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PAUL'S COURTSHIP.



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PAUL'S COURTSHIP.

A Novel.

BY

HESBA STRETTON,

AUTHOR OF "THE CLIVES OF BURCOT."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:

CHARLES W. WOOD,

13, TAVISTOCK STREET, STRAND.

1867.

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LONDON:
BRADBURY, EVANS, AND CO., PRINTERS, WHITEFRIARS.

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PAUL'S COURTSHIP.

CHAPTER I.

THE sun was setting when the travellers arrived at Leamington. Doris had received no other address from Tom Fanshawe than that of the Post Office. The best clue to his temporary abode would be found at the residence of Emma Aspen, from whom they could without doubt obtain the necessary information. The languor that had been visibly creeping over Doris during the journey, after the agitation and fatigue of the day, now gave place to a fevered excitement, which Paul watched with anxiety. When the conveyance they had taken stopped before the door of Emma Aspen's lodging, and Doris turned to him her eyes brilliant with an unnatural

light, and cheeks burning with a hectic glow, he assisted her to alight with unwonted carefulness. Still keeping her hand in his, as he drew it through his arm, he addressed her in compassionate and encouraging accents.

“Be calm, Doris,” he said. “You possess courage and resolution; call them to your help now. Believe me, I fully share your pain, and as far as it lies in my power, I will shield you from any further distress.”

She pressed his arm gratefully, but without raising her eyes; clinging to him, as if she had not strength to enter unsupported, they followed the servant, who answered their summons, and conducted them at once to the presence of Emma Aspen. The room was dark with the gathering twilight; but near the window sat two figures side by side, whom they recognised in a moment as the persons whom they were seeking. Paul felt Doris's footsteps falter, and laid his hand again upon hers to reassure her, while Tom Fanshawe and

Emma confronted them with an air of some confusion. Emma uttered a piercing little shriek, when she detected in the dark, who were the silent strangers before her; but Tom Fanshawe, coolly availing himself of the obscurity, muttered an apology for leaving, and a farewell to Emma, and was effecting a rapid retreat.

“Stay, Mr. Fanshawe,” said Paul, intercepting his escape, “our business is with you.”

A second shriek from Emma, followed by a series of hysterical sobs, was the immediate reply to this announcement. In the slight interval that their almost involuntary attention to her occasioned, Tom Fanshawe had time to collect his faculties. He could not at once perceive the reason that had brought both Paul and Doris there, though he had a shrewd guess at it; and it behoved him to proceed with caution until he could learn the true cause of their unexpected appearance together. The arrival of either would have scarcely sur-

prised him at all; but that both should come made it more difficult to discover the clue.

“Shall I ring for your servant, Emma?” asked Paul. “Miss Arnold and I have important business with Mr. Fanshawe. Your presence is unnecessary.”

“Oh, no, no,” gasped Emma, convulsively, “I must stay; you cannot have any business with him, which I may not hear. You shall not send me away, Paul.”

“She must go,” said Doris, in a decisive tone to Tom Fanshawe, as though she knew him to possess tact or authority enough to manage the weak woman and her emotion. He had some difficulty nevertheless in persuading her to leave them; and both Paul and Doris had so accurate an acquaintance with her character, that after she was gone their voices fell into a key so low as not to be audible beyond the walls of the apartment. Tom Fanshawe followed their example, and a calmer, more softly breathed conversation was

not sustained that evening in any residence in Leamington.

“I do not want to look at you,” said Doris with rapid intonations, and drawing so near to Paul that he felt rather than heard the tremor of her voice. “I am thankful that the dark hides you from me. I could almost wish—almost—that I might never see your face again; only yet you belong to me. I cannot free myself from you. I am bound to you, I suppose, for the term of your shameful life.”

“By Jove! Doris,” was the answer in tones as low as her own, but with a ring of mockery in them, which roused Paul’s anger in an instant; “you spoke that well, with both emphasis and action. How many times now did you render that speech to yourself on your way here?”

“Your dishonesty has been found out,” she continued; “it could not fail to be found out. You thought because I was—you thought you were safe in forging Dr. Lockley’s name. Do not make any further mistake. There is no

engagement between us ; and I did not accompany him to plead for you, or to screen you. I came here to say to him in your presence what I have said to him before. Do with him, Dr. Lockley, whatever your sense of justice demands ; and I will myself be a witness against him. It is of no use to let him escape the punishment of his crime. This is the second sin. He robbed my father first, a man of unblemished honour ; and because of his crime, he went out again, heart-stricken and broken-spirited, and died far away from his home and me. He caused my father's death. Do not spare him for my sake, Paul."

Doris's voice died away in stifled sobs, and Paul drawing her hand through his arm, pressed it against his heart.

"Et tu, Brute," said Tom Fanshawe, sneeringly.

"Good heavens!" cried Paul, "can you be such a scoundrel as to mock at words like these, and a sorrow like hers? I wish to Heaven there was no one to consider but

yourself; you should be dragged from this room, like the villain you are, to the nearest jail."

"Thank you," he replied, in the same light and irritating tone; "but there are several persons to consider. First and foremost there is your own betrothed Doris, who has brought you here. Imagine yourself appearing as a prosecutor against me! Why, man! it was nothing more than a little friendly borrowing between brothers. A friendly forgery, if you like to call it so. I knew you could not find it in your heart to proceed to any severe measures. For your own sake you would be willing to hush matters up, and quietly pay the tax upon your felicity."

"There is no engagement between us," whispered Doris, still clinging to Paul's arm.

"It grieves me hear of it," he answered. "I regarded it as a very eligible settlement for you. Still, I hold other cards in my hand, if you force me to play them. But, Doris, I

must call you to account. I wish to be made acquainted with the exact purpose of your very remarkable appearance here together. It can hardly be for pleasure, since you tell me you have dissolved partnership by mutual consent."

Doris shrank from her clasp of Paul's arm. He sprang forward, and seizing Tom Fanshawe by the collar, shook him with vehement force, before he could recover from his surprise.

"You villain!" he exclaimed, "you scoundrel! I should like to horsewhip you through every street of this town. Insult Doris again in my hearing, and I will not answer for what I shall do to you!"

"Come, come," said Tom, freeing himself with some effort, "I was not prepared for you, Lockley. Let us keep our temper, whatever we do. I simply request to know why I have the unexpected pleasure of seeing you now both before me."

Paul did not answer for some minutes, until

he could recover his self-command after the rare ebullition of passion into which he had been hurried ; when he spoke it was in short and excited sentences.

“ You will return with us to Thornbury. I have communicated with the police here, and they will keep an eye upon your movements. You shall not escape me. I shall return with you to your hotel ; and by the first train in the morning you will go back with us.”

“ I feel honoured indeed,” he answered jeeringly, “ in having a gentleman and a scholar like Dr. Lockley for my jailer. But what particular *rôle* does Doris take ? Pardon me, I have no intention of hurting her feelings ; but why, in the sacred name of woman, has she come across the country with you, on such an errand as this ? ”

“ I came to do what Dr. Lockley would leave undone,” said Doris. “ I came to claim all that remains of your ill-gotten money. The duty of repaying the whole sum will fall upon me, and I must take care the burden is as

light as it can be. You have robbed me, as well as my father, George!"

"George!" echoed Paul, as a new light broke suddenly upon his mind, bringing with it a vivid glow of satisfaction, "Who is this fellow, Doris? What relation does he hold to you?"

"My brother," she murmured. "You knew he was my brother. I am the sister of a criminal. He is George Arnold, the only son of a broken-hearted father."

"Your brother!" repeated Paul, in a tone of deep content; "but you never told us you had a brother. How could I be otherwise than deceived? I thought—well, never mind what Rufus and I thought."

His words were followed by a gay laugh from George Arnold.

"By Jove!" he cried, "quite a farce! So, Lockley, you fancied Doris and I were old lovers? And you followed us into the cloisters that night. If I had only known you were there, wouldn't I have put more ardour

into our interview? But now, if that is your quarrel, make it up at once; and let me preside at the reconciliation."

"Be silent, fellow!" exclaimed Paul, "you will make me kill you."

His voice was so hoarse with suppressed passion, that George Arnold felt it was time to set a constraint upon his mocking tongue. After a few hurried words between Paul and Doris, the former took his departure, closely followed by George, who waved an undetected adieu to Emma, as she leaned anxiously over the balustrade of the staircase. She joined Doris immediately; and through the greater portion of the night wept and bemoaned herself, in the hope of obtaining the explanation to these mysterious circumstances, which by Paul's advice, Doris withheld from her.

CHAPTER II.

A bird of the air shall carry the voice, and that which hath wings shall tell the matter, has said the wise preacher. Rumour hovers, with noiseless, invisible wings, in the atmosphere which surrounds us; taking flight, it carries away hints and pregnant germs of our most hidden secrets, and scatters them far and wide upon the lips of those who will eagerly spread the report. However cautiously Paul discussed with Mr. Palmer the forgery detected by them so unexpectedly, a whisper of it had got afloat, and passed from mouth to mouth before the same night set in; and the certain intelligence that Dr. Lockley and Miss Arnold had started from the Thornbury station after booking to Leamington gave colour to the mere hearsay of the rumour. There was

something also in the professional air of secrecy assumed by the clerks at the bank, whose suspicions had been more quickly kindled than Mr. Palmer supposed, which added to the general presumption, and gave to the charge a fair show of likelihood. The household at Fairfield and the Priory had been too long subjected to a microscopic scrutiny for any unusual event to pass unnoticed; and it was swiftly reported that the Croftons, with their well-known ally, Tom Fanshawe, had committed a successful forgery upon Dr. Lockley to a fabulous amount.

It was in the early morning after the departure of Paul and Doris; while Mrs. Aspen was seated opposite to Mr. Vale at the breakfast-table, presiding in Doris's place with a charming, old-fashioned courtesy, which was mirrored by the old clergyman's obsolete politeness; that a visitor was announced in the person of Mr. Weston. He apologised earnestly for his untimely call, but pleaded his extreme anxiety that no ill news should

reach Mrs. Aspen's ears before she had been carefully prepared for its reception.

"I should have come along to Ryton last night," he continued, "but it was late in the day before the report reached me. I scarcely credited it until they told me at the station that Lockley was gone to Leamington after Fanshawe. That is correct, I believe?"

"My nephew and Miss Arnold are gone to Leamington," replied Mrs. Aspen, "but it is to see a brother of Miss Arnold's, who is dangerously ill."

"Indeed?" said Mr. Weston, with an incredulous air; "my story runs somewhat differently. Do not be alarmed, my dear madam; it is nothing that affects you personally. The whisper is that Fanshawe and the Croftons have forged a cheque upon Rock's bank for some thousands of pounds, for the whole of the sum in fact that Lockley has deposited there. You are aware that Fanshawe is in Leamington, I presume?"

Mrs. Aspen and Mr. Vale gazed rigidly at

the speaker as he gave voluble utterance to his news. When he paused for some expression of amazement or disbelief they remained speechless, and he resumed his statements with slower and more marked emphasis.

“The story is thus told to me. For some time past Fanshawe, and the ladies from the Priory, have been in the habit of presenting cheques of various amounts at Rock’s bank. Of course Mr. John was not implicated in it except as accompanying the others. Some of these cheques bore Lockley’s signature; indisputably his in the opinion of the cashier. Yesterday Lockley asked for his cash account; which was taken in to him into Palmer’s parlour. After some time Palmer came out looking very grave, and instituted a close inquiry as to who had presented a certain cheque for a very large amount—the sum is variously stated—only a few days previously. It was distinctly remembered, for there was something odd about the occurrence, that Mrs. Crofton and Fanshawe were the parties.

Palmer said nothing ; but they tell me that Lockley went through the bank with a face as pale as death. The same afternoon he started to Leamington, accompanied by Miss Arnold, and it is supposed that she is gone to be with Mrs. John Aspen. They may have told you that they were going to see a brother of hers ; but I assure you, my dear Mrs. Aspen, Mr. Fanshawe has been staying there for some weeks past."

Mrs. Aspen had been listening intently, and now recovered her scattered faculties, which had been confounded and perplexed by Mr. Weston's first eagerness in making his announcement.

"Mr. Weston," she said, smiling, "my nephew's bankers are too well acquainted with him to be cheated by such unusual and irregular calls upon his account with them. They would have made some inquiries from himself before paying so large a cheque."

"My dear lady," said Mr. Weston, "it was supposed all along that the forged cheques ;

for there are several of them it is believed ; were drawn by Lockley to defray his debts of honour to the Croftons and Fanshawe."

"My nephew gamble!" exclaimed Mrs. Aspen, drawing up her tall and slender figure with impressive dignity; "you astonish me, Mr. Weston, by repeating such mere gossip."

"But, Mrs. Aspen," he continued, "it is well known throughout the neighbourhood that during the whole of last winter, while you were absent in London, there were some strange doings going on at the Priory. Foreign play not quite free from suspicion. I was there myself one evening, when Sutton of Sutton flung the cards into Mrs. Crofton's face, and charged her with cheating. It caused a great scandal, for Sutton was in a towering rage, and so was the lady; and Richard Crofton was nearly mad with passion. Sutton told me himself the day following that he had lost upwards of a hundred pounds that night; and he was convinced that Fanshawe and Mrs. Crofton had some way of playing

into one another's hands. Oh! I assure you, there has been some very high play carried on at the Priory."

Mrs. Aspen sat stiffly erect for some minutes, as if the whole force of Mr. Weston's statements could not penetrate all at once to her brain; but as she began to realise their import her demeanour changed into one of overwhelming excitement.

"My Priory!" she cried, "my home polluted by such scenes! I must hear all now, Mr. Weston. Tell me what else has been done there? What other degradation has fallen upon Monkmoor Priory? It is a just punishment upon me for fleeing from the scene of my sorrow."

"I feared you might hear of it casually," pursued Mr. Weston, "for all this is well known throughout Thornbury, and the country round. Anslow, and Lawrence, and many others, have been well fleeced. Lockley, too, was there frequently. Palmer had every reason to suppose the cheques were in due

order. Why, it is not very long since he withdrew 500*l.*, and handed it over to the Croftons; Richard Crofton told me himself. No blame can attach to the bankers."

"But why is he gone to Leamington?" asked Mrs. Aspen. "What brings Mr. Fanshawe there?"

"It is said," was the reply, "that he is paying his addresses to Mrs. John Aspen. My dear lady, do not agitate yourself. I am informed that they are seen constantly together there."

"Never!" exclaimed Mrs. Aspen, rising from her seat with an air of offended majesty. "I refuse to give credence to your story. This condemns and contradicts it altogether. Emma could never forget John. She refused to forsake the spot where he died, that she might cherish continual remembrances of him. My nephew is gone with Miss Arnold to attend her brother, who is on the point of death."

"They may have told you so," said Mr.

Weston, in a confident tone, "but I understood that Miss Arnold had no relatives? I know she was on terms of some intimacy with Fanshawe, for she met him at Murivance the very day that he prevented this last cheque at the bank. It is possible that she may have some knowledge of his affairs that would make her presence of service to Lockley; or she went to take care of Mrs. John."

"Doris!" cried Mrs. Aspen. "Who then am I to believe? If Paul and Doris deceive me; if they deal treacherously with me in my old age, in whom can I put any trust?"

The fire and dignity of her aspect faded, and she sank down again trembling upon her chair, and lifted her wasted hands to her face.

"Madam! Clarissa," said Mr. Vale, in faltering tones, "look up at me. We are old friends. We have known and esteemed one another for many a long year. There are but a few steps between us and the grave: we will be true to each other to the last. Trust in me, dear old friend; I could never deceive

you. I will be as true to you, as if we were already in the heaven of truth and uprightness."

"I do trust in you, Reginald," she answered, and the old man's face was suffused with a glow from his youth as she pronounced his name. "But I will tell you what I must do. This very day I must return to the Priory, and purge it from the pollution of vice there. The blood-stain was upon it, and I shrank from that; but now there is the brand of guilt and folly, from which I might have secured it. I ought to have known that Harriet Crofton could not change her nature. The Priory will not long be my own; but the author of this evil shall not remain in it another day."

"You shall go," he said reluctantly, yet with a smile lingering upon his features. "It has been the most blessed time of my life, while you and Doris have dwelt under my roof. We will not be hard upon our Doris; we must not judge her harshly, and without

hearing her. But you shall go home to the Priory, Clarissa. This house will become a solitude to me again until you return."

He glanced mournfully round the peaceful room. As if feeling that his season of halcyon enjoyment was ended, and he must make some exertion to aid his old friend, he intimated to Mr. Weston that Mrs. Aspen would prefer to be alone. After accompanying him to the gate, he walked on with a brisk step to Fairfield, where he imparted Mrs. Aspen's intention to Mrs. Margraf, and requested her and Rufus to be in readiness to go with her to the Priory, that she might not enter its doors, and meet Harriet Crofton, with a forlorn sense of being alone and unprotected. Mrs. Margraf was all impatience and eagerness to comply with his desire; and in the course of an hour, Mrs. Aspen leaning tremblingly upon her old friend's arm, and followed by Rufus and Mrs. Margraf, returned for a brief sojourn under the roof of her ancestral home.

CHAPTER III.

HARRIET CROFTON had driven over to Thornbury that morning to execute the commission, which she had entrusted to Paul the day before, fretfully resenting his inattention. But in some vague and undefined manner the drive through the streets, and the few calls she had made, were not pleasant to her. She was conscious of a marked change in the glances that she met, and in the cold and constrained greetings which returned her gracious smiles of recognition. She was unaware of anything new to create an increase of supercilious neglect on the part of her numerous acquaintances, unless it was the certainty of Mrs. Aspen's loss of the Priory, where she and her husband had been living upon the bounty of their kinswoman. But she was so well inured to

the contempt of poverty, that she smiled back with gay warmth upon the cold looks flung at her, and secretly wished a time might come when she could repay their sneers with interest.

In all probability she was never more amazed in her life, than when, from her favourite station in the oriel window which overlooked the river, the road to Thornbury, and Paul's house, her bright eyes beheld the forms of Mr. Vale and Mrs. Aspen, Rufus and Mrs. Margraf, descending the steps at Monk's Ferry into the boat, and being rowed across to the Priory. She felt instinctively that some imminent crisis was at hand. She looked again, and Paul and Doris were not there, and Mrs. Aspen was returning to the Priory unannounced, and attended by such an escort! A few seconds' deliberation indicated a possible course of action, by which she could gain more time for consideration, and multiply her chances of learning the meaning of this unlooked-for event. Before the boat reached the

Priory banks, she had retreated hastily to her bed-room, changed her dress for a loose robe, and with the windows darkened, and her face turned away from the dimmed light, threw herself upon a sofa with every semblance of a sudden and acute illness. The servant who had searched for her through the house and ruins in obedience to Mrs. Aspen's orders, was sent back to her mistress with a message that Mrs. Crofton was suffering from a severe attack of headache, which rendered her unable to lift her head from the pillow, or even to speak coherently beyond the assurance that she could not bear either to move or talk.

Mrs. Aspen found herself foiled, when she had expected to carry out her intended purpose with instant energy ; but she would not listen to Mrs. Margraf's proposition that they should follow Harriet Crofton to her chamber, and insist upon her rising at once to prepare for an immediate departure. Neither Mr. Vale nor Rufus seconded the proposal. A woman, sick and suffering from whatever

malady, had a sacredness of claim upon their sympathy which they could not ignore. Richard Crofton was gone to attend the weekly market at Thornbury; and the time of his return was uncertain. Like Harriet they gained time for consideration, and for discussing their several opinions. It appeared that after all it might be as well to avoid any further cause for public scandal, such as the sudden ejection of the Croftons from the Priory; the more so as the mysterious journey of Paul and Doris was yet inexplicable to them all; though Rufus had some heart-shaking suspicions that Doris's love for Tom Fanshawe was in some way the reason of it. Every one avoided the mention of her name; yet the thoughts of each were occupied with her. Rufus sat apart in profound and sorrowful reflections upon all the phases of Doris's conduct, and Doris's character.

At Thornbury the tide of public excitement rose to the fullest height when Dr. Lockley reappeared at the railway station, accompanied

by Mr. Fanshawe, Miss Arnold, and Mrs. John Aspen. It was eagerly reported through the town that he looked very grave; that the ladies, closely veiled as they were, bore the traces of violent weeping; but that Mr. Fanshawe was more gay and debonair than ever, greeting every acquaintance whom he met with so light-hearted and palmy a manner, that it was remarked by the bystanders that he looked more like a bridegroom than a criminal. He assisted the ladies into the conveyance procured for their farther journey to the Priory, with a grace peculiar to himself, and occupied the seat opposite to them with a smile of perfect satisfaction; while Dr. Lockley sat stiffly erect, and turned a grim, grey frown upon the little crowd which had collected at the station. The drive to the Priory was a silent one, interrupted only by periodical sobs from Emma of varying intensity and duration; an exercise in which she had indulged from the moment when Doris, with a cold and unsympathizing sternness, had informed her of

Tom Fanshawe's relationship to herself, and the crime of which he had been guilty.

It was about two hours after Mrs. Aspen's return to the Priory. She was still waiting, surrounded by her faithful escort, in anxious expectation of Richard Crofton's appearance; to whom she desired to communicate the painful discovery she had made, and her irrevocable determination that he and his wife should leave her home, only awarding to them a few days of grace to render their banishment less disgraceful; when the sound of wheels along the drive gave intimation of some arrival. The glimpse she caught of Paul's face; as he looked through the carriage window in nervous scrutiny of the house, where he was about once more to meet the treacherous woman who had twice defrauded him; lifted a heavy load from Mrs. Aspen's heart. Rufus also, with an exclamation of gladness and relief, darted into the hall to receive them. It was no light surprise to any of them when Paul was followed into the study by Doris,

Emma, and Tom Fanshawe ; and that none of the three advanced with any greeting to the group already assembled in the room ; but in their own astonishment stood together, silent, perplexed, and conscious ; a cluster of down-cast-looking culprits, with Emma's sobs rising unnoticed and unsoothed to an hysterical pitch. It was a meeting so unforeseen and bewildering that each group gazed upon the other in speechless amazement ; until Doris, putting a few paces between herself and her brother, appealed imploringly to Paul.

“ Oh, be quick ! ” she said, with mournful impatience. “ Your silence tortures me. I want everything to be known at once, that I may feel some rest and peace.”

“ Paul and Doris ! ” cried Mrs. Aspen, “ what is the meaning of all this ? ”

“ I scarcely know,” replied Paul, gazing in perplexity at the assemblage. “ How is it that I find you here, aunt ? What has brought you across to the Priory at last ? ”

“ I came here,” she said, with solemn dic-

tion, "because I heard that my nephew, Paul Lockley, whom I believed to be my honourable and trustworthy kinsman, has permitted the pollution of vice to fall upon my home. I came because I was told that Paul Lockley is a gambler, seduced by the wiles of a dangerous and wicked woman; though he was betrothed to a girl, whom I regarded as my adopted daughter. I came to sweep out of the house, which will be mine for a little time only, the sharpers and impostors who have brought a stigma upon the old Priory."

A deep bronze flush crept over Paul's grey face as Mrs. Aspen spoke with her grave and measured utterance, and her air of deep resentment and regret. But he was too confounded by her accusations to reply at once, and the voice of Doris again ended the silence, in passionate and vehement tones.

"No, no," she exclaimed, "Paul is not to blame. He is as honourable and trustworthy as ever; he is no gambler. George himself will tell you that he would never play. He

did not know what was going on here ; not half as well as I did. Listen. Let me speak. That man there, who has called himself Tom Fanshawe to you all, is my brother, George Arnold."

"Your brother, Doris!" cried Rufus, drawing nearer to her as she stood alone by the window, with her head bent down, and her hands clasped nervously together.

"Yes," she answered, raising her eyes to his face, and speaking as if to him alone, but in a low, clear voice, which filled the room. "I can tell you all about it, Rufus. He is a brother to be ashamed of and dreaded. When I came here, where nobody knew anything about me, I resolved to forget him. But he found out my refuge, and followed me down to this quiet place, knowing that I could supply him with money; just as he will follow me everywhere that I try to escape to. It was on Christmas-day, just before you came, and he took the last money I had from me. If you had been five minutes sooner, you must

have seen him. There was a reason why I should hurry him away from the neighbourhood, and I gave him willingly every shilling I possessed."

Doris paused for a minute, and glanced round upon her eager audience with a colour that came and fled rapidly upon her delicate face; but again she fastened her gaze mournfully upon Rufus.

"I thought once of telling you that evening," she continued; "but how could I when I dared not tell Paul? You did not know when you called yourself my brother, how keenly you were smiting me. It was of no use trying to hurry him away from here. He heard, for every one knew of it, that I was engaged to your brother; and it tempted him to make a market of his supposed love to me. He thought that if Dr. Lockley loved me, he might with safety repeat the crime he practised upon our father. I suppose he trusted that if I made my secret known to your brother, he would still have opportunities for getting

money from him in some way. But I knew nothing of his being here until I returned from London. How could I know that the Tom Fanshawe, who was mentioned in so many letters, was my brother, George Arnold? When I came back I found him on terms of close intimacy with you also. It was only by threatening to disclose his relationship to me, his assumed name, and his former crime, that I persuaded him to leave Thornbury."

"Doris," whispered Rufus, who had approached so near to her that he could feel the trembling of her slight frame, "my darling, do not say any more. Have pity upon yourself."

"I must say more," she answered, falteringly. "I must say that there is no contract or attachment between Dr. Lockley and myself that can screen my brother from a just punishment. If there be no one else to consider except me, I would have that consideration swept out of the way altogether. I am no weak woman to deprecate any deserved

disgrace. I repeat again, Dr. Lockley, that it will be a false and wasted mercy that spares him a second time."

"But there are others, Doris," said Paul, for the first time taking note of Harriet Crofton's absence from the circle so unexpectedly drawn together.

"Of course there are others," interrupted George Arnold, with a gay smile. "My Spartan sister is for ever isolating herself and me from the rest of the world, as if we did not belong to it; whereas we are connected with our race by a number of social and domestic ties, for which we are both eminently fitted. I am sure my heart has often throbbled with pride and pleasure to observe how Doris has been appreciated by this family; especially by the talented and venerable lady, whom I find to be the head of it. That we should both become members of this exceedingly estimable circle has been my ardent desire for some months past."

A convulsive sob from Emma, who had

sunk upon a sofa, and buried her face in the cushions, rounded off the impressive and emphatic sentences.

“ I find,” continued George, “ that my poor Doris is willing to deliver me up to what she calls justice. I did not expect this from her. I trusted to her sisterly and womanly instincts. But how does the case stand? Dr. Lockley is engaged publicly enough for some nine or ten months to a young lady; and then breaks off his engagement in order to prosecute her brother for a friendly use of his signature. There might be some unpleasant circumstances attending the trial at Thornbury; at any rate it would really look something like a family quarrel, you know. But I have to congratulate myself upon possessing a closer, and more indissoluble tie to this family, of which I shall be an unworthy member. I am ready to receive your felicitations upon my marriage with one of your very interesting circle.”

He turned airily to Emma, whose sobs

grew more and more hysterical, until they threatened to drown every word he uttered. But apparently he had some charm to quell them, for at a whisper from him, and with the touch of his hand upon her arm, she checked her emotion at once, and raising her tearful face, looked across at Mrs. Aspen.

“ Yes,” she said, “ he would marry me. I shall never forget my poor, dear John, who was so kind to me ; and I shall always look to you as my mother. I never knew his name was not Tom Fanshawe till we were inside the church ; and everything was settled then, you know. There was the ring, and the clergyman, and everything waiting. So I could not do anything but go on. And we are going to be very poor ; poorer than the Croftons ;” and a sob from the very depths of her heart put an end to Emma’s eloquence.

“ Yes,” said George Arnold, assuming a grave aspect, “ it is I who am defrauded. You have imposed upon me. How could I

know, madam, that you were the owner of the Priory, when I found Emma here acting her part as mistress with consummate and uninterrupted success? Doris herself never gave me a hint of the important fact, until the information was useless. I have found myself in a scrape once or twice in my life, but never in one like this. What compensation can be made to me, for the sacrifice of my liberty, my talents, and my future prospects?"

His speech, spoken in a tone of refined ridicule, partly of himself and partly of his audience, was stopped suddenly by Mrs. Aspen rising from her seat, and tottering forward to the centre of the room, where she leaned with her hand upon the table, confronting him and Emma with a rigid face, and lips that worked with voiceless agitation. She recovered her speech with a vehement effort, and looking beyond him to the affrighted woman, addressed her with a forced and unnatural utterance.

“Emma, is it true?” she gasped. “Are you married again, and to this man?”

“Yes,” was the answer.

“Then Heaven pity you!” she said. “Oh, my poor John! my poor, poor John!”

She wailed out the name as if he were within hearing, and would be wounded by his wife's inconstancy, and swift forgetfulness of his love; for an instant they seemed to listen for his approach upon the staircase and gallery. But the illusion died away with the sound of her passionate cry; she spoke again, but in a very bitter tone.

“I am deceived where I trusted most,” she said. “Doris Arnold, you will never know how I have loved you; you have not a heart to know it. You might have hidden your face down upon my bosom, and told me every secret of your life; if it had been a sin and shame of your own I would have received it only as a penitent confession, and cherished you the more for it. I took you to be all truth; but I find you to be false.”

“ I have deceived you,” cried Doris, with her downcast head, and clasped hands.

“ I am an old woman,” moaned Mrs. Aspen, “ old and very poor. I had a son and daughter only a year since ; and a home and many trusted friends. But they are all gone ; and I stand by myself in my desolate old age. Let me alone. I must seek strength to bear my troubles alone.”

She passed slowly, and with an erect bearing from the room, Paul restraining Mrs. Margraf from following her. They heard the beat of her measured footstep along the polished floors to the door of her old chamber, which she locked against any interruption. Emma had been too greatly amazed and alarmed to resume her sobbing ; but now she addressed herself tearfully and indefinitely to the assembled group.

“ It's very hard,” she said, “ I'm sure it is no fault of mine. I told Tom, I mean George, that if I did consent to marry him, I should never forget poor, dear John. I suppose I

am not such an old fright yet, that nobody would have wanted to marry me, if Tom hadn't."

"Arnold," said Paul, without heeding Emma's querulous remonstrance, "you are right in supposing that your marriage with my poor cousin's widow will prevent my going further with this matter; even if I could forget Doris. But tell me truthfully, if you can speak the truth, what accomplice had you in this fraud upon me? Both Emma and Mrs. Crofton have been with you when you presented the forged cheques; how much knowledge had either of them of the forgery?"

"None whatever," replied George, in some astonishment; "their presence was accidental, but gave some countenance to it. Why, there was positively no risk; not enough to give it a zest. A mere friendly, brotherly use of your autograph, in anticipation of what you would do for me, when we were akin to one another. I trust there may be a fra-

ternal tie between us yet, though matters look a little black. But if there had been any risk, you wrong me, Lockley, by supposing that I would involve any woman in it."

His air was one of lofty resentment, but Paul did not notice it. A gleam of intense relief passed across his clouded face, which Doris was watching furtively. For a minute or two he appeared lost in profound deliberation.

"Arnold," he said, and he seemed to find no difficulty in giving him a new name, "I need scarcely tell you that neither you nor your wife will be welcome under this roof; but it will be well for us to avoid more scandal. I tell you frankly you will be equally unwelcome at Fairfield; but I cannot see what else can be done with you, until we have had more time for consideration. You had better go there, and at once."

"I shall imagine myself anticipating my sister's hospitality," replied George, blandly.

"You will imagine nothing of the sort,"

said Paul, choked with rage. "More unwelcome guests never crossed a threshold, but I see no help for it. I will ask neither Rufus nor Sophia to accompany you; you can find the way very well for yourselves."

"George," said Doris, leaving the side of Rufus, and crossing over to her brother, "we will not enter any house of theirs. There is time for us to go back to Thornbury; and we will find a place for ourselves. Come, it is killing me to stay here."

"Doris!" exclaimed Paul, "you must not leave us. No one blames you. None of you must go to Thornbury. Good heavens! Doris! I never meant to grieve you. Your brother exasperates me beyond all the bounds of patience."

"It is best for us to go," she answered, looking steadily and sadly into his face. "I could almost say that I wished I might never see any one of you again. I do wish that I never had seen you. Good-bye, Dr. Lockley. Good-bye, dear Rufus!"

She did not offer her hand in parting salutation to either of them ; but bidding George give his arm to Emma, she led the way out of the house, down the narrow path to the ferryman's cottage. In a little while, Rufus, watching the long, broad stretch of the river glistening under the sunshine, saw a boat glide down its crimson-tipped waves, and carried swiftly along by the current, until it disappeared from his view behind the Poplar Island.

CHAPTER IV.

It had been an unspeakable relief to Paul to discover that his grave and apparently well-grounded suspicions of Harriet Crofton were altogether unfounded. There was a glamour over his eyes ; occasioned partly by the remembrance of the sweetnesses of a first love, which never wholly die out of a man's tender memory ; partly by the crafty beauty and charm she brought to act upon him, which made her appear to him far less dangerous and unprincipled than she seemed to others. He acknowledged her manifest faults. He felt that it was a degradation to Doris, for him even in thought to compare her with Harriet. He knew that she was completely unlike the ideal woman whom he had worshipped in her ; and he was in truth grateful

that she had not been destined for his wife. Yet so keen and strong was his relief when George Arnold exonerated her from all share in his fraudulent practices, that a spring of gladness, and almost of tender emotion towards her was touched in his heart, and he recoiled from his unjust and premature accusation of a second treachery against himself.

It was at this moment while Mrs. Margraf was occupied with Mrs. Aspen, who had at length admitted her into her room, that a message was brought to Paul to the effect that Mrs. Crofton was very ill, and requested to see him for a few minutes, if he could spare the time to visit her. He obeyed the summons at once, and found her in the darkened chamber, with sufficient languor and anxiety in her aspect to give some truth to her complaint ; but she scarcely suffered him to touch her pulse, and motioned him to a chair a few paces from her.

“ Paul,” she said, “ what is the matter ?

What has brought Mrs. Aspen and Sophia over here? Richard has been away all day, and I felt too ill to go down stairs when they came. But I can rely upon what you tell me. Let me know the truth. You will be my friend."

"Sophia tells me," answered Paul, briefly, "that Weston came over from Thornbury this morning, and informed Mrs. Aspen of that affair of Sutton's."

"Of Sutton's?" she said, in a tone of inquiry, "but that is months ago."

"Mrs. Aspen had never heard of it," continued Paul, "and he informed her of some of the latest gossip about us. We have been unfortunate of late in becoming the talk of the town; my journey to Leamington last night did not escape observation."

"To Leamington?" she repeated, raising herself upon her elbow, and turning a face of eager curiosity towards him. "Last night? What have you been to Leamington about? Anything about Emma and Tom Fanshawe?"

And how is it that you are back again so soon?"

"Harriet," he replied, "I have done you a wrong in my thoughts. Yesterday I called at my bank for the balance of my account, and I discovered that a very serious forgery had been committed upon me, at different times, and to different amounts. I was informed that you and Tom Fanshawe were the persons who had presented the forged cheques. I immediately followed him to Leamington, and brought him back here with the intention of confronting him with you. Harriet, it was very bitter to me to believe that you had betrayed me again."

"Paul!" she cried, clasping her white hands together, and gazing at him with a light of troubled tenderness shining in her dark eyes, "is it possible that you could think me capable of wronging you any more? Ah! you do not believe how greatly I repent the treachery of which I was once guilty. But I am not worthy that you should

trust me at all; you so good and noble-hearted. No. Think me vile and ungrateful. If it will give you any pleasure load me with accusations. I will not deny one of them. I am unworthy even to speak to you."

She sank back upon her pillows, covering her face with her jewelled fingers, through which the tears found their way. Paul felt exceedingly disquieted.

"You must not agitate yourself," he said, soothingly; "it will increase your illness. I acknowledged that I had done you a great wrong. Fanshawe frees you from all knowledge of the transaction; the suspicion of it arose from the fact that you were with him about a fortnight since, when he presented the last cheque. There, Harriet, be calm; do not give me the pain of seeing you so much distressed."

He was remembering an old, old scene, when she had clung to him with tears, because of some lover's quarrel, provoked by

herself. Harriet lay silent for a few minutes, as if unable to command her voice; and Paul with increasing uneasiness stood by, and watched her.

“Have you lost much money?” she asked at length, glancing up to him from under her quivering eyelashes. “It is so short a time since you lost a great deal to save Richard from being carried away to a jail. Have you been robbed of a large sum, Paul?”

“More than I can afford to lose,” he answered, gloomily. “I have particular need of this money just now, and I shall be embarrassed by the want of it. What are you going to do, Harriet?”

She had started from her sofa, with the full, soft folds of her white robe hanging in loose and graceful drapery about her slender figure, and her black hair falling in rich masses about her face and shoulders. She opened her jewel-case, and emptied its contents into a fold of her dress, which she

gathered up into her hand. Bringing them to his side, she sat down on a low footstool with the costly trinkets glistening upon her lap, while she looked up into his face, with an inimitable blending of humility and passion in her aspect.

“ See,” she said, “ they are most of them family jewels ; my mother’s. I thought I could never part with them unless we were in the greatest straits. Richard would expect to go to jail a hundred times, rather than get my consent to sell them. I love them dearly ; I love to wear them ; but they are all yours, Paul. They are worth the money you lent us a little while ago ; and oh ! I am so glad I can do anything to save you from any annoyance. Good-bye, my poor trinkets.”

She lifted one or two of them to her lips, stealing a sidelong glance at Paul, who stood looking down upon her in speechless amazement and admiration at the sacrifice she was willing to make for him ; but as she drew the rings from her taper fingers, and began

to unhook the jewelled pendants from her delicate ears, he broke out into an extravagant protestation.

“I would not take them from you to save my life,” he exclaimed. “Harriet, what do you imagine me to be? Do you take me for an usurer to hold your jewels in pawn? Do you suppose I could suffer you to make a sacrifice for me greater than what you would make for your husband?”

She shrank under his air of grave rebuke, and with a sullen look upon her averted face, replaced the ornaments in their case; while Paul watched her with a keen and observant eye.

“Harriet,” he said, “are you really ill?”

“No, I am not ill,” she answered, turning to him defiantly. “I saw Mrs. Aspen, and a lot of her people crossing the river, and I ran up here to gain time till Richard came home. I have not a single friend here. You thought first that I could rob you; and now you think I could be false and unfaithful to my husband for your sake.”

It was so very like his thought, and clothed in such plain words, that Paul's veins tingled, and he hastened to deny it vehemently.

“There, never mind,” she continued, with some return of graciousness, “you never will understand us. Next to Richard, and above Richard in some things, I esteem you. But you must not think badly of me, Paul; you must not go on heaping faults upon me, which are not mine. I have enough of them, Heaven knows; and the world charges me with more; but not this. My husband never doubted me.”

She had caught something of the sublimity of injured virtue, as she stood before him in her snow-white robes, looking innocently and sorrowfully into his face. Paul was overwhelmed with the injustice he had done to her; taking the hand she held out to him in token of forgiveness, he bent his head over it, and with a swift, impelling memory of the old times, pressed his lips warmly upon it.

A gleam of triumphant satisfaction flashed across her brilliant face. Before she could speak, or Paul had loosed her hand, a light rap was heard at the door; at the same instant the handle was turned, as if the intruder were apprehensive of having admittance denied; and Mrs. Margraf appeared in the doorway.

“ Paul!” she exclaimed. But with admirable self-possession she continued in the same brisk accent, as if it were no tone of astonishment: “ I am glad you have been prescribing for Harriet. You seem a great deal better, Harriet; and as Mr. Crofton has returned, Mrs. Aspen wishes to speak with both of you immediately. She has sent me to see if you are able to leave your room. My aunt desires your presence also, Paul.”

Without reply, for he was again at a loss for words, Paul retreated from the room, with a fretting feeling of irritation against himself, and all about him. He was in no haste to seek Mrs. Aspen just then. He

remained pacing to and fro along the polished floor of the gallery, chequered with the light and shadow of the diamond windows, until Harriet Crofton appeared; still arrayed in her white drapery, but with her black hair gathered up into a lace cap, giving to her a home-like and matronly aspect, as of one whose whole nature was absorbed in domestic duties. She smiled softly and sadly upon him as she passed by; with an air of guileless dignity she glided slowly into the study, where Mrs. Aspen was awaiting her approach.

The traces of her strong emotion were upon Mrs. Aspen's aged face, though she sat upright and firm, as if scorning to yield to the weakness of leaning back in her chair. Richard Crofton stood upon the hearthrug, with an uncomfortable air of wonder and apprehension, for a profound silence had reigned since Mrs. Margraf had been commissioned to summon his wife to the presence. The grave countenances of both Mr. Vale and Rufus were in no way reassuring

to him. An undefined thrill ran through all of them when Harriet entered with her harmless and unblamable aspect. After sweeping a rapid scrutiny round the assembled party she glided to her husband's side, and placed her hand through his arm. Mr. Vale and Rufus retracted their judgment upon the spot; Richard Crofton's face lit up with a look of fondness, and he raised his head as if proud of the woman beside him.

“Richard and Harriet Crofton,” said Mrs. Aspen, as if pronouncing a judicial sentence, and altogether unmoved by the seeming innocence of one of the culprits, “this morning I received the first intimation of the career you have been pursuing under my roof. You were admitted to its shelter solely for the sake of a weak and worthless woman, the widow of my dear son; now the wife of your friend and accomplice. In a thousand ways you have abused my kindness in permitting you to return to it. I came across this day with the

determination to expel you with the ignominy you deserve ; but I do not wish to harm you in any way, and you have many friends in this neighbourhood. Make it known to them in what manner you please that your long visit here must terminate in the course of a few days."

"What have we done?" asked Harriet, in a meek voice, and looking only into her husband's face.

"Aunt," said Richard Crofton, "we do not understand you. Harry and I are guilty of nothing but what you have known this fortnight past. I would cut this right hand off, if that would bring you back your property ; I would, by Heaven ! I've squandered all my own property away ; but I never felt as I have done since I brought you into trouble. What can I do ? I have no hope of making restitution to you."

"It is not that, Richard," replied Mrs. Aspen, in a softened voice. "I believe you had no thought of the ruin you were bringing

upon me. But it is that within these walls, and perhaps in this very room, which has been mine since I was a little child, you have carried on a disgraceful and dishonest course of gambling. In the place where I have prayed, Richard; where the hours have fled by in innocent thought, and harmless if not useful pursuits, you have introduced the companions and the customs of your foreign gambling-houses. I will say nothing of the man who has married my daughter-in-law. Even my nephew, Paul Lockley, has connived at the dishonour; he has forborne to see it, lest he should have to battle with it. You two, to whose care my dying son commended me, have brought this grief and shame upon my grey hairs."

She did not weep, but a quiver of pain shot through every feature, and she sighed bitterly; while Paul listened with a heavy heart.

"If anybody is to blame," said Harriet, in a plaintive and musical tone, which charmed

every ear, "it is I, Mrs. Aspen. Richard and Paul have never played. You have heard an exaggerated accusation of me; for I have enemies. If I played for large stakes, it was fairly and honourably. Perhaps if I had had a home like this, and a mother like you when I was a child, and grown up amongst good people, I might have been a very different woman. But think of what my training was; and how these pursuits, and this sort of life are as necessary to me as your books, and happy work, is to you. I have never, never, never played dishonourably; do not believe it. But, oh! if I had lived here all my life, I might have been a good woman like you or Doris."

An air of sorrowful innocence still enhaloed her, as she stood leaning upon her husband's arm, and speaking in a tone of penitent humility. Mrs. Aspen visibly relented towards her.

"Harriet," she said, "you might have been almost an angel. I scarcely know what to

think of you ; whether you are greatly misguided, or dangerously wicked. But in either case I do not wish to be harsh with you. The Priory will be no longer mine in a few weeks ; I wish to have it to myself, during the little time that remains. You must make it known among your friends that you are going to leave it."

"Richard," said Harriet, "it is time for us to go. Paul tells me that Tom Fanshawe has forged cheques in his name upon Rock's bank, and he suspected me, your wife, of being his accomplice. Now, Mrs. Aspen accuses us of bringing dishonour and disgrace upon her home."

"Forgery! Tom Fanshawe!" cried Richard. "I know nothing. I am quite in the dark. I cannot understand any one of you. Will somebody explain the meaning of all this to me?"

"It is briefly this," replied Paul. "Yesterday I discovered forgeries of my signature, and received the information that Fanshawe,

Mrs. Crofton, and Emma were the persons who had presented the cheques. I followed Fanshawe immediately to Leamington; and brought him and Emma back with me a few hours ago."

"And where are they now?" inquired Richard, looking round the room.

"They are gone to Thornbury," answered Mrs. Aspen, with another quiver of pain upon her face, "accompanied by his sister, Doris Arnold. Spare me—I cannot bear to speak of it yet."

She walked feebly from the study; supported by Mrs. Margraf; and Paul was left to explain the whole of her mysterious communication, and the strange occurrences of the day. The night had set in, and Mr. Vale and Rufus took their departure; but Paul lingered in earnest conversation with the Croftons. When he left them at last, he whispered in Harriet's ear, "Pardon my unfounded suspicions. I was mad to think you would be so treacherous!" And she re-

plied, with a glance from her dark eyes which haunted him for the night: "Ah! you have had so much to forgive in me, that I could never, never blame you, Paul."

CHAPTER V.



BOTH Paul and Rufus were experiencing that rebound of feeling, which, after we have held our loved ones in some painful and unmerited suspicion, is eager to repair the wrong by a more generous faith, and more unquestioning affection. If Paul left Harriet Crofton with a warm kindling at his heart, partly of anger against himself, and partly of a subtle admiration for her; Rufus was piercing himself with keen arrows of self-reproach, as he recollected the cold neglect which Doris had suffered from him during the last few weeks. That she was suffering had been visible to him all the time, but though his own heart ached at the pain he inflicted, the stern pride of an uprooted trust must satisfy itself. Our self-elected idols, when they fail us, must be cast

down by our own hands, and thrown to the moles and to the bats, be they as sentient, and as tremblingly alive to keen anguish as ourselves. But Rufus had withdrawn his homage, forsaken his shrine, and counted the object of his reverent love altogether unworthy of it, while she still maintained her high and pure peerlessness among women. The recoil from his unjust anger carried his ardent and impetuous nature to a height of abandonment and devotion, which all his former love had never reached.

This chronicle has failed to achieve its purpose, if it has not indicated with tolerable clearness one characteristic shared almost equally by the two heads of the families, whose history it records. Both Mrs. Aspen and Paul Lockley shrank, with the fastidious sensibility of contemplative and self-communing minds, from the petty tittle-tattle of the country circle, which surrounded their own abstracted and isolated lives. There was an excruciating pang to each of them in the con-

viction that the babblers of the neighbouring town were talking open-mouthed about their private affairs. And the events of the last few months had afforded plentiful subjects of gossip. No sooner then did Mrs. Aspen learn that Emma with her second husband, and accompanied by Doris, had positively left the Priory to seek some temporary abode in Thornbury, than she began to feel that it was a rash and unwise thing to give farther food for scandal to the dreaded tale-bearers. Gladly would she have recalled them to the dishonoured walls of the Priory, until they could make the arrangements necessary for their final departure ; but in this she found herself steadily opposed by Doris, who refused to return to either of the dwellings offered to them with an unwilling and compulsory hospitality. She said that it was already too late to avoid the town-talk ; it was known throughout the country that Emma Aspen had contracted a second marriage with the adventurer, whom rumour pointed out as the successful

forgery of Dr. Lockley's signature. Though it was not distinctly understood in what relationship she herself stood to them, this was a point of very slight importance, and she did not see any possibility of glossing over the scandal by their return to the Priory. Her only desire was to escape as quickly as possible from persons and scenes that were hourly wounding her spirit. She refused to see either Paul or Rufus. Shutting herself up in the house at Murivance which had been eagerly offered to her, even though George and Emma were her companions, she never wandered from the narrow strip of garden which stretched from Mr. Atcherley's southern window to the banks of the river, lest at any time she should meet with those, whose very looks she dreaded.

But neither George nor Emma was anxious to float away from the one little raft, to which they could still cling for a brief season, before it also went down in the storm, which was raging round the ancestral home of the aged

poetess. Emma could scarcely realise the fact that she was without a home, except such an one as George Arnold could provide by his unscrupulous and perilous practices ; as long as Mrs. Aspen owned Monkmoor Priory she could not bring herself to believe in her destitute condition. Her mind recurred querulously to her former position of security and plenty ; but by the strange contradictions that exist in the nature of a weak woman, she felt for her young, gay, careless, and contemptuous husband, a love such as would have filled with rapture the heart of the honest, affectionate, and simple-minded man, who had been jealous of any breath of air visiting her cheek too roughly. Lest she should make George angry with her she set such a watch and constraint upon herself as would have been incredible in former days, and contented herself with the narrow confines of their residence at Muri-vance with a cheerfulness that awakened all Doris's wonder. George yielded to Doris so far as not to avail himself of Mrs. Aspen's re-

luctant invitation to return for a few days to the Priory; but as long as there was any possibility of procuring the needful supplies either from her, or Dr. Lockley, he could not be persuaded to launch away altogether upon the pathless sea, which he saw stretching around him with no promise of land upon the horizon.

However wearily Mrs. Aspen might long for a little period of solitude and repose, before losing for ever the home she had been born to, it seemed imperative that she should sacrifice her wishes to the necessity of keeping up a decorous appearance, and of confuting the already confounded reports buzzed about Thornbury. The Croftons continued at the Priory, but she seldom saw them; and Mrs. Margraf would not leave her exposed to their influence. Even the latter, who was absolutely pining to sweep away the Croftons and the Arnolds, especially Doris, from the neighbourhood, and who would afterwards be willing, in spite of the sore mortification of losing

the Priory, to take her aunt home to them in their house at Fairfield—even Mrs. Margraf acknowledged the urgent importance of putting a fair face upon their private and family calamities. She only waited for some opportunity of presenting an impressive and pictorial scene of family union, which should give a contradiction to the numberless scandals of the public; and then the whole group might be scattered to the four winds of heaven.

Such an opportunity was at hand. Some weeks previously, Mr. and Mrs. Crofton had given their names as patrons to an annual fête celebrated on the Poplar Island, to which most of the local families of any note or position were accustomed to resort. The previous year Mr. and Mrs. John Aspen were among the patrons; and it was with the approbation of Mrs. Aspen herself, who was willing that the Priory should still be represented at the yearly festivity, that the Croftons had accepted the honour proposed to them. The events that had transpired since that time, grave and

ominous as they were, did not affect their festive position. Their names still stood at the head of the list of patrons for the speedily approaching fête. It appeared to Mrs. Margraf as directly ordained that a stage should be thus erected upon which they might appear for a brief occasion as a united family group, and take a decorous and impressive farewell of that world from which several of them were about to disappear altogether.

CHAPTER VI.

THE Poplar Island ; whose grove of slender and tremulous trees was just visible from the oriel window, at the end of the long flash of the river, which stretched like a lake between the Priory and the town ; was a small islet of three or four acres, which lay in the middle of the stream, with a deep and rapid current between its fretted banks, and the shore next to Thornbury. Nothing more than a cool, green, shady meadow, raised a few sloping feet from the bosom of the gleaming water ; with a rustling murmur of the never quiet leaves, and the play of their quivering shadows upon the soft sward, and upon the tiny waves which rippled round its narrow limits. It was always a favourite place for pleasure parties from the town, which grouped themselves in

picturesque knots upon the turf, and watched idly the boats plying up and down the river. The annual fête, which was held late in the month of September, was considered the close of the summer season, and was always largely attended; especially as the owner of the island was careful to secure the patronage of many of the leading families, and to provide for the entertainment of the throng who crowded thither. A regatta in the afternoon was succeeded by a concert held in a large marquee erected for their shelter after sunset. Such musical talent as could be induced to visit the remote country town being secured, the concert upon Poplar Island once a year was the greatest treat offered to the musical amateurs of Thornbury and the surrounding country.

A bold and novel idea had occurred to the mind of the conductor of the fête; it had been cordially accepted by the managing committee, of whom Richard Crofton was one. In former years every boat along the course of the river

for miles distant had been engaged in the service of the crowd, who had to be conveyed across the stream to the island; but upon this occasion a bridge of boats, constructed under careful and scientific supervision, was to stretch from shore to shore, affording a firm and steady footing to the throng of passengers crossing to and fro. Richard Crofton, upon whose experimental nature the idea had taken a firm hold, felt a peculiar interest in its construction. Amid all the perplexity and disgrace of the last three weeks he had succeeded in driving from his mind many of the painful and gloomy thoughts that threatened him by the study of pontoon-bridge making, and by the superintendence of the men at work upon it. Both Harriet and Emma also forgot a great portion of the anxiety attendant upon their position in the cares of their toilette; Mrs. Crofton being one of those women, whose blandishments, freely and shrewdly exercised, have the power to overcome the prudence of the most wary tradesman. Notwithstanding

the known insolvency of her circumstances, she achieved triumphantly the most elegant and becoming costume that had been seen upon the Poplar Island for several years.

But no anxiety or interest could equal the intense and over-strung impatience of Rufus, who looked forward feverishly to the day as giving him one more opportunity of seeing Doris, and talking with her. Since the evening when she quitted the Priory, carrying George and Emma with her by the energy of her rarely exerted will, she had steadily refused to receive either him or Paul; and Mr. Atcherley had entreated him not to come to Murivance. It had been in vain that he had loitered day after day about the streets of Thornbury which led towards her dwelling; he had caught no glimpse of her. Paul placed in his hands a letter she had sent to him, in which she bade him a last farewell in brief and cold terms, and implored him to employ every means for hastening the departure of her brother and his wife. There had

been a sad smile upon Paul's face, as he replaced the short missive carefully into his pocket-book after Rufus had read it, though he said in a resolute tone which carried comfort to the boy's heart, that they would never lose sight of Doris, were she ever so determined to free herself from them.

"She belongs to us," said Paul, grasping his brother's hand in a firm grip, and looking encouragingly into the depths of his despairing eyes. "Though she may never bear our name, Rufus, for I am unworthy of her, she shall be as dear to both of us as a sister might be. Doris has not so many friends that she will always despise our faithful friendship." Still Paul, busy with his own affairs and Mrs. Aspen's, could not linger about Doris's dwelling as the boy did. As day after day he did not see her, beyond a passing glimpse of her face and figure within the familiar house from which her presence shut him out, his heart grew weary for the time when once more she must listen to the petitions he would pour out to her.

The long-looked-for day dawned at last ; one of those rejoicing days of the early autumn which retain all the jubilant and sunny brightness of the summer, without any of its sultry heaviness. Every street of the country town was filled with festal groups. Processions of school-children filed along the pavements, with banners waving in the slight, cool breeze, shrill shouts of gladness running along their ranks. The banks of the river on either side were dotted with pleasure-parties, who intended to spend the sunny hours within sound of the mirth-making music on the Poplar Island, though they might not be included in the number of those who were privileged to cross the garlanded bridge, and set their feet upon its mossy turf. Never had there been so general a stir and tumult throughout the town ; never so universal an interest in the festivities of the day. The members of the committee congratulated one another upon the complete success of their efforts ; and the proprietor of the island cast off every care

before the exhilarating influence of the joyous crowds. Yet amidst all the abandonment to pleasure that pervaded Thornbury, there were not a few questions propounded as to what share the families at Monkmoor Priory and Fairfield would take in the general merry-making. The events of the past twelve months beginning with Paul's betrothal to Doris and ending with Emma Aspen's marriage with the suspected forger, had been freely and fully discussed by all the acquaintances of both households. An under-current of strong curiosity ran beneath the surface. It had been announced by an advertisement in the Thornbury papers that the whole of the ruins at Monkmoor, with the ancient pleasure-garden, would be opened to the public on the day of the fête; and many a party was planned for a row up the river to the Priory, before the regatta began. The boat-race was to come off along the smooth, wide flash stretching from the ruins to the island, and the whole line of shore was

crowded with witnesses both upon the water and the banks. This was the time chosen by Mrs. Margraf; and eagerly seized by Harriet Crofton, to make an effective progress down the river. A group dramatically arranged, comprising all the members of the scandalised circle, with the exception of Mrs. Aspen, were watched by many curious eyes descending the time-worn steps at Monk's Ferry, and seating themselves in Dr. Lockley's pleasure-boat. Impelled by the oars of the four gentlemen, and skilfully steered by Mr. Crofton, who sat at the helm radiant with delight, it sailed gallantly down the crowded river, amid the friendly greeting of the numerous acquaintances whom they passed. It was a fine pantomime; and gave a direct contradiction to one half of the injurious rumours which had been whispered about. Even Robert Atcherley, who lay upon the banks looking at the gay scene with sorrowful eyes, and who had a strong conviction that the very worst was true, gazed after the boat which

carried Doris, as long as it was in sight, with a vague hope that his suspicions, and those of the world about him, were unfounded.

There was an admirable tact in the demeanour of Mrs. Margraf and Mrs. Crofton, when they were playing into one another's hands, which made it a matter of regret that the two clever women should ever be antagonists. Before they had been upon the island very long, those acquaintances who had glanced coldly at Harriet Crofton, and who had exchanged merely distant civilities with the sister of Dr. Lockley, were clustering round them eager to offer and receive the gracious courtesies they were reciprocating on every hand. Paul, who was greatly out of his element, found himself suddenly popular, and greeted by casual associates with all the warmth of established friendship; while George Arnold, whose gay manners and joyous laughter suited the pageant of the hour, was received everywhere with smiles, and bland congratulations, as if no stigma

rested upon his name. It was an hour of intense triumph both to Mrs. Margraf, and to Harriet Crofton.

But to Doris, who, sad, weary, and dejected, shrank aloof from the gay circle which gathered around her party, the hours were full of an oppressive sense of humiliation. She had submitted with strange reluctance to the scheme proposed by Mrs. Margraf, and she could not shake off even for a moment the ominous melancholy which weighed upon her spirits. Rufus never left her side, but he was very quiet, silenced by the din and confusion of the crowd which surrounded them, whose thronging prevented the passionate outpouring of his pent-up emotion. He had been longing for this last opportunity, with a hope that in some nook of the shady island there would be a solitary spot, where he could appeal to Doris not to persist in her resolution of leaving them for ever. But from the moment of landing from the boat he had perceived the utter impracticability of his purpose.

Yet lingering at her side, with her hand now and then resting lightly on his trembling arm, and her pale, unlighted face beneath his eyes, he was silent with the intense yearning that filled his heart to say some word, which, penetrating through all the coldness and bitterness which enveloped her, should prevail upon her to trust once more to his love and Paul's.

“Doris,” he said, bending his head to hers that no one of the many persons about them should overhear him, “have you forgiven Paul?”

“Forgiven him!” she repeated, looking across to where Paul stood, grave but courteous, beside her brother, who was conversing with him in a free and ostentatious manner; “I have nothing to forgive. He is loading us with undeserved kindnesses; he is shielding us from shame. I know that to-day George might have been lying in yonder gaol, which we can see even from here. I walked past it this morning that the thought of it might

humble me. See now how he stands side by side with the man who robbed him. I do not ask for whose sake he does it; but oh! Rufus, I have nothing to forgive Paul."

"Doris," he answered, hurriedly and earnestly, "there is a chance of happiness for us all yet. Paul released you from your betrothal to him, only because he believed you still attached to a former lover. He would have lost all his fortune rather than you; and now it is for your sake that he shields your brother from shame. Do you suppose that he cares less for you, values you less, loves you less, because you have a greater sorrow and burden to bear than we knew of? How will it be for you to leave him, and go out into the world alone with this burden unshared? You might have told him and me all, and we would have taken the heaviest portion of it, all we could of it, to bear for you. Think of yourself, if you will not think of him; a lonely woman, unprotected and unloved, for if you will not share

your sorrow with Paul, to whom could you entrust it. Oh, my darling ! do not let any mere pride stand between us and our last chance of happiness. We might still be so happy at Fairfield now there are no secrets among us ; you, and Paul, and my aunt in our old home ; and Sophia keeping a bachelor's house for me in the village. We will forget all these troubles ; or if we are forced to remember them, we will look at them together, and bear them bravely. Let me bring Paul to you. Only this morning he was talking of you to me, so tenderly and pityingly, Doris ! If you could have heard him, you would have been sure that he never will love any one as he does you."

"He does not love me," breathed Doris, her eyes filling with tears, and speaking in a tone of mingled denial and questioning. "You cannot believe that he cares for me."

"Oh, he does," persisted Rufus, "not with a blind, vehement fondness, such as my love might be ; but with a calm, strong, deep ten-

derness, such as a man like Paul feels. This morning when he spoke of you he stretched out his arms, as if he could fold you into them, and so guard and keep you safe from trouble. You would find a shelter in his love, Doris. Let me call him."

"Not now," she answered, with a face brightening and flushing into smiles, and glistening eyes which fell swiftly under his steadfast gaze. "I could not speak to him here, Rufus; in this crowd."

The boy drew her hand through his arm, and pressed it against his throbbing heart, content to let her stand aloof and silent, now that the gloom had fled from her features. If he could only see her gathered into the sure shelter and safety of his brother's home, he fancied it would be no hard thing for him to look at happiness through another man's eyes. During the last few days, while she had steadily refused to see him, he had had a foretaste of the chill blank that would fall upon his life, if she were lost to him alto-

gether. Yet when Paul approached them, and there ran a thrill of fluttering disquietude through Doris's frame, as she turned her smiling and blushing face towards him ; though she still retained her hold of his arm, and her hand tightened involuntarily upon it ; Rufus felt that even in Paul's happiness there would be a sharp pang of misery for himself.

“Take my place, Paul,” he said, loosing Doris's hand. He let his arm fall listlessly at his side, as he saw her stand between them, with no thought of him, looking up into Paul's face with a half-timid and half-steady gaze.

“I cannot, Rufus,” he answered. “I am just going to conduct Mrs. Crofton to the tent. I came only to tell you to take charge of Doris. I need not have done that, my boy ; but Sophia was afraid that there should be any blunder in her arrangements. She thought we might forget you, Doris.”

Paul spoke smilingly, but turned away immediately to Harriet, who was waiting for

his escort, and watching him with keen eyes. It was an imposing procession that was being formed under Mrs. Margraf's auspices. Paul and Harriet Crofton, whose names had been so frequently linked in the gossip of Thornbury; George Arnold and his bride; herself and Richard Crofton, Doris, from whose features the brief gleam of sunny hope had fled, lingered behind as they threaded their way through the crowd; and Rufus, whose amazement was blended with bitter resentment against Paul, did not hurry her footsteps. The twilight was falling; the numerous groups surrounding them were flocking towards the tent. In a few minutes there was comparative stillness and solitude within the dusky shadows of the tall poplar-trees, which were waving and rustling high above their heads. The din and tumult in the lighted tent reached them so softly that every whisper of the lowered voice of Rufus fell upon the ear of Doris in agitating and impassioned accents.

“ He does not love you, Doris ! ” he cried. “ Listen to me this once. I thought I would let my own love consume itself in silence ; but Paul neglects and slights you, my darling. Cannot you feel that you are the very life of my life ; the heart of my heart ? I always hear your voice speaking to me ; I see your face always before me. See ; I press your hand here upon my heart that you may feel its throbbing. I would love you so for ever, if you only returned my love. A few minutes ago I told you that our only chance for happiness was in you becoming Paul’s wife ; but I should not live long to call you sister. I have known it these months past ; but I thought it would be happiness enough to die with your hand in mine, and your face, dear to the last, bending over me. But you would give me life, if you could give me your love. Paul does not love you ; I know it now. Doris, I am very young to die. Lay your hand upon my heart, and bid me live.”

He was pressing her hand open-palmed

upon his heart, which fluttered against it with a vehement and irregular throb. She stood before him motionless for a minute or two, her head drooping, her hand resting quietly beneath his own upon his breast; until with a wild gleam of rapture he withdrew his clasping hold, leaving her free to press her open palm upon his heart still, while he listened with over-wrought eagerness for her first word. If it would only be "Live!"

"Dear Rufus," she said calmly but mournfully, "it is true that Paul does not love me, and that you do. But this can never be. We all believe we shall die when the first deep sorrow comes; but you will be a better and a happier man when this trial is over, and you can think quietly of me. You trouble me, my dear friend, and I have many other troubles to bear."

The last sentence, spoken while she still stood before him with her hand resting where he had placed it, calmed the boy's passionate emotion at once, and awoke all the genuine

loyalty of his chivalrous devotion. She should bear no trouble for him among her other burdens. Lifting her hand softly and tenderly to his burning lips, he called a smile to his pallid face as he looked down upon her in the twilight. "Forget what I said, Doris," he answered, "it matters little whether I live or die. I feel excited to-night; but to-morrow I will talk to you quietly. Sister or friend, you are very precious to me. Listen! The concert has begun. Let me take you into the tent, lest our absence should be noticed."

The tent was filled when they reached the entrance; and the rest of their party were seated in the front amid the other patrons of the fête. To neither of them was it a disappointment that they were unable to make their way to them. Rufus, securing a seat for Doris, where he could screen her from any intrusive observation, left her undisturbed to her own reflections; while he stood with his pale, young face turned towards the group far beyond, which he watched with keen and

clear-sighted eyes. Once Paul looked round anxiously, and catching sight of his face, smiled back upon him; but the heavy frown upon his forehead, and the sharp set of his compressed lips did not change. Paul, looking again and again, received that expression of deep and wrathful resentment upon his brother's face indelibly fixed in his memory.

CHAPTER VII.

THE night was unusually dark when the assembly flocked from the tent, for a murky pall of clouds had overcast the sky, with the threat of approaching tempest. The river, subject to sudden floods, by reason of the heavy rains that fell among the mountains from which it flowed, had risen rapidly during the last few hours. The ripple of its waves against the mossy banks had given place to the low, continuous rolling of the swelling waters, too dull yet in its ominous muttering to be heard amid the cheerful voices of the dispersing crowd. A line of link-bearers marked the path across the island to the bridge. The fitful blaze of their torches threw a glimmering and ruddy glow upon the swift stream, that beat with a strong current

against the boats. Overhead the fading leaves of the poplars caught a transient hue, and seemed to dance in the red gleam with a lighter grace; while the birds, frightened from their nests, fluttered through the branches with sharp, shrill notes of disquiet. The scene was one of gay and picturesque beauty, with its procession of pleasure-seekers hurrying down to the shore, amid the uncertain and flashing light, the snatches of song and merry laughter. Even Doris and Rufus, who were carried forward resistlessly by the throng, sad and weary at heart as they were, shared for the instant in the general buoyancy, and looked into one another's eyes with a smile, as the glare of the pine torches shed new colour upon their pale faces.

Paul, with Harriet Crofton hanging on his arm, was detained by her within the lighted tent, while she exchanged some last graceful courtesies with the few who remained behind until the crowd should have dispersed. The unaccustomed pageant would now soon be

over; in a day or two most of the actors in it, those to whose career his own seemed linked, would be scattered, and he left alone to pursue the course he had planned out for himself. There was a scarcely acknowledged satisfaction in listening to the farewell speeches which Harriet Crofton was uttering, and her reiterated announcement that the next day they were quitting Thornbury and the Priory. Paul was weary of the show into which he had been entrapped; weary of the forced smiles he had been compelled to call to his unwilling features; very weary of the bland and polished but empty phrases he had heard and spoken. Since the glance he had caught of Rufus's resentful and reproachful face, he had been still more ill at ease. Once too when his eye fell upon Doris, with her sorrowful and depressed air, he had felt a strong desire to make his way to her; to sit silent and quieted by her side, or see if he could recal that expression of mingled shyness and gladness with which she had looked up into

his face. That steadfast but timid gaze had given him a thrill of pleasure, and some vague longings were seeking to find shape and utterance in his inmost heart. But a new life of difficulty and struggle lay before him ; and it was perhaps best that circumstances had kept him apart from Doris that last evening.

As he thus stood, moody and abstracted, beside the little knot of loiterers, there rang through the night air a cry—the tumultuous, multitudinous cry of many voices, pitched to one shrill, poignant tone of anguish. Far up the river, along the smooth, wide reach of water, it pierced into the deserted study of Mrs. Aspen, who was weeping and praying alone over her double desolation : down through the sinuous windings of the rapid stream, it reached the garden at Murivance, where Robert Atcherley and his blind mother had been listening to the faint and fitful sound of music, carried to them by the descending current. It was a strong, mighty cry of sudden horror and agony, from the blended voices

of men and women, through the wild din and uproar of which, Paul ever afterwards believed that he had heard Doris calling to him by his name.

For a minute the gay little group within the tent stood motionless, gazing with blanched faces upon each other; but as the single volume of agonised sound became articulate with separate cries for help, they hurried panic-stricken to the bridge. The gloomy obscurity of the night, only lightened by the flickering flame of the torches, which were now scattered along the shore of the island, hid the catastrophe from their sight, yet deepened the profound dread which fell upon the hearts of all. On the opposite bank could be seen a dim throng pressing back to the edge of the water; pushing forward with phrenzied eagerness, as if impelled to share in the fate of those who clung with a desperate grasp to the fragments of the broken bridge. When the light fell there was a vision of dark and sullen waters rushing inexorably along: with faint-

ing, beseeching, despairing figures, trampling upon one another in the swift current, fastening with dangerous hands upon imagined helps.

It was at the moment when Paul, closely followed by all who had remained in the tent, reached the water-side, that the last chain gave way. The boats, sinking under the weight of those who held a death-like grasp upon them, drifted down the current into the thick pall of darkness. None knew who might be in the water that were dear to themselves. The indistinct crowd on either side of the river strained their eyes in vain efforts to recognise their beloved ones among those who were safe on the opposite shore. Voices raised high above the shrieks of the drowning strugglers, cried through the darkness on those who might even then be trampled into the depths of the black stream. Here and there, with the red light of a torch gleaming upon them, might be seen with strange distinctness the scared face and starting eyeballs

of some swimmer, contending helplessly with the hands that seized upon him, and dragged him back into the deeper water.

“ Oh, Paul ! ” cried Mrs. Margraf, “ where is my boy ? where is Rufus ? ”

The shrill, passionate voice was echoed by the boy's shout in the dark gulf before them.

“ Paul ! Paul ! ” he cried, “ save Doris ! She is here. I can hold her yet, but my strength is going. For mercy's sake, save Doris.”

The accent was one of intense and despairing anguish. As the shifting torches cast a fresh beam of light upon the river they saw Rufus clinging to the broken chain, and grasping Doris with his right arm. Both faces, white with an agonised terror, looked up to them from the deadly stream ; and Paul was casting himself into the water, when Harriet Crofton threw her arms about him with the strength and energy of a blind fear.

“ It is madness,” she said. “ You would be

dragged down in an instant. No, Paul, no ! I will never loose you."

"Save Doris," implored Rufus, whose face was lost again in the gloom, "my strength is gone, Paul. Save Doris."

Mrs. Margraf snatched a torch from one of the link bearers, and held it down towards the dark spot where Rufus was. Already he had lost his hold upon Doris, and the stern agony of his face was changing to a rigid calmness. With a powerful effort Paul shook himself free from the restraining arms of Harriet Crofton. Doris was lost ; but Rufus might yet be saved. He passed through a brief, maddening conflict with the clasp of dying hands ; a dizzy dream, in which he trampled upon drowning victims who sank beneath his feet into the black abyss. Then he drew to the shore, and laid upon the bank, at his sister's feet, the death-like form of his young brother.

It was only for a short interval that Paul succumbed to the sickening delirium of incoherent thoughts which thronged his brain

On each side of the river men were rendering brave assistance. The whole scene of the catastrophe was a limited one ; and the struggle for life was confined within a few rods of the swollen stream. The bridge had been built economically, with the keels of the boats stretching across the current instead of lying with it. The force of the flooded waters, with the strain caused by the multitudes passing over it, had easily snapped asunder the chains by which they were linked together. It had been constructed also at a point where an easy descent led to it upon each bank ; but beneath it, in the bed of the stream, there lurked one of the dangerous and treacherous holes of unfathomed depth, which were well known to the swimmers in the river. Into this pit the weakest and feeblest were trodden down, amid the fierce and anguished contest. It was counted marvellous, after the first shock was over, and men began to calculate the peril of the disaster, that the number that perished was so small ; that of the hundreds who were

in the water nineteen only were brought out dead. But as one after another, most of them young girls and children, were drawn out of their hidden grave, which had been yawning beneath them as they tripped over it in the sunshine with light and mirthful steps, Paul's heart died within him. He dreaded to see Doris brought before him; her fair hair streaming with the fatal water, her sad face carved into a speechless image of the horror, which had rested upon it, as he stood for a moment senseless and spell-bound near the margin of the death from which he might have rescued her.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was a night to be remembered by the people of Thornbury. - Throughout all its dismal hours might be heard hushed footsteps passing hurriedly but stealthily along the streets, and voices, eager in their tones, but lowered to an ominous whisper, as if death had entered into every household. Once the bells of its oldest church tolled solemnly for a little time; but the gloomy yet penetrating sound ceased as the universal agitation seized again upon the hearts of the ringers, and the succeeding silence seemed more funereal than the measured strokes. There were lights, like the vigil lamps in dead rooms, in all the houses. Now and then a casement would be opened, as a procession of silent and slow-footed men paced along the pavements; a

loud, hoarse whisper of some muffled voice would inquire what burden they were bearing, and whither; and when the answer was given in the same awe-stricken tone, sobs, deep-drawn but subdued, followed the hushed march of the corpse-bearers. Those who could not sit still at home, but wandered about from house to house like men distraught and confounded, did it with a muteness and suppressed excitement more eloquent of calamity and death than all the noisy lamentation of ordinary sorrow. In the families where some member was missing, those who were safe waited in a stupor of benumbed fear for the noiseless entrance either of the lost one rescued and alive, or of the hushed bearers who carried in a silent corpse.

The dread and agitation lasted late into the night, for on either shore those who were safe were uncertain whether the friends belonging to them had reached the Thornbury banks or remained securely upon the island. The efforts of each party were at first concen-

trated upon the rescue of those who were in the river, and upon their recovery when brought to land. Paul, in spite of the dire distress and horror which from time to time shook him to the centre of his nature, was busily occupied in using every remedy at hand for the resuscitation of those who had been long in the water, or who had been rendered insensible by the dread of their sudden danger. Rufus had been carried into the tent; Mrs. Margraf and Harriet Crofton were watching beside him, but he lay in a swoon so like death, with the expression of an unspeakable pain upon his face, that Paul could hardly endure to look upon it, whenever, from the press of other cares, he stole some minutes to stand beside him. There were other motionless forms lying in a distant corner of the tent, but no hope of life was left for them; and amongst them there was not the slight, delicate figure which Paul had dreaded to see. Doris might yet be lying in the deep hollow where the rest had met

with death. Behind every other anxiety, underlying all the busy cares of the sorrowful time, he felt that there was one thought fraught with untold anguish which would rise up and conquer him with an irresistible mastery, whenever the present strain should relax itself but a little. There was already within his spirit a deep, gnawing, unutterable groan, murmuring amid every other sound the name of Doris. Neither Paul nor Mrs. Margraf gave one thought to the other members of their party, George and Emma Arnold and Richard Crofton. Having left the tent by a side entrance, they had been earlier than themselves in their passage towards the bridge. But Harriet Crofton had not forgotten it. She had seen her husband only a few minutes before the cry reached them, and she knew that he was not now upon the island. There was a dull, brooding impression vaguely at work upon her mind, which kept her passively beside Rufus, though her eyes maintained a keen

watch upon every group that entered the dim and far-off corner of the tent. A phantom of a thought, which was not altogether a fear, haunted her brain, and forced itself with subtle perseverance into every perception, until she saw and heard nothing of the scene around her. She stole away at last, unnoticed, and stood in the entrance of the tent. The night did not seem dark to her. She saw, or fancied she saw, the broken banks of the island and the tangling osiers and willows which hedged them. She saw, as in a dream, that the searchers, with their pine torches, after saving all who had any life left in them, had caught sight of a hand clinging convulsively to the twisted roots of the willows. She heard, with her unnaturally quickened senses, the splash of the water, and the heavy, irregular tread of the men who were bearing a burden to the tent; and she watched one of them pass in and summon Paul away. She dragged her feet wearily towards the corpse. A lantern was being

held down to the swollen features, and Paul was bending over them. She crept nearer to it slowly and reluctantly. There was no need to tell her who it was. Paul shuddered when he felt her small hand laid heavily upon his shoulder as he knelt beside the dead body, and, looking up to see who touched him, met her rigid and stony gaze.

“It is Richard,” she said, in a dull, impassive tone. “He is dead.”

“It is Richard,” echoed Paul; “my poor Harriet, it is your husband.”

“Yes,” she said, her delicate fingers closing upon Paul’s hand with a grasp which seemed impossible for them; “my husband, Paul, my husband.”

She seated herself upon the turf beside the corpse in the vague, apathetical stupor which the calamity of the night had caused in so many minds. Paul, after gazing for a minute or two upon her expressionless face, turned away silently and left her there alone. She could hear the rushing of the waters with

their continuous muttering round the island; the rustling of the poplar-trees above her, with the same soft and quiet sound as if no cry of anguish had rung through their tremulous branches. Now and then a passing step paused, and if she lifted up her head she met some tear-filled eyes looking down upon her pitifully; but she had neither wish nor energy to move. Richard dead and Doris dead. Those words filled to overflowing the bewildered chambers of her brain; she muttered them over to herself again and again, as she sat at the head of her husband's corpse. How long she was thus left alone she did not know; but at length her dim reverie was broken by a hand touching hers gently, and Paul's voice penetrating into her deaf ear.

“Harriet,” he said, “we are going home. It will be day-break soon. Every one is removed from the island. My boat is here to take us home. Rufus is still insensible.”

She did not move at first, but sat still like

one slowly awaking from a profound sleep. Paul stooped to raise her from the ground.

“Leave everything to me,” he said. “I have given orders as to what must be done. You must go home now with us. Rouse yourself, Harriet. The boat is waiting.”

She reeled a little when he lifted her to her feet, and clung helplessly to his arm, pointing down to the body, over which some one had thrown a cloak, and whispering hoarsely, “He is dead, Paul.”

“Yes,” he said, “yes !”

“And Doris is dead !” she added.

He trembled then, and groaned bitterly, with such a throe of his unspoken sorrow that it communicated itself to her torpid insensibility. She could not see the expression of his face ; but she reiterated with a dull, instinctive hatred, “Doris is dead.”

Paul said nothing, but led her down to the boat, where Rufus was stretched in apparent lifelessness, with his head lying on his sister's lap. A few watchers were left in the tent

beside the bodies, which would be borne home at day-break. The lighted canvas, gleaming white under the dark shadow of the trees, still wore a festive look as the boat quitted the island. There was a lamp burning in the oriel window at the Priory, and Mrs. Aspen was watching from the casement; having heard the fatal news long hours since. The boat tarried underneath for a few minutes, while Paul gave her a hurried account of the incidents of the night. He would have spared her the worst of the news, leaving some hope to dwell in her heart. But Harriet Crofton looked up with her face just visible in the faint dawn of the morning, and in a clear, shrill accent repeated her miserable refrain, "Richard is dead, and Doris is dead!"

CHAPTER IX.



A FEW hours of the morning had passed before Paul could resolve upon leaving Rufus in his protracted and dangerous insensibility in order to ride over to Thornbury, at once to procure further medical aid for his brother, and to learn the minuter details of the catastrophe. It was probable that the day would bring to light more victims of the death that had swooped down upon the pleasure-seekers the night before ; and it was possible that he might find Doris among the ghastly group of unknown dead which lay side by side in an apartment of one of the hotels. The body of Richard Crofton had been brought up to his own dwelling ; and Harriet was wandering to and fro about the house with tearless eyes, and lips that moved with a ceaseless whisper,

that Paul shrank from hearing. He determined to ride over to Thornbury, and call at the Priory on his return, that he might give such consolation as he could to Mrs. Aspen.

Paul was on the point of starting, when a message was brought to him as he took a last look at Rufus's death-like face, to the effect that Robert Atcherly was waiting to speak to him. He recoiled from meeting him, lest he should be bringing some intelligence of Doris, which would come with a greater bitterness from his lips ; but nerving himself for the unavoidable interview, he left Rufus, and repaired to the library.

The artist was standing upon the hearth, looking up to his own picture of Doris, which hung undisturbed above it. There was the pallor of sleeplessness and strong excitement upon his face, but none of the gloom and pain which Paul was prepared to see. On the contrary, his eyes gleamed with a brilliant light under his heavy eye-brows ; his cynical mouth

was softened into an expression of trembling gladness. Yet when Paul entered the room he neither offered his hand, nor took any notice of the one extended to him; but turning away from his contemplation of the portrait, he confronted Paul with a grave and constrained aspect.

“My errand was with Rufus,” he said, “but they tell me that I cannot see him. Is he so ill, Dr. Lockley?”

“He is in great danger,” answered Paul; “passing from one swoon into another. He may be dying.”

“I had a message for him,” continued Atcherley. “Miss Arnold sent me to assure him of her safety.”

“Saved!” cried Paul, sinking exhaustedly into a chair, and covering his face with his hands, “Doris saved! How shall I ever thank God for this?”

His strong frame was shaken like a child's; his chest heaved with uncontrollable sobs, as the great load that had weighed upon him was

suddenly lifted from his heart. It was some minutes before he could raise his head, and look his informant in the face. When he did so at length, he saw Atcherley regarding him with curiosity, but with an evident relenting in the expression of his features.

“Tell me how it was,” said Paul, briefly.

“It was just this,” replied Atcherley, in short sentences of suppressed emotion. “I was in my boat when that cry came. A cry that will ring in my ears to my dying day. It was dark; you know how dark it was; but I pushed off, and rowed up the river towards the island. I could hear that some great calamity had happened; but the river was black and swollen; and it may be that some bodies drifted past me in the darkness. At last I saw a light object floating on the surface. I drew it, a human being, out of the water. Some drowning woman; dead, perhaps. When I carried her up to the light of my own home, it was Doris.”

Atcherley's voice failed him. He stood

silent for a minute, glancing furtively at her portrait.

“I thought,” he resumed, “that that was the cause of the terrible cry I had heard. It never crossed my mind that anything else could have happened. I could not leave her at first to the care of my blind mother, and her terrified servant. When I went out at last to seek some help, for she seemed as if she were dead, I heard it all. It has been a fearful night, Lockley.”

“Yes,” said Paul, shivering and trembling with an utter prostration of his strength.

“Doris is recovering,” he continued. “Mr. and Mrs. Arnold came in late in the night, having stayed by the water side in the dread of seeing her drawn out of it lifeless. They were only a few yards in advance of her and Rufus, but they managed to get safely to the shore before all the boats gave way. They believed she must have sunk. Lockley, Doris says that it was in your power to save her if you would, but that you left her

to float away, when Rufus lost his hold upon her."

"Yes," replied Paul, scarcely conscious of what he said, and shivering again at the remembrance of the awful occurrences of the night.

"It is impossible!" cried Atcherley. "We have steadily assured her that it was the delusion of a bewildered moment. She says that she saw Mrs. Crofton fling her arms round you as you looked down upon her and Rufus; that you made no effort to free yourself, and to rescue them. It is a delirium with her; a maddening fancy, and she can speak of nothing else."

"I will come to see her," said Paul, raising himself feebly, and gazing absently at Atcherley. "I must come and explain it to her."

"She lies there," he resumed, "with her eyes closed, and her face wan and colourless; very quiet and still, except that now and then she repeats that story to herself. Once she

asked for Rufus, and we told her that he was saved, for Weston knew it ; but she made no other remark than that you had suffered her to float away to die."

" I will come to see her," repeated Paul.

" You shall not see her to-day," replied Atcherley, jealously: " You shall never see her again unless she wishes it. Doris has borne enough from you, Dr. Lockley. If there be any truth in this, as you confess there is, she will shrink from looking upon your face again. But it is impossible. You could not have had it in your power to save her, and failed to seize the opportunity. Some devil of cowardice must have possessed you for a moment ; and yet you are a brave man. They tell me in Thornbury that no man made greater efforts, or encountered more risk than you did. Every one is speaking in your praise. Let me take back to Doris the assurance that she was deceived. Tell me that you never saw her, and had no chance of saving her."

" I cannot speak of it," said Paul, shudder-

ing. "Atcherley, Rufus has not yet recovered his senses. Richard Crofton is dead!"

"Dead!" echoed Atcherley; and the two men looked into one another's faces with a keen and silent scrutiny. One thought had flashed into their minds at the same moment; a thought which had kept away from Paul's preoccupied brain until it glanced through Atcherley's eyes. An expression of perplexity and distress sat upon his face, and he spoke with extreme earnestness.

"Atcherley," he said, "I must see Doris; she must not misunderstand me. One wretched moment of bewilderment was the cause of what she fancies. I risked my life many times last night. I would have risked it a hundred-fold for her, but she was lost to my sight in the dense darkness. For Ruf's sake, if not for my own, I must see her, and explain it all to her."

"I will let you know what she wishes," answered Atcherley coldly, and preparing to

take his leave. "Under my roof Miss Arnold shall act as she pleases."

Paul sat motionless for some time after the artist was gone, in a state of nervous exhaustion, following upon the overwhelming excitement he had endured. He did not know till now at what a strain his whole being had been stretched during the last twelve hours; and for a while he felt sinking into an utter failure of his energies. But there was intelligence to communicate to Rufus, which would prove a health-giving cordial in the first moments of returning consciousness. With renewed hope he returned to his anxious vigil beside him. At last there was the dawn of life upon the corpse-like face. While yet the spirit seemed scarcely linked to the operation of the senses, Paul laid his mouth against the dull and drowsy ear, and breathed the electric words, "Doris is safe."

An hour afterwards Paul was riding to Thornbury, with a heart so lightened of its heaviest load, that it seemed to beat almost

gaily in his breast, though his road lay along the sullen and muddy waters of the guilty river, until he entered into the mourning streets. A profound gloom rested upon the town; every countenance wore an aspect of solemnity and dejection. Little knots of talkers were congregated together here and there, conversing in bated tones, and telling to each other fresh details of the sorrowful night. Business was suspended. In many houses the windows were darkened, and the shutters closed, giving some intimation of the general sweep of the calamity. Down by the river-side, where there was yet a possibility of some other victim being recovered from the watery grave, there was a great multitude of spectators. Before the hotel, whither the bodies had been carried, and where they lay side by side in a lifeless fellowship, there stood a concourse of people, drawn to the spot by a restless and morbid curiosity; yet quieted and depressed into such a strange stillness, that no voice could be heard among the crowd

at the distance of a few yards. They were not "useful lives" that had been lost; not the lives of men and citizens, upon whom many interests depended, whose death would be a loss to the common weal. Yet the sadness that prevailed was not the less touching because it had been the young and feeble who had been trodden down to an inevitable doom amid the fierce struggles of the stronger crowd. Many remembered, almost conscience-stricken and with a sharp grief that remained long unhealed, how they had felt weak hands stretched out to them which they had pushed aside; helpless forms sinking beside them unheeded, and left to perish beneath the trampling of their feet.

Paul stayed but a short time in Thornbury; and returned by way of the Priory in order to see Mrs. Aspen. He found that Atcherley had called immediately after leaving Fairfield, to assure her of Doris's safety; and that Mrs. Margraf had sent a servant across to inform her of the partial recovery of Rufus. She was

in a state of trembling and agitated thankfulness, blended with the horror she felt at the dire disaster, and her grief at the death of Richard Crofton. The anger which Mrs. Margraf had been assiduously fostering in her heart against Doris since the day when she quitted the Priory with George and Emma Arnold, had been obliterated by the thought of her peril. The aged gentlewoman was eager to bring her home again for the short time that she herself would dwell at the Priory. Even George and Emma shared in her full forgiveness; and she said, with tears, that she blessed God for the safety of her poor John's enemy. It was agreed between her and Paul, that the latter should make his way to Doris's presence the following day, and employ every art of persuasion and entreaty to prevail upon her to return to the tender love of Mrs. Aspen.

CHAPTER X.

DORIS lay, very much as Robert Atcherley had described her, silent and still, throughout the day ; though after he had given to her a faithful account of his interview with Paul, she no longer repeated her mournful and harping refrain : “ He might have saved me, but he let me float away to die.” George, subdued by the catastrophe and his own narrow escape from sharing Doris’s peril, would have returned again and again to the room, with new details of Paul’s efforts and the hazards he had run in the rescue of the drowning wretches, with a hope that his intelligence would pacify the delirious distress which had oppressed her fancy. But she shrank from hearing them. The horror was too recent for her to bear the sound of any

words which gave utterance to its particulars. She was content to lie still, unquestioning and speechless, with the quiet ministrations of the blind woman alone surrounding her, and with no curious eyes to rest upon her face. The hours of the day, lonely and silent as they were, fled by with rapid swiftness as her thoughts travelled busily over some melancholy topics. With a sense of indifference, strange even to herself, she wished to ask no question, and to hear no circumstance of the accident in which she had been a fellow sufferer.

But the next morning found her awakened to a keen and feverish disquietude. She could no longer remain unconcerned about the fatal occurrences of the calamity, from which she had been marvellously rescued. A thousand questions which had remained in lethargic torpor the day before pressed themselves upon her excited curiosity. Mrs. Atcherley and Emma, who had been only permitted to stay a few moments in her room,

had assured her in general terms of the safety of her own party, but they had kept back the fact of Richard Crofton's death, until she should be strong enough to hear it. But there was much to quicken her curiosity to learn the particulars of the catastrophe. She remembered with vivid distinctness the moments of suspense, while Rufus held her in a firm and tenacious grasp, amid the whirl of the numbing waters, and the struggles of the drowning crowd, who were contending together for the barest chance of life. The torchlight had gleamed brightly upon the group on the island. So keenly had the momentary indecision of Paul, and the sight of Harriet Crofton winding her arms round him, stamped themselves upon her vigilant observation, that though insensibility had followed instantly, the recollection of the scene had been the first and sharpest of her sensations when consciousness returned, and she found herself safe at Murivance. The dull apathy attendant upon the exhaustion of the

previous day was past, and an irrepressible, consuming anxiety to hear every detail had taken possession of her.

Neither Emma nor Mrs. Atcherley understood this change in Doris. They had been too stringently admonished to be silent about the accident to venture to answer her inquiries: and she perceived quickly that they were giving her garbled statements. When at length she was left alone, she rose and began to dress herself with the intention of seeking Robert Atcherley, and learning from him what she desired to know. It seemed to her that the traces of her dangerous illness had returned; as if she had only just left the room where she had gone through a hand-to-hand conflict with Death. There were the same dull, discoloured circles under her eyes, and the same pale haggardness upon her face. She could never think of that illness without remembering Paul's neglect of her; for with some feminine inconsistency she had secretly blamed him for pursuing the very line of

conduct which she had enjoined. Twice he had left her to die. Twice he had seemed to possess the skill and the chance of rescuing her from a great danger; and the influence of Harriet Crofton had prevailed to deter him. Her face grew paler as she thought of it, and the expression of sadness deepened. She felt feeble too; so feeble, that after a long and painful effort in dressing, she crept wearily downstairs to the sitting-room. She opened the door, and entered, weak and speechless, but with a faint smile struggling to her lips as she anticipated the surprise her appearance would create; but upon looking round she found herself face to face with Paul.

“Doris,” he cried, meeting her hastily and taking both her trembling hands in his, “Doris, I did not ask you to do this. I did not wish you to see me yet. Weston told me how great the shock has been to your system; I gave up the hope of speaking to you for some days. It was rash and imprudent of you to do this.”

But he spoke tenderly, scanning her face with an eager and solicitous gaze before which her eyes sank, and she freed herself uneasily from the grasp of his hands. He looked down upon her with a deeper heaviness of heart, for there was in her expression an evident recoiling from his presence. As he met the reluctant glance of her eyes, lifted for an instant with a dull gleam of dread, and saw the shudder which shook her frame, he turned away from her with a deep-drawn sigh, and she sank feebly into a chair beside her.

“Doris,” he said, returning and standing before her, “it is plain to me that you did not expect to see me here, or you would not have entered this room. There is a look of aversion on your face. If that is the last look I am to see there, it will be a trouble to me my life through. May I speak to you fully; will you listen to all I have to say?”

“Yes,” she answered, looking away from him, and resting her head languidly on her

hand. "I want to hear everything. You were there, and saw it all. Tell me everything."

"I saw it all," he repeated, "and I shall never forget what I did see. When that cry rang through the tent it paralysed every one of us with an undefined horror. For a moment or two after we had reached the banks, the scene before us was like the wildest, most delirious fever-dream. There was the red, uncertain light gleaming upon your white face, Doris, and upon Rufus holding you with a death-grasp, and calling to me to save you. I scarcely saw the numbers that surrounded you, but it did not seem possible that it was a reality; it was more like some horrible illusion from which I should soon awake. It did not appear more real, because I found myself held back from helping you. There was a voice in my ears which said that nothing could be done."

"I heard and saw all that," murmured Doris, her face still averted and concealed.

“Doris,” he continued, “when I shook myself free from that momentary stupefaction, I could no longer see you. The torch failed us at that instant. When through the black darkness, I gained the spot where you had been, pushing off, Heaven help me! the wretched creatures who clung to me imploring for life, I found only Rufus, still grasping the chain, but insensible with a profound swoon. I saved him, and others. It was no time for any man to be idly bewailing a lost chance. You had been carried away out of the reach of my help; but there were other women and children who could be rescued. I was busy; but in the midst of all the full and rapid events of that melancholy night, there was underneath every other thought, and every other feeling, the one haunting idea that I had lost you. I dreaded the moment when Rufus should awake and demand you from me. Whenever I was called to render aid to any poor creature drawn dead or dying from the river, I

almost shrank from looking upon the face, lest it should be yours, Doris."

His voice failed him in the painful and insufferable remembrances that shook his spirit. Glancing towards her for some look or word of sympathy, his eyes rested only upon her downcast and hidden face, and he withdrew farther away from her before he spoke again.

"They told me at last," he continued, in broken accents, "that a hand had been seen clinging to the roots of the willows down the river. More than an hour had elapsed since the sharp conflict for life; there was no hope that this one had survived. They spoke sorrowfully and cautiously to me as I stood beside Rufus, telling me that this death touched me more closely than any other. I asked no questions, Doris; for I dared not hear your name uttered by any voice just then. I followed them out of the tent silently. When I saw that it was Richard Crofton, who lay there on the ground, dead

without remedy, my first exclamation was one of thankfulness that it was not you !”

“Richard Crofton !” cried Doris, looking up with a startled and ghastly face.

“He was dead,” said Paul, excitedly. “My early friend ; the traitor who had turned all the pride and joy of my young manhood into sorrow and humiliation. Once I might have thought of him ; but there was no thought in my heart then but of you, and of Rufus in his dangerous swoon within the tent. Even when the dead man’s wife came—and I loved her dearly once—I could hardly refrain from telling her that there was a faint hope springing up within me that you might be safe somewhere. I would not have quitted the river-side until I had learned some tidings of you ; but Rufus’ condition grew more dangerous every hour, and I could not leave him. He needed my care, and I returned with him to Fairfield.”

“And Mrs. Crofton ?” said Doris.

“She came with us,” he answered, a swift

spasm of pain shooting across his troubled face. "She has no home to go to, and she is now in my house. Nay, Doris, you are too tender and true-hearted to misunderstand me in this thing. Her husband lies there dead; my windows are darkened for him. She was never more alienated from me than at this moment. But she is desolate and homeless; and the bond of old memories fetters me more than most men. I have scarcely seen her since she entered my home. All my time has been given to my poor Rufus."

Paul wondered, during the long silence which followed, that Doris made no inquiries about Rufus. She was sitting perfectly still and motionless, with her face again hidden, and waiting passively for him to speak. In his own powerful agitation he failed to perceive that she was enduring the nervous reaction which was following her peril and excitement. Every word he uttered carried with it a sharp and venomous sting, which

rankled in her moody imagination. Her aching head, which throbbed against her feverish hands, was filled with thick-coming fancies, and racked by wild conjectures and vague recollections. But clearly she seemed to see Paul again standing upon the brink of the river, looking upon her danger, yet yielding to the restraint of Harriet Crofton's white arms. It was too keenly engraved upon her brain, for the memory ever to be effaced. While she waited motionless and voiceless for Paul's next sentence, the picture was before her mind in strong and vivid retention.

“Doris,” he said, in a calm and lowered voice, which fell upon her ear in chilling tones, “this shadow of a bond between us has been a safeguard to me. It was nothing; it had no substance; yet because your name was linked with mine, and the thought of you was growing into my daily life, it protected me from what you call temptations. Harriet practised all her old forms of attraction, such as had won a love from me as impassioned as

that which Rufus feels for you ; but her arts were ineffectual. Always between her and me there stood a quiet, shy, half-real phantom of a love, which might some day grow into a full verity."

He paused and looked steadily at the silent protest of her nervous hands, which she had flung away from her face, as she returned his gaze, with a peremptory disavowal in every line of her agitated features.

" You would tell me," he said, mournfully, " that I have no love to offer. You would say it was all lavished years ago upon a worthless woman. You think I am too old to love again. Doris, if the heart and soul, and all that is best in man, grow stronger and purer as we gain a clearer knowledge of life and its duties, then the love I could give to you would be fuller of simple truth, and self-denying devotion than the passion of my youth. You would be to me no idol, reigning over me through my own passionate folly ; but a very precious trust committed to my charge, with

some fair qualities which perhaps no care but mine can develop; some beauties and perfections of character which only my touch can awaken. You are very lonely in the world. You are homeless and friendless. Come to me, and let me gather you into a shelter and a home."

He stretched out his arms towards her, as Rufus had described him doing, when he was pleading for his brother upon the island. The remembrance was peculiarly unfortunate. It brought with it the recollection of the chilling neglect with which Paul had turned away from her trustful and timidly glad smile to pay honour to Harriet Crofton. There returned to her mind the passionate avowal of love and resentment against Paul, which Rufus had poured into her ears. The nervous excitement from which she was suffering converted every word that Paul uttered into a cruel insult. Her face, pale before, grew more colourless and stern, and her eyes glittered with an angry and indignant light.

“You deceive yourself,” she answered, “but me you cannot deceive. I have been watching you these nine months, and seen you yield more and more weakly to the fascinations which brought you into bondage. I warned you of it, at a great sacrifice of my own feelings, but you would not heed me. You imagined yourself safe perhaps because no lasting bond could exist between you and Mrs. Crofton; but your position is now changed. I can fully understand that Mrs. Crofton is not the woman you would choose for your wife; but you feel yourself to be a weak man, and you are willing to place me between yourself, and the dreaded influence of that woman!”

The arrow shot home, and Paul flinched; but Doris went on irrevocably.

“If it were possible for me to listen to you, and believe you, what chance would there be of happiness for me while I was always fearing the influence of an unprincipled woman? You have seen us both;

but my words and warnings, painful ones they were to me, were ineffectual against her fascinations. You think me a young woman; but I have seen a good deal of life, and human nature, and I should not dare to trust myself to your professions, while I know what Harriet Crofton is. You have no strength of mind in anything that concerns her; and you are afraid of her now. If Mr. Crofton had lived I should have heard nothing of all this. I feel ashamed," she continued, with bated breath, "to speak about this so soon after his death; but it is you who chose this time for offering me your love, as you call it. You know you are afraid of Harriet Crofton because she is once more free."

"Doris," cried Paul, biting his lip till it was white and bloodless, "I swear to you that Harriet Crofton can never be anything more to me than she is at this moment."

"It does not matter to me," said Doris, relapsing into languor, "this is the last time I

shall see any of you. I wish you had not said these things to me, but I shall try to forget them. I am very sorry to leave Rufus without seeing him again; tell him that. It was not possible for me to love him. I cannot live among you any longer. Say good-bye for me to all of them."

She had risen from her seat as she spoke, and stood before him with every spark of her fiery resentment quenched, her tearful eyes lifted up to him, and a plaintive tone in her lowered voice. But before he could answer, or arrest her departure, she had glided quickly from the room. Paul remained alone for some minutes, gazing blankly at the door through which she had disappeared, with an undefined expectation that she would return to his side to retract her bitter words. But as minute after minute crept by, and there was neither sign nor sound in the quiet house in which he was almost a stranger, he passed through the entrance-hall; pausing as he did so with a lingering and forlorn hope. Let-

ting himself out unattended, he mounted his horse at the door, and rode off along the river-side in the direction of Monkmoor Priory.

CHAPTER XI.

THE purpose with which Paul rode to Monkmoor was to make Mrs. Aspen acquainted with every circumstance of the imposture practised upon her, and their whole circle, by his fictitious betrothal to Doris. She was quite alone in her old home, longing for the return of her adopted daughter, whom Paul had rashly engaged to restore her. He told his story with great hesitation and embarrassment; laying the chief blame, where it justly rested, upon his sister, whose love of finesse and management was known to both of them. Mrs. Aspen listened to his narration with mingled incredulity and indignation.

“Do I understand aright,” she said, “that the engagement which gave his last gladness on earth to my poor John was a mere fraud?”

Were we, he and I, made happy by a poor, pitiful imposition, the conspiracy of three persons in whom we fully trusted? Did you and Doris never love one another? It was a sorry trick to play off upon us all, Paul Lockley."

"I own it," he replied, with a look of deep humiliation. "But Sophia's arguments and entreaties were plausible. I assure you Doris and I were both hurried into the imposture in spite of our instinctive reluctance, and before we had time to deliberate. Ever since, the whole course of events has been opposed to the termination of the deceit. You must remember it was no part of our scheme to practise it upon you, or any one else but poor Rufus. We are all of us well punished. Of late I have not wished to break the slight tie which bound Doris to me. She has grown very dear to me, aunt; and I dreaded the time that must separate us, unless the betrothal could be renewed in very truth. It was a pleasant thing from the first to have a

right to seek her society ; and the last few months I have felt myself a better and stronger man, when I have had her by my side. How could I compare her day after day with Harriet Crofton, and Emma, and Sophia, without acknowledging her superiority? You do not see Doris with my eyes ; delicate, refined, timid ; yet brave and resolute when she has some purpose to work out. There is no guile in her, none ; even though we have betrayed her into this miserable folly.”

He spoke with warmth ; and his eye kindled and softened again, as he glanced round the study to the oriel window, where Doris had been wont to sit at her desk. Mrs. Aspen caught and comprehended the glance, and she fastened a look of keen scrutiny upon him.

“ Paul,” she said, “ if you can be as simply truthful as I once believed you, tell me frankly what are your feelings towards Doris Arnold, and what is your motive in making your confession to me at this time ? ”

"I love Doris," he answered, briefly. "I wish you to recal her to the Priory. She would perhaps return, if you would only seek her out yourself, and ask her to come back."

"How am I to believe you?" she asked. "Does not all the world say that Harriet Crofton exercises her old influence over you?"

"It is false," exclaimed Paul, in a tone of miserable self-reproach. "I have been placed in peculiar circumstances. Doris would not suffer me to render to her the attention her relation to me seemed to demand, and you ascribed every apparent slight to the influence of Harriet. Perhaps there have been some old memories at work, which made me less hard to Harriet; and I may have been to blame in yielding to them. If I was wrong I have suffered for it in many ways. But, aunt, I must not lose Doris, if there be any possibility of winning her."

Mrs. Aspen fell into a profound and prolonged reverie, while Paul strode to and fro in suppressed impatience. She had missed Doris

sorely; but the wound of Emma's marriage with George Arnold had been too deep to heal over quickly; and Doris's resolute avoidance of her presence had tended to increase the soreness of feeling, which it had been Mrs. Margraf's care to inflame. The great peril to which Doris had been exposed, and from which she had escaped narrowly, had turned Mrs. Aspen's heart to her once more. The catastrophe was still too recent, for this discovery of a new deception to kindle again the embers of the quenched resentment. Yet amid all her softened feelings towards Doris, Paul's confession stung afresh the aged gentlewoman's sensitive dignity. They had been playing upon her credulity, and acting a part before her eyes with so much skill as to mislead her completely. The fraud had been so paltry, in spite of Mrs. Margraf's plausible reasons with regard to Rufus, that she felt herself offended by its success. Paul deserved to wear that look of humiliation; his honour was shorn of its beams on every side. Sud-

denly, her eye, which had followed Paul in his restless pacing to and fro, fell upon the beautiful edition of the Monkmoor Roundelays, the publication of which had cost her a sum known only to Doris and herself. She had betrayed to no one the chagrin and disappointment which she had suffered in London. Instead of returning home humbled, and with her tuneful note lowered, she had counterfeited a spurious success, and accepted laurels which she had not won.

“We all wear a mask at times, Paul,” she said, with a pang of conscience, “but it is unwise. Very well before the world, perhaps, which need not see one’s countenance when it is downcast; but very foolish at one’s own fireside, where it must fall off sooner or later. I am not without this sin, and I cannot throw a stone at you. I forgive you both fully and freely; but how will you make known your deception to poor Rufus?”

“I do not know,” answered Paul, “it has all worked wrongly. Rufus is as fondly

attached to Doris at this moment as he ever was. I believe, in truth, the only happiness he could now feel would be to see her my wife, and his sister."

"You think then," said Mrs. Aspen, smiling, "that the deception need not be made known to him, if you can only convert it into a reality. Is my dream to come true at last, and shall we live together at Fairfield? The old woman none the less welcome to her kinsfolk, because she is a poor pensioner upon their bounty? Paul, I should not grieve very much even at the loss of the Priory, if I could realise these last hopes of mine."

"You are as a mother to me," said Paul, tenderly. "You will be no pensioner of mine. Only get Doris home again here, and let the future shape itself. She must not go away with that worthless brother of hers. I cannot have her thrust out into a hard world. Whether I can win her love or no, she must be sheltered where our friendship can protect her. Aunt, when I feared that she was lost, I felt

that no charm or gladness would remain for me in life. Is there any hope for me? Do you think it possible I can make her believe that I love her truly?"

"She will return to me," she replied, with a firm conviction that Doris could not resist her entreaties. "When she is here, and Harriet Crofton away, you may win her, if you are in earnest. You may marry Doris if you will. I am sure of it. She could not have blinded me so completely, if she had been only feigning love to you. I am convinced she loves you, Paul."

His face flushed as he caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror, whose polished surface had often reflected the delicate features of Doris. But the transient glow grew dim, and fled altogether, as the sun-light glinting upon his dark hair, displayed the tinge of grey that was gathering upon it. Twelve years of moody seclusion had traced their lines upon his face; the sunbeams marked them out so clearly that they scarcely seemed to be hiero-

glyphics of the past, but spoke a plain unvarnished tale of irrecoverable youth.

“I am growing old,” he said, “a mere idling book-worm. Doris could never love me. You are mistaken. Perhaps those who knew me when I was a young man may see in me what I was then, and be blind to the detriment of time. But to her I must be a man many years her senior. I told her this morning that I loved her——”

“And what was her answer?” asked Mrs. Aspen, eagerly.

“She spoke of Harriet Crofton,” replied Paul, his dark face deepening into a dull red. “She said with great bitterness, and injustice, that I asked her to be my wife, because Harriet was free, and I was afraid of her fascinations.”

A faint smile stole across Mrs. Aspen's features as she heard Doris's answer; but she made no reply to Paul's communication. For some time he maintained a moody and unbroken silence; but he shook off his reverie

at last with an effort at an answering smile to that which lingered on the old lady's face.

“ I have lost Doris,” he said, “ but my folly must not visit her. She must have a home here with you. Now that nothing is concealed from you, she will live happily in the enjoyment of your love. By-and-by perhaps she will not recoil from seeing me, as she did to-day. You will go yourself to Murivance, dear aunt ? ”

“ I cannot go out to-day,” she said, sighing heavily. “ It is a sorrowful anniversary to me. Twelve months this day ! Ah, Paul ! you are my son now ; ” and stepping across the hearthstone to him, she lifted up her face for him to kiss ; “ my son, Paul ; and Doris is my daughter. To-morrow I will fetch her home. I will take Rufus with me. Is Rufus well enough ? She could never resist his entreaties and mine.”

“ The boy's life is bound up in her,” answered Paul. “ For his sake we must not suffer her to go away. He would rise from

his death-bed if he were summoned to Doris. I have only to tell him that to-morrow he is to accompany you to Murivance to prevail upon her to return to us, and new life and energy would flow through his veins."

"Leave me then, and try the remedy," said Mrs. Aspen.

In a few minutes Paul had reached Fairfield. Standing beside the bed where Rufus still lay in utter exhaustion and debility, he told him that if he were strong enough for the exertion on the morrow Mrs. Aspen wished him to escort her to Murivance, in order to add his persuasions to her own that Doris would return to the Priory. A brilliant and héctic glow of happiness dawned upon his languid face, and a smile of rare sweetness played about his lips; but Paul would not allow him to waste his returning vigour by any premature efforts. It was enough however for him to lie still in a trance of ecstasy, with the thought of Doris no longer a torture, but a hope. What might loom beyond the morrow

he cared not. He should see her again, her whom his feeble hand had traitorously yielded to the grasp of death. He should speak to her once more, and listen to her voice. Whatever might happen after that seemed removed into a very vague and far-off future.

CHAPTER XII.



A DEEP dismay, a terror of the inexorable fate which appeared to be pursuing her family, were at ruthless work in Mrs. Margraf's mind, paralysing her mental powers. The chain of disasters, beginning with the death of John Aspen, and growing link after link until the Priory was lost, Richard Crofton drowned, and Harriet thrown in a desolate and destitute widowhood upon her hospitality and charity : this chain fettered her with a slavish captivity. She perceived at last that there were some circumstances which she could not control ; some hidden hinges and springs in the great machinery of affairs, which her fingers could not touch. Great evils had befallen her ; a deeper sorrow than all seemed to hang over her. She left Paul to work out his own destiny, let it

carry him whither it would ; she did not even attempt to think what he would do. But to Rufus she clung with despairing fondness. If the idea of seeing Doris again, painted the semblance of health upon his cheeks ; though in the depths of her heart there was an inextinguishable dread of something she dared not name to herself ; she was willing to sit patiently at his side, and listen to his rapturous anticipations of the joy that was to come in the morning.

Rufus appeared so little altered by his sharp and serious illness that Mrs. Aspen regarded him with pleasurable surprise when, accompanied by Paul, he reached the Priory early upon the appointed morning. With the genuine selfishness of an absorbing passion, he was altogether oblivious to the tristful and gloomy circumstances surrounding him. He took no notice of the darkened rooms, which in their sombre shadows were a perpetual suggestion and remembrance of the light of life so suddenly extinguished in their kinsman.

Only that he shuddered for an instant, and the feverish colour on his cheeks somewhat paled, at the first sight of the fatal river, flowing tranquilly and rapidly along its course, he betrayed a jubilant play of spirits, which, hovering about the name of Doris, still kept it shyly and reverently unuttered, even to the ears of Mrs. Aspen. The boy's untimely gladness bore a sense of pain to her heart, yet she knew not how to check it. But when she told him that it was possible they might fail in persuading Doris to return, as she could offer her a home only for a short season ; that he must add his arguments to hers ; he leaned back in the carriage, and in almost languid happiness, pondered over every solicitation he could use to induce her to comply with their wishes.

It was not many days since Rufus had lingered about Murivance ; yet the low-roofed house, with its white walls and dormer windows, seemed to bear a new aspect as they approached it. A smouldering fire of

jealousy, which had remained latent in a kind of hazy pity of the deformed artist, and his hopeless love, burst into a flame as he thought of Doris, dwelling under his roof, and owing her life to him. It gave Atcherley a claim upon her which he could not brook. He was impatient to carry her away, and so break off the dangerous series of familiar and homely associations that were forming around them. He cast an envious glance at the window of the studio, where Robert Atcherley might be painting, with Doris looking on, and growing always more interested in his work; but the casement was closed and curtained, and there was no sign there or elsewhere that she was a resident within the walls of Muri-vance.

Mrs. Aspen was scarcely less agitated. Since Paul had made his confession to her, her thoughts had been distracted from the memory of her son, and during the sad hours of the sacred anniversary, she had been recalling and comparing all the proofs she fancied

she possessed that Doris had not been feigning an attachment which she had never felt. The persuasion had deepened into an assurance in her mind; but this morning it yielded no settled satisfaction, while she watched the unconcealable excitement of Rufus. This cadet of her husband's family, with his young, fresh enthusiasm, and unworn passion of life; which rang rapid changes, always with a certain melody and rhythm, upon every chord of his unexhausted nature, was as dear to her as the elder brother, for whose happiness she was working. It would be a grievous discipline of life's sorrow for Rufus, and one that he could not escape, to yield to Paul finally and irrevocably the love upon which his own heart was set.

There was no Doris in the parlour whither they were conducted; but in a few minutes Robert Atcherley joined them. There was an air of quiet gravity upon the artist's face, which struck coldly upon the over-wrought sensibility of Rufus. The dwelling which

before had seemed full of the presence of Doris was suddenly disenchanted and made empty. There was neither sign nor sound of her occupancy; no faint tone, too low for any other ear to catch, of her voice speaking in some other chamber; no token for his watchful eye to rest upon, that she had been within those walls. The place was void, uninhabited, deserted. With a chill dread of hearing the answer, he asked in impetuous accents for Doris.

“She left Thornbury this morning,” was the reply, gravely spoken.

“Left Thornbury!” cried both Mrs. Aspen and Rufus in one breath of dismay.

“Yes,” said Atcherley; “yesterday she met Dr. Lockley by an unfortunate accident against which I ought to have guarded. The effect of the interview was most painful and dangerous to her. I did not attempt for a moment to change her firm resolution to escape from all possibility of a renewal of her distress. She assured me she could not

bear to see any of you again, even Mrs. Aspen; she desired me to keep the place of her retreat a secret from you all, but especially from her brother. The shock of last Wednesday has been too great for her; she needs perfect repose and retirement in order to rally from it. These she could not insure while exposed to the possibility of seeing any person belonging to Dr. Lockley's household, or of hearing any news respecting him. She left me therefore this morning with my mother, who will not leave her until she is better both in health and spirits."

"Then you know where she is gone," said Mrs. Aspen, eagerly.

"Yes," he answered. "But I promised her faithfully that I would tell no one of her residence. Her secret is safe with me."

An air of satisfaction pervaded Atcherley's features as he spoke, but it passed away as he met the despairing gaze of Rufus's deep and scintillating eyes.

"But, Mr. Atcherley," pleaded Mrs. Aspen,

“the misunderstanding that exists between Doris and my nephew Paul can be explained and removed. I came to make it right, and to offer her a home so long as I have one to share with her.”

“Miss Arnold is in no want either of a home or of friends,” he replied, proudly. “I put forward no claim but that of friendship, and in me she shall find a true and constant friend. She repeatedly assured me that she would not have seen Dr. Lockley, but for the accident of coming downstairs at a time when I was absent, and he was waiting for my return. You cannot know all the circumstances of his conduct, or you would not blame her. She had determined never to enter any dwelling where she might meet with him again; and her departure from Thornbury was only hastened a few days by the dread of further agitation.”

“Atcherley,” said Rufus, looking at him with eyes from which all the light had died away, “tell me where she is. Let me follow

her. She must come home to us. She belongs to me by the right of a true and endless love."

"I cannot, Rufus," answered Atcherley, reluctantly. "My promise to her was well considered and binding; I did not forget you when I made it. But I have long seen how Doris's life has been oppressed and burdened by her betrothal to a man who knew nothing of the value of her affection. When she asked me to help her to set herself free, confessing her own weakness to complete and secure the separation, I could not hesitate. It is possible, but barely possible, that she may give you some clue herself; but I cannot tell you whither she is gone."

"Do you know what you are doing?" asked Rufus, with a faint smile. "You are bidding me go home, and yield myself hopelessly to this dull quenching of life which I feel stealing over me. You are my friend, Robert; the only friend I have ever had beyond my own kin. Doris would listen to

me if she were here; she would come back with me if I could only plead with her."

"It is true," replied Atcherley, in a tone of distress. "She owned to me that if she saw you again, and you appealed to her as you did upon the Poplar Island, she could not tear herself away. But she would remain to be humiliated and miserable. It was a question of your suffering or hers; and it was I, Rufus, who struck the balance. If I judge you rightly, you would rather endure suffering yourself than see Doris drooping under it."

"A thousand times!" he said sighing, though the feeble smile upon his face brightened and strengthened. "It shall be as she pleases. My darling! I came here with the thought we should take her home with us, and that I might feast my eyes upon her face, for I saw it last when the horror of death had stricken it. But she has fled from us. Atcherley, this is the last home that was open to her while we still had a little claim upon her.

Tell me all she has said and done while she has been with you. Show to me the place where you rescued her from the death to which I surrendered her."

"Rufus, she left a letter in my care to be forwarded to you," said Atcherley, regarding the boy's smiling face with painful interest. A look of intense yearning and passionate tenderness came up on it as he stretched out his hand eagerly and speechlessly for Doris's farewell letter. Throwing open the sash of the window he strode down to the clump of alders growing out of the margin of the river, that he might read it within view of the island where he had last seen her, and where he had lost sight of her for ever. The hand which had clung to him, and which he had loosed from his feeble grasp, was the hand that had written those beloved and familiar characters, and he bent his head over the folded paper with a voiceless and wordless prayer for strength to bear the suffering which it was doomed to bring to him.

“ My dear Rufus,” wrote Doris, “ I believe in your love for me ; I know that it is true and deep, but it could not continue to be so. Such a love is too self-exhausting and self-consuming for a world like this. When your eyes are opened, as they must be by the years and experience which are coming to you as to every one of us, you will be amazed at your own infatuation. Even if any woman could be all that you imagine me to be, a passion so absorbing would be unworthy of you as a man, and you would outgrow it as you entered into the graver duties of life. Again and again I would repeat to you that I love you as the dearest and best of brothers ; but you demand from me something more than that, and I cannot give it to you. I searched my heart closely some months ago, and I found that your image did not fill its inner recess. In a few years, a few months perhaps, you will be almost glad that I have no more ardent feeling for you. But as my brother, I love you with a very tender love.

“I think it right that at last I should let you know what a sacrifice, though it has been a vain one, I have made for you of those feelings which are the finest and most sensitive in a woman's nature. I was assured that there was no hope of your conquering your vain love for me, unless your honour and loyal affection to your brother were enlisted against it. It was urged that the very thought of sacrificing yourself to him would at once impel you to the conflict, and lessen his pain. I knew well that you had a spirit noble enough for self-conquest, wherever you saw it to be duty; and I consented to the scheme proposed to us by your sister. Dr. Lockley, a man many years older than myself; upon whose judgment I was willing to rely with implicit submission; had given his sanction to the seemingly harmless fraud. I permitted myself to be represented to you as betrothed to your brother.

“Rufus, it was done so hastily that I had no time for reflection. I could not foresee

the pain it would bring in its train. Every falsehood can be nothing but a misery and a degradation; for the simple truth alone is delicate and refined. There was a coarseness and vulgarity in the false relations between Dr. Lockley and myself, which continually jarred upon every sensibility of his nature and mine. Not that he was ever wanting in a fine consideration for me at all times; but the whole thing was a foolish and useless falsehood, which fettered both of us on every hand. You can see some of the evil consequences it wrought. It closed my lips to Mrs. Aspen, while she believed that I regarded her as a mother. It brought me into unwelcome and distasteful contrast with Mrs. Crofton. It presented a new and successful temptation to my unhappy brother. It made me shrink always from your friendship as a concealed impostor. I have been very miserable, dear Rufus; and for that misery's sake, you must forgive me.

“I never thought that I should have to

render this wretched confession to you ; but after much consideration I have decided that this atonement I ought to make. It is better for you to know at last that your brother has been guilty of only one error of conspiracy against yourself, than that you should continue to accuse him of a treacherous unfaithfulness to me. None of us saw any of the mischievous results which might follow. For your sake alone we entered into a plot against you, whose execution seemed simple and easy enough for us all. Dr. Lockley never loved me ; never regarded me as his future wife ; and this intelligence will clear him from all the blame he has incurred in your mind. It is no pain to me to place an impenetrable silence and separation between us. But for you I am very sorrowful tonight ; you, who will miss me greatly, and long for my presence. Only now you will cast me down from the pre-eminence you have assigned to me, and you will remember me as a woman untruthful and less refined

in feeling than you imagined me. Let it be so. You asked me to bid you live. I do so now. I tell you this that the fire which consumes you may be quenched. You will be a wiser man when you have learned that we who surround you are no perfect beings, but every one of us clogged with follies and sins, which unfit us to be idols to whom you may burn incense without danger to yourself. Neither Paul nor I have been what you believed us. Yet when I am convinced that time has obliterated your old passion, I shall seek to be restored to your friendship, for that is very precious to me. Until then I must remain a stranger to you.

“Let Dr. Lockley and Mrs. Aspen see this letter. For all their kindness to me I give them unspeakable thanks. That any grief should have befallen Mrs. Aspen through me and my brother, is a source of deep trouble to me; but it makes it impossible that I should see her again. I shall hear of all of you from time to time, and always with pro-

found interest. But above all I shall wait anxiously for tidings of your career, and the success which will attend the exertion of your talents. In every triumph of your college life, if there be any pleasure in the thought, be sure that I am sharing in your pride. Again I say you have been, and are, as a very dear brother to me.

“Your loving sister,

“DORIS ARNOLD.”

While Rufus was reading, so intent upon the miserable words before him, as to be unconscious of external changes, a heavy cloud crept across the sky, and shed a dun and saddening shadow upon the earth. He looked up at the end, and gazed with dim-sighted eyes upon the familiar landscape, which seemed suddenly darkened and despoiled of all its light and beauty. He knew not if the change were within himself, or in the woods and fields of his boyhood. The river at his feet rolled past; a dark and turbid stream, which

bore no sparkle of sunshine upon the tiny crest of its waves ; the fading foliage of the poplar trees and the silver alders looked dark and dingy with decay, as if an icy sigh of the winter, which was still in bondage to many weeks of gorgeous autumn, had blighted them before the time. A glory had passed away from the earth. He knew that henceforth he should see around him no more than other men could see ; a blank, bare, common world, that only at rare intervals might bring to him some vague intimations of a hidden meaning, a hieroglyphic of the mystic past or the slumbering future. He felt the vision which had attended him thus far, die, and fade away into a common light.

He roused himself at last, shivering with a deadly sensation of heart-coldness. Yet the letter which he held in his hand he folded reverently, for the sake of the old glory which had enhaloed Doris. He tried to recall that light to his remembrance ; but the blank and black shadows that had fallen upon the land-

scape reeled about him, and made him dizzy with their motion. His forehead, when he lifted his hand to it, was wet with a cold perspiration. His spirit had been shaken to its centre; but neither anger nor resentment had gained admittance to it; only the dull and fatal death-blow that had been struck at the finest and keenest instincts of his generous, and still boyish heart. They in whom he trusted had wounded him. He had been contending with a phantom merely. He had been pouring out his lifeblood, slowly, drop by drop, in a sacrifice that was laid upon no altar, and that gained no blessing. He crept back feebly to the house along the grassy walk which Doris's feet had often trodden; along which she had been carried by Robert Atcherley, when he saved her from the watery grave, which they had wellnigh shared together. Better, he thought, if it had been so. Happier, at least for him, a hundred-fold, if he might have passed away from life with an unshaken faith in her and Paul.

Mrs. Aspen and Robert Atcherley were struck with an undefined apprehension when Rufus reappeared, with a strange aspect of age impressed upon his haggard face, bowing down his young shoulders. But he gave them no opportunity for trying him with questions. With the smile that would linger about his lips to the moment of his death; a smile expressive of mournful tenderness and gentleness; he told them he was eager to see Paul, and must hasten home at once. In a few minutes he was seated in the carriage again beside Mrs. Aspen, his aching head resting against the cushions, and his eyes closed to the dreary, garish light of the common day.

CHAPTER XIII.

DURING the hours in which Mrs. Aspen and Rufus were accomplishing their mission to Murivance, Paul had been engrossingly occupied. Two whole days had intervened since the time when Harriet Crofton had entered Fairfield, and he had carefully avoided seeing her. When summoned to give to her his professional aid, he had sent Mr. Weston, who was in attendance upon Rufus. The corpse of her husband was lying under Paul's roof waiting for the day of its interment. Every window in his house was darkened for the death of the man, who had been guilty of a great and intolerable wrong against him in past years; but he felt no emotion except of regret at his untimely fate, and of deep and bewildering perplexity, when the thought

forced itself upon his mind of Harriet's forlorn position. He knew the destitute condition of her affairs; and he had a conviction that she would cast herself in some way or other upon him. It was a difficult problem to solve, and Paul could not drive it from his thoughts. His first love; the object of his poor, pitiful, boyish devotion; was thrown upon his care, with all its tinselled lustre tarnished; yet not the less demanding from him such succour and help as it was in his power to give. The taunt which Doris had uttered, that he was still afraid of its tawdry attractions, had completed the work of disenchantment which had been going on secretly for years. Harriet Crofton was nothing to Paul Lockley but a perplexity and a care.

For some time after his return from the Priory, after starting Mrs. Aspen and Rufus on their mission to bring back Doris, he had been lost in vexatious musings upon Harriet Crofton's situation, and his own duties towards her, when she herself entered the library,

whither she had so often forced her way by the sheer boldness and brilliancy of her confident tactics. A vague dread had possessed her ever since she had heard of Doris's safety. The early expedition of Rufus with Paul to the Priory, after being so long confined to his chamber, had not escaped her observation. The unexpected return of Paul alone was an enigma to her, but one she could not leave unexpounded. As soon as she heard him retreating to his own fastness, she stole cautiously out of her room to seize for herself the interview he avoided. But Mrs. Margraf was on the alert, keeping an instinctive watch upon the movements of the dangerous guest, who had found a refuge at Fairfield. She could not yet give up Paul altogether to his destiny. While Harriet presented herself before him, her beautiful face expressing a pensive sorrow, and her shining eyes in which the tears were trembling, lifted up to his reluctant gaze, the vigilant sister followed her. She seated herself by the fireside, with an air of such defi-

nite determination to remain, that Paul, relieved and strengthened by her presence, could not help but smile.

“Sit down, Harriet,” he said, in the subdued voice which seemed most fitted to her forlorn condition; and she glanced at him tenderly as the sympathy in his tones fell soothingly upon her acute ear. “I was just now thinking of asking an interview with you. Are you already well enough to see us? Do you feel able to speak to Sophia and me?”

“Yes,” she answered, looking from one to the other, and evidently foiled at the calm intrusion of Mrs. Margraf. “I have waited to see you these two days. I thought at least there must be some business to consult me about. Oh! Paul, I have been almost killed by the thoughts I could not drive away.”

“You have been very much alone,” he answered, “and your mind was unstrung before. It has been a sorrowful time for every one of us.”

“But Doris was saved!” she said, with a cold, jealous glitter in her eyes.

“Yes, thank Heaven!” he exclaimed, bending his head with a profound and reverent look of gratitude upon his face.

“And my husband was drowned!” she added.

So still was the library after she had uttered these words, that the hum of a bee among the autumn flowers in the verandah sounded visibly through the room, with a cheerful, busy, homely blitheness, that was oddly at variance with the solemn pause and silence which had fallen upon them. Harriet was the first to move, and to speak; for Paul's thoughts had been caught again in the whirl of bewildered uncertainty, in which they had been eddying before she appeared. His sister was simply keeping a wary watch, and knew how to remain speechless, until her moment came.

“Paul,” she said, in a tone that thrilled keenly through his abstraction, and awoke

some ringing echoes in his memory. "Paul, all this time that I have been alone I have been thinking that I am cast, a poor, friendless, loveless woman, upon your pity. I have neither husband nor home; and no friend except you. Once, many, many years ago I dreamed that I stood thus before you, penniless and desolate; but in my dream I remember I smiled carelessly at my own destitution. Paul, what am I to do? where am I to go?"

This was Mrs. Margraf's moment. She fancied she saw a dangerous softness in Paul's dreamy eyes, and listening air. There was a perilous trembling about his mouth. While his unready tongue faltered, her answer came sharp and clear as a sword-thrust.

"Harriet," she said, "I wrote to your sister Mrs. Milwain yesterday, and invited her to come over, and counsel you. Tomorrow's post will bring an answer, if she should not arrive in person to-day." The colour mounted high on Harriet Crofton's forehead, but she held her peace, while she

stole a furtive look at Paul, whose features wore an expression of great relief, blended with compassion for herself.

“My poor Harriet,” he said, “I have not been forgetting you during these sad days. If you are averse to returning with your sister to her residence, I have another plan to suggest. Yesterday I was speaking with George Arnold about his own plans for the future. He consents to live abroad upon a small allowance which we shall contrive to raise for Emma, so long as they remain out of England. You are attached to Emma, and she would gladly have you with her, if we can make some mutual arrangement to that effect. You are accustomed to continental life; and you prefer it to an English residence.”

A dark and sullen cloud gathered upon Harriet Crofton's face, as she listened to Paul's calm though sympathising voice. She chafed at the cold, invincible presence of Mrs. Margraf, and her obstinate occupancy

of the vantage-ground she held. There was a lurking triumph in her placid mien, and the tranquillity of her attitude, which stung the agitated woman almost to phrenzy; while in Paul's dark eyes there was a glimmer of irresolute tenderness that seemed ready to betray him if she could only speak to himself alone. A sigh of profound bitterness escaped her lips.

“I think,” pursued Paul, pityingly, “that you could not be happy here; even if it were in our power to offer you a home. Even in this neighbourhood you could not be happy. I agreed with Emma that you would have a better chance of recovering fully from the shock you have received if you left England altogether; for some years at least. You know that I am perfectly acquainted with your circumstances; I am thankful at this time that you have made them so well known to me; do not be too greatly troubled about them. Neither Mrs. Aspen nor I could allow the wife of our kinsman to suffer any distress.”

He spoke with an air of princely generosity, which caused Mrs. Margraf to shudder with a nipping sensation of chilliness amid all her triumphant repose, as there opened up to her imagination a long series of claims made upon the modest estate of Fairfield, by the greedy dependents added to its list of pensioners. She had heard for the first time of an allowance to be made to Emma Arnold; and now Paul was promising vague and large aid to Harriet Crofton. She turned her bland face towards the latter, and was startled to see the gloomy and sullen eyes, and fascinated gaze, which she had fastened upon Paul.

“I’m glad,” continued Paul, quite unconscious of her riveted regard, for his eye had stolen a glance at Doris’s portrait, “I am glad to have this opportunity of speaking to you and Sophia together. Some mistakes have arisen among us which must be set right; and there are some decisions of my own which I wish to make known to you. It is thought by both of you; and I own that I have given

both of you reason to think so ; that I have no real affection for Doris Arnold. It may have been so up to a certain time ; but for a long while past she has been dearer to me than any woman ever was before, or ever could be again. I need not tell either of you why it is so, for if you are blinded to her excellence no words of mine could open your eyes. Were she the sister of a convicted felon, I would seek her and no other for my wife. Yesterday I sought to renew upon a firmer and truer basis the relationship which has existed between us ; and she rejected me with contempt. You will understand how deeply in earnest I am in this matter, when I tell you that Mrs. Aspen and Rufus are gone to Murivance this morning to implore her to return to the Priory. I shall leave no means untried to win her for myself at last. I trust that in a few months, or years it may be, Doris will become my wife. If not, I will never marry."

His eye, dilating with anticipation, fell upon

Harriet Crofton's riveted gaze, with its fire of smouldering passion glowing dangerously behind her steadfast look. Paul had been standing on the hearth during the conversation, and she placed herself face to face with him, her flashing eyes meeting and entrancing his troubled glance. Mrs Margraf had also risen, and drawn nearer to him, with a vehement working of her placid features, and a host of entreaties, arguments, and protestations upon her lips ; but a sudden movement of Harriet Crofton's checked their utterance. She had seized Paul's arms with her small but muscular hands, and fastened upon him a gaze of passionate reproach.

“ Paul,” she cried, “ do you know what you are saying ? It is I whom you love. You are a dreamer ; a vague, visionary man, and you fancy yourself bound to Doris, though you care nothing for her. You love me—me, and I claim you from that pale, insipid girl. Wake yourself, Paul ; and look at me. I am Harriet, whom you almost died for once.

Richard Crofton is dead; and I am free again. You do not know what you are talking about. Paul! you belong to me."

She loosed her grasp of his arms to fling her own round his neck, and to lay her head down upon his breast. The attitude, with the strong and phrenzied pressure of her arms, recalled to him the moment when she had held him back from the attempt to rescue Doris; and he endeavoured to release himself once more from her clasp.

"My poor Harriet," he said, gently, "I know well what I am saying; but you do not. We will forget these words; they are no more true than the ravings of delirium. Your mind is excited and disturbed. Go back to your room, and try to sleep a little. In the evening you will be yourself again, and then I will talk with you."

"Paul," she exclaimed, in accents of desperation, "you believe I am still the shallow-hearted coquette, who was inconstant to you, when you had given your whole love to me.

But I am altered. I was only a foolish girl then ; I am a woman now. I could make life full of pleasure to you. I could atone beyond measure for all these years of cold austerity. Doris can never be what I could be to you. Love me again, Paul."

"Mrs. Crofton," interposed Mrs. Margraf, in measured tones, "you forget that your husband has been dead only two days. This conduct is unseemly."

"Peace, woman!" she answered, fiercely. "I have nothing to do with you ; you have been my enemy always. Paul, speak to me. Do not turn away from me thus. What have you meant by seeking me so often, if you had no remaining love for me ? I am the same Harriet ; I am not the less beautiful than I was a few days ago. Again a thousand times I tell you that I love you, and have loved you ever since I returned to this accursed place, and looked upon the cold face of that accursed girl. She has no love for you. Look at me, Paul. Tell me that you listen to what I say."

“Harriet,” he replied, looking steadily into her glittering eyes, until she quailed, and lowered her fringed eyelids before his severe gaze; “I hear all you say, and it has no more effect upon me than the humming of yonder bee among the flowers. I call your conscience to witness,—if you have any conscience,—whether it was I or you who sought the close intimacy between us since you came to the Priory, which may be the cause of my losing Doris altogether. I have been a weak man; but my eyes are too open to my weakness ever to be blinded again. My judgment chooses Doris before all other women, because my heart could safely trust in her. If she will give herself to me, I shall take her and cherish her as one of God’s best gifts. But if she refuses me her love, I shall value any other love of woman as not worth a straw. You can be nothing to me but the wife of a distant kinsman, with some little claim upon my regard.”

Harriet Crofton’s lowered eyelids opened

again ; the dilated icicles beneath were fixed upon him as he spoke in deliberate accents, with a fiery gleam in them, which faded away quickly under his unwavering gaze. Her large eyes grew dull and lustreless with the extinction of their dangerous light. Yet she snatched her hand away from his firm grasp with a petty movement of malice. Her pallid lips uttered low and indistinctly a volley of imprecations against him and Doris so wild and malicious, that both he and Mrs. Margraf shrank from her in momentary horror. Paul was the first to recover himself. Once more he took her hand, and looked into her eyes with a stern and dominant influence, against which she struggled in vain, while the words faltered, and died away upon her tongue.

“This is madness,” he said, with marked emphasis, “your mind is thrown off its balance. Be careful, or you will not recover yourself. You must go to your room now, and lie down. I will send you a draught

which you must drink at once. You must obey me."

He led her unresistingly to the door of the library, and stood watching her. With unsteady steps, as one blinded with passion, she staggered across the lobby to her chamber, the door of which she flung-to with a vehement force that resounded through the house. Paul turned back, and met Mrs. Margraf with a pale and solicitous face.

"Do not speak to me now, Sophia," he said, "I cannot bear it. But send one of the servants with some excuse or other to attend upon her. She must not be left alone at present. There, leave me; not a word upon any subject whatever."

He was occupied for some minutes in the preparation of the opiate that was to tranquillize and deaden the perilous tempest of passion which had transformed his old love into a raving fury. When his task was completed, he sat down among his books, once so peacefully beloved, but now powerless to

calm his spirit. Resting his head upon his scholarly hands, but with no other sign that could have betrayed his emotion to any spectator, he passed through a bitter agony of regret for the irredeemable past, and of painful anticipation of the future.

CHAPTER XIV.



So long did Paul retain his motionless attitude of dejection, so absorbed was he in the remorseful and bitter reflections which possessed his mind, that he neither saw nor heard the door of his library again open ; and only the strong presence of Rufus's hand upon his shoulder aroused him from his self-communing. The face that was bent over him was that of one suddenly aged. The indescribable gleam and glow of youth which had lingered upon it beneath all its gravity and sadness, had vanished away altogether. The eyes bore the coldness of manhood ; the lips, as if contracted into sharper and sterner lines, no longer quivered with the faint irresolution of an untried spirit. Paul's heart throbbed for an instant with a pang of instinctive dread ;

yet Rufus was looking at him with an air of settled grief, rather than of resentment.

“ Paul,” he said, in a voice, whose accusing tones fell heavily upon his brother’s heart; “ Paul, I trusted in you perfectly. I believed that you and Doris were so true man and woman, that neither of you could swerve a hair’s breadth from what was upright and good. Even when circumstances seemed most against you, my love was willing to believe that I was blind, and could not see your actions in their true light. I placed an implicit faith in you; but this morning has robbed me of my faith, and I feel that you are a stranger to me. I do not know you, and never have known you. The brother under whose roof I have lived a happy life has been a being of my own fancies, and not the living man, whose voice I heard, and whose hand I could grasp. You have been living beside me with a lie standing between us, and I have seen, and spoken to you, and known you

through that false medium. You are not the brother whom I loved and revered."

"What is it, Rufus?" asked Paul, in a low and troubled voice.

"Would that I could make you know my heart," continued Rufus, tremulously; "that I could open to you the records of the past, and let you read them as God reads them, that you might see for yourself how true I tried to be to you and Doris! When it was told me that you loved her, there fell a sentence of condemnation upon all my love for her. From that moment I guarded myself against every thought that was a wrong to you. But I could not escape from the tyranny of temptation. Did you ever know what it is to be terrified and tempted by dreams? All the day long I could maintain a vigilant watch, that never slumbered for an instant, lest I should call Doris to myself by any other name than sister; but at night I have fallen into a sleep which brought visions of such a gladness and a joy as my waking thoughts

dared not imagine. Yet in my sleep there sounded a never-ceasing wail of conscience, which rang like a death-knell for ever in my ears. Day and night, Paul, day and night, there has been a voice whispering to me, 'Your love for Doris is a crime; a wrong against your honour and duty to your brother.' That has been the sorrow. I could have loved Doris hopelessly, and yet have been at peace. But the sting was, that I could not cease to love her when it had become a sin to do so."

"Rufus," cried Paul, "I never thought of this."

"It has haunted me," said Rufus, "like some fiendish adversary that stood between me and every lawful ambition. There was death in it to every right and true feeling. I have had to fight daily with it, lest it should destroy whatever good there was in my nature. I, an appointed priest of God, whose heart should be purified of every stain before putting on the white robe of the priesthood. Envy, and jealousy, and hatred have tugged at

my very heart-strings. I have been compelled to wrestle with them, God only knows with what despair and anguish of soul. And beneath these there were deeper and more subtle torments assailing my inmost spirit. 'This day I learn that all my conflict was with a vain shadow; was a mock combat such as must have moved the tempting devils to laughter. I have been fighting with the empty air. There was no conflict needed; and if I had conquered, no crown for my success.'

"My boy!" cried Paul, in a voice full of tender deprecation. But Rufus continued without heeding the interruption.

"When I read her letter, I knew that I could feel youth and life no longer. There fell scales from my eyes. All the brightness that had dazzled them before faded into the dull, clear, cold light, such as you men see with. I shall be deceived no longer. I know you all now. You, a man good and honest enough as the world goes, a fair specimen of what

human nature can be ; but with no unsullied, incorruptible integrity that would keep you loyal and single-hearted, if every power of earth and hell were arrayed against you, and you stood alone for God and the truth. And Doris, fair enough, sweet enough ; with a certain womanly gentleness about her ; but with no trustworthiness like a rock beneath the sweetness, which never could betray the heart that trusted in her. Every one else has sunk to a common level. I shall now see as the world sees. I am no longer the boy you thought me, to be tricked into peace and goodness. At last, and for ever, I am a man."

His voice sank into a low and troubled tone, with no ring of the exultation with which he might have flung out the statement as a challenge for life to test his manhood. Paul turned away with a pang of speechless regret again thrilling through him.

"Doris is gone," said Rufus, after a long pause. "She left Thornbury this morning."

"Gone!" repeated Paul, recalled to the interest he held in the mission to Murivance, "where is she gone to?"

"Atcherley refuses to tell," answered Rufus. "But she left this letter for me, which she desires me to show to you."

Paul took the letter. Rufus turned away listlessly to the window, gazing out with sad eyes upon the beloved landscape, or looking within upon the shelves which lined the walls with Paul's books, which he had been wont to regard with boyish interest and reverence. Upon everything there was written "The glory has departed;" and above all, upon Paul's face, which grew grey and gloom-smitten as he pondered over Doris's letter. He spoke at length in a tone which Rufus could not resist. With some faint show of reluctance he retraced his steps to his side, and took the hand which Paul extended to him.

"Rufus," he said, "my dear boy, let it be once again like the old times when you were not afraid to lay bare your heart to me:

though it is my turn to give you a fair insight into mine. When Sophia told me of your attachment to Doris, she urged with deep anxiety that its disappointment would undermine your health and spirits, unless some counteracting passion could be awakened. Ambition was not strong enough in you ; and literature could not satisfy a young heart like yours. She argued ; and I believed her ; that only by appealing to the deepest, most rooted, and most sacred of your affections, could we supply the stimulus which your spirit needed to spur it to self-conquest. You had another love, almost equal in its strength to your love for Doris. If you felt that you were sacrificing yourself to my happiness, you would find in the act a redeeming energy which would save you from the despair through which I had once passed myself."

Paul was leaning back in his chair, and looking dreamily away as if the words he uttered were spoken only to himself, while Rufus listened with breathless eagerness.

“I sought to spare the lad that blank despair,” he said. “I thought he should convert his love into a pure friendship for Doris which should last his life-time. She told me again and again that there was no love in her heart for Rufus, and that she could never regard him otherwise than as a brother. So the plan seemed to be wise and good, so far as he was concerned.”

Paul was silent for a minute or two, and then looked up keenly into his brother's face.

“I had taken but little notice of Doris,” he continued, “but after that time it was not possible for me to overlook her. Presently I caught myself listening to every tone of her voice, and watching every turn of her face. A sweet face it was, that glided imperceptibly into one's heart. So shy with me she was; half petulant at times, and fretting against the chances that threw us together; yet with a look now and then as if I did not altogether displease her. Still I should have rejoiced in any change that would have inclined her to

listen to your suit, until Harriet Crofton came. I had then an opportunity of comparing her with the woman who had made so many years of my life a solitude, and an isolation. Her return awakened the old dormant yearnings after a home and domestic ties such as other men possess ; but I thanked heaven that she was not my wife and the mother of my children. On the other hand the false contract between Doris and me formed an insuperable barrier between us. She could not listen to my professions with any faith ; they would sound like a mockery to her. I longed to break through the deception ; yet I had not strength of mind to release her from that mere shadow of a betrothal, which seemed to bind her to me. Every day as the falsehood grew more irksome, it appeared to possess a greater sweetness. I could not resolve to speak the words which would sever the frail tie altogether."

"Then you love Doris of a truth?" said Rufus.

“Love her!” he repeated, in a tone of irritation. “Rufus, my boy, I have been nothing but a simple visionary ; a dull pre-occupied book-worm. These women, Harriet and Sophia, have woven cunning little meshes about me, which have shackled me more than any fetters a man like myself could forge. I was partially conscious of their cunning, not altogether blind to their manœuvres ; but they were women, and I could never find it in my heart to break away roughly and harshly from their poor wiles. Remember I was doing Doris no wrong in yielding somewhat to the pleasant lures with which Harriet Crofton, in her innate coquetry, drew me to her side. And Rufus there was something like a renewal of my youth in listening to her, and looking upon the lovely face, for which I had once well nigh died. Doris had her own secrets, and she had a right to keep them to herself ; but they deceived me still farther, and her close reserve separated us. So I continued a dreamer until a few weeks since, when I

awoke to find Monkmoor Priory lost to Mrs. Aspen through my neglect ; myself robbed and slandered ; and Doris the sister of an unconvicted felon."

"The sister of a felon!" echoed Rufus, in a tone that betrayed how slight an influence such a thought would exercise over his heart. After a long silence Paul continued :

"From the moment that Doris told me the forger who had robbed me was her brother, I longed to gather her to my heart as a sure shelter which would be her resting-place for ever. I should not demand too great a sacrifice from her in asking her, young as she is, to become my wife ; because I felt that the calm tenderness of a man who knew all her troubles, and the shame which attached to her brother, would satisfy her better than the more ardent and more uncertain passion of a younger lover. But I had no opportunity of speaking to her as I wished to do ; and presently the thought came into my mind that the life of fresh struggle to which I am

pledged was not the home and repose I longed to offer to her. Yesterday, forgetting in her presence this last idea of prudence, I made her an avowal of my love, which she rejected with scorn; a scorn well merited. There remained one chance for me. I might win her if she returned to live with Mrs. Aspen, with whom I should often see her after I was freed from the chafing presence of Harriet Crofton. This morning you went with my aunt to add the weight of your entreaties to hers. But she is gone; our Doris, whom we have both lost; who will never be to us either wife or sister."

Paul's face sank again between his hands, as he spoke in accents of bitter self-reproach and regret. But Rufus laid his hand once more upon his shoulder, and his voice fell into a key of profound tenderness.

"Paul," he said, "I forgive you with my whole heart. We will forgive one another. Brother, let us be at one again, with neither falsehood nor cloud between us."

A brilliant colour had flushed back again into his cheeks, and his eyes shone with a rekindled light, as Paul looked up into his glowing features. An expression of deep anxiety flashed across his own ; he was silent for a minute, scanning closely every line of the boy's animated face. Then with a solemn restraint of some almost overmastering emotion, he folded him in his arms, and kissed his fevered and trembling lips.

“My boy,” he said, “there shall be perfect trust and truth between us from henceforth.”

CHAPTER XV.



THE solitary and silent hours of the ensuing night were to Rufus the season of a sleepless and solemn trance. The strong excitement of the day was over. The certainty that Doris had placed an elected and inevitable separation between herself and him left him keenly alive to every sorrowful influence. Upon a temperament so sensitively strung, and now left free to the contemplation of it, the presence of death beneath the same roof produced a vivid exaltation of thought and imagination. The awful circumstances attending the fate of Richard Crofton served to heighten the vague and mysterious problem. He sat motionless at the window from which he had been wont to watch the lingering light in Doris's casement in a half-conscious reverie. With stead-

fast eyes he followed the waxing and waning moon as it stole down the sky, and sank behind the western hills; while a darkness, deeper than that which the sunset leaves, fell like a pall upon the landscape. The night had spent itself while he had been dreaming about the mystery; presently the grey and stealthy dawn would awaken the morning to its daily resurrection. But this brief darkness was death. This blank, cold, impenetrable darkness, against which he strained his flashing eyeballs in vain; through which the faint, melancholy wailing of the fatal river floated on the air with an eerie undertone of insufferable pain. He shivered as if descending into the dead chillness of a grave. Still half-unconscious of his purpose, he crept cautiously through the profound gloom which enveloped the house, to the apartment where the corpse lay in the grand isolation of death. Entering noiselessly, as if he might break in upon its ineffable slumber, he stood with bowed head in the presence of the external

mystery of the problem which had enthralled him.

It was the guest-chamber of the country dwelling, a room rarely visited by Rufus. Throughout the house there was no spot so strange to him; its unfamiliar aspect harmonized with the dreamy and unreal tone of his perceptions. A vessel was burning with a dim and sacred light before a mirror, whose surface reflected the softer and more shadowy glimmer of a spectral lamp, lit in a ghostlier chamber, in whose distant recesses there stood an inaccessible counterpart of the massive bed, where the folds of heavy drapery enshrouded jealously the great secret confided to their keeping. Was there within the depths of the ghastly mirror any strange and spectral vision of the concealed but real death, which filled the room with a pervading presence? Rufus drew nearer to it, seeking rather to look upon the image of the mystery, than the very mystery itself. With a strong throb and succeeding pause of his

heart, his eye fell upon a crouching figure partly hidden by the thick curtains ; upon a white face, whose eyes were wide open with a steady gaze, and whose lips were colourless and rigid with a look of bewildered wrath.

“ Harriet ! ” he whispered, approaching and bending towards her that he might address her in a lowered voice ; “ Harriet, what brings you here ? ”

She fastened her steadfast, wide-open eyes upon him, and laughed gaily. Such a laugh as he had listened to many times from her lips, but which sent a shudder through his frame as it rang suddenly through the solemn chamber.

“ Hush ! ” he whispered, “ hush ! You must not stay here. Let me take you back to your own room, and call Sophia to you. This is no place for you.”

“ It does very well,” she answered, in a clear and unfaltering voice. “ I came here because I was so lonely in my room. I hate

to be alone. Paul made me take a draught which kept me asleep all day. Such a sleep that when I awoke from it, it seemed as if I must have been dead. So I came in here to see what death is like. There is no voice, no hearing, no feeling. It is a sleep like mine without an awakening. It is a horrible thing, Rufus."

There was no accent of grief or sorrow in her voice but a hard tone of disgust and abhorrence. She raised herself slowly from her crouching attitude, and drew aside the curtains, revealing the faintly-outlined form, which lay under the white drapery.

"This was my husband only two days ago," she continued, "yet he seems removed from me by a century of years. I have almost forgotten the sound of his voice. His face, when I looked at it a while ago, was like the face of a stranger. Why, two days ago, this man had a husband's authority over me, and a husband's claim upon me; I had to go where he went, and live where he lived. But

now he is nothing ; and might never have been. He will never speak to me again, or hear my voice. It is all ended. You think perhaps I ought to weep and lament over him as other women would do, but what good would it do to either of us? Every man must die, and it is no use moaning about the dead. Rufus, I shall have to be alone now."

"Harriet!" he exclaimed, shrinking from her a pace or two, while she regarded him with an empty smile glittering upon her face, "have you then no love or grief for your husband?"

"I think not," she answered, the smile giving place to a dull look of thought, "love and grief are mere words to me. Tell me what love or grief is. I am hungry and sleepy; I shiver with the cold, and warm myself at the fire; my face looks the same in the glass as if Richard were alive, or Paul were my lover. If that sleep, so deep and heavy, had ended in death, Rufus, would not

Paul have come and looked at me, as I am looking at Richard, and gone straight away to his books, knowing that everything which concerned me was ended? Can love and grief keep men alive, or bring them back when they are dead? I fancied I loved Paul, but it cannot be the love you think of; for since he said to me, in a manner which I could not disbelieve, that I could be nothing to him except Richard's widow, it has all died out of my heart. I should like to be avenged on Doris; I should like to prevent her becoming Paul's wife. But there is danger in revenge; it is a great trouble, a very long, wearisome, and dangerous trouble. Better let everything go on smoothly. There is a verse in your Bible 'Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.' I can do that; but to love or grieve—there is nothing of that in my nature."

"Harriet," said Rufus, in a tone of deep and pitiful tenderness, which made his words more an appeal to her conscience than the

question they seemed to be, "have you then no soul?"

"A soul!" she repeated, with the same dull look of thoughtfulness, "you talk often of a soul, but what is it? Why should a creature like me be burdened with such a weight? Surely if I had had a soul I should have felt it before now. But you see all my life. I eat and drink and sleep; I dress myself; I seek my pleasure in any way, and by any means. But of love and sorrow and conscience, and all those sounding words you men use, I know nothing. If I ever had them they have slept themselves to a death like this. There is neither sound nor motion of a soul within me. I am only fit for the life I live, and I want no other. Only, now Richard is dead I am alone, and this horrible solitariness is closing around me. I want always to be looking into another living face; to hear a living voice speaking to me, and to answer it again. But for this loneliness, I should be sleeping now as softly and quietly

as though none of these things had happened."

Her clear voice ceased. Rufus was silent, glancing from her beautiful face, which while she spoke to him had regained its brilliant colour and animation, to the dim and immovable lines of the shrouded corpse, by whose side she stood. Her hand still held back the crimson curtains, and her shining eyes fell upon it from time to time. Fine shades of thought flitted over his countenance as swiftly as the shadows of clouds pass over a sunny landscape. At last a glow of intense earnestness rested upon it, as he fixed his eyes upon Harriet Crofton's face.

"You belie your own nature," he said. "There is something of truth and tenderness in it. Somewhere there must be a woman's heart, and a woman's soul, within you. God has not made you a beautiful lie to mock us men who trust in you. Think of this man lying here dead by a shocking death. Remember all the years he has lived with you,

loving and caring for you; they are not blotted out of reality because two days since he was taken away out of this place of life. Is there no memory, at least of your first married days, which makes you sorrowful for the husband who has been hurried away suddenly from your side? Why, if only a dog died that had belonged to you you would be pained a little. You will never hear his voice again. But has he never spoken words of tenderness, which sank into your heart, and which awaken some sorrow now, when you see him lying here for ever speechless? Can you think of nothing in all your married life which makes you long to speak to him once more; whisper into his listening ears some few words of love and grief, which would enter into his soul, before it passed away out of sound of your voice, into the unknown and far-off land?"

"No," she answered, the dull look returning to her face. "I tell you again, no! You do not know me, Rufus. We are talking to one

another in a strange language. I believe you feel all this ; and would feel infinitely more if you stood beside Doris dead ; but to me they are all empty words. I have no tender memories in my heart. I am sorrowful only because I am alone."

"Oh woman!" he cried, mournfully, "if you have no love you have no life. If you cannot tremble and weep here in the shadow of death, your soul must be dead within you. Better to live in the bitterest anguish, though it tests and proves the life of the soul by throbs of agony. Death has no meaning to you save that of a full and final separation. You have for ever parted with this being who has filled all your life for many years. In the grave you lose all instead of gaining all. You perplex and grieve me immeasurably more than this death which I came here to look upon."

His voice fell into broken and troubled tones, and his eyes filled with tears. She looked steadily into them for a minute or two,

with a searching and almost incredulous scrutiny, and turning away from him wrung her delicate hands in a passion of self-reproach.

“Rufus,” she cried, sobbing, “I would give worlds to be like you ; but I cannot even understand you. I am born of a different race. Were there not in old times two races, the sons of God and the daughters of men ? Perhaps I could never have been like you. But listen to me, you who are going to be a priest before God for such lost and deadened souls as mine. Boy, I belong wholly to this world ; the God and the heaven you speak of are no portions of my thoughts ; how should they be ? What could I do up there, with the angels for my companions ? Look you at this dead man. The first thought I had, when I leaned my hand upon Paul’s shoulder, and saw this dead face, was not of any grief or love for him, but that the only barrier between Paul and me had been removed. I felt Paul’s presence more than the presence of the lifeless head upon my lap.

I only glanced at this face, and then I looked upon Paul's, white and gloomy, yet handsomer than when I forsook him for the sake of Richard Crofton. I was not sorry. I saw a pleasant, easy life here at Fairfield waiting for me ; and how could I be sorrowful ? Doris was dead and Richard was dead. There might be a few months of decorous soberness ; and then—I had no doubt of the end, Rufus. Only since yesterday, when Paul cast me off ; flung my love away as a vile and heartless thing ; only since then have I grieved. I am very poor. My beauty will fade before long, and what will become of my old age ? That is my grief. I have neither truth nor tenderness in my nature. Yet at times, and now while you are looking at me with those eyes ; eyes which can see many things which are hidden for ever from my sight ; I would give worlds to have a fresh, unstained, living soul like yours. You, boy as you are, with the hand of God upon you, can never know the nature of a woman like me. But tell me

what I shall do. Lay some penance upon me. How shall I atone to this dead man, who, it may be, hears all that we have spoken? Richard, how shall I atone to you for my unfaithfulness?"

Weeping bitterly she sank on her knees beside the bed, and hid her face in the white drapery which covered her husband's corpse. Rufus, distressed and bewildered at her confession, glanced round the awful chamber in silence. The ghostly lamp in the mirror shed its pale beams upon the reflection of his own haggard features, and upon the figure of the woman kneeling at his feet. It could not be a reality; those bodiless images in the mirror were not more visionary than himself and the form beside him. But between the curtains which covered the window the dim dawning of the real day was stealing into the room, The black and bewildered night was passing away. Death was ended. The faint streaks in the east towards which he turned his eager eyes, heralded the birth of a new life. He

retraced his steps from the window, and laid his hand with gentle compassion upon the head of the woman, whose soul was shaken amid its death-like slumbers. She looked up into his pitying face; his lips trembling with words of consolation, but she raised her hand with a gesture of silence.

“Hush!” she said, “I have made a vow while you were praying for my soul yonder. I will make an atonement to my dead husband. Richard, I will never, never more in life, see Paul Lockley’s face again. Perhaps to separate myself from him will awaken my soul. I will not stay here pretending to mourn for my husband, while Paul’s face haunts my thoughts, and his scorn of me is the only pang I feel. Rufus, I do not love him as you love Doris; but such love as a woman like me can feel I have lavished upon him. A bad, vile gift it was; and I dare not see him again. You shall help me to get away from here at once. Tell them that I have preceded George and Emma to Paris.”

“But Harriet——” began Rufus.

“Do not hinder me,” she cried, “you do not know me. These last few hours I have been mad; and I am on the verge of madness yet. If there is any hope for me, any chance whatever, it is to get away quickly from this place. Another day like the last, and I should never be sane again. I cannot stay alone in my room hour after hour, brooding over the horrible thoughts that come to my mind. I must fly at once; I must make my escape, and feel myself in the world once more, before I can be myself. Nay, I have vowed it to my dead husband, and he knows what I mean.”

There was a phrenzied but invincible decision in her tone and manner to which Rufus yielded. She returned to her own room to make some preparation for her hurried flight. Coming back after a short absence, she laid her hand softly with a calm gesture of farewell upon the covered forehead of the corpse. There were no tears in her eyes, no faltering

in her steady footsteps. Before the sun had risen above the line of vapour which stretched along the horizon, she was hastening Rufus to more rapid steps along the river side towards Thornbury. The Priory, as they passed by on the opposite bank, was bathed in the rosy morning light, which touched brilliantly every broken column, and the old, quaint tracery wrought by mouldered hands; the oriel window, full of many associations to both of them, hung empty and tenantless over the stream beneath it. They lingered for a moment, arrested by a mutual though unexpressed impulse, looking up to its mulioned casement. Then, with a bowed head and veiled face, Harriet Crofton quickened her pace. Burdened with unutterable regrets, she spoke no more until Rufus seated her in a carriage in the early train, which was starting for London. "God bless you!" she murmured, stooping forward, and pressing her lips to his forehead as he gathered her cloak round her with careful attention. "God

for ever bless you, Rufus ! When shall I see your face again ? ”

She spoke mournfully, and the tears gathered under her long eye-lashes. Rufus smiled, with the soft and sweet smile which he had been wont to reserve for Doris.

“ Never ! ” he answered, with a tender gaiety in his tones, “ I shall see you no more. But you will be dear to me to the end. I shall care for you to the last.”

He lingered on the platform, and watched the carriage window through which she was leaning, until it was borne out of his sight. And she, her eyes dim with tears which sprang from a new source, gazed upon his young face, lit up with its pitying smile, until it was lost to her for ever.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE intelligence which Rufus conveyed to Paul of Harriet Crofton's departure, and of the solemn vow she had taken beside her husband's lifeless form, bore with it a feeling of mingled relief and pain. He could not part altogether with the object of his first love without a bitter though fleeting regret. There is a separation colder and harsher than that of death, when the heart continues to beat, and the eyes to shine, and the lips to speak, upon the same earth; yet for evermore strange and alienated from those who were once fondly loved. They are speaking the same language, these lost friends of ours, as when their words awoke echoes in our own hearts; their faces are turned with the same smiles upon the countenances of others, as when ours were

made glad by their glances ; they are weeping and laughing, rejoicing and grieving as they were wont to do at our side ; but it is no longer our sympathy which they seek. This is the real death. Better a thousand times to resign our beloved ones to the numbness of the grave, with sealed lips, and closed eyes, and hearts that have ceased to throb, than to give them up to another life in the same world, but so far removed from us that we can never hear them speak again. We do not lose our friends by death ; we lose them only by estrangement.

The full bitterness of this was not suffered by Paul, because there was a very real and sensible relief blended with the pain. His perplexities were removed. The way was cleared to him for proving to Doris, should any chance be afforded him, that her jealousy and suspicions of Harriet Crofton were unfounded. Mrs. Margraf was simply and genuinely delighted ; though she hardly dared to believe that her unwelcome guest was gone

never to return. There seemed some little difficulty in accounting satisfactorily for the unexpected and sudden departure of Mrs. Crofton before the interment of her husband ; but with industrious zeal she spread the report that her mind and nerves had received so great a shock as to awaken serious apprehensions for her mental health ; that she had yielded to the earnest solicitations of her friends to remove herself from the scene of deep and protracted agitation. As soon as the fitting obsequies of burial had been solemnised, with a state suitable to the last of the Croftons of Monkmoor Priory, George and Emma Arnold bade a last farewell to Mrs. Aspen. Joining Mrs. Crofton in London they proceeded at once to the Continent, in accordance with their agreement to exile themselves from their native country.

The funeral of the last kinsman of her race over ; the widow of her son, alienated from his name and memory by a second marriage, having taken her departure ; Mrs. Aspen was left in melancholy solitude beneath the roof of

her ancestral home, which was soon to be her dwelling-place no longer. The aged and bereaved poetess wandered through its deserted chambers, with a heavy heart and an aching brain, which could command no tuneful verses, such as had consoled every lighter sorrow. For the first time in her poetic life the harvest passed and the summer ended, but no Thanksgiving Hymn was penned by her gentle hand. Once more the doleful verses, "See the leaves around us falling," were sung by the village choir. The season itself was mournful. The autumn deepened to the dreariest period of heavy skies; the thick fogs which tracked the course of the river hid it from the view, and blotted out the beautiful face of the earth. A profound melancholy seemed to brood over the fated ruins, so soon to pass into the possession of strangers. The silent walls of her dwelling, resounding with no footstep except her own, had never been so desolate and deserted as while affording a short shelter to their ancient owner.

In the home of her husband's kindred across the river the same deep but unspoken sadness reigned. As slowly and gradually as the autumn waned and faded into its sure decline; springing back into brief snatches of sunshine and warmth, as if recoiling from the chill, inevitable winter towards which it crept reluctantly; so Rufus, with short, half-conscious conflicts with the subtle and awful numbness of his mortal malady, was surely, and step by step, gliding towards the death, which his sister had dreaded, and vainly sought to cheat. Even her eyes could not close themselves to the signification of the flush upon his face, more boyish than ever in its hectic hues, and in the luminous brightness of his large eyes. Nor could Paul satisfy himself with the seclusion of his library. When there the face of his young brother so haunted him that he could not continue at his studies; but with the impatient disquietude of a love that hoped against hope, and chafed fruitlessly at the clear and unwavering forebodings of his own skill,

he would hasten back to his side ; or summon him to share the quiet and repose of his secluded room, where his presence would soothe the fever of anxiety that awoke for him whenever he was absent. In those days the brothers held with one another unreserved and perfect confidences, full of painful sweetness, as they stood thus consciously, heart to heart and spirit to spirit, in a strong but fugitive union, which might be dissolved before they had time to test and realise its power.

In the meantime Paul had been quietly completing his arrangements. The purchase of Monkmoor Priory by private contract from the assignees of the Thornbury Joint-stock Banking Company presented no difficulties, and the matter was in the hands of his solicitor to be accomplished as speedily as the affairs of the bankrupt company would permit. His friend Palmer was a willing purchaser of Fairfield, which could now be sold with the advowson of the living at Ryton, and was consequently nearly equal in value to the Priory

estate. A few months, he thought sadly, would be the longest term of his young brother's life, and the home must not be broken up until his death dissolved it. It would then be no very hard thing to banish himself from the literary ease and leisure of the last ten years, and to resume the toil and absorbing occupation of his profession. Now and then a smile of some bitterness stole over his careworn features as he listened to Mrs. Margraf's schemes for the future, when Mrs. Aspen should have become a resident in their household. He anticipated the violent opposition, and unmitigated mortification which his own plans would provoke ; but he maintained a strict silence respecting them, willing to encounter the storm, when no change of purpose was in his power.

In the hearts of all, but unuttered and pondered over in secret disquietude, was the thought of Doris. Underlying every other subject ; like a deep, still, hidden undercurrent of irresistible force, above which the

noisy and feeble surface babbles and murmurs in the ears of all ; there flowed through the mind of Rufus from hour to hour one unbroken, absorbing reverie. He was himself partially unaware of it ; it would have created in him no surprise, if at any instant he had heard her voice, or his eyes, opening with the dull languor of his disease, had seen the vision of her beloved face. Paul, ever watchful, recognised the engrossing passion in every gleam and shadow of the boy's expressive face, which no longer wore the veil of control he had been able to cast over it while in health. Mrs. Margraf detected it, but endeavoured to deny it to herself. The name of Doris trembled upon Mrs. Aspen's lips, whenever she sat by the side of Rufus, but she had not strength to utter it, while she read it in the depths of his dark eyes. To all of them the numberless associations, which linked her to the eventful past, out of which they seemed scarcely to have escaped, returned day after day with soft or poignant touches of remembrance,

that made their hearts sick with a deferred hope.

It was one proof of the truth and depth of Paul's love to Doris that since her flight he had never gone to Thornbury without visiting Murivance. There was no lurking feeling of jealousy or resentment towards the artist who had rescued her from death, and brought her into the refuge of his own home; and who now, for the sake of the friendship thus tried, possessed the secret of her present abode. He met Atcherley with a frank cordiality. The two men, seeing one another in their true light, grew daily in mutual esteem. Yet Atcherley never mentioned Doris of his own accord; and answered but briefly whenever Paul, with a reluctance he could hardly conquer, made any inquiry concerning her. The blind mother was garrulous in her reminiscences of the past two years, but she was chary of Doris's secret. Paul, with a bitterness of self-humiliation, acquiesced in the justice of the separation so resolutely main-

tained by Doris. Still Atcherley and his mother formed a link between them. The visits he paid to the artist's home, or the hours which Atcherley passed at Fairfield in painting the portrait of Rufus, during the earlier stages of his deceitful illness, seemed to unite them both in some vague and slight manner, with the beloved one whom they had lost.

If it had not been for this vanished hope; this blank which was always felt yet remained unfilled; the early stages of Rufus's malady would have been like some pleasant dream, with only a faint shadow of sadness dimming its sunshine, and an undertone of sorrow whispering amid its quietness and peace. Mrs. Aspen was then gentle and lofty in her comforting thoughts; uninteresting to him with the tenderness of an aged mother, who scarcely grieved because her hour of reunion would swiftly come. The white-headed priest, with offices of faith and consolation derived from a life-long study of the truths wherein

the boy was a mere neophyte, was treading with him step, by step, the softly declining path along which his feet were surely but smoothly descending. His sister, exquisitely vigilant of every want, watched beside him. His brother and his friend, both loved with the enthusiasm of a boyish affection, spent large portions of their time with him; while Paul, with all the resources of his profession at command, met every change of his disease with remedies which alleviated half its pain. But for the absence of Doris, for whom he yearned with an ever increasing craving, Rufus would have felt that this interlude was the linking harmony between two glad stages of his existence.

CHAPTER XVII.

IT was perfectly well known that the affairs of the Thornbury Banking Company were being wound up with unusual expedition by the assignees; yet no curious strangers had been seen surveying and estimating the time-honoured ruins of Monkmoor. This circumstance did not awaken any surprise on Mrs. Aspen's part, so fully were her thoughts occupied with the condition of Rufus; and Paul was quite satisfied with it, as he considered the whole matter secure in the hands of his solicitor. Great, therefore, was his amazement and chagrin, heightened by an acute pang of remorse, when he received from him the intelligence that the Monkmoor estate was not in the market, having been sold immediately after the bankruptcy,

for the full value at which it had been rated by a competent surveyor employed by the assignees. The solicitor could not at present obtain the name of the purchaser, but as it must transpire in the course of a few weeks, some arrangement might be made with him; at least for the continued residence of Mrs. Aspen at the Priory.

Paul left Thornbury after receiving this unwelcome information without calling at Murivance, and rode home slowly along the river side with heavy and depressed spirits. The mid-winter had come; the river, turbid yet sluggish with the frost, rolled under leafless willow wandz, and between brown banks. The Poplar Island, with the bare and slender shafts of its trees, looked dreary, even if no painful associations had made it desolate in his eyes. Farther up the stream, the Priory, with its closed doors and unoccupied windows, stood mournfully amid its ancient thorn-trees, and looked as if it were already forsaken by its hereditary owner. No gleam of sunshine

played about it; but a grey, uniform cloud which was spread over the wintry sky, cast a dull, shadowless, and sunless light upon the old homestead, and upon the crumbling fane amidst whose ruins the home had nestled. Paul could not think, without sore vexation, of seeing any strange family residing there. After looking across the river for a minute or two, he spurred his horse to sudden swiftness, and rode on homewards with the speed and impatience of a mind ill at ease with itself.

For some time past his library had been converted into the ordinary sitting-room of Rufus, fitted up with the appliances and luxuries of a sick-chamber. The scene upon which he entered abruptly was one of unusual animation. Mrs. Aspen and Mr. Vale were criticising, with polite diletanteism, the portrait of Rufus, fresh from the finishing touches of the artist's hand. Atcherley himself was standing near them; with his blind mother close at hand listening intently to every word

spoken about her son's work. Mrs. Margraf was comparing the living face with the likeness; while Rufus in one of the brief snatches of almost gay energy, which characterised the changeful nature of his illness, was strolling to and fro, with a bright smile upon his face, and cheerful words upon his lips. It was one of those moments of oblivious ease, when both those who suffer, and those who watch, gather a little strength for the sharp conflict that follows soon after. Paul broke in upon it with his troubled and anxious heart; and each felt the sudden chill of some new, impending calamity.

“Paul,” said Mrs. Aspen, advancing hastily to meet him, “what is it that troubles you now? You need not hesitate to tell us. We are growing too used to sorrow to be greatly shaken by it.”

“It is a sorrow,” he answered, in an accent of deep concern, “a trouble which you cannot help feeling. I have heard in Thornbury that the Priory is sold.”

Mrs. Aspen's eyes closed, and her white head sank a little from its erect and airy carriage. Paul grasped her hand, and regarded her with an air of keen self-reproach. But calling a smile of courage to her face, she raised her bowed head, and spoke in a tone of content.

“Be it so, Paul,” she replied. “Well! you will give me a home among you. Clarissa Aspen of Monkmoor will not soon be forgotten in her native place, even if she lose the inheritance of her fathers. My property is not myself, Paul.”

She bridles with something of the antique stateliness of her early days, and a lofty look rested upon her features, which recalled the rapt enthusiasm of her old poetic trances. Mr. Vale's dimmed eyes were fastened upon her with undisguised admiration; to him she had never appeared more lovely and more noble. He breathed a sigh to the long years in which he had worshipped her in silent devotion, and affirmed to himself that never

had an unavowed love been so worthily cherished. He stood beside her and Paul, gazing from one to another, with an agitation that was unconcealed, and unable to express itself in fitting words.

“I cannot bear it,” cried Paul, taking both her hands in his, small and shapely hands they were, though worn and thin with years; “it is I who have made your old age desolate. I thought at least to secure your old home for you, by the forfeiture of my own, but it is denied me to make you any reparation. It is through me, and my folly, that you have lost Doris, who was as a daughter to you; and I can neither restore her, nor the Priory to you. I can never forgive myself.”

There was a stir throughout the library at the utterance of the name, which had been upon the hearts of all for many silent weeks. Rufus drew nearer to Paul, with a more vivid glow upon his hectic cheeks, and laid his feeble hand upon his arm. But it was some moments before any voice ended the pause

which had followed the name of Doris. Then it was Mr. Vale who spoke in thin and quavering tones.

“Madam ! Clarissa,” he said, while he trembled with agitation, “there is no need that I should tell you that your friendship has been the greatest joy of my poor life. Those weeks, which were but as one short day to me, in which you and our Doris dwelt within my unworthy home, made the halcyon season of my existence here ; a little span of felicity which compensated by its sweetness for all the solitariness of former years. I do not dare to ask for such another period of happiness ; but I beseech you for a favour, Clarissa ; as we stand here face to face, firm and true old friends, who may not long have the power to grant or receive kindnesses like these.”

“Ask anything that it is in my power to grant, Reginald,” she answered, with a grave graciousness.

She extended her hand to him, and he

caught it between his own with a touching eagerness, while tears of uncontrollable emotion stood in his dim eyes.

“Clarissa,” he said, “when you were a girl, and I a youth dumb from a sense of my own demerits, my lips were sealed, and never could find the words they longed to speak; and all these many years of your widowhood I would never offend you by telling you that I loved you. Let that be silent betwixt us for evermore. It is my glory now in my old age to declare before these young people that I have loved worthily and constantly. But I am a solitary old man; and all my friends are gone before me into the grave. There is no one to whom duty bids me bequeath the wealth which God has given me. If you deem that I have acted well in never grieving you by declarations of my love; if I have read correctly the delicate reserve of all your gracious intercourse with me; if I have not been wretchedly blind and mistaken in concealing my affection until this moment, when

life is well nigh spent; then give me the token I ask that I have not lost my happiness by my silence. Take from me the poorest of the gifts I should have bestowed upon my wife. The Priory never ceased to be yours, for I am the purchaser of it. Receive it from me, Clarissa, as a proof that I have not been robbing myself of the love I most valued upon earth."

The old man spoke fluently, and with a tone of impassioned feeling that touched the hearts of all who heard him. Mrs. Aspen's colour rose, a soft, sweet bloom rare in cheeks wrinkled with years, but it faded quickly from them, and her lips quivered like the mouth of a child.

"Reginald! Reginald!" she murmured, but her voice failed her before she could utter any other word.

"Clarissa!" he pleaded, as if dreading a refusal, "you can make me very happy by doing this thing. Sophia alone knew of my affection for you. These young people will

not ridicule the idea of love in a heart so old as mine. It has been true and constant ; faithful enough to be worthy of a slight reward. You must suffer me to return to you the possession of your paternal home. Paul thought to sacrifice his own home to you, but I can do it without any sacrifice. Say only one word, and let me know that I have acted rightly all these years. Tell me you will accept my poor gift."

"I will, Reginald," she answered.

"I thank Heaven!" he said, raising one of his shrunken and tremulous hands to his face, while he kept hers within the grasp of the other. "You have crowned my old age by granting me this favour. Oh, Clarissa! if I had lived to awake some morning to the knowledge that you were banished from your own place, there would have been no brightness in the daylight. I can restore the Priory to you. As long as I have strength to cross my threshold I can come and see you in your old home, so dear to both of us.

Would, Clarissa, that I could bring back our child, our daughter, our Doris, to your fire-side ! ”

Again there was a stir, and a faint murmur of suppressed excitement through the room. Rufus, resting for support upon the arm of Paul, turned a white face of speechless entreaty towards Atcherley. Mr. Vale, losing the fugitive courage which had borne him through his projected scheme so far, glanced anxiously and nervously from Mrs. Aspen to the artist, whose thick brows were knit together, and his deep eyes lowering gloomily beneath their heavy shadow.

“ I understand you,” he said, in a tone of bitterness ; “ you think I could bring her back by letting her know how her presence is longed for. I cannot tell. She was impatient to get away. But for Doris to come back means that she will marry Paul Lockley. Yes ! what foolish hopes my mother yet cherishes for me ; she is blind, you see, and I have no hopes for myself, mark you ; those feeble, groundless

hopes will perish upon her return. I shall have to see Doris another man's wife. Rufus, turn your face away from me. Even if Doris knew all she might not return."

"Tell me where she is," implored Rufus. "I have strength enough yet to follow her and beseech her to come back to us. It may be too late in a month's time. Oh! if I could but see her once again before I die."

There was a vehement unutterable longing in his voice which tingled in the ears of the listeners, and thrilled to their inmost hearts. The blind woman, whose soul was touched the more keenly by its mournful tones because she had no sight of his imploring face, burst into tears, and spoke with sobs as she tried to check them.

"Robert," she said, "I give up Doris. Mrs. Aspen is old like myself, and more lonely. If it is for my sake you will not tell her how she is wanted here, don't think of me any more. I did hope because you saved her life, some time or other when this had worn

off, she would have learned to love you ; but I give it up. Dr. Lockley, I have always hindered him from saying anything to Doris that would bring her back. I would not let him write anything about you ; not a word. You will never care about her as my poor son does ; but people tell me that you are tall and grand-looking, and my poor Robert was injured by the fall he had when I was going blind ; and young girls look at the outer appearance and not upon the heart. Oh, my poor Robert ! this is a bitter hour for me. But let her be told all ; and let her decide for herself. Mrs. Aspen, my son will write to Doris."

She rose from her seat, and taking her son's arm, passed from one to another bidding them farewell. When the thin, wasted fingers of Rufus rested in her hand she stroked them softly with a motherly tenderness, and fixed her eyes steadily upon his face, as though she could catch some glimpse of it through their visionless pupils.

"My poor boy," she murmured, "it is you

who have loved her. Oh, foolish Doris! blinder than my darkened eyes! But you shall see her again. She will come back to you."

And for the rest of the day, prostrated by the undue excitement which he had felt, lying faint and speechless upon the sofa, the blind woman's words rang through the heart and mind of Rufus, as a promise to be surely fulfilled. Nor did his faith fail as day after day passed by, and still Doris, so long and eagerly waited for, delayed the hour of her return to him. The Old Year of many troubles was ended, and the New Year came in. Each January morning, as it dawned with chilly and reluctant light, found his strength lessened, and the force of his malady augmented; yet the boy's confidence continued unshaken. 'To the restless disappointment of Paul, whose heart relinquished the hope of her coming at the first symptom of delay, he opposed vehemently and perseveringly the assurance that Doris would return in time for him to see her face once more.

CHAPTER XVIII.

IN the place of banishment to which she had withdrawn, Doris was enduring a sharp agony of self-humiliation and self-censure. She was heaping reproaches upon herself, with a ceaseless, stinging sense of shame, for the whole protracted course of artifice and dissimulation, in which she had from lack of thought and foresight suffered herself to be involved. She imagined that every member of the circle from which she was exiled thought of her with contempt equal to her own. The very recollection of the names of Mrs. Aspen and Rufus made her head throb and her veins tingle with a passionate mortification ; mingling with the bitterness of feeling that she had lost the esteem of those whom it was a gladness and a benefit to love. She could not bear to think

of her brother and his wife; the remembrance of Mrs. Margraf she sedulously dismissed from her mind. Shame, and jealousy, and anger were at stern conflict in her heart. Towards Paul, whose image lay deeper down than any of the others, her feelings, such as she dared to acknowledge, were those of a heart-burning resentment, which wounded her into a constant recurrence to the whole manner of his conduct towards her through the difficult and delicate part it had been his to act. Certainly he had no right to despise her, being himself in the same condemnation; and her memory bore decisive testimony that no shade of contempt or slight had ever blended with the chivalrous consideration of his bearing. Yet it was a passion of shame which Doris was suffering. Every recollection of the past was a cruel insult. She affirmed to herself, having no confidant or counsellor except her own indignant spirit, that she could never endure to see Paul's face again. By one violent effort she had burst through the strong chain which

had been welded about her during the past two years, cast aside Mrs. Aspen's affection, and trampled upon the love of Rufus; and she would not lift a finger to reunite the links from which she had escaped into a lonely and melancholy freedom.

In the height of this tempest Atcherley's promised letter reached her, the only one of his communications in which he made any mention of the friends she had left. It contained a finished and picturesque account of the family interview at which he and his mother had been accidentally present. So far then from despising her, Mrs. Aspen and Mr. Vale still called her their daughter, and were impatient to welcome her once more to their friendship. Rufus was ill, fatally so, with the gradual but sure fading away of the disease which his sister had dreaded for him; the heart, whose boyish tenderness they had played with as with some puppet which could be removed by their clumsy machinery, was yearning for her presence in its last stages of

earthly passion and disquietude. But the letter contained no mention of the name of Paul. Atcherley as he wrote it could not fail to notice that he had taken no part in the entreaties that Doris would return; and on her part there was a consciousness, well silenced and corrected, which made her shrink painfully from meeting him again of her own accord. The exaggerated and heathenish sense of degradation and reproach which she had suffered on his account, demanded as an imperative right that he should stretch out his own hand to lift her up from her self-abasement; that he should stoop lower than the depths of mortified pride into which she was plunged in order to solicit her to shake off the dust of her humiliation. It was an overstrained contrition, which had taken possession of her; she would willingly have set herself some hard penance, but she could more readily die, she professed to herself, than return unsought to the cool, unmoved dignity of Paul's presence. Yet with true feminine

inconsistency she repeated her prohibitions to Atcherley against making known the secret of her retreat. In a fever of restless and miserable indecision she allowed day after day to slip by, bringing nearer the inevitable death of Rufus, whom she loved with a close and sisterly affection. The question of her return trembled in a balance; more imminent danger to Rufus, or a message soothing to her wounded pride from Paul, would have decided it in an instant.

It was the thought of Rufus that conquered her pride at last; for no message came from Paul through the medium of Robert Atcherley. Stealing back guiltily; carried thither by the hunger of a heart which had found its home and refused to dwell in peace elsewhere; Doris found herself in the early dusk of a January evening standing irresolutely upon the bridge, from whence she could see at once the broken pile of Monkmoor Priory, and the square front of Paul's dwelling at Fairfield. A solitary ray gleamed from the oriel window of Mrs.

Aspen's study, leaving the rest of the house to the deepening shadows of the night; but on the other side of the river all the upper casements were bright with lights, while the lower ones remained dark and untenanted. Doris understood the token; the gathering of the family into the fastness where disease had entrenched itself. Paul's library and Rufus's chamber, from whose window he had kept faithful watch in earlier days, were ablaze with lights. Looking towards them sadly until her eyes grew dim, Doris dropped her head upon the parapet against which she leaned, and yielded herself to an agony of tears.

The echo of a horse's hoofs along the frost-bound lane roused her at length, with a sudden throbbing of her heart, and trembling of her highly-wrought nerves. The pace was distinct in its regular speed, and approached with a metallic clang of the well-shod hoofs which she recognised instantly. She had listened for it from the hawthorn meadow which lay between the bridge and the Priory,

on many a summer evening, when the rider was hastening past from Thornbury on his way homewards. There was no time to descend the steps which led into the meadow, but the dusk favoured her. Paul, too absent and abstracted to see her, had often passed by in broad daylight, with neither glance nor salutation. She retreated to the end of the bridge, and with her veil down turned her face towards the faint glimmer of day upon the horizon, as if watching for its last beams; a slight, motionless, darkly-clad figure, standing in the shadow of the brown hedges, which might readily escape his notice, as he rode swiftly by; or, catching his eye for the moment, might be passed without any curiosity or suspicion. The hoof-beats to which her heart and pulses bounded drew nearer, and went on, while both heart and pulse sank with a sudden chill; but throbbed again with a wilder tumult, as there sounded through the quiet air the stamping of a horse brought to a sudden stand. Paul's voice, hesitating and

dreamy, as though he had often seen such another vision, and been mocked by it, fell upon her ear in a low and questioning tone.

“Doris!” he said.

She made no answer, and drew back a little farther into the shadow; but the crackling of the stiffened leaves under her feet, and the short snap of the brittle branches betrayed her movement.

Paul gazed again more intently, straining his eyes through the gloom, until the slender and shrinking form grew familiar to his satisfied scrutiny.

“Doris, Doris,” he cried again, springing from his horse, and approaching her, “you have come home at last then. I had given you up, but Rufus is hoping for you still. Give me your hand, Doris. God bless you for coming after all.”

“Rufus has been hoping for me,” she repeated, with a timid and reproachful intonation, which struck with keen pleasure upon Paul's heart.

“ I dared not,” he answered, eagerly. “ I could not hope that you would make a second sacrifice of all your feelings for us. Your coming back is a matter of grace, and I, at least, had no right either to ask or to look for it. Yet, Doris, if I had not been tied to this place I would have sought you out long since, and owned to you the presumption and folly of my last interview with you. How could I have blamed you if you had refused to enter my dwelling, even though it was the dying request of my poor Rufus?”

He spoke in a tone of profound regret, looking down at the dimly seen figure, and veiled face before him; at the hand quickly withdrawn from his clasp, and resting upon the coping of the bridge, against which she leaned, shrinking evidently from him. He sighed heavily, and Doris answered him with an unsteady voice.

“ I came only to see Rufus,” she said.

“ Child,” he answered, with a ring of remonstrance and pain in his accents, “ do not

be afraid that I misunderstand you. But for Ruf's fatal illness you would have separated yourself from us for ever, as Harriet has done. I should never more have looked upon your face, and listened to your voice as I do now, and as I shall do for many days to come. My Doris, for you were mine once though by a false title, you need not fear that I shall claim any share of this grace. For Rufus's sake alone you have laid aside your just resentment, and returned to us for a little while?"

"Yes," she whispered, her quivering lips steadying themselves for an instant to pronounce the word.

Paul stood silent for a minute or two until a low, suppressed sob followed the faint utterance.

"You are cold and weary," he said tenderly. "The night air is not fit for you. I will fasten my horse to the gate here, and take you down to the Priory. How welcome you will be there no words could tell you."

Doris turned away her veiled face while he

fastened his horse's bridle to the gate, as though he could see the tears which were burning upon her cheeks. He lifted her carefully over the stile, and led her down the frosty steps into the meadow; but there with a mute gesture she rejected the offered support of his arm. A moment afterwards she reproached herself; but Paul was walking beside her silent and aggrieved; and the low, arched porch of the Priory was nearly gained.

"Oh!" she cried, stopping suddenly, "I have been so miserable. Even now I am wretched. I could not forgive you—you and Mrs. Margraf. You ought not to have led me into this deceit, you who are so much older and wiser than I. It has changed and poisoned all my life."

"Doris," answered Paul, amazed at this outburst, "if it were possible that by any means I could atone for the pain we have caused you, I would leave none untried; and then I would ask for your forgiveness. As it is I can do nothing to deserve it; it is not in

my power to repair the wrong. Tell me what I can do; anything, my darling; and I will do it."

"Paul!" she breathed in a tone so low that it scarcely fell upon his ear, and just catching it, he listened breathlessly and incredulously for another word to follow it; but none came, and he sighed again with a feeling of bitter self-contempt.

"There is nothing, Doris," he said, earnestly, "nothing that I would not do to prove the truth and depths of my regard, my devotion to you. I am many years older than you; any transports and fumes of passion would make me ridiculous in your eyes. I must preserve my own self-respect as far as I can, though it has been greatly humbled by the follies and negligences of these last few months. You know what I have been; an idle and a bookish man, little acquainted with the outer world; and above all things unversed in the ways by which other men win the love they crave. Older than you by many years; a

grave recluse; unsuitable and unworthy of you. Yet I venture to make one last appeal to you. If it be possible by any means to gain your love, Doris; for me to gain it; such as I am with all my faults and follies; let me know it now by some word or sign from you; or let me for ever extinguish the hope that disturbs my peace."

He stood before her in the path leading down to the porch, his face concealed by the darkness; but his voice, grave and clear, bore in its accents the cadence of a final and irrevocable resolve. Doris hesitated; trembled; glanced in vain at the indistinct features which were bent over her. For an instant the wild passion of humiliation which she had suffered shook her heart again to its centre, and tempted her to a last assertion of the resentment she had cherished. The momentary pause was one of intense pain to both; but the decision was made. Doris placed her hand upon his; and in a breath so low that no ear except his own, strained with an acute anxiety, could

have caught the murmur, she whispered, "Paul!"

His heart dare not give credence to it at first. The visionary life he was accustomed to lead had filled his mind so full of fancies, and of late with such fancies as these, that he feared to stir, lest this should also prove a dream. His firmness and resolution fled, and left him tremblingly afraid to seize the treasure he coveted. Her hand rested lightly and timidly upon his, and he had not heart enough to grasp it lest it should melt before his touch, and leave him once more comfortless and hopeless. By a fine and instinctive sympathy with his dreamy temperament Doris comprehended the chilly doubt that lurked beneath the surprise of his unanticipated gladness; and her fingers, soft and warm, fastened with a more clinging pressure upon his hand.

"Do you really love me then?" she asked in a clearer and more penetrating tone, which thrilled through Paul's frame, and awoke within him a pang of happiness as solemn and

poignant as the touch of some keen sorrow. He grasped her hand with the full sense of possession; and raising his hat, stood bare-headed for some moments in the attitude of a devout thoughtfulness, absorbing in its depth and silence. He had never loved her as he did at that instant. The old passion, but purer and stronger, with a flame that rose tremblingly upwards, was rekindled in his nature. This was his wife; the companion whom God had given to him; the woman who would enter into all his life, and who, he asked it of God in a voiceless prayer, would be near to him in the hour of his death. The thought of death is always present with a great happiness.

“My poor Rufus!” said Paul, drawing her closely to him, “my poor, poor boy! This will be a pure joy for him.”

“I cannot think of him just now,” answered Doris, with an unquiet fluttering in his arms. “I want to know if you despise me at all. Are you sure, quite sure, that you love me,

Paul? How much do you love me? As much as you used to care for Harriet in the old times? Or do you only care for me a little, out of pity and kindheartedness? Shall you never tell me that it was I who returned to you because I could not rest away from you, instead of you seeking out me? Oh, Paul, speak to me vehemently. You could not make yourself ridiculous in my eyes."

Paul laughed a gay and blithe laugh of exultation, such as had not rung from his lips since the days of his own early manhood. It was a strange sound to Doris, and she struggled to free herself from his arms, but he swept back the veil from her face, and kissed her forehead and lips with an impassioned kiss.

"Let those stand for words," he said. "I have not many to utter to-night. And now I must see my Doris. I have not seen what changes these long months have made. Stay, let me keep fast hold of you still; I cannot afford to lose you again."

He led her into the arched entrance-hall, up

the broad staircase, and along the polished floor of the gallery to the door of the study where he had first seen Doris with unobserving eyes. The door opened noiselessly, and Doris looked in upon Mrs. Aspen sitting alone by the fireside. Near at hand stood her small reading-table of ebony, upon which lay an ancient silver-clasped bible, and a copy of her own Monkmoor Roundelays. The latter was open, and an ivory marker rested upon the page; but the poetess had turned away, and was gazing mournfully into the embers of the solitary fire. An atmosphere of loneliness was diffused throughout the room; Mrs. Aspen seemed oppressed and bowed down by the solitude that was closing in about her declining years. Doris freed herself from Paul's detaining grasp, and swiftly gliding across the soundless floor fell on her knees before her, and threw her arms round her slender and stately figure.

"I am come back," she cried. "I came back a long time ago, and Paul met me

on the bridge. I am to stay with you always."

Mrs. Aspen looked round with a bewildered air, as Doris lavished numberless kisses upon her hands. Paul advanced into the study with such an expression of satisfaction and triumph as arrested the words that rose to her lips.

"It is all right, aunt," he said, looking down fondly at Doris, who had hidden her face in Mrs. Aspen's lap; "she will not run away from us again. This girl, aunt Aspen, is to be my wife."

Mrs. Aspen felt the closer clasp of Doris's arms as Paul told how he had met with her stealing home in the twilight, and almost escaped his inadvertent eye, under the shadow of the brown hedgerows. He spoke with the animation and triumph which had been so long foreign to his manner; and Mrs. Aspen listened with eager attention. When the short narrative was ended she freed herself from the clinging of Doris's arms, and pacing with slow

and faltering steps across the floor, she placed herself before the portrait of her son.

“ Oh, John, John !” she cried, tremulously, “ it is true then. Your last joy was no falsehood. We were not made glad by a lie. I am no longer a childless old woman. I have a son and daughter again.” She stood for a few minutes looking up to the honest and beloved face of her son with tear-dimmed eyes; but when she turned and retraced her steps to the hearth where Paul and Doris were standing she trod with a lofty and elevated air; the old gleam of poesy shone in her eyes, and an expression of fine imagination dwelt upon every feature.

“ Paul,” she said, “ Doris would not permit your betrothal ode to be included in the Monkmoor Roundelays; but I will write you an Epithalamium that shall be worthy of the first place in my second edition. My muse has returned to me.”

She looked tenderly at Doris; and Paul laughed again. But there was no time for

him to tarry at the Priory. The remembrance of Rufus, never far from the central point of thought, summoned him irresistibly away. He bade them good-bye, with a moment or two of loitering as Doris's hand rested in his, and her eyes smiled shyly back into his own, noting keenly the changes which the period of her exile had wrought upon her face. Then returning to the lonely lane, where a short half hour ago he had been riding homewards a disheartened and care-worn man, he pursued his journey through the still and frosty night, with such an exultation and sunshine of spirits as renewed to him the days of his youth.

CHAPTER XIX.



THE assurance that Doris had returned would have possessed power to recal Rufus from the very verge of the grave; though the fatal malady under which he was sinking had made rapid raids upon his remaining strength during the last few weeks of prolonged expectation. Carefully as Paul revealed the events of his ride homewards, they filled the boy's heart with an emotion and rapture, which drove sleep from his eyelids. When Paul told him in the morning that he was about to fetch Doris over to Fairfield, new vigour seemed infused into his languid frame, and he could hardly be persuaded to await her coming, instead of accompanying his brother to the Priory. He watched the boat which brought her nearer to him crossing the ferry; the

wan and transparent lineaments of his face brightened with a crimson flush of excitement ; his hands, fine and hollow with the wasting away of idle sickness, trembled with nervous eagerness to hold hers in their feeble grasp ; feebler now than when they relinquished her to a threatened death. With a lightning flash of thought, the full memory of their last meeting and parting swept across his mind ; the passionate confession of his love which had been wrung from his lips, and her calm and quiet answer ; the smile with which she had glanced at him in the festal procession which had glided down to a hidden calamity lying in wait for them ; the last, white, despairing stamp of anguish upon her face, when the red light of the torch fell upon it before his own eyes grew filmy with unconsciousness. The sound of her voice, low and hushed, as she approached the library, recalled him to the present moment. When the door opened, and he saw her hesitate upon the threshold, with the sudden thrill of sadness which his

changed aspect awoke, he stretched out his hands towards her with a beseeching gesture. Doris no longer hesitated. She flew to his side ; flung her arms round him ; and pressed upon his white forehead, and quivering mouth, kisses which seemed to him full of the rapture of life.

“ It is enough,” he said, sinking back into the chair from which he had risen at the first sound of her approach, “ I have seen you once more. My darling, you are come back to me and Paul ; and you will never leave us again.”

“ Rufus,” answered Doris, looking tenderly into his pale face, while her own colour deepened, “ I came back only for your sake ; that I might see you again, and hear you speak to me. My dear, my dear, it was only my love for you that brought me back.”

She choked back the sobs that were rising to her lips, and checked the tears that were burning beneath her eyelids as she met the boy's impassioned and mournful smile. Both

Paul and Mrs. Margraf had warned her against the undue excitement she might foster, and they stood near to her, to restrain, by their presence, the deep emotion which Rufus would experience.

“I will never leave you again,” continued Doris, as his white lips moved without uttering a sound, while his imploring eyes were fastened upon her, “see, I am come back to be your nurse. We will be very happy together, Rufus. Paul promises to bring me across the river every morning, and I shall stay with you all the day long. I have never, never ceased to think of you, my dear, since that dreadful night.”

She had fallen on her knees beside him, clasping his hollow hand in her own, and kissing it between every sentence, while he seemed to hearken and reply with his dilating eyes, so immovably were they rivetted upon her beloved face.

“My dear,” she resumed, reiterating the words of endearment with a deepening tender-

ness in her tones, "if I told you that now I love you equally with Paul I should but speak the truth. I could never tell you how dear you are to me. You are so precious to both of us that we would willingly give up all this new happiness to keep you with us. Our love is shadowed, and made as mournful as a sorrow by your illness. Oh, Rufus! we would consent to lose each other if we could win new life for you."

The crimson glow upon the face of Rufus was passing away, and the gleam in his eyes grew dull; but the smile played still about his mouth, and Doris went on in eager accents.

"I need not ask for your forgiveness. I know you have forgiven me long ago. You have never ceased to love me, even when I proved unworthy. My dear, I did not know what I was doing. How could I tell that you were so greatly different to other men? But see, I give myself to you for the rest of your life. I will have no thought but for

you. You shall bid me do whatever is pleasing to you, and it shall be a pleasure to me to do it. So long as you want me no one shall lay claim to my time or my love. For your sake I came back ; and I give myself solely to you."

Doris's tears were flowing freely, and her lips were fastened upon his transparent hand as the seal of her devotion to him. Mrs. Margraf who had listened with impatience, was about to speak ; but Paul checked her. Rufus was recovering from the earliest tumult of his agitation, and he had regained the command of his faltering voice.

"My darling," he said, "if you give yourself to me, it is only that I may give you up to Paul. I shall be happiest in his happiness and yours. The only care and anxiety I have is to see you safe and sheltered in our home. You may trust yourself securely to Paul. I should like to call you my sister of a truth before I die."

No answer was given to his words. Doris

still hid her face upon his trembling hand ; and Paul looked gravely and sadly upon his wasted features. Mrs. Margraf turned away, and hastened from the room. He spoke again in the thin, shrill accent of his weakened voice.

“ Paul,” he cried, “ did you hear me ? I said I would give Doris to you. I am longing to see the light of your wedding day, and listen to the peal of your marriage bells. Yonder old church bells have rung hundreds of times in my ears, and I should like to hear them then. Why, Paul ! I ask you to make sure of your happiness before my death comes. Do you forget that my death would cause a long delay ? After that it would be months before you could call Doris your wife.”

“ Rufus,” answered Paul, glancing fondly down from his face to the bowed head of Doris, “ we must give her time ; it is a new thing to her yet. She must not be hurried and troubled for me. It was only last night that she let me believe that I could win her

love at all ; and this morning I cannot ask her for the consummation of her new-born affection. She has to learn to accustom herself to this fresh relationship between us. The new tie might break if I strained it too hard. Let us have patience, my boy. If she be mine at last it will satisfy me."

Yet there was a subdued eagerness in his voice which Doris's ear detected, though she could not see the unquiet working of his features. Rufus looked up to him with a keen scrutiny, and grasped Doris's hand more closely as he spoke again.

"Doris," he said, with a strange pathos in his tone, "Paul does not read your heart yet, as I can read it. This is no new thing to you. Tell me, my darling ; not Paul, you need not speak to him ; but whisper it to me, if you have not loved my brother these many months past ; while he has been blinded, partly by his own distrust of his worth, and partly by the wiles that have been played against him. I have watched you, and read

your heart wrongly, if you have not loved Paul many a long month ago."

Paul bent eagerly forwards, with his arm passed round the boy's shoulders, as Doris raised her head, and met the gaze of both fastened upon her. There was a playful smile struggling through her tears, but it vanished as she looked up into the calm, sad, questioning eyes of Rufus, and the unconcealed and expectant agitation upon Paul's face.

"Oh, Rufus!" she said, mournfully, "Paul never felt it. He never felt that I had given to him my richest treasure. He did not know why I could love you only as a brother. He has not faith to believe it yet. It is for him to learn to know me, and to think of me in this new relationship!"

"Doris!" cried Paul in an accent of rapturous yet incredulous reproach.

"Yes," she said, the smile dawning again amid her tears, "yes! Paul has so much to learn yet. He says he knows nothing about

us women, nor about the ways by which other men win our love ; and he must stoop to gain the knowledge. Let him have time, Rufus ; and let me belong only to you."

An air of dismay, blended with vivid exultation, spread over the countenance of Paul, as he listened wonder-stricken to the softly-spoken words which Doris uttered, before she hid her face again upon the thin hand of Rufus. In the silence which followed, his mind was busy with the faintly out-lived remembrances of the past, which had seemed to fade away altogether from his memory, but which had been safely stored up there, ready for their awakening to a glad recollection. A hundred trifling incidents, light as air, crowded to his brain, reproaching him with pleasant censure for his blindness and deafness to their signification. He saw Doris again, grave and timid, vigilant and shy ; shunning him often, yet listening to him and sitting beside him at other times, with a tranquil quietude, which had possessed a soothing charm for himself.

He heard her, while the dim haze of delirium still hung about her thoughts, upbraiding him with languid tears for leaving her alone in her perilous illness. He called to mind the earnest face, and the serious but gentle tones, with which, unconscious of his presence, she told the blind mother of Atcherley that she could love Paul Lockley. It seemed a marvel to himself that he had been hoodwinked and dull of hearing so long. This treasure, which he had learned slowly but surely to value at its full worth, had been within his grasp at any time, yet he had never stretched out his hand to take possession of it; he would have lost it altogether, but for the less selfish and keener love of Rufus, which had prevailed against the pride and resentment that had filled the heart of Doris. She had come back for him, the truer and more tender friend who would soon be inevitably separated from her. A reverie, ill-timed and dangerous to him while Doris was waiting with a beating heart for his next word, was weaving a treacherous

web about his dreamy fancy, when he caught sight of the white face, and deep-sunk, hollow eyes of Rufus raised imploringly to him.

“Rufus,” he cried, “my poor, poor boy, I love her in the very core of my heart, but not as you do. You shall see our marriage day. You shall call Doris your sister of a truth.”

CHAPTER XX.

WITH no nuptial pomp or ceremony, with no bridal preparation such as Mrs. Aspen's imagination had loved to sketch out, Doris became the wife of Paul Lockley. Mrs. Margraf, driven from all her bland philosophy and smooth self-possession by the unconquerable aversion she had formed to Doris, refused her countenance to the marriage which she could no longer retard: and on their wedding-day shut herself up in her chamber to lament over the utterly unmanageable turn the affairs of her family had taken. The position she had held for many years as the mistress of her brother's household was no longer hers; the reins had slipped from her fingers, because the whip-hand had been hers, and she had driven at the outset in the direc-

tion which pleased her. It might have been a somewhat slighter mortification if Harriet Crofton herself had been the bride upon whom that day's sun was shining. But she drew the curtains over the windows of her room to shut out the sunshine; and she bewailed herself with unmingled bitterness.

Rufus, stationed at Paul's library window, watched with straining eyes to detect afar off the first appearance of his beloved Doris, and to see her coming down with Mrs. Aspen to the margin of the river, where the boat was waiting to bring her across to the secure shelter of Paul's home. He saw Paul meet them at the Ferry. Through the leafless hedges of the lane which led towards the little church he caught glimpses here and there of his brother's tall figure, and of Doris leaning upon his arm, until they passed out of sight under the arched doorway. Then a trance came over the boy; a vision of life and rapture, in which he himself was wandering along mossy lanes, with leafy branches waving jubi-

lantly overhead, and flowers laughing before him on his joyous path ; while upon his arm, nerved and knit with the strength of manhood, Doris was leaning shyly and tremblingly ; Doris, who glanced up into his bending face with tender, half-concealed smiles that stirred the languid pulses in his veins, and shot a thrill of glad energy through his wasted frame. From this dream, which possessed a sweetness that seemed to make it real, the sudden clang of the church bells awoke him : the one short peal, clashing merrily through the clear and quiet atmosphere of the silent country place, for which he had entreated with feverish impatience, that he might listen to Paul's marriage chimes. The joyous notes smote upon his ear as his own death-knell. A subtle and instinctive feeling, which could not be called a hope ; and which had lingered in sunless life, like some arctic flower, far into the darkness of a northern night ; perished under the shivering chill of his awaking, as the sounds vibrated upon his ear. Nor could his smitten

heart decide whether it was the hope of Doris, or the hope of life, which he had lost.

She came to him at last, alone, leaving Paul to follow her presently. Paul would have led her himself to Rufus's side, bidding him welcome his wife, but Doris understood the boy's heart better. The tender, penetrating eyes, which met the dull and despairing glance turned upon her, read the secret of his final relinquishment of a hidden hope. She ran eagerly to him, drawing his drooping head, with soft pressure of her hands, to rest upon her bosom, while she kissed his forehead with soothing and sisterly kisses.

“My dear, my dear,” she sobbed at last, “I am never to leave you again. I am your sister to be with you always. I belong to you more than to Paul himself.”

Rufus lived two months of serene and placid gladness. Paul, and Doris, and himself were gathered into a marriage feast, of which Paul was half unwitting, while he and Doris were wholly conscious of its deep and

sacred meaning. He watched Doris growing day by day into the full security of a home. His unsleeping solicitude saw the repose and tranquillity of a settled lot effacing the homeless and solitary expression which was the characteristic of her portrait, towards which he often turned his eyes as the resemblance of the Doris whom he had loved. Little by little, with fine touches and changes only noticed by his keen regard, he saw her assume her position as the wife of Paul; saw her gliding into wifely ways that were full of homely tenderness; heard her foot-fall echoing from room to room with the free step of a mistress. Rufus watched her and Paul with vivid and rejoicing sympathy; himself passing away from the scene of the new happiness. The close of his young life seemed to him like some jubilant sunset, filled with the carolling of birds, and bright with flickering pencils of light, streaming down as from some window opened into the heavens. An evening hour in which every living creature

rejoices with a triumph as of some great glory, and the topmost branches of the trees, catching the level golden rays, bear them proudly as a crown. Yet a sunset still, tending every instant towards gloom, and loss, and separation.

He died one sunny evening in the early spring, holding, as he had wished to do, the hand of Doris, and looking into her eyes with a smile of painless peace. All the friends of his boyhood and youth were about him ; Mrs. Aspen and Mr. Vale ; his brother, whom he had proudly revered, and the sister, whom he had trusted in with unwavering confidence ; but for the last hour or two he had been unconscious of their presence. He saw no face but the face of Doris ; heard no voice but hers ; felt no touch, save the encircling grasp of her fingers. He had spoken last to her, tender words of a deathless devotion ; the last bright glimmering of light, which blazed for a moment in his dark eyes, shone upon Doris with an infinite and imperishable

love. Paul himself gazed awestruck; as if the veil which was wont to shroud the holy place had been rent before his sight, and he had seen for an instant a glory, ineffable and solemn, before which the common, garish sunshine of his own love faded into an earthly gleam.

Little remains to be written concerning the coadjutors, conscious or unconscious, in Paul's courtship. Paul had sold Fairfield to his friend Mr. Palmer, and though the latter was willing to resign his purchase, Mrs. Aspen was too urgent that Paul and Doris should reside with her at the Priory, for them to resist her wishes. Mrs. Aspen's old age was filled with more poesy and fine phrenzy than any previous portion of her career. She was never heard to complain of being misunderstood or unappreciated. Every circumstance of the placid current of events into which her life again glided was hailed with some musical trifle, to which Mr. Vale was wont to listen with rapturous and unquestioning admiration.

In the course of a few years, encouraged and assisted by Doris, she made a second selection of poems, which were published upon the same terms as the first ; and which met with a favourable reception in her native town, though it missed by some accident, the notice of the *Athenæum*. Through the streets of Thornbury, Clarissa Aspen of Monkmoor Priory was accustomed to ride with that condescending humility which distinguishes an acknowledged poet.

Mrs. Margraf, bewildered at the mortifying discovery that all her talent for finesse could not guide her family affairs as she planned them, and completely defeated by circumstances over which she had no control, fell into a profound melancholy upon the death of her young brother. Doris was delicately considerate of her feelings, and refused to assume the position of mistress over the household at Fairfield, as long as they dwelt under the same roof. But Doris's gentle efforts at propitiation were wasted. Mrs. Margraf felt that

her rule and avocation were gone. Rufus was not more removed from her influence than was Paul, who gave himself up fearlessly to the guidance of his young wife. She pined and languished under her sense of degradation and defeat for some time, until she learned, through an indirect channel, of the style and magnificence of her husband's mode of life in India. She was seized immediately with a strong and wifely desire to join him. Recovering on her voyage out the bland and smooth philosophy which had been the law of her actions in former times, and adding to it the determination to close her eyes to every unpleasant sight, and to scheme for no person's advantage except her own, she was no unwelcome companion to Mr. Margraf; who was equally happy with or without the society of his wife.

Harriet Crofton's soul, fanned into a brief flame by the impassioned spiritualism of Rufus, and by the vow which by the penetrating sting of a new consciousness had been ex-

torted from her, flickered for a little while in dim longings, which met with no fostering influences. For three days she immured herself within the dull walls of a religious house, and went through the monotony of religious exercises, amid which her soul went out into an utter extinction. George Arnold became her colleague and partner at the tables of the Continental gambling-houses. Their gains, with the income regularly forwarded from Paul; augmented by frequent appeals from Emma to Mrs. Aspen, who could not steel her heart against John's poor Emmy; maintained their position with considerable success in the gay circles, where alone they found the true element of their lives. Happily for Doris, George Arnold was too shrewd to practise his friendly forgeries upon any person, who was not too closely allied to him to be able to proceed against him in a court of justice. His father, his sister, or any near relative he might defraud; but his discretion kept him clear of any alien enterprise.

The artist's house at Murivance became the place where Paul Lockley spent most of the leisure hours, which he passed away from home. Up and down the river, under the shadow of the trees upon the Poplar Island, the boats from Murivance and Monkmoor shot to and fro in frequent and uninterrupted voyages of friendship. The blind mother and Mrs. Aspen entered into a strong bond of mutual confidences respecting Doris, with a slight infusion of patronage on the part of the talented and stately owner of the Priory which accorded well with the homely sense of inferiority in the artist's mother. Robert Atcherley claimed the privilege of painting a likeness of Doris, whenever her well-studied face had changed and deepened into a new aspect. One attempt alone satisfied him, for in it he had caught an air of profound and spiritual satisfaction which rested upon her features: a child, named Rufus, was in her arms and she was lifting him up to look at a picture; not with a smile but

with a grave peacefulness in her eyes and upon her lips, while the little one stretched out his arms towards the portrait of Paul's young brother.

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