "Can you bear to hear the subject discussed in a cool, dispassionate, perhaps you would call it a worldly manner, now that you know how entirely I feel with you?"

"Why should it be worldly?" said Gertrude.

"The word sounds out of place, I own; but when I say worldly, I do not for an instant mean to imply

that we must lower our principles, but merely that we must not let zeal, however pure, warp our sober judgment."

Gertrude's countenance expressed disappointment. "It frightens me to hear zeal condemned," she said; "these are not days when it is too abundant."

"It is not the virtue, but the manner of exercising it, which we must guard against," replied Mr Dacre. "I have often found it advisable, when my heart has been very much set on any object, to endeavour to view it in the same light in which it would be regarded by men of the world; and I hope, by that means, I may have avoided giving unnecessary offence."

"And what do you think a man of the world would say to my project?" inquired Gertrude.

"The first question he would be likely to ask," replied Mr Dacre, "would be as to any other claims upon your fortune; but this you tell me has been already considered."

"I think so," said Gertrude: "there are no family claims certainly."

Mr Dacre hesitated a little before proceeding. He was doubtful how far his suggestions might be considered intrusive. "Perhaps," he said, "there are no claims which are absolutely pressing, but is it not as well to guard against any appearance of injustice? I mean, that when you are calculating how much you may expend, you should take into consideration, that other persons may have naturally and fairly looked forward to some increase of their own comforts when you came into possession of your property."

"I understand you now," exclaimed Gertrude. "I know that I cannot live at home upon the same footing with my sisters, though we have all an equal share in the family property. I ought to add something to it."

"Yes," he replied, "I think you should; and this might be first cared for. It will not prevent your following out your own wishes afterwards; but it will prevent any one from blaming you for doing it. It will be avoiding the appearance of evil."

"And my sisters," said Gertrude. "I have thought of them also. Edith agrees so entirely with me, that she will not hear of my reserving any portion for her; but I should be sorry for the others to be disappointed."

"And most probably," observed Mr Dacre, "the very care you show for them will induce them to enter more fully into your plans, and be anxious to share them. It is a great thing to put it into a person's power to act rightly."

"One so longs to do every thing," said Gertrude; "but I suppose in all these cases there must be some self-denial."

"Yes, and where there is not, any virtue must be doubtful: generosity, for instance—which is a mere luxury, unless it is founded upon the restriction of personal indulgence."

"And justice," added Gertrude, smiling, "which you have been so carefully inculcating upon me."

"Not because I thought you had quite forgotten it, but because it is a grave, shy virtue, very fond of keeping in the back-ground—hidden like the stars by the sunlight of generosity—though without it the most munificent actions may be, and generally are, condemned, and by none more than by keen-sighted, cold-hearted men of the world; and so we return to the point from which we set out,—that it is well to look at our actions in the way in which they look at them, that we may not give unnecessary offence, and repel instead of attract them."

"I am afraid," said Gertrude, "these necessary provisions will principally interfere with the endowment. The church need not be large for such a small

district, and I could manage it without the least difficulty. What I should have wished certainly would have been to have done all that might be required—school-rooms, and things of that kind; but I suppose it would be better not to attempt too much, the endowment is of so much more importance."

"Yes," said Mr Dacre: "once provide a good clergyman, and as far as human calculation goes, you need have no fear of the result being what you wish."

"It will be but a small income," replied Gertrude; "five thousand pounds, or even six or seven, will not go very far in these days."

"If it is all that is allowed you to give, there can be no cause for regret. The blessing rests not upon the little or the much, but upon the spirit in which it is offered."

Gertrude sighed. "And that," she said, after a short silence, "we forget. Things become so low and earthly when we descend to details."

"Yes," replied Mr Dacre: "they are the body of dust in which the spirit is enshrined; and I fear you are scarcely aware of the trouble and even pain you are bringing upon yourself by engaging in them. But it is a great victory when we have learnt to infuse a holy principle into the minutest concerns of life—money matters especially."

"Edward must be spoken to," said Gertrude, "and mamma and my sisters; but I wish there was no occasion for it."

"Your brother of course has the first claim to be consulted. I should be glad to spare you the effort of mentioning it, but it is impossible."

"It will be the hardest task of all," said Gertrude. "And I seem to know so little of him. I shall be sadly afraid of jarring upon him."

Mr Dacre smiled, but it was not cheerfully. "You

must jar upon him," he replied; "for many reasons you must. Principally, because the duty is one which was once his own; and scarcely any person can bear to see another fulfil his office. And now I must give you one piece of advice, which I am afraid will sound cold and prudent beyond what is necessary. If, at the end of six months, you see no reason to alter your plans, then I hope you will be able to begin immediately; but I think you will be doing right to wait, and well consider every objection,—to 'count the cost,' in fact, before you undertake so great a work."

Gertrude was scarcely disappointed by this suggestion, for she had not believed it possible to follow out her plans immediately. All that she desired was the permission to think upon them. Mr Dacre did not press the point. He seemed wearied, and Gertrude proposed they should return to the house. He stopped, however, before entering, and in a voice almost tremulous from repressed feeling, said, "The first wish of my heart would have been gratified, if it had been permitted me to have had such a conversation with my own child as I have now held with you. Will you let me consider it a bond of union between us, and allow me to help you, if possible, under all circumstances, as I would have helped her?"

Gertrude's answer was a warm pressure of the hand, which said all that Mr Dacre required. Edith met them at the door, and read in her sister's calm sweet smile that all her doubts were at rest; but there was something of disturbance in Mr Dacre's countenance, which, now that Edith's thoughts were less occupied by Gertrude, she could not avoid noticing. It was remarked, however, only by herself. The evening passed as usual; if any secret care was preying upon his mind, it was diverted by music and conversation; and when the little party broke up, the observation made was, that Mr Dacre had seldom

appeared so comfortable. And Gertrude retired to her room, to indulge for the first time without fear the dream that had haunted her from childhood. She knelt in her accustomed place to repeat her accustomed prayers; but as she closed her eyes to shut out all earthly objects, tall clustering pillars, and carving, and fret-work, arose before her, and in imagination she felt herself worshipping in the temple of holiness which she was about to raise to her Maker's honour; and when her head was laid upon her pillow, the same visions floated before her in dim and shadowy beauty; while tones of solemn music seemed borne upon the soft night breeze to soothe her sinking fancy, with the prophecy of what might so soon be reality.

CHAPTER XXIX.

It was late on the following morning that Laura, after a tête-à-tête breakfast with her husband, of more than usual length and silence, wandered into her morning room, to endeavour, if possible, to find some occupation that might pleasantly engage her thoughts, and prevent her from dwelling upon the contrast between Edward's present gloom and reserve, and the light-hearted cheerfulness of former days. It was useless to account for the change by attributing it to a passing annoyance. Certainly he had pronounced the coffee insipid and badly made, the eggs not sufficiently boiled, the marmalade inferior, the cutlets uneatable; but Laura felt too truly that the real grievance lay in the secrecy of his own heart. It might perhaps have been increased by some information in the letters, which so deeply absorbed his attention as to cause him entirely to forget his wife's presence; or it might be attributed to the last night's interview with Mr Rivers, which had occasioned her a dreary, solitary evening; or it might be the result of General Forester's visits, which had latterly become very frequent, and never failed to put him out of humour; but after long consideration, it still remained a mystery, known only by its fatal effect upon her domestic happiness. From her husband, Laura turned for comfort to her child, but the nurse had taken him out, and he was nowhere to be found; and in his absence she would willingly have had recourse to a friend; but at the thought of Miss Forester Laura's countenance assumed a deeper gravity, and something like a tear dimmed her

bright eye. There was but one person whom at that moment she could have seen with pleasure, though why, she could not have told. Gertrude's features were plain, her manners were simple, her talents were not brilliant; she never was known to flatter—she did not appear anxious to please; and Laura had been idolised from her cradle, and taught to consider elegance, beauty, and vivacity essential to an agreeable person, and their deficiency only to be atoned for by the homage shown to her own superiority. There could not have been two characters more unlike—and Edith would have said, that, as a necessary consequence, it would have been useless to attempt creating any mutual interest between them. And yet, in Laura's present state of depression, the thought of Gertrude's gentle smile, and the recollection of her soothing voice was like the oasis in the wilderness—the one green spot on which alone she could bear to dwell. For Gertrude had gradually and unobtrusively connected herself with Laura's best and happiest feelings. In many a morning conversation and evening walk she had given her that which we are accustomed to consider a trifle, to be bestowed according to the humour of the moment—sincere, unaffected attention. Laura spoke of her childhood, and Gertrude's questions led her to enter into details of her home; she mentioned her first acquaintance with Edward, and Gertrude, instead of bringing forward other instances of happy marriages after a short acquaintance, made her relate the little details which were fondly treasured in her memory. She told of her foreign tour, and Gertrude, though she had never travelled herself, entered fully into her pleasures and disappointments; and, above all, when, with a mother's doting partiality, Laura praised her darling child, Gertrude showed no symptoms of weariness, but listened to the little incidents of his daily life,

and deduced from them his future character, with as much earnestness as if their positions had been reversed: and this without effort or insincerity, but because she had taught herself to look upon all connected with her, or related to her, as portions of one great family, into which she had been born at her baptism. It is a habit of immense importance—that quiet attention of which we think so little: we speak of sympathy, and commend it, and wonder that it is so rare and so difficult of attainment; and the next minute lose ourselves in a dream of business or enjoyment, and repel with a short answer or an abstracted look the very persons who most require our friendship; and when once repelled we may regret, but we can scarcely hope to retrieve, our error. The regard and confidence, however, which Gertrude had thus awakened in Laura's mind, were as yet shown only in trifles. Laura had not become sufficiently unreserved to speak to her of her hidden causes of anxiety. All that she felt was a sense of protection in Gertrude's presence; and when oppressed by care, something of refreshment and repose in the tones of kindness, which expressed sympathy without asking why it was needed. But on this morning Laura was not destined to receive any such comfort. A short time only elapsed after she had left the breakfast table, and she was still standing sadly at the window of her morning room, when a gentle, a very gentle tap was heard at the door, and with an involuntary shrinking she gave permission for Miss Forester to enter.

"Alone as usual," was the first observation that greeted Laura's ear, recalling in insinuating accents her now frequent subjects of complaint against Edward: "I thought it would be so."

"We have just finished breakfast," replied Laura, impatient at any imputation upon her husband from

another person, however she might be inclined to find fault with him herself.

"Ah! you are late at night, I know; and my father says Mr Courtenay looks dreadfully harassed just now. This prospect of a change of ministers, and another election, must give him a great deal to think of."

"So soon? it is impossible. He has said nothing to me."

"Very likely; the thing is not certain; and gentlemen seldom think it worth while to converse with ladies about politics—my father excepted. He tells me every thing. But I did not intend to talk to you about elections; my business is a little private affair of our own." And Miss Forester drew her chair near to Laura, and lowered her voice to the strictly intimate mysterious tone, while she took from her reticule a packet of papers and letters. Laura with difficulty suppressed a heavy sigh, and looked uneasily at the door. "You need have no fear," continued Miss Forester; "if any persons should come in, they would not understand any thing. In fact, there is little to understand; it is a mere trifle; and I should not have reminded you of the affair, but that Hanson's bill came by this day's post, and I thought you would be glad to see it."

"And know the worst," murmured Laura.

"No, no; you must not call it the worst,—a few hundreds can be nothing to you. It is absurd to look at this splendid room, and then think of your being distressed at a jeweller's account."

"You forget Waterloo House, and Madame Larue, and yourself."

"Myself! that really is not worth mentioning; merely a question of five hundred pounds to you who have thousands. Waterloo House, too, is nothing; and as to Madame Larue, she is a perfect impostor.

Hanson is the most provoking of them all; and of course impertinent dunning from him comes home to me, because the last purchases were made in my name." This was said with a martyr-like air, which was both painful and irritating to poor Laura; but without trusting herself to notice it, she said, hesitatingly,—

"I thought—but I must have been mistaken,—only I understood that you could arrange these things, without trouble, for me."

It was now Miss Forester's turn to be confused; but she had studied her part beforehand, and knew well how she was to act. Her eyes were bent on the ground, and her fingers busy with the silk tassel of her parasol, while, with an effort more evident than was necessary, she said—

"Certainly I had thought so; nothing could have given me greater pleasure; but you know,—I can scarcely bring myself to say it—these are not times when it is in one's power to do all that one wishes. With Mr Courtenay's guarantee there would be no difficulty; but without it, however my own inclinations might prompt me to make sacrifices for one so dear, I do not think my father would approve."

"But you said—you told me—" began Laura, and her voice trembled as she spoke.

"And at the time," interrupted Miss Forester, "I fully believed that I could have accommodated you without difficulty; but the last few days have forced me most unwillingly to alter my views. My father so highly disapproves ——"

"General Forester!" exclaimed Laura, starting from her seat, and drawing up her slender figure to its full height, while the flush of indignation crimsoned her face and neck. "How could he know? how could he venture to offer an opinion upon the subject?"

"You forget," replied Miss Forester, coolly, and a sarcastic smile curled the corner of her thin lips, "the business is mine! and the interests of a father and a daughter are inseparable." Laura reseated herself, despairingly, and the expression of sarcasm on Miss Forester's countenance became more marked as she proceeded: "It was a disagreeable task, but my father is not a man to be trifled with. The money which I had advanced was indeed my own, but the authority of a parent is too sacred to be disputed; and when he insisted, a few days since, upon receiving some account of my little pittance, that he might be better able to settle a business matter of his own, it was impossible for me to refuse."

"Your promise!" murmured Laura.

"Yes, I own it was broken in the letter, but not in the spirit. Your affairs are as safe with my father as with me. The only misfortune now is, that I no longer feel my own mistress. I cannot do what I would. It is so distressing, so very distressing to confess it."

Laura shrank from the touch of the hand which was placed caressingly on her shoulder. The plausible excuse for the moment silenced her; but the feeling of distrust which had long been gathering in her mind was increased to aversion.

"The affair itself is a trifle," continued Miss Forester; "but just now, when Mr Courtenay is likely to be much worried, it is a most unfortunate moment to be obliged to call upon him for money; and gentlemen never make allowances for a little imprudence in ladies. These tradespeople, too, are so very pressing. One thing is, that the difficulty will soon be over; it is but the momentary effort of mentioning what has been done."

Laura raised her head, but the expression of her

countenance was beyond Miss Forester's comprehension. She would have ridiculed as impossible the idea that any person in Mrs Courtenay's position could be more grieved at the recollection of having been guilty of deceit, than at the prospect of confessing folly and extravagance.

"I am afraid," added Miss Forester, "that my father will not endure the subject to be mentioned again, unless indeed,—but I need not tease you about politics, I know you dislike them."

Laura made a gesture of impatience: "Why keep me in suspense about any thing?" she exclaimed; "nothing can tease me."

"But it is such an intricate business, and unless you give your mind to it, you won't understand it; and if you do, you may not view the case as we do."

"Why? What are you speaking of?" inquired Laura; and she rose from her seat, and stood before her tormentor with a countenance so beautiful even in its suppressed suffering, that Miss Forester's selfishness was for the moment overpowered by regret for the pain she was inflicting.

"My father says," she replied, "and I think he must know, that after Mr Courtenay's heavy expenses since the last election, he should be wrong in permitting me to involve myself in any way without security being given; and he implies—(you must not think I believe it, though)—that just now this would be a difficult matter; that,—in short, you know what I mean,—all gentlemen are distressed at some time or other, and if it were to come to the worst, a few years abroad would set every thing to rights."

A glimmering of the truth flashed upon Laura's mind. Edward's gloom, and impatience, and reserve; the long visits from Mr Rivers; the restless irritation with which, day after day, he had opened his letters, all tended to confirm it: but the effect of

the idea was not what Miss Forester had imagined. Laura neither shed tears, nor fainted, nor burst into exclamations of distress; but a red spot burned upon her colourless cheek, and her pale lips were scarcely seen to move, as in a nearly inaudible voice she replied,—

"Tell me why you say this?"

"Perhaps it will be best to be candid at once," said Miss Forester, soothingly; "and when I have put the case before you, you will see there need be no cause for uneasiness, if Mr Courtenay can be persuaded to be reasonable. You must know that he has peculiar opinions of his own, and will go against the wishes of his party. My father has often talked to him, but he can make no impression; and if he persists, there really is very little chance of his re-election, at least, so my father says. There is no doubt, indeed, that instead of walking over the ground without a rival, some one else will be brought forward by many of his former friends to oppose him."

"And what has this to do with me?" exclaimed Laura, impatiently.

"You will see in one moment," replied Miss Forester, in the same unruffled tone as before. "The being re-elected would not in itself, perhaps, be of so much importance to Mr Courtenay. I daresay he could be very happy in private life, though certainly he would be casting away most brilliant prospects; but a letter my father had yesterday from a very influential quarter, says, that Mr Courtenay would certainly be appointed to a very high office under the new ministry if it were not for his obstinacy—(excuse the word)—upon two or three points; the same, in fact, which his friends in the country are so anxious about. From this you will understand how much depends upon his being re-elected."

Poor Laura had but a faint perception of Miss

Forester's words. They appeared spoken without any object; and again, though more mildly, she entreated to be told what connexion there could be between Edward's being in Parliament, and her debts.

"I think you will understand upon consideration," said Miss Forester, coolly. "A child could see the difference between entering into a money engagement for the wife of a member of Parliament, holding a government office, and the wife of a private gentleman, reported to have considerably outrun his fortune."

"It is false! it must be false!" exclaimed Laura, driving from her mind the doubt which had a few minutes before possessed it. "How can General Forester lend himself to such gossip?"

"It may be false or not," replied Miss Forester; "but one thing is quite true,—that my father will not consent to allow my affairs to remain in their present state without interfering, unless he finds Mr Courtenay's prospects assume a different shape from their present one. A fourth part of the legacy left by my grandmother is already risked."

Laura's crushed spirit was roused by the threat implied in this speech. "I will not give General Forester or any other person the trouble of mixing himself up with my affairs," she replied. "By to-morrow all shall be settled;" and she moved, in order to suggest to her visitor to leave her. But this was far from Miss Forester's idea. She had no intention of bringing matters to a crisis, and separating herself from Laura entirely. Her wish was rather to draw her more completely into her power. Notwithstanding the opinion she had given as to the state of Mr Courtenay's affairs, neither she nor her father believed him to be suffering from more than a temporary embarrassment; but the opportunity of forcing

Laura to use her influence over her husband, was one of which both, from different motives, were most desirous to take advantage. Since another election had been considered probable, General Forester had been endeavouring by every argument in his power to bring Edward to his views, and induce him to pledge himself to his party upon the points at issue between them, and Edward had continually refused. If this refusal were persisted in, his former friends were certain to forsake him, and bring forward another candidate: there would then be a division of interests, and the cause which General Forester fancied he had at heart would most probably be lost; or perhaps, as the truer motive, General Forester's lately acquired importance as Mr Courtenay's adviser and oldest friend would be at an end; and he would return to his former insignificance. Miss Forester's reasons for wishing Laura's position to remain unchanged were very much the same with those which had first caused her to thrust herself upon her friendship. She liked to be on terms of intimacy with a person of fortune and fashion, and felt herself raised in dignity both in town and in the country by being known as the chosen companion of the beautiful Mrs Courtenay. And within the last year she had experienced the satisfaction of ruling one whom all others were willing to obey. She had fostered Laura's extravagance, assisting her originally by trifling loans, but afterwards by sums which she had no power to repay; and at length, by inducing her to keep her affairs a secret, from the dread of her husband's displeasure, she had bound her to her, as she hoped, for ever. Her will was now the law whenever they were together, except when Edward occasionally objected; and even then there had been but few instances in which she had not been in the end victorious, by insisting upon Laura's urging in private what she could

not venture to mention in public. Laura felt the tyranny, and struggled to escape from it; but every day's delay in confessing her folly to her husband, rendered her more completely Miss Forester's slave. The very ingenuousness of her disposition made her shrink from acknowledging deceit; and though she had often been goaded by the misery of her feelings to the point of owning all, she had never yet summoned resolution even to allude to it. Miss Forester knew well the person she had to govern, and felt but little afraid of any sudden fit of heroism.

"You understand your own affairs, no doubt," she said, in answer to Laura's proud speech. "If you think it well to trouble Mr Courtenay with money matters at this time, I have nothing to say. I should dislike the task myself, because there is no doubt of his being very much pressed; and with the prospect of a new election before him, he will certainly be extremely angry now, though by-and-by he might not care about it."

"I thought," said Laura, indignantly, "that it was only a question between General Forester's interference and my own."

"Oh! no; you mistake entirely. My father would not think of such a thing, if he were not obliged to do so from consideration to me. He and I have been talking a great deal about the affair since yesterday, and he really has but one wish—to do what is best."

"Best!" repeated Laura scornfully.

"Yes, best. It must be for Mr Courtenay's advantage to give up these foolish scruples, and secure his seat and his appointment; and it certainly must be for yours, because, in that case, nothing would be told to Mr Courtenay at present, and I should no longer be forbidden to help you, as I have been able to do before. My father would be satisfied with

your promise to use your influence. However, since you are willing to take the matter into your own hands, I may as well leave Hanson's bill with you, and go."

She held out the paper, but Laura did not take it. She stood for a moment as if stunned; and then her head grew dizzy, and her knees trembled, and, sinking into a chair, she burst into tears. At that instant the door opened, and a servant entered the room with a note, which he was going to give to his mistress, but seeing her incapable of attending to it, he laid it on the table and withdrew,—sufficiently observing what was going on, to enable him to report in the servants' hall that something was very much amiss, for Mrs Courtenay was in violent hysterics. But Laura was not in hysterics, nor anything approaching to them. For a few minutes her tears fell fast; but they were quiet and unobtrusive, requiring no aid from the Eau de Cologne which Miss Forester was offering, as she stood over her, with a patronising air, smoothing her shoulder, and begging her to be composed. She was also quite aware that the note had been brought, and fully equal to the exertion of reading it, though Miss Forester entreated her not to trouble herself about it, and proposed to open it instead, and see whether it required an answer. Taking it from her hand, Laura hastily read it, but something there was in its contents which evidently took her by surprise. A second time she perused the few pencil lines, and turned the paper in every direction, to extract some further information; and at last, folding it together, she said, coldly—

"I have been wrong in allowing myself to give way; but I am not equal to discussing these things further. They must be delayed till I have had time for consideration, and then I will write."

Miss Forester was frightened; for Laura had

seldom appeared so determined. She would willingly have pressed the subject, but finding that Laura would not listen, she pushed the papers towards her, saying—

"Then I may suppose you are decided. You will find the accounts correct. The old ones and Hanson's bill together make up more than six hundred pounds."

Laura mechanically laid her hand upon the papers; and then, scarcely waiting for Miss Forester to leave the room, threw herself upon the sofa in an agony of distress.

CHAPTER XXX.

THAT little note—how much pain had it caused! Edward had left her for London;—left her, without even returning from Elsham, where he had gone to speak with Mr Rivers, to give her one parting kiss, one word of explanation. Yet his expressions were more than usually affectionate, as if purposely meant to soften the annoying intelligence. He entreated her to forgive him for what might appear unkindness in his sudden departure, which was caused by important business, and begged her on no account to make any change in their plans for the week. The archery party which had been invited for the next day but one was still to be received, for he had little doubt that he should be with her before their arrival. If anything occurred to vex her, he should recommend her applying to Mr Dacre. And this was all; and again and again Laura read the note, and again and again pondered its contents, but without gaining any insight into its meaning, beyond the certainty that something was amiss. Yet, although in most cases the first thrilling apprehension of impending evil is worse than the fatal reality, to Laura, the hints she had received from Miss Forester, even when coupled with Edward's absence, brought ideas so vague as to make but a faint impression upon her mind. Her own cares were more pressing than her apprehensions for the future. A dark cloud was hanging over it, but what might be behind she did not attempt to conjecture. It was sufficient suffering to know that Edward had gone away from her, depressed and harassed, and that when he returned

she must either brave his displeasure, and add to his heavy anxieties, by confessing her past folly, or persist in a course of deceit, and put herself completely in Miss Forester's power. She thought long and deeply, but although shrinking from the prospect of a life of wretchedness such as she had lately endured, she still felt herself unequal to the task of increasing Edward's uneasiness at such a time. Delay seemed everything, and the hope of relief which had been held out was too tempting to be rejected. At what sacrifice it was to be obtained she did not fully comprehend, for she had never inquired particularly into Edward's views, and cared so little for politics, as to consider it generally a matter of indifference which side he supported, so long as he distinguished himself. Besides, General Forester was a man of honour, and Edward's friend, and she had no just reason to doubt the kindness of his intentions; and influenced, partly by the hope of saving her husband, and partly by the wish of saving herself, Laura smothered her pride, though not without considerable difficulty, and endeavoured to believe that by giving the promise to do her utmost in furtherance of General Forester's wishes, the threatened storm would be dispelled, and all be bright as before.

The morning, however, passed slowly; work was irksome, reading was impossible; even little Charlie's gentle tap was answered by an order to run away then, and come again by-and-by; for Laura's mind was dissatisfied; her thoughts would revert to the past; the events of her married life came before her, one after the other, and still with each was associated some remembrance of Edward's trust in all she had done or said; while the words which he had used in the conversation held the day after their first arrival at Allingham haunted her incessantly: "We were to have no concealment of any kind." This had been

their agreement, and how had it been kept? If she followed General Forester's advice, how must it be kept? Sincerity was still the foundation of Laura's character,—hidden, but never destroyed, by the false principles of her education, and the follies of her life; and, miserable at the idea of continued deception, she longed for some friend in whom she might confide without fear; and the wish was no sooner felt than the image of Gertrude rose before her. But how would it be possible to apply to her? Could one so free from weakness, so superior to herself, sympathise with her anxieties? Would she not turn away in disgust from the thoughtlessness which she could not understand, and reproach instead of advising her? If it had been Edith, Laura felt that she could have endured any pain rather than confess to her the smallest fault; but Gertrude's winning gentleness and sympathy had so softened the effect of her strict principles that Laura's awe of her superiority was forgotten in the recollection of her humility; and before the afternoon was over she had ordered her pony carriage, and was on her way to the Priory, with the purpose of acknowledging to her sister-in-law the errors which had produced such bitter consequences. And Gertrude, in happy ignorance of the gathering storm at Allingham, had spent the morning in writing for Mr Dacre a detail of all the plans respecting the church, and in trying to amuse her mother. Mrs Courtenay's usual habit was to retire to her own little sitting-room soon after breakfast, from which she was seldom known to emerge till nearly luncheon-time. How she occupied herself in the intermediate time was a mystery, which none of her family had hitherto thought it necessary to penetrate. Sometimes, indeed, a letter was produced for the post—the result of a morning's thought; and occasionally she was heard to inquire for a club-book; but these were the excep-

tions: as a rule, she was never actually discovered to have done any thing; but the general belief was, that she principally employed herself in putting drawers in order, and looking over old papers; and with this idea, Jane, Charlotte, and Edith felt perfectly at liberty to follow their own inclinations. Mrs Courtenay never complained, so of course she was happy. Gertrude, however, thought differently, and constantly endeavoured to persuade her mother to join them in the drawing-room; but it was not Mrs Courtenay's way, and even if she consented, it was evident that she was out of her element, and preferred her own apartment, though she confessed that sometimes it was rather lonely. "Don't trouble yourself about me, my dear," she said, as Gertrude made a last effort to persuade her to remain with them, by proposing to assist her in her difficult knitting. "You know I never knit in the morning: I am a great deal too busy, though to be sure, the day before yesterday, you all laughed so, I had rather a wish to come down."

"I don't think you would have entered into what we were laughing about, mamma," said Charlotte; "it was a book Gertrude was reading out."

"Very probably, my dear; I daresay I should not; but you all seemed very merry, and I liked to hear you. I hope you will do the same to-day." And with this wish Mrs Courtenay gathered up her keys, her spectacles, and her knitting, and left the room. Her departure was succeeded by the beginning of an entreaty that Gertrude would enable them to follow the advice which had been given; but Gertrude had disappeared; and Mrs Courtenay had only just reached her room, when a soft voice asked for admittance. "Your room is so quiet and sunny, dear mamma, and mine is not in order yet,—would it worry you very much if I were to sit here for a quarter of an hour and read?"

Mrs Courtenay's face brightened with pleasure. She insisted upon Gertrude's occupying her favourite seat, and moved away everything she thought might be in her way; and Gertrude thanked her with a kiss, and opened her book.

"That is so like your dear father, my dear; so fond of reading he always was. I have seen him sit for hours together, and not open his lips, when he had a book he liked."

Gertrude smiled, and said that she had learnt to prefer quiet employment from being so much with an invalid, and the conversation dropped; but after a short pause it was again resumed by Mrs Courtenay.

"Is it a very interesting book you have there, Gertrude, my dear?"

"I don't know that you would exactly call it interesting," replied Gertrude. "It is a volume of sermons, which has just been lent to me. There is one not unlike part of Mr Grantley's last Sunday: I think you will remember it." And she read out a few lines.

"That is not all, my dear, is it?" said Mrs Courtenay, her ear caught by the beauty of the language and the melody of Gertrude's voice.

"Not all," replied Gertrude; "but I thought perhaps you would not like me to go on."

"Ah! you are tired, my love, I daresay; but I don't very often have any one to read to me."

"No, indeed, I am not tired," exclaimed Gertrude. "I used to read to my aunt for more than an hour at a time. Should you mind my finishing the sermon aloud?"

"Oh no, my dear, I should be glad. It is not very long, I suppose?"

Gertrude relieved her mother's apprehension as to the length, and began to read. As she proceeded, Mrs Courtenay laid down the papers which at first

she had rustled incessantly, took off her spectacles, and drawing her chair close to Gertrude's, listened as she would have done to the tone of a familiar air sung in a voice she loved.

"That sounds better than when Mr Grantley preaches," she said, as Gertrude paused, fearing that her mother's attention might be wearied. "Your voice is so clear I can tell every word, though I am a little deaf. But why don't you go on; isn't there some more?"

Gertrude accordingly continued; and as she closed the volume ventured to say, "If you would like it, dear mamma, I can read another day to you any thing that you like."

"Well, that would be very nice," replied Mrs Courtenay; "but are you going away now?"

"Not if you like me to stay," said Gertrude; "I was wishing to write something, and I can do it as well here as down stairs; but I must go and fetch my desk first."

The desk was in the drawing room; and Gertrude no sooner appeared, than she was assailed by half laughing, half serious reproaches for running away.

"There," said Charlotte, drawing a chair to the table, and almost forcing her sister into it, "you must stay, Gertrude. Here is the book open at the very place; now begin. You have no excuse, for the gardening was all done yesterday; and Jane and I have a good fit on us, and are going to work, so you are bound to encourage us. That is so like you charitable people," she continued, observing that her sister looked rather puzzled; "you never will believe that any one out of your own set can do a virtuous action."

"Some day or other, Charlotte," said Gertrude, smiling, "you shall tell me what you mean by a set; but now I must go back to mamma, for I promised I would."

"Mamma!" exclaimed Jane; "what business can you have with her? You don't mean that she has admitted you into her cabinet of antiquities."

"Admitted, and begged me to remain," said Gertrude.

"What have you been doing there? Why are you going back again?" And at the idea of Gertrude and Mrs Courtenay's spending a morning together, even Edith's attention was roused.

"I will tell you," said Charlotte; "Mamma is going to publish a treatise on the art of knitting, and Gertrude intends to edit it." Three of the party laughed, but not Gertrude.

"Mamma was busy when I went in," she said; "but I did not observe particularly what she was doing. And when she saw I had a book, she wished me to read out."

"Read out what?" inquired Charlotte; "Smith's Wealth of Nations, or Jack the Giant Killer?"

Gertrude held up the book which she had in her hand, and showed the title. Charlotte looked slightly abashed; and Edith observed that her mamma had been better employed than she had been.

"Thanks to Gertrude," said Jane. "What an immense pity it is that you are not a man, Gertrude."

"Why! what do you mean?"

"Only that you would have made such a first-rate missionary. I don't think any one could have resisted you."

Gertrude looked grave, and closed the conversation. "When I have finished what I have to do in mamma's room," she said, "I daresay there will be time for a little reading before luncheon, and I will come back again."

Edith sighed as her sister left the room, and the sigh was echoed by Charlotte; and then, struck with a sense of absurdity, both involuntarily laughed.

"Now for confession," said Jane; "what was your sigh for, Edith?"

"Charlotte is the elder," said Edith; "you should apply to her first."

"Mine!" exclaimed Charlotte; "I don't know that I can tell. It had something to do with Gertrude, but I am not clear what."

"And yours, Edith? Such a lucid explanation is quite an example."

"I have no doubt what mine was for," said Edith; "but I am not so certain that I shall be disposed to own."

"Envy," exclaimed Jane; "that must have been it. You are envious because Gertrude has such a peculiar knack of making herself agreeable."

"The strange thing to me," said Charlotte, "is, that Gertrude finds time for Edith's duties and her own too. She takes immense care of her district, and works, and has her days at the school, but she manages her time so well. I do wish you would take a lesson from her, Edith."

At another time Edith might have been angry, but Gertrude's humility was infectious. "I mean to do it," she said: "I should be more glad than I can tell to be like Gertrude. It would be so pleasant to feel that one's presence was like oil upon the troubled waves, and that is always the effect being with her has upon me."

"A very old simile, very well applied," said Charlotte. "I must own that sometimes I am guilty of the weakness of believing, that if Gertrude were to set up a convent, and turn lady abbess, I should choose to be one of her nuns."

"It would be a peaceful household, if it had no other recommendation," said Jane; "and that is a rare thing to find in these days."

"I don't know that," observed Edith; "there are the Grantleys, and their seven children."

"Peace and seven children! did they ever dwell together for five minutes?"

"They would if Gertrude was at the head of affairs," said Charlotte.

"Mrs Grantley is too indulgent; she is as bad as Laura; and there is a peaceful household," exclaimed Jane, sarcastically; "Charlie!—to live in the same village with him shakes one's nerves out of all order, and to be in the same house would shatter them to pieces."

"Allingham is a mystery to me," said Charlotte; "and it has been ever since Edward married. I don't know why, but I never go there without feeling as if I were treading upon a volcano that was going to burst."

"I can tell you why," said Jane: "It is because of that care-worn, abstracted look of Edward's."

"And Laura's too," said Edith; "I never saw any one so changed as she is lately. One would think sometimes she was brooding over a great crime."

"To be committed?" exclaimed Charlotte, laughing; "Laura is very much indebted to you, Edith, for your good opinion."

"No," said Edith; "whatever sins Laura may commit, they will never be premeditated. But let the cause be what it will, I am sure she is very unhappy."

"And Miss Forester is at the bottom of it," said Charlotte; "that I have discovered. Just notice the next time you have an opportunity, how Laura changes colour when her dear friend comes into the room."

"Friend!" repeated Jane, with emphasis, "I could as soon have petted a toad."

"A viper," said Charlotte; "toads have no sting."

"A gift peculiarly reserved for human beings, some people think," said a gay, gentle voice; and Gertrude's

arm was thrown round her sister's waist, while she looked laughingly in her face.

"Now, Gertrude, that was a speech not intended for your ears, so you have no right to find fault. Besides, I protest against any one taking Miss Forester's part; and moreover, you look satirical; and I thought satire was your peculiar horror."

"Always excepting on certain occasions," continued Gertrude, in the same light tone, "self-defence, et cetera."

"Then this is not one—no one is accusing you of being a viper."

"Only one of my acquaintances—I cannot say friend."

"No, that would be too absurd. You Miss Forester's friend! The poles are not more widely separated."

"Yet friend, too," said Gertrude, "inasmuch as she is not my enemy."

"I would not answer for her not being the enemy of every member of the family," said Charlotte "Edith's I am certain she is."

"So much the more reason for taking her part," replied Gertrude, rather more seriously than before. Charlotte looked at her sister, in the belief that she was in jest: but Gertrude's smile had nearly vanished, and Charlotte saw directly what was in her mind.

"No lecturing! Gertrude," she exclaimed, "I will not bear it, even from you."

"If one could only conceal one's thoughts better," said Gertrude: "but when grave notions are in the mind, they will show themselves in the face,—in mine at least; so please not to quarrel with me, Charlotte. Lecturing, as you call it, is my misfortune, not my fault."

"Well, then, let me hear. I know you won't be happy till you have delivered your testimony."

"It would be a very long testimony, if I were to begin," said Gertrude, gaily; "and I don't at all think you are in the humour to hear it."

"Never more so; I made some resolutions upon humility only this morning. Or, stay, I can give a lecture myself just as well. Listen: I will divide my discourse into three parts: first, the characteristics of Miss Forester; secondly, those of the venomous reptiles called vipers; thirdly, the utter dissimilarity between the two; to be concluded with some practical reflections upon the pernicious habit of evil-speaking. And, first, for the characteristics of Miss Forester ——"

"Which shall be reserved till another day, to please me," said Gertrude, playfully; "because, if we go on talking now, there will be no time for reading."

"But I thought you were going to mamma," said Edith.

"Yes, and I did go, but I happened to mention Susan Philips's name, and then she remembered having promised to mix some medicine for the child, and went to do it; and I thought I would come down to you in the mean time."

"We shall be a reformed household in time," said Charlotte. "If mamma takes to mixing medicines, and Jane and I to poor work, there will be no calculating upon any thing. We may all end our days as Sisters of Charity."

Gertrude smiled; and, taking up her book, she began to read, and so the morning passed: and to many it might have seemed unprofitable, for Gertrude had nothing to show as the fruit of two hours' labour; but one glance at the temper of mind cultivated in her sisters by the sacrifice of her own occupations, might have induced a different opinion. Edith especially felt the difference caused by Ger-

trude's attention and tact, and stopping her as they were going into luncheon, said,—

"I must say one word to you; really I won't keep you five minutes, but I want you to tell me something. Why do you think Jane and Charlotte find so much fault with me?"

"What a question! dearest," exclaimed Gertrude. "How is it possible that I should tell?"

"But you must have some notion. Do I ever do disagreeable things?"

"We all do occasionally," said Gertrude.

"But I in particular. They are always complaining of me. I know I am untidy, and not at all punctual; but have you ever remarked any thing else?" Gertrude hesitated to reply.

"I should be very glad if you would tell me," continued Edith; "because I often wonder why you suit them so much better than I do, when your notions are quite as different; and I am sure the fault must be in myself."

"There are some little trifles," said Gertrude; "but they are merely trifles. One thing I thought I would tell you of: the other day, do you remember, when you were making breakfast, you had finished before any one, and you went away, and left us all to pour out the tea for ourselves?"

"But what was the use of remaining? I had a great many things to do."

"Merely that it was uncomfortable: it disarranged us, and broke up the party, and made us feel as if we ought all to be in a bustle too. And for the time being, you know, you were the lady of the house."

Edith thought for a minute, and then said, "Go on quickly, or they will wonder what has become of us."

Gertrude smiled. "I really can't remember in such a hurry; especially when they are not such very

great offences. I think, perhaps, sometimes you irritate Charlotte by your manner of saying you can't do as she wishes, or that you do not like things. You put the objection first, and the desire to oblige afterwards, and then it does not tell."

"I don't quite know what you mean," said Edith.

"It is only the turn of a sentence," replied Gertrude; "as I heard some one call it once, putting the negative before the affirmative in life."

"Indeed, that is such a mere nothing," said Edith.

"So it is; but the impression of the two sentences will be as different as possible; and I am sure you will find it so if you observe."

"The objections always come to my mind first," said Edith.

"They do to most persons; but if they are spoken they give the idea that you are not pleased, or that you do not wish to oblige, which is the last thing any one has a right to say of you."

"And is that all?" said Edith; "I should like to know every thing."

"Those are all the great faults I can remember to-day," said Gertrude, laughingly, "except, perhaps, such trifles as putting the chair you are sitting in in an awkward place, so as to make the room look uncomfortable; and running away in the middle of a conversation, in which we are all interested, as if you did not care about it."

"If I were not so busy," said Edith.

"But it is easy to make a little excuse, and then no one would mind. I very often feel a blank when you are gone, as if the subjects we liked were of no consequence to you."

"No, indeed, Gertrude; whatever pleases you I am sure pleases me."

"I know it does in reality; but at the moment I can hardly believe it."

"One thing I must say," replied Edith, "that if we are to be so very particular, you do away with all the liberty of home."

"Only in little trifles and courtesies," said Gertrude; "and I don't see how it can be otherwise, when a number of grown-up people have to live together. If they are not under some restraint they must quarrel. And certainly one's first object—earthly object, I mean, should be to make one's home comfortable."

"I don't think Jane and Charlotte care much about it," said Edith.

"Perhaps they have not quite the same principles to act from as you have; but when all are on an equality, some one must yield; and I think those who are most anxious to do right should set the example."

Edith sighed, and exclaimed sadly, "I am always doing wrong, I know. I make all sorts of good resolutions in general, but I never know how to put them in practice."

"You will if you study character more," said Gertrude; "and consider in the morning what is likely to happen in the day, and what you will be called on to do. It is the being busy and abstracted which makes it so difficult, and the business, I know, you cannot well avoid; though it might worry my sisters less if you could go out when they do, and stay at home oftener in the morning, to practise and read with them."

"Such a waste of time all that seems," exclaimed Edith; "and accomplishments lead to so much vanity."

"But not if they are cultivated from high motives," said Gertrude. "There is a difference between wishing to please and wishing to give pleasure."

Edith seemed inclined to agree, and to continue

the conversation further; but Gertrude was afraid of annoying her mother, and hastened her into the dining-room, where Mrs Courtenay was already beginning to be uncomfortable at her non-appearance.

There were many rumours afloat at Allingham on that day, as to the cause of Mr Courtenay's sudden journey: and the spirit of curiosity was not quelled by the sight of Laura's pale, tearful countenance, as she stepped into her pony carriage, with the intention of driving to the Priory. So visible, indeed, were the effects of her sorrow, that the old butler, who met her as she alighted, was tempted to inquire whether anything was the matter with Master Charlie; but hastily turning from him, she begged to see Gertrude alone, and walked into the library to wait for her. The few minutes of delay were an age; and Laura stood before the pictures, and looked out of the window, and drew patterns on the carpet with her parasol, whilst her courage sank to its lowest ebb, and she almost resolved to go back as speedily as she had come. There were voices in the lobby, and a message was given to a servant, and then a light footstep was heard on the stairs; and Laura, conquering a strong impulse to run away, moved to the door, and met—not Gertrude, but Edith. Her disappointment was evident, and Edith, too, did not appear pleased at the meeting. She was dressed for walking, and to be stopped was very provoking.

"You here, Laura!" she began; "how strange! No one said anything about it; but you are looking so ill,—what is the matter? where is Edward?"

"Nothing is the matter," replied Laura, quickly; "nothing, that is, in which you can help me. I wanted to see Gertrude."

"She is gone out, but I expect her home every minute. There is something the matter, Laura; I am sure there is."

"My head aches," said Laura: "I think I have been walking too much lately."

"But that is not all," exclaimed Edith, beginning to be alarmed. "Won't you tell me where Edward is?"

"In London, I believe, or at least on his way there. He left me this morning."

"In London!" repeated Edith; "but what took him there?"

"I don't know," said Laura, coldly: "He did not tell me."

"And when will he return?"

"I don't know—possibly the day after to-morrow."

"Oh, Laura! this is cruel," exclaimed Edith. "I am sure something is the matter."

"Not particularly with Edward," said Laura; "but I suppose all persons have reasons for looking grave at times."

"It is not merely being grave,—you are so pale. Can't I get you anything? a glass of wine, or some water only?" And Edith's manner softened at the sight of her sister's uneasiness, till it became almost affectionate.

"Thank you," answered Laura, with a faint smile; "but you can't do me any good. If I could only see Gertrude."

"She must be back in a few minutes," said Edith. "Are you sure I can't help you?"

"Quite sure."

Laura's tone was decided, and Edith felt annoyed.

"I don't wish to intrude upon you, Laura," she said, "but it is natural to be anxious about one's own family concerns."

"Yes, very natural," replied Laura. "How long has Gertrude been out?"

"More than half an hour; and she only went to speak to a person about some work. She must be here directly. Are you sure that Edward is well?"

"So far as I can be sure from having seen him in perfect health this morning. Indeed, Edith, you need not worry yourself; my concerns are my own."

"If I could be quite certain about Edward," said Edith, half speaking to herself; and then she added, in a louder tone,—"He has looked so harassed of late. You say he is gone to London upon business?"

"Yes, private business. Why should you cross-question me in this way, Edith?"

"I did not mean to do it," said Edith, "but you make me so anxious by your manner. I only wish to be treated as a common friend,—as Miss Forester."

Unknowingly, Edith had touched upon a most vulnerable point. Laura's cold dignity gave way under a torrent of bitter recollections, and she exclaimed, "I have never had a friend. Those whom I looked to for affection neglected me."

"Do you mean Miss Forester?" said Edith. "You must indeed have been blind if you expected anything lasting from her."

"No, no—not Miss Forester," said Laura, striving to hide her tears; and as the wretchedness of her feelings became more overpowering, she added, in a tone of the deepest dejection, "If Gertrude had been here, I should never have been left to her."

Edith had no words to reply. That one sentence was the key to many a misgiving which had lately arisen in her thoughts as to the conduct she had pursued; and as a vivid consciousness of unnumbered neglects flashed like lightning upon her mind, Laura had no cause to dread the confession of her own follies: the heart just awakened to the sense of a hidden fault would have been the last to condemn another. For several minutes both remained in silence, Laura leaning her head upon her hand, and Edith standing by her, longing, yet not venturing, to offer her sympathy.

Perhaps the delicacy of Gertrude's tact would have suggested, that, under such circumstances, solitude would be the most effectual relief; but Edith had never thought it worth while to observe the effects of her words and actions, and, as a consequence, she had no tact; and would probably even then have forced upon Laura the avowal of her own self-reproach, if Gertrude's entrance had not prevented it. Edith no sooner saw her than she exclaimed, "How long you have been, Gertrude! Laura has been waiting for you till she is tired."

"Not quite that, I hope," said Gertrude, glancing at her sister-in-law; and untying her bonnet, she placed it on the table, and then made Edith assist in arranging her dress. "I really could not help myself, though I was uncomfortable all the time, knowing you would wonder where I was. Anne Downer would tell me a long story about one of her children being in disgrace at school. I said I could not understand it, because this was not my week; but she would persist, and at last I told her she should come and speak to you, and she is waiting for you in the hall. Won't you see her?"

Edith left the room, and Gertrude, going up to Laura, who had not till then summoned resolution to look up, placed her hand gently upon hers, and said, as she kissed her forehead, "I should have been more vexed if I had thought I had vexed you."

Laura again covered her face with her hands, and tears streamed through her slender fingers. For some minutes Gertrude did not attempt to stop the course of her grief, but at length she said, "It would be such a pleasure to be a comfort to you."

"To me!" exclaimed Laura, forcing herself to be calm. "Gertrude, you do not know me."

"I know myself, though," replied Gertrude; "I know that I cannot bear to see you unhappy."

"But I deserve it," exclaimed Laura; "I have done wrong—worse than you would have imagined. Do not despise me, Gertrude."

Gertrude shrank from the word. "It would be sad indeed," she said, "for me to dare to despise any one,—most of all my sister."

"And will you indeed think of me kindly?" said Laura. "Will you listen to me? I have so much to tell, and I am so miserable—so very miserable."

"Say to me anything—everything—dearest," replied Gertrude; "let it be, much or little as you please; only give me the opportunity of helping you."

Laura heaved a deep sigh: "That cannot be," she said; "even you cannot undo the past."

"But perhaps I can be of use to you for the future."

"I have no hope," replied Laura, mournfully. "I do not come to you for that; but Edward is gone, and I am alone; and I am so wretched that I cannot bear myself."

"Edward gone!" exclaimed Gertrude,—"so suddenly! You cannot be in earnest."

"He is in London: he was called there on business; but he is to be back again the day after to-morrow."

"And then you will be happier," said Gertrude, gently.

"No, no," exclaimed Laura; "his coming can never make me happier. Not that I do not love him," she added eagerly;—"love him?—none—none on earth can tell how well; but—— Gertrude, I cannot say it; you must despise me."

"You will not repeat that again, I am sure," said Gertrude: "it pains me very much."

"But I have deceived," exclaimed Laura,—"deceived Edward, when he loved and trusted me. Yet,

indeed, Gertrude, I did not know what I was doing when I began. Miss Forester urged me to do it. She told me that things were necessary, and I bought them; and wherever she went she was always admiring and wishing for what she saw, and I could not help giving it to her; and there were my own relations, who thought me rich, and looked to me for so much. I was obliged to spend money upon them too, and at last it all came to such a sum, that I was desperate, and was going at once to tell Edward, but she—Miss Forester I mean—persuaded me not; she said he would be angry, and I knew that was true, for he was in a dreadful state whenever he was asked for money; and then she offered to lend me some, and from that time she used to tease me into doing whatever she wished, and so I could not go on better. She was always alluding to what she had done for me, and if she saw I was inclined to do what she did not like, she used to hint that she should be obliged to tell everything to Edward. I have many times made up my mind that I would confess it all, and rid myself of her, but, when it came to the point, my courage always failed. If I could only have avoided taking her to London, it would have been so much better; but I did not dare; and I was forced sometimes to make Edward angry, by persuading him to allow it, all the time hating it myself. And now, Gertrude, after all this she has told her father, and I have had such a visit from her this morning. General Forester has said such strange things of Edward. He thinks, I believe, that he is going to be ruined, and that the only hope is for him to give some pledge which way he will vote, and then he will have a government office; and if I were to try and persuade him, General Forester would not mind his daughter's helping me even more than she has done; but if I don't, everything must be told

to Edward at once. I thought at the time anything would be better than leading such a miserable life as I have done lately; but afterwards—Gertrude, it would kill me if Edward were to love me less. Even when he looks grave I am wretched; and how could I endure it if he were to change entirely?"

Gertrude's heart sank within her. Laura's statement, rapid and even incoherent though it was, opened before her a vague but fearful prospect of trial for Edward and every one connected with him; yet even then her ready sympathy did not forsake her. She saw that Laura dwelt far less upon Edward's danger than upon her own fault; and setting aside her impatient desire to hear all that Miss Forester had said, she answered—"Are you not distrusting Edward, by imagining that he could change? Could you do so in his place?"

"I cannot tell," replied Laura, sadly; "but he would never have acted as I have done. Yes, he must change when he hears it. He can never think of me as he did."

"He may not think you faultless, but he will surely forgive one whom he has promised before God to love and comfort."

"And honour," exclaimed Laura; "you forget that, Gertrude. He can never honour me."

"Not when he sees that you prefer the pain of owning all that has passed to continuing in what is wrong. Dearest Laura, indeed you do him a grievous injustice."

"If I could only think so," said Laura. "Perhaps I might be able to tell all if he were here now; but my courage will never last till he returns." And after a few minutes' pause, she continued: "It is easy for you to talk, Gertrude, but you cannot know a wife's feelings. It would be such bitter degradation to confess."

"But still more bitter to deceive," said Gertrude. And then, fearing lest the words should have been too strong, she added, "I know that I cannot tell all a wife's feelings, and I know too that it is easy to give advice which perhaps the person who gives it would be the last to follow; but, dearest, have you not said yourself that any suffering would be endurable rather than that you have borne lately?"

"It would only be delay," said Laura; "and if Edward were to follow General Forester's advice he would not be worried about money, and then he would not care half as much when he heard what I had done."

"And if he does not follow it?" said Gertrude.

"But he must—there is no help for him. He will not be re-elected if he does not; and I know he would make any sacrifice rather than fail in that."

"Not the sacrifice of honour," said Gertrude; "and you would be the last person to wish him to do it."

"Honour!" exclaimed Laura, with a bewildered look: "it is no question of honour; it is merely a political affair, which ladies have nothing to do with."

"So it is said," replied Gertrude, "and so I agree in most cases;—but has General Forester spoken to Edward himself?"

"Yes, I believe so, a good many times;—but he says Edward will not listen to him; and I suppose he thinks he will to me. Gertrude, why do you look so pale and shocked?"

"And Edward is in London, you say?" continued Gertrude.

"Yes, he went away this morning quite unexpectedly; he did not even stop to say good-bye. Stay, here is a little note he wrote just before he started."

Gertrude took the note, and read it hastily.

"He was so grave at breakfast," continued Laura —"more so than usual; and Mr Rivers was with

him till twelve o'clock last night, and I am nearly sure Edward went to him again this morning. Gertrude, you would not have me make him more anxious than he is."

"Dear, dear Laura," exclaimed Gertrude, earnestly, "do not ask me for advice. I cannot give you what you will like—and it is hard to feel that I am disappointing you."

"Not disappointing," replied Laura. "I thought what you would say; but it cannot be. It has gone with me through my whole life—that power to see the right. But, Gertrude, I am not like you—I have never yet been able to do it. The beginning of my life was weak and sinful, and the end must be so too." And she burst into tears.

The faint colour on Gertrude's cheek went and came as her sister spoke; and as she watched the expression of despairing suffering which rested upon her young fair features, a pang of bitterness shot through her heart at the thought of all that she might yet be destined to endure. "Laura," she said—and she knelt by her side, and looked fondly in her face—"when you promise your child that you will give him all that he may need, could you bear him to doubt your word?"

"He is too young to do it," said Laura, in a tone of surprise.

"But if he were older," said Gertrude, "would it not vex and pain you?"

"Yes," said Laura; "but ——"

"But are we not all children?" continued Gertrude; "and is it not distrust to think that we shall be permitted to remain weak and sinful when we have but to ask for strength and receive it?"

"Do not talk of those things," exclaimed Laura: "I cannot listen to them; they have no power to comfort me."

"Then there is indeed no hope for me," said Gertrude, sadly: "I have nothing else to say that can give you relief."

"And will you leave me?" exclaimed Laura, bitterly—"leave me to my misery?"

Gertrude's answer was in action more than in words. With the tenderness of a mother for a petted child, she threw her arm round her sister's neck, and gently unloosening her bonnet, said, as she laid her head upon her shoulder, "How could I leave you when you have confided in me?"

"And you will still love me," murmured Laura, "though I cannot feel as you do?"

"I must love you through every thing," said Gertrude; "but it is a love which will but give me pain, if I may not talk to you upon the only subject which can be a blessing to you."

"A blessing to the good, you mean, not to me," replied Laura. "There is no blessing for me, Gertrude: I am not worthy of it."

"And who may expect it, if worthiness is needed?" said Gertrude. "You may have done wrong, very wrong; but if there is no help for you, there can be none for the best of human beings. Will you not think of this, and pray?"

"It will not make me happy," said Laura, in a faint voice.

"Yes, in time it will, it must," replied Gertrude. "If at this moment you could be assured of Edward's pardon, it could not be sufficient for your happiness, without the pardon, and the assistance of God; but if you have that, you need not fear any thing."

"My life has been so different from yours, Gertrude. I cannot think about it at all now. When I have nothing else upon my mind I will try to be better."

"And if that time should never come—if you were never to find courage to speak to Edward, and were to go on for years with this secret preying upon you?"

Laura shuddered.

"It is the power to do right which you want," continued Gertrude; "and that power cannot be obtained by your own efforts, and therefore you cannot look forward to any time when you will be able to amend. I know that you are miserable, dearest; and perhaps it seems idle to talk so generally, when you are thinking only upon one subject; but I cannot offer you comfort which I feel to be false. I may tell you that Edward will forgive, and I am sure he will; but I am sure also that his forgiveness is not all you require, and that if you trust to yourself you will not have courage to ask it. You would not bear to believe that your future life was to be like the past."

"No, no," exclaimed Laura, vehemently.

"And you have owned to me that you are wretched, and that you are most grieved for having acted wrongly; and you wish me to help you. Oh Laura, why will you not confess this to One who can?"

"But," exclaimed Laura, "it is no use to be sorry, and pray to God to forgive me, whilst I am deceiving Edward."

"No," replied Gertrude; "and if you feel this, there can be no doubt of your duty."

Laura was silent.

"For Edward's sake, for your own sake, for all our sakes, do not delay," continued Gertrude, in a deep earnest tone. "Only say that you will not—only ask that your courage may not fail."

Still Laura was silent. The agitation of her mind was fully visible in her countenance, and twice she strove in vain to answer. At length, rising from her seat, she said, with a forced effort, "I shall see you, Gertrude, to-morrow. I cannot talk of other things now."

"To-morrow, if you will," replied Gertrude; "and shall it be at Allingham?"

Laura busied herself with her dress, and appeared not to hear; and Gertrude added,—"If I might, I should ask to be with you this evening. I should only be unhappy here in thinking you were alone."

The manner in which this was said completely overcame Laura's effort at self-command. "Why are you not with me always!" she exclaimed. "Then I might be different; but now ——"

"Now you will think of all we have been saying," replied Gertrude, affectionately, "and resolve, but not in your own strength, and then promise that you will act."

"Yes," began Laura, earnestly, "I will promise you;" but Gertrude stopped her—"Stay, dearest," she said; "a promise is too sacred to be given in haste. When we meet this evening you will have had more time for consideration."

"And you—will you not go back with me?" said Laura, imploringly. "I have many things to say besides this one. If Edward should not return in time, what shall I do on Thursday? I am feeling so ill and tired, as if I could not possibly receive all those people alone."

"You must trust that Edward will keep his word," said Gertrude, encouragingly; but Laura's sigh reminded her that both his absence and his presence would be equally painful. "At any rate, we can talk over your difficulties to-night," she added, "which will be more convenient to me than going back with you at once; and with so many sisters, it will be strange if you are left without some help."

Laura tried to smile, but her heart was too heavy, and her manner alone showed her consciousness of Gertrude's affection.

CHAPTER XXXI.

If Laura had need of solitude, it was not less required by Gertrude; and, dreading interruption, she shut herself up in her own room to think at leisure upon what she had heard. The interest of the conversation had prevented her thoughts from dwelling upon the fears which had been awakened for Edward, but when Laura was gone they returned in full force. She was too keen-sighted not to have perceived that something had been preying upon her brother's spirits ever since her return to the Priory; but it was the fashion to attribute it to Parliamentary worries, and the style of living at Allingham forbade any one to think that economy was at all requisite. Even the conversation which she had held with her sister on Torrington Heath, had only made her uncomfortable for the moment; as Edith herself seemed then to think that her former apprehensions were groundless, and it was difficult for Gertrude's charity to believe, that one so perfect as Edward in word and feeling, could be so faulty in practice. And now, it was not that she at all surmised the true state of the case, but she was oppressed by that dark, fearful apprehension of coming evil, which is often experienced by persons whose early lives have been free from trial, and who know that, in the course of God's providence, affliction must sooner or later be at hand. Sad visions of care passed before her as she thought upon Edward, but there was something worse than care, which she scarcely dared to dwell upon. If he were embarrassed, who could tell how strong might be the temptation to free him-

self at any sacrifice ; and little as Gertrude had hitherto known of political affairs, she felt that the pledge proposed by General Forester could scarcely be consistent with strict honour. She tried to persuade herself that he had mistaken Laura's words, but the impression of them still remained. She reasoned, but reason was useless. It seemed impossible that Edward could act dishonourably, but the firmest characters had failed in less trying circumstances. It was unlikely that the proposal had been made, but certainly Laura had mentioned it. General Forester was not a man of any weight, and Edward would not listen to him ; but he had lately been his chief guide in his election affairs. Gertrude's clear intellect was bewildered with fear. She closed her eyes, striving to shut out all that might distract her, that so she might more clearly see whether any thing could be done to guard her brother from the temptation. Money seemed the one thing required ; and as she felt this, a doubt, painful almost to agony, crossed her mind. With an involuntary effort she resisted it, but again it came. Gertrude's conscience was not one to be trifled with. Once more she turned from it, but only for an instant ; and when still, through every other consideration, the question forced itself upon her, she knelt to pray that if the sacrifice of her long cherished wishes were required, it might be made without repining. The words had scarcely been uttered, when a knock was heard at her door, and a servant begged that she would go and speak to Mrs Courtenay. Gertrude's first impulse was to send an excuse. It seemed impossible at that moment to give attention to any one ; but respect for her mother conquered her reluctance, and without delay she went to her room. Mrs Courtenay was resting after a drive to the county town, but seemed full of business and excitement.

"Ah! my dear," she exclaimed, "you have not been out. That is very wrong; you will never be well if you shut yourself up so. And what have you been doing? We have had such a nice drive. I saw the child, and she is a great deal better,—quite a different creature—that medicine is so remarkably good; though, by-the-by, they have made it up very badly. But, do you know, we were intending to call at Allingham, and they told us at the lodge that Edward was gone to town; and Johnson says that Laura has been here, and that she was looking ill, and it put me in such a fright that I sent for you directly."

"Laura has been here," replied Gertrude, in a tone which, to any other ear than her mother's, would have betrayed a painful effort; "I don't think she was looking particularly well, but I shall hear more about her this evening, for, if you have no objection, I am going to drink tea with her."

"Objection, my dear! no, what objection could I have? but you had better order the carriage directly —Foster is not half as punctual as he used to be."

"Laura will be alone," said Gertrude, "for Edward is gone to town."

"But what for? He said nothing about it yesterday; and why doesn't Laura come and drink tea here, instead of taking you away. It would be much more sociable; just let me send and say so. Edward can't really be gone, though,—there is the party on Thursday; he must be at home then."

"Laura hopes he will," said Gertrude; "but if he should not, she must do as she can without him; so I had better go to her this evening, because she wants to talk over some arrangements, and they would only be tiresome to you."

"Oh no, my love! not at all tiresome. There is nothing I like better than arrangements. But it is best to let young people please themselves, so if you

like to go, do; only don't let Laura think we should not have been glad to see her. I must give you some sugar-plums for Charlie, which he was to have had this afternoon, but we did not go in." Mrs Courtenay dived into the depth of a most capacious reticule, and drew out one by one its various contents, commenting upon each as she laid it on the table; "That—no, that is not it; it was a little square box; there are some lozenges for you in it too, my dear. I heard you cough last night, several times. Wait one minute, I must take out the parcels first, and then I shall find it. The ribbon is for my morning cap; and the gloves I bought at Earl's—Sadler's gloves are so bad, they don't wear any time. So provoking it is! what is wanted first, is always sure to be last. Dear me! Jane forgot her letter for the post."

"Can I help you, dear mamma?" said Gertrude, in consternation at the sight of a little packet of bills, two more boxes, and a thimble.

"No, my dear; no, thank you. I shall find it presently; it is one of these, but they are so much alike."

"There is the first dinner bell," said Gertrude mildly.

"Never mind, my dear; it won't signify about your dress, we are only ourselves. So tiresome this is, I do think I must have left the box at Earl's."

"Perhaps some one will be going to the town to-morrow," said Gertrude, "and then it can be asked for."

"Well! that would be a good plan; but—now I recollect—I left the sugar-plums on the drawing-room mantelpiece, just by the middle vase; you had better go and fetch them, my dear, or somebody will be sure to take them."

Poor Gertrude! what would she not have given for those few minutes alone—but it was not to be.

The sugar-plums were found, and brought back; and then, considering that Gertrude was in the room, and her maid not, Mrs Courtenay thought it better to trouble one than the other, and suggested that her bonnet should be put in the wardrobe, and her shawl in the drawer, and all the other et ceteras of her walking dress properly provided for, till the second bell rang before all her wants were attended to, and Gertrude had only time to make a hasty toilette, and descend to the dining-room with an apology for being late. The dinner appeared interminable; and, with all her endeavours, Gertrude could not prevent herself from occasionally beginning to weigh the conflicting claims of Edward and the church. Charlotte addressed her twice without being answered, and Jane several times begged for the salt in vain; and then both began to rally her upon her unusual abstraction, till the tears rushed to Gertrude's eyes, and a choking sensation was felt in her throat; and, as a last resource against observation, she pleaded—what was indeed the case—a bad headache. Edith watched her with the greatest uneasiness, and followed her to her room when dinner was over, to seek an explanation, but Gertrude could not feel at liberty to give it. All that she owned was that Laura was unhappy about some personal affairs, and had come to consult her; and this, with the headache, was the best information Edith could obtain. She was silenced, but not convinced, and was just beginning an account of her own interview with Laura, when the carriage was announced, and the few minutes, which Gertrude had calculated upon having to herself, were gone. Yet there was no impatience in her replies; no annoyance in her countenance; not even a symptom of irritation in her manner, when Mrs Courtenay stopped her in the hall, to entreat that she would send an excuse to Laura, and go to bed; or (if that

were impossible) take a dose of sal-volatile before she set off. She did, what the most obedient of daughters would scarcely have thought necessary; and Mrs Courtenay returned to the drawing-room, to spend a comfortable evening, satisfied that poor, dear Gertrude's headache was nervous,—she could tell it from the way her hand trembled when she held the glass,—and nothing could be so good for nervous headache as sal-volatile. Charlotte resisted the notion of Gertrude's having any nerves; declaring that, in nine cases out of ten, they were only an excuse for ill temper. Jane complained very much of her going away; and Edith strongly took her part; and in the olden time, such a source of disagreement might have brought on a skirmish of words for at least half an hour; but Edith had not passed several months under the same roof with Gertrude, without learning something of her way of preserving family harmony; and the proposal of a few turns upon the terrace with Charlotte, followed by a little music, was successful in restoring unanimity of feeling.

It was late when Gertrude returned. The drawing-room was empty, and the lamp extinguished, and with silent steps she stole up the stairs to avoid disturbing any one. But Edith's quick ear had caught the sound of footsteps, and gently unfastening her door, she beckoned her sister to her room.

"They are all gone to bed, except me," she said, as Gertrude entered; "but I could not make up my mind to go till I had seen you, you looked so miserably ill when you went away."

"Did I?" said Gertrude, with a faint smile.

"Yes; and you are not much better now. There must be something very much the matter. Why won't you tell me?"

"Perhaps I might tell you part," replied Gertrude, "though of course not what concerns Laura person-

ally. Do you remember something you said to me a few months ago when we were walking on Torrington Heath—it was about Edward?"

"And my fears?" said Edith, "and Mr Dacre's? Yes, I remember it perfectly."

"If they should come true," continued Gertrude, in a calm voice.

Edith started: "Oh Gertrude! tell me; pray tell me. What do you know?"

"Hush! dearest," replied Gertrude; "we must not frighten mamma; and I do not exactly know any thing."

"But you suspect something."

"I suspect—indeed, I am nearly sure he is in very great difficulties. I guessed it from some facts Laura told me this afternoon, and I have been talking to her since; and though she will not face the possibility of the case being a bad one, she allows there is something amiss."

"Then it has really happened as Mr Dacre and I imagined," exclaimed Edith bitterly; "and Edward has been wilfully blind. What fortune of two thousand a-year could stand the expenses of six?"

"How?" said Gertrude, and her tone of surprise awakened Edith to the consciousness of having betrayed her brother's secret.

"It is scarcely a thing to be kept private, now," she replied; "at least from his own family. When Colonel Courtenay died, the Allingham property was worth only two thousand a-year; but no one knew it except Edward and his lawyers, and the one or two persons who learnt it from him. My mother was never told, nor Jane, nor Charlotte; but at that time he kept nothing from me."

"And Laura?" said Gertrude.

"I cannot tell. I have often tried to find out; but we have known so little of each other intimately,

that it was impossible to do it; and after Edward married, he threw such a veil of mystery over all his affairs, that I could not ask him any thing about them."

"Laura does not know, I am nearly certain," said Gertrude. "I have been talking to her a great deal this evening, and she has given me an account of their London life. Even with six thousand a-year they would have been dreadfully extravagant."

"Yes," said Edith, "I know they must have been. Charlotte spent one spring with them, and gave us details of enormous expenses; but it was just then that every one was praising Edward's talents, and prophesying that he would be a great man, and I thought less about it."

"And do you really mean," said Gertrude, "that Edward's income has never been more than what you say?"

"Never; and it was the knowledge of this which made me tremble at the election."

Gertrude almost shuddered at the very name of the election. "Tell me, Edith," she said, after a short pause, "if Edward's affairs are really in the state which we fear, how will he be able to bear it? Will he have courage to face the evil?"

"No," said Edith, sadly, but decidedly. "He will drive it from his thoughts till it is forced upon him without the possibility of escape. And then,—I cannot tell——" And poor Edith turned away to hide, even from her sister, the bitterness of her feelings. "You have never loved him as I have loved," she said, when Gertrude strove to comfort her: "You cannot know how all my purest enjoyments have been blended with him. If I have ever had a good thought, or been able to conquer a bad feeling, it was because of the principles he taught me; and he is good—he must be good now; others

have been extravagant, too—it is not a sin. Gertrude, dearest—only say so; say you do not think the worse of him."

It was a painful appeal for Gertrude's sincerity. Wilful extravagance involves so much of self-indulgence, and thoughtlessness, and neglect of solemn duties, that she could not bring herself to answer.

"You may condemn him," continued Edith, eagerly: "but if you had but known him as he once was—so noble, and kind, and careful for every one, and thinking so little of his talents, and only wishing to do good. Gertrude, he was perfect; yes, indeed, he was perfect: and oh! how I loved him!"

"And we all love him now, dearest," said Gertrude; "and must try to help him. And it was this which I wished to speak to you about."

"And can you help him?" exclaimed Edith, a gleam of hope lighting up her countenance.

"Not permanently, but I might do something for the present; only then ——" the sentence was unfinished, but Edith understood it.

"No!" she exclaimed; "that cannot be. After all your wishes—your plans—and it would not be right."

"I cannot say," replied Gertrude quietly. "There may be duties even greater than the building of a church. If it were to save him from a great temptation, Edith;—from the sacrifice of his highest principles?"

"But is it so?" said Edith, in alarm; and, after a minute's consideration, she added, "and if it were so, your fortune is so small."

"It would be something; it might stay the evil, though not prevent it."

"But you could not," exclaimed Edith. "The church has been your dream for years; you said so only the other day."

"Yes," replied Gertrude; "yet that may be the

very reason why it may be necessary I should relinquish it."

Poor Edith felt confused by the conflicting ideas which presented themselves to her mind, and could not realise the danger to Edward's principles to which Gertrude had alluded. "Have you really determined upon giving up the church?" she said, at length.

"No; I have not had time for considering the subject, and as yet everything is uncertain. But merely upon the supposition, I like to think how I should be bound to act. How could we endure any person's assisting him upon terms which are not honourable?"

"How could we endure any person's assisting him upon any terms?" interrupted Edith, proudly. "Do not mention it again, Gertrude. A Courtenay submit to an obligation! Even Jane would sacrifice her last farthing to prevent it."

"The Courtenays may be doomed to greater trials than that," said Gertrude, mournfully. "Dishonour is more galling than obligation. I would give—but it is not right to distrust—only it seems as if there would be less cause to fear if Edward were not gone."

For some minutes Edith stood mechanically playing with the candle, and gazing upon its light; at length she said, "Can you not fancy, Gertrude, what it would be to be borne along by the eddies of a whirlpool—to see before you the gulf in which you must sink, and to feel yourself at every instant approaching it with greater velocity?"

"Yes," said Gertrude, "life has its whirlpools, and this may be one; but we need not be afraid of sinking without the power of rising again: it would be a want of faith. Hark, Edith! the clock is striking twelve. How frightened mamma would be if she were to hear us!"

"Never mind," replied Edith; "we shall neither of us sleep very much, if we do go to bed."

"But I have so much to think of," said Gertrude: "Indeed I must not stay."

"I would rather not go to sleep," replied Edith; "there will be the waking to-morrow with that vague, horrible feeling, of some unknown evil hanging over one."

"And the gradual dawning of the truth, and the wretchedness of the full reality," added Gertrude, attempting to smile, as she took up her candle to go; "but we will not fear; it is wrong."

Edith's reply was a whispered "God bless you, dear, dear Gertrude," and the sisters separated, Edith remaining to meditate upon the long dreaded events which seemed now approaching, and Gertrude stealthily treading the carpeted floors, to avoid disturbing the household, before she reached her room. And with what different feelings did she now enter it from those which had so filled her heart on the previous evening! There were the same walls, the same furniture, the same books. There was the table piled with drawings of churches, which it had been her pleasure to collect from her friends. There was the desk, on which lay the letter which she had finished for Mr Dacre. There were papers scattered about, on which she had even proceeded to make calculations of different items of expense. But the charm of all was gone. Scarcely allowing herself a glance, she replaced the drawings in her portfolio, and the letter and papers in her desk; and forgetting the lateness of the hour, and the mental fatigue she had undergone, once more knelt to ask for strength, both in judgment and in action, and then set herself seriously to consider what ought to be her conduct under the circumstances which Laura had more clearly explained in their evening conversation.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE breakfast party at the Priory was not now what it had been, when more than four years before Edith had so sighed over the absence of family union. Mrs Courtenay still complained of sleepless nights, and Jane lamented her habitual ill health; Edith also took as great an interest in the parish school, and Charlotte talked as lightly, and cut bread as diligently as before. But the sharp edges of character had been much worn away by the influence of tact and example; and notwithstanding their serious causes of uneasiness, Edith would have hesitated to exchange her present feelings, had they not been mixed with self-reproach, for the loneliness and discomfort which she had experienced on the morning when she received from Miss Forester the first hint of Edward's intended marriage. All trials are comparatively light whilst the sanctuary of home is untouched; and Edith, though burdened with regret for the past, and forebodings for the future, could still be thankful for the mercy which was sparing her the additional pain of domestic discord. Gertrude, however, was not so fully alive to the effects of her own conduct, and still saw much which she longed to alter; but every other feeling was now engrossed in anxiety for Edward.

A sleepless night had brought its natural consequences—a continued headache; and Mrs Courtenay's faith in sal-volatile was rather shaken, when she observed Gertrude's heavy eyes and pale lips.

"You were so late last night, my love," she said; "Mitchell told me that you were not back till after

eleven, and I am sure I heard you moving about after twelve."

Gertrude pleaded guilty to being late, but said "that Laura never went to bed early herself, and so persuaded her to stay."

"And talk over to-morrow, I suppose," said Jane. "What does she intend to do, all by herself?"

"She depends upon Edward's returning," said Gertrude; "but I tried to persuade her not to do it. It seems very uncertain."

"If it is uncertain," observed Charlotte, "you may be quite sure what will happen. Gentlemen only say they are uncertain when they have fully made up their minds, and have not courage to confess it; and Edward hates archery parties."

"Yet they are better than anything else," said Edith, "less formal, and not so expensive."

"Who cares for expense at Allingham?" exclaimed Charlotte. "Besides, from what I have heard Laura say, I suspect this will be any thing but an economical affair."

"A splendid imitation of the Vivian parties last year, I suppose," said Jane.

"It will be an extremely pretty thing, if it is well managed," said Gertrude. "They are going to light up the conservatory in the evening, and give up the drawing-room for dancing, and the library is to be used for the reception room, and the dining-room for the *déjeûner* and the refreshments."

Edith sighed audibly, and Gertrude, fearful of her attracting observation, hastily continued,—

"Laura will have so many things to do to-day that I have promised to help her. She is not at all equal to any exertion."

"I don't think I shall go," said Jane: "It is a very agreeable thing to talk about, but one pays a dreadful penalty afterwards for being amused."

"Laura said she hoped we should all go," observed Gertrude; "and, if Edward is not there, we might be extremely useful."

"Yes," said Charlotte; "she might station us at different places, with certain divisions to look after. Remember, I put in my claim for the dining-room. I venture to say I shall be more popular than any one of you."

"The reception is the awkward part of the business," said Gertrude; "half the persons invited are election acquaintances, and Laura has never seen them above once or twice, and some not at all."

"I am not sure that I like these huge omnibus parties," observed Charlotte; "one gathers up such a quantity of scum with them."

"It is better than having the scum alone," said Jane. "If you must invite disagreeable people to your house, it is far better to swallow them whole, with something to make them palatable, than to have a separate dose of each individual."

Gertrude felt distressed at the turn the conversation was taking, and quietly made an effort to divert it. "Laura and I were wondering last night," she said, "whether Mr Dacre would go. He had a most pressing invitation, and says he will if he feels equal to it, but I suspect that is more than half an excuse."

"I don't want to see him there," said Charlotte; "he would be out of his element."

"How unkind, my dear," exclaimed Mrs Courtenay; "and we all make so much of him when he comes here."

"The very reason why I hope he will keep away from Allingham," replied Charlotte; "I respect him too much to wish to see him in a false position."

Mrs Courtenay adjusted her spectacles, and looked at her daughter for a minute, but reading no explanation of her words in her countenance, returned

to the newspaper; and Edith, weary of a trifling conversation, when her thoughts were engrossed with more important subjects, took the opportunity of a pause to rise from the table, and beg Gertrude to go with her into the garden.

"How can you talk with such indifference, Gertrude," she exclaimed, when they were alone; "and about things which come home to one so painfully? I thought I must have left the room when they were discussing the archery party."

"I thought so too, at first," replied Gertrude. "Certainly nothing could be more contrary to one's inclinations than talking about it, except, perhaps, joining it: and poor Laura is so sadly worried, she says that if Edward does not come home she shall never be able to go through with it. That is one reason why I suggested our all going; for really, if she is as unwell to-morrow as she was yesterday, we might be of the greatest use to her."

"Not you, I am sure," said Edith; "you are more fit now to be in your bed than any where else."

"To make up for want of sleep last night," replied Gertrude, with a sad smile; "but I am more comfortable upon one point. I have determined upon consulting Mr Dacre as to what should and might be done; and I have written to him to ask him to come to me this morning."

Edith's face brightened with greater satisfaction than she had yet experienced. "Yes," she said, "there is no one else to help us: and, Gertrude, I told you; he knows all. He learnt it from some business transactions which he had with Edward's lawyer—that is, he guesses it, for I suppose he could not have been told details. But it is so strange. I cannot realise that there is any reason for great alarm, as I did last night. Then I was utterly miserable, now I think I am only irritable and impatient."

"It is because every thing about us is just the same; and besides, sunshine and beautiful scenery help persons through so much, when they are not absolutely overwhelmed."

"And another feeling I have," said Edith, "is, that if any thing is going to happen, I long that it should come at once. I think I could make up my mind to bear a great calamity, but it is the sitting still and watching for it which tires me."

"Suspense is a great temptation to impatience, certainly; but the calamity will come soon enough, I suspect. There was something in the tone of the little note Edward wrote to Laura yesterday which makes me think he must be prepared for some shock, and that he is wishing to prepare her too."

"Any change would be bad for her," said Edith. "To be obliged to reduce, with her habits, would half kill her."

"I think you do her injustice," replied Gertrude; "she has one point of character, which is every thing as a foundation."

"Truth: yes, I acknowledge that."

"And take her from Miss Forester, and place her in situations of trial, in which others are dependent upon her, and I am nearly sure you would find her very superior. Trial would strengthen her religious principles."

"Religious principles!" exclaimed Edith; "she has none:" and then, shocked at her own words, she began to qualify them: "I mean, that she has never acted upon any."

"It is hard to say that, when we cannot look into the heart," said Gertrude; "and Laura's candour, and good-temper, and love for Edward are, it may be almost said, germs of religion. Very weak, indeed, and in themselves nothing, but showing that there is a good disposition to work upon."

Edith walked on for several minutes in deep thought. "Gertrude," she said at length, in a very serious tone, "I felt yesterday, when Laura was miserable, as if I was the cause of it, and I was miserable too. I could almost wish that the feeling would continue."

"Not exaggerated," said Gertrude: "there can be no good in that."

"But," said Edith; "perhaps it is not exaggerated. Perhaps I might really have worked upon all the good which you say is in her character; and if she had been a different person, Edward might have been so too. I can speak about it calmly now, but I could not have done it last night, when I lay awake thinking upon it."

"I am afraid," said Gertrude: "even the best of us would have something to regret, if we were to compare what we have done with what we ought to have done."

"But what should you say," continued Edith; "do you think I have been very much to blame?"

"You must remember that I was away from you: how can I judge?"

"You can form some idea; you know something of what passed from what I have told you. I am sure you think I have done very wrong, and you are afraid to say it."

"I am not afraid, if you are not afraid to hear it," replied Gertrude.

Edith stopped suddenly, and her countenance changed: "I did not believe," she said, in a voice of mingled agitation and displeasure, "that I was likely to be of any use. And there were other duties which I had been accustomed to; and I did not like to neglect them."

"It seems cruel in me to say any thing at this moment," replied Gertrude.

"No one can think it cruel to receive an opinion which has been asked for," said Edith, with a little pique in her manner.

"But, perhaps, I implied more than I ought; there is such a difference between an error of judgment and a wilful fault; and, after all, it is impossible I should be able to decide how far you were right in acting as you did."

"You need not retract," said Edith, in the same proud tone; "your first words were sufficiently plain."

"Plainer than I meant them to be; and I am vexed with myself for using them, because they have given you a false impression."

Edith bit her lip, without answering, and moved a few steps towards the house; and then, as quickly returning, she exclaimed, while tears rushed to her eyes,—"Gertrude, I am very wrong, but you have made me really wretched."

"If I might only tell you, dearest, what I meant," replied Gertrude.

"But I know it," said Edith. "You mean that I have been the cause of it all: that I might have prevented it."

"No," replied Gertrude; "not *the* cause, as if there were only one. Edward's own weakness has been the cause, and his hasty marriage, and his ambition. There have been many causes."

"But I have been one," persisted Edith. Gertrude could not deny it, and Edith was not in a state to listen to any extenuations that might be offered.

"Yes," she exclaimed, "if I had been at Allingham oftener, and tried to please Laura more, perhaps I might have been to her what you are now; but she says that I neglected her, and she is right. And now the time is gone, and I can never make amends."

"Do not say that," said Gertrude; but Edith interrupted her;

"I must say it, for it is true. How can I make amends now? Who can recall the years that are passed, and how can I save Edward and Laura from misery? And when the worst is come, and they are ruined—ruined for their whole lives—how shall I feel, when they look back and say I was the cause of it?"

"They cannot say so," replied Gertrude, gently; "if they blame you, they must blame themselves far more."

"It is no comfort," said Edith: "do not think of it, Gertrude. Words are useless."

Gertrude felt that at such a moment it was too true: words were useless. And when Edith again walked away, though not proudly, as before, she did not attempt to follow her; but leaving the torrent of excited feeling to exhaust itself, before attempting to offer advice or consolation, she re-entered the house to find her mother, and occupy herself with her till the arrival of Mr Dacre. And now, as often before, Gertrude experienced the benefit of that self-control which she habitually practised. With her attention absorbed by one subject of anxiety, she was yet mindful of the duty she had imposed on herself the previous day; and Mrs Courtenay's smile of pleasure, as she opened the door, and told her she had been expecting her, would alone have been a sufficient recompense. But the effort, though painful at first, served to divert and relieve her mind; and when, before she had ended, the sound of a bell announced, as she believed, Mr Dacre's arrival, she scarcely dreaded the interview. It was not, however, Mr Dacre. It was a note, saying that he should not be able to call at the Priory till the afternoon; and, at the same time, came a few hasty lines from Laura, begging that Gertrude would on no account delay going to her, and adding, as a postscript, that the

pony carriage had been sent, in order that there might be no excuse.

"I am so sorry for it, my dear," said Mrs Courtenay; "but it is all right, of course; and do tell poor Laura to send here for any thing she may want for to-morrow; plates, or glasses, or knives and forks."

Gertrude could scarcely forbear smiling at the notion of Laura's knowing any thing about the importance of providing such humble necessaries; but she did not enlighten her mother's mind as to the extent of her daughter-in-law's ignorance of domestic affairs, and only assured her that there was no doubt the housekeeper would ask for all that was required.

"And Foster shall go for you earlier to-night, my dear," added Mrs Courtenay. "It is bad for you to sit up late, and Laura, too, will have enough to fatigue her to-morrow. So mind you don't consent to stay longer than ten o'clock."

Gertrude promised to attend to her wishes, and set off; leaving, however, a note to be sent to Mr Dacre, with a request that he would, if possible, see her at Allingham in the course of the day.

"My mistress is in her bed-room, ma'am," was the information Gertrude received upon alighting; and, to judge from the appearance of the lower part of the house, a bed-room seemed likely to be the only safe refuge from carpenters, housemaids, and footmen, who were rushing to and fro with chairs, and tables, carpets, benches, and lamps, all in preparation for the next day. But Gertrude moved on through the confused mass of furniture, without overturning more than one chair, or entangling herself more than twice with balls of packthread; whilst she felt a little amused at the sudden transformation of the elegant, orderly house and establishment, though distressed at what must be an additional expense, at the very moment when economy was above all things needed.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"You see what a state we are in," exclaimed Laura, with a forced laugh, as she opened her door, just in time to save Gertrude from being struck by a long ladder which two men were carrying along the gallery: "I have scarcely ventured out of the room the whole morning, and it has been so lonely."

"Has it, indeed?" said Gertrude, kindly; "I thought you would be too busy to want me."

"It would be absurd for me to interfere much," said Laura; "my housekeeper understands every thing; so I give the orders occasionally, and leave her to see them executed. But you must not think that I can never bear solitude. It is only rather bad just now."

Gertrude was beginning to express regret for not having been with her sooner, but Laura stopped her: "I cannot bear excuses from you," she replied, sadly; "I have no claim upon you, or upon any one. It is very kind in you to come at all, and perhaps you will read this, and help me to decide what is to be done;" and she took up a letter which lay on the table.

Gertrude looked at her sister, as she spoke, with deep compassion. Her brilliant complexion was faded, and almost sallow; her eyes were heavy and sunken; her lips parched; and even her dress, so generally admired for its neatness and elegance, seemed carelessly thrown on without any attempt at arrangement. "You know the handwriting," continued Laura.

"From Miss Forester?"

"Yes, but I do not understand much more of all she refers to than I did yesterday."

Gertrude received the letter, and began to read, but found herself by no means as much perplexed as Laura. It commenced with protestations of the strongest affection, which no circumstances, however trying, could weaken; it then went on to recall the proofs that had been given of sincerity, hinting at enormous sacrifices made, with no hope of an adequate return; and declaring that all which had been done was as nothing compared with the happiness of being of service to one so dear. Then followed mysterious allusions to impending dangers, from which there could be no escape except by Mr Courtenay's following General Forester's advice; and at last came vehement entreaties that, in order to save herself and all around her from misery, Laura would undertake to persuade her husband to yield his opinion upon points of no importance. The letter ended with renewed protestations of affection, and as a postscript were these words:—"I have said nothing about our own private affairs; delicacy forbids me to enter upon them in detail; but you will yourself be the best judge how far you can venture to explain all that has passed to Mr Courtenay, at a moment when my father knows him to be harassed almost to desperation. Delay I fear is impossible, as my father will no longer allow matters to remain in their present state. I need scarcely say how sincerely I desire that you should promise to use your influence in bringing Mr Courtenay round. If his pledge were once given, my father's natural fears on my account would be at rest, and I should be able fully to indulge my own wishes."

"What does it mean, Gertrude?" said Laura, as her sister laid the letter upon the table with a disgust which she scarcely endeavoured to suppress; "Is there really any harm in it?"

"Can you doubt it?" replied Gertrude, who, with all her knowledge of human nature, scarcely understood, as yet, to what extent a person of Laura's character would be influenced by a wish; "I do not, of course, know all that General Forester requires, but there can be no question of its involving a sacrifice of some honourable principles."

"I don't see that," said Laura, musingly; "and Edward would be happy again if he were out of his difficulties."

"But, my dear Laura, is it a case which concerns General Forester, or any thing he has said or done? If he were to offer to settle every thing, without any conditions, could you consent?"

Laura's lip quivered, and she could scarcely restrain her tears. "I thought of it all last night, when you were gone," she answered, in a half frightened tone; "and I said over to myself all that Edward would say, and fancied him just opposite to me, listening; and afterwards I went to bed, and then it came to me again,—the same scene I had been picturing; but he was changed. He looked at me as he had never done before, and he said that his love was gone; and I threw myself before him, and clung to him, and prayed him to forgive, and he spurned me. Yes, Gertrude, he spurned me; and I know it must be so." And Laura leant her head upon the table in agony.

"And will this save you, dearest?" said Gertrude, quietly. "When you have gained your point, and Edward is in possession of all you expect, must not the confession be made?"

"But the time is distant," replied Laura; "he will be happy, and he will not care."

"Happy that he has been mistaken in his wife?—that she talked to him, and persuaded him, apparently for his own good, when in reality she had secret motives of her own? Oh Laura! concealment be-

tween any friends is dangerous—between a husband and wife it is certain misery."

"I would only delay," said Laura, faintly.

"And if delay could save you from suffering, without being wrong, can you think that a sister would not be more willing to help you than Miss Forester?" Laura seemed unable to reply; and Gertrude, placing a sheet of paper before her, and a pen in her hand, said, "It is but the work of a few moments, and it may be for your happiness for years; only say that you have resolved to speak to Edward."

Laura took up the pen almost unconsciously; it seemed as if the burden upon her mind had destroyed her power of self-guidance; and trusting instinctively to Gertrude, she wrote the words which were dictated. But they were no sooner ended, than she drew her pen across the paper, and casting it aside, rose hastily from her seat, and walked the room.

"Go, Gertrude," she said; "you have done all that was in your power, and it is vain. Why should you distress yourself more?"

"No," replied Gertrude, firmly; "it cannot, and it must not be in vain. The decision is to be made now, and if you will not follow me, you must follow Miss Forester. Will you write and tell her so?"

Laura looked hopelessly around, as if seeking some means of escape.

"Will you bind yourself to her," continued Gertrude, "to be her friend and companion,—to have her with you always,—to risk even Edward's annoyance, rather than her anger? And will you consent to feel that General Forester knows more of your private affairs than your husband, and that at any moment he may betray you?"

"And can you be cruel, too, Gertrude?" exclaimed Laura; "then my last hope is gone."

"Not cruel, dearest," replied Gertrude, earnestly, "but merciful—most merciful; for I would save you from years of suffering."

"And at what price?" continued Laura. "You talk to me in ignorance, for you cannot understand my feelings."

"And do you really think I cannot?" replied Gertrude. "Do you think I cannot tell what you will feel when you have placed yourself in Miss Forester's power, and how you will shrink from Edward's love and confidence, and how bitterly you will repent having yielded to the temptation of this moment?"

Laura heaved a deep sigh, and again took a sheet of paper from her desk, and recommenced her note; but she had only written the first words when it was once more put aside. "It is useless to write," she said; "I know she will call by-and-by, and I will see her."

"The note may prevent her calling," said Gertrude: "Laura, why will you delay? If you are grieved at having deceived him, why will you not take the first step towards truth?"

Laura shook her head, but made no attempt to write; and Gertrude, vexed and disappointed, moved away from the table, when a sound of footsteps on the stairs caught her ears.

"She is coming," exclaimed Laura, in a feeble voice of terror, and she sank into a chair. Gertrude ran to the door and locked it; then returning, said in a low voice, as she seated herself by Laura's side, while her whole frame trembled with agitation,—

"You said to me yesterday that you would promise; and I would not take your promise; but now, if you have ever loved me, you will give it."

Laura raised herself in her chair, and with a look of anguish her eye rested upon her husband's picture.

"Remember," said Gertrude, as she watched the expression of her countenance: "there is but one moment; it is a decision between confidence in him whose every thought, whose whole heart is yours, or in Miss Forester. Laura, you must promise."

Laura threw herself upon her sister's neck, and whispered, "I will promise, but I cannot see her."

"It shall be my duty," said Gertrude, rising. "Go into the dressing-room, and trust in me to say and do all that is necessary."

Laura left the room; and Gertrude, unlocking the door, admitted Miss Forester. There was a start of surprise at the meeting, followed by an expression of pleasure; for Miss Forester, on the same principle which induces a child to stroke a mastiff, was always lavish of her civilities in proportion to her awe; and she had long since discovered that Gertrude was not to be dealt with as an ordinary person.

"I am afraid I am intruding," she said, as she looked in vain for Laura: "I was told I should find Mrs Courtenay here."

"My sister has been here," said Gertrude, with an emphasis upon the word *sister*, which served to remind her visitor that in Laura's house she had more right than a friend to feel at home: "but she is not able to see any person just now, and I must ask you to excuse her coming to you."

"Oh certainly, if it is necessary. I should have supposed, though, that Mrs Courtenay would have made an exception in my favour. Is she so very busy?"

"Not busy," replied Gertrude, "but she is desirous of being alone. Can I be of any service in taking a message to her?"

"I think she would admit me, if she knew I was here," replied Miss Forester, stealing on tip-toe to the dressing-room door; but Gertrude dexterously placed herself before it.

"I am sorry to prevent you," she said; "but quiet is so essential to my sister, that I cannot allow her to be disturbed."

A frown gathered on Miss Forester's brow, but her tones increased in gentleness, as she replied, "Indeed! I am so grieved to hear it. How long has she been so unwell? It must be quite a sudden seizure."

"It is no seizure," said Gertrude, coolly; "but she has had a good deal to think of this morning."

"Ah yes! all the arrangements for this grand party; but she is so energetic about every thing. I am afraid she has worried herself, without waiting for me to come and help her, as I promised. Between ourselves, my dear Miss Courtenay, she is like many other lovely young creatures of her age,—not at all prudent. I saw a great deal of it when we were in town lately; and when we go up again, I intend to keep a strict watch upon her."

"Thank you," said Gertrude, politely; "but with regard to her occupations to-day, the housekeeper manages everything so well, there is scarcely any necessity for Laura's interference. She has been engaged this morning upon rather a different subject —this letter—" and she pointed to the lengthy epistle which lay upon the table. Miss Forester glanced at it, and turned pale; and then glanced a second time, and coloured; and stretching out her hand to take it, said, with a faint laugh,—

"Oh! that—it is not a matter of any consequence; to-morrow will do just as well."

"I beg your pardon," said Gertrude, "but my sister is of opinion that no day can be like the present for business of this kind; and being unable to undertake it herself, she has begged me to arrange it for her."

"Certainly—if you will—no one more competent

——" began Miss Forester, and then stopped in confusion.

" She would be sorry," continued Gertrude, " for either General Forester or yourself to be misled as to her intentions."

" My father would be unwilling to hurry Mrs Courtenay," said Miss Forester, " but—I may speak plainly, I see, to you, my dear Miss Courtenay; it is a very awkward business."

" Particularly so," replied Gertrude, in a tone which Miss Forester did not entirely like or understand. " If you will do me the favour to listen for a few minutes," continued Gertrude, " I think we shall be able to put things on a better footing. With regard to my brother's opinions, General Forester must judge for himself how far it is right to urge any gentleman under any circumstances to profess a change without conviction. It is a political affair with which my sister has no desire to intermeddle."

" Oh yes, very right, quite natural; but my father is so devoted to Mr Courtenay's interests—so anxious for his welfare,—Mrs Courtenay may safely trust him," said Miss Forester, evidently much piqued.

" Possibly," said Gertrude, quietly; " but in the present instance there is no necessity for trusting to any one. Laura would have spoken to my brother this morning if he had been at home, as she is desirous that you should no longer be inconvenienced by the assistance you have been kind enough to give her. In my brother's absence, perhaps my cheque will be equally satisfactory." And without waiting for a reply, Gertrude seated herself at the table, wrote an order for six hundred pounds, and put it into Miss Forester's hands. It was received mechanically. For the first time for many years Miss Forester was sensible of shame;—she felt that Gertrude knew her.

"It is correct, I believe," said Gertrude, rising. "Perhaps you will do my sister the favour also to return the different bills of her London trades-people, which you have had the goodness to keep."

"I, really—I did not wish—I scarcely expected" —stammered Miss Forester: "I should be so sorry to give Mrs Courtenay any additional trouble just now."

"Pray do not distress yourself," said Gertrude. "It will involve no trouble to my sister; she merely wishes my brother to see them when he returns." Miss Forester's keen face expressed incredulous surprise, but Gertrude did not choose to explain farther than was necessary. "Perhaps," she said, in a tone which, notwithstanding her native humility, was tinged with hauteur, "you will also be kind enough to say to General Forester, that my sister prefers leaving to him the task of persuading her husband to profess a change of principles. She has neither the inclination nor the power to attempt it herself."

Miss Forester looked things unutterable; but as she attempted to speak them, her spirit quailed before the calm, pure dignity of Gertrude's manner. Something she murmured of interests, and wilfulness, and regret, but the sentence was lost in confusion, as her eye met Gertrude's searching glance, fixed as if she could read her inmost thoughts; and, thrusting the cheque into her reticule, she turned away and glided from the room, without appearing to notice Gertrude's civility, when she hastened to open the door, and politely wished her good morning. Gertrude listened to her retreating footsteps, and when the hall door was closed against her, drew a long breath, as if relieved from a great oppression. The first act of the sacrifice she expected would be required had been made, but she did not for an instant regret it. Laura was saved from temptation; and if Edward's affairs were prosperous, the obligation would soon be

repaid; if not, the experience of that morning had left but little doubt upon her mind as to the course to be pursued. And now, her first impulse was to go instantly to Laura, and tell her she was free from Miss Forester's snares; but a little consideration checked her. When she had once owned what had been done, it would be difficult to insist upon Laura's keeping her promise, since it might appear that she had a personal interest for urging it; and though Laura's word had been given, Gertrude still felt doubtful whether, when the moment for confession came, she would not make some excuse for putting it off. Yet it was a difficult resolution to keep, when, as she entered the dressing-room, Laura sprang from the sofa, and entreated to be told all that had passed. Gertrude gazed with pity upon the countenance once so full of happiness, now so marked by sorrow, and longed, as she had seldom longed before, to act against her knowledge of what was right. One smile, such as Laura had given in brighter hours, would have repaid and satisfied her; but the time was not arrived; and Gertrude, though with an effort known only to herself, could be as firm in inflicting pain, as she was gentle in soothing suffering. A few words of explanation were soon given. Gertrude merely thought it necessary to say that she had told Miss Forester that Laura declined interfering in political affairs, and intended upon Edward's return to take some steps for the immediate settlement of her affairs; and Laura, although she felt frightened at being thus bound to her promise, without the possibility of delay, seemed in a degree more satisfied. Edward's displeasure was indeed inevitable, but she was no longer called upon to struggle against her own failing resolution; and Gertrude, trusting that she would now be able to take a little rest, persuaded her to lie down, and left her.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

And rest Gertrude required herself, but more for the mind than the body; and hoping to find refreshment in solitude and the open air, she wandered into the park. On other occasions, the beauty of nature had never failed to soothe her in her greatest uneasiness; but on this day its influence was gone. There were dark shadows passing over the distant hills, and thin lines of blue smoke curling upwards from cottages half hidden by trees; and the sunlight rested upon the tall spire of Elsham church, as it stood with its "silent finger" pointing to the sky; and before her spread the green sward sprinkled with wild flowers, and parted into dells and glades by the inequality of the ground, and the varied masses of oaks and beeches, the growth of years gone by. But Gertrude looked at all with a saddened heart. She seated herself on the trunk of a splendid tree, which had been one of the finest in her brother's possession, but which now lay leafless and prostrate, and closed her eyes, striving to forget, if possible, a beauty associated with so much earthly care. But care still haunted her—thoughts of Edward, and his talents, and his influence and station, and the account which must one day be required of him; and shrinking from the prospect, she raised her head, and turning involuntarily from the lovely landscape before her, looked up into the clear blue sky. It was the faint image of heaven,—taintless and unchangeable; and Gertrude dwelt upon its purity, and strove to pierce into its depths, as if seeking to reach that home of peace, where her spirit longed to be. For she felt that the struggle of life

was beginning. Hitherto the current of her existence had flowed smoothly and tranquilly, unmarked by sorrow except in the one first grief, which had left little but peace behind it. But those unruffled days were now vanishing. She was to feel, and act, and judge; to bear with others' sufferings,—to stand prepared for any duty; and though she had long looked forward to the day of trial, there was a natural failing of the heart at the first perception that it was near. And it is a bitter consciousness—(none can tell how bitter but those to whom it has been given)—when we are wakened from our youthful dream of happiness by some stern reality, and know that from henceforth it may never be indulged again—when an all-powerful though all-merciful hand has passed over the beautiful vision we so fondly cherished, and its dazzling colours have faded beneath the touch, and we see that the form is the same, but the lustre can never be recalled. We may have thought that our minds are ready for the change,—we may have pictured it to ourselves, and sorrowed for the inevitable hour, and even prayed for strength to bear it,—but the experience of one real grief will teach us what no preparation will impart. It will show us our own weakness, and the vastness of that mercy which stooped to share a nature endowed with such capacities for suffering. It will force us to look upon the unknown future with a chastened and a thoughtful eye; and whilst it bids us bear thankfully in our hearts the remembrance of our early joy, as the type granted us by God of the blessings reserved for us in heaven, it will tell us that from henceforth the warfare of human life must be ours; and that, till the grave has closed upon our heads, we may hope but for intervals of rest.

And so it was with Gertrude. Till within the last two days she had never known the value of the

unanxious life which she had hitherto led. Not that a mind like hers could be insensible to mercies, or blind to the possibility of losing them; but her anticipations of the future had been vague and unreal, and from principle she had never suffered herself to dwell upon them. And now, almost without warning, trial seemed near at hand, and in the form most at variance with her own disposition. She could think, and repent, and amend for herself; but Edward was beyond her reach, except through that privilege of intercession, the power of which we so little understand; and to some minds, the sufferings of others are far more dreadful than any personal sorrow. Sad, however, as Gertrude's meditations were, she felt that as yet she did not comprehend all that it might be required of her to bear. There was still much cause to hope that her fears might be unfounded: and in a calmer frame of mind she would have reproached herself for giving way to what might be a causeless dread; but in her present excited state,—feverish from wearying thought, and want of sleep, and the agitation of the morning—it seemed that the worst reality would be preferable to the wretchedness of apprehension. It was a morbid state of mind—most unusual and painful; and Gertrude had indulged it only for a few minutes when she was conscious that it was wrong. She tried to bring her mind to the right temper of unhesitating faith, and was striving to collect her thoughts to pray for a spirit more in accordance with the will of God, when an approaching footstep startled her; and she turned and saw Mr Dacre coming towards her. Gertrude rose, and was about to utter an exclamation of pleasure; but the words died upon her lips as she saw the expression of his countenance. It was grave and sad—far more than usual; the lines of care more rigidly marked, and the anxiety of his mind revealed by the frown

upon his forehead, and the compression of his lips.

"I have frightened you," he said, in a deep tone, observing that Gertrude did not speak: "I was told you were walking in this direction, and I knew you were wishing to see me."

"Thank you, yes," replied Gertrude; and she reseated herself on the fallen tree, for her knees trembled so that she was unable to stand.

Mr Dacre looked at her with compassion. "You have been exerting yourself too much," he said; "and you are ill."

Gertrude shook her head, and endeavouring to recover herself, said faintly, "It was very kind in you to come so far."

"Only a morning's walk," replied Mr Dacre: "and perhaps our meeting will be better here than elsewhere; it will be less liable to interruption."

Gertrude raised her eyes to his, and as they met, unable longer to endure suspense, she exclaimed: "If you have anything to tell me, I would hear it now, at once—only speak."

"And might I not say the same?" he replied: "I came at your request."

"My request!" exclaimed Gertrude; for in the confusion of her feelings she felt a difficulty in recalling all that had been in her mind.

"Yes; and I hoped you were going to mention some way in which I might be of service to you."

"Edward ——" began Gertrude, and then paused, scarcely knowing how to introduce the subject of her fears.

"Mr Courtenay is absent, I know," continued Mr Dacre. "He is in London, on business."

"But is he well? have you heard any thing? will he return to-morrow?"

"I have heard nothing of his movements," was

the reply; "but the dissolution of Parliament is hourly expected: will not that account for his sudden journey?" His voice was steady, but his manner was agitated; and Gertrude said, firmly,—

"It is useless to attempt reserve: there can be but one cause of uneasiness where Edward is concerned. You have heard, I am sure, the reports that are abroad, and you know that they are well founded."

"I have just left Mr Rivers," replied Mr Dacre, very gravely; "and therefore I cannot be totally ignorant."

"And you can tell me," exclaimed Gertrude, while the colour rushed to her pale cheek: "Is it what they say? Has Edward indeed been acting so blindly?"

"I will tell you all that I know," replied Mr Dacre; "it is right you, at least, should be prepared for what must in all probability soon come."

"At least," thought Gertrude; and she mechanically repeated the words to herself.

"Mr Courtenay has acted blindly indeed," pursued Mr Dacre; "but we must be careful in our condemnation. He has done but what thousands have done before him, and perhaps with less excuse. The chief object now must be to prevent him from engaging in another election. It would be madness."

"But is there nothing to rest on?—no hope of retrieving?" exclaimed Gertrude. "If I could but know the worst!"

"It is soon told; and I see that it will be no kindness to keep it from you. If any thing could have been done to stay the evil, I hope I need not say to you who would have been most anxious to assist; but in the present condition of your brother's property, his best friends cannot aid him."

"But not for the present," exclaimed Gertrude,

eagerly,—"not to save him from a great temptation?"

Mr Dacre looked at her in astonishment.

"I forgot," she continued, and she bent her eyes upon the ground, for she was about to speak against those who were among his nearest connexions: "I fear that what I say may displease you; but surely Edward's friends are guilty of a grievous error in urging him to pledge himself to them against his own convictions, and offering to reward him by an appointment."

"Indeed I do not understand you," said Mr Dacre. "I have heard nothing of this,—who is your authority?"

"Laura, and General Forester," replied Gertrude, hesitating, as she pronounced the last name.

Mr Dacre started,—every muscle of his countenance seemed working with repressed indignation, and broken exclamations of "base!" "mean!" "dishonourable!" escaped him, notwithstanding his utmost efforts to be calm. At length he said, as he leant for support against a neighbouring tree, "You may tell me all. General Forester's opinions and mine, I know, are very different."

"It is but little that I have to tell," replied Gertrude. "The offer has been made, and General Forester has been strenuous in urging it, and hitherto Edward has refused it. I have known this only within the last two days; but when I was told of it, I was told also of his embarrassments, and then it was that I became alarmed lest he should yield."

"And do they really think," exclaimed Mr Dacre, vehemently, "that any cause will prosper when such means are used to promote it? And if they were to bind your brother to them as they desire, what recompense could they offer him in return?"

"They would save him from —— ruin," said Gertrude, and her voice trembled as she spoke.

"Do not believe it," replied Mr Dacre, gently, but very gravely, as he seated himself by her side; "It is better that such a delusion should be taken from you at once. Your brother may think—possibly he does think—that there is hope; but there is none. If now the whole of his property were sold he might be freed from his difficulties, but he would be left —— without resource."

Gertrude felt paralysed. Miserable as her suspicions had been, they yet fell short of the reality.

"If you knew—if you could imagine," continued Mr Dacre, "the bitter pain of being the first to open your eyes—but it may save you all from worse suffering. Let him pause now, and no one will dare to lift up a finger of reproach against him. Another year, spent as the preceding ones have been, and his loss may involve the sufferings of many others."

"And does he know this?" said Gertrude.

"Yes," replied Mr Dacre, "he knows it as far as words can make him acquainted with it; but I am afraid he does not realise it. This morning I went to Mr Rivers, in consequence of the report which had reached me, for I hoped it might have been in my power to do some good; and he then told me that for many months he had been endeavouring to force the truth upon him, especially since the election had been thought probable. Yesterday morning, when the dissolution was announced as certain, your brother went to make some inquiries, preparatory to coming forward a second time; and when the hopeless condition of his affairs was at last put beyond doubt, he gave no hint of his intentions, but started immediately for London."

"Then it is done," exclaimed Gertrude, clasping

her hands in agony: "Oh that he had been spared the trial!"

Mr Dacre scarcely knew how to reply.

"You believe it is so," continued Gertrude, raising her eyes to his face, with an expression of calm wretchedness which was more touching than any words; "or perhaps," she added, in a voice so faint that it almost died into a whisper,—"perhaps you are certain of it."

"No, no, indeed," exclaimed Mr Dacre, eagerly, "I am not certain of it. I am totally ignorant of the cause of his sudden journey."

"But can you not follow him? Can you not save him? Can no one warn him?"

"It is too late,—he is to return to-morrow."

"Dishonour!" murmured Gertrude to herself, in a low bitter tone.

"There is hope," said Mr Dacre; "we must think of that. The temptation is less than you imagine—at least if he should allow himself to reason. It may be delay, but it cannot be escape."

"God grant that he may see it," said Gertrude, with a sigh of relief; "it may all be borne but that: and when he had done it he would never know happiness again."

"No; and it is the knowledge of this which may give us hope that he will pause. His high sense of honour is not often to be met with."

"And if he is firm," said Gertrude, "the alternative is ruin."

"The world would call it so, but you will not."

"You are right," exclaimed Gertrude, eagerly: "there can be no ruin where there is no dishonour. If I could know that Edward were saved from that snare, I think I could see Allingham a desert, and scarcely consider it a trial."

Mr Dacre gazed on her with sorrow, for he knew

that she was little aware of her own feelings; and the next moment Gertrude's mind had turned from herself to one who would be a far greater sufferer. "Laura!" she exclaimed, in a tone of anguish, and unbidden tears rushed to her eyes.

"Do not think," said Mr Dacre,—"if it is possible, do not think. There must soon be trial on every side of you; but if you dwell upon it you may be prevented from alleviating it."

"And can it be alleviated?" exclaimed Gertrude. "Is it in my power? Tell me quickly, for it will be my only comfort."

Mr Dacre looked towards the hamlet on the heath, the dark cottages of which were at that moment touched by the lustre of the mid-day sun; and Gertrude felt the direction of his eyes, though she had not followed it.

"Do not fear to speak," she said gently; "I have already thought of it. It was a bright dream, but I was not worthy of it; and it is over."

"And can you indeed relinquish it?" said Mr Dacre, with mingled pity and reverence: "Shall you have no regrets—no doubts?"

"Regrets!" exclaimed Gertrude, mournfully. "It was the vision of my happiest days—the charm of my solitary hours. It has kept me from so many vain and evil thoughts, that it has seemed as a guardian angel sent to chase from my heart every earthly feeling; and I thought that it was blest by God; but his ways are best, and I must learn to think so."

"You will think so," said Mr Dacre; and he took her hand affectionately. "The bitterness of this moment will pass—not it may be soon—not entirely for years; but it will pass; and when you look back upon it, you will own how great has been the mercy which has taught you, in your youth, to sacrifice your purest wishes without murmuring."

"And now," said Gertrude, "tell me what I must do. You say that I cannot save Edward."

"No," replied Mr Dacre. "His only safety will be in giving up Allingham immediately."

Poor Gertrude shrank from a truth which she had not ventured before to utter, even to herself. "His home!" she said, and her eyes wandered over the beautiful park, and rested upon the splendid colonnade, which was seen as the termination of a long vista of trees.

"It will be a heavy trial," said Mr Dacre, "but who would not rather leave his home with honour than live in it with self-reproach."

"And where will he go?" exclaimed Gertrude, overwhelmed by the prospect which was opening before her—"how will he support himself? he will never consent to be dependent upon us."

"The usual resource is a residence in a foreign country."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Gertrude, "he cannot do that. His life would be without object—he would be miserable, and his talents would be wasted."

"I am glad you think as I do. There are indeed grave reasons against leaving our natural duties, though there may be cases in which it is necessary; but I do not see that your brother's is one. His profession is still open to him."

"If he would return to it," exclaimed Gertrude, while a feeling of hope lighted up her countenance; but it died as quickly as it had been excited. "Who will persuade him to do it?" she added.

"That must be your duty. He will not bear the idea at first, for he will feel that he is exposing himself to public observation; but if he should consent, you ——"

"Yes," said Gertrude, interrupting him; "I see it now. If my fortune were Edward's he would begin

life a second time with comfort. But you do not know him—he will never listen to the offer."

"I do not know him as you do, yet I think if it is in the power of any human being to induce him, it will be in yours."

"He is proud," said Gertrude; "he will shrink from the very idea of obligation."

"Not so much to a member of his own family—and you must remember the proposal may be made as a loan, not as a gift."

Gertrude thought for a moment. "Yes," she said; "it may be a loan now, and a gift in years to come."

"That may not be necessary," said Mr Dacre. "If your brother should prosper in his profession he may be able to repay the obligation, and you will be once more free to follow your own wishes."

But Gertrude shrank from the words, as if struck by a sudden pain. "Talk to me of Edward, and his plans," she said—"not of that;" and she turned away her head to conceal her tears.

"Forgive me," said Mr Dacre: "I thought it might have given you comfort."

"No, no," she replied, eagerly. "Years must pass before I could venture to hope it, and I feel, now that it has been denied me, as if it would be wrong still to cherish the wish. But," she continued, with greater unreserve, "it could not have been presumptuous; the property was Edward's, and the people were so miserable; and lately I have been amongst them very often, and fancied them peculiarly my own charge, because I had been told by the rector that I might have a school at one of the cottages, and Edith and I had planned it, and next week we were to have talked to Edward about it, and to have made Laura take an interest in it; but it must all go now."

Mr Dacre did not try to comfort her; he felt that it would do no good.

" It may be superstitious," she continued, " but I have sometimes had a horrid feeling in returning from the heath, as if there was a curse on the rest of Edward's property because of it;" and forgetting her resolution of forcing her thoughts from the subject, she fixed a long and earnest gaze upon the little hamlet.

Mr Dacre was still silent.

" If we could only look upon our fellow-creatures as we did in childhood," added Gertrude, " when they seemed but moving machines, and we lived with them, day by day, and had no consciousness that they were immortal."

" You would not wish it," said Mr Dacre.

" No; I would realise truth at whatever sacrifice of happiness; but there are moments when it is almost more than one can bear." And rising, she walked a few paces apart; and, as Mr Dacre followed her with his eye, the remembrance of one, who, like her, had given up the best years of a young and happy life to the service of her God, and who was, he trusted, then reaping a glorious reward, rose before him. If Edith resembled his child in features, Gertrude was even more like her in character, and it was with a father's pity that he felt for her grief, and longed to inquire whether the idea, which, during the conversation, had been gradually strengthening in his mind, could ease the burden upon hers. After a few moments, Gertrude returned, saying that she wished to go back to Laura; but Mr Dacre observed that the cloud still rested upon her spirits. She spoke but little, and walked slowly and thoughtfully. There was no opening for what he wished to say, yet he could not leave her in such a state of depression; and as they approached nearer to the house, he became nervously anxious for some occasion of renewing the conversation, though conscious that his

intended plan might to some minds give pain rather than satisfaction.

As they stopped at the shrubbery gate, Mr Dacre saw that Gertrude expected they should separate. "My road lies in a different direction from yours," he said, "but you must let me go with you a few steps farther. I had one thing more to say to you."

"I had many to say to you," replied Gertrude; "but I am afraid to leave Laura alone when she is ill. Perhaps we shall be better able to tell what is to be done after Edward's return."

"I was not going to speak of him, but of yourself."

"You would teach me to be satisfied," said Gertrude, with a melancholy smile.

"I was going, not to teach you," he replied, "but to suggest a notion of my own, which might possibly —I do not know—but it might accord with yours; and if it did, it would give me greater satisfaction than I have felt for some years."

"Is it what I can do?" asked Gertrude.

"Not what you can do, but what you would have done."

Gertrude looked bewildered, and Mr Dacre was vexed. He had hoped that she would have guessed his meaning. "I am a solitary man," he said, "with few claims in England, though many in a distant land; and perhaps the best offering I could make for the benefit of a place which is associated with so much of early happiness, would be the church in which we are both so interested."

Before the sentence was concluded, its meaning had flashed upon Gertrude's mind. Respect and gratitude struggled fearfully with the keenness of a disappointment which till that instant she had never fully realised; and, yielding to a sudden impulse, she turned away without one word of reply. When she again looked for Mr Dacre he was gone.

Poor Gertrude! it was a bitter moment—one that in after years was never remembered but with penitence and shame. She, who had believed that her will was subdued, even as her reason was convinced, had been betrayed into coldness and unthankfulness towards the person whom of all others she most reverenced. With a heavy, aching feeling of regret, which none can understand but those who have suddenly failed when they surely trusted that they stood firm, she entered the house; wretched at the recollection of her proud, rebellious spirit, and doubtful whether it would ever be possible to re-establish herself in Mr Dacre's regard. After some thought, she determined upon writing to him at once, confessing her weakness, and begging him to return as early as possible, to assure her of his pardon. "I cannot attempt excuses," were the concluding words of her note; "they will not raise me in your estimation, or render me less unworthy in my own; but as you once reminded me that you could enter into a father's feelings, so, as an erring child, I would entreat you to forget, if possible, my apparent ingratitude. I believe I was disappointed at not being permitted to follow my own will; and the only evidence that will really convince me I am forgiven, is such as I scarcely dare to ask; but if I might be allowed to assist you in any way, it would prove to me (what now it is difficult to hope), that you will still give me the blessing of your friendship."

CHAPTER XXXV.

When this note was dispatched, Gertrude's mind was comparatively relieved. She had done her utmost to atone for her fault in human eyes, but the fault was not therefore forgotten. It still remained, to increase the burden upon her spirits; and her manner was so altered, when she went to her sister's room, as to excite Laura's observation.

"I was going to ask you, Gertrude," she said, "to go down stairs and see what the people are about, but really you look so fagged, I don't think you ought to do it. Where have you been walking to?"

"Only into the park. What shall I do for you below?"

"Any thing you please. They have been to my room for orders half a dozen times already; and at last I said no one should come again on any pretence whatever; for my head aches so dreadfully, I cannot bear it."

"Lie down again," said Gertrude, "and let me place the cushions for you, and then you shall send me about just as you please."

"That is what I don't want; I had rather it should be as you please. There is some fuss about the conservatory; it must be lighted at night, and yet we want it to look pretty in the day, and they can't exactly tell how to manage it."

"I will do my best," said Gertrude; "but you must remember it is not much in my way."

"Quite as much as it is in mine," said Laura, sighing. "Edward had planned it all, and we talked it over one night; but I don't know exactly what

he decided on. Is it not strange, Gertrude, how differently one feels now about things, from what one did a few years ago?"

"Or a few months ago," thought Gertrude, but she did not say it; though it seemed almost wrong, knowing what she did, to allow Laura to remain in ignorance of the whole truth.

"I think so much about to-morrow," continued Laura; "and ever since you have been away, I have been startled, when I have been trying to go to sleep, by some sudden noise, which made me fancy Edward was here; and once I thought I heard Miss Forester's step; but you don't think she will come again, do you?"

"No," replied Gertrude, "you are safe from her at any rate; and as for Edward, we may hope that after to-morrow ——"

"To-morrow!" interrupted Laura, in a tone strangely different from usual;—"I feel as if to-morrow would be the end of one life, and the beginning of another. I have feared many days in my life, but none like it. Gertrude, what will come after to-morrow?"

There was a wild sadness in the expression of her sparkling eyes, which chilled and startled Gertrude. She trembled, lest excitement and agitation should be about to produce fever; and again entreating Laura to lie down and rest, she left her, and went down stairs. Here she found everything in very much the same state of confusion as she had left it. In the absence of a presiding head, there had naturally arisen a conflict of public opinion; and carpenters, gardeners, footmen, and housemaids, had all considered it incumbent on them to leave their several stations, in order to give their ideas for the general good. There was an assembly of the lower house in the entrance hall; and the housekeeper, who justly

considered herself entitled to at least the casting vote, was declaiming vehemently in favour of silver sconces, instead of oil lamps, when Gertrude appeared on the staircase. "Hush! hush! here is the young lady—here is Miss Gertrude!" was murmured around; but the full tide of Mrs Dickson's eloquence was not to be stopped by either mistress or master. "How should they know?" she said; "which one of them was there that could tell a silver candlestick from a tin one, till she taught them the difference; and now, for them to sit up and judge! But it was the way of the world. She'd seen enough of it, and all she longed for was a quiet life, only she would see justice done. While she lived at Allingham, there wasn't one that should say that things weren't handsome: and silver sconces and wax candles there should be, if she bought them, and paid for them herself."—"But 'tis what we all wants, that things should be handsome," interrupted the butler; and he was proceeding to expatiate in his turn upon the opposite side of the question, when Gertrude, stepping in amongst the group, caused a sudden dispersion. The carpenters took up their hammers, the housemaids their brushes and dusters, the footmen returned to their occupations; even Mrs Dickson vanished, though not before Gertrude had overheard her issuing strict orders to one of the men to run down to Elsham and tell them to send all the wax candles in Johnson's shop—there wouldn't be one more than was wanted, and if there was they could easily be returned. Gertrude could not smile. The thing might be a trifle—an accident—but it was a symptom of a most dangerous disease.

"Perhaps, ma'am, you'd be so good as to show us how we are to go on here," said one of the workmen, accosting her respectfully; "they've brought up the evergreens, but we don't know how Mrs Courtenay

chooses to have them put; and Mrs Dickson says there's to be some flowers stuck up somewhere."

Gertrude followed, rather as if about to superintend the preparations for a funeral than a fête. Her head swam, her eyes were dizzy, and the complete transformation of the house made her feel as if in a painful dream. The drawing-room was empty and uncarpeted, and strewn with branches of laurel, laurustinus, and evergreen oaks, some of which were carelessly piled against the delicate paper on the walls, and others stuck against the splendid glasses, without taste or design. Gertrude sighed at the task before her, and, as a preliminary step, was going to propose that the room should be half cleared, when a merry voice exclaimed—

"*Chacun à son gout*, Gertrude. I should not have said this was yours."

"Necessity," said Gertrude, with a faint laugh: "but what brings you here, Charlotte?"

"That which takes all women everywhere—at least, so say all men—curiosity. Where is Laura?"

"Up stairs, very unwell."

"That means I am not to see her; but I shan't break my heart. Mr Dacre, you may venture in—there is no one here."

Mr Dacre appeared in the door-way, but was evidently shy of coming forward.

"What was your correspondence about?" whispered Charlotte to her sister. Gertrude's reply was a deep blush, and Charlotte looked very malicious. "I shall leave you to your tête-à-tête," she said, "and when you have finished, you may send for me."

"My errand is soon done," said Mr Dacre, turning to Gertrude: "I received your note just as I was talking to your sister, and I walked back with her to say, that if you had any plans or drawings

you can let me see, I shall be very much obliged. Good-bye to you; I won't keep you when you are so busy."

"Good-bye," said Gertrude, and her voice shook; "you shall have the drawings this evening." And as she held out her hand, there was a long warm pressure, which told that all was forgiven. Gertrude felt very foolish, almost as if she could have cried, but Charlotte's eye was upon her, and she exerted herself to be composed.

"A strange person that," said Charlotte, musingly, when Mr Dacre was gone; "but one can't think about him now. What are you doing here, Gertrude?"

"Nothing."

"What have you done?"

"Nothing;—and what am I going to do?—nothing. So do, Charlotte, take the affair off my hands."

"It looks inviting, certainly; but may I have my own way?"

"Yes, anything and everything you please. Laura can't work, and I won't."

"Won't! that is very unlike you. I thought you would do all things."

"Would, if I could," said Gertrude, with an unconscious emphasis upon the words.

"Well! I like to see great geniuses baulked occasionally. So you leave the reins of government in my hands?"

"Yes, if you will let me retire;" and without listening for an answer, Gertrude ran out of the room; for her heart was full, and she could not trust herself to another sentence. Charlotte thought her manner peculiar, but did not trouble herself to ask questions. The bell was rung; the housekeeper summoned, and when Gertrude returned, she found

her sister in full consultation with Mrs Dickson, as to what was going on, and giving rapid orders to the work-people for the decorations. The first sentence which she heard, made her repent having yielded her authority.

"Mrs Dickson, these hangings look awkward: I think if some one were to go down to Elsham, they might find some silk to match them, and we might have festoons between the windows."

"Yes, ma'am; yes, certainly. One of the house-maids shall go directly."

"She can take a tassel to get a good match: and stop," continued Charlotte; "let her tell Miss Harvey to send up all her artificial flowers. She had a great box from town, I know, only the other day."

"And some more twine and tin-tacks, Mrs Dickson," said one of the men.

Poor Gertrude listened in extreme discomposure,—the twine and tin-tacks seemed the climax of extravagance. "You can't have used all I saw here this morning," she said, as she picked up half-a-dozen from the floor; and then went searching about for more. Charlotte burst into a fit of laughter, and begged to know what tin-tacks were a hundred.

"I don't know," replied Gertrude gravely; "but it is as well to be careful."

"Quite as well: mind they match the silk properly, Mrs Dickson."

"Oh, Charlotte! you are not in earnest," exclaimed Gertrude: "there is not the least occasion for it."

"I thought I was to have my own way," replied Charlotte.

"Yes, as long as it is a rational one."

"That was not an article in our agreement."

Gertrude could not dispute the point while the servants were present, and before she had time to speak to Charlotte alone, a summons was sent her

from Laura. "Promise me you will not send for any thing till I return," said Gertrude; but Charlotte was resolved, and although Gertrude was only wanted to report progress, the interruption was fatal to her economical wishes. Laura kept her in her room talking for a considerable time; and when she again went to the drawing-room, a shopman was measuring out lengths of pale blue silk, and Charlotte was kneeling by a bench, picking out the handsomest artificial flowers from a heap which lay beside her, to form wreaths for the sconces and the glasses. The whole of that evening was as a miserable mockery to Gertrude. Charlotte stayed to dinner at her own request; and Laura appeared, and exerted herself to seem cheerful, and light conversation was held, and all the ordinary courtesies of life went on, as if no secret spring of grief was working beneath. Yet to Gertrude almost every word and look was burdened with a double meaning. The furniture of the room, and the elegancies of the table, were no longer Edward's. The deference of the servants was an outward show. She felt herself only acting a part in the general deception; and the dark eyes and stern countenances of the old family portraits seemed to reproach her with the ruin about to be associated with their name. Ruin—and it might be, dishonour; and as the possibility crossed her mind, she longed to shut her eyes to the light, and close her ears to the sound of human voices, and banish the very name of her family from the world's remembrance. Charlotte was too busied with her new office to notice very minutely what was passing; and dinner was no sooner ended, than she again adjourned to the drawing-room, to put the finishing stroke to her work. The room was cleared, and the benches were put in order; and then some candles were lighted, and a few lamps placed in the conservatory, to give

an idea of what the general effect would be the next evening.

"It is beautiful, you must own," exclaimed Charlotte, when all was completed, and Laura was ushered into the room in state: "and just fancy how it will look to-morrow night, filled with people. I am sure Edward will be pleased."

A smile of gratification lighted up Laura's pallid features; but, as it died away, a hectic flush crimsoned her cheek, and she put her hand to her forehead to still its painful throbbing. "Why does she speak of him, Gertrude?" she said, in a faint voice, while the same wandering expression gleamed in her eyes, which Gertrude had noticed once before.

"She hopes he will come," was the reply; "and so we all do."

"Come! yes, there is no doubt of it. Who says there is?"

"Now, Laura, look this way; at the effect through the pier glass," interrupted Charlotte, beckoning her to the lower end of the room.

Laura went, and as she caught sight of her own figure in front of the brilliant reflection, she stopped, and a ghastly smile passed over her countenance. "How will it be to-morrow?" she said, turning to Gertrude, who stood by her side, with her arm encircling her waist, from a vague fear lest she should be seized with a sudden giddiness or faintness. "Edward will be here; and Miss Forester—what will they say?"

"Edward would say now, that you are tired, and ought not to be here," replied Gertrude: "will you not go with me to your own room?"

Laura took no notice of her sister's words. She stood for several minutes as if fascinated by her own exquisite beauty, and then in a sad voice, murmured, "He said that his love was gone;" and seating

herself upon one of the benches, she burst into tears.

"I cannot leave her in this state," said Gertrude, drawing her sister aside; "mamma will not care. Tell her that Laura is not well, and that I shall sleep here."

"She frightens me," said Charlotte; "what is the matter?"

"Don't ask," replied Gertrude: "only say what I tell you, and don't let mamma be anxious."

"But what shall you do if she is not better to-morrow? how shall you manage?"

"I don't know—I can't think. To-morrow will be sufficient for itself; let us do what is best to-night." And Gertrude again began to entreat Laura to go to her own room.

"I cannot, indeed, I cannot," she replied; "I shall be alone. Hark! did you not hear a carriage?"

Gertrude listened anxiously, but caught no sound: "it is but the wind," she said, "and your fancy."

Laura dragged herself, rather than walked, to the door, to be quite certain; and Gertrude followed, assuring her that if she would only consent to go to bed, she would herself remain with her.

"But he may come; it is not too late," persisted Laura; "and he did not say he would not be here to-night."

"And if he should come, will he be pleased to see you ill?"

"Pleased!" repeated Laura; "pleased with me!"

Gertrude saw that it was in vain to reason, and assuming a different manner, she said, "Laura, you must go. I will stay with you, and do everything you may require if you do; but if you do not, I will leave you directly."

"Alone!" again muttered Laura; but her voice

was faint, and when Gertrude gently led her from the room she no longer resisted.

The scene which she had just witnessed had convinced Gertrude that it would be right, at any risk, to calm Laura's mind as much as possible; and they were no sooner left by themselves than she told her in few words of all that had passed with Miss Forester. But the effect of the communication did not answer her expectations. Laura's gratitude and affection were excited to the utmost, but Gertrude saw that she had not understood her character. She no longer spoke of delay, but seemed rather to think that there was a greater necessity than before of confessing everything to Edward, in order that Gertrude might not be inconvenienced. And the pressure of this idea still weighed upon her mind so painfully, that Gertrude did not venture to continue the conversation. Every mention of Miss Forester's name recalled some cause of repentance or regret; and Gertrude, feeling that her only hope of giving comfort was at an end, was obliged to confine her observation to common subjects.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

It was late that night before Gertrude retired to rest. Laura's nervous agitation was so great that she could not bear a moment's solitude; and after assisting her to undress, Gertrude sat by the bed-side, watching her breathing, with the intention of sending for medical advice, if she saw any indications of increasing fever. The symptoms which had alarmed her seemed, however, more the result of anxiety of mind than natural illness; for after some hours' restlessness, Laura's uneven pulse grew calmer, and her countenance more composed, and at length sleep gradually stole over her. It was then midnight; but Gertrude felt no weariness: she almost dreaded to lie down, from the knowledge of what her waking would bring. It was the first night, too, that she had passed at Allingham; and the strangeness of the apartment, its size and furniture, so different from her own little room at the Priory, contributed not a little to the unnatural excitement of her feelings. A sensation of awe came over her, as she looked at the large bed and massive cabinets, and tried to find out what was hidden in the dark corners; and then caught the still, almost inaudible, sound, which reminded her she was not alone: and when she placed herself at the dressing-room door, which had been left open, and looked down the long gallery, listening to the dull, regular ticking of the time-piece in the hall, and feeling herself the only waking being in the house,—a chill fear, such as she remembered to have been the torment of her childhood, came over her, while shadowy forms seemed to be gliding near, and

the rustling of her own dress, and the touch of her own hand, startled her. Gertrude was not timid, but she was worn with harass of mind. She did not reason with herself, or even ridicule the absurdity of her own fancies; but she quietly closed the door, and kneeling down, buried her face in her hands, and brought herself, at once, into the real presence of that unseen world, the shadows of which had caused her to tremble. God was guarding, and her Saviour was watching over her, and the Spirit of Holiness was strengthening her feeble heart, and angels of peace were waiting to minister to her comfort; and when, with solemn reverence, the humble confession, and the earnest thanksgiving, the entreaty and the intercession, had been made, Gertrude rose from her knees tranquil and trusting, and when she lay down, slept as a child would sleep beneath a parent's eye. With the first dawn of morning she awoke, but not with the wretchedness which she had anticipated. The light was indeed blue and cheerless, very different from the rich, fading glow of sunset; and the flickering of the expiring lamp reminded her that the rest of night was over; but Gertrude's last thoughts had been of peace, and peace had not deserted her. After a glance at Laura, which satisfied her that there was no particular reason to be uneasy, she went to the window, though with no wish to see if the weather was likely to be propitious for an archery party. She had almost forgotten that it was of importance, but the vain longing to know "what the day might bring forth," made her look upon its first opening with something of a superstitious eye. There was little comfort, however, to be gained from the outward world, for dimness covered the distant country, and the trees in the park were still in comparative darkness. Only the white road gleamed in the twilight, and a thin column of smoke arose from one solitary

cottage; while far away in the east, a bright crimson streak was gradually extending itself, and dispersing the masses of grey clouds which had gathered to greet the rising sun. For a long time Gertrude remained at the window, watching till the crimson streak had spread into a broad belt, and the grey clouds had separated into light flakes; and then the glorious orb of fire stole upwards between the shadowy hills, marking their smooth outlines, and brightening their grassy slopes; while still, as it ascended, the mists floated from before it, and the radiant sky melted into a clear pale blue; and silently and swiftly the gladdening rays travelled onwards, till hill and valley, streamlet and tree, tall spires and clustering cottages, had felt their magic power, and started into life beneath their touch. Alas! for Gertrude. That dazzling scene was not for her; those brilliant rays had no charm to cheer her burdened spirit. She was in Edward's home, looking upon Edward's property; and the next few months might see him banished from both by his own errors. With an aching heart she turned away, for the sunlight had brought with it visions of earth, and earth has no spell to soothe the troubled breast. Yet she was not condemned to inaction, that most painful of all trials when sorrow is at hand. The comfort of many might be promoted by her exertions; and it was with this thought that she steeled herself to bear, not only patiently but cheerfully, whatever might be in store for her.

By the time Laura awoke she was dressed, and ready to attend upon, or talk to her, or do whatever might be needed; and Laura, refreshed by her night's rest, and ignorant of the chief sources of uneasiness, was less insensible to the influence of a brilliant summer morning, though something unnatural still lurked in her smile, when she spoke of all that was to be done during the day.

"I am so much better this morning," she said, in answer to Gertrude's inquiries; "and I must get up and see what they have been doing."

Gertrude entreated her to remain quiet, and to think as little as possible, for that every thing had been prepared the day before. "If you will promise me not to worry yourself," she added, "I will leave you after breakfast, for they will be anxious for me at home."

"I will be quiet if I can," said Laura; "but you will not be gone long."

"Not longer than I can help, and I can bring my dress with me for the afternoon."

"Ah! that reminds me," exclaimed Laura, starting up in bed. "Just look in my wardrobe, there is a dress there. I don't know how it is—" and she sank back on her pillow—"my head is very troublesome when I move."

"Then do not move, dearest; stay where you are till after breakfast."

"But the dress—Watson knows about it. It is that very pale violet-figured silk, Edward's favourite. I shall wear it, I think."

"And why am I to take it down?"

"I must look at it, and the white bonnet, too; the new one with the wreath, and the lace mantilla. I should like to see them all."

"But what is to be done with them?" inquired Gertrude.

"Nothing; but Edward asked me what I should wear, and I wish to be in time. He will be pleased to see me dressed; don't you think he will?"

Gertrude's fears of the previous night returned as Laura spoke; but after a few minutes she mentioned a few alterations which were to be made in the arrangements, with so much clearness, that Gertrude could scarcely help accusing herself of being fanciful

in feeling uneasy. "Remember your promise," she said, at parting; "you are not to ask any questions, or trouble yourself about any thing, and trust to my being back in time to see that all is ready."

Laura agreed, and Gertrude set off for the Priory. There was but one person whom she dreaded to see. It would be easy to satisfy her mother and Jane, whatever inquiries they might make; and Charlotte, too, was not likely to suspect any thing wrong, except Laura's illness; but Edith had a right to know every thing; and after leaving her in such a state of distress the previous day, Gertrude really feared what the consequence might be when she was told the truth. She was not in the drawing-room, however; and Gertrude had only at first to reply to a string of questions from Mrs Courtenay, and assure Charlotte that Laura was not dangerously ill, and that no one had presumed to interfere with her decorations.

"Well! my dear, I am so glad," exclaimed Mrs Courtenay; "I did not know what was going to happen last night, when Charlotte came back without you; something terrible, I was sure. Edward's going up to town in that strange way seemed so odd, and then Laura's crying, as Charlotte said, and your looking so ill: but it is very natural after all. I know what it is to have a large party. Have as many servants as you may, they must be looked after."

"Laura has not been well for two days," said Gertrude.

"Poor child! it is a very nervous business, and Edward was very thoughtless in running away from her just now; but men always are so; your poor dear father was exactly the same."

"But about to-day," said Jane; "do you think Laura really expects us all?"

"She expects me," observed Charlotte. "I con-

sider it my party, since I had the dressing up of the room."

"It is very troublesome," said Jane; "one doesn't know what to put on. It is neither an out-of-door, nor an in-door affair. What shall you wear, Gertrude?"

"I don't know; I have two or three dresses that will do."

"Now, is not that like Edith?" exclaimed Charlotte. "Actually this party has been talked of for the last fortnight, and at last the day is come, and Gertrude has not made up her mind what dress she shall appear in."

"But I have made up my mind," said Gertrude, endeavouring to appear interested; "at least so far as to settle that it shall be one of three."

"And you did really think about it?" said Charlotte, doubtfully. "And you do consider it a matter of consequence whether you are dressed in brown holland or silk? Then you shall come and choose for me. Miss Harvey has sent home my peach-coloured satinet such a figure that it is not fit to be seen. A desperate scolding she shall have to-morrow, but that won't help me in my difficulties to-day."

Gertrude was dragged away to Charlotte's room, and soon employed in deciding whether blue silk or white muslin would be the more becoming; and comparing flowers and ribbons, scarfs, mantillas, and gloves, in order to find out which would suit best. Then came Mrs Courtenay, with an earnest request that dear Gertrude would just try and alter the folds of her black satin dress; she was sure no one could do it as well. And she should like to know, too, whether Miss Harvey had not put too many flowers in her bonnet. "There are no lady's maids in the house," whispered Charlotte, satirically; but Gertrude did not reply in the same tone. She did all that was

required—took out the flowers, and put them in again differently, sewed some edging to a pair of cuffs, and then, when the clock had struck one, petitioned to be allowed to return to Allingham. And all this time she had not seen Edith. She had asked for her several times, but no one knew any thing about her, except that at breakfast she had scarcely spoken; to which Charlotte added, that she was pale, and did not eat; but since then she had not been seen.

"You will find her at the school, I have no doubt, my dear," said Mrs Courtenay; "I saw her go out with her bonnet on."

"And did she say nothing about me?" inquired Gertrude. "She must have thought I should be here."

"No, nothing at all; but you are not going to run away, my dear. Now I have settled my dress, I want you to tell me something more about Laura, and what time we are to go, and whether you think the archery ground will be damp, because, if so, I shall send my galoshes; and about Edward—when does Laura expect him? Just sit down quietly, and tell me."

Gertrude sighed inwardly but patiently. The pettiness of trifling duties at such a moment was irksome almost beyond endurance. Once or twice she felt an impulse to own every thing. The sorrow must come sooner or later, and deception seemed wrong; but then she checked herself with the remembrance that it was not her part to tell what Edward had concealed. The trial ended at last. Mrs Courtenay repeated several times that the carriage should be at the door exactly at half-past two, and that she would put some cloaks and galoshes in, for fear they should all take cold; and after desiring Gertrude to send word if Edward was arrived, and if she met Edith to be sure and tell her to be in time, she allowed her to depart.

"I am half inclined to go with you," said Charlotte, as they met on the hall steps; "only there is the trouble of returning."

Gertrude did not press the matter, for she longed to be alone. "You will have fatigue enough," she said, "before the day is over; and if you are not here, no one will be ready to start before three o'clock."

"But that will be time enough; we shall have plenty of archery between that and half-past four."

"Yes, but mamma wishes it. She wants to be at Allingham before any one comes, because she dislikes going into a crowd. Besides, if you stay, you can attend to some little matters for me. I have looked out all the things I want, and ordered them to be sent after me directly; but I daresay the servants will forget, or send them wrong, if they are not watched."

"That is the good of having so many idle people about," said Charlotte. "However, we are better than at Allingham. I tried to count the servants there one day, and actually I could not do it, there were such shadowy groups of kitchen maids and under-gardeners in the back ground. Rather expensive, I should think! but Edward knows best."

They were Charlotte's last words: and poor Gertrude, as she walked along, repeated them over and over again to herself, though not always attaching any meaning to them. She wandered through the park, turning from time to time, as she fancied she heard the wheels of a carriage or the trampling of horses. It was scarcely possible that Edward should have arrived; but Gertrude was not in a mood to calculate probabilities; and when she distinguished two figures, a gentleman and lady, at a little distance, the fancy crossed her that they might be Edward and Laura. A second thought made her smile at the

folly of the supposition, and as she drew nearer she had no difficulty in recognising Edith and Mr Dacre. Edith was standing under the shade of the large beech, from which the full front of Allingham could be seen. Her face was not directed to Mr Dacre, and she did not appear engaged in conversation; but as she leant against the huge trunk, her eyes seemed bent upon the ground, and when occasionally she raised her head it was but for a moment, and immediately she resumed her former dejected attitude. Gertrude hesitated whether it would be well to interrupt them; but there was no time to spare, and she knew that Edith would naturally be desirous of seeing her; and, whilst she still doubted, Mr Dacre perceived and came up to her. Gertrude held out her hand rather in confusion; for Mr Dacre might have forgotten, but she had not. It was taken exactly as usual, and as she looked towards Edith, he said, in a tone of compassion,—

"I am glad you are come. Your sister has been forcing me to talk to her."

"Has she indeed?" exclaimed Gertrude, and she sprang forwards.

"Don't startle her," said Mr Dacre, "she is sadly upset."

Gertrude's step was stilled in an instant. "I knew she must feel it," she said, "for many reasons—every reason."

"And you"—he replied.

"Do not think of me, but teach me how I may help others to bear it. Does Edith know all?"

"All without reserve. One secret has been hers and mine for very long."

"Yes, *the* secret—the foundation of every thing; but it is useless to look back. Oh! if Edward would come and satisfy the one horrible doubt remaining."

Mr Dacre said nothing till they drew near to Edith,

when he stopped. "You will remember," he said, "that you were to allow me to be of use to you under all circumstances. I shall wait anxiously to know if there is any thing I can do. And now good-bye: I do not think we shall meet again to-day."

Gertrude did not press him to remain, for she felt that his presence might be a restraint; and after watching him for a few moments, as he crossed the park in the direction of his own cottage, she walked on. Edith was still standing motionless, with her head averted; and her name was twice repeated before she recognised Gertrude's voice, and turned towards her. A look from each told what words could never have expressed of sorrow, and sympathy, and self-reproach; and Edith, throwing herself into her sister's arms, wept long and bitterly. "Can you love me, Gertrude?" were the first words she spoke. "It is my doing—misery—misery for us all."

"Edith, dearest, you must not think so. Who could bear it?"

"And I cannot bear it; but it is true—even you can do no good—no one can."

"That is despair," said Gertrude.

"Is there hope, then? Can any thing save Edward?"

"Not from earthly trial; but, Edith, you know that his present suffering may be his greatest good."

"And I!" exclaimed Edith; "he will never look upon me with kindness; and if he does, I shall not be able to endure it. Gertrude, no one can tell how wrong I have been. The world will blame him, when it is my doing. I was every thing to him once, and I did not act by him as I ought." And she again burst into tears.

"I cannot leave you whilst you are so unhappy," said Gertrude, kissing her; "but I do not think you will care to hear what I could say."

"I would rather be wretched," replied Edith—"but must you go?"

"Laura is expecting me, and it is late."

"Then go, go,—do not delay an instant. Yet there is no fear—you will not neglect her, as I have done."

"We shall see each other again to-day," said Gertrude.

"Not at Allingham—'t is impossible."

"But it is Laura's wish that you should be there; and for my sake I hope you will come. Remember there is no one who can feel with me as you do; and if Edward returns I may sadly want some one."

"Yes, yes," sighed Edith. "But I am not afraid as you are. He could never be tempted to dishonour."

"Perhaps not," said Gertrude, doubtfully; "yet, at any rate, I shall long for you so much."

"Am I fit for it?" said Edith. "I shall never bear to see Laura; and to hear her laugh would be worse than any other suffering."

"She will not laugh much," said Gertrude. "There are things upon her mind, as well as upon ours."

"What things?—what do you mean?"

"I cannot explain now, but you need not fear her cheerfulness; only come—it will be such a comfort to feel you are there."

"Who could deny you any thing, Gertrude?" said Edith, earnestly; "but you would not ask me if you knew the effort it will be."

"The long afternoon, alone," said Gertrude, "will be very bad. If we are together we can at least feel that we understand each other."

"And you will be lonely in a crowd," said Edith—"lonely and wretched from my doing. Gertrude, there is one thing you can never forgive me—the church."

Gertrude tried to conceal the exquisite pain which the allusion gave her, yet she was not able. "It is not your doing," she said; but her voice was choked.

"Yes, yes, it is—it is all my doing. I blamed Edward once, and thought he had much to answer for, because Torrington was left without a church; and now there might be one, if I had acted differently."

"There is to be one," said Gertrude.

"Is? — impossible! How can you do every thing?"

"I am not going to do it,—Mr Dacre is."

There was no symptom of agitation in Gertrude's manner, and Edith looked at her in astonishment, and after a minute's silence, exclaimed, "Is it really true? And can you say it so calmly? Oh, Gertrude, I shall never be like you."

"Hush! hush! Edith. If you love me, never speak such words again. Will you come with me now?" And with a rapid step Gertrude walked towards the house.

"Not now," said Edith, following her; "but I have vexed you."

Gertrude's lip quivered, and her voice was tremulous. "No, you never vex me; but I am so—I have been so wrong—I will tell you another time. Say you will come by-and-by."

The sight of Gertrude's distress was decisive. Edith consented, and the sisters parted.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WHO has not experienced the weight which presses upon the spirits, as the hour draws near for the arrival of a large party when but one wish is uppermost in the mind—the longing for solitude and silence? Gertrude felt it intensely, as she approached the house, and saw the marquee erected on the archery ground, and heard the distant sound of the instruments which the musicians were setting in order for the fête. During her absence all the preparations had been completed; the hall was dressed with flowers, the dining-room glittered with glass and plate, and the dancing-room, with its smooth floor and ornamented walls, looked inviting even in the daylight. Gertrude glanced into the different rooms, but had no time to inquire into the minutiæ of the arrangements. It was already a quarter-past two, and some punctual people would be sure to arrive by half-past; and almost dreading reproaches for her delay, she hastened to Laura's room. She was standing by the window, her eyes directed to the road by which Edward must arrive. Gertrude entered unperceived, and when she gently said, "Did you think I should never come?" Laura started, and in a frightened voice exclaimed, "You, Gertrude! I fancied it was Edward."

"He may be here soon," said Gertrude.

"Have you heard? Is he come?" exclaimed Laura, hurriedly.

"No, no one is come; and I have heard nothing: but I am so late—I must go and dress quickly. I came though to know if you wanted any thing first."

"Thank you; but I think I am ready; just look at me and see."

Gertrude gazed with a criticising eye, but the most fastidious taste could scarcely have found any thing to amend in the simple, elegant dress, which displayed Laura's slight figure and delicate features to the fullest advantage. She was less pale than she had been in the morning, for the flush of excitement was tinging her cheek, and the restlessness of her deep, hazel eye had ceased, though in its stead there remained an unnatural brilliancy, which Gertrude remarked with disquietude.

"You will find me in the marquee," said Laura. "I suppose I must go, and I believe I am longing for the fresh air."

"Mamma and my sisters will be here presently," said Gertrude; "so they will help you; but I can dress very quickly when I try; and as I am not the lady of the house, it won't so much signify if I am not perfect."

"Perfect in mind," said Laura, earnestly; but Gertrude did not wait to hear the compliment. She was gone to her own room, to complete a more hasty toilette than she had imagined possible; but with all her speed the rumble of carriages was heard in the park before she could go down stairs.

"The company are all in the marquee, ma'am," said the butler: "Mrs Courtenay, and the young ladies, and Lady Stapleton, and Sir Henry Colburn, and Mrs Ringwood, and Captain Stuart, and ——"

"Poor Laura!" thought Gertrude, not anxious to hear any more arrivals, and leaving the butler in the middle of his sentence, she hastened into the garden. It was even then a brilliant scene, filled with people, some clustered in groups and engaged in conversation, —others wandering leisurely through the walks,— and a few, just arrived, lounging at the entrance of the marquee. There were bright dresses, and young,

happy faces, and the music was sounding joyously, and laughter and light words were passing on all sides; and rich flowers—geraniums, fuchsias, heliotropes, and verbenas, and every choice treasure of the greenhouse,—were scattered in profusion amid the green lawns, and the unclouded splendour of a summer sun shed a dazzling lustre over all; but the envied master of the fête, the possessor of so much beauty, was—where? Few cared, though many asked;—only Gertrude, as she heard the whispered inquiries and civil regrets, felt that each word was torture, and watched the expression of the speakers' countenances, and weighed the accent of every sentence, to discover whether any but herself surmised the reason of his absence. It was some time before she could make her way to Laura, who was seated in the marquee, with little Charlie by her side. She was surrounded by a large party, and talked quickly and gaily. Her eyes sparkled, her mouth was brightened with smiles, and occasionally the sound of her silvery laugh was heard, as she replied to some witty remark or satirical observation. Was there indeed any thing hidden beneath? Was it Gertrude's fancy that the brilliant flash of the eyes was unnatural,—that a convulsive movement as of great pain made her suddenly raise her hand to her head? and in that clear, sweet voice, could it be true that there was discoverable a secret tone of anguish? If it were so, none perceived it but Gertrude. Lovely and fascinating as Laura had always been considered, on that day she was thought to surpass even her former self. Praises of her dress, and manner, and beauty, were circulated on all sides; and even in the midst of her anxiety, Gertrude could not help feeling pleasure as she looked at her. But the pleasure was momentary,—the pain that followed lasting. As the music ceased for a few minutes, the rumble of a

carriage was heard, and Laura's eye was in an instant directed to the turn of the winding road through the park. Some one spoke to her, and she laughed; but the remark that was made could not have been the cause; for she blushed, and apologised, and again gazed into the distance.

"Laura, my dear, Mrs Ferrers is waiting to introduce her daughter," whispered Mrs Courtenay.

"Yes, certainly, most happy;" but Laura's head was fixed in the opposite direction, and Mrs Ferrers looked haughty and annoyed, while her timid daughter seemed ready to hide herself in the farthest corner to escape observation.

"Laura, my dear Laura"—and Mrs Courtenay touched her arm.

"It is not Edward," said Gertrude, in a low voice.

Laura breathed more freely; and without attempting an excuse, received the introduction as if nothing had been amiss. Mrs Ferrers was stiff and cool, but her annoyance was thrown away. Gertrude felt vexed, and moving from her seat, offered it as a little atoning civility. It was accepted, and conversation followed as a matter of course. Mrs Ferrers had never been at Allingham since it came into Mr Courtenay's possession, except at a morning visit; she had no idea of the beauty of the grounds—they were so extensive—Mr Courtenay must have such good taste, they were so well laid out. She remembered them in Colonel Courtenay's time, but now they were completely altered. The observations were very natural and civil; but to Gertrude they were fretting, so that she could scarcely listen to them with patience. From the mamma she turned to the young lady, but it was the same thing. What else could they say upon such a short acquaintance? Gertrude felt herself unjust, and started another topic. The charms of archery—the difficulty of practising—the

good excuse it formed for bringing people together. She knew exactly what to say, for every body makes the same observations at archery meetings, and she could almost have repeated the words in her sleep; and whilst she was able to keep to this subject, there was no difficulty in watching Laura, thinking of Edward, and noticing every one who passed, to endeavour to find out if Miss Forester had made her appearance. But Mrs Ferrers grew tired of her secluded position, and proposed to walk, and Gertrude had no excuse for not accompanying her. Miss Ferrers did not shoot, and took no particular interest in the amusement; and she thought it would be extremely pleasant to stroll through the gardens; and then Gertrude's penance again began. She was stopped every five minutes with admiration, inquiries, and regrets,—forced to explain where Edward was, —when he was expected,—condoled with upon the prospect of a new election, but congratulated that Mr Courtenay's success was certain. Even Mrs Ferrers laughed at hearing the same things repeated from all quarters.

"A tax for being related to a distinguished person," she said. "One is so thankful for one's insignificance on these occasions. However, it is better than being distinguished in any other way. It would be dreadful to go through the world with a story attached to one's name."

Gertrude assented heartily. She felt as if the story of her name had already begun. "Will you rest here?" she said, pointing to a bench upon a high green bank, which commanded a view of the gardens and archery ground. It was the favourite point, and several parties had already collected there; and Gertrude hoped that amongst so many she might be spared the exertion of entertaining, at least for a few minutes. She began to be seriously uncomfortable at

the effect which Edward's non-arrival might have upon Laura, and vexed with herself for having left her; and she dreaded also the appearance of Miss Forester, and the first meeting in her absence, which would bring back so much that was painful, and might even induce Laura to give some open expression of her feelings. But it was useless to gaze upon the marquee, and try to find out what was going on, for Gertrude was still kept a prisoner. Kind friends crowded round her, and Miss Ferrers, frightened at so many strangers, suggested that, instead of remaining where they were, they should walk up and down the pathway below, whilst her mamma rested. Gertrude's consideration made her fully alive to the poor girl's embarrassment; but just as they were leaving the little hill she caught sight of a bonnet with a profusion of feathers, and a rich satin dress, glancing in the sunshine. It was the glitter of a snake in Gertrude's eyes, but she did her utmost to feel charitable. Miss Forester was accompanied by her father, and advancing to the marquee; and Gertrude, as she watched her, and thought of Laura, forgot that she might appear rude, and making a sudden apology, committed Miss Ferrers to the charge of an elderly lady who was standing near, and quickly retraced her steps. Miss Forester saw and came towards her—a smile full of contemptuous meaning was on her lips. They met in silence, and bowed; General Forester bowed too. Gertrude could not understand the expression of his face; it was not contemptuous, but triumphant. They pressed on to the marquee, Gertrude longing to give Laura warning; but she was just then engaged in showing the prizes which were to be distributed, and the people were standing round and admiring them. Jane, wrapped in an Indian shawl, was seated by her; and Mrs Courtenay, in a state of nervous bustle, was

insisting that no one could see either the ring or the pencil-case in such a bad light; but Edith and Charlotte were no where to be seen. Gertrude narrowly observed Laura's countenance, and as she did so, felt thankful for the crowd which kept Miss Forester from her view. Her face was flushed, the blue veins in her transparent forehead were swollen with agitation, her hands trembled, and from time to time, she cast a quick glance behind, and then with a slight shudder began talking rapidly. Charlie still stood by her side, amused, and wondering; and sometimes, as Laura looked at his innocent face, and heard him admired and petted, she smiled with a natural and happy smile; but in another moment the smile was gone, and in its stead came a forced hollow laugh.

It is a miserable thing to see too deeply behind the exterior of any scene of earthly enjoyment. Gertrude marvelled as she saw the gaiety, and listened to the mirth around her. It seemed impossible that all should be deceived; there must be some who felt with her—who knew that Laura was wretched, and Edward ruined. They were but acting a part, and in a few minutes the veil would be cast aside, and the name of Courtenay would be a mark for their ridicule and contempt. The thought was in her heart, and she turned and saw Miss Forester's eye fixed upon her, and at the same instant a voice whispered in her ear—

"I was anxious to tell you a friend of mine saw Mr Courtenay yesterday, in London. He was at one of the Treasury offices. I knew you would like to hear of him."

If Miss Forester desired revenge, she had it to the utmost of her wishes. Gertrude's face became deadly pale, but the tone in which she said "Who saw him?" was calm, from the very excess of her anxiety. Before

she could receive an answer, there was a movement in the party, and Mrs Courtenay's hand was stretched out to greet Miss Forester.

"I am so sorry I did not see you before. Have you looked at the prizes yet? I suppose you have though: Laura told me they were your ordering."

Laura turned at the sound of her own name. Miss Forester approached sweetly and courteously as usual, but Laura seemed spell-bound. Miss Forester was resolved that there should be no appearance of a diminution of intimacy; and unheeding Mrs Courtenay, who held up the prizes before her, she bent forward, and taking Laura's unresisting hand, said—

"I am afraid you must have thought me very remiss in not being with you the last two days, but I assure you it was not my own doing."

"Laura," interrupted Gertrude, who, forgetting everything but her dread lest her sister might betray her feelings too strongly, had pressed forward behind Miss Forester, "I think you are wanted in front; there are many persons wishing to see you, and you are quite hidden here."

Poor Laura gazed upon Gertrude as upon a guardian angel. She put her arm within hers, as if for support; and Gertrude passed her hand caressingly over her trembling fingers, and led her from the marquee.

"Gertrude, my dear," exclaimed Mrs Courtenay, "if you are going to walk, do see if you can meet Charlotte and Edith. They were to have come with us, but Edith was not ready, and so I sent the carriage back. But they ought to have been here long ago, and they will miss the best part of the day."

"Shall I look for them?" said Miss Forester, following, and though slightly abashed at her reception, determined to be one of the family. Laura looked beseechingly at her sister.

"Take me away, Gertrude," said she in a faint voice; "I am so ill; I cannot bear it. If they would only go, all of them."

"Perhaps, mamma," said Gertrude, "you would like to walk round with Miss Forester. It is not far, and you will be amused to see what is going on."

"Oh! yes, my dear, the very thing; and Charlie, little darling, shall come too. Jane, you can take care of him."

Jane consented, though unwillingly; and Miss Forester, having no objection ready, was obliged to set off, with Mrs Courtenay by her side. Gertrude felt that she had secured their absence at least for half an hour, and seeing that Laura looked relieved and tranquil, persuaded her to stay and watch the archery, and pay a few necessary attentions to her guests; but she soon repented having done so. The last round was shot, and the marks were counted; and when this business was transacted, the prizes were brought to Laura to be presented. All who had not seen them came to look at them, and amongst them Mrs Ferrers and her daughter. Mrs Ferrers was a connoisseur in jewellery, and admired in the warmest terms. She had never seen anything so perfect as the workmanship of the ring; she remembered to have seen one like it in some great shop in town.

"Hanson's, I think, mamma," said Miss Ferrers.

"Hanson's, was it? Yes, I think you are right. Every one deals with Hanson: the taste of his things is so perfect. Don't you think so, Mrs Courtenay?"

Laura's reply was indistinct, and Gertrude felt extremely uncomfortable.

"Tremendously expensive, Hanson is," said an officer, taking up the ring.

"And so enticing," observed Mrs Ferrers. "You can never escape from him. He has such a way of recommending things."

"There will be a law against ladies entering his shop by-and-by," said Captain Stuart; "at least I am inclined to think I shall make one when I have a wife."

"She will rebel."

"Very possibly, but I suspect I should prove the conqueror."

"He has never tried, Mrs Courtenay," said Mrs Ferrers, laughing; "and I don't think either you or I should advise him to make the experiment."

Laura clung to her sister's arm, and trembled violently; and Gertrude looked round for some opening to escape, or change the conversation, but in vain.

"It is very well for ladies to talk," continued Captain Stuart; "but there are occasions on which a man must have his own way. A friend of mine was ruined the other day by his wife, and I am afraid it is a case beyond forgiveness."

Laura uttered a faint exclamation, which to Gertrude's ear was agony.

"Hark! there is a flourish!" exclaimed Captain Stuart; "now we shall hear who has been the winner. Mrs Courtenay, allow me to give you the prizes."

Gertrude took them, for Laura's hand was powerless.

"Only for one moment exert yourself," she whispered: "it must soon be over; you can sit down for a minute."

There was a little bustle of preparation, and an opening was made for the successful archeress. She was young, interesting, and happy looking; and as she came forward, Gertrude felt painfully the contrast between Laura's expression of misery, and the brightness of one who appeared never to have known care. Laura rose; and Gertrude once more whispered to

her to be calm. Again, for the last time, the bugle sounded. Was it the rattle of a carriage which jarred with the lingering notes? A thick shrubbery divided the archery ground from the road; and no one could see. Laura held the brooch in her hand, but her lips were parched, her voice was choked. Every one listened instinctively. The carriage rolled on, but stopped before it could have reached the house, and the attention of all was directed to the path leading into the park. It must be Edward. Gertrude's countenance showed that she had little doubt, and Laura's face became crimson and pale at each instant. Some few advanced beyond the rest, and Mr Courtenay's name was repeated on all sides. Laura caught the sound, and the ring dropped from her hand. She withdrew herself from Gertrude's grasp, and rushed forward; but as she came in sight of her husband, a miserable fear overpowered her, and she stood motionless. Gertrude watched her with mingled interest and alarm, and would have followed, but Edward was close at hand. His step was firm, his manner collected, and his countenance — what would not Gertrude have given to read it? He came near to Laura, but she did not move; he held out his hand, but her eyes were bent upon the ground. Gertrude feared that she would faint, but in another moment the charm of his voice had broken the spell; she started, and raised her head; and when the crowd, which at this moment pressed in front again separated, Gertrude saw her advancing towards her, leaning upon Edward's arm.

Could it be pleasure that made Gertrude smile, and step forward, and speak words of congratulation? She did not know. All that she did or said was mechanical. She saw that Laura was composed, but in exterior only; that her manner to Edward was restrained, and that he was noticing and suffering

from it. He turned to her perpetually, and seemed with difficulty to show the proper courtesies to his friends; but Gertrude could discover nothing of that which she so longed to be told: only once, when General Forester was seen at a little distance, Edward's brow darkened, and his voice grew louder, as he asked a few rapid questions of a gentleman who was near him. Laura noticed him too, and trembled, but Gertrude was prevented from observing any thing further. There was a general movement towards the house, and in the crush she was separated from her own party. With her usual thought she looked round for her mother, and seeing her with no one but little Charlie at some distance, was hurrying towards her, when she was stopped in one of the walks by the sudden appearance of Edith and Charlotte.

"Gertrude running so fast! what a dignified proceeding!" began Charlotte, in a laughing tone.

"Hush! hush!" exclaimed Edith; "something is going on. Edward is come, I am sure."

"Well! suppose he is, what does it signify? A very pleasant surprise it will be. Why should you all look like frightened hares?"

"Charlotte, Charlotte, pray don't talk so. Is he come, Gertrude?"

"Yes, don't keep me. I am going to mamma."

"But have you seen him—what does he say?"

"Never mind," interrupted Charlotte. "Don't you see that Gertrude is in an agony at being kept? you are so tiresome, Edith!"

"Only one word."

"I have scarcely spoken to him," replied Gertrude, and without waiting for another question, she went on.

"Mystery!" exclaimed Charlotte. "You do delight in it, Edith; and Gertrude too—I really am angry with her."

"Gertrude!" exclaimed Edith, "she is an angel, if you did but know it."

Charlotte laughed, and Edith suddenly stopped. "I cannot go with you," she said; "I told you I should be much better at home,"

"This is mere folly," said Charlotte; "after I have wasted the whole afternoon for you, and taken the trouble to dress you, and make you look respectable (for you were anything but that before), why should you be so tormenting? I can't go on the ground alone."

"Stay, there is the bell," said Edith: "dinner will be ready in a few minutes: let us wait here till afterwards."

"Thank you, what good will that do to either of us?"

"I cannot see Edward," exclaimed Edith: "it will drive me wild."

"You will drive me wild, Edith, and I will not put up with it. I am your sister, and I have a right to know things as well as you."

"A right? yes: but if it is to make you wretched?"

"Then let me be wretched: it is not my fashion; but I suppose I shall survive it."

Edith hesitated, and longed for Gertrude to decide whether she should tell. Charlotte held her firmly: "I am resolved," she said; "we will neither of us go till I have learnt all."

"Then have your will—Edward is a ruined man."

The words were just uttered, when the band struck up a joyous air, and the larger portion of the company crowded into the walk. Charlotte stood aside to allow them to pass; and before she could reply to Edith, Gertrude and her mother came up.

"Take care of mamma, Charlotte," said Gertrude. "Jane is behind somewhere, and I must carry Charlie to his nurse."

Charlotte felt it was no moment for explanations, but she caught Gertrude's arm, and said hurriedly, "Is it true? Is Edith dreaming?"

"I don't know—who told?—ask nothing now," exclaimed Gertrude; and taking the child by the hand, she led him away.

"Charlotte, my dear, don't you see you are in the way?" said Mrs Courtenay. "Move, my love, move."

Charlotte looked round—Edith was gone, and Gertrude; before her were passing groups of the gay, the beautiful, and the wealthy, and on all sides were sounds of mirth and light-hearted enjoyment. How could the words she had heard be true?

"Charlotte, my dear, you have lost your senses; pray, come on, we shall be very late." Mrs Courtenay spoke in a tone which for her expressed great irritation. "You know there will be such a crush presently. I wish I had not been so foolish as to send General Forester away; but I wanted him to speak to Edward. I was just going after him to shake hands with Edward myself, when Gertrude came, and I meant to have got into the house before any one to avoid the bustle, but it has all gone wrong together."

Charlotte silently offered her arm, and Mrs Courtenay's mind was in a few minutes relieved, by the approach of a gentleman who proffered his services. They passed on to the house. Charlotte's eye sought her brother as she seated herself at the dinner-table, but his place was empty, and some minutes elapsed before he appeared.

"Mr Courtenay is looking remarkably well,—don't you think so?" observed Charlotte's right-hand neighbour.

"Yes, very."

"And such an unexpected pleasure it is, his having arrived in time. Every one had given him up."

"Yes, every one."

"His stay in town must have been extremely short; but rail-roads make travelling a mere farce compared with what it used to be."

"Certainly—it is very different."

There was a silence. Charlotte Courtenay was generally considered a lively, agreeable person, but at her brother's table on that day she did not shine.

"My master begs you will drink wine with him, ma'am," said the butler to Mrs Courtenay.

Edward looked down the table. "My dear mother, you will excuse me; it is very old-fashioned, but we have not met before to-day."

Mrs Courtenay was proud and pleased. Her son never forgot her, and she murmured her satisfaction to Charlotte. "Dear Edward! he is so unlike other people,—so very considerate, and it is such a pleasure to have him here. The party would have been nothing without him. And did you ever see a table so beautifully laid out? Just look at the flowers in the vases, and all those curious pastry and sugar figures, and the cut glass and plate: how well it is all arranged! Dickson is a very clever person, certainly. I suppose she managed it all."

"I don't know; I suppose so."

"Courtenay," exclaimed Charlotte's discomfited neighbour, "you cut me dead, yesterday."

"Yesterday!"—Edward stopped, as he was about to address an observation to the lady on his right hand—"I was not here."

"No, nor I neither. We passed each other as you were coming out of one of the Treasury offices. If you were not near-sighted I should have thought they had been making a great man of you, and given you a fit of pride."

"Ah! indeed!—Stupid fellow! don't you see what you have done?"

A plate of blanc-mange fell from the hands of one of the servants; Edward bent his head, and trusted that Lady Paulett's dress was not hurt, and then turned angrily to the man. A little confusion followed. Lady Paulett's dress was very much spotted, and Edward was still more provoked. The servant apologised humbly, and retired as quickly as possible to complain to his companions that Mr Courtenay caused the accident himself, and afterwards laid the blame upon him. Charlotte watched the scene, but discovered in it nothing unusual, and Edith from the opposite side of the table watched too, and perhaps saw deeper into its meaning. And Gertrude—in a distant corner of the room, at a side-table, she was engaged in making herself agreeable to a little knot of young boys, invited out of mere compliment, who from shyness and awkwardness had been the stragglers of the party, and suffered the usual fate of boys in a large party—no seats, and very indifferent attendance. Whether she noticed much beyond what was passing immediately around her, none but a very keen observer would have perceived. Several times, indeed, she moved her seat so as to obtain a view of Laura, and once she forgot to answer a question; but beyond this her whole mind seemed given to the task of entertainment. Enjoyment was the ostensible object of the meeting, and enjoyment all seemed determined to have, Laura not excepted. Gertrude distinguished her laugh, and saw that she was eager in conversation; and her mind rested contented, for she had lately learnt to feel that, under some circumstances, "sufficient" unto the hour, as well as unto the day, "is the evil thereof." Yet the ordeal was a trying one. The highest principle will scarcely stand the wearying exertion of appearing gay when the heart is sad, for any length of time; and Gertrude's spirits nearly failed her before the ladies rose from the

table. The change was a relief, but only a temporary one. Laura's face told a tale of hidden suffering, which Gertrude trembled to see; and her first entreaty was, that she would leave the party, and go to her room. "For an hour,—only for an hour, dearest," she said; "we will do everything that is wanted, and you shall appear again when the dancing begins."

Laura shook her head: "You don't know what you are advising, Gertrude. Feel." And she put her hand within Gertrude's. It was burning with fever. "I must stay," she said: "an hour's rest would be no rest,—only do not leave me: my head is giddy—I cannot trust myself; and I might be obliged to talk—Miss Forester might come: I know her eyes are fixed on me now; I feel them wherever I move; but she shall not see. Gertrude, she sat near me at dinner. Did you hear me laugh?"

"Ah! my dear," exclaimed Mrs Courtenay, who had overheard the last words, "I wanted to know what you were so merry about. It did one's heart good to hear you. I must tell you," she added, lowering her voice, "every thing was so very nice; I was charmed that it went off well—all but poor Lady Paulett's gown—dear me! there she is sitting alone; I must really go and ask her whether any thing can be done about it."

Laura followed, glad to have some excuse for moving; and Gertrude, rousing herself to exertion, did her best to make the next hour pass agreeably. She was left almost alone to the task, for Jane was tired, and Charlotte and Edith were gone. Gertrude from the window perceived them once at the farther end of the colonnade. They were talking earnestly; but as they turned the angle of the house she lost sight of them. Their conversation was no mystery —nothing was a mystery now but Edward's journey, and Miss Forester's meaning smile.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"THE dancing is just going to begin, my dear; where are your sisters?"

Mrs Courtenay's voice awoke Jane from a reverie. "Gertrude, mamma, do you mean? There she is, talking to that young lady in blue."

"No, not Gertrude, but the others."

"Oh! never mind, they can take care of themselves. Look, mamma, that really is perfect."

The folding doors were thrown open, and a sudden blaze burst upon the spectators. The splendid drawing-room, apparently forming but the anteroom to the illuminated conservatory, glittered as if by magic lights, sparkling amid dark leaves and gay wreaths, and reflected, again and again, from opposite glasses.

"Charlotte's work,—how beautiful!" exclaimed Jane; "what pleasure she will have in seeing it!"

A heavy sigh, so close as to be heard even amongst the murmurs of admiration, was the answer. Charlotte was standing near them in the doorway.

"My dear," exclaimed Mrs Courtenay, going up to her, "I have been looking for you so long. Captain Stuart has been asking for you; he wants you to dance the first quadrille."

"Me? I can't dance; don't let him ask me."

"My dear Charlotte, you are foolish. What did you come here for but to dance? Do persuade her, Jane. Where is Gertrude? I do hope some one will make her do it."

Mrs Courtenay became agitated, as she often did when other persons would have been out of temper.

"Yes, where is Gertrude?" exclaimed Charlotte;

and without attending to her mother she moved away.

The music sounded, and dancing commenced; but Gertrude was not seen. Standing in a corner of the library by the entrance of the drawing-room, she was watching with breathless interest the progress of a conversation between Edward and General Forester, who, taking advantage of the noise and gaiety, were evidently engaged in a discussion of no light moment. General Forester's manner was eager and authoritative; his arm was occasionally stretched out, as if forgetting the attention he might attract in the importance of the question; and once his hand was placed upon Mr Courtenay's shoulder, with the familiarity of an old, long-tried friend. And Gertrude's longing desire to discover as much, at least, as Edward's countenance could reveal, was granted. Pride was stamped upon his noble brow, and bitter thoughts of scorn curled his lip. He leant against the doorway, and his foot moved with restless impatience, but his eyes were fastened upon the ground, and when from time to time he raised them, there was that in their expression from which Gertrude shrank. Was it her brother?—was it Edward? with his high principles, and splendid talents, and strong resolution. Could he be reckless and despairing? Oh! who shall smile at weakness, and think lightly of vacillation, when they may be the first steps on the downward road to ruin?

The music ceased, and the hum of merry voices rose around. Gertrude heard her name repeated, and ventured forth. It was only her mother inquiring where she had been hiding herself? but when she had once appeared there was no retiring again. To dance was not necessary, but to assist Laura was. Yet, was the exertion possible? She stood by Laura's side, but her gaze was fixed upon Edward; she moved, but her attention was still directed to him; she knew the

precise moment when he ceased speaking to General Forester; she saw the effort with which he engaged in conversation; she noticed every person whom he addressed, and heard his hollow laugh through the din of light-hearted merriment. And the moments fled away, and the countenances around her grew more joyous, and the music more exhilarating, and the brightness of the scene more dazzling. How was it that in Gertrude's ear a solemn under tone blended with every note; that when her thoughts wandered for an instant from the one engrossing subject, the glittering ball-room, its lights and decorations, passed from before her, and in their stead arose the dim, narrow aisles, and arches, and windows of a simple village church? Was it strange that when she looked at Edward a feeling more bitter than regret crossed her mind. There was indeed much to struggle against. The vision she had so long dwelt upon with delight, and which for the last two days she had so earnestly striven to forget, was recurring with painful distinctness. The remembrance of what might have been her duty, and of Edward's folly—worse than folly, his selfishness, pressed upon her mind. The sacrifice seemed so great; would it indeed be necessary? As she asked herself the question, a well-known voice whispered in her ear—

"Will you allow me a few minutes' conversation?"

Mr Dacre was standing beside her. Gertrude coloured with surprise, and perhaps with the consciousness of her own thoughts. She felt that they were wrong, for she would have been ashamed to confess them.

"Did you speak to me?" she exclaimed. "I did not know you were here."

"I am but just come," he replied.

"So late!" and Gertrude looked and felt alarmed. "There must be a cause."

"Yes, can you grant my request?"

"A crowd is the best solitude," said Gertrude.

"But can you trust yourself?"

"I don't know. I can bear any thing but suspense."

"Only for a few minutes. I am come because there is no one but yourself who can act in this case, and no one who will understand that it is necessary. Have you spoken to your brother?"

"Yes, but not alone. There has been no opportunity."

They were standing at the lower end of the dancing-room, and a quadrille having just finished, several parties came up to them. Mr Dacre seemed hurried and uncomfortable.

"It will not do here," he said. "We shall be interrupted. Is there no other place?"

Gertrude led the way into the conservatory, and seating herself on a bench by the door which led into the garden, said—

"We shall be private here for a few minutes at least; and now tell me—I am prepared for every thing."

"Even for the fulfilment of your worst fears?"

Gertrude grasped Mr Dacre's arm, and looked wildly in his face.

"I am torturing you," he said; "but I cannot help it. I know nothing for certain, but to-morrow (I heard it about half an hour ago from Mr Rivers) there is to be a meeting held, previous to the announcement of the candidates for the next election. If your brother intends coming forward, he must declare himself immediately."

"Intends!" said Gertrude faintly. "I have tried to think there could be no doubt of his refusal."

Mr Dacre gazed upon her with an expression of the deepest commiseration.

"You are pitying me," she exclaimed. "Why? What have you kept back?"

"Nothing but ——"

"But what? If you can feel for me, you will hide nothing. It is misery."

Mr Dacre took her cold hand in his, and said in a tone of affection—

"I have not concealed any thing, but I have a dread, it may be a fancy, that all is not right—that Mr Courtenay's journey to London may have determined him. He may be already pledged."

Gertrude clasped her hands despairingly.

"To-night there is hope," he continued. "General Forester is here; with what intention we can both guess. Before he is gone your brother's resolution must be taken; and before this time to-morrow it must be known by many, and with it his change of principles; for he will be forced openly to declare which side he will support in every question of importance. If he does not, he will be forsaken by more than half his party. Will you save him? Will you go to him, and urge him to pause?"

Gertrude closed her eyes, and her breathing was quick and irregular, but she made an effort to reply; —"Now he will not listen. He will feel that it is not for me to interfere."

"Now or never. Who can say any thing if you do not?"

"No one. I see it must be so; but I am ignorant. I have no arguments to use."

"It is not a case for arguments. It is the heart, not the reason, which requires to be convinced; and I need not remind you, that if words are powerless, prayer is not."

Gertrude sighed deeply.

"This is not the scene for such an undertaking," she said; "but if it is right ——"

"Your brother is not here," interrupted Mr Dacre; "he left the dancing-room with General Forester at the moment we did."

Gertrude started from her seat. "If he is pledged!" she exclaimed.

"Still go to him,—pray him,—force him to retract. Tell him he cannot save himself. If you have ever loved him, do not let him sell his honour for a hope that must be vain."

"Found at last," exclaimed a bland voice.

Mr Dacre withdrew himself from the touch of Miss Forester's hand.

"I heard you were here, and I have been looking for you so long."

"I thank you. You have given yourself too much trouble."

"Oh no, none at all; but I was so anxious. Some one told me you had passed down this way, and I was sure you would take cold."

Mr Dacre looked at Gertrude entreatingly.

"You have nothing more to say?" she inquired in a low voice; "no arguments?"

"Nothing. Only go to him immediately."

"Perhaps you will tell my father where I am to be found, if you see him," said Miss Forester, as Gertrude turned away: "I suspect he is closeted with Mr Courtenay. They have been looking very business-like the whole evening."

Gertrude did not see the look which accompanied the words; she was gone before the sentence was concluded.

"Where did you say your father was?" inquired Mr Dacre coldly.

"I don't know exactly, but he told me he had a good deal to say to Mr Courtenay. In fact, I suspect they are just determining what the address is to be. My father wishes to carry it away with him. But,

my dear sir, you do distress me so by staying here. Fancy what it would be if you were to be taken ill."

"Very unpleasant," said Mr Dacre.

"Now you will go back with me; I am really frightened about you. Remember, I shall have to nurse you."

"Thank you, but my housekeeper generally takes that trouble."

"So obstinate, so very obstinate," said Miss Forester, sweetly. "You will at least let us take you home in the carriage. It is very late."

"I am obliged, but I have no intention of going yet. Do you know where I shall find Mrs Courtenay?" And Mr Dacre walked hastily away.

Miss Forester's face was any thing but amiable as she followed. The Courtenays in some shape or other seemed destined to come between her and every endeavour she could make to win Mr Dacre's favour.

The room was gradually thinning, and the spirit of the evening seemed evaporating. The dancing still continued, but many of the party were gathered together in little knots, talking with more than usual earnestness, and glancing occasionally at a group formed at the upper part of the room, of which Mr Dacre saw with uneasiness that Gertrude was one. She was bending over Laura, who was seated upon a sofa, talking quickly. The burning crimson of fever was on her cheek, and her eyes rolled vacantly but incessantly around the room. Edith and Charlotte were with her, and there was an evident desire to conceal what was passing. Gertrude looked at Mr Dacre, as if to ask his forgiveness for delay; but as he approached, Miss Forester came up also.

"Stand near," whispered Gertrude to Edith; "she must not see her."

Laura turned hastily.

"Go," she said, wildly. "You crowd me. Give me air. Gertrude—where is Gertrude?"

"Close to you, dearest," said Gertrude, gently; and she placed herself directly in front.

Mr Dacre held back, but Miss Forester pressed on. Several other persons came up at the same time, and Laura's voice was again raised, begging that they would leave her.

"She is not well; there are too many about her," said Gertrude; "I must beg you not to come so near."

The words were addressed to Miss Forester, but she did not or would not hear.

"Oh, it is the excitement! I knew she would do too much. I must offer her these salts."

Her hand was stretched out, but Gertrude thrust it aside with a civil apology—

"Excuse me; I must insist."

She looked round for Mr Dacre.

"Have you forgotten every thing?" he said, as he came close to her.

"It is impossible to go," replied Gertrude; "Laura is ill."

"It must be possible. Another quarter of an hour may be too late."

"But Laura ——"

"Leave her, leave her. There are others to care for her."

"Let me come for one minute," said Miss Forester, pushing herself before Charlotte. "Dearest Mrs Courtenay, only try this. You used to be very fond of it."

Laura had sunk back upon the sofa, and her head was averted; but the smooth accents fell upon her ear, with all their miserable associations, and with a scream of anguish she started up. The music sud-

denly ceased, and there was a general rush of inquiry.

"Go," said Mr Dacre to Gertrude, almost sternly.

Gertrude cast one lingering look upon Laura.

"Remember, you are to see him, whoever may be with him."

Gertrude turned away as Laura uttered her name, and, without being noticed by any one, left the room.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

In the small luxurious apartment, hung with prints and crowded with books, which was appropriated as a study, Mr Courtenay was seated in company with General Forester. Both were engaged in writing; the one deeply, with his brows knit, and his head leaning upon his hand; the other carelessly, as if merely for the passing away of a few spare minutes, or, more probably, as a screen to conceal the attention with which he marked the progress of his companion. The door was closed and locked, the curtains were drawn, and the lamp burnt brightly on the table. It seemed an hour devoted to business, but bursts of music and tones of gaiety were sounding faintly from the farther extremity of the corridor; and the roll of carriages, and the bustle of departing guests told that a different scene was passing in the other part of the house.

"It is late," said Edward, laying down his pen with a weary sigh, and looking at his watch; "will not to-morrow do as well?"

"No time like the present," was the answer; "besides, we have a meeting at ten in the morning."

"It is not a thing to be done in a hurry," exclaimed Edward; "if it were only to judge how the sentences should be worded."

"Oh! that—there is no difficulty in managing the words; let us only have the sense. May I be allowed to look?"—and he took up the paper, which lay on Mr Courtenay's desk.

"What do you say?" inquired Edward, rather anxiously; "will it do?"

"Ah, hem! we will see: it is a good commence-

ment." Edward beat his foot in irritation. To be patronised, was more than any ordinary temper could endure. General Forester went on reading, but the writing was bad—the sentences were interlined—many required consideration. Edward's eyes were fixed upon him; it seemed as if he would never end.

"You had better let me have it," and he took the paper from his hand.

"No, no; I understand it perfectly. It is very well—very right, as far as it goes; but ——"

"Well! what?"

"It won't suit. It is not explicit."

"Every subject is mentioned which we have ever discussed."

"Yes; but not your definite opinion."

Edward pushed aside the table, and rose angrily from his seat. "I can bear a great deal," he said, "but not to be dictated to. I will give my promise upon every point: Church question—manufactures—poor-laws; my honour will be pledged upon all; but the manner in which I am to express myself to my constituents is my own affair; and I am, and must be, the best judge of what is right." The word "right" was pronounced with hesitation.

"Then we part," said General Forester, coolly. "Put forth such a declaration as this, and two-thirds of your supporters will leave you. They require, and will have, a positive open avowal."

"Require! will have!" repeated Edward.

"Yes; they are strong words, but true ones. Who will believe that you are intending to vote against all you have hitherto upheld, unless you profess it plainly?"

"Who?—who, indeed?" were the words which rose to Edward's lips. He walked to the window, and, drawing aside the curtain, looked out upon the bright summer night.

"Time is passing," said General Forester; "do you repent?" Edward's gaze was upon the deep blue sky, and he did not answer. "Mr Courtenay, this is trifling: I am not here to wait your leisure. Am I to consider this paper as the only declaration you intend to give?"

Still Edward paused. From the purity of the heavens, he had turned to the beauty of the earth, —to the fair domain, the outline of which was dimly shadowed forth by the pale moonlight. Let him offend General Forester and his party, and his election was lost. Let his election be lost, and the hope for which he had been willing to sacrifice his honour, the prospect of retaining his property and saving himself from ruin, was lost likewise. General Forester waited in angry surprise, and was about to make another and a last effort, when Edward placed himself again at the table. "It must be," he said. "Yes, you are right; it must be; but the recompense will be ample." The pen fell from Edward's hand. Why did the thought of recompense make him start with the fear of a coward?

"Half-past eleven," said General Forester: "my watch is very correct. I am sorry to hurry you."

"Some one knocked," exclaimed Edward, and he turned pale.

"Oh! no; never mind. The door is fastened; we can't be interrupted." Edward took up his pen again. Another knock, and a louder one. "No admittance!" exclaimed General Forester. But he had gone a step too far; Edward allowed no one but himself to be master in his own house. His pen was once more cast aside,—his paper carefully covered,—and the door was opened. It was Gertrude, trembling and agitated; her face of care sadly contrasting with the light elegance of her dress, and shrinking with a natural timidity from a task for

which her youth and sex rendered her in her own opinion unfitted.

"Edward, I am come—may I see you? Could I speak a few words?" she began.

"Not now—by-and-by. I am engaged particularly." He was about to close the door, but she prevented him.

"It is necessary—indeed I must: it is something which must not be delayed."

"Laura!" exclaimed Edward, in a tone of uneasiness.

"No," replied Gertrude, though her conscience smote her as she remembered the state in which she had just left her.

"Then go, go. I cannot listen to you now."

"Edward, dear Edward; let me come but for five minutes: it will make me wretched if you refuse."

"Are you foolish, Gertrude? Don't you see I am engaged? General Forester is here."

"General Forester? that is but another reason. I must speak to you at once."

"Ridiculous! absurd!" exclaimed Edward, allowing her to enter. "If you insist, you shall make your own apology."

"General Forester will excuse it, I am sure," said Gertrude, recovering her usual quiet dignity of manner. "My business is of consequence, or I would not dream of intruding."

"It will be attended to, I have no doubt," said General Forester, with a formal bow; "but perhaps you will not object that mine should be ended first."

Poor Gertrude felt abashed and confused, but did not offer to retire, and Edward looked at her impatiently. "You forget," he said: "a lady, and a young lady, may surely give way."

"I would indeed, Edward, if I dared. If General Forester will allow me but a few minutes."

The General's countenance expressed irritation and contempt.

"I can scarcely ask you to wait," said Edward: "this important matter can be nothing but a trifle."

"My time is not generally at the disposal of every young lady who may require it," said General Forester; "however, since you wish it ——. You will send, I suppose, when I may be allowed to return."

He left the room. Gertrude's heart failed her; she stood before her brother mute and trembling. Edward seated himself in pettish silence. "I am ready," he said, after a short pause. Gertrude's lips moved, but no sound escaped them. She drew near to the table, and took up the papers, and touched the pens, but no words came to her assistance. "Gertrude," exclaimed Edward, "I am in no mood to bear this trifling." The allusion dispelled the charm by which Gertrude was bound.

"I know it," she said: "it was for that reason I came; only bear with me patiently."

"Speak!" he replied, hastily; "I wish for no mysteries."

"It is not my place," continued Gertrude; "but I am forced into it. General Forester is urging you to stand for another election."

"Well! yes. Why should it distress you? Do you think I shall lose it?" And he tried to laugh.

"I don't know. It is not the election: it is not your success which I care for."

"Go, Gertrude," exclaimed Edward; "this is unworthy of your sense. What folly has possessed you? If this is all, General Forester had better return immediately."

"Stay, stay," exclaimed Gertrude: "it is not all. Blame me, laugh at me, if you will; yet I must speak. Edward, is it true that you are going to sacrifice your principles?"

"Do you know what you are saying?" interrupted Edward; and he held her firmly by the arm, and fixed on her a gaze which made her shudder. "Even Laura herself should not speak to me in such terms."

Gertrude's heart beat violently,—she was almost on the point of leaving him. "They are hard words," she said, "but there are none others that I can use. I have been fearfully wretched since I heard it."

"How can it signify to you?" he exclaimed, in a softened voice. "It is a woman's weakness which makes you fear; you do not understand these things."

"No," replied Gertrude, endeavouring to be composed. "There are many things which I do not understand, but this is not one. You are not fitted for dishonour, Edward; you could not bear it. It would crush you to the dust; you would be miserable—miserable for life, and Laura too."

Edward returned to his seat, and again began writing. "You will tell General Forester," he said, without raising his eyes, "I am ready for him."

"Edward, I cannot go. I will not, till you have granted me one favour. Wait only till to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" exclaimed Edward, throwing himself back in his chair. "Folly! impossibility! ignorance! Listen, Gertrude!" He held her hand, and looked at her with a ghastly smile of despair. "I am pledged. Now go." He pushed her from him, and once more rose from his seat.

Gertrude stood thunderstruck. A mist floated before her eyes, and her thoughts were wandering and indistinct. Hopelessness was in her heart, but she forced herself to speak. "I will hide nothing from you, Edward," she said: "I know all. You are driven to this, because you have no other resource. You cannot bring yourself to declare that you are ruined."

Edward recoiled from the word. He clenched his

hand firmly; and the veins in his forehead swelled with indignation, as he moved towards the door.

"I am going," said Gertrude, in the quiet tone of misery, which cannot be expressed. "I would save you—God knows how willingly! and not with words only."

Edward heard, but did not comprehend. He stood with his arms folded, his eyes fixed. At that moment a bustle was heard in the passage, and immediately afterwards a quick knock at the door. Gertrude thought of Laura, and hastened to open it. "I gave orders not to be interrupted," exclaimed Edward.

"My mistress, sir," replied the servant.

"What of your mistress? Speak instantly."

The maid looked at Gertrude. "Is she worse? What has been done?" asked Gertrude eagerly.

"Miss Edith thinks, ma'am, that some one should be sent for, but she wishes my master to say."

"What does it mean?" exclaimed Edward. "Gertrude, you have kept it from me. I saw she was unlike herself."

"You would pardon me if you knew," began Gertrude, but Edward would not listen. He thrust aside the hand which she had laid upon his arm, and rushed to Laura's apartment.

CHAPTER XL.

THE excitement of Laura's mind during the whole of that eventful day might have affected even a much stronger constitution than hers, and when added to the anxiety, not of days, but of weeks and months previous, its effects were very alarming. When Gertrude left the dancing-room, it could no longer be concealed that Laura was seriously ill. Her voice and manner, so strange and wandering, roused general attention; and inquiries and surmises circulated quickly through the room, but it was a considerable time before she could be prevailed on to move. Edith entreated, Charlotte insisted, Mrs Courtenay, in great alarm, threatened an immediate visit from a physician, but Laura was inflexible. Mr Dacre stood by, at first afraid of interfering. He could not go away, for he felt as if he was responsible for all that might happen in Gertrude's absence; but seeing that Miss Forester's presence was painful, he ventured at last to exert the power which he knew he possessed, and in a tone that sounded like command, suggested, that in cases like the present, relations were the only proper persons to take any active part. Miss Forester frowned her annoyance, but obeyed; and withdrew to a distant corner, to express her fears that "dear Mrs Courtenay was worried. Her sisters were very kind, but it was clear they did not understand how to treat her." There were few, however, to listen. One by one the guests had dwindled away,—some from delicacy, others from fatigue. The dancing had ceased, the lights were burning low, the evergreen

leaves were drooping, the sounds of waltzes and quadrilles were exchanged for the tread of the musicians as they stepped over the empty benches with their instruments clattering against the stands. There was a bustle in the anteroom; a search for shawls and furs; and a whispered murmur amongst those whose carriages had not been announced; but by degrees these also ceased. The guests had departed, with the exception of Mr Dacre, Miss Forester, and her father, who was waiting in gloomy silence his summons to the study, and Laura was then induced by mingled force and entreaty to retire. Miss Forester would have followed, but Mr Dacre prevented her; and in a fit of irritation which could not be concealed, she threw herself back upon the sofa. Mr Dacre seated himself opposite, and General Forester paced the room. No one was inclined for conversation, and few words were spoken, except when Miss Forester occasionally urged upon her father the folly of remaining longer.

Minutes and half-hours passed; the lights were nearly extinguished; and the General grew impatient. Footsteps and hushed voices were heard perpetually. Mr Dacre went to the door, and meeting a servant, made inquiries for Laura. "It is a brain fever, sir," said the man, in a low voice. "My master has sent off for advice." Miss Forester heard the announcement, and the colour forsook her cheek. She said no more about going, but sat still and silent;—perhaps she was meditating upon her own share in Laura's illness.

They are stern but most salutary truths which are taught by a sick bed; and taught, not always by degrees, but often as suddenly and impressively as the visitations with which we are afflicted. Edward had passed through life with scarcely any experience of illness: he had known but one great shock—his father's death, and this had taken place when he

was absent from home; and since that time, disease and death had never been brought closely to him. And now, with his conscience burdened, his heart distracted with worldly care, he was in a moment, as it were, confronted with them. He placed himself by Laura's bed, but she did not see him; and when he spoke, she seemed not to hear. Her beautiful eyes were glaring and vacant, her mouth was half open, her lips were dark with fever. A gulf seemed suddenly to have opened before him; and in it, in a few short hours, might be entombed all that had made his life desirable. Without his wife, what would wealth or honour profit him? During the first stupifying horror, no one dared to address him; but when his face relaxed from his expression of agony, and he began to inquire what had been done, Charlotte, in ignorance of his tone of mind, spoke to him of hope. He took no notice of her, but immediately left the room. To tell him there was hope, was to tell him also that there was fearful danger. After a short interval he returned: and Gertrude suggested to Edith that she should give up her place by Laura's pillow, and leave him to do any thing that might be required. He seated himself, but it was only to gaze for a minute, and then to turn away, as if unable to endure the sight. Gertrude thought of General Forester; but the past and the future seemed suddenly to have vanished from Edward's mind. His only thought was for the arrival of the physician, whose delay seemed longer than was necessary. He came, however, at last; and all felt thankful and relieved, if it were only to be saved from the misery of doubt as to what should be done. The first order given was to send from the room all except those who could really be useful. Jane went willingly; but Mrs Courtenay insisted upon remaining in the dressing-room; and

Edith still lingered, though conscious she could do little to assist. Gertrude was uneasy; she would willingly have gone herself, but her long experience of illness made her presence necessary. Edward was becoming impatient: he seemed distressed at the least noise,—and to see any persons about him beckoning and whispering, was more than his irritability could bear; for, besides his anxiety about Laura, he had still on his mind the weight of his other cares. He had not forgotten General Forester, though Gertrude thought he had; but, in that chamber, he could not resolve to follow his guidance. Whilst others were attending upon Laura, he had leisure for meditation. Stationed behind her, he watched all that was passing, and listened to her wandering words; and the sudden change—the possibility of what the end might be—awoke feelings which had long slumbered in his breast. Suffering and sorrow bring us near to the invisible world; and in the presence of saints and angels, and before Him who is the Lord of all, how shall we resolve to sin against our own convictions? Edward thought, and hesitated. He looked at Gertrude, and the word "dishonour" rang in his ears. He gazed upon the features of her whom he most loved, and the still image of death rose up before him, to warn him of the vanity of earthly hopes. He knew that if the world thought lightly of what he was about to do, yet his own conscience would continually accuse him; and even then, pledged as he was, he asked himself if it would not be possible to give up the election, to forget the offer that had been made him, and again retire into privacy; and if Laura were restored to him, should he not appreciate as he had never done before the happiness of domestic life. But the scene changed. His happiness was to be centered in his home. And his home, where would

it be? He was a beggar. He clasped his hands, and bent his head upon Laura's pillow. With a wild unconscious movement she pushed him from her; and then in a tone which thrilled to his very soul, called upon him to come to her; accused him of unkindness, and prayed him to forgive her.

"Take me, take me," she exclaimed; "Gertrude, I deceived him. He is gone. Who says he did not love me?"

Edward leant over her in agony. "Go," he said, aloud, as the physician would have beckoned him away. "Leave me, all; you can do nothing."

"He is right, Edith," whispered Gertrude; "some one must go, for all our sakes."

"Jane and my mother," began Edith. She was interrupted by Edward, who came up to her as if a sudden thought had struck him, and said, in a hurried under-tone, "Why do you stay? You did not care for her."

"Oh, Edward, forgive me; I have done wrong; but do not punish me so cruelly."

"This is not the place, Edith," said Gertrude. "He will not listen to you."

"He must: I cannot go. It is in vain to insist

"Edward, Edward," again repeated Laura. And Edward groaned in misery.

"You can do nothing now," said Gertrude, drawing Edith aside; "if you will take my mother home, and leave Charlotte with me, you shall hear the very first thing. It is madness for us all to waste our strength, when we cannot tell how it may be required."

"But you, Gertrude, who have had so much to bear."

"I must not leave Edward. Every thing depends on the next few hours. Things are worse than we

imagined. I have spoken to him, but as yet to no purpose; and I must try again. Whatever happens, he must be kept from sacrificing himself."

"But there can be no such great reason for being uneasy at this instant."

"Yes, indeed there is. I cannot explain, but you must not urge my leaving him."

Edith still seemed unwilling to consent to the arrangement; she returned to the bed, and Gertrude stole noiselessly from the chamber. Two servants passed her in the gallery, and from them she learnt that General Forester was still in the house. She listened at the top of the staircase, and heard his step as he walked the room below, and directly afterwards the drawing-room bell rang. Gertrude waited till a second peal, and then hurried back to the sick-room. Edith was waiting with her mother in the dressing-room, and Edward had given up his place to Laura's maid, and was seated at the bottom of the bed. Gertrude dreaded to make him angry by speaking, when he longed for silence. She placed herself by him, doubting what to do, but he soon observed her, and inquired eagerly if she wanted any thing.

"Let me speak but two words with you."

"Not now," he replied, gloomily: "spare me; I have had enough."

"But it must be now,—General Forester is waiting."

Edward rose hastily, and signed her to follow him. "Your incautiousness is maddening," he said, as they stopped at the head of the staircase. "Why are my private affairs to be betrayed to every one?"

Gertrude made no excuse. She stood meekly before him, as if really in the wrong, and then said, "I know you have much to excuse; but may I take your message to General Forester? He is still here, and of course expects that you will see him again."

"Tell him—but no, there is no time. Say that I will leave every thing ——" He paused again.

"Not to him!" exclaimed Gertrude. "Oh, Edward, have pity!"

"And bring Laura to misery," exclaimed Edward. "Gertrude, it is but selfishness in you to ask it."

"Selfishness!" began Gertrude, with the proud consciousness of innocence; but the sentence went no farther, and leaning against the balustrade, she shed tears such as she never shed before. For the third time the drawing-room bell rang, loudly and angrily. A servant crossed the hall, and Edward called to him. "Is General Forester here still?"

"Yes, sir; he has just rung."

"Stop; take him this message." Edward put his hand before his eyes, and Gertrude, with her hands folded, and her gaze riveted upon her brother, waited for the next word with an intensity of expectation only endurable because it was blended with prayer. The dull ticking of the clock told the rapid moments. To Gertrude they were as the slow passing of an hour. Edward did not move, and the servant stood patiently below, looking up into the glimmering darkness of the gallery, when Laura's unconscious laugh was faintly heard. "Tell him I cannot see him; he shall hear before ten," exclaimed Edward. He was gone the next minute. The message was taken to General Forester, and Gertrude was left alone.

It was a reprieve—only a reprieve; yet Gertrude was inexpressibly thankful. She felt that it was the answer to her prayer. She remained till certain that General Forester was gone, and then went to find Jane, and prevail on her to return to the Priory, as an inducement to Mrs Courtenay and Edith to go too. When the house was free, she hoped that Edward might be less harassed. Jane roused her-

self from a slumber on a sofa, in a distant chamber, and objected to being sent away in the middle of the night; but Gertrude's influence was seldom exerted in vain, and with some demur she consented. Mrs Courtenay was obstinate, and Edith very miserable; and it was not until after a conversation of nearly half an hour, that all parties agreed at last to order the carriage. The physician was upon the point of departure also, for Laura was quieter, and all had been done which could at that moment be required. He spoke cheerfully, and told of several cases in which, when all hope was relinquished, recovery had been granted; but Gertrude read in his countenance a fear which he would not confess, and even Edward seemed scarcely comforted by an opinion so doubtful. There was now, however, a stillness in the house, which in cases of sickness is almost as necessary to the watcher as to the sufferer. Laura still lay with a vacant distressed gaze, but her pulse was less violent, and her manner more composed. That she was in danger no one could doubt; but after the lapse of more than an hour, Edward, as he remarked the dangerous symptoms diminishing, although almost imperceptibly, felt that he need not despair. Under other circumstances the blessedness of hope would have been without alloy—but now it brought only a change of care. While Laura's state was so appalling, he forgot in a measure that any other trial awaited him; but when that ceased, the future in store for them both came distinctly into view. Vacillation would soon be no longer in his power. He had left Elsham for London, on a sudden impulse, because ruin stared him in the face. Without allowing himself time for recollection, he had seen his friends, and pledged himself to give up all that he had hitherto upheld in opposition to them, if only he could be assured of the promised office,—and in a few hours

time he was to profess his weakness publicly. All this he had engaged to do. And when he had done it, what would be his feelings? How would he enjoy his home, and the society of his family? With what pleasure would he listen to the praise of his talents? How would he endure to meet the eyes of those who had hitherto respected him? Above all, how would he dare to kneel before God and ask His blessing, when bound by a promise to his fellow-creatures to support the very measures which in his heart he believed to be evil?

Gertrude knew her brother well, when she said that dishonour would crush him to the dust. But there was something more terrible than dishonour which at that moment pressed upon Edward's mind. He had erred, blindly and foolishly, but his conscience was not yet deadened. Memories of the past, recollections of early resolutions, of dreams of goodness, and longings to attain even upon earth the holiness of heaven, rose before him in the gloom of those solemn hours; and when the morning light stole through the crevices of the window, upon Laura's darkened chamber, Edward in the bitterness of his anguish could almost have been satisfied to be told, that on earth she would never wake to the consciousness that he was a guilty or a ruined man.

CHAPTER XLI.

But the hour of final decision rapidly approached. The grey twilight faded before the rising sun, and the distant sounds of busy life broke upon the deep stillness of the dawn. The servants moved with silent footsteps about the house, unlocking doors, and opening shutters, and endeavouring, as much as possible, to remove the vestiges of the last evening's festivities. The maid left Laura's bedside, and crept softly about the room, putting the chairs against the wall, and smoothing the carpets, and arranging the glasses and bottles on the stand. Edward envied her her occupations. To have gone forth to work for his daily bread would have been delight compared with the mental suffering he was enduring. He looked round for Gertrude. She had been resting on the sofa for a considerable time, and he thought she was asleep, but she had left the room unperceived. He waited long, expecting her return. Though he could not ask her to forgive him, he thought he should like to show by his actions that he was no longer angry, and it was an excuse for delaying the task of reading over the papers which had been left in the study, so as to re-write them to suit General Forester's views. Still Gertrude did not come, but he could not make up his mind to go, for Laura was becoming more restless. He begged Charlotte to relinquish her seat, and poured out some medicine himself, and was about to give it; but Laura bent her eyes upon him, and asked him who he was, and the glass dropped on the floor.

"Where is Gertrude?" he inquired, going up to Charlotte again.

"I don't know. I think she is gone to lie down somewhere else. She has had no real sleep."

"Is it late?" said Edward. "Do you think she will come back?"

"Half-past seven. I daresay she will stay some time; she requires rest more than I do."

Two hours and a half still. But Edward was becoming dreadfully excited. He felt that he must determine at once. Another hour of indecision would be more than his mind would bear. The dressing-room was closed, and fancying that he heard some one move, he softly opened it. Gertrude was there, but Edward dared not speak to her. She was kneeling before the open window, her hands clasped in prayer. He gazed upon her for a few moments, while many thoughts of self-reproach filled his mind, and was then about to shut the door, when she suddenly rose. A deep blush overspread her countenance, as she turned and saw him.

"I am interrupting you," he said. "I did not know you were here."

"Perhaps I ought not to be," said Gertrude; "but I could not go far from Laura; and when we are unhappy, what can we do besides?"

"What can you do? you mean," replied Edward; and he put his arm round her, and kissed her. "It is not every one that can pray."

"It must be so horrible not to be able to do it," said Gertrude, with a sigh. "Life must be such a burden without it, I have wondered sometimes that any one can keep his senses who does not do it."

"But there is hope for us now," said Edward. "Laura is not worse."

"No," replied Gertrude; "and she has a strong

constitution, which has never been much tried. There are many things in her favour."

Both paused; for they felt that Laura's illness was not then their chief anxiety.

"We shall be happy," began Edward; but the word grated upon him.

"Happy? When?" asked Gertrude.

"I don't know. Never!"

Gertrude longed to speak; but she had done her utmost, and now she was resigned.

"There is no happiness for me, Gertrude," he continued. "There may be for you."

"Not for me, without you. I may submit and be grateful, but I can never be happy."

"Then there is a long life of misery before you," exclaimed Edward: "inevitable. Whichever way I act, there is no escape."

"You are speaking from feeling and not from reason," said Gertrude. "In one case I know you must be miserable, and so we all must; but not in the other."

"Not miserable!" exclaimed Edward. "Then you do not know one half of what is in store for me. Look," and he drew her to the window, and pointed to the park and gardens; "you think all this is mine —but, Gertrude ——" and his voice sank with agitation—"I tell you, not one tree, not one flower, not one stone upon the whole of the estate is mine, unless I consent to keep my pledge. And when all is gone, what am I to do? Where am I to wander to? Must I return to my mother, and beg her to receive me as a dependent, and give me bread to eat, and feed my wife and child? I would die first."

"Is there no alternative?" said Gertrude, gently. "Your profession is still open to you."

"And what? Scorn and poverty. How am I to enter upon my profession, when I am penniless?

And if I were to do it, how could I bear the taunts and ridicule I should be exposed to? For myself I could brave any thing, but I am not alone: I must think for others."

"It is a question between the scorn of good men and of bad," said Gertrude. "I do not think you have sufficient confidence in yourself, Edward. You do not know how much you could bear, if you felt you had acted uprightly."

"And Laura is to be punished for my folly! She would curse the day of our marriage."

"She would endure all things, thankfully and cheerfully," said Gertrude. "If ever deep, pure love was felt for any human being, she feels it for you."

Edward struggled against betraying his emotions. "I think she loves me," he said; "though lately—but I cannot talk of her; she was too good to be thrown away upon one who has deceived her."

"Yet," said Gertrude, "you still can determine to deceive her more. Edward, if you care nothing for your own happiness, still remember hers."

There was a light tap at the door. Little Charlie's voice was heard, entreating that he might come in. Edward rested his head against the window, and Gertrude saw that he could not trust himself to answer. She tried to send the child away with the promise that he should return soon, but he still lingered, petitioning that he might come, only just for one minute. Gertrude doubted, and was going to admit him, when Edward signed to her to stop.

"I have ruined him," was all he said.

His countenance told the hopeless misery of his mind. Gertrude's heart sank.

"General Forester's servant is coming down the road," said Edward, in a deep changed tone.

He roused himself, as if to go, but immediately sank back again to his former posture. Gertrude

made no answer, and at that instant the heavy sound of the old church-bell was borne towards them on the morning breeze. It was tolling for an early funeral. Edward heaved a heavy sigh, and Charlie's voice was again heard.

"Take him—send him away!" exclaimed Edward, in a voice of agony.

Gertrude opened the door, and the child in a moment was in the room.

"Papa, dear papa!" and he seized his father's hand, and tried to climb up to his neck.

"Papa is busy," said Gertrude; "we must not disturb him."

"Papa will go to church," persisted Charlie, trying to drag Edward from the window.

"Not to-day," said Gertrude; "another day, perhaps."

"Is papa naughty?" said the child: and he looked wonderingly in Gertrude's face.

Edward stooped suddenly; lifted him in his arms, and covered him with kisses; and when he set him down, Gertrude saw that his little cheek was wet with tears.

"Charlie must not stay here," she said, coaxingly, as she took him by the hand.

The little fellow rebelled for a few moments, till Gertrude gently insisted, and the door was again closed. But Edward did not notice what was passing. He was listening to the slow, regular toll of the funeral bell, and wrapt in thought. Gertrude listened too, and an overpowering sensation of awe mingled with the bitterness of her feelings. It was as a voice sent to warn them of death, and the judgment that shall follow it. Many minutes elapsed, and neither of them spoke. Edward was the first to break the silence.

"I have been harsh to you," he said. "Can you forget and pardon it?"

"It is you who have to pardon," answered Gertrude, "that I should have dared to say so much."

"Your duty is done now," replied he; "you have but to leave me to my fate. I cannot bring Laura to poverty."

"But if I were to ask one more favour," said Gertrude, "for the last time—tell me you will not be angry."

She spoke faintly, and Edward pushed a chair towards her, and made her sit down.

"I have talked of honour," she continued; "but I felt all the time that it was a low, worldly term. Oh, Edward! even honour must so soon pass—it is but a dream; and if you could keep Allingham, and be happy to the end of your life, it would be such a mere nothing, it seems strange that we can ever think about it. So that, perhaps, if you had only little, and knew that you were exerting yourself,—I mean if you had just enough for Laura and yourself, and were practising in your profession,—you might be really as happy as you have been. And if you could bring yourself to think so, and would take what I have, it would be something to begin upon. It is nothing to what you have been accustomed to, I know ——"

Gertrude's voice grew husky, and she stopped. Edward struggled with his rising agitation. Gratitude and astonishment were succeeded by far different feelings. The very offer—the putting it in his power to give up Allingham without involving Laura in absolute poverty, seemed like the completion of the act. He saw himself already bereft of his home—a wanderer upon the world; and the beauty upon which his eye at that moment rested, was but an aggravation to his trial. Gertrude waited in patient expectation, for she knew what must be passing in his mind.

"You will hate me," he said, at length, in a tone

of deep dejection; "it cannot be otherwise; but I am unworthy of such love."

"I only ask that you should not reject it hastily," replied Gertrude; "that you should think upon it."

"And can thinking be of any avail? No, Gertrude, no; the time for drawing back is past. But when you would condemn me, remember that I am not acting for myself."

"You would leave an inheritance to your child," said Gertrude; "but if it is purchased by the sacrifice of right, what will be its value? Poverty is hard to bear, but shame and self-reproach are still harder."

Edward was silent.

"When you have done all that is in your power to retrieve the past," continued Gertrude; "when Allingham is gone, and you have entered upon your new life, surely there will be happiness in reflecting that you have resisted a great temptation; in looking round upon the world, and knowing that no human being can cast a slur upon your name."

"My name!" exclaimed Edward vehemently. "Yes, you may well remind me of it. It will be remembered as the last of the Courtenays of Allingham."

"And if it should be," replied Gertrude, gently and solemnly, "it is but a name of Earth."

Edward threw himself into a chair. His thoughts were to be read in the changes of his countenance. It was as the struggle of life and death, and Gertrude turned aside, that she might not witness his suffering. When he again spoke, his manner was altered. "I have been blind and thoughtless," he said; "but whatever may be the consequences of my folly, I cannot involve you in it. It would be but a miserable reward for affection which can never be forgotten. If I am to bear poverty, it shall be alone. Laura would never endure that you should be injured; and, Gertrude," he added, in a tone which chilled her with its

quietness, "it may be that she is to be spared the bitterness of my trial."

Gertrude dared not comfort him. "Why will you talk of injury?" she said. "If our positions were changed, how should you feel?"

"It would be injustice," he exclaimed; "the world would say it, and you yourself might live to rue the day on which you had urged me to consent. You may marry."

"And if I do," she replied, "I am not worse off than thousands; but I may also die, or" (and her voice changed) "I may choose to appropriate my money for other purposes. My duty, Edward, cannot lie with the future; that is in the hands of God, and with him I do not fear to trust it."

She knelt by his side, and threw her arm around his neck, and Edward kissed her pale forehead, with a feeling of reverence and affection too deep for words to have told. "Gertrude," he said, "do not tempt me. You may be about to mar the happiness of your whole life. It is not a common risk which you will run. If I fail in my profession your fortune will be irrecoverably gone."

"Then let it go," she exclaimed eagerly, "without a thought or a regret,—only with thankfulness that it was bestowed upon those I loved so dearly." Edward wavered. The vision of a name unstained, a life without disgrace, was nerving him for the sacrifice. "It is your own lesson," continued Gertrude. "Years —years have passed since it was first taught me. Can you recollect your twelfth birthday, and my mother's present of a sovereign? I cried because I wished to have one too, and you came to me, and forced me to accept it, because you said I wanted it more than you did, and that we were both of one family, and what was given to one was for the use of all. Oh, Edward! why are we not children now?"

It was the whisper of an angel's voice, and Edward could not but obey it. He buried his face in his hands, and Gertrude rose and stood by him, motionless as a lifeless statue. There was a long, long silence—a bitter conflict, seen but by one eye—and the trial was over. Half an hour afterwards, General Forester's servant was returning to the Grange, bearing a letter from Edward, in which he stated, that, after deliberation, he felt it would be advisable to relinquish the honour of again standing for the county. He therefore begged General Forester to express, in his name, his grateful thanks to the friends who had hitherto supported him, together with his regret that family circumstances would prevent him from taking any active part in the coming election. The letter concluded with acknowledgments of the General's exertions in his behalf, and an apology for having led him to suppose on the previous evening that he had intended to act differently. When it was gone, Edward realised, for the first time, that, by his own act, he was ruined without hope of redemption.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE deed was done. Edward repeated the words as he shut himself up in his own room, and Gertrude pondered upon all that was involved in them, as she returned to her task of watching by Laura's bedside. But it is not in moments of excitement that we fully know what sorrow means. There is a greatness in intense suffering which unconsciously ennobles and upholds us. We feel that we are called to act a part above our fellow-creatures, and the knowledge that all which is important to them has suddenly become nothing to us, gives dignity and strength to our minds. And in seasons of distress men are more to be pitied than women. Gertrude, besides the unspeakable relief which her brother's decision had afforded her, found many things to distract and occupy her thoughts. Laura required constant attention, and, at her own request, she agreed to remain with her for several hours, whilst others took their rest. The inquiries of friends seemed incessant, and verbal answers and notes were to be sent in return. Edith came from the Priory, and to her Gertrude could speak without reserve; and all this, together with the interest of writing to Mr Dacre, and making arrangements for Laura's comfort, served to pass the weary hours. Fatigue and sleep also came to her assistance; but not so with Edward. He was chilly and uncomfortable, and his head ached, and his limbs were stiff; but he had no thought of rest. From Laura's bedroom to the hall, and from the hall to his study, and from the study to the garden, he wandered without object. The visit of Dr Grant was the only

event which seemed left him to anticipate. His bailiff came to consult him upon some farm business, but he was sent away. What good could it be to interest himself in property which would soon cease to be his? The post brought letters, but most of them were upon parliamentary business, and no longer concerned him;—only a few bills were opened in a fit of desperation, and spread out before him, and conned with an abstracted mind, as if the mere looking at them might be the means of diminishing their amount. And during all this Edward's mind was reverting with miserable doubt to Laura's state. He believed her better, and Dr Grant had assured him that if the dangerous symptoms did not increase he might reasonably entertain hope; but the blessing seemed greater than he could dare to expect. One grief makes us fear another; and, with a self-tormenting spirit, Edward thought over all he should feel when left alone; the bitterness with which he should regard every object connected with her; the loss to his child; the hopelessness for the long life which probably lay before him; till in agony he was about to pray, that if she were taken he might not be spared. The prayer was not uttered, for something in his own heart made him tremble lest it should be granted. And so the day wore on, Dr Grant came, and his report was satisfactory; and when he spoke of the possibility that Laura would be restored, a gleam of happiness passed over Edward's darkened heart. But it was momentary. How should he dare to tell her the miserable truth?

It was late in the evening, after a sad and silent dinner with his two sisters, that he resolved upon sending for Mr Rivers, in order to take some immediate steps for the settlement of his affairs. Gertrude heard him say that he was going to write a note, and suggested that the walk might refresh him; and

the idea was seized upon with avidity: it was something to do.

"I shall not see you again to-night, probably," she said, as he took his hat to depart; "I am going to bed. We have a nurse for to-night, and Dr Grant says she will be sufficient alone."

Edward held out his hand; he was too wretched to be affectionate, and Gertrude was deeply hurt. She had made a sacrifice of every prospect most valuable to her, and after the first moment it seemed scarcely to be appreciated. Edward had shown her, during the whole day, not the slightest mark of peculiar regard. But a person must be far advanced in goodness, before grief makes him thoughtful for others; and even Edward's kindness of heart was not proof against the numbing effects of his sorrow.

"Don't go yet; this is the first moment we have had together, alone," said Charlotte, as Gertrude was leaving the room.

"I can do little good by staying, I am afraid," replied Gertrude.

"Yes, indeed, you can, by telling me every thing, and putting me out of my misery. What is Edward going to do?"

"I can say it to you," said Gertrude; "you are not a person to be overpowered. He must give up all he has, and leave Allingham."

Charlotte was not overpowered, but she was inexpressibly shocked.

"That is the worst, at once," continued Gertrude. "It is best for some minds not to be prepared."

"Prepared!" said Charlotte. I have been prepared enough all day, and yesterday too. But it is an absurdity. A man of his fortune! You must be dreaming."

"What do you think his fortune is?" said Gertrude.

"Six thousand a year, of course."

"Two; it was never more."

Charlotte stood in mute astonishment.

"It was mortgaged when he came into possession," continued Gertrude: "Edith knew it from the first."

"That explains, then," exclaimed Charlotte, interrupting her. "So many things in Edith's manner have puzzled me for a long time, besides some strange hints she gave me yesterday; but when did she tell you?"

"Two or three days ago; she has had a great deal to bear."

"And has made other people bear a great deal; but, however, I don't understand now. Edward may be in difficulties, but what you say is impossible."

"Just consider," replied Gertrude. "He set out with Colonel Courtenay's establishment, which was princely; married, and new furnished his house. Then came the election."

"The expenses of which were paid," said Charlotte.

"So it was understood; but we both know Edward too well to believe he would accept more assistance than he could avoid. After the election followed the house in town, and parliamentary dinners, and Laura's grand fêtes; and open house here in the intervals. No fortune of two thousand a year would stand it."

"Two thousand a year!" repeated Charlotte, slowly. "I don't believe it."

"Whether it is true or not, there can be no doubt of the state of Edward's affairs at this time."

"And what will he do?" exclaimed Charlotte.

"I don't know, at present. Return to his profession by-and-by."

"Don't hesitate," said Charlotte; "I am in a mood to hear any thing."

"That is all," said Gertrude quietly.

"And enough," was the reply, in the same tone.

Both were silent for several minutes.

"I am glad you told me, Gertrude," said Charlotte, at length; "and not any one else."

"Why?"

"Because you say it all out in a minute, and don't moralise."

"It is a case for action, not for moralising," replied Gertrude.

"If you would give me the world I could not cry," said Charlotte. "What is Edward gone to see Mr. Rivers for?"

"All sorts of business, I suppose; but I did not ask him."

"It will half kill mamma," said Charlotte.

"Yes, I have thought of her; but it must be broken to her gently. We shall see how to manage when the moment comes."

"And Laura too—does she know any thing?"

"She has suspicions; but nothing like the truth."

"Wonderful changes!" exclaimed Charlotte. "No wonder you have looked like a ghost the last day or two. And how horridly people will talk! If one could only change one's name!"

Gertrude could not avoid smiling.

"It is a happy thing that no strangers are here," she said.

"Because they would not understand? Very possibly not; but you do. I am as unhappy as heart can desire in reality; yet just now—did you ever hear of a person in a sort of trance knocking his head against a wall and not feeling it?"

"The waking will come soon enough," said Gertrude.

"Yes!" and Charlotte sighed from the bottom of her heart. "This is but the beginning; but we will not sink, Gertrude. No one shall pity us."

"Not if we can help it; for my mother's sake we must keep up."

"They must go abroad," said Charlotte, after some consideration.

"I suppose they must, for a year or so, but not for a continuance."

"How will they manage to live in England if they have nothing? Edward's profession will not support him at his outset; and he will never hear of being dependent upon us."

"He will have something," said Gertrude. "You know my fortune is a great deal more than I can spend."

"You are not going to give up your fortune," exclaimed Charlotte.

"Why not? it may as well be used by one member of the family as another."

Charlotte's firmness was shaken. Her eyes glistened; and, with an earnestness of feeling most unlike her usual cold light-hearted indifference, she said, as she kissed her sister, "Gertrude, if I were only certain that I should some day be like you!"

The next moment she dashed her hand across her eyelid; and ran out of the room, declaring that she had been wanted to take the nurse's place a quarter of an hour before.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THREE days had gone by—days of wearisome, anxious watching, and gloom. Edward's time had been divided between Laura's chamber and his own study; he could not summon resolution to go beyond. A barrier had suddenly sprung up between him and the world, in which he had played so busy a part; and all that passed in it was now but "as the idle wind, which he regarded not." His note to General Forester had been answered the day after it was sent; but even the cold sarcastic tone in which the General lamented the unfortunate circumstances that had induced him so totally to mislead his party, nor the information that a personal friend of his own was about to occupy his position and stand for the county, served to excite pain. Some hasty expressions of contempt escaped him, and the note was tossed aside, and thought of no more. Gertrude noticed his manner, and strove, by every means in her power, to interest him. She had determined upon remaining at Allingham with Charlotte, notwithstanding Edith's entreaties that she might share the fatigue, for she could tell, from the few words which now and then dropped from Edward, that he disliked seeing Edith attempt to nurse Laura. He remembered her neglect in former days, and he fancied that Laura herself would dislike it. This decision was a sad trial to Edith, whose only wish now was to atone, as much as lay in her power, for her former conduct; but Gertrude was firm. She had deemed it necessary to tell Dr Grant her opinion, that distress of mind had increased, if not entirely brought on, Laura's illness,

and he had so strongly insisted upon the necessity of keeping her free from excitement, whenever the fever should decrease, so as to restore her to consciousness, that Gertrude dreaded to allow any person but herself to remain with her. She entreated Edward to keep himself out of sight, and he obeyed; not because he considered it necessary, but because his spirit was so sunk that he had not energy to resist; and then Gertrude stationed herself in the sick room, and smoothed the pillow, and administered the medicine, and bore with all the harassing requirements of serious illness, till at length the office of nurse was tacitly yielded to her; and even Charlotte only came into the room now and then to know if any thing was wanted. Gertrude was contented at her post, for it occupied her usefully; but it also gave her much leisure for thought, and thought was very bitter. One thing seemed absolutely necessary—that Edward should be told of Laura's debts. To leave her to make the confession herself, when both mind and body were weakened by illness, would be out of the question; but it was not easy to find a favourable moment for the disclosure. He was silent at breakfast, silent at dinner, silent whenever they met in the course of the day. He never mentioned Laura's name, or referred to the past; and Gertrude shrunk from intruding upon his sorrow. Every hour, however, increased her anxiety to speak to him; for Dr Grant became more hopeful at each visit, and spoke confidently of his expectation, that if a tranquil sleep could be produced, Laura might again be fully restored to them.

Gertrude was in the room alone when this opinion was expressed; and Dr Grant was no sooner gone then she hastened to the study. Edward was there engaged in looking over some papers, which, at her entrance, he thrust into a drawer His countenance

did not give her encouragement; and the tone in which he inquired what she was come for, augured ill for the patience with which he would be inclined to hear her. She informed him first of Dr Grant's opinion, and he expressed himself deeply thankful; but when she still lingered, he became restless, and glanced at the door, plainly wishing that she should go. Gertrude felt that the shortest would also be the best way of proceeding, for he was not in a mood to bear circumlocution.

"If Laura should get well," she began.

"If? You have just told me that Dr Grant has little doubt of it."

"Just so, and that is the reason I wanted to say a few words."

"They must be very few then. I am busy."

Gertrude bore with the ungracious permission, and in a manner of perfect gentleness stated to him briefly, but cautiously, the circumstances which had produced so deep an impression upon Laura's mind; the temptations of her London life; her belief that Edward's fortune was large; Miss Forester's influence and the power which she had obtained by assisting her in her difficulties; the unhappiness which Laura had experienced, whilst conscious that she was deceiving her husband; and the firmness with which at last she had resolved to give up all offers of further help, and confess every thing. "I have told you myself," concluded Gertrude, "to save her, and in order that you might know how to act; and now I will go: but you need not trouble yourself with regard to Miss Forester; I have settled her part of the business."

She was about to leave him, but he caught her hand. The settled gloom upon his countenance had given way to an expression of intense suffering: "Stay, Gertrude," he said.

"Not now, unless you have questions to ask."

"No," he exclaimed, vehemently, "it is too clear for questions. If you had been here, Gertrude, all might have been different. It was Edith who threw her into that woman's hands."

"Edith has suffered much for her error," said Gertrude.

"It was cruel," he continued; "Edith, whom I trusted so entirely! I am not blind to my own faults. I know they have been great,—so great that at times I dare not dwell upon them; but my offences have not been against Laura's happiness. I only loved her too well, and therefore I could not mar her enjoyment by checking it as I should have done; but Edith neglected and repelled her."

"You would forgive her," said Gertrude, "if you knew her misery."

"Heaven forbid that I should not forgive!" replied Edward, solemnly; "but she can never make amends. Did Laura indeed dread my anger? How little she knew!" He stopped, overcome by the ideas which crowded upon his mind. "It was that one concealment," he exclaimed, after a pause. "Fool that I was! if I had but told her all, she would have warned and supported me. And you Gertrude," he added, "who have done no wrong, must be punished for us all! Edith thought her selfish," he continued, "and accused her to me of selfishness; but she had not a care for herself. She was idolized in her home, and when they trusted her to me, they thought they were sending her to those who would idolize her too. Gertrude, if you had only seen her as she was when first we married, you would own that it was a harsh spirit which could utter a word against her."

"There are few to equal her now," said Gertrude, feeling that it was not the moment to attempt Edith's defence.

"She was perfect," exclaimed Edward, enthusias-

tically; " and she was happy as she deserved to be. She knew no care till she knew me, and I made her give up all, and promised to cherish and protect her, and then brought her to misery."

" You will not think it misery by-and-by," said Gertrude.

" If it is not so," he exclaimed eagerly, " it will be through your means. Do not judge me hardly, Gertrude. I may seem to you cold and ungrateful, but it is only from wretchedness." The tone was one of despair, and Gertrude feared to allude again to the former subject, though she knew that something ought to be done immediately for the settlement of the remainder of Laura's debts. But Edward had lately brought himself to think over the details of business, whatever might be the state of his mind. With a calmness which surprised while it pained her, he asked for the bills, and said that he would consult Mr Rivers as to the best mode of discharging them. " It will be the first step," he said, " towards freeing myself;—freeing myself, that is, from all obligations but the one which no money can repay."

The words were common, but the manner in which they were spoken, and the look which accompanied them, sank deeply into Gertrude's heart. She left him, satisfied, and comparatively cheerful, and returned to Laura's chamber. She had not reached it before the door was very softly opened, and Charlotte's finger was held up in token of silence. Dr Grant's prescription had taken effect, and Laura was sleeping. Gertrude beckoned her sister into the gallery, and then entreated her to leave her alone in the room; but Charlotte strongly objected, saying that no one could tell how long the sleep might last, and that Gertrude was not equal to such constant fatigue. There was a little pique mixed with Charlotte's determination; she did not approve of wholly giving up the

duty of nursing, and she was not unselfish enough to see that there are times when sitting idle is as great a virtue as exertion. Gertrude was equally firm, though conscious that she must appear wilful—perhaps unkind and selfish. It was essential that Laura's mind should be kept quiet on first recovering its tone, and no one could do this as effectually as herself; but it was not easy to explain this to Charlotte; and when at length the point was yielded, it was with a very bad grace. Gertrude was extremely vexed. Circumstances had compelled her to take more upon herself than she would otherwise have thought of doing; and it was peculiarly disagreeable to insist upon any thing in which her own gratification seemed involved; but there are duties to be performed through evil report as well as good, and this was one. She crept into the room, and sat down in the accustomed chair. Laura lay with her head bent down, her lips apart, and her thin white hands spread upon the coverlid. Her breathing was so still that it could scarcely be heard, and a horrible suspicion crossed Gertrude's mind, as she watched for some symptom of life. There was not a sound in the house; her least movement might disturb, and she dared not summon the nurse; and hour after hour she sat in the same posture, her dread increasing at every instant, till the sun had sunk low in the horizon, and its parting rays shed a golden light over the room, and lit up Laura's pallid features with something of an unearthly radiance. Gertrude trembled; she rose, leant over her, and tried to listen again for the breathing, but her nervousness had become so great that she could hear nothing but the beating of her own heart. With a faint feeling, from mingled fatigue and alarm, she tried to reseat herself as before, but her foot touched the chair, pushed it along the floor, and with the noise, slight though it was, Laura awoke. The unspeakable relief of that

moment Gertrude never forgot. In the happiness of finding that her fears were unfounded, she did not even observe that the glaring lustre of Laura's eye had been succeeded by a quiet, natural clearness, and when her name was repeated in a sweet feeble voice, she started as if awakened from a dream.

"Is it very late?" asked Laura, as she looked wonderingly at her sister.

"Not very," replied Gertrude; "but you have been asleep some time."

"Asleep!" repeated Laura, and she glanced restlessly over the room.

"Yes, and ill too; but you must be still; you are not strong enough to talk."

Laura acquiesced, for even these few words were an effort; but after a few moments she again signed to Gertrude to draw near. "Did you say I had been ill? Weren't there people about? It is such a trouble to think."

"Wait till presently," said Gertrude. "You must take something now."

"But only tell me,—Edward,—why is he gone away?"

"Edward is not gone; he is here. I shall go and tell him you are better."

"But he won't come to me, I know; my head is so dizzy. What is it that is so dreadful?"

"Nothing is dreadful, dearest," replied Gertrude, "and Edward will come to you presently, when you are strong enough to see him."

Laura was silent from exhaustion, and Gertrude was uncertain whether to assist her in recalling what had passed, or allow her to remember it gradually. She seemed, however, too much weakened for thought of any kind, and Gertrude rang for the nurse, that something might be given her; but she would not allow any one else to be told of the amendment, fear-

ing lest Edward's impatience might get the better of his prudence, and mischief might be the consequence. When her strength was a little restored, Laura's mind again began working; and Gertrude, seeing that she would not rest till every thing had been explained, sent a message to Edward, to tell him that he need no longer be uneasy, but entreating him on no account to come into the room until she sent for him.

"Master won't listen to that," muttered the old woman, as she left the room; and Gertrude was of the same opinion, and returning to Laura, resolved to say at once all that was necessary, if she found that her sister could bear it. "You will be better now," she said, with a smile, as she took Laura's hand, and arranged her pillow.

"No," said Laura; "I am not better. I can't remember; it is very unkind in you, Gertrude, not to help me."

"I will help you now," said Gertrude; "you have been ill two or three days; and the people you have been thinking about were at the archery meeting."

"Yes, yes, I remember," said Laura, slowly; "but that was not all. There was something dreadful. Why am I afraid to see Edward?"

"Because you had something to tell him, which you thought would worry him; but I have told him all, and he does not care."

"Something? I thought he would be very angry."

"It was about Miss Forester," said Gertrude, "and the money she lent you, and the bills from London; but it is all settled. Edward took the matter very quietly, and he will come and give you a kiss whenever you wish to see him. I think, though, you had better lie still a little while first."

Laura looked distrustful. "Why should I not see him at once?" she said. "Are you sure he loves

me? Some one said he did not. It was a voice—I heard it always."

"That was your fancy when you were ill," replied Gertrude; "but he will come soon, and tell you himself."

"Bills?" said Laura, thinking; "were they long ones?"

"Rather; but don't distress yourself about them. Edward is not at all displeased."

A slight noise was heard,—the door was opened, and a stealthy footstep approached the bed. Gertrude knew that it must be Edward. She lifted up her finger to stop him, but Laura's attention was attracted.

"Who is it?" she said, quickly, as she tried in vain to rouse herself to see.

"Only be still," replied Gertrude, laying her hand upon her.

"It was Edward," said Laura, in an agony of expectation; "is he gone without speaking? Then he has not forgiven. Oh! Gertrude, why did they not let me die?"

Edward heard the words, notwithstanding the faint tone in which they were spoken; and, regardless of his sister's warning, came forward suddenly. Laura's eyes met his with a fixed, earnest gaze. She held his hand as he bent over her, and whispered words of purest affection and thankfulness, but she could not articulate a reply; and by degrees her feeble grasp was relaxed, her head drooped, and she fainted away.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE calm which follows a storm may be, and often is, a season of thankfulness and hope; but it may be also nothing but the lulling of the winds before the gathering of another tempest: and so it was felt at Allingham. All things were returning to their usual course. Laura's good constitution had borne her through the trial of severe illness, and now it assisted her in regaining her lost powers. Day by day some new progress was made, trifling, perhaps, and only marked by the eye of affection, but serving to show that she might in time be restored to her former health. Gertrude seldom left her, and ventured by degrees to talk to her upon the subjects weighing upon her mind. And when her memory grew clearer, Edward himself encouraged her to speak openly. But her confessions, in their simplicity and humility, were often very painful. She told of her vanity and weakness; and he remembered his own. She entreated him to forgive her deception; and the sin, not of months, but of years, lay upon his own breast: and she promised amendment, and begged him to guide and teach her, at the very moment when he felt that his own errors had marred his happiness for life. Laura saw that something was amiss, but she attributed it to regret at her own conduct, and this brought deeper expressions of repentance than before; till Edward was often on the point of acknowledging the truth, without thinking of the consequences, merely to save himself the wretchedness of feeling he was deceiving her. One thing he was obliged to own, that he had declined standing again for the

county; but this, though startling intelligence, did not awaken suspicion, for Laura's mind was not entirely clear as to all that had occurred previous to her illness, so as to enable her to put facts together, and reason upon them. She thought that he must be tired of the responsibility, and perhaps willing to avoid the expense: but this was all; and her own feeling was that of satisfaction, for with her newly formed resolutions, it would be keeping her out of the way of temptation. But the time was fast approaching when concealment would no longer be possible. Edward's embarrassments became more and more pressing, and Mr Rivers urged the necessity of some decisive step being taken, for rumours were afloat, and commented on, and circulated, by all but his own family. Mrs Courtenay, with that happy buoyancy of spirit which can accommodate itself to all circumstances, no sooner learnt that Edward had resolved upon giving up the election, than she declared it was by far the best thing that could have been done. It had always been too much for him; and now he would be able to live quietly at Allingham with dear Laura, and they should see so much more of him. She quite looked forward to the winter, and he would be able to give such nice parties; though, to be sure, she never went to any of them for fear of taking cold; but it was pleasant to think other people were enjoying themselves. The observations were made to Charlotte, whose reply was brief and unceremonious; and Edith, who was present, also escaped as quickly as possible, to go to her own room.

"There is but one comforting thought in the whole of the business," said Charlotte, following her, "and that is, that if Edward is not member, no other of his party will be. I care not one iota about politics, but I could not bear the notion of his being thrust aside, and no one missing him."

"But how do you know no one else will be?"

"Because there is a split amongst them. Mr Dacre, or some one, was saying so this morning; and there is to be an opposition. There would have been none if Edward had stood; and I saw General Forester ride past just now, as I was standing at the Lodge gate, and I thought he looked as black as November."

"That accounts for General Forester's being so anxious about Edward," said Edith; "but, however, it does not signify to us now. Public affairs are all very well when there is nothing else to think of, but that is not the case with us."

"And will not be for many a long day? I wish Edward would settle something. This living with a sword hanging over one's head is not agreeable."

"How can you talk so lightly, Charlotte?" exclaimed Edith.

"No, it is not lightly; it is sober truth. But there is no good in putting on a sad face; misfortunes are never the less for our being doleful about them. Life to me is very like a furze brake; you must be scratched, go which way you will; but if you step out boldly, and make up your mind not to care, you are sure to be better off than you expected."

"We are in the midst of a very thick furze brake just at present," said Edith.

"Yes, very; but we shall see our way out of it by-and-by."

"I wish Jane knew it," said Edith; "I really think she ought to be told."

"What for? to make her uncomfortable before there is any occasion. Just leave her to me; I understand her better than you do, and I will tell her when it is necessary."

"But she will be annoyed at being the only ignorant one," said Edith.

"We cannot help that. For all our sakes she must be kept quiet as long as possible. You know what she is like when things go wrong."

Edith did know from bitter experience. A vision of dark looks, sharp words, and a fit of hysterics, presented itself; and, following Charlotte's counsel, she said no more about telling Jane.

But though Edith and her sisters were so regardless of public affairs, Edward still felt some interest in them. He received the information of the progress of the election with an air of proud indifference; but when at length the news reached him of the defeat of his former friends, he felt a momentary satisfaction; for it proved that his own importance had been greater than he imagined. If he had stood, no one would have ventured to oppose him. He was, however, too wretched and too penitent to dwell upon the idea; and, after a little exertion, so disciplined his mind, that even the report of some hasty expressions made use of by General Forester against him, scarcely excited his indignation. The General had, in truth, considerable cause for annoyance. With Edward's retirement and the downfall of his party was involved the loss of his own position. He was no longer the friend and adviser of the county member, possessing influence and occasionally patronage, and the change was keenly felt. His ambition had been low, but earnest; and in the bitterness of his disappointment, he accused Edward of inconsistency, and even duplicity. Miss Forester shared his feelings, though in a different way. The enjoyments of the last four years were now at an end. Under any circumstances she felt that her intimacy with Laura must cease, and with it much of the pleasure derivable from luxuries and amusements, which to her were the grand objects of her life. But Miss Forester's selfishness did not render

her wholly callous to the misery that might be the result of Mr Courtenay's embarrassments,—the report of which was now very generally believed. She had some regard for Laura,—deeper than she herself was aware of—and her anxiety during her illness had been sincere; and when she remembered that she had done her utmost to encourage the thoughtlessness which seemed about to bring such fatal consequences, something like repentance arose in her heart. She did not dare offer her society or assistance; but if they had been sought, her mind would have been relieved from a burden of unusual weight.

It was a day of exquisite beauty when Laura was first carried out of doors, and laid on a sofa under the colonnade. The season had been unusually fine, and the garden, instead of being burnt up by a scorching sun, retained very much the appearance of early spring. Laura, her mind relieved from great care, felt as if she had never before enjoyed the loveliness of her home. She delighted in the sunshine, the birds, and flowers,—the lights and shadows upon the lawn, and the soft warm breeze that fanned her cheek. She could not believe that the summer was so nearly gone, and appealed perpetually to Edward to join in her ecstacies.

"Now that you have given up the election," she said, "we shall have so much time together, and I intend to make you fond of gardening; and in September it will be such delicious weather for riding. I suppose by that time I shall be strong enough to bear it. Edward, dearest, don't be so grave, it makes me unhappy. Do teach him to smile, Gertrude."

"I would if I could, you may be sure," said Gertrude, attempting to smile herself; "but he is obstinate. I see Mr Dacre coming," she added; "but I shall not let him talk to you now; you have had enough excitement for to-day."

This was perfectly true; but Gertrude was not sorry to have an excuse for a tête-à-tête, for it was her chief comfort. This day, however, she had less satisfaction than usual; Mr Dacre was looking very ill, and walked feebly; and Gertrude fancied she could see the effects of thought and anxiety for her brother. He was not a person to take a half interest in a character like Edward's; and perhaps, the consciousness that his own strength was rapidly diminishing, and that, in all human probability, he should never live to witness the effect of the change of circumstances upon Mr Courtenay's mind, served to increase his care, and made him peculiarly watchful for the little indications of firmness and resolution, which he fancied he discovered in the course of their conversations. Laura followed Gertrude with her eye, till she had joined Mr Dacre, and taken his arm, and turned into the shrubbery; and then, looking at Edward, she said,

"We are alone now, Edward; there can be no reason for not speaking out. Why are you so changed?"

"I have had enough to change me," he replied, "if it were only fear for you."

"Yes, my illness; but not other things,—you tell me you have forgotten them; and if I thought you had not, I should never forgive myself."

"Forgotten!" he exclaimed; "if every thing were but as easy to forget as that, I should indeed be a fortunate man."

"But am I the cause of your vexation?"

"Yes:" and then checking himself he added, in as indifferent a tone as he could assume, "you must always be, since your are dearer to me than any thing on earth."

Laura looked agitated and excited, and Edward was frightened.

"It is all nothing," he said, carelessly; "every one has moods. Don't you think you have been here long enough?"

"I have not been out ten minutes. You never used to have moods."

"Yes, frequently; only you don't remember."

"There are a great many things I don't remember," said Laura: "but it will all come again in time, I hope. What should you say, Edward, if it did not?"

"Why ask?" he said anxiously. "Do you feel worse?"

"Not exactly, but I think sometimes it would be very disagreeable always to feel as I do at present."

A deeper gloom overspread Edward's countenance.

"You want change," he said, and paused. "Will you go abroad?"

The tone was startlingly abrupt, but Laura did not remark it.

"Really, are you in earnest?" she exclaimed, and her eyes sparkled with almost childish delight.

"Will you go?"

"Yes, every where with you; but abroad would be so very delightful! You have often promised you would take me again, and there has always been some reason against it."

"There is none now," he replied, in the same gloomy voice.

"And the season of the year would be so good," continued Laura, "if we set off at once. September is always fine, and deliciously cool. Do you remember what torrents of rain we had when we were in Normandy, four—nearly five—years ago? How time passes! Ah, Edward, we were very happy then!"

"Are you not happy now?"

"Yes, if you are; but there is something in being

very young, and not having known what care meant. And all was so new to me. Only Allingham, I think, is pleasanter and dearer every year."

Edward suddenly left her side, but immediately returned.

"Are you very fond of Allingham?" he asked.

"What a question! Is there any other spot on earth which has half its charms?"

"Will you leave it?"

There was that in his voice which made Laura look up into his face, and shrink from the expression which she saw there.

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed. "You frighten me, Edward. Why are you so strange?"

Edward felt that he had done wrong, but he could not retract.

"Tell me, Laura," he said, "if you had united your fortunes with those of a man whom the world thought wealthy,—if he deceived you for years, and suffered you to act wrongly, and set you the example, and then brought you and your child to ruin,—how should you feel?"

Laura gazed on him, bewildered and alarmed.

"You would hate and despise him," continued Edward, vehemently; "and with justice. But if he loved you, Laura,—loved you,—idolized you,—felt that life was only endurable when shared by you,—if his deception was but the result of an affection so great that it would have ransacked the whole world to gratify your slightest wish,—could you forgive him?"

"Who? What?" exclaimed Laura. "You, Edward! Is it real?"

"Yes," said Edward, bitterly; "you may well ask 'is it real?' Who would believe that the man whom hundreds honoured,—the man who dared to seek your love,—could act a part so base? Yet, Laura, I am he,—most miserable,—most unworthy."

He cast himself on the ground beside her, and as he bent his head on her hands, scalding tears of anguish fell upon them. A mist seemed suddenly to vanish from Laura's eyes. The dim past came vividly before her, and the rumours which, before her illness, had been so little regarded, returned clearly to her recollection.

"Edward, dearest," she said gently; "this is not the posture for you. If sorrow is at hand, who shall teach me to bear it if you fail?"

Edward clasped her hand convulsively.

"Why should you fear to tell me all?" continued Laura. "Am I not your wife? Is not our existence one?"

"Yes," he exclaimed, rising suddenly; "and therefore the more wretched! Laura, you little know what is before you. I am ruined. Allingham can no longer be your home."

He bent upon her a stedfast gaze, as if to read her inmost thoughts; but she did not shrink from it. The sight of his grief had nerved her, and not a muscle of her countenance moved: only the faint tinge of red forsook her cheek, and her voice slightly shook as she said—

"My home is in your heart. Whilst you are spared to me, all trials will be light."

"And can you indeed say so?" exclaimed Edward. And bending over her, he imprinted a long, fervent kiss upon her brow.

"But you have never felt privation, and how will you bear that Charlie's lot in life should be so different from that to which he was born?"

"If it is your lot," replied Laura, "you will teach him to support it nobly; and for myself, I am not, Edward what I was. I have lived many years with the last few months, and life can never again be the light and valueless thing I once thought it.

If you could give me boundless wealth, it could not make me happy; and I trust I should not wish it for my child."

"But the shame,—the ridicule,"—exclaimed Edward.

"Let them come. I have deserved them, if not for this, for other and worse follies. Only tell me all that has happened."

Edward hesitated, for Laura sank back on her sofa, exhausted.

"I would rather hear it now," she said, earnestly; "and you would rather too."

"Yes, but I can bear delay. The worst suffering is past."

Laura, however, again entreated, and Edward then confided to her the whole state of his affairs, together with the weakness which had caused him to conceal from her the heavy claims upon his estate, when first they married.

"It is this which lies heaviest on my conscience," he said. "It was the root of all other errors. And Laura, if you have ceased to respect me ——"

Laura stopped him.

"Do not recall my own faults. Love might be your excuse, Edward, but fear could not be mine."

Edward heaved a bitter sigh. His wife's humility and strength of character were as so many reproaches for the part he had acted towards her.

"I would rather you should speak hardly of me," he said. "I could bear anything but this; and I feel you must be miserable."

Laura's eyes filled with tears as she answered—

"Oh! Edward, is affection indeed of so little worth in your estimation? When I vowed to love, to honour, and obey you, was it for your money and your position? If you had been poor and homeless, to have been your wife would have been greater

happiness than to have been united to the wealthiest noble in the land. And now, what have I done that you should doubt me?"

"Doubt you!" exclaimed Edward. "No, never for one moment. You are my hope—my comfort—my precious, inestimable treasure! You will endure with an angel's patience; but it will still be endurance, and I shall be the cause. And, Laura, there is one thing yet untold. What if our only prospect of subsistence, until I can rise in my profession, should be by dependence?"

Laura's cheek flushed crimson.

"You would not consent," she said, eagerly.

"Not if Gertrude entreated,—if she said that her happiness depended on it?"

Laura looked at him, to discover his meaning, and then burst into tears. At that instant Gertrude returned.

"I have done it," exclaimed Edward, in a frightened voice, as he hastened towards her. "I can't tell what possessed me. Why did you leave us, Gertrude?"

"You have not told her all?" said Gertrude, alarmed in her turn.

"Yes—all. I could not help it. It was agony to be with her longer, and deceive her."

"And she has borne it—how?"

"Nobly!—wonderfully! I never understood her, or appreciated her, till to-day. But go to her, Gertrude; she can consent to all but what you would do; and I cannot consent either."

He walked into the house, and Gertrude quietly seated herself by her sister's side. Laura tried to raise herself, and when Gertrude put her arm round her to assist her, she leant her head on her shoulder, and sobbed with the weakness of a child. Gertrude kissed and soothed her, and strove to restore her to

composure; but her presence only seemed to increase Laura's distress; though once, when she attempted to leave her, Laura caught her hand, and signed to her to remain.

"I cannot think of it," she said at length, in broken words, "for you to suffer. I could beg my bread rather."

"We will not talk of it now, dearest," said Gertrude. "When you are better you shall hear all I have to say, and no one shall force you to do anything against your will; but Edward must carry you to your room. He has done enough mischief for to-day."

"I would bear all pain—all imaginable pain,"—whispered Laura, "rather than you should ——"

"Yet you will not agree to the only plan which will save me from it?"

Laura was going to answer, but Gertrude would not give her the opportunity; and summoning Edward, insisted upon her being left without disturbance for several hours.

CHAPTER XLV.

EDWARD had said that his worst trial was over, and so perhaps it was. There was at least no longer anything to conceal—no necessity for appearing cheerful when his heart was sinking in despondency. But there was also, now, no pretext for further delaying his ultimate intentions. Before the winter, Allingham must be left; and in Laura's delicate state, a few weeks might make a considerable difference in the prudence of travelling. For this was the final arrangement. A twelvemonth's residence abroad would give Mr Rivers time for settling Edward's affairs, and enabling him to return to his country with freedom and honour; and he would then take the necessary measures for again resuming his profession. And all this sounded easy; but how much was involved in it! How many bitter remembrances, and self-accusations for the past!—how many sad visions for the future! It required all Edward's newly-strengthened principles to teach him to submit to the duty before him. If there had remained any hope of a competency, however small, out of the wreck of his fortune, he might probably have been tempted to continue abroad for the remainder of his life, rather than brave the observations which must follow his intended line of conduct. But to be dependent upon Gertrude, to feel that he was depriving her of her right merely to gratify his own weakness, was impossible; and if, for a moment, his resolution wavered, Laura was at hand to warn and support him. Trial, with her, was indeed working its great end, repentance and amendment. Her step

was slow, and her eye dim, and her whole bearing thoughtful and sometimes sad, but not in Edward's presence. With him she was cheerful, contented, sanguine; occupied only in endeavouring, as far as lay in her power, to smooth the rugged path upon which he had entered. If she could not actively exert herself, she could write for him, and think for him; she could discuss his plans, and brighten his dark prospects, by hopeful smiles, till even in the midst of his grief Edward sometimes felt that a spring of happiness had opened in his desert life which might make amends for all that he had lost. But this was but seldom. Too heavy a burden lay upon his conscience to be cast suddenly aside. His offences were errors in the eyes of his fellow-creatures, but they were sins before God, and the sins of years, in the face of warnings and instructions; and years must pass before he could hope to enjoy that peace of mind which long-confirmed habits of watchful obedience alone can give. The plans were at length definitely fixed: the day of departure, the route, the place of destination. Edward had committed his affairs without reservation to Mr Rivers, in the certainty that all would be done which talent and integrity could effect, and two things only remained to be thought of: the one, the best mode of breaking the intelligence to Mrs Courtenay; the other ——

"Gertrude will not consent to it," said Edward, when Laura first proposed it. "To leave her home for a twelvemonth! I think you can hardly ask it."

"She will tell us at once if it cannot be," replied Laura; "and it might be less painful than remaining behind."

"That will not weigh in the scale," said Edward. "But you must write to her. It is not fair to take a person by surprise in these cases."

The note was written. It was urgent and affec-

tionate, begging that, if it were possible, Gertrude would agree to accompany them.

"If it were merely a question of pleasure," wrote Laura, "I should hesitate in asking, knowing the claims you already have at home; but, dearest Gertrude, there are many things in which you are become necessary to us both. It is not a common case. Edward will have much to encounter, and I feel myself so overwhelmed when he is miserable, I scarcely know how to comfort him. Pray think of it. If it is not right, I will be contented; but I cannot resist proposing it, even if you should be obliged to say no."

The idea was not new to Gertrude's mind. She had observed with anxiety Laura's delicacy of constitution since her illness, and often dreaded the consequences of the fatigue and distress of mind which must attend her journey; but the duties of her home were primary, and, for a long time, her decision wavered. She knew that she was useful to Laura, but she still felt doubtful as to leaving her mother until aware of the effect which the intelligence of Edward's circumstances might have upon her. If Edith could go instead—but no, Edith could never regain her lost place in Edward's affection. He had seen and acknowledged to Gertrude his injustice in accusing any but himself of having led Laura into error, and his manner to Edith had lately been peculiarly kind, as if to atone for the harsh words he had spoken; but the love that has once been chilled can never be restored to its former warmth. And Edith felt this, daily and hourly. It was the most bitter drop in her cup of sorrow, for it was the consequence of her own actions. In the doubtful state of her mind Gertrude had recourse to Charlotte, whose quick yet cool judgment she had learnt especially to appreciate since it had been lately called into

action. "What new mischief is there?" was the observation with which her request for a few minutes' private conversation was received.

"Not mischief at all as yet," replied Gertrude; "but I want your advice. Edward and Laura go next week."

"And they wish you to go with them?—exactly what I said they would. Edith and I were talking of it only last night."

"And what did Edith say?"

"She is in the passage. I will make her come and tell herself."

Poor Edith looked so very unhappy, that Gertrude did not like to drag her into the conversation, but Charlotte began without mercy. "Now, Edith, give your own opinion. Is it best for Gertrude to stay at home with us, or go abroad with Edward and Laura?"

"I don't know—I don't care. Why should you ask me?" said Edith.

"Because you are a party concerned. If Gertrude goes, the care of mamma and Jane will fall upon our shoulders: do you feel equal to bearing it?"

"Should you very much object?" said Gertrude gently.

Edith appeared extremely distressed.

"Well!" exclaimed Charlotte, "if you will not speak, I may as well do it. Go, by all means, Gertrude. I shall hate it cordially, and be wretched till you come back; but still, go. If I were you, I should dislike such short notice; but that is not my affair."

"My mother!" said Gertrude. "That weighs with me most. I know if we ask her to consent, she will; but the whole thing will be a shock to her. I cannot think what she will say."

"She has a notion already," said Charlotte. "The

rumour has been mentioned by visitors, though she has always contradicted it, and I took an opportunity, yesterday, to say that I thought it very probable Edward and Laura would spend the winter abroad, and she opened her eyes, and said that it would be a very good thing, and that it might make Laura quite a different person."

"But the circumstances?" said Gertrude.

"Why say any thing about them? Nothing will be done with Allingham for some time, and when she has once become accustomed to their absence she will feel it much less. It must be broken to her gently at all events."

"But she must hear of it all soon," said Gertrude.

Charlotte looked annoyed. "I see how it is, Gertrude," she said: "you distrust us; you think we shall not take care of my mother, but," she added, more gravely, "I think you might give us credit for having learnt something within the last twelvemonth."

"I was really thinking only of myself," replied Gertrude. "I could not agree to the notion unless mamma did; but even if she were to consent, I could not go with any comfort if I fancied she had any thing dreadful hanging over her head, to be told her when I was away."

"Then tell her at once yourself," exclaimed Charlotte: "you have no time to lose."

"That is the difficulty: perhaps it would be better; but we must decide immediately."

"Yes, a week is a very little time for you to settle every thing, if you are going. But how will you manage?"

"I am not sure," said Gertrude, "whether it would not be the best way to say every thing at once. I don't mean suddenly; but one trouble neutralises another, and the selling Allingham will swallow up

all minor evils. Mamma will scarcely care for my going when she thinks of Edward."

"If it is to be done," said Charlotte, "the sooner the better. I should infinitely prefer myself sitting down in a dentist's chair, which I used to think the acme of human misery: however, you are a person of courage, Gertrude."

"I do not feel at all courageous, just at this minute," replied Gertrude. "I must consider about it quietly alone first."

She walked to the door, and Edith followed her. "Did you think me cross just now?" she said. "It was very foolish and wrong, but I think I was jealous. Five years ago, Edward would not have asked you to go abroad with him."

Gertrude wished to say that the time might come when he would feel again as he had once done, but she had little hope of it, and Edith, having made her confession, hurried away.

Mrs Courtenay was in her little room, as usual; but not, as usual, busied in doing nothing. She was knitting a pair of woollen socks for a poor old woman in Elsham, and a book lay open beside her. "I was just looking out the place where we left off, my dear," she said, "and thinking I would go on by myself. What kept you so long?"

"I have been talking to Charlotte and Edith," replied Gertrude.

"Well? but you have been with them ever since breakfast. What can you have to say to each other?"

"We were talking of Edward and Laura," said Gertrude. "You know they have some idea of going abroad."

"Yes; Charlotte told me so yesterday; but is it settled? How quick they are in all their plans!"

"It is Edward's way, generally," replied Gertrude; "and now, I believe, he has particular reasons for it.

It is rather necessary he should make some change; he has been at such heavy expenses."

"So he has, poor fellow! As your dear father used to say, people don't go into parliament for nothing."

"No, indeed, they don't," said Gertrude; "and Edward has been particularly pressed lately."

"Has he, indeed?" and Mrs Courtenay looked up from her work, rather frightened.

"I think you must have seen he was worried," continued Gertrude; "and that has been the cause."

"Ah! very likely; nothing is so troublesome as money matters. When I first married I always had a headache whenever I thought about them; and at last your father took them out of my hands entirely."

"If Edward goes abroad," said Gertrude, "he will probably stay some time."

"Yes, I daresay, when he is once there, he will wish to see every thing,—all young people do. But, my dear, I don't like to think about it. It made me very nervous when Charlotte told me yesterday. Some one called at the time, and I thought it was merely a notion of hers, not of any consequence. He won't be going just yet, though?"

"Next week, I rather think."

Mrs Courtenay laid down her work, "Next week! Gertrude, my dear! you are dreaming. He can't—it is impossible—he won't be ready."

"He does not like to delay," said Gertrude, "because of Laura. Travelling later in the season will be inconvenient on her account."

"To be sure, I forgot. But, my dear, what will he do with Allingham? Not trust it with Mrs Dickson, I hope? I don't know why, and I have no wish to say a word against her, but I can't help thinking she cheats him."

"Allingham is a very large place," said Gertrude; "too large for a man who desires to economise."

"So it is, dreadfully expensive! I forget how many servants the Colonel used to say it required, but it was an immense number; and Edward, poor fellow! is so fond of having things in style."

"Perhaps it would be better if he were to let or sell it," said Gertrude, pronouncing the last word with hesitation.

"Better! my dear," repeated Mrs Courtenay, and she placed her spectacles on the table, in utter astonishment and horror. "Better to let or sell Allingham! Why it has been in the family for I can't tell how many years. It came to them just when the last wall of the Priory that stood near here was pulled down. The house then was an old place, all full of gables and chimneys; and old Mr Courtenay, Samuel Courtenay, that was, your great great grandfather, had it taken down, and built up again as it is now. I have heard your father talk of it a hundred times, and he always had a notion that some day or other it would come into his part of the family. He and the Colonel never liked each other very much."

"It would not be desirable, I grant," said Gertrude; "but if it were right, dear mamma, you would be the last person to object."

"My dear, you are not serious. Right! how could it be right?"

"It would be better to sell it," said Gertrude, "than to live in it and run in debt."

"But who talks of running in debt? Edward has a very handsome fortune,—ten times better than he had any reason to expect when your father died."

"It was not so large as people imagined," said Gertrude; "and, at all events, he has had immense claims upon it; and I think if he were to go abroad, he would most likely decide upon doing something with Allingham during his absence. Mr Rivers strongly advises it."

"Mr Rivers, my dear! advise! What are you talking of? Mr Rivers is no relation."

"No, but he has the whole management of the property, and knows what would be most prudent. And, dear mamma, if they did go away, they still would be tolerably near you, because Edward would most probably live in town. He thinks sometimes of trying his profession again."

Mrs Courtenay looked at Gertrude, and then rubbed her eyes. "I don't know," she said, "it is a very strange world; things come so suddenly. Has he only thought of it all since yesterday?"

"Oh yes, he has been planning it for some time, but he has only just decided; and what made me think of talking to you about it this morning was, that Laura has written me a note to ask if I would go abroad with them for a twelvemonth; and, of course, I could not consent unless you did."

This last request was the completion of the shock. Mrs Courtenay threw herself back in her chair, and gasped for breath.

"Abroad! all of you gone! to leave me!"

"It would not be very long," said Gertrude. "Time passes so quickly, and I think you would be more comfortable about Laura if I were with her, and you would hear much oftener. Edward is an extremely bad correspondent."

"Yes, to be sure, Laura looks very thin; but, my dear, what shall I do? If you are not here, who will read to me?"

"Edith will, I am certain," said Gertrude; "and one thing, dear mamma, their being abroad will accustom you to their absence; you will not care so much for Edward's giving up Allingham."

This was the important point which Gertrude felt it necessary to insist on, as it was clear her mother by no means realised it. "It will be a very great

trial for us at first," she continued; "but if he can sell Allingham, he will be freed from all his incumbrances,—his debts, I mean; and he will begin life, as it were, afresh; for he will go to the bar, and he is certain of doing well, as far as any man can be, he is so clever."

A glimpse of the truth was dawning upon poor Mrs Courtenay's mind. She obliged Gertrude to repeat her words, and questioned and wondered, till the facts were clearly brought to view, and then her burst of grief was terrible to witness. The whole pride of her heart was centred in Edward. From the day of his birth till that hour she had looked upon him as something almost more than mortal, and the idea of distress ever reaching him in his journey through life had never yet entered her mind. Gertrude felt for her mother's sorrow, the more because it was so hard to comfort. Her mind was not equal to listening to reason at such a time. She wrung her hands and cried,—one moment entreating that they should all give up every thing,—that they should leave the Priory, and live upon nothing, rather than Edward should suffer; and the next declaring that the report must be untrue,—it was only what ill-natured people thought, and she wondered Gertrude could attend to such nonsense. With unwearied patience Gertrude listened and sympathised, but she did not attempt explanations. She knew that the feeling could not be lasting from its very violence, but she felt thankful that the truth was known; and when Mrs Courtenay at length lay upon the sofa, silent and still, because her strength was exhausted, Gertrude alluded to the only point which she had not yet mentioned, and which she had purposely kept back, in the hope that it might be some slight consolation.

"We will do something for him, dear mamma," she said; "he can have aunt Heathfield's fortune,

instead of me, and that will make him comfortable now, and by-and-by he may be a rich man again."

"Ah! my dear, yes. Poor fellow! Who could think it. Your aunt's fortune was little enough."

Gertrude felt a pang of disappointment, though she reproached herself for it. She did not wish to be praised for a common act of duty; but she forgot that no one but Edith, herself, and Mr Dacre understood the full extent of the sacrifice—how her bright day-dreams had been destroyed, and how overpowering had been the first feeling of disappointment. Yet she continued the subject for nearly an hour; and, at the end of that time, had in some degree reconciled her mother to the arrangements, and obtained permission to accompany Edward and Laura.

That day at the Priory was more painful than any which had yet passed. Jane, who could no longer be kept in ignorance, went to her own room and refused to see any one. Mrs Courtenay cried incessantly; Edith sat by, the image of blank despair, while Charlotte and Gertrude discussed the proposed journey, and the preparations required. The tone of the conversation was not agreeable to Gertrude's feelings. Charlotte was extremely useful, sensible, and practical; she thought of every thing, obviated every difficulty, suggested plans, which none but her own peculiarly clear head could have devised; even insisted upon making considerable sacrifices for her sister's comfort; but it was all done cheerfully, and poor Gertrude was wretched. The idea of going abroad, which at another time would have been a delight, was now full of gloom. She fancied herself in a foreign country, amongst people who could neither understand nor sympathise with her,—Edward miserable, Laura ill. She thought of her mother's distress at home, and Edith's loneliness, and the desertion of Allingham, and the trial it would be

to them to see it inhabited by another family. It seemed equally hard either to go or to stay. And then came other thoughts, of the church and Mr Dacre. She had schooled herself into submission, but the vision had never ceased to haunt her. Even in the midst of all her late anxiety, it had been with her,—in fancy and in dreams; and before she returned it would in all probability be reality. Some necessary steps had already been taken, and now that the Allingham property was to be sold, there would be no difficulty in determining the site. It was a painful interest which Gertrude felt whenever Mr Dacre had lately alluded to the subject. She longed to hear every thing, and yet when she had heard, she almost wished that it had never been introduced. From any other person it would have been overpowering, but Mr Dacre's perfect consideration and gentleness softened the trial; and even when suffering most, she felt as if she had never before sufficiently estimated his character. And of him, when they were so soon to part for many months, Gertrude thought much and anxiously. He had been a friend when friendship was above all things needed, and he had understood and sympathised with feelings so sacred and private, that she could not have mentioned them in words. When she returned to England, would he be waiting to welcome her, or was it more than probable that, before a year had gone by, his troubled life would be over? That his health was sinking there could be no doubt; it was the general remark, and he himself frequently spoke of it, but the knowledge had never pressed so heavily upon her before; and when Edith mentioned it as they sat together, after the remainder of the family were gone to rest, Gertrude turned from the idea with a hasty assent, and began talking of other things.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE evening was clear, soft, and motionless; no breath of wind stirred the leaves; the song of the birds was stilled; the hum of the insects had nearly ceased. A few bright, flaky clouds were gathering around the setting sun, which, as it slowly sank to its repose, lit up the western horizon with a broad, golden belt, melting through scarcely perceptible shades from brilliant orange into a dim shadowy green, and rising again from the most delicate azure to the deep purple of the overhanging sky. It was an hour for sweet yet solemn thoughts, for chastened memories of earth, and tranquil hopes of heaven—a time when holy influences seem hovering near, hushing to rest the cares of the busy world, and shedding a secret charm over the homes of earth unfelt and unthought of in the dazzling lustre of day. And Edward and Laura stood together for the last time beneath the colonnade at Allingham. The parting words had been said, the last farewells taken. It was their own request that their few remaining hours should be alone. And who could venture to intrude upon such sorrow? Who that has felt the bitterness of parting for years, even with the prospect of return, from scenes endeared by associations with all that life holds most precious, could wish to disturb the grief which must fill the heart, when the parting is brought upon us by our own folly, not for years, but for ever? And it seems vain at such a time to say that happiness may be found in any place. Perhaps it may, and so may kind words and voices of affection; but do we therefore feel the less when forced to relinquish all which we have hitherto prized? And the beauty of nature, and the scenes of home,

are not senseless and inanimate. There is a spirit enshrined in each object on which our eyes have long been accustomed to dwell, for we have hung upon it hopes and fears, thoughts of love, and dreams of enjoyment; and when the hour of separation draws nigh, they will crowd around us like the ghosts of bygone days, to mock us with the remembrance of pleasures which may never again be ours.

It was not a moment for words; deep feeling is, and must be, silent; but Laura clung to her husband's arm as she tearfully gazed on the gorgeous sky; and when a sigh escaped him in the anguish of his soul, she turned to him with the same smile which had once possessed such power to lead him from the right path, and whispered, as she laid her hand upon his, "Mine still for ever." Edward dared not speak, but he threw his arm round her, and pressed her to his heart, and then slowly and sorrowfully they went forth together. Through the walks, and shrubberies, and terraces—by the green lawns, and the radiant flowers, which shone mistily in the evening light—not one spot was left unvisited, though Laura's weary step told that her strength was nearly gone, and Edward, in anxious apprehension, urged her to return. The task was at length over. Laura again stood under the colonnade, and cast a lingering look upon the garden.

The sun had sunk, and by the pale streak of light which marked where his path had been, the evening star now glittered in solitary beauty. Edward raised his hand and pointed to it. "Will it be as lovely in a foreign land?" he said.

"Not to our eyes," replied Laura; "but shall we murmur, Edward? Is there not much left us?"

Edward thought for a few moments. "Yes," he said; "this same hour might have come, and I might have been alone."

"And Charlie," said Laura, "and Gertrude, and the consciousness that no one will have suffered but ourselves; that no slur can be cast upon our name. We have much to be thankful for."

"Much, every thing, while you are spared," he exclaimed, earnestly.

"And our child," said Laura; "will you not come and look at him?"

Edward hesitated. "Go alone," he said. "Why should I be reminded that I have injured him?"

The tone was so wretched that Laura could not press him. She entered the house, but Edward immediately followed her. The hall presented a dreary contrast to the beauty without. It was filled with boxes and trunks, and the few servants who had not been dismissed were collecting the remaining articles for the travelling bags, and discussing in an under-tone the reasons for their master's movements. Laura passed up the splendid staircase, and through the long gallery, hung with family portraits, till she reached her own luxurious apartment. The furniture had been chosen to suit her particular taste, and involuntarily she stopped and looked wistfully at the tables and chairs, the glasses and couches, with which it was adorned. It was not a sigh of regret, but of affection, which escaped her; but Edward heard it, and it cut him to the heart.

"You will come," said Laura, opening a door which led into her little boy's sleeping-room.

And Edward went. Laura bent over the bed, and in the delight of a mother's heart, forgot, as she gazed upon her child's fair forehead, and long dark eye-lashes, and rounded cheek, flushed with the rosy tint of health, that life could have any trials whilst he was with her; but to Edward's mind they were more vividly present at that instant than they had ever been before. He stood apart, his arms folded on

his breast, and his features rigid with the effort to control his feelings: but when Charlie moved in his sleep, and softly murmured his name, his stern self-command gave way, and for the first time, unmindful of Laura's presence, his grief burst forth without restraint.

Who may tell the wretchedness of the remainder of that dreary evening? The comfortless tea taken in Laura's room, because she was too tired, and too sick at heart, to go down stairs. The pain with which Edward looked at the smallest article with which he was to part. The trial of searching over Laura's own books to see which it would be best to keep, and then the last walk through the long dark rooms, partly from a wish to see them once more, and partly with the view of deciding whether it would be desirable to give up two or three favourite pieces of furniture. It was one protracted suffering, yet neither of them could forego it. The drawing-room was the last place they visited. It had not been used since the night of the dance, and Laura shuddered as she recollected the splendid misery of the archery party. Every thing in it was to be sold: Laura's inlaid work-table (Edward's present on her last birth-day), her chess-table, and flower-stand, and Mosaic cabinet; even the enamel miniatures, and collection of drawings by modern artists. It was her own especial request. Since a sacrifice was necessary, she desired it might be complete. Gertrude indeed had urged that her mother was anxious to spare the several articles which were especially valued, but Laura was resolved. They were luxuries, she said, and from henceforth her duty was to live without them. Yet she could not resist going round to each, and turning over the drawings, and opening the drawers of the cabinet; and Edward moved mechanically wherever she did. "This rubbish had better

be thrown away," she said, at she took out some old papers. "Let us just look through the cabinet. We should be sorry to leave things which people may remark upon."

"They must have been here an immense time," observed Edward, unfolding a roll. It was the plan for the church. He had never seen it since the night preceding the nomination-day of his election. Laura looked at it now attentively, with far different feelings from those which she then had.

"The mistake was great," said Edward, answering what he felt must be in her thoughts. "If this had been my object, how different things would have been!"

"You did what you imagined your duty," said Laura.

"No," he exclaimed, firmly, though sadly; "I made my duty suit my will, not my will my duty."

"But how could you have known what was your duty?"

"External circumstances — property — my own doubts—the opinion of a man like Mr Dacre: but repentance has come too late." And heaving a deep sigh, he cast the paper aside, and leaning his head upon the cabinet, remained buried in thought.

With that one sin came the remembrance of many others. The doubtful acts which, though not encouraged, had been allowed in order to secure his election; the weakness and irresolution which had induced him so frequently to act against his conscience, in compliance with his wife's wishes, and which had been the cause of Miss Forester's influence; and an offence, little thought of at the time, and long since forgotten, but which now, by some mysterious power, returned upon him in all its reality —the selfishness which had urged him to meditate an act of cruelty, only not carried into effect, because

the hand of death anticipated his purpose. Was it superstition which made him read in the trial of that hour, when he was bidding farewell to his home, something of retribution for the hardness of heart which would have inflicted a similar suffering on a fellow-creature? They were bitter thoughts; and if Laura could have known the secrets of his soul, she might have heard his earnest confession in the words of one who also had wandered far astray: "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before Thee, and am no more worthy to be called Thy son."

"There is no use in staying here longer," he said, at length. "My sisters will take care that nothing is left which ought not to be. I have spoken to them about it—and it is late. Remember we must set off early to-morrow."

Laura still lingered; past hours of happiness crowded upon her memory, and her heart was full; but she looked at her husband, and recovering herself in an instant, she said, quietly, "I think we have done all that was necessary;" and led the way from the room. The timepiece in the hall was striking ten, and Edward insisted upon her going immediately to bed. He feared the fatigue of the next day, and he thought she might be able to sleep; but for himself he knew it would be vain to expect it; and many times in the course of the long night, as Laura awoke from her broken slumbers, she heard him pacing the adjoining room, and groaning in the anguish of a repentant spirit, over the desolation which his own sins had caused.

And on that evening there were other farewell looks and parting thoughts, arising from the same circumstances, but mixed with better, happier feelings. Gertrude walked with Edith and Mr Dacre on the Priory terrace, and watched the golden sunset, and welcomed the pale evening star, and knew that the

morrow would see her far away from the scenes and the friends she loved so well; but her heart was thankful and at peace. She had endeavoured to conquer the vain regrets for Edward's suffering, from the hope that it might be the beginning of a new and holier life; and she could look back on the events of the last few months with the consciousness that, with all her faults, she had acted with a single heart. Purity of intention is the great secret of peace; and after a long conversation with Edith, in which she received a strict promise that all other ordinary duties should give way to the paramount obligation —her mother's comfort—Gertrude enjoyed with melancholy pleasure her last conversation with Mr Dacre. She spoke to him of the church, of her weakness, her disappointment, the difficulty of submission; and, if he had allowed it, she would again have begged his forgiveness for her hasty unkindness. And then she entreated that he would himself write to her a detailed account of the plans for the building and the progress made. Mr Dacre listened with the deepest interest, and entered into all her feelings; but when she alluded to the future, his manner changed. "He would write," he said, "whilst he was able; but a year was a long time even for the strongest to calculate upon."

Gertrude understood him, and a choking sensation arose in her throat.

"You will be in my thoughts," he said,—"all of you,—every day. My prayers may comfort you, when my fingers are powerless."

Gertrude felt a gratitude which she could not speak. She had often longed to ask him to remember her thus. "I little imagined," she said, "that my first visit to the Continent would have been so unjoyous. It was one of my childish dreams of perfect happiness."

"And it is in this way that the greater number of our early wishes are granted," replied Mr Dacre, "and at length we learn the meaning of our disappointments; we fear to wish at all. So, at least, I think you will feel, if you ever reach my age."

"I have begun to feel it now," said Gertrude. "At this moment I am not aware that I have any great wish."

"Not for Edward?" inquired Edith.

"No, not even for him, beyond the desire that he may act rightly. Which of us would venture to restore Allingham to him if the means were in our power?"

"My mother would," said Edith.

"Poor mamma!" exclaimed Gertrude. "It is a worse trial for her than for any of us; but she will be better when to-morrow is over."

"She was sadly upset this afternoon when Edward and Laura came over to see her," said Edith. "I think she fancied it was the last visit, from their manner, though they did not exactly say it."

"It will have been the last," said Gertrude. "The carriage is to come for me first to-morrow morning. We agreed about it before they went away."

"Then I shall not see you again?" said Mr Dacre, in a peculiarly suppressed voice, as he directed his steps towards the entrance gate.

"We start early," replied Gertrude, "but is it impossible?"

"It could do no good," he said, "and you will have enough farewells without my adding to the number."

Gertrude felt he was right, but she could not force herself to acknowledge it. They reached the gate in silence. "You will think of me in my long weary journey?" said Gertrude, as Mr Dacre lingered, unwilling to open it.

"And you of me in mine, if such should be the will of God? It may be a long, but not, I trust, a weary one."

"Why—why should you say it?" exclaimed Gertrude; and her cheek was pale, and her lip quivered. "I told you I had no great wish; but I have one,—that we may meet again."

"And it will be granted," he said, solemnly, "though many years may pass first."

Gertrude's tears came in spite of her utmost efforts. "It may be on earth," she said.

"Yes, and if not ——." He took her hand and pressed it to his lips. "May God's blessing be with you through life!"

Gertrude would have spoken, but he had turned away. For a few minutes he pursued his path rapidly, but then his strength flagged; and when she looked at his tall, attenuated figure, and feeble steps, Gertrude felt as if the decree had already gone forth that she should see him on earth no more.

CHAPTER XLVII.

All who have experienced the oppression of that moment when we first awake to consciousness upon a day of heavy trial, will understand the weight upon Edward's heart when the light broke into his chamber, and roused him from the deep slumber which had followed his long hours of watchfulness. It was a glorious morning. The sun shone brilliantly in the unclouded sky, and the freshness of the early dew was lying on the smooth turf; insects were humming on the window, and straggling sunbeams dancing on the many-coloured carpet and damask furniture. The luxury and beauty of his home struck Edward with the vividness of a scene which is gazed on for the first time. He thought that he was leaving happiness for ever. Other scenes might be as fair, —other spots as fitted for enjoyment; but, even were they his, where would be the associations which had made Allingham so dear? and when would the buoyancy of spirit be restored to him which had enabled him to enjoy them? The answer came from the depth of his heart—"Never!" And Gertrude awoke yet earlier, with the knowledge that much was still left her to think of. Her last evening had been occupied with her mother, whose anxiety for Edward had increased daily as the time drew near for his journey. Understanding little or nothing of business, she could not persuade herself that his ruin was complete, and harassed herself with the idea that it would still be possible, by some great personal sacrifice, to save him. Edward, when

the notion had first been hinted to him, rejected it without a moment's hesitation; but Mrs Courtenay would not be convinced, and with all a parent's partiality for an only son, she would have given up all herself, and overlooked the privations entailed upon every other member of her family, to save him from suffering. Gertrude's sacrifice she scarcely considered. Nothing indeed would have satisfied her but the complete restoration of his fortune, and it was not until Gertrude had reasoned, and entreated, and repeated the same arguments again and again, that she had been persuaded, late on the preceding evening, to give up the idea of their all leaving the Priory, and agreed only to make such alteration in their style of living as would enable him to live with greater comfort abroad, and to begin his profession upon a competency, when the year of exile was expired. And even this Gertrude knew must not be hinted to her brother. Whatever was to be done must pass through her hands, and this formed an additional reason for being contented to go with him. There were so many ways in which he might be assisted without his delicacy being wounded, which no one but a member of his own family could discover. Mrs Courtenay was, however, at length convinced, apparently, if not really, and Gertrude was relieved at finding that her mother's tears ceased, and that she became more tranquil. She bade her good-night, with the earnest request that she would not think of rising early the next day. It would only make her ill, and the rest of the family uncomfortable, and she promised to go to her room the last thing. Mrs Courtenay assented, but the next morning, before Gertrude was dressed, she heard her mother's voice, inquiring whether the coffee was ready, and sending the footman to the lodge, to look down the road, and see whether the

carriage was coming. Gertrude left the conclusion of her packing to Charlotte, and went down stairs. Jane and Edith were writing directions, and Mrs Courtenay, whose sorrow and nervousness were conquered for the moment by the interest of providing for her daughter's comfort, was cutting some meat at a side-table. "I thought you would never come, my dear," she exclaimed; "your coffee is quite cold, and you will have no time to eat."

"I want very little, thank you," said Gertrude. "I am not at all hungry."

"Oh! but my love, just consider, you are going such a long journey; you will make me very unhappy if you don't: and I ordered the chicken to be dressed expressly, for I thought poor Edward and Laura might come without any breakfast, and then perhaps they would finish here."

"I scarcely think they will be ready in time," said Gertrude, "and they wish me to go to them. Perhaps it will be the best arrangement."

The knife and fork dropped from Mrs Courtenay's hands, and all the grief which had been for the time suppressed burst forth again. Lamentations, sighs, tears; but in the midst of all she still insisted upon Gertrude's eating.

"Don't attempt it," whispered Jane; but Gertrude saw her mother's eyes fixed upon her, and forced herself to do the only thing which she knew would satisfy her.

"You will write to me?" said Edith, in an undertone. "All my comfort will go with you."

"Not all, dearest; and I am sure you may make things better."

"I will try; but I don't understand it as you do."

"Attention," said Gertrude,—"attention to other persons' ways and habits. I think that is the secret."

Edith looked very desponding. At that instant Charlotte entered. "Done at last," she exclaimed, holding up the keys. "I would not have taken the trouble for any other human being."

"Just in time," said Jane: "I hear the carriage."

Mrs Courtenay went into the hall with the faint hope of seeing Edward.

"We shall hear from Boulogne?" said Jane.

Gertrude promised that she would not delay a single hour if she could possibly avoid it. They should have a detailed account of every thing. And anxious to shorten the parting, she hurried out of the room, followed by her sisters.

"This time twelvemonth, dear mamma," said Gertrude, as she threw her arm round her mother's neck,—"we must look forward to that."

Mrs Courtenay seated herself in a chair, and cried bitterly; and Gertrude felt inclined to repent her decision. The servants crowded into the hall; she could scarcely speak to say good-bye to them, and almost wondered at herself for feeling so much. "My mother!" was her last word to Edith as she held her hand.

"You may depend on us both," said Charlotte.

Gertrude stood up in the carriage till it had turned the corner of the road, and then gave up her mind to Allingham.

And much indeed there was to prepare for; but the drive was short, and before she had summoned up all the thoughts which she trusted might support herself and others in the coming trial, the carriage stopped. Edward and Laura were awaiting her arrival in the hall; and little Charlie, standing by his nurse, was expressing in broken accents his wonder and delight at the novelty of the scene. Edward leant against a marble pillar, with a countenance which told but too plainly the tale of his

broken rest and his morning's agony of mind. He looked at all that was passing, but he gave no orders; even then he felt himself a stranger in his own halls. And Laura was at his side, silent and trembling; only occasionally she stroked her child's glossy hair, or in a faint voice inquired if every direction had been attended to. There were few servants present, and of those few, none who had any peculiar interest in their master. All whom he had most valued he had provided with other situations before parting with them. The housekeeper had taken upon herself the whole authority, and moved and spoke with an air and tone which, a few months before, would have ensured her immediate dismissal. Edward was not insensible, though he appeared so. He heard every word, and saw every action, and each symptom of indifference or inattention was felt with the keenness of a broken spirit. Gertrude greeted him briefly. She expressed no fear lest he had been kept waiting, but assisted in collecting the few things that were not already packed, and then going up to her brother, she said, "The carriage is ready." Edward sprang forward, as if he dared not think. With perfect calmness he assisted Laura to put on her cloak, and tied his child's hat, and walked round the hall to see that nothing was left behind, and then, placing Gertrude and Laura in the carriage, he seated himself with Charlie by his side, and drawing his travelling cap over his forehead, closed his eyes. Gertrude held her sister's trembling hand. Laura sat upright, and her breath was quick and faint. It seemed as if her earnest gaze was seeking to retain the impression of every tree and fence,—every winding of the road; and onward the carriage rolled, rapidly and easily, each turning of the wheel robbing them of some spot endeared by memory and affection. It

was but the work of a few minutes. They reached the park gate. The lodge-keeper, an old grey-headed servant of the family, came forward to express his wishes for his master's prosperous journey. Edward raised his head, and tried to thank him, but the tone was strained and unnatural; and Laura bowed her gratitude,—she could do no more. And the greeting was over. Edward, in a hoarse voice, called to the postilion to proceed, and then once more the carriage rolled on, and Allingham was left for ever.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

About half-way up the ascent of a wide heath-covered hill, distant nearly two miles from the village of Elsham, stands a small church of modern date, in the decorated style of the fourteenth century. The beauty of the situation, commanding an extensive view over the valley of Elsham, backed by the Allingham woods, might alone excite admiration; but a more rare, and perhaps more interesting subject for observation, is to be found in the building itself. The deep porch, with its massive door and ornamented hinges, the flowing tracery of the windows, the rich mouldings, the buttresses surmounted by carved pinnacles, the trefoil parapet, the spire rising from a tower of exquisite proportions, all tell that the hand of taste as well as of piety has been busied in erecting a fitting temple for the worship of God. And to those who have gazed on it with pleasure, it may perhaps add something of a deeper interest to know, that he who dedicated no small portion of his worldly substance to be thus employed for his Maker's honour, was summoned to his great reward before he had been permitted to witness the full completion of his work.

About three weeks previous to the day fixed for the consecration of Torrington Church, Mr Dacre breathed his last, after an illness of a few hours; his final request being that no alterations might take place in the arrangements which he had made. He had no regrets, no longings; the praise of man could be nothing to him, who for so many years had sought only the favour of God. Some thoughts,

indeed, there were of one, who in the course of a few days was about to return to her home, and whose voice it would have soothed him once more to hear; but they were thoughts of comfort and peace, for Gertrude's frequent letters from abroad had relieved him from many sources of anxiety. She had told him of Edward's increasing stability of character, of Laura's improving health, and her own perfect satisfaction in all that had been done. She was not, she said, resigned merely, but grateful. Edward's peace of mind had been lightly purchased by the sacrifice of her own inclinations, and all that she desired was to know that the task which had fallen into Mr Dacre's hands had been fulfilled according to his wishes. To have received the assurance from her own lips would, indeed, have been a blessing; but Mr Dacre had learnt most perfectly the lesson of submission, and when he was told that a few hours must, in all human probability, terminate his existence, he turned from the prospect of an earthly meeting, to the hope of one upon which no parting should follow. And as Mr Dacre had lived, so he died,—humbly, thankfully, and in faith,—his hands crossed upon his breast, and his lips moving in prayer to the Saviour, in whose merits alone he trusted; and when the last breath was drawn, not one of those who viewed the smile which rested upon his worn features, dared, even for an instant, to indulge the wish that would have recalled him from his deep repose.

It was a bitter trial for Gertrude when the intelligence first reached her. She was then on her way to England, and the latest accounts had been so good, that she had buoyed herself up with the idea that the foreboding tone of their last interview had been merely the effect of passing circumstances—that they might meet again, and that, perhaps, it might be granted to her to be a comfort to him in

his last days. She thought of her home, and longed to be restored to it; but the remembrance of the voice now silent, which she had hoped would join in welcoming her, cast a melancholy shade over every anticipation of pleasure.

The arrangements of Edward's property had by this time been made. Allingham had passed into other hands; and, with no fortune but that of a name unstained, and resolution strengthened by trial, he was about to recommence his career in life. Gertrude staid with him till he was settled in London, in a small house, in a quiet street, with two servants,—no carriages, no luxuries, nothing but the necessaries of life; and when she had seen him smile, as Laura occupied herself with domestic affairs, and laugh at the deficiencies of his establishment, her mind was happy. If he had no false shame, she had little doubt of his ultimate success. And Edward was hopeful also. He knew his own powers, but he did not trust to them. If the blessing of God went with his endeavours, they would prosper—if not, the wisdom of ages could not help him. And the blessing of God rests upon a pure intention, a heart which will shrink from evil, at whatever risk, under whatever temptation. With Allingham in his possession, purchased by the relinquishment of a single principle of right, his happiness would have hung upon a thread, which a single instant might sever; and this he now unhesitatingly acknowledged.

The moment was a happy, though a trying one, when Gertrude once more found herself seated in the drawing-room at the Priory, her mother questioning her about Edward, and her sisters crowding round her, as around a newly-found treasure. But the pleasure was quickly damped,—an allusion to Mr Dacre brought back the full remembrance of her loss. Yet it was only when by herself, or with Edith, that

she ventured to give way to her grief, for Edith alone had known and appreciated him truly. To hear his name mentioned carelessly was a profanation scarcely to be endured; but it was a trial to which she was daily subjected. A person of Mr Dacre's character and fortune could not die without leaving many causes for curiosity and speculation.

Every one turned to General Forester, as the party most interested in the event; and the General attended at the opening of the will, with a self-important manner but ill concealed by an affectation of regret. Yet he might have spared himself any anxiety. He was remembered, so was his daughter, so were Edward, and Gertrude, and Edith, and the housekeeper and servants, with kind expressions and small legacies, but the bulk of Mr Dacre's fortune was gone. He had disposed of it during the latter part of his life, in favour of some public institutions in India, and the church had swallowed up the remaining portion, which he had reserved for his own especial need. He was a rich man, but he died poor; no one knew how poor, but those who had witnessed the increasing abstemiousness of his habits, and the denial of what to many would have been only necessaries, after he had decided upon the building and endowment of his church. General Forester's disappointment was keen, and plainly shown. Miss Forester affected indifference, but not with her usual success. The last year had robbed her of much of the interest of her existence; and middle age was creeping upon her before she had forgotten the follies of youth. The Grange was distasteful, the Priory odious, Elsham insipid. She spoke of travelling, and her father seconded the idea. He thought it might amuse, and relieve *ennui;* but it was a delusive fancy. Happiness lies in our own hearts, and they who seek it elsewhere will assuredly seek in vain.

It was with an involuntary feeling of satisfaction that Gertrude heard of their intention to leave the Grange, at least for two years. Every association connected with them was full of pain. She could not endure Miss Forester's inquiries after Laura, or the tone in which she alluded to Mr Dacre, as her late dear uncle; and when, about a fortnight after her return, she understood that business had called both the General and his daughter to town, and that it was thought they would not return again, the relief was not to be expressed. Yet, notwithstanding Gertrude's many subjects for regret, there were some changes in her home circle which were a source of never-ceasing thankfulness. Mrs Courtenay's mind was not, indeed, enlarged, but she had become less exciteable, less dependent upon luxuries, and estimated more deeply the importance of religious duties; and Edith and her sisters were more united, more willing to take a common interest in the poor, and to exert themselves in the schools. Edith was considerate, and Charlotte softened, and Jane less wrapped up in herself. The difference was not very marked, but it could not be hidden from Gertrude, for trial had brought with it thought, and thought was maturing into practice; and as Gertrude watched these dawnings of a better spirit, she thought that no affliction could be overwhelming, which brought such blessings in its train. Yet, when the day of the consecration arrived, the spring of her past sorrow seemed opened afresh. Since her return she had never summoned courage to walk to the heath; and when she stood, for the first time, with Edith before Mr Dacre's church, the memories which flashed like lightning upon her mind were sad almost to tears. Allingham and its beauty, Edward's ruin, her own disappointment, Laura's illness, seemed again realities; and Mr Dacre seemed still near her,—she almost heard his grave, quiet tones, and saw his deep-

searching eye, and sweet though sad smile; and then she looked upon the beautiful building before her, raised as if by magic in the wilderness, and it was a dream—a phantom. Edith drew her into the church, for the crowd was pressing on. Through the stained windows was gleaming a misty light, and upon the clustered pillars rainbow hues were flickering; and dimness rested upon the dark oak roof and the raised chancel,—a dimness which was, as it were, the shadow of heaven. The building was the type of the spiritual temple of God, and his peace seemed resting upon it. With soothed and tranquil hearts Gertrude and her sister took their places, where, retired and unobserved, they might join without distraction in the services of the day. By degrees the church was filled, the rustling murmurs ceased, and the procession of the bishop and clergy moved down the narrow aisles. And then was heard the solemn acknowledgment of the sovereignty of the Lord of Heaven, and the encouragement to those who with clean hands and pure hearts would seek to rise up in His holy place; the exhortation to pray faithfully and devoutly for the blessing of God; and the entreaty that He would vouchsafe to be present with those who were there gathered together; that He would accept their service and bless it with success; that He would sanctify those who in that house should be dedicated to Him by baptism; that He would keep for ever, and preserve in the unity of His Church, those who should there renew their vows; that He would fill with His heavenly benediction whosoever should in that place receive the blessed sacrament of the body and blood of Christ; that He would give strength for the performance of the marriage vow; grace to the hearers of His holy word; stedfastness of faith, seriousness, and sincerity to the penitent; and to all such a portion of His Holy Spirit, that after serving and worshipping Him

below, they might finally be received into His presence.

The service proceeded. The appointed psalms, the lessons, with the solemn words in which Solomon dedicated the Temple of Jerusalem, the daily prayers, in which the needs of the Church are intended to be continually represented before the throne of grace; the entreaty that the people of God might be filled with an awful apprehension of his Divine Majesty, and a deep sense of their own unworthiness; the assertions of the Apostle, of the mysterious privileges by which Christians are made the temples of the living God; and the awful warning against profaning the dwelling-place of the Most High.

The sermon followed; and when it was ended, and the final prayers were read from the altar, Gertrude's heart beat quickly. There was one most fervent petition for unity, and then the bishop paused. He, for whom the next prayer should have been offered, was beyond the reach of intercession. Lonely and childless, he had passed to his eternal rest, and the kindness which he had showed for the house of his God, was written among the deeds which shall be blessed, not on earth, but in heaven. For him there was no need to seek "the peace that passeth understanding."

Gertrude and Edith were among the first to leave the church. They did not pause, or speak, or look back, till they had reached a still, sheltered spot, far from the road which they believed all others would take; and then Edith drew a long breath, and in a low, half-broken voice said—

"Gertrude, was it a sinful wish? The prayer was uttered for no one;—it might have been for you."

Gertrude's answer was firm. "Yes; and at that moment a thought of self might have arisen, and the offering would have been marred."

On the north side of the altar in Torrington church there is inserted in the floor a small brass plate, inscribed with Mr Dacre's name, and the date of his birth and of his death. It is all that remains to tell of him who founded and endowed the beautiful edifice which is now the admiration of the beholder, and the centre of instruction and blessing to the neat and orderly population which has sprung up around its walls. But there needs no earthly monument to remind those who once dwelt within reach of his bounty, of the friend thus granted for their aid. In the cottage and the hovel, in sunshine and in gloom, beneath the summer's sun and by the winter's hearth, his name is yet remembered and beloved; and when years have gone by, and the great and the powerful have sunk into oblivion, it may be that the light of his example shall still linger upon earth; for "the memory of the just is blessed."

THE END.

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