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Sir Salar Jung Bahadoor G. C. S. I.

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THE RIVAL SUITORS.

A NOVEL.

BY MRS. HUBBACK,

AUTHORESS OF

"THE WIFE'S SISTER," "THE OLD VICARAGE,"

&c. &c.

"THAT WHICH IS CROOKED CANNOT BE MADE STRAIGHT."

Solomon.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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THE RIVAL SUITORS.

CHAPTER I.

Give and forgive, do good and love,
By soft endearments and kind strife
Lightening the load of daily life.

CHRISTMAS was almost come, and Nora, do what she would, could not always prevent her memory running away with her cheerfulness, for as sure as she allowed herself to look back to old times, and the innocent gaiety of former years, so surely did a dim cloud come over the present, and a deep, weary, heart-aching sense

of desolation and disappointment oppress her. Yet days and seasons, anniversaries and other mental milestones would recall other times in spite of her sincere endeavours to avoid unwise retrospection.

It is sad, indeed, when so early in life, a gulf bridge-less, dark and dangerous, divides the past from the present. That advancing years should occasion such a separation between our present and our former self is natural, perhaps inevitable. Few there are, probably, who can recall the memory of thirty years, and not see such chasms in the way they have journeyed ; depths into which they dare not look ; breaks in their path, which have suddenly turned them aside from the course they intended to pursue, or which have, as it were, cut them off from companions who once trod life's road beside them.

But Nora was not yet twenty, and she was very, very young to be thus isolated.

To her childhood's friends her heart would have gladly turned, but conscience checked her.

She found it safest not to indulge in recollections of Miriam's kindness, for they made her present life seem more dreary ; and as to Gerard, she dared not think of him at all. She shut her eyes, and turned away her head, for in that last interview she had read his secret, and something seemed to tell her, that had she known it sooner, her fate would have been different.

To indulge this thought, to picture what it might have been, had he not so misled her, to give the true name, to what her former affection for her cousin might, had he known it, have ended in, was what she never ventured to do. She had strength of mind enough to avoid the dangerous topic, to make no comparisons between her husband and Gerard, and to indulge in no fanciful pictures, such as discontent with the present too often leads the idle or the weak to paint. She dwelt little on Gerard in her letters to Miriam, and his name was rarely mentioned in Miss Barton's replies.

This conduct saved her from much of additional but unnecessary evil, to which weaker principles would have tempted her.

Had Nora met with confidence, tenderness, and sympathy from her husband, all painful recollections and regrets connected with her cousin would have died away in the warmth of conjugal affection; the girlish love she had entertained for Mr. Mortimer would, if he had encouraged it, have deepened into the truest wifely devotion; she would have repaid his attachment with interest.

He had held her heart by those slight and airy ties, which, skilfully managed, may be woven into the thread of life, and strengthened until their tenacity and endurance exceeds life itself, proving truly that—

“ Though the life-cord is so brittle
The love-cord is very strong.”

But far from taking pains to do so, he had lost these threads one by one, dropped them in

careless disregard, or snapped them in rude or cold disdain.

But still there was one bond left stronger than all, aye, strong enough to control all rebellious flutterings, and check every sentiment of resentment.

Duty bade her love her husband still ; and it furnished her with assistance which made the command practicable.

Duty taught her to forgive, to excuse, to pity ; and the cultivation of these emotions towards those who have injured us, keeps the mind in such a position as not only renders hatred impossible, but encourages every spark of opposite feeling. It is not for nothing that we are charged to " Do good to those who hate us."

Nora thought she was alone in her struggles, quite alone. There was no earthly friend at hand to breathe a direct word of advice, for to none had she uttered a syllable of complaint ; but though she knew it not, there were eyes

watching her with kind interest, and words which she supposed to be simply the result of accident, were spoken expressly for her support and guidance.

She had in her troubles gone to the true source of strength ; alone in heart, she had turned to the Father who never leaves or forsakes His children ; and she had received support and guidance, not by any miraculous interference, but in the simple way appointed for all and open to all, in the church and from the Pastor of her new home.

One who had known the family for thirty years, could have little difficulty in rightly appreciating the trials inevitable in her situation ; and so soon as he learnt to understand her character, Mr. Armytage had also devoted himself to helping her on in her thorny path.

By an inadvertent admission on Nora's part, he had discovered what no one else in the circle of her acquaintance knew, how deeply she had been wronged by her husband, in being, as it

were, tricked into a situation so unsuitable as that which she filled towards her step-daughters, when their respective ages were considered.

He knew too well of how much selfish meanness Mr. Mortimer was capable, to wonder at the fact; and he greatly admired the quiet self-devotion with which she bore the neglect of those who believed she had willingly intruded over them.

Although avoiding every demonstration of sympathy for sorrows which he respected the more because they were unacknowledged, he knew how to frame his advice and his actions to suit her case and character. He encouraged her desire of self-cultivation; directed her taste and her judgment; gave her occupation for others, of all kinds the most fit to divert her thoughts; and, in short, unperceived by herself, guided her as if she had been the lost daughter whom he sometimes fancied she resembled. And when she thanked him for his almost paternal care, he disclaimed all right to gratitude, as finding more

pleasure and profit in the acquaintance than herself.

It chanced one day, when, as I said, Christmas was drawing near, that Nora was sitting alone in the morning room, of which she was usually the sole inhabitant: she was rather sad, for a letter from cousin Miriam had aroused thoughts which otherwise would have slept in peace; and her efforts to engross her mind in some new book had not quite succeeded. Still she was struggling for victory, when the door was thrown open, and looking up, half expecting to see Mr. Armytage, she was surprised by the announcement of Lord Clarence St. Amand.

It was a very great pleasure; he was the first person she had seen since her marriage at all connected with her early life; and, with a glow of satisfaction, she rose to shake hands most cordially, and express her feelings.

“Where did you come from? I had no idea you were in the neighbourhood.”

"Fanny and I are staying with the Mordaunts; but we only arrived two days ago."

"Lady Fanny there too? oh, I hope I shall see her."

"I assure you she would have come to-day, but the Mordaunts had some plan which she could not thwart, so she submitted to their measures, and was ruled."

"And you revolted?" said Nora, smiling.

"I! oh, I was not wanted; and men are more independent, you know. Nobody tried to stop me."

"Well, I am glad to see you at all events."

"And where are Mr. Mortimer and his daughters? Shall I not have the pleasure of seeing them?"

"Mr. Mortimer has ridden out with Blanche, and Margherite and Bertha are gone out in their pony-carriage. They went this morning to see the hounds throw off, somewhere about six miles off."

"And left you to the luxury of solitude, on which I am encroaching."

"You are very welcome," replied she, simply. "I have had enough of my own society for one morning at least."

"And don't you ride too?" inquired he.

"No, Mr. Mortimer does not think a woman should attempt it unless she has learnt. He says it is not safe, or else I should like it."

"Why don't you learn? It is easy enough. He should teach you."

"Oh, no, he means learning in a riding-school, and you know I cannot do that here. And he always has Blanche with him, so he does not miss me."

"Miss Mortimer used to be her father's most indefatigable companion, both on horseback and on foot," replied Lord Clarence, looking out of the window.

"She is just the same still," said Nora, earnestly; "and he is so proud of her, as well he

may be, for she does everything well. She is so clever."

"You must find her an agreeable companion?" said he, interrogatively.

Nora coloured; she would not say the truth, that except at meals she seldom saw Blanche, and still more rarely spoke to her. And after a momentary hesitation, and looking down intelligible enough to her visitor, she asked how long he had known Miss Mortimer?

Lord Clarence told her, but with something of constraint of manner, that he had been intimate with her brother, both at Eton and Oxford; had often visited at the Park, both during Pierrepont Mortimer's life, and since his death; and, in short, had known them all perfectly well since his boyhood.

"What's your study, now, Mrs. Mortimer?" added he presently, more gaily, peeping into one of her books, and then another. "How get on military tactics and gunnery?"

Nora laughed, and laid her hand over some of the volumes on the table.

“You will think me almost as bad when you see what I am reading; but I found I was ignorant of some things I wanted to know, and so I have tried to learn them.”

“Not an irrational resolution. I see you have studied history, political economy, architecture, and law. Well, that is a step beyond my novels, certainly. I shall be afraid of you.”

“But some of those are only books of reference,” apologised Nora; “when I hear things I don’t understand, it is so useful to look them out; and I get Mr. Armytage to tell me how to find the meaning;—he helps me so much.”

“Rural economy, too, cottage allotments, and Benefit Societies,” added Lord Clarence, pursuing his investigations.

“You see, to be of use in the village, I must understand the poor people’s situation, and I thought I would just read those through; they

are very useful," continued she, in a deprecating tone.

"And dear old Mr. Armytage helps you, does he?" inquired her companion, with great interest.—"You like him?"

"Oh, yes, he is such a friend; of course you know him."

"Yes, I am glad you have so safe an adviser in your multifarious studies. You will not go far wrong whilst he guides you, Mrs. Mortimer."

"You laugh at me and my studies, Lord Clarence; but I am only anxious to be on a level with those with whom I associate."

"No, indeed, I am not laughing. But, Mrs. Mortimer, I am keeping you in this fine forenoon; is it not your duty to take a walk?"

"I was lazy," said Nora, "and did not mean to go out."

"Ah, but do mean it now. Say you stayed in for want of a companion, and that I may supply the deficiency."

“I will say, what will do as well, that we will go out together, if you like. But are you sure it will be pleasant?”

“Ask me when I come back. May I hope you are going to prepare for walking.”

“Do not be too inquisitive about my books whilst I am gone, and I will be as quick as I can in returning,” was Nora’s answer, as she left the room.

Lord Clarence remained alone, and looked round him attentively. Did Blanche Mortimer ever inhabit this apartment now? Formerly, her harp used to be in one corner, and a portrait of her mother hung over the fire-place. Both were gone. So, too, were sundry other tokens of her presence. The embroidery frame, the easel, the German and Italian literature in which she delighted, a favourite dog once belonging to her brother, and a bear-skin which always formed the animal’s rug, were all away. Not the smallest symptom, not the slightest trace, by which a sharp eye could recognise a well-known

presence, occurred to make him think she was ever there. Of all subjects, he was most anxious to know how she behaved to her step-mother, and to ascertain the terms on which they stood together. It was one of his motives for coming now ; but he could not help thinking, as he saw the paleness of Nora's cheeks, and the graver expression of her eyes, joined to the fact of finding her thus alone, that all was not so smooth and pleasant as he could have wished, or as the Mordaunts represented it to be.

"How lucky I was to find you at home," said he, as they issued from the house together ; "if I had known about the hunting, I should have despaired altogether."

"Without any ground for it," said she. "I was not near going. It is dull driving without a companion ; and if I can help it, I never go out in the carriage. I prefer walking."

"Have the young ladies taken to walking, then?" enquired he.

"No ; but Margherite drives her pony-

phaeton, and Blanche is always with her father. Do not you agree with me, that one can amuse oneself much better alone on foot?"

"I dare say *you* can. I prefer a horse myself, because, you see, when I am vexed or provoked I can retaliate on him; a necessity which, probably, never occurs to you. Are you going to the village to call on Mr. Armytage?"

"If you wish it."

"And then, I think, you must want to go and see the school," added he.

"Perhaps you do?"

"Yes, I just caught sight of some rules in your room for your school, and they seemed better than mine, I thought."

"Ah, but they are not in practice yet—they are only speculative; I was meditating about them, because Mr. Armytage complained that some new regulations were wanted."

"And were those your own idea, then? I wish you would give me a copy," said he, earnestly.

“Certainly, if you need them ; but I would recommend your thinking for yourself, and then we might compare ideas. I should expect to be the gainer.”

“Oh, I have my own rules, such as Fanny and I could invent ; but they do not work quite well, and some of yours looked feasible. We will try them, and compare results, if you like.”

Nora enquired where his school was ; on which he told her that, about a year ago, he had come into possession of a small property, with a mining population, in great need of care and supervision ; that he had spent all his time there, since they met and parted at Airstone Hall, and that his sister and his mother had also been with him.

This introduced the subject of Mr. Lawrence, and his accident. Nora knew most about them ; her information had been very constant and regular. Miss Barton had been a good deal at the Park, when Mr. Lawrence was beginning to recover, and the owners never seemed able to do enough to express their friendly feeling towards

the brother and sister. The real reason of this conduct, which was gratitude to Nora, never occurred to the imagination of the latter. To her mind it needed no explanation that any one should display friendly feeling towards her cousins, and she dwelt on the kindness of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence with an earnest simplicity which amused her companion.

They had a very pleasant walk down to the Rectory, met the clergyman at the door, and after making them come in and have some luncheon, which Nora laughingly said was a reflection on her hospitality, he went on with them straight towards the school-house.

It was a very picturesque and comfortable village; the houses were all in good repair, and there was less of external dirt and slovenliness than in most places of the kind. Mr. Mortimer was particular about appearances, and would not put up with idleness and untidiness. As to the inhabitants, there was no reason to suppose they were much better or worse than the generality

of a rural population. They quarrelled with one another, complained of ill-usage, and envied their superiors, in the ordinary style. Mr. Armytage had always taken great pains with them, and they were generally fond of him. Their landlord they disliked ; and although Miss Mortimer intended to do good, and really took some pains, they were too much afraid of her to feel anything approaching to affection. But young Mrs. Mortimer was different. Under the guidance of the clergyman, she went about, speaking so sweetly, listening so kindly, reasoning so quietly and yet so patiently, enduring all their follies, prejudices, and ignorance, that she seemed like another species of being from her haughty husband and his daughters ; and she, quite unconsciously, had acquired a degree of popularity which, though thoroughly deserved, was alike unsought and unsuspected by her.

Whilst she was quietly busying herself in the affairs of the school, attending to a story which the school-mistress had to relate of a sick child,

who had been sent home that morning, and afterwards trying to bring a refractory girl to a state of humble penitence, Lord Clarence and the clergyman conversed apart, first about the school, and then, naturally enough, about the lady herself.

“Yes, she is very charming,” replied Mr. Armytage, in answer to some warm praises from his companion; “a sweeter temper, a humbler mind, a stronger desire to do right, I have seldom met with. Mr. Mortimer has a mine of happiness within his reach, did he but know how to explore its treasures.”

“Hers must be a difficult situation,” observed the young man.

The clergyman shook his head. “My dear Lord, you have known the family from your boyhood—you can imagine what it is.”

“Still sweetness, forbearance, and truth, will win their way at last, and we may hope that her future will improve,” said Lord Clarence.

“I wish it may. I think Blanche must even-

tually see how deeply she wrongs her. But prejudices are stubborn things. However, we must believe that the discipline is all for some unseen purpose."

"I should have thought that Blanche, at least—" began Lord Clarence, hastily, and then suddenly stopping, he added in another voice—"Does not Miss Mortimer like the connection?"

"She *says* nothing. If she could only bring herself to associate more with Mrs. Mortimer, she could not choose but be won by her sweetness."

"Just what I was going to say. Is she really neglected? If you had seen the devotion which was displayed to win her, you would have thought her happiness perfectly secure."

"You were present—you saw her before marriage. I wish you could convince Blanche that the connection was of her father's own seeking. For though she says nothing, I know her sister has insinuated, and perhaps she thinks the same,

that Mr. Mortimer was tricked or trapped into the marriage."

"I have not usually been very successful in persuading Miss Mortimer to adopt any of my views," replied Lord Clarence with a conscious smile ; " but with her noble character, her scorn of trick herself, her pride in truth, she ought not to be ready to suspect others. Though, perhaps, in this case, filial affection gives rise to the suspicion. But it is most unjust, I am sure."

"Not my method of managing the children, I hope," said Nora, gaily, who had caught the last words as she advanced to the window where the gentlemen stood. "I trust that vehement denunciation had something to do with politics, or regimental disputes, and did not convey a censure on my proceedings here or elsewhere."

"If you have finished, Mrs. Mortimer," said the clergyman, quietly, "as I hope you will call in again at the Rectory, on your way home as you promised, I think we had better not linger,"

or daylight will fail us, and I should like to show you those books."

His companions assented, and they left the school.

It was long since Nora had spent such a pleasant afternoon ; she was not at all disposed to hurry homewards, until it was absolutely necessary ; so that it was but little before sunset, when her companion, having accompanied her to within a short distance of the house, took leave of her at the corner of a road leading to the stables, preferring himself going in search of his groom and horses there, to running any risk of meeting the rest of the family, with whom at that moment he felt too indignant to wish to encounter them.

When Nora entered her usual sitting-room on her return to the house, she found Bertha crouching by the fire. This was by no means an unprecedented circumstance. If Bertha quarrelled with Margherite, and wanted to complain, or had heard any exciting news and wished to

circulate it, or if she were only particularly idle, and wanted a gossip, she would come to Mrs. Mortimer's apartment.

Nora had some reason to dread these visits; for if the object was to murmur either at Blanche or Margherite, Bertha was sure to say things which she thought wrong, and which she would rather not hear; and she had only too much reason to think that when the quarrel was made up between the sisters, the youngest would recapitulate what had passed in her room, without being always perfectly exact about assigning the right speeches to the several speakers.

The particular object of this visit to-day became immediately manifest, by Bertha's eager exclamation, when she saw her step-mother enter alone,—

“Where is Lord Clarence?”

“Gone back to Oakley,” replied Nora, quietly, as she seated herself; “he did not come up to the house.”

Bertha looked vexed. However, as compen-

sation, she closely questioned Mrs. Mortimer as to what he had said, done, and looked ; where they had been, and how long he had stayed with her altogether. Also where they had first met, and how many days they had spent together at Airstone. It was so little Bertha Mortimer knew of her companion's former life, that if she could once lead her to the subject, she was not very scrupulous about asking questions concerning it, nor at all regardful of Mrs. Mortimer's feelings, in requiring explanations and answers.

As to what they had said and done that day, Nora answered simply and readily, stating where they had been, and also mentioning that she had promised to drive over and see Lady Fanny the next day at Oaklea, on hearing which, Bertha immediately promised her the pleasure of her society. But on every subject connected with former times, and her previous acquaintance with Lord Clarence, Nora was cautious and reserved.

When Bertha had obtained all the information

which she could, she went away ; and when the family met at dinner, no allusion was made to the visitor by either of the sisters ; but it struck Nora that Blanche was somewhat more haughty, and Margherite more unpleasant than usual ; and in some way she could not avoid connecting these appearances with the circumstances of the afternoon.

There were, however, some visitors at dinner, gentlemen who had been invited that morning, which was not an unusual circumstance when the young ladies accompanied their father on such an expedition as had that day engaged them. There was consequently talking enough round the dinner-table, of one kind or another, for neither Margherite nor Bertha deserved any better denomination than decided flirts ; and although Blanche despised flattery and nonsense, she was really fond of society. Everybody is naturally inclined to like doing what they do well, and Miss Mortimer had a talent for shining in society when she chose, of which she was tole-

rably conscious. Nor was Nora the least attractive of the ladies there ; so that, besides the attention which as mistress of the house was her due, she had rather more than she wished for, in right of being a young and pretty woman.

The rest of the party never looked gratified at distinctions which seemed a sort of tacit reproof to them, and the poor young wife had soon learnt, that to keep the proper medium between the elegance and polish Mrs. Mortimer ought to display, and the quiet retirement which the step-mother should invariably practise, was the most difficult thing in the world, if it were not to be classed among entire impossibilities.

Not a syllable was said about Lord Clarence by Mr. Mortimer himself, nor did either word or look on his part express any peculiar concern in the topic ; and as Nora had not thought any more about her morning's visitor, in the engrossing anxiety to get through the evening with

tolerable comfort, she inadvertently neglected to give him any account of the transaction.

She was destined, however, to hear more on the subject. The following morning, as she was quietly occupied in her usual pursuits, she was surprised, and a little alarmed, by the sudden entrance of her husband; an occurrence which happily was rare, as it usually foretold a storm.

He sat down at the table opposite to her, and she, closing her book, took up some needlework, and tried not to tremble, although she was really much too frightened to speak a word. After pausing sufficiently long to give peculiar emphasis to his language, Mr. Mortimer began in an impressive tone of voice—

“I really feel perfectly at a loss how to express what I am going to say.”

He paused, and Nora laid down her work, and looked up with surprise and suspense.

“I am so deeply grieved, so acutely hurt by what has passed—your conduct betrays such an

entire want of concern for my interest, my character, my respectability even, that I hardly know how to express my opinions with due regard to my own dignity and sense of right."

Again he paused; and his wife, making a strong effort to command her voice, seeing he expected her to speak, said—

"What can you mean?—I am quite at a loss to imagine to what you refer."

"No, Nora," replied he with a majestic wave of his hand, "do not add duplicity to your other faults; do not attempt to put me off with assumed ignorance."

She crimsoned deeply, then grew rapidly pale, but she did not speak.

"You will not, I presume, deny that you yesterday went strolling about the village with a gentleman whom you had received in my absence," said he, in that voice of affected calmness which predicts a storm even to the most inexperienced ear.

"I certainly went down to the Rectory with

Lord Clarence St. Amand," replied she, gaining courage as she obtained some clue to her offence, "and afterwards, in company with Mr. Armytage, we went together to the school. If there was anything improper in that, I am sorry; but, indeed, I was not aware there could be."

"Of course, it never occurred to you," said he, speaking with most contemptuous bitterness, "that in thus staying at home alone, when the rest of the family were amusing themselves abroad, in choosing to absent yourself from their pursuits, and avoid their company, you gave rise to unfavourable insinuations, and unfounded accusations of neglect. In short, that you were making it appear that you are slighted and ill-used by your nearest connections."

"I am sure," said Nora, earnestly, "nothing could be farther from my wish than to give rise to any such idea."

"Nay, do not pretend to excuse yourself. You cannot mean to say, you cannot expect me to believe, that such ideas have never oc-

curred to you. I am thankful that I have not yet arrived at such a state of dotage, at least, as to be imposed on by paltry affectations of innocence. You must know that in sitting at home in sullen solitude, you are making it appear that you have not befitting society in my family ; and that in being ready to adopt as companion the first stranger who presents himself, in seeking with him the most public places, and making his society the remark of the whole village, you confirm every idle whisper or false report to my disadvantage."

"You are not just to me," said Nora, with emotion in her voice, and tears in her eyes ; "indeed, you are not just. How could I help being alone ?—it was not my fault ; I could neither ride with you and Blanche, nor drive with your other daughters. I had no choice but to be alone !"

"I am very sorry to see that you give way to such unbecoming tempers, Nora ; obstinacy in defending an erroneous course of conduct is

an incurable fault, I fear ; and this peevish assertion that you are not to blame, shows a degree of passion which I did not expect. Do you really mean to assert, that you, *my* wife, Mrs. Mortimer of Brierly Park, have not proper attendants, proper equipages, everything suited to your rank ; that you cannot drive when and where you please — that you are forced to sit here alone, because I fail to provide you with your due ? Nora, Nora, of what can you be thinking ?”

“ You misunderstand me,” replied she, in desperation. “ Of course I could have driven out, had I wished ; but still I must have been alone, for there was no one to go with me ; but, indeed, I intended no reflection on you, or on your daughters.”

“ It is exactly of that I complain ; you give no thought to me or my daughters either ; you do not trouble yourself to consider for a moment, how following your own wild fancies will appear to the public eye. Do you imagine it

reputable, that a young and inexperienced woman like you should be walking about in company with a man like Lord Clarence?"

"I did not think there could be more objection made to walking through the park with him, than to sitting in this room together," said she, humbly.

"Then why dismiss him before he returned to the house? why scrupulously avoid alluding to his name afterwards? Nora, where there is shame and concealment, there must always be a consciousness of something wrong!"

"There was neither," said she; "I told Bertha all she asked about it, and I forgot about the matter afterwards, or I might have told you."

"May I beg that no more such scenes may occur; I request you will order your carriage and go out driving, as becomes a lady of your rank, to-day," said he, shortly.

"I am going to Oaklea to-day, to call on

Lady Fanny St. Amand," replied Nora, meekly ;
" Bertha asked to go with me."

" Going to call there—going to pay the first visit yourself ; no, Nora, it is Lady Fanny's duty to come and call on you, and I cannot allow you to call there until she has done so."

" I told Lord Clarence I would call on his sister ; and, indeed, as she is only here on a visit, I ought to do it : if you recollect a moment, you will see it is right."

" I cannot allow it, I repeat. After what passed yesterday, for you to be rushing off in such unbefitting haste, I will not say in pursuit of the person with whom you spent yesterday afternoon, although it might seem so ; for you, I say, to do this, would be indecorous and improper in the highest degree, and if you have not sufficient delicacy to restrain you, I must interfere to prevent it."

" Ah, how can you say such cruel things !" cried Nora ; " you know that I would not, for anything, do what could be considered a ques-

tionable act; but who would think ill of my going to see Lady Fanny?"

"I expect my wife to submit to my opinion without murmuring or disputing," replied he, coldly, "and all this warmth only makes me more unfavourably impressed towards you. May I beg—for, of course, to so well-judging and resolute a lady, I must not presume to dictate—may I beg that you will to-day oblige me by going to call on Miss Fairfax at Walcot Lodge?"

"But it will be so rude," replied the wife, well knowing this was a powerful argument; "so very rude, after the message I sent to Lady Fanny; and perhaps even Lady Mordaunt may take offence at it herself."

"I believe you may trust my judgment and knowledge of the world, Nora; I flatter myself I have a little experience and a slight sense of propriety. Perhaps, therefore, you will condescend so far as to do as I request, and leave the consequences to me. I hope I am not

taking too much on myself in presuming so far to dictate to you."

"Why will you speak so bitterly, Mr. Mortimer? you know that I am always ready to submit to your judgment or your wishes. Please do not treat me as if I were a rebellious child. If I offended you yesterday, I am very sorry; will you not say that you forgive me?"

"Of course I forgive you," replied he, in the most stately manner. "I hope that *I* am incapable of sullen resentment, or malevolent obstinacy. I forgive you, Nora, your neglect of my wishes and interests; your disregard of my feelings, your pettishness and your pride. I am thankful that I have not to accuse myself of unkindness or harshness to you, and that I can reflect on my temper, words, and sentiments, without a wish to recal them. If you can say the same, if your conscience is equally clear, Nora, you may forgive yourself."

So saying, he inflicted on her forehead a stately kiss, and immediately left the room.

CHAPTER II.

A random shaft in season sent,
Shall light upon some lurking harm,
And work some wonder little meant.

PERHAPS it was not wonderful, after such an interview as this, that when Mr. Armytage entered the room about half-an-hour afterwards, he found Mrs. Mortimer with evident marks of distress and emotion in her countenance. He came to consult about some village matters preparatory to Christmas, and at first, Nora, by a strong effort, succeeded in giving him a little attention ; but in spite of herself, her thoughts

wandered from accounts of flannel and blankets, and her answers became more and more uncertain every minute ; until at last, on a kind remark from her companion that he feared she was not well, she gave way altogether, and burst into tears.

Now Nora was not like some heroines of whom one reads, every page of whose history, with few exceptions, is marked by floods of tears, so frequent and so violent, that they would in real life have dimmed the brightest eyes, and left indelible traces on the fairest face. She did not often cry, and Mr. Armytage had never seen her so distressed before. All that the kindest sympathy could dictate, he said and did to soothe her ; and after a little while she so far regained her composure, as to be able to give some account of her trouble. She very innocently told him she had displeased her husband, and that was what distressed her.

Of course, to such a confession, the clergyman replied, by speaking of the duties owing

between married couples, the necessity of the wife submitting, and the propriety of acknowledging, and so far, as we can, atoning for what has been done wrong.

Nora admitted it all, though she felt that none of his observations were exactly applicable to her own case; but, to explain what had really passed was impossible, without criminating her husband; and to throw blame on him was not to be thought of, even when speaking in confidence to Mr. Armytage.

With a little hesitation, she said that could she explain what had happened, were it a thing she was at liberty to speak of, there was no one whom she would sooner trust, or more entirely confide in, than Mr. Armytage; “but,” added she, colouring deeply, “you must feel that there are cases in which, if one is not wrong before, one would certainly become so by complaint or even vindication; so do not think, please, that it is obstinacy in me which prevents my saying

more, or either taking blame, or justifying myself."

"Believe me, dear Mrs. Mortimer, that I am quite convinced both of your candour and your desire to do right. Still I must remind you, that though in many cases silent submission even to harsh judgment or unjust accusation is a positive duty, there are others in which explanation and openness are equally desirable; circumstances in which too great a fear of hurting others, or indulging in a readiness to complain, may lead us to bear in silence mistakes which a few words would set right, to the great advantage of all concerned."

"But how are we to know?" sighed Nora.

"It is not so very difficult. The relative situations of parties must be considered. Of course, in all conjugal disagreements, there is but one course for the wife,—entire submission in everything which higher duty does not forbid; submission which implies the same silence relative to the husband's faults which

she would wish him to observe regarding hers. The same may be said regarding filial subjection; but between equals, or others to whom this profound honour is not due, perhaps an explanation through a mutual friend may be of use, when personal communication is not in the power of the injured party. We are permitted, by the highest Authority, to refer disputes to the judgment of impartial witnesses."

●Nora sat in profound meditation. At length she said—

"Mr. Armytage, I think you are right, and perhaps it might be useful to adopt your advice. You know my husband's daughters; you have long known their characters; so I need not speak to you of Margherite or Bertha. But, oh, if I could make Miss Mortimer my friend, if I could only win her esteem and regard, my life would be a far happier one."

"I have seen that," said he, compassionately.

"You do not know how I have tried—how I

have longed for her friendship," continued she, hurriedly. "When first I came here, I felt I was greatly her inferior, not only in accomplishments, but in general information and literature. I felt it every day; and it is for that I have laboured and read; for that I have had recourse to these books," looking round her at the volumes of the table. "Oh, if she would but love me—she whom I admire and esteem so highly."

"Trust and hope, dear Mrs. Mortimer. Some day Blanche will perceive her error, and love will conquer; and if not, this indulgence would not be withheld, were it good for you. Meantime, self-culture and self-conquest are not thrown away, though they should fail of the object you especially seek. Strengthen your mind, improve your understanding, cultivate your intellect, whilst you have leisure and opportunity; who knows but that the day may come which will show you why you were guided to do all this."

Nora listened with a calm attention to her old friend's counsels ; and as he proceeded to dwell upon her duties, and point out the talents which were committed to her, and the advantages for which she was responsible, she felt and admitted that there might be a bright side even to her cloudy sky ; and she saw more strongly than ever that it was right, as well as prudent, not to allow her " thoughts to cling to the mouldering past," if she desired to banish repining and discontent.

She resigned herself to the prospect of driving to call on Miss Fairfax, and trusted that some means would be found for explaining the circumstance to Lady Fanny.

Blanche Mortimer was pacing slowly along the sunny terrace, when Mr. Armytage issued from the house. She came forward to greet him respectfully, for she always behaved to him with regard and attention ; and then turning, took the road to his house in his company.

The clergyman began telling her that he had

had a visit from an old friend of hers yesterday, and related how he had come down to the Parsonage and gone on to the school, because he had been anxious to compare it with one he had recently established.

Blanche listened with an interest too profound to be quite concealed, but said very little in answer, except that she had not seen him.

She heard that he had inquired particularly after her, to which she replied, with a little, very little pique, that she supposed Mr. Armytage's answers were perfectly satisfactory, as Lord Clarence had testified no concern to meet her, having been quite occupied with Mrs. Mortimer's society.

Mr. Armytage told her in reply, that he knew Lord Clarence did esteem and like Mrs. Mortimer very much; he had known her before her marriage, and he expressed the highest opinion of her character, and great interest in her well-being.

A crimson tinge flitted across Miss Morti-

mer's face ; but after a moment, she raised her eyes, and said, with a haughty glance, "Did he come here to investigate into her happiness?"

"He did not tell *me* so," answered the clergyman ; "probably, had that been his object, he would have applied to you, as being the better authority. He must know how greatly it is in your power."

"*My* power," repeated Blanche.

"Yes, Miss Mortimer, who has more power at the Hall than you? Though not the nominal mistress, you well know that actually you have undisputed sway there."

"Did Mrs. Mortimer tell you that, Mr. Armytage?"

"No, it was not necessary. Old as I am, I still have eyes and ears, and they alone are sufficient to inform me that Blanche Mortimer rules supreme in her father's halls."

"And who has so good a right?" replied the young lady, with a gratified smile. *

Hé made no answer ; and after watching him a moment, she said, "Does your silence mean to dispute my claim?"

"Blanche," said he, taking her hand kindly, "will you let me speak to you as an old friend, one who, having known you from infancy, loves you dearly ; one who, having signed on your forehead the sign of the Cross, would venture sometimes to remind you of what that rite was a token, and would speak truth to you, when all others flattered or deceived you?"

"Speak," said she ; "I have always loved you."

"Tell me, then, should you claim this influence as your right, if your mother were now alive?" said the old clergyman, in a voice of great solemnity.

"Certainly not," replied the young lady, frankly ; "it was hers before it was mine."

"And was it hers, Blanche, as your mother, or your father's wife?" inquired he.

She coloured again more deeply than before ;

but, after a momentary struggle, she raised her eyes, and said—

“I condemn myself, Mr. Armytage, but I cannot deny that it is the right of my father’s wife.”

“You are as you have ever been, Blanche, nobly frank,” said he, with a look of gratification at her answer, which gave her great pleasure.

“But, Mr. Armytage, although I admit your principle, I do not think it is entirely without exceptions; and my case may perhaps form one, if you knew all.”

“And perhaps not, Miss Mortimer, if *you* knew all.”

“Knew what?” said she, earnestly.

“Knew the feelings of her whom you slight, despise, and neglect.”

Blanche compressed her lips a little, and then answered—

“That she should complain to you is just on a par with the meanness of her previous con-

duct. I cannot think well of a girl of her age, who has consented to form a marriage so disproportioned, so ill-assorted. I cannot, from respect to my mother's memory, love or reverence one who has thrust herself into her place—a place she fills so unworthily.”

“If respect for your mother's memory did not prevent your father putting her there, it is at least a reflection on him, which his daughters need not make, to oppose his will on that topic. If, through your influence, Blanche, your father is induced to infringe the vow he made to love and cherish his wife, with whom will rest the guilt of tempter? I speak strongly to you, Miss Mortimer; you have a strong mind, and can bear with me.”

Blanche walked on in silence for a little way, but her countenance told of powerful emotions at work within. Presently she said, with an effort—

“I have been wrong; I have encroached; I have been cold. But oh, Mr. Armytage, I do

dislike her so very, very much, that to affect to be otherwise, would be an hypocrisy of which I cannot be guilty; it would be worse than all."

"And you think you cannot help this aversion?" replied he, looking gravely at her.

"I am sure I cannot," was her answer.

"That is, indeed, unfortunate," was his rejoinder, in the same grave tone, pausing in his walk, and almost facing her; "for we know that he who 'hateth his brother, is a murderer.'"

"Oh, Mr. Armytage!" exclaimed she, "you use hard, shocking words."

"They are not *my* words," replied he, earnestly.

"But can they apply to me?"

"That you must yourself decide. Do they apply to those, who, having been injured, ill-used, deceived, feel that, in spite of their best efforts, the presence and society of their enemy is painful and oppressive? or do they refer to those, who, without offence given, without any

known or ascertained cause of grievance, conceive, harbour, and indulge an unmitigated dislike to some individual whom they merely suspect of injury to themselves?"

"And is that a picture you conceive applicable to Mrs. Mortimer and myself?" said Blanche.

"Do not trifle with your conscience, dear Miss Mortimer, and avoid answering that; and then I will excuse your not answering me," said her old friend.

"No, I will answer you so far as I am concerned. My conscience condemns me, if your doctrine is true; but surely there must be exceptions, mitigations, allowances to such a rule. How can I help disliking her? or what can I do to alter a feeling which has been growing for months?"

"Doubtless it would have been easier to have crushed the viper's brood when in the egg, than now, that they have acquired strength and life and vigour. It was a sad neglect to overlook

the danger, because it was so easily remedied. Yet, if you still delay, every day will add to their power of tormenting you, and diminish yours of resistance."

"Tell me, Mr. Armytage, do you speak so to Mrs. Mortimer?" inquired Blanche, after a silence of some minutes.

"There is no need."

"And has she no angry feelings, no aversion to overcome? Have you not to teach her forgiveness, too?" persisted Blanche.

"Not towards you at least."

"Yet she must hate me!"

"I wish you could have heard her this morning, Blanche, how ardently she longed for your friendship, how warmly she praised you, how earnestly she admired you."

Blanche was silent again, but at length she exclaimed eagerly—

"What can I do? I would love her if I could; but my whole soul revolts at the idea,—and to affect what I do not feel—to say what I

do not think! Impossible, a thousand times impossible, Mr. Armytage."

"There are people, Blanche, who treat their readiness to confess their faults as if it were an indemnification for retaining them. Take care you do not secretly console yourself that way, and fancy that because you are more willing to acknowledge an unjustifiable aversion than some other persons, that therefore it is less culpable in you to indulge it. Now I must leave you, for I have business to attend to; so good morning."

Blanche gave him her hand, and then walked back thoughtfully to the house.

She had not intended to be unjust; she would have scorned such a fault; nor had she really any idea of the extent to which she had made her young step-mother suffer. She had thought of Nora as a rival, as one with whom to contend was natural and lawful, and, as she said, she had allowed the feeling of dislike to grow and strengthen until it seemed now insurmountable.

But all the way home, her mind was dwelling on the ugly picture Mr. Armytage had drawn, and she seemed to see loathsome vipers crawling and writhing round her heart, stinging her better mind to death in their subtle advances.

At the moment when Mr. Armytage met her, she was meditating on another subject.

Margherite and Bertha had determined to call on Lady Fanny St. Amand, and, although Mr. Mortimer had forbidden his wife's going there, from pique at her conduct, inspired by the malicious insinuations of his second daughter, and the untrue representations of the younger, he did not interfere with them. On the contrary, as he was extremely anxious to keep up the friendly terms which he had long been on with Lord Clarence, he resolved to call himself, and proposed that Blanche should accompany him. But whatever were her private feelings, Blanche would not make such a demonstration in favour of a man who had avoided meeting her the day before.

Whatever his motive might have been, the slight was palpable and public. She declined the expedition for herself, although highly approving that her father should accompany her sisters on such an occasion. She gave no explanation of her motives, nor any idea of how she intended to occupy herself meantime; but when they were gone, she stood musing some time at a window, and then suddenly taking a resolution, she walked with an air of rather less haughtiness than usual to Mrs. Mortimer's morning-room.

Nora, who was just putting away her books preparatory to her drive, had not the least idea whose entrance to expect, in answer to her gentle "Come in;" for it was the first time Blanche's fingers had touched the door, and Bertha was accustomed to enter without ceremony.

Miss Mortimer advanced to the hearth-rug, and stood a moment without speaking. Nora, surprised and a little alarmed, inquired if she could do anything for her, to which Blanche,

with an uneasy smile, asked if she were going out that afternoon, and offered her company.

Mrs. Mortimer coloured and hesitated a little, as she replied in the affirmative to both questions ; whereupon the other said rather decidedly, that if her society was unpleasant, she would not inflict it.

Nora eagerly disclaimed such an idea, but added, that she hesitated because she was going to call on Miss Fairfax, and she was afraid Miss Mortimer might not like the drive.

“What makes you go there?” said Blanche, shortly.

“Your father wished it,” was Nora’s answer, accompanied by a look of a criminal caught in his evil act ; for she feared lest her interrogator should report that she complained of the task assigned her, or should suppose she meant to boast of her submission.

“Then I will go with you,” replied Blanche, most decidedly ; and finding that it was time to

prepare for the drive, she begged Mrs. Mortimer to do so—she herself was quite ready.

Nora left her accordingly, and whilst hurrying over her toilette in the greatest trepidation, lest she should keep Miss Mortimer waiting, was divided between wonder at the unexpected honour thus conferred on her, and a sort of trembling, frightened pleasure at the prospect of such an advance towards companionship.

“If I can but avoid being very disagreeable and tiresome to Blanche,” thought Nora, “perhaps she will repeat the same thing, and the result would in all probability be a little more union between me and my husband. We may never be again what we once were, or rather what I once fancied we were ; I must not expect that. But oh, if I could only believe he loves me a little still, how much easier and lighter my tasks would be.”

In the meantime, Blanche was standing in the other room, looking round her and recalling the past, with some such feelings as had occupied

Lord Clarence on the same spot the day before. The apartment had once been hers ; and it formed one of the earliest grievances on Mrs. Mortimer's part, that she had been forced to give it up to the new comer. She had felt it with the bitterness of a haughty spirit, unused to yield in the smallest trifles ; but she was too proud to complain, so that she continued ignorantly to ascribe to a love of domination, a disregard of others, and an indecent indifference to propriety on Nora's part, a circumstance with which she had had nothing whatever to do.

The fact was, that early after the marriage, Mr. Mortimer, then in the first ardour of a passion which had since so rapidly vanished, would have allowed his wife a choice of any matter which did not concern him, and he had asked her what aspect she preferred for her bedroom and other apartments. The result of her choice, which she made, quite ignorant that there were others to be consulted besides herself, was, that directions were transmitted to England to

fit up a suite of rooms for her use, which happened to be perfectly agreeable and convenient to her husband also ; but one of these was the identical sitting-room, which, from its pleasant aspect, cheerful view, and convenient situation, had for several generations been the favourite apartment of the successive mistresses of the mansion.

Blanche, without a word, had selected another sanctuary for herself, and all but made a vow never to enter the desecrated chamber from which she was thus expelled.

Now she stood there, and gazed about her like one who returns after a long interval to her childhood's home ; then she tried to read the character of the present occupant in the books and articles she saw before her : with what feelings she was not quite sure. She was not certain whether she desired to see arguments for strengthening herself in her dislike, or motives for relaxing into a favourable opinion. She surveyed the volumes on the table ; and just before her, on a beautifully carved book-stand, evidently

brought from Switzerland, lay a small book in a cover of velvet, elaborately embroidered; she opened it, it was a Bible, and on examining the fly-leaf, she saw that it had been presented to Nora by her cousin Gerard on some previous birthday. She turned over the pages, and mechanically glanced at words so familiar to the ear as to convey little meaning to the heart. But the leaves fluttered over, until they divided of their own accord at one place, as if there they were accustomed to be often opened. Blanche read again,—

“BLESSED ARE THE MEEK — BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL — BLESSED ARE THE PEACE-MAKERS.”

With a sting of conscience she put down the sacred volume, and turned away. At that moment, Nora entered with an eager apology for having kept her waiting. Miss Mortimer's answer was short, for her feelings were very powerful; and her timid companion, afraid she was displeased, felt frightened and unhappy.

In the carriage, Blanche leant back in silence for some way ; but as they drove through the village, her eye caught the figure of Mr. Armytage in the distance. She was conscious that her present situation would seem the result of his earnest reproofs, a sign of repentance, as well as an acknowledgment of error. She sat up with a deepened colour ; and when Nora smiled and kissed her hand in passing the clergyman, Blanche too bent her head, and endeavoured to show, by her unembarrassed air, that she was not ashamed of doing better.

“He is going our way,” said she hurriedly ;
“could we not take him up?”

Nora drew the check-string almost before the words were finished ; but when the footman presented himself at the window, she was so little accustomed to claim precedence over Miss Mortimer, that she waited for her to give the order, and Blanche, from old habit, spoke first. She recollected herself almost immediately, and politely apologised for the liberty she had taken,

just as she would have done to a stranger ; but it was so much more than she would have done a week ago to Mrs. Mortimer, that poor Nora coloured like a culprit, and could hardly say a few words to the effect that it did not signify.

Mr. Armytage presented himself at the carriage-door, and made some remarks on the object of their journey, but declined entering the carriage, as he was only going a little farther. He expressed neither by word or look the slightest surprise at seeing the two ladies together ; and to all appearance, had totally forgotten the meetings and the conversations of that very morning : then observing that they had a long drive before them, and that he would not detain them, he wished them both good morning, and left them.

This little diversion to their thoughts was useful, as breaking the stiffness of Miss Mortimer's manner. She remembered, that if her company were not to be a penance, she must make some effort to be agreeable to her com-

panion, so she began searching about for a subject of conversation. She was aided by Nora, observing, as her eyes just then fell on the picturesque school, that she believed the building was designed by Miss Mortimer herself.

This introduced some amicable conversation about the children, the mistress, the clergyman, and other village matters ; and the ladies became more easy together every five minutes.

Being rather desirous of vindicating herself with regard to the visit of Lord Clarence, Nora next, though with some hesitation, alluded to him. The hesitation was misunderstood ; and Blanche, secretly conscious that she cared more for his lordship than she allowed to be apparent, relapsed into coldness at the mention of his name.

Still Mrs. Mortimer went on, and repeated what he had said about his estate, his tenants, his schools, and his other objects of interest, anxious to show that it was with no particular

regard to her society, but a much higher motive, that he had spent the afternoon in walking about the village with her.

It was deeply interesting to Blanche; and in this new development of Lord Clarence's character, she read what she had believed hitherto to be wanting in him, a steadfast aim and worthy object in life; a principle and tone of mind, which justified a partiality for him such as she had hardly before supposed him to deserve.

That Lord Clarence had long loved her, as Margherite had said, she knew pretty well; but, although not insensible to his preference, she had scorned to be won by personal attractions or polite accomplishments. Now that he showed himself possessed of something more than these, she need not blush to encourage a suit which depended only, she believed, on her smiles, to be advanced.

Miss Fairfax, of Walcot Lodge, was a very disagreeable person, whom nobody liked to neglect, although nobody wished to see much of

her. But a visit there was a penance which Blanche seldom inflicted on herself, and she had a great mind not to go in at all on this occasion ; and although she did not keep to this resolution, but accompanied Mrs. Mortimer into the hot drawing-room, strong with the odour of dogs, monkeys, and birds, she might almost as well have been absent, so far as her assistance in conversation was concerned.

The good of her visit was all to herself ; and she certainly derived some useful reflections from her observations on the occasion.

She saw in the patient kindness and polite attention which Mrs. Mortimer bestowed on the peevish and selfish invalid before her, what true courtesy was, and she sat wondering silently from what source such endurance could spring. That it contrasted forcibly with her own usual manners, and that the haughty unconcern with which she would have listened, was very different both in its expression, cause, and effect, from Nora's look and tone, she could not possibly

help seeing. Again and again she pondered the question—what was its source?

It was not, as she would a few days ago have recklessly concluded, a shallow intellect and unoccupied brain which made the listener thus tolerant and indulgent; for not only had it glanced into her own comprehension to-day, that her young step-mother was clear-headed and intelligent, and she had ground for believing her also possessed of a cultivated and well-informed mind, but she was perfectly aware that all the frivolity and folly of Bertha would never have made *her* listen with civil patience for even ten minutes to the tiresome particulars on which old Miss Fairfax dilated. No, it was something beyond what Bertha possessed, something unknown even to Blanche herself, but something which, unintentionally and almost unwelcomed, brought to her mind the idea of a pitying angel.

The words which she had read—"Blessed are the meek," again recurred to her memory,

and appeared to convey a wider meaning than before.

At length it was over, and the ladies returned to their carriage.

"I hope I did not seem rude or impatient," said Nora reflectingly; "it is so difficult to find subjects of conversation with Miss Fairfax."

"Rude and impatient, my dear Mrs. Mortimer! I was going to ask you how you could possibly find any sort of interest in discussing the merits of lapdogs, the illness of monkeys, or the faults of a footman and groom?"

"Well, indeed, I should not have chosen such subjects; but it is better than to indulge in gossip; and last time I went there, Miss Fairfax told me so many bad things about all the neighbours as made me quite unhappy."

Blanche opened wide her black eyes, and looked as if she did not feel competent to enter into the sources of such unhappiness.

"Is it not very painful and depressing?"

continued Nora, in explanation, "to hear about the follies and faults of others, when we can neither contradict nor excuse them?"

"Very tiresome, I admit," replied Miss Mortimer; "but if we are to make ourselves unhappy about our neighbours' faults, much less their follies, we shall have a tolerable burden to carry. Why, you must exist on a perpetual bed of hot coals, if you concern yourself in that way. At least, I hardly know an individual whose bad qualities might not afford a weeping philosopher sufficient sources of distress to last for life. Men and women are, with few exceptions, the most ludicrous compounds of insincerity, contradiction, and absurdity—fit only to be despised."

"Oh, no," said Nora, gently; "I beg your pardon for contradicting you; but everybody has some good quality; and as to their faults, we never can tell what peculiar temptations they may have had, so we ought to make allowances accordingly."

“The longer I live in this world,” replied Blanche, “the more I see of despicable and contemptible in human nature. Show me the man who has not stooped to court popularity by mean arts, or disgraced himself by vacillating opinions and renegade conduct, or quarrelled with his best friend for some paltry object, or madly risked his credit and comfort in mercenary speculations, from a thirst of gold. I speak of those who have some character and mental *à plomb*, not alluding to the idle, volatile, frivolous crew, who crowd the fashionable world, and live only to eat, drink, and be merry. And as to women, most of them are so utterly beneath contempt, that I would not characterise them at all.”

“I daresay you have seen more of the world than I have,” answered Nora ; “for you know until I married your father, I lived so very retired a life. But I hope you see things too strongly. I would rather not think so very ill of everybody.”

“If one could think differently !” ejaculated Blanche.

“But when one does a wrong thing oneself,” replied her companion, “at least, when I do, I always find myself making so many excuses, discovering so many palliations for it ; the temptation came so gradually that I did not see it ; or so suddenly that I was not prepared ; or so unlooked for that I never thought of it : and all these things make it seem so natural to do what we afterwards ourselves condemn, that at the time it is almost as if we could not help yielding to it.”

“Well !” said Blanche, as if not understanding.

“Then I suppose the same things happen to others ; and they may excuse themselves, and we might excuse them, if we saw all. You know on a steep coast, little streams of water, invisible and imperceptible, make their way underground, and wear out, slowly but surely, the foundation of high, solid rocks ; and some day,

although they seem so safe and steady, down the cliffs tumble into the water beneath. Something like this, I think, must happen to individuals; but then, after their fall, they may rise again, and there the analogy ceases to be correct."

"This catastrophe can only happen to those who attempt to conceal their faults, by your own showing," answered Blanche. "It is the hidden stream which saps the foundation. Candour and sincerity would prevent it; and it is the universal want of these which makes me so infinitely despise most other human beings. I can forgive anything better than duplicity; but in some shape or other, it meets one at every turn."

Nora was silent; and after a pause, Blanche suddenly said—

"Will you tell me exactly what were the motives which made you listen so patiently to Miss Fairfax to-day?"

Mrs. Mortimer coloured very deeply, and,

after a little consideration, said—"You have asked rather a hard question."

"I should be much obliged by an answer; and I cannot but believe that you had a definite motive, one that you could express if you would."

"I would do a great deal to oblige you," said Nora, looking up at her companion with eyes which spoke the same feeling. "It was partly, I think, the wish to do as I would be done by; partly the fear that she might find other subjects more unpleasant and unprofitable."

"Do as you would be done by!" repeated Blanche; "you do not inflict on your visitors such discourse, I am sure."

"Perhaps, although my topics may be different, my conversation may be as tiresome to others," replied Nora, humbly; "I am afraid it must often be very dull, and so I ought to make large allowances at least."

There was another lengthened silence; and

they had approached the gates of the Park before Blanche spoke again. Then she said, in a much less haughty tone than usual—

“I am obliged to you—very much obliged for your answer.”

Nora longed to say words of kindness and good will; she longed to express the warm desire she ever felt to win Miss Mortimer's regard. She would have said much, had she dared—but she had no courage. Blanche was too awful a person for such unreserve; too little demonstrative herself when pleased; too open in expressing contempt or anger when she felt them.

It would have been better, perhaps, had she indulged the promptings of love instead of fear. The warmth which some individuals cannot bring themselves to show, they value highly in others; powers which we do not ourselves possess, we are often ready to admire for that very reason; and though it was exceedingly difficult to Blanche to put into words any sentiment

which she felt strongly, she might, now that she began to give Nora credit for sincerity, have been gratified at her acknowledgment of regard.

The drive, however, had been productive of pleasant sensations to each ; and when the ladies parted, on alighting from the carriage, it was with sentiments of good will on one side, and obligation on the other, which they had neither experienced before. There are few more delightful reflections than those produced by overcoming a prejudice, or conquering an unfounded dislike ; except, perhaps, it may be that of sincerely and cordially forgiving an enemy, and returning good to those who have before done us evil.

Nora's share of satisfaction was, as it ought to be, the most agreeable, and she sat down by her solitary fire, with a tremor of almost incredulous emotion at the thought of how she had spent the afternoon. It was so far more than a recompense for having tried to submit quietly

to a disappointment, and take an injustice patiently, that she did not even think of it in that light. It was an indulgence, as welcome, as it was in her mind both unexpected and undeserved ; and she could not restrain her fancy from running away into speculations of possibilities, which looked bright from the dull spot from which she viewed them.

Miss Mortimer, too, was thinking of the drive, and taking pleasure in the recollection of this conciliatory movement towards one whom she had supposed her enemy.

Nora was not so bad as she had fancied ; no, that was an unjust way of putting it. She was really an amiable, well-intentioned young woman, and had she not married, Blanche would have thought very well of her. That was the blot ; the marriage ! how could she have done it ?

Blanche again reverted to the idea that it must have been the work of another hand. Whatever of trick or underhand dealing there

might have been, she felt persuaded was not on the part of this straight-forward, conscientious, and humble-minded child. She knew nothing of Nora's family or connections, nothing of her private history ; she had never condescended to inquire particulars, and never listened when Bertha gossiped ; or if she had heard, she had never believed what her sister said.

Be that as it might, she resolved from that time to take some trouble to behave differently ; she would show her father's wife more attention ; she would try to make her situation more comfortable than she believed it had been. She would do her best to overcome the proud dislike which she had allowed to grow ; to conquer her repugnance to giving up the first place to her ; in short, she would show that she could amend her conduct when convinced it had been wrong ; that she was not above trying to improve ; and perhaps when Lord Clarence came next time, Mr. Armytage might have a different tale to tell.

She hoped that she should not see him just at present ; and she fancied that in all probability as his visit at Oaklea would be short, they might avoid an interview.

CHAPTER III.

There are in this loud stunning tide,
Of human care and crime,
With whom the melodies abide
Of th' everlasting chime—
Who carry music in their heart,
Through dusky lane and wrangling mart,
Plying their daily task with busier feet,
Because their secret souls a holy strain repeat.

MRS. MORTIMER was still meditating by fire-light, when Bertha suddenly entered the room, and told her she was come to gossip for half-an-hour.

Her commencement of, "Well, what do you

think?" prepared Nora for some important communication, or at least something which Bertha considered highly important — but it gave her no clue whatever to the subject.

"Well, only think, Lord Clarence and his sister are coming to stay here. What do you suppose Blanche will say?"

Mrs. Mortimer was terribly disturbed by this communication. It was not the want of due regard for her situation as nominal mistress of the house, which Bertha displayed by her haste to forestall her father's announcement of this impending visit; it was an instinctive feeling that this thoughtless indifference on Bertha's part to propriety would surely be visited on herself in her husband's wrath. *She* would be blamed for this, most certainly; and protestations that she could not help it, and had really asked no questions, would be treated as,—

All too little to atone

For knowing what should ne'er be known.

Moreover, she had an additional reason for

shrinking from a visit from Lord Clarence ; for absurd and unfounded as her husband's accusations were, he might yet again revert to them ; they could not but make her extremely uncomfortable ; they were painful and offensive in the highest degree.

What should she do then, how could she behave, so as to avoid exciting these disagreeable remarks, and yet sufficiently fulfil her duties as mistress of his house ? Mr. Mortimer's expectations on that subject were so very decided ; he so particularly insisted on a free, graceful, easy, unconstrained air, and was so grievously annoyed at awkwardness or dullness.

Certainly, so far as Lord Clarence was concerned, he was so amiable, cheerful, and well-bred, that it would be easier than with some other persons to get over the unpleasantness of what had passed, if Mr. Mortimer would not again revert to it ; but if he should, the young man's frank, friendly manners would be against

her ; how could she adopt coldness and reserve without making matters worse ?

All this ran quickly through her mind after Bertha had spoken ; then she recollected that of all follies, that of tormenting ourselves about the future possible evils or inconveniences in our path, is the greatest. She had only to do what was right now, and that was, if possible, to stop Bertha's gossip.

"Blanche was so cross at his not coming in yesterday to see her, that she would not drive to Oaklea to call on Lady Fanny," pursued Bertha ; " I suppose she has been sulking at home alone. I wish her joy of it "

"Your sister drove with me to call on Miss Fairfax," said Nora, quietly ; " we had a very pleasant drive."

"To call on Miss Fairfax !" screamed Bertha. " Well, wonders will never cease ; and with you too ! what shall we hear next ? *Après nous le déluge.*"

Nora was perfectly silent after this exclamation.

“I say, Mrs. Mortimer, what made Blanche do any such thing—such a penance? for we all know how pleasant it must have been to you both. ‘I never!’ as my maid says.”

“She proposed it, but she assigned no reason,” said Nora. “I suppose she wished to go.”

“Well, we went to Oaklea, papa, Margherite, and I,” pursued Bertha, after sundry more ejaculations expressive of amazement.

“Perhaps you will excuse me,” said Nora, in desperation, rising to go; “I really must dress, for I have a great deal to do.” *

Bertha, angry and disappointed, was forced to let her go, and retired murmuring; however, her anger Nora thought of less consequence than Mr. Mortimer’s displeasure.

Her husband came to her dressing-room just after she entered it. He came to announce the expected visitors, but he entered into no par-

ticulars as to the reason of the invitation, nor did he make any explanation about having gone to pay a visit with his daughters, which he had forbidden to his wife. It was not necessary to mention such things; all her business was to receive his guests when they arrived with proper attention.

Mr. Mortimer seemed in a particularly placid mood, and although he made rather a parade of his deference to her, in thus communicating this piece of intelligence, he was quite kind compared with his ordinary manner; and Nora began to wonder what happy star was shining benignantly over the house, and shedding so soft an influence on the minds of both father and daughter.

Nothing was said that evening publicly about the visitors. Blanche never voluntarily named Lord Clarence, and Nora could not guess from her look or manner, whether she were pleased or not by the arrangement. Margherite never condescended to enter into details as to where she

had been, or what she had done, to her step-mother ; and Bertha was afraid to talk about such things as concerned her sisters in their presence ; moreover, she was so affronted with Mrs. Mortimer, that she had resolved not to speak to her at all.

So the evening wore away, as usual, in dullness, and chiefly in silence ; and outwardly there was no apparent change from any preceding one ; and yet there was a difference to two of the party, for Nora felt lighter-hearted than she had done for many a long day ; and Blanche, having made the effort to procure for her step-mother the civil attention of an early communication regarding the expected visitors, which she had persuaded her father to go at once and tell her, was enjoying the uncommon luxury of self-approbation for an act of consideration to the feelings of others.

Luncheon-time the next day brought the visitors.

Lady Fanny expressed so warm a pleasure at

meeting, and testified it so openly by her greeting of Nora, as made Margherite, who was present, shrug her shoulders, and Bertha determined to forget all past causes of dissatisfaction.

Lord Clarence was to Mrs. Mortimer just the same as ever—particularly friendly, cordial, and pleasant.

To the other ladies he was decidedly cooler in his manner; and with Miss Mortimer, who entered the dining-room rather late, and whom Nora watched as they met with some secret interest, he was perfectly calm and self-possessed, so entirely so, that a vague idea she had entertained of there being some peculiar regard existing between these two, was abandoned for the time as fanciful and unreal.

“It is really very good of you and Mr. Mortimer to receive us,” said Lord Clarence to his hostess, as he was carving the cold fowls at luncheon for her, “after being twice driven away by such very unpleasant circumstances from houses where we have been visiting, you

show great strength of mind in not shunning us* yourself !”

Mrs. Mortimer did not at all understand to what he alluded, and shewed it by her looks.

“Did not Mr. Mortimer tell you the reason for his extending his kind hospitality to us ?” asked he.

“No, indeed ; he knew that I required no reason, and no excuse to make me welcome your sister, and I am also glad to see you,” said Nora, very sincerely.

“Ah then, he conceals from you the obligation under which he lays us. The fact is, ~~that~~ but for his kind hospitality Fanny and I should have had to return to a desolate and dilapidated dwelling, or to quarter ourselves at Castle St. Amand all alone, for the Duke and Duchess are at Paris at present.”

“But why should the Mordaunts turn you out ?” asked she.

“I am sorry to say the eldest son’s wife is very ill, and Sir Henry and Lady Mordaunt were

anxious to go to him, and of course the young ladies also accompany them, or go somewhere else for the time. At all events, we could not remain there; and my little house at Mineton is undergoing repair this autumn, and not exactly habitable yet."

"I am very sorry indeed for the distress of the Mordaunts, so much so as almost to be ashamed of being so glad to see you here; but then, we will set that down to satisfaction at Mr. Mortimer being able to accommodate you, and my pleasure will pass for a virtue."

"I am very much obliged to you," was his reply, with some emphasis.

Bertha eagerly interposed a question, as to what had happened before; what previous event had driven him away; from what place; and how should Mrs. Mortimer know anything about it.

He mentioned the bare fact; but that did not satisfy Bertha, who kept on questioning him, until she attracted Lady Fanny's attention, who

had been previously chatting with Mr. Mortimer. She took up the story, and repeated all the particulars, with a protestation that Mr. Lawrence owed his life, perhaps, to the firmness and prudence of Nora.

The latter coloured deeply, and in the first pause said, without raising her eyes—

“It was Mr. Mortimer’s promptness in riding off for a doctor which was of the greatest service. Nothing I could do was of importance, compared with that.”

Thoughts of those days and of the difference between *then* and *now*, of the feelings which accompanied them, and the disappointments which had so quickly ensued, flitting across her mind, made her extremely glad to find at that moment that the party had finished their luncheon, and were all disposed to move from the table.

Lady Fanny came up to Nora’s side, and passing her hand affectionately through her arm, repeated her protestations of pleasure at their

meeting again, in which expressions Bertha tried hard to have a share, but not very successfully.

The day was cold and gloomy, threatening snow from the heavy clouds which hung low, giving a chilling atmosphere to external nature, which was peculiarly unattractive. Something was said about its being too bad to go out. Blanche declined riding, which was unusual with her; and Mr. Mortimer said he was glad of it, as he had letters to write.

The party separated. Blanche, had it not been for the visitors, would perhaps have carried * out her new-formed plans, by offering to sit with Mrs. Mortimer, instead of shutting herself up alone; but she could not endure the appearance of imitating Bertha's behaviour, and therefore she walked away, and Margherite accompanied her, making a slight apology, by observing, that as Lady Fanny was going to her own room, she would not want them now.

Lady Fanny with exemplary politeness begged

not to interrupt their pursuits, and then followed her hostess upstairs, to Bertha's great delight, who was left, as she supposed, to a *tête-à-tête* with Lord Clarence.

"Come to the library, and see how papa has improved it," said she. "I am going to read there."

"Thank you, but not just now; I am not studious. I shall go out for a turn in the Park," was his disappointing answer; and Bertha had the library to herself if she liked.

Nora and Lady Fanny speedily agreed, that although it was dull out of doors, still a quick walk would do them good; besides, the visitor wanted to see the school of which her brother had spoken much; and instead of adjourning to the hearth-rug, they went down stairs, prepared to leave the house.

Nora, asking her companion to wait one minute, repaired to her husband's room to account for herself, and her intentions.

"Lady Fanny has asked me to go out with her—you have no objection?"

"Very right—very right; her ladyship will find it cold, I can tell her, but that is her concern, not mine. Where's her brother?"

"Gone out, I believe, alone; we saw him from the window."

"Oh, well, then Blanche could come to me. I want her advice and help."

He went on speaking as he was mending a pen. Several letters and notes were lying on the table before him.

"Can I be of any use to you?" asked Nora humbly.

"None, except to take care and make it pleasant to the visitors. Pay every sort of attention to Lord Clarence and his sister. The Duke's interest may be of great importance, and one cannot take too much pains to secure it."

"Lady Fanny said she should find her brother if she could," continued the conscientious Nora, "and ask him to walk with us?"

"Very well, if they like it, you cannot do better. The great object is to make the house agreeable; which, as mistress is a duty, that falls exclusively on you. Find out what they like, and let them do it; only make it pleasant, that they may be in no hurry to leave. Now you understand what I wish?"

"Perfectly," said Nora; and off she went, to act on these injunctions.

They soon fell in with Lord Clarence, had a very pleasant ramble, which made them forget the cold, and did not return to the house until the rapidly fading twilight brought them back with spirits raised, and quickly circulating blood, the reward of exercise, in a cold wintry air.

"I hope you are going to take me to that pleasant boudoir of which Clarence told me," said Lady Fanny, as they walked through the hall together.

"Oh, it is no boudoir," replied Nora; "it is a comfortable sitting-room, where you or any

body who likes, and wants my society, may come when they please."

"A permission of which I shall gladly avail myself," said both brother and sister.

"I sit there to read and write when I am alone," continued Nora, "because even the ordinary drawing-room is too large for comfort to a creature brought up in a nutshell, as I was; but this room is so nicely fitted up, and so very luxurious, that I feel often ashamed of having it so much for my own use, and am thankful to share the pleasure with a friend."

As she spoke, she ushered them into the apartment in question, where the blazing fire shed its ruddy glow on the cheerful-looking curtains, the polished walnut-wood book-shelves and the handsomely bound volumes which filled them; and then, as it glanced on the centre table so replete with materials for pleasant occupation, on the easy-chairs so tempting for luxurious idleness, it threw up their strange, distorted,

dancing shadows grotesquely on the blue and silver paper hangings.

Lady Fanny sat down at once on the rug, with an exclamation of delight, and Nora so far imitated her example, as to take the lowest footstool there; leaving Lord Clarence to instal himself in the depths of one of the easiest of lounging-chairs.

They were in the full enjoyment of the most sociable chat, comparing recollections of the Rhine and the Alps, and laughing merrily at Lord Clarence's burlesques of travellers' affectations, when Bertha joined their party, and rather chilled their mirth.

The pause made Nora uncomfortable—she was afraid Bertha would feel herself an intruder, although she might have spared her anxiety, for that young lady was not gifted with such acute sensibilities.

Anxious, however, to introduce some discourse, she mentioned a book she had been reading, and they soon went off again into a

most animated comparison of pleasure in reading certain new publications, and differences of opinion regarding them. In spite of the fitful light, Nora could not help seeing that any observation of hers regarding books Blanche had mentioned, or remarks which she had heard Miss Mortimer make concerning authors and their works, were received with a difference of manner by Lord Clarence, which made her again doubtful whether his calm and lofty courtesy were not in part, at least, a disguise.

Bertha was reduced to silence. She never read herself, and she had therefore nothing to say on such topics ; all she could do, was to assume an air of deep interest in the conversation, and make this particularly marked when the gentleman spoke.

Her theatrical airs were perfectly lost on her companions, and when they all separated to dress for dinner, she could not help thinking how stupid the other three were.

After the ladies left the dinner-table that

evening, as they were all standing round the drawing-room fire, Lady Fanny suddenly asked them, in a general way, how they thought Clarence was looking?

Nora said "Thin;" Bertha protested "Very charming; but don't tell him I said so," which his sister readily promised; Margherite observed carelessly, "Much as usual;" but Blanche, betrayed for a moment into exhibiting an interest she wished to conceal, said, with some earnestness, "Has he been unwell at all, or why do you ask?"

"Overworked, Miss Mortimer—he is worn to a shadow, and we came away from Mineton for change of air for him. Clarence has been doing such wonders of self-denial and goodness, that it is a matter of astonishment that there is anything of life left in him. I thought we should have lost him half-a-dozen times this autumn."

Of course she was eagerly pressed to tell her meaning; and not a little proud of her

brother's character, she was ready enough to do so.

"You know what a very unhealthy^{*} summer it was ; the scarcity had brought on low fever, and even in our own village at St. Amand, there was a great deal of illness. But I went to stay with Clarence at Mineton, and whilst I was there typhus, or as the people call it, *the fever*, broke out among them violently. The Mineton people are not badly off for wages, but they have been dreadfully neglected ; they have overgrown their houses, and their occupations are mostly unhealthy. Their immorality, the result of crowded houses, is frightful, and their helplessness in sickness perfectly astonishing. Well, Clarence wanted me to go home at once out of harm's way, whilst he stayed, and with the clergyman and doctor, superintended hospitals and fever cases ; nursed, fed, and physicked two or three hundred sick persons ; visited infected cottages ; cleaned out pestilential rooms, such

as one never dreams of; and, in short, toiled on from morning till night unceasingly."

"And did you?" asked Blanche, in a deeply earnest tone.

"No, of course not; if *he* had been taken with fever, who would there have been to nurse him? Whilst he was hourly exposing his life, to try and atone for the neglect of the former proprietor, it would have been too bad to have shrunk from standing by him, so far as I could; I was not quite so wretched as to desert him then. However, he was uneasy, and wrote to mamma."

"And the Duchess ordered you home, I suppose?" said Margherite.

"The Duchess did no such thing," replied Lady Fanny; "my mother came herself to help us. It rather startled me, I confess, to see how fearlessly she threw herself into the work with Clarence; but she said, people of her age were less likely to take infection, and she could have every advantage in food, and change of clothes,

and fresh air at home. And how could we say she should not do what she so dearly loves—devote herself to the good of others?”

“And what did you do, Lady Fanny?” said Nora, taking her hand.

“Stayed at home and made broth, jelly, gruel, arrow-root, weighed out medicines, and poured port wine into small bottles, suitable for distribution. Mine was a most inglorious, unheroic part, and I had not always enough to do to keep me from worrying a little about my mother and Clarence, when they stayed out very late.”

“But they came to no harm?” said Nora.

“They did not take the fever, but Clarence was worn by his unwearied exertions to a perfect shadow. He is not naturally strong, and sometimes I thought he must give way. But mind triumphed over matter; resolution, and intense self-devoted zeal, carried him through. When the last case was reported cured, and everything was in its natural order, we got him

to come away, and after a fortnight of purifying at Malvern, we came to the Mordaunts."

"And all this is only just over, then," said Nora; "no wonder he looks so thin."

"The hard work has been over these two months now. The worst was in September, and by the beginning of November there was comparative tranquillity; but it was some time before we were quite sure that everything infected or infectious was removed, and he would not go till he had made arrangements for better dwellings for his people. The expense of the new rows of cottages, and the fever, and the repairs to his own house, which were indispensable, have made him very poor this year; he has parted with all his stable establishment, and given up every sort of expense which he could curtail. In fact, he is a much poorer man now, since he has had this property, than he was before in his regiment, with the allowance papa made him."

"Probably a happier one," suggested Nora.

“Infinitely. You have no idea how comfortable and snug he and I were together, before the fever appeared, in his little house at Mineton. To be sure, had we known how unsafe the roof was, and that any day a gale of wind might bring it down on our heads, we should not perhaps have slept so soundly ; but ignorance in our case was decidedly bliss of the very first quality,”

What were Blanche Mortimer's feelings in discovering how completely she had undervalued and mis-appreciated the character of a man, whose devotion she had despised too much to secure it by encouragement ? That this former devotion was no longer in existence, that his opinions or his wishes were altered, she could not but feel. She had been conscious of it at their first meeting, and the dinner had confirmed her conviction. There was no longer the anxiety for her good opinion which had made his eye constantly seek hers, as he spoke, to read there what she thought ; there was none

of that deference with which her lightest word had formerly been listened to ; there was nothing in his address of ill-concealed consciousness, or eager desire to please ; nor was there either, on the other hand, the shadow of pique or resentment. It was no assumed coldness, to veil strong feelings ; it was neither contempt nor anger ; his behaviour was as far removed from insolent neglect, as it was from pointed admiration. He treated her with a calm, easy, well-bred attention, such as any woman might expect, and which, as Miss Mortimer, was peculiarly her due ; but the calmness and self-possession with which friendly civilities were offered, testified that her power over his heart was at present gone. Why ?

Conscience told her that Lord Clarence had learnt, perceived, or in some way discovered, the faults for which Mr. Armytage had so deservedly reproached her the preceding day ; and it was this discovery which had alienated him. Conscience told her more ; it told her he was

right ! Pride and anger struggled in her mind with truth and repentance ; her long-indulged hatred to her young step-mother rose up again, as anger whispered that it was her doing ; it was through her that she had lost a treasure, of which too late she saw the value. Was it not enough that she should have endeavoured to supersede her in her father's heart, should have really done so in his house, but must she also rob her of the affections of the only man who seemed to her worthy to love her—the only man whom she herself could ever love ?

Then came unwelcome truth, and whispered, nay, but the cause and effect were alike the work of Blanche herself. Who else was to blame for the cold neglect, the extreme aversion with which she had uniformly treated her father's wife ? Had she not purposely drawn away her father also, preventing all unity, all sympathy between the married pair, by the influence which she had unscrupulously exerted to engage him in pursuits and pleasures in which

Nora was not permitted to share? And what punishment so just, for the woman who had so ruthlessly inflicted this injury on another, as to find that she had brought down a like sorrow on herself?

The warfare in her mind was so bitter, so overpowering, as to make her incapable of entirely regulating her manners; and when Lady Fanny talked of music, and Nora ventured, on the strength of their yesterday's amity, to ask Blanche to touch her harp, she received a cold and ungracious negative, such as completely silenced the petition, and visibly disconcerted Nora.

A moment's reflection made Blanche regret her answer; more especially when, raising her eyes, she caught a glimpse of Mrs. Mortimer's face of distress and penitence. It was a strange sort of fascination which that face exercised over her now. In her thoughts, when she dwelt on the idea of her step-mother, her antipathy seemed unabated even to herself. Out of her

sight she still hated her ; but when they had really conversed together, Nora's sweet and humble looks had gained an influence over her affections, and when she met her eye, she could no longer consider her as the enemy her imagination dwelt on : she seemed another being entirely. No, she could not hate her, face to face.

To fill a silence which seemed rather awkward, Lady Fanny asked Margherite if she had seen a new opera ? The reply was, that Blanche had the music, and played it sometimes ; how did her ladyship like it ?

A slight discussion about the merits of some particular song followed ; and presently Blanche, when referred to, offered to play the piece in question, to settle some difference of opinion ; and though conscious how whimsical she must appear, she went straight to her harp.

This action was very differently interpreted by those who witnessed it. The brother and sister considered it, as it must naturally appear, an act

of caprice intended to make her reply to Mrs. Mortimer more pointedly rude; whilst Nora, on the contrary, judging her with a kindness to which, it must be admitted, Blanche had little claim, took it as it really was, a concession on her part that she had been wrong in refusing.

Lord Clarence was very fond of music; and there was a time when Miss Mortimer's harp and voice would have brought him instantly to her side; but that time was past.

Music had its sway still, and politeness also had its laws. He listened with an attention which Bertha could not distract by any effort of which she was capable; but though music was the same to him, Blanche was not; and even when bored by Bertha's attempts to engross him, he moved away, and, in his enthusiasm for Beethoven, drew near the harp, it was perfectly apparent that it was his ear and his taste which were influenced, and not his heart. The performer was little more thought of than the instrument.

She felt it ; and anxious to preserve her dignity, she felt she must not show her recognition of the change. Her manners must be the same as ever, preserving just such a degree of friendly courtesy as was due to the dear friend of her lost brother, and equally free from encouraging kindness as from conscious and repulsive coldness.

So they stood there whilst she re-tuned her harp, and conversed of recent composers, and the value of their works, of symphonies, and songs, and other subjects connected with the art ; and no one would have guessed what either brow concealed under its polished calmness, or could have imagined the contradiction which existed between those open, easy tones of friendly discussion, and the tumult of thoughts within.

Blanche went to her room that night with a heart writhing under the humiliating discovery that she had just made, that she had succeeded in extinguishing the affection of her former admirer, at the very time when she became

conscious how strong an influence he held over hers.

From her inmost soul she regretted this most unfortunate and ill-timed visit ; it crossed her plans, it interfered with, it grieved, it humbled her. Had he not been there, there would have been no difficulty in retracing her steps, and adopting a conciliatory conduct towards Mrs. Mortimer.

She was so gentle, humble, and unpretending ; she seemed so absolutely unconscious of her claims, so ready to accept as a favour the smallest attention ; so perfectly devoid of all triumph, if Blanche owned herself wrong, either by word or deed, that Miss Mortimer had thought atonement for the past, and improvement in her future conduct towards her, would be an easy task.

And so it would have been, had circumstances remained as they were. But it is not intended that the paths of repentance should be always easy, or the act of amendment sweet. Our sins

must often bring their own punishment, and we must bear it.

It was all her own doing too ! She had made the evil that she feared, then fought against it under the idea that she was the injured party.

Had she only acted as she ought to have done to her father's wife, she would have found in her a friend, a companion, a blessing for her daily life ; and perhaps—yes—perhaps, Lord Clarence would have been still the same as ever to her.

But now what was she to do ?

Change her whole conduct towards Mrs. Mortimer, and thus seem to court the company of her former lover when he was inclined to draw back ? No, no, never ; she could not thus disgrace herself. Every feeling of her mind revolted—she was only humiliated, not humbled yet.

She would, she thought, take a middle course ; she would be quiet—inobtrusive ; she would avoid all occasions on which her wishes and

Nora's might jar. She would, when they were together, be scrupulous as to her conduct, and would carefully avoid such blameable proofs of ill temper as she had exhibited this evening.

She thought, that with visitors in the house, the whole family must be brought nearer together, and then she might, without its being in any way perceptible, influence her father to behave with more attention to his wife's wishes, and give her more share in his company and consideration.

CHAPTER IV.

“ There are to whom this gay green earth
Might seem a mournful penance cave.”

MR. MORTIMER had been forcibly struck by the propriety of procuring such amusement as company and change could afford to his present guests, to enliven their residence under his roof ; or, in other words, he was desirous of making use of them as a bait, to allure to his house visitors who were usually shy of his society.

It was his great desire to be on good terms with the best families in his own neighbourhood ;

but he never could quite conceal from himself the unpleasant fact, that he was by no means a popular character amongst them.

His parties were large and numerous at times, his dinners good, and his wine excellent. Moreover, he had three very handsome daughters; yet his house was never spoken of as a pleasant one, nor were his neighbours' visits so frequent as to run the smallest risk of being called intrusive.

His daughters had, perhaps, something to do with this; their manners were not always gracious nor conciliating.

Margherite was almost unrivalled in insolence of conduct to such as she conceived her inferiors, and could walk through a room occupied by persons she would not recognise, as if the chairs, in front of which she swept, had been untenanted.

Ladies especially, whether young or old, were her aversion, unless they had some distinguishing characteristic, such as rank or fashion: but

she could generally contrive to be gracious to young men, who were recommended by a much smaller share of merit.

Bertha was anxious generally to be as rude as her sister ; but being a great deal more silly, her imitations of Margherite's manners were not well got up ; but her taste for flattery and idle flirtation was far more strongly developed, and required much less refined aliment to nourish it.

The worst that could be said of Blanche was, that she was often haughty and cold.

She had too much self-respect to stoop to insolence, she was too proud to be rude. She had always piqued herself on fulfilling the duties of mistress of the house with propriety ; but she certainly had not the art of popularity any more than her father. Perhaps it was self-consciousness which interfered in both cases. She could never forget that she was Miss Mortimer of Brierly Park, and her behaviour was too apt to remind others also, of this indis-

putable fact: it was evident to the observing that she was gracious, because it became her position, not because it was their due.

It was to concert some measures for securing a larger party in the house, that Mr. Mortimer had summoned Blanche to his room; she had suggested, on that occasion, the propriety of referring the propositions to Mrs. Mortimer, or giving her some option in the matter.

This her father had negatived: first, because it was unnecessary, as she would of course make no difficulties; secondly, inconvenient, as she was gone out, and to wait would be loss of time; thirdly, useless, as she knew so little about who should be asked, or what it would be proper to do: and so having disposed of Nora's claims to consideration, he related his plans to his daughter.

The next day being Sunday, of course they should invite nobody but Mr. Armytage; but there were some families who would probably be at church, and whom they might take the

opportunity of asking, in a friendly way, to an unceremonious dinner on Monday; whilst deliberate invitations sent out that afternoon, might secure visitors for the rest of the week, who would be ready to dine and sleep at the park.

Blanche had no objection to make to the plan, except what had been included in her wish to consult the nominal mistress of the house; she felt even then, that it would be a relief to have some addition to their party; and when she reflected on it at night, after the painful constraint under which she had been suffering, she was truly glad of such a prospect.

Mr. Mortimer did not tell his wife of the plan, until all the invitations were despatched, when she had nothing to do but to give her acquiescence, and promise to do her best to entertain any visitors whom he chose to ask.

When the party met at breakfast the following morning, it was discovered that the thick clouds which had been so heavy the day before,

had cleared away, and given place to a frost so sharp and sudden as to take them all by surprise.

“Another such night,” said Lord Clarence, “and the ice will bear, I should think.”

“Charming,” cried Bertha, “we shall have some skating; Lord Clarence, you used to excel in that!”

He made some indifferent reply; and she went on chattering, detailing to Lady Fanny some delightful parties which they had two winters ago, when the lake was frozen over, and a great many people came there to skate. She hoped the same thing would occur again, it was so delightful; they had the best sheet of water in the neighbourhood, and a great many young men had been glad to come to it.

Lady Fanny bore the prospect with equanimity, and as soon as she conveniently could, turned away from her.

Bertha's anticipations were realised; the frost continued all Sunday, the December sun having

no power over the ice, except that of making the minute crystals on the ground and shrubs glitter like fairy diamonds.

The day was spent much as usual by the family, only Nora, between the services, had the pleasure of Lady Fanny's society, instead of sitting in solitude as she so often had to do. She had become so accustomed to the habit of secluding themselves, which Blanche and Margherite practised, that she took it now quite as a matter of course, and it never occurred to her that any one would take umbrage at her welcoming her young visitor to her own favourite sitting-room, or would hesitate about joining them there, if they wished for their society. ' .

She little suspected with what malevolent interest her behaviour was watched by Margherite, or the cruel and false interpretations which that young lady was always ready to put upon her simplest actions. Margherite was particularly provoked at the preference which Lady

Fanny showed for Mrs. Mortimer's society, neither was she blind to the change apparent in the brother's behaviour to Blanche. This she scrupled not to attribute to Nora's influence, exerted probably from anger and resentment, and she watched her therefore with a determination to discover that she was the authoress of this alteration, and to convince both her father and sister of the fact.

She was the more anxious to do so, as she fancied that she saw symptoms of weakness in Blanche, which she had little expected. Her sister seemed inclined to make peace with her step-mother. Such an act, such a concession was not to be borne if it could be averted. It would be a reflection on their previous conduct, an admission of former wrong-doing, the bare idea of which threw Margherite into a fever of ill-humour. Determined to continue to do evil herself, she was indignant that her sister should show symptoms of doing better, and she set herself to find additional causes of irritation,

which might serve to prevent any reconciliation between the parties.

Whilst the family were at church on Sunday morning, Bertha's eyes had been arrested by the appearance of a stranger in a pew nearly *vis-à-vis* to their own. The party who sat there, were a quiet, respectable, elderly couple, who possessed a small property bordering on Brierly Park, where they resided; they were not remarkably wise, not astonishingly cultivated, they were neither elegant nor very wealthy; they were simply a plain, well-meaning pair, of regular habits. Mr. Johnson read the papers, grew excited about politics; at least every quarter confidently predicted that the nation was on the very brink of ruin, and would be entirely upset in less than two years. Such were his theories: his practice was different, for he cultivated his fields, built a new stable and coach-house, and planted a number of young fruit-trees in his orchard, with a confidence of reaping the advantages and fruits of his labours, which either

showed little faith in his own predictions, or an extraordinary persuasion that he and his would remain firm in the general overthrow.

His wife was a very quiet person. She did carpet-work, reared expensive poultry, had a nice green-house, and gave away broth to sick persons. The most salient point of her character was, that she was a mother ; that was her glory ! she was mother of one son, a tall, affected, slow young man, who tried, by drawling and lisping, wearing odd-looking clothes, and keeping his hair, beard, and whiskers, uncouthly long, to look as much like a foreigner and as little like a rational Briton as he could.

He was well known to the young ladies at the Park, and when no better individual was present, Bertha had enjoyed many a flirtation with him ; moreover, he was rather proud of their notice, and boasted in certain circles of his acquaintance with the Miss Mortimers, especially amongst those who were not quite elevated enough to enjoy that privilege themselves. It

was not, however, his presence at church which disturbed Bertha's devotions ; it was that of a companion who accompanied him.

This individual was so decidedly foreign in his countenance, dress, and appearance, as to throw into the shade all Alfred Johnson's assumptions, and make him look very English indeed. Bertha quickly made up her mind that the stranger was a Frenchman, and also that he was a very good-looking man, and most exquisitely dressed. The next thing she discovered was, that the pew she occupied presented a great attraction to the gentlemen. A good deal of whispering passed between them, and the eyes of both were constantly directed, as she believed, towards her. Certainly hers was the most conspicuous face amongst the ladies there ; and as her eyes were constantly turned in that direction, she might naturally suppose they repaid the compliment.

Bertha was highly delighted, when, after service, Alfred Johnson approached Mr. Mortimer,

and asked permission, if the frost continued, to bring a friend up to the Park to enjoy a little skating on the lake. The leave was readily given; the young men were invited to come to luncheon, and Mr. and Mrs. Johnson were not only courteously requested to come up and see the diversions on the ice, but afterwards to honour them with their company at dinner.

The Johnsons were not the people he most wished to secure for Monday, but there was no harm in asking them.

General Langdale and his family were much more important persons in Mr. Mortimer's eyes. He was an extremely wealthy man, who resided about five miles from Brierly; but having quarrelled with his own clergyman about tithes, or church-rates, or something of the kind, had been for years in the habit of driving over on Sunday to attend, at what he was pleased to call, Mr. Armytage's church, and show his contempt for the Mr. Cooper who was rector of his own parish.

Mr. Mortimer had the triumph of persuading General Langdale to promise his company on Monday, together with that of his wife and daughters ; for although at first he rather hesitated and hung back, such was the magical effect of rank on Mrs. Langdale's mind, that the moment she heard of a Lord and Lady being at Brierly, she accepted the invitation in a most decided way, leaving the General nothing to do but acquiesce in her decision, and declare himself happy and honoured.

So Bertha was secure of some amusement if the frost continued, and Blanche was content to feel safe from the pain of such another evening as Saturday.

Nora was exceedingly disappointed at this sudden prospect of an influx of visitors into the house. She had hoped to enjoy Lady Fanny's society in comfort, and they had planned together delightful schemes for reading in doors, and rambles in the park.

"It is all at an end," said she, with a sigh,

as Monday forenoon drew to a close; and they were expecting every moment to be summoned to luncheon. "General and Mrs. Langdale, with their two daughters, sleep here to-night, and I must forsake this pleasant, room and devote myself to being as civil as I can to them all in the drawing-room. I only hope the frost will continue, and then there will be something to amuse all the visitors. There are some more people coming on Tuesday, after the Langdales go, and we shall be full all the week."

Mr. Alfred Johnson presented himself punctually at the luncheon, and introduced to his host and hostess the smiling, well-dressed, whiskered stranger, by the title of M. le Marquis de Veri. This gentleman was overwhelmed and delighted with the kind urbanity with which Mr. Mortimer did receive him into his amiable family. He was only too happy to make his acquaintance, and that of these very charming ladies.

Mr. Mortimer himself did not look particu-

larly delighted at the introduction ; he evidently viewed the stranger with coldness and distrust, and cut short his polite harangue by begging him to take a seat at the luncheon-table.

Of all the ladies, Bertha alone seemed at all pleased with this new acquaintance. They sat together at table, and kept up a wonderful chattering and giggling ; whilst Mr. Alfred Johnson was trying by a more solemn style of attention, to recommend himself to Blanche ; who having resolved to be amiable to the miscellaneous visitors about to be inflicted on the party, and so do her best to assist and support her father's wife through the troublesome duties thus imposed on her, exerted herself to reply to his serene and laboured platitudes with all the complaisance she could command.

When the repast was concluded, they all prepared to go down to the lake, where the ice was reported to be beautifully firm, smooth, and glassy. It proved, in fact, much too slippery for the ladies to venture on at all, and the gentle-

men had the field to themselves. There was however, a good deal of amusement, as the party was joined by several additional performers, young gentlemen at home for the Christmas holidays, and eager for an excitement which in our country is popular, not only from its own intrinsic charms, but because of the uncertain and often brief opportunities during which it can be enjoyed. There were merriment and shouts ; there were trials of skill, and races ; there were falls, and failures ; and the bright eyes that beamed on the performers, of course cheered them on to greater exertions.

In the midst of the amusement, whilst Bertha was making an attempt to advance upon the ice, supported by Alfred Johnson's powerful hand, giggling and screaming at every step in the hopes of attracting universal attention, and especially that of the charming Marquis, she suddenly perceived that the individual in question was not in sight.

She stopped to enquire what was become of

him. Her companion did not know, and nobody else near her could tell either. Bertha began to excite herself: she was sure the unfortunate stranger had met with some accident—he had broken through in some place, and was perhaps drowned. She conjured all the skaters to search immediately for some trace of him, and persuaded them to separate in different directions to discover, if possible, the hole by which he had been lost.

There really was something a little alarming in his sudden disappearance in such a place; and for a moment the other gentlemen listened to her eager entreaties; but then it was discovered that Mr. Mortimer was gone too, and before Bertha's filial affection had found time for much display, Nora, who had been walking at a little distance, listening patiently to Mrs. Johnson's admiration of her son's performance, heard what was passing, and quieted them all, by stating that she had seen Mr. Mortimer and M. de Veri land on the other side of the lake,

take off their skates and walk away into a thick plantation, which skirted the water.

What they could be gone for, nobody could divine, and few cared to guess, except Bertha, who, with the infatuated admiration with which some girls always consider a handsome foreigner, could talk of nothing else, and persecuted Alfred Johnson with questions as to his history and antecedents.

The good-natured Alfred told her all he knew ; but that was not much. M. de Veri was, he believed, a man of good family, and appeared to be well-off ; he knew all the best society at Paris ; had been recently introduced to Alfred himself, at Folkstone ; was very accomplished ; never gamed, and altogether seemed a very respectable party. Mr. Johnson added, slyly, that from the great admiration he expressed for English ladies, and his peculiar anxiety to be introduced to the family of Mr. Mortimer, he thought he must have some designs in his head.

In about half-an-hour, M. de Veri returned to the party, with a peculiarly cheerful appearance ; he accounted for his absence by saying that Mr. Mortimer had been so good as to take him for a pleasant walk through part of the grounds, and that they had enjoyed it very much. Mr. Mortimer himself had gone on a little farther to speak to some labourers, but he had been in haste to return to the charming society he had left behind !

The Marquis did not again go on the ice, but attached himself to the party of ladies, especially to Bertha, to whom he seemed bent on making himself agreeable, and with whom he was far more successful than with her sisters ; as nothing could well be more repulsive than Margherite's looks ; and Blanche met his advances with a lofty and chilling politeness, from which he was glad to turn.

The sun had set ; twilight was beginning to fall on the earth, for it was nearly the shortest day, when Mr. Mortimer emerged from the

plantations near the lake, and rejoined his visitors.

They were all standing together, preparatory to returning to the house, when the owner of Brierly, coming up to Alfred Johnson, said—

“I have had the pleasure of discovering in your visitor, M. de Veri, the—the—connection—near relative—cousin, I think, of a former friend—” Mr. Mortimer, whose voice was thick and husky, broke off from a violent fit of coughing, which for some minutes prevented his going on. However, after a while, he recovered enough to say—“I really beg your pardon—hem—but what I was going to say was, that as soon as you can spare him to us, we shall be proud, happy, Mrs. Mortimer and myself, and my daughters, to receive him at Brierly, and try to return to him the kindness which—” here a return of this choking and spasmodic cough, cut short the speech. However, Alfred had caught enough for all purposes of comprehension; and as soon as he could be

heard, or rather a little before, protested in his slow way that he was perfectly satisfied to part with the company of his friend, if it was agreeable to all parties that he should do so.

M. le Marquis declared himself *abimé*, and *désolé*, that he could not be in two places at once, but the extreme kindness of Mr. Mortimer could not be disregarded; so as Mr. Alfred was ready to spare him, he would be only too happy to accept the invitation, and transfer himself to Brierly Hall to-morrow.

This conversation was listened to with various feelings by the auditors. Bertha was delighted; Blanche astonished and perplexed; whilst Nora was principally occupied in scanning her husband's countenance, where her timid but watchful eye could read signs of passion subdued and kept under, but yet whose internal violence frightened her. Something, she was sure, was very much the matter.

The brother and sister walked up arm-in-arm to the house, a little apart from the others.

Lord Clarence showed, by a low, subdued whistle, that he was not pleased.

“What’s the matter?” asked Lady Fanny, when out of hearing.

“I think Mr. Mortimer might really exercise a little more judgment and discretion in the choice of the visitors he invites to the house, whilst *my* sister is here, whatever he may do for his own wife and daughters.”

“My dear Clarence,” remonstrated his sister, “what whim is this?”

“Why, do you think my father and mother will like you to be associated with that smiling, ecstatic French adventurer there? did you not hear Mr. Mortimer invite him to his house, just now?”

“Yes, but I do not see why you should call him an adventurer. Mr. Mortimer, I understood, knows his family.”

“The gentleman claims to be connected with some one whom Mr. Mortimer had known; but how do we know that it is not a got-up story.

I believe him to be a fortune-hunting adventurer, and nothing more."

"Well, Clarence, supposing that you are right, he will do *us* no harm; you are not afraid of my being captivated by his elegant flatteries; you cannot suppose he will catch either my heart or my purse. I trust I've seen within my life, five hundred good as he, to take a slight liberty with the dear old ballad: I think I could resist!"

"Pshaw, Fanny! you do not suppose I am afraid of that; but still the association may not be desirable."

"It will be only for a day or two, I suppose," replied her ladyship.

They walked on in silence for a little way, then she added—

"Clarence, don't be the dog-in-the-manger."

He squeezed her hand up under his arm with a little laugh.

"I am not, Fanny; but still she is too good for a French adventurer, and though I have

retired, I should not like her to fall so low."

"She never will. Bertha might be deceived; she seems ready to rise at the bait like a silly fish. But Blanche—oh, no, never!"

Meantime in the division of parties which had occurred in returning, Nora found herself near Blanche.

Mr. Mortimer, as soon as the other gentlemen had taken leave, in order to return home and prepare their dinner toilettes, had again hurried off by another route, and was out of sight; and Margherite and Bertha were whispering together.

"Dear Blanche," said Nora, laying her hand on Miss Mortimer's arm, with an instinct which, in moments of agonising terror, will make even the timid hare seek shelter in the arms of a human being, "can you tell me what is the matter with your father?"

"No, not exactly," replied Blanche; "I observed that he was disturbed; but I do not

think you need frighten yourself so ;” for she felt the hand which touched her tremble exceedingly. “I do not suppose it is anything of great consequence.”

“But perhaps you did not see his face ; and then you do not know how terrible it is when he is moved like that ; you have never offended him.”

“I am sure *you* have not, now,” returned Blanche, with an affection of manner very unusual with her ; “whatever is the matter cannot in the least be connected with you,—indeed, you may depend on that.”

“May I ? But do you know they both looked at me—at the moment when your father spoke, they each threw a glance on me ? M. de Veri’s was a sneering, unpleasant look, a sort of triumph ; and your father’s !—Oh, Blanche, it seemed to say—I can hardly tell you what—or how dreadful it was.”

Blanche walked on in silence for some distance, only drawing her companion’s arm under hers,

as if with a wish to support and shelter her through some threatened danger. As they came near the house she said, in an under tone—

“You are sadly tired now, and you have a long, tedious evening before you. Let me recommend that you go and lie down quietly in your own room, and take a cup of hot coffee as a stimulant. I think you will escape a headache.”

Nora assented.

“I daresay Lady Fanny will sit with you,” pursued Blanche.

“I shall not ask her; for if your father wanted to speak to me, he would be annoyed at finding any visitor there,” replied Mrs. Mortimer.

“And yet you think there is danger of his being displeased,” replied Blanche, with a look of surprise. “To have another person there, might serve as a shield.”

“If he is displeased, Blanche,” said the wife,

“ he has a right to say so, and I must bear it as I can. I would not shelter myself behind any visitor ; nor is there the least good in procrastinating or delaying an explanation.”

“ I admire you !” exclaimed Blanche, warmly ; “ that is a degree of moral courage for which I had hardly given you credit. But will you allow me to come to you ? I could, perhaps, explain some things then, which I cannot do now, lest I should be overheard ; and my presence would certainly do you no harm, as it could cause no offence.”

Nora gratefully assented, and a minute after, they entered the house.

As the whole party stood together, for a brief space, by the blazing wood fire in the large hall, Clarence asked his sister to come to the library with him, to look at a curious old volume he had that morning been examining ; and immediately afterwards, Nora retreated. She was, however, too uneasy and excited to lie down until she was joined by Blanche, who, on her entrance, found

her standing thoughtfully in front of the fire.

“Please don’t think it necessary to knock at this door,” said Nora. “Bertha never does, and Lady Fanny and her brother come in as they like. I am sure you are welcome.”

“Thank you. Now let me see you put yourself on that sofa to rest. The Langdales will be here by five o’clock, and then your labour must begin again.”

She made her young step-mother lie down, and then taking a stool by her side, she began in a low voice to tell her certain circumstances which had taken place some years ago.

“I daresay you do not know that my father at one time lived a great deal abroad? Up to the period when I left school, nearly seven years ago, he was rarely resident here. However, when I was eighteen, he returned home, and since that he has never visited France. What took place there I do not at all know; but some events of a very painful nature cer-

tainly must have happened, for I soon found that my father disliked exceedingly the smallest allusion to the time he spent abroad, and would on no account associate with Frenchmen. Down here they did not often come in our way ; but on one occasion the Dukes of O—— and N—— were in the neighbourhood, and most of the gentlemen resident about (of course of a certain station) made a point of paying respect to them ; but my father would not, although my sisters were wild to join in the fêtes which were given them, and I should not have minded it either ; but he was inflexible, and we saw none of them or their suite.”

“Then why should he ask that M. de Veri here ?” demanded Nora, in surprise.

“I cannot tell the reason, but I can quite account for his emotion on the occasion. That it is extremely disagreeable to him I can fully understand, although there may be motives sufficient to compel him to act contrary to his inclinations. But Mortimers do not like being

mastered by anything, even by fate; and the struggle between necessity and will is enough to account for the looks of discomposure which you noticed. And now you see why I said it could have nothing to do personally with you."

"Probably not. I know nothing of the French, except my poor little Louis;" and Nora sighed away a sad thought or two as the memory of the past rose up.

The natural question as to who was Louis, was followed by the history of the romantic manner in which the child had been saved, which was all quite new to Blanche. She listened with an attention as eager and a triumph as glowing as was Nora's animation in narrating the event.

It told her much concerning her step-mother's early history which she had not known before, and convinced her more than ever of her own injustice and unkindness ever since Mrs. Mortimer's arrival amongst them.

“But what do you think of this M. de Veri?” said Nora, at last, after a pause.

“I can hardly tell. I greatly misdoubt him. I have no confidence in any respect in Mr. Alfred Johnson, either as to knowledge, judgment, taste, or any other quality which could enable him to discern a true man from a rogue. He may be the person, he says. I suppose he is, as my father believes it; but still, his motives for thrusting himself on us appear to be questionable; and I shall most certainly, and without scruple, keep him at the greatest distance which politeness will permit.”

“Bertha—” said Nora, and then stopped.

“Bertha is a goose!” replied Blanche, hastily, “and it would signify very little if she should be carried off by this marquis, be he good, bad, or indifferent.”

“Oh, Blanche!”

“Well, well, you see she never can be happy with such a temper and disposition, let her marry whom she will; and something silly she

will be sure to do. No rational man has ever shown any inclination to marry her; and if she does not get picked up by some French adventurer like this marquis, she will certainly fall a prey to some speculating fortune-hunter from Leamington, or some penniless lieutenant in the army."

"That sounds harsh," interposed Nora.

"You would not think it beyond the truth, if you knew all. When she was only eighteen, she was on the verge of an elopement, and was only stopped by the prudence of one—one whose name you must have heard, my brother Pierrepoint.

"Young as he was, he had the penetration and judgment of a man; and but for him, Bertha would have run away with a wretch who turned out to be a mean attorney's meaner son.

"And another time, Lord Clarence himself interfered, to open my father's eyes to an ill-judged flirtation with a handsome scapegrace in the Marines, which, I believe, is something between

a soldier and a sailor, who unites very often the worst peculiarities of each profession.

“I don’t exactly know the particulars ; but I believe he passed himself off for somebody very grand, and turned out like Sir Piercie Shafton in the story of the Monastery. Bertha was very subdued after this discovery. I know all this will be quite safe with you, otherwise I would not have alluded to it. You may imagine they are not facts to create any great satisfaction or gratify family pride.”

Nora could readily understand that, and quietly agreed to it.

The couple continued talking until towards five o’clock, when Blanche told Mrs. Mortimer the Langdales might be expected every minute ; so she felt obliged to rise and put herself in order to receive them.

In spite of Miss Mortimer’s assurances that she was in no way concerned with her husband’s causes for anger, she could not altogether banish the idea ; and her greatest comfort was,

not that Blanche told her not to be frightened, but that she had promised to stand her friend for the future.

The dinner and evening passed over with solemnity rather than mirth. Neither the Johnsons nor the Langdales were very lively ; and there were private elements of discord between the party which once or twice nearly burst out into sight.

M. de Veri, who sat next Miss Mortimer, and opposite Lord Clarence, was trying, with indefatigable perseverance, to conquer the young lady's reserve, and thaw her icy stateliness of manner.

It certainly was but little encouragement that he received ; and the firmness of mind with which he bore his reverses, and the resolution with which he renewed the assault, might have even extorted admiration from unprejudiced observers.

But there was an expression in the eyes of the gentleman *vis-à-vis* to him, and a cold,

repelling courtesy in the lady, which did not speak of success.

After a while, however, Lord Clarence changed, and appeared more willing to take up, across the table, the conversation which Blanche had suffered to languish. He began asking questions about Parisian society, and induced the gentlemen to pursue the subject.

M. de Veri, flattered by his notice, and anxious to make a favorable impression, assured his Lordship of his intimate acquaintance with the best and highest circles; and never for a moment suspecting that his interrogator happened to be really as well acquainted with certain celebrated individuals as *he* pretended to be, he talked on in a grand way until he had entirely committed himself by saying things which were easily disproved.

Under ordinary circumstances, Lord Clarence would have had too much good breeding and good nature to have noticed or exposed the little failings of a self-complacent vanity; but he

could not pass over these without, as he thought, assisting in a deception and imposition which he believed the so-called Marquis to be practising.

Quietly, and with perfect self-possession, but in a tone which, not only Blanche, but the Frenchman could appreciate, he stated such facts, and asserted so intimate a knowledge of the parties in question, as made the voluble boaster shrink into himself, looking very small indeed.

M. de Veri saw that the English milord was not a person to be disputed with there; and he saw also in the eyes of Miss Mortimer, that she thoroughly comprehended the foil he had received.

A look of fiendish and malevolent indignation passed over his countenance; then suddenly recovering himself, he said—

“Ah, I did mistake—that is all. What milord says is very true.”

And then, with a composure which astonished

those who saw it, he began talking of the French climate and the winter in the Pyrenees.

Blanche imbibed a worse opinion of him from the sudden change in his look so quickly subdued, than from his vanity in claiming grander acquaintance than he really had.

No well-disposed man, with a proper regulation of his passions, would have expressed in his countenance so malicious and angry a feeling. No ordinary man would have been able to conceal it so quickly.

The being who had such strong control over the expression of his features, who could wear a mask so effectually as she believed him to be doing, was far more to be feared than one who gave way to hasty emotion: from looking on him as merely a conceited coxcomb, she began to regard him as a dangerous and designing intriguer.

There were music and singing to diversify the long evening. M. de Veri performed some charming French romances, which threw nearly

all the ladies into raptures; and Mr. Alfred Johnson breathed a plaintive melody on his flute, which instrument he said he had brought with him without the least idea of using, as he was afraid such a musician as Miss Mortimer would criticise him sadly.

Lord Clarence and Miss Julia Langdale were engaged in one corner over a game of chess, which the lady won,—partly, perhaps, because the gentleman, in spite of his best endeavours, could not keep his mind from wandering away from the chessboard into the music-room, from whence so much melody proceeded.

At length the evening came to a close; and when those who were to go were gone, the rest retired for the night, or made believe to do so.

Nora had been anxiously watching her husband's face, but without reading anything decisive. He seemed more than commonly talkative; and, what was unusual with him, she observed that he laughed a good deal.

Nothing could be more courteous than the way in which he pressed his hospitality on his French friend, and spoke of the anticipated pleasure of seeing him next day ; and yet, when Blanche lingered a moment at her door to ask how she felt now, Nora could only shake her head, and say she could not tell.

CHAPTER V.

“Alas for sullen souls, that turn
Keen wholesome airs to poison blight!
Touch'd with Heaven's rod, in ire they burn,
Or in dim anguish writhe ———.”

MARGHERITE and Bertha sat together that night in the apartment of the latter, where her sister had joined her soon after she retired.

Bertha was frightened at this visit, which she half expected would result in some unpleasant reproaches regarding her sudden and marked flirtation with M. de Veri. But such was not Margherite's purpose; she came to do as she had often done before, to work on Bertha's idle

vanity and thoughtless folly for her own ends and purposes.

Drawing a chair close to the fire, and settling her feet comfortably on the fender, she began to insinuate, in gentle terms, that it was in Bertha's power to do a very great service to the family generally, and herself in particular, if she would.

Bertha, like all weak people, was delighted at being thought of much consequence, and professed her readiness to exert herself immediately.

Margherite went on to ask if she had not seen the very great change in Lord Clarence's manner since the commencement of this visit, from what it used to be towards Blanche.

• To this Bertha eagerly answered that she had, and added that he had been so attentive to herself occasionally, as to make her wonder what he meant.

Margherite, with some difficulty, suppressed an exclamation of contempt and upbraiding at

her sister's folly; but as she did not want to affront her just then, she did suppress it, and contented herself with replying, that probably his object was to show that he had no peculiar partiality for one more than another, that he might not be called to account for previous attentions. But Margherite was certain that once he had meant more, and eagerly asked Bertha if she knew what had changed him so completely.

Bertha's wit, however, was not equal to suggesting any reasonable answer to this question, nor, indeed, any answer at all, since her sister would probably not listen to any explanation,—taking for basis the idea that he was changed by the influence of *her* charms; so she was forced to repeat Margherite's words with helpless surprise.

The elder sister then quietly suggested, that the alteration having commenced only since their father's recent marriage, it appeared probable that the young woman whom he had so unfor-

tunately been induced to place at the head of his establishment, had been the first cause and origin of it; and there seemed no reason to doubt but that she had complained to Lord Clarence, and set him against a connection, which he had formerly so much desired and so eagerly sought.

Bertha, seeing nothing at all interesting to her self-love in this view of the topic, asked, somewhat peevishly, what it signified to her after all, as she could not help it in any way? But Margherite knew how to influence and interest her. She just hinted that the withdrawal of Lord Clarence's attentions having piqued Blanche, she had determined to show her unconcern by encouraging another admirer. Bertha must have seen this at dinner-time; and she might calculate what the chances would be if a certain gentleman were to be flattered by Blanche;—would he look at anybody else?

This affronted Bertha again exceedingly; and she protested she could see no reason why Mar-

gherite should affect to consider matters in this light. She was not afraid of a comparison. This was a point which Margherite did not mean to contend with her. She let it pass, only observing, that however true it might be, there would be no fear of rivalry at all, if the old lover could only be brought back to his former state of admiration; and this Bertha might do, if she would take some opportunity of representing to Lord Clarence, in her lively, playful way, the real state of the case. She must find out what that young person had said, and contradict it; she must dwell on Blanche's good qualities, and all that in a most sisterly way; but above all, she was to extract from his lordship exactly what had been said, and carefully report it to her. It was too bad if this person was to drive away their lovers in this way, by attracting them herself; she would no doubt be flirting with M. de Veri next, and then Bertha must look out for herself.

This idea filled Bertha with such extreme indignation, that she gave vent to a sudden and violent wish, that her father had never married her.

“If wishes would make a difference,” said Margherite, “she would soon cease to be mistress here. I would surrender half my fortune, I would give up my right hand, to hear the blessed news that she was no longer his wife.”

The result of this conference was, that Bertha undertook the task assigned her; with many cautions from her sister as to a careful fulfilment of it; and many injunctions, above all, to find out what had been said against Blanche.

This was indeed the point on which Margherite was most anxious. She wanted evidence to convict Nora, both to Blanche and to her father; and if she could prove she had complained, she need have no more. She trusted a good deal to Bertha, who being a person much accustomed to say thoughtless and

inconsiderate things, she trusted might escape being accused of acting by design, whilst her personal interest in the matter, in the hope of securing the undivided attentions of the Marquis, would make her very eager in the cause.

What advantageous result she expected from thus farther embroiling the family, was not very easy to discover. However much she might irritate her father, she could not, by that means, get rid of her step-mother ; unless, indeed, she could succeed in breaking her heart, and that is a slow process in general, and by no means certain in its results.

But with these reflections she did not trouble herself ; she was satisfied to fight and struggle, she scorned to submit peacefully ; she preferred remaining in a state of constant, irritating, wearing ill-temper and ill-will, more destructive of her own happiness even than of that of her family, to being supposed capable of yielding to an unwelcome but just dominion, or admitting

the right of her father's wife to be head of her father's family.

The next morning, Bertha, ready primed for the occasion, was eagerly on the watch to find some opportunity of securing an uninterrupted conversation with Lord Clarence. Margherite had gone over again all her injunctions, and re-urged the principal points on which she was to dwell, and they both expected much effect, if they could only secure the opportunity for action. Nor did they fail in this ; they succeeded in discovering Lord Clarence alone in the library, and Bertha joined him there. He was not reading, but only idling, apparently, with a pencil in his hand, making sketches on scraps of paper, in that sort of listless way in which men trifle, when their minds are occupied by conjecture or hesitation.

Bertha looked over him, and playfully observed that one of his outlines resembled somebody whom they both knew ; then she asked him to make a sketch for her, and when he

begged her to give him a subject, yielding, because he thought it would be less trouble to give than to refuse the drawing, she pretended to think that he meant he would take her as a subject, and replied that she had not the least objection, if he thought her face worth drawing.

Having thus established herself as his companion for some time, she proceeded to fulfil her task to the best of her abilities.

“You must have been surprised, Lord Clarence,” said she, “to find Blanche completely turned out of her old room as she has been. Poor thing ! it was a great trial to her.”

As she paused for an answer, he was obliged to make some remark ; so he hazarded the observation, that it was a very pleasant apartment.

“Yes, I suppose that was the reason that Mrs. Mortimer chose it. It would be unkind to imagine that she knew what a sacrifice she was exacting of Blanche ; having no association

or predilection for one room more than another, perhaps she did not think any one else had. However, Blanche has been obliged to move, and it certainly was, considering all things, very hard. Do you not think so, Lord Clarence?"

"I can imagine its being painful; but then Mrs. Mortimer had the right of choice."

"Yes, might makes right; and she had the power. The order came home from Germany, and Blanche had no opportunity to remonstrate with my father, and no choice."

"Then Mrs. Mortimer had not seen the rooms when she chose the one you are speaking of; perhaps she knew nothing about it."

"Seen them! oh no, of course not; and Blanche had too much spirit to remonstrate. She took another room herself, and Mrs. Mortimer is not troubled with her company in the old one; I really don't believe she has ever entered it since."

Lord Clarence made no answer, but pursued his drawing.

“My father’s marriage has been a terrible trial for Blanche,” continued Bertha, looking at him fixedly ; “but she has behaved like an angel. I should not mention it to every one, but you, Lord Clarence, are an old friend, and I have been so long used to look on you almost as a brother, that I do not mind talking to you. Blanche has indeed suffered much, but she has behaved with a spirit and understanding worthy of the most elevated rank.”

Still her auditor preserved a profound silence ; and presently Bertha, who was disconcerted at not being able to make him ask questions, made a direct appeal by saying,—

“Don’t you think, Lord Clarence, Blanche is altered ?”

“Not so much as Mrs. Mortimer,” replied he ; “who, when I first knew her, was as merry and happy-looking a young thing as I ever saw.”

“Ah, yes,” replied Bertha, shaking her head, “it is, as somebody said, very melancholy,—

“ ‘To see that saddest sight of all, a gay and girlish
thing
Lay aside her maiden gladness for a name and for
a ring.’

But Mrs. Mortimer has nothing but her own temper to vex her—she does just as she likes in almost every thing.”

She paused again, but no answer or remark followed.

“I know,” she continued, “people, some people, have an idea that Blanche is proud, and ill-uses her step-mother, because she does not pretend to be fond of her; but how can she be fond of a woman who turned her out of her own room in that way?”

“Really, Miss Bertha,” interposed her companion, “I think we have said quite enough on this subject; perhaps further discussion might lead to evil.”

“Oh, not with you, you are quite one of the family; I know Blanche and Margherite both consider you as—as—I must not say what;

and I want to—they want to—to—what shall I say, vindicate our conduct, or rather theirs, regarding Mrs. Mortimer, lest you should think she has really any reason to complain.”

“But where no blame is attached, no vindication is needed,” was his answer.

“True; but then you see it was not Blanche’s fault that Mrs. Mortimer shut herself up, and would not associate with us; so if she complained of that to you, she was unjust.”

“She never complained of anything, allow me once for all to state, and then pray drop this subject. She has too much delicacy, patience, and charity to complain of Mr. Mortimer’s family !”

“Never? Margherite was sure she had; and I believe Blanche thinks so too; about not being able to ride with us; and Blanche and Margherite never speaking to her if they could help it, and never going any where with her, or telling her where they went, and going out with my father whilst she was quite alone. I wonder

she never said anything to you—perhaps she did to Lady Fanny—for I can tell you, when Blanche and Margherite are determined to make the house uncomfortable, it is not a little thing will turn them from their way, and we all hated the marriage with all our hearts.—Where are you going?” continued she, suddenly interrupting herself, on seeing that he had thrown down his pencil, and risen from his chair. “Have you finished the sketch?”

“No,” said he, walking to the fire, and then, after musing there a minute, he turned to her.

“Miss Bertha, you honoured me a little while ago, by saying that you regarded me as an old friend, and almost a brother. Although I have no claim to the *last* title, and not the presumption even to desire it, yet allow me to avail myself of the *first*, to say one word to you. Your father’s wife never mentioned your names to me, but with the kindness and regard which were suitable in speaking of her husband’s

daughters, however undeserved by those of whom she spoke. If you have any concern for your own or your sisters' characters, you will imitate her example. The least that is said about the past, the better for you and your sisters, for, in these transactions, I believe that Mrs. Mortimer deserves *all* the praise; if the blame can possibly exceed the merit, it is only because it is divided between your three selves."

He left the room, and Bertha, although not very quick or clear-headed in general, remained perfectly convinced now, that some very great mistake had been made. Either Margherite had mis-calculated what would be the effect of her interposition, or she had in some way mistaken her part, for his concluding words were too distinct and too severely said for her to understand them as conveying anything but a decided censure. She was very angry with him for this, and for a good while gave way to an idle and pettish irritation at what he had said, her own consciousness of failure making her feel

ill-used, exactly in proportion as she felt foolish and self-condemned.

How to report to Margherite what had passed was something of a puzzle ; but she settled it at last, by deciding to tell her, that Lord Clarence would listen to nothing in the shape of reason, connected with Mrs. Mortimer ; that he flew into a passion at the mention of her name, and, after launching out into some extravagant praises of her, quitted the room in the rudest way possible.

Lord Clarence himself went out to cool his indignation, it may be presumed, in the Park.

There was a severe struggle in his mind at this time ; he had known and loved Blanche from his boyhood, before her character had hardened, as he believed it now had, under the influence of power and pride. For years his devotion had been sufficiently marked to be obvious to her family, although, as she had herself told Margherite, he had done nothing, in her opinion, to deserve the decided encourage-

ment which would have led him on to ask for her hand ; and in her own haughty, but honourable sense of rectitude, would have bound her to accept him.

If she had never exactly favoured him, she had never admitted the attentions of another ; and now that he had a settled home, and a real object and business in life, he had sought Brierly Hall with a full intention of putting his influence to the test ; if in the recent trial, which he knew had come on her, she had shown that she was worthy to exercise power, by submitting gracefully to a resignation of authority.

Bitterly disappointed he had been ; his own observations, with a little information which he wrung from Mr. Armytage, had compelled him to admit the fact, that she had failed miserably. His love was not of that blind, undistinguishing nature, which leaves no power of discovering aught but ideal perfections in its object ; and he shrunk from the temper which could prompt, or permit, such cruel coldness to one, who, he

believed, had neither deserved nor provoked this unkindness.

He felt that there was no excuse for Blanche ; and when he met her again, it was with a mind and heart quite made up, he believed, to renounce his wishes, and a resolution to show by his calm, self-possessed, friendly bearing, that he regarded her now no more than he did her sisters.

• Still under the immediate influence of her voice, her smile, her glance, of all those external charms to which men, in spite of their superior wisdom, are so often temporary slaves, he had undergone a strong struggle between reason and passion. He had begun to hope that he had overstated to himself her faults, until Bertha's remarks, although not intended to do so, confirmed all his previous bad opinion, and sent him indignant from her company. He resolved he would no longer hesitate ; he would not be the weak slave of fancy, of imagination ; he would not, for the sake of every personal or mental charm which could be combined in a

woman, wed one whose temper would surely prove so bitter a curse. He would conquer a boyish infatuation, and be master of his own mind and affections.

The notion of leaving Brierly occurred to him, but was, on due consideration, rejected. His sister was very desirous of remaining a little with Nora, at least for a few days more : it was not in his nature to disappoint her, for his own pleasure ; besides that it was well known to the Mortimers, that until the friends, to whom they were to have gone, on quitting the Mordaunts, could receive them, they actually had no claimants on their time. He might have invented an excuse for absenting himself, but he would not leave Lady Fanny in such a strange *mêlée* of characters as the house threatened to present ; so he resolved to remain until the end of the week, which was the time fixed on for continuing their tour of visits.

The language of Bertha had seemed to intimate that his former wishes had been so far

obvious to the family, as to give rise to expectations, at least on the part of Miss Mortimer's sisters. He resolved, therefore, to be more than ever on his guard, and behave in such a careful way, as should convince Blanche, at all events that he had no intention of aspiring to the honour he had once desired ; although he would cautiously avoid any such obvious change as might make it a matter for private gossip or open comment.

M. de Veri was so very happy to avail himself of Mr. Mortimer's hospitality, that he arrived with his portmanteaux before luncheon on Tuesday, and being met by the master of the house with an anxious courtesy, such as he seldom bestowed on single gentlemen, was presently installed quite as one of the family, and desired to make himself completely at home.

As the Langdales had gone before luncheon, and the Murrays, who were to succeed them, were not expected immediately, Nora calculated that she might very well steal down to the

Rectory in the afternoon, to superintend and assist at the distribution of her Christmas bounty to her pensioners, which she had promised Lady Fanny also should see. The afternoon was cold and stormy, and repeated showers of snow, which had come on at intervals during the preceding night, had spoilt the ice for the present, and put skating out of the question, to the great disappointment of many, besides Bertha Mortimer.

Having privately taken Blanche's opinion on the matter, Nora and her friend proceeded to fulfil this plan, and enjoy themselves in seeing the pleasure of others, leaving Bertha and Margherite to divide the attentions of M. de Veri, who had, by some wonderful process of flattery, succeeded in winning his way to the good graces of the second Miss Mortimer, notwithstanding the studied insolence with which she had at first treated him.

Frightened and unhappy as Nora was by many things which she saw at home, she had yet sufficient lightness of heart left, to be able to banish her

uneasiness for the time, and enjoy a run through a drifting snow-storm, and a struggle with a frosty north wind, as much as her companion, who had so little care on her shoulders.

Yet Nora, looking round on the circle in which she moved, saw a great deal to perplex and disturb her. The conduct of Lord Clarence towards Blanche grieved her very much : for she could not help understanding his feelings ; and although Miss Mortimer had at one time been to blame, she did not, Nora thought, deserve to be abandoned for a temporary wrong course of conduct, which had now in great measure ceased.

At times she thought of telling him, or perhaps his sister, that she and Blanche were on very friendly terms at present ; but she feared lest any allusion of the sort should lead to inquiries about previous feelings, which she would rather not answer. Besides, Blanche evidently herself shrank from notice in their intercourse, and she might be offended if Nora

ventured to publish what she wished to conceal. So she resolved to abstain entirely from interference which might do as much harm as good.

Then there was Bertha, whose absurd way of going on with this Frenchman vexed her extremely ; it appeared to her equally indecorous and foolish ; and although Bertha had little claim on her affection, Nora did not regulate her concern for her by that standard.

But, most of all, was she uneasy about her husband ; his strange wildness of manner when not under the strong constraint of society, his restlessness and irritability, and the violent mental excitement under which he laboured, even in his sleep, when he had repeatedly startled her, by murmurs and incoherent ejaculations, all showed a spirit fearfully disturbed. What contributed to frighten her still more, was his extreme anxiety to conceal his agitation ; even her notice displeased him ; he abruptly and harshly denied that there was anything the

matter ; accused her of childish folly in thinking it, of idle curiosity in wishing to discover it, and mischievous interference in alluding to it.

And then, when he was in society, his brow was so smooth, his smile so ready, and his accent so calm, that she could almost fancy her fears were an illusion, had she not seen at times, when others were not looking, a flitting expression of mental agony cross his countenance, which told her only too truly how little his spirit was at ease.

As they were returning from the village, Mr. Mortimer suddenly joined his wife and her companion, and walked with them towards the house. When within a hundred yards of the porch, he asked Lady Fanny if she were going in ; and, on her replying in the affirmative, he told his wife he wanted to speak to her for ten minutes ; and drawing her hand under his arm, he led her away across an open part of the extensive lawns, where a broad gravel-road had been swept clear of the snow.

Here, where it was impossible for any one to come within hearing without being seen, he began in a low voice, which anxiety made somewhat unsteady :

“Nora, I wish to caution you about your conduct regarding this De Veri. First, it is absolutely necessary that whilst he is here, everything should be done which can make it agreeable to him. Whatever he may say in public, whatever blunders his egregious vanity may lead to, (and Heaven knows he has enough to make him claim kindred with the Emperor, if he pleases,) no notice must be taken of it ; he is not to be provoked, ridiculed, or put down in any way which can expose or annoy him. Do you understand ?”

“Yes, certainly ; but I should never think of doing otherwise ; it would be so rude to expose him, or provoke him in one’s own house.”

“It is not merely what *you* may do, Nora, which signifies ; if possible, others must be brought to do the same. No more such scenes

as Lord Clarence chose to enact last night. I heard what passed at dinner ; and even at the risk of affronting his lordship, you must, in some way, let him know that this must not occur again. You are intimate enough with him to ask this as a personal favour to yourself ; say you dislike jars ; say, as mistress of the house, it is your duty to shield your guests' harmless failings ; say anything, in short, except the true reason, that it is *my* wish, and that it is an object of consequence to me to preserve an appearance of peace with him."

Mr. Mortimer paused, and walked on for a little way in silence.

"And now as to your conduct, Nora," added he, after once or twice drawing breath, as if about to speak, and then stopping—"your conduct to him, I mean. You must behave to him with open, ready, perfect courtesy. If he pays you attentions, you are to receive them easily ; if he flatters you, you may laugh and trifle—you may *not* be offended ; should he even indulge

in what seems to you idle gallantry—" Mr. Mortimer paused, and seemed to speak with difficulty; but presently he went on—"you may not repulse him as you would, of course, do to an Englishman; remember it is his way—the French way—means nothing—implies no harm, and can only *be* harm if you attach a wrong meaning to it. It may be unpleasant, but you must bear it."

"I fear very much," said Nora, gently, "that I cannot easily bring myself to submit to conduct which requires to be excused by the assurance that it is only a Frenchman's way. An English wife must have English feelings of honour and decorum."

"Nora, you must do as I tell you," replied her husband, in a hoarse, low voice. "Do you suppose, wilful girl, I would risk your honour, or bid you do what was really indecorous? All I say is, that *if* this man—mind I say *if*, I do not say he will—should be disposed, as Frenchmen are, to idle gallantry, you are not to fly

into a violent passion of modesty, you are not to make a grievous outcry; you are simply to smile unconsciously as long as you can, or frown as women do when they say oh, fie! by way of encouragement. Beyond this he will not go, take my word for it; trust and obey me, Nora! Your honour is as dear to me as my own."

Another pause, and then he continued :

"But Nora, whilst you bear with, and keep him in play, you are not to believe a word he says. Not one syllable he may utter is to be trusted, unless you know it can be confirmed by myself; though it suits us both to appear friends, neither you nor I have a bitterer enemy on the face of the earth. There are not, perhaps, two who so thoroughly detest each other in this world.—So beware. And should the wily serpent whisper soft things to you with a really bad meaning, turn a deaf ear, and do not understand him. Remember English wives have no comprehension of the word *intrigue*,

and always tell their husbands everything. Say so to him if he goes too far ; say, with a smile, that you do not quite understand his language, and that you will ask *me* what it means, for I can better explain a French idiom. Say this, and you will avoid a quarrel, and consequences worse than you can imagine."

"I can readily promise, at least, to repeat to you whatever he may say to me," replied Nora ; "and I suppose if I tell him I shall do so, he will be careful what he says and does."

"But do not talk to him about me, Nora ; never venture on family topics, and never listen to or believe a word which he may say regarding me. I do believe you have less of the fatal curiosity of women than half your sex, or I should not trust you as I do !"

"But, Mr. Mortimer," said Nora, after a pause of consideration, "if he is what you say, false, hypocritical, your personal enemy, is it safe to let Bertha be so much with him ? Consider

her feelings ; should she not be put upon her guard by a warning as to his character ?”

“ As you value peace and safety, Nora, give no hint to Bertha of what I have said,” exclaimed he, vehemently ; “ she is safe enough—quite right—I will take all necessary care for her. But do not rouse her curiosity ; it would be safer to blow a slow match in a powder magazine. I know I can trust to you entirely, if you in return will only trust to me. Believe me, and attend to my words. Now come in. We must do something to-night to make things a little pleasanter than yesterday. Think of something — charades, tableaux — anything to occupy the visitors and make a noise. Kate Murray and her brother Tom are a host in themselves, and you have only to set them going. Christmas Eve is an excuse for extra merriment ; anything will pass at such a time.”

He led her to the house as he spoke ; they entered together, and still keeping her hand under his arm, he accompanied her upstairs.

She looked up at him wistfully and uneasily, then whispered as they entered her sitting-room—

“If you would only trust me entirely—if I might only prove my love by sympathy.”

“Nora,” exclaimed he, with a passionate caress, such as it was long since she had received from him, “I trust you entirely, but to grant your request is impossible. If you knew—if you could guess the torture I bear for your sake, you would know that, however I may have wronged you, I love you still.”

He was gone before she could recover from the strange emotions excited by his wild words and ways; and she was left to compose her spirits as she could, with the assurance that he did love her still.

Before many minutes, however, she was hurried down to meet the Murrays. The party consisted of a very tall, thin father, a short, plump mother, two pretty daughters, and a son; all equally merry, talkative, and good-humoured. They were distant connections of the Mortimers, and

seemed more at home at the Hall than any visitors she had yet seen, and certainly they received a warmer welcome.

She scanned their pleasant faces with reviving spirits, and felt that Mr. Mortimer was right about them. Something might be done with them, their entertainment would not be entirely thrown on her hands, and they might accomplish diversions together which in the society of the decorously solemn Langdales would have been impossible.

There was so much going on round her, that Nora had little leisure for observation, and less for reflection ; yet as her eyes intuitively sought the Frenchman, she caught every now and then a token which reminded her of what there was to fear. A whispered jest, replied to by a look of intelligence, met her eye more than once, as passing between him and the two younger daughters of her husband, and marking the good understanding between them. She saw, too, some advances made to Blanche, which were

repelled by a haughtiness and reserve, evidently felt acutely. She noticed looks of suspicion and anger at Lord Clarence, returned by glances of unconcern and slight contempt from his lordship; and again and again she saw the anxious restless shadow on her husband's brow: and all these were mingled with cheerful mirth and civil speeches, and gay compliments, and lively repartees, until she felt as if she herself were moving in a dream, and all the figures she saw round her were but visionary companions, unreal and shadowy.

The necessity of preparing for dinner scattered the party, and gave the hostess a short breathing time, which she felt very much inclined to employ in reflection instead of adornment; indeed, nothing but the urgent exertions of her maid, and her watchful care, could have ensured her being dressed at all, as after her hair had been arranged, she sat so long in a profound reverie in front of the mirror, that the young Frenchwoman was obliged respectfully to interfere to

arouse her ; and even when she submitted to have her dress put on, and Mademoiselle Juliette was, with true artistic pleasure, contemplating the effect of the rich bronze-coloured velvet in which she had arrayed her, she displayed so thorough an absence of mind, and so total a disregard of the robe over which her waiting-woman ecstasised, as were almost too much for the philosophy of the latter.

Indeed, I have little doubt but that had Mademoiselle Juliette been asked for a character of her mistress, she would have replied that she was the sweetest and kindest lady in the world, but like many of Mesdames Anglaises, not only ignorant how to dress herself, but extremely indifferent about this important topic.

It was a gay and brilliant circle which surrounded Mr. Mortimer's dinner-table that evening ; there was no trace of a cloud on any brow ; no sign of discontent ; no token of anxiety or regret ; with their evening toilette, every one had assumed a face of smiles and civility, and

sat there pleasing and pleased, enjoying and causing enjoyment.

Could the mask have been taken from every countenance, had the features and the tongue been compelled to show the workings of every heart, how many changes would there have been ! Not, more, perhaps, than in most other societies assembled at random, and yet bound by the same laws of polite restraint. Nor do we mean to blame them : self-control and restraint must be practised for the good of others, and mental, like bodily wounds and sores, must be dressed in private, and decently concealed from view.

It was Christmas Eve, and the party of ladies were re-assembled in the drawing-room before the gentlemen had quitted the table, when a request was brought in from the village choir to be allowed to perform their carols, for the pleasure of the squire's family.

Before Nora had time to do more than look hesitatingly at Blanche, uncertain what to say,

both Kate and Anna Murray had cried out, "Oh, do let us hear them;" and the wish seeming to be universal, the singers were admitted into the hall, and the ladies adjourned there. Here they were soon joined by the gentlemen, and whilst standing here, an idea was originated, no one exactly knew how, that this hall would be a delightful place for [acting charades, as there were accommodations in the way of doors, rooms, screens, and other conveniences, which would make it perfectly charming.

The notion once set on foot, was not allowed to drop; the Murray girls were famous actresses in this species of amusement, and M. de Veri appeared equally enthusiastic, which ensured the consent of the two younger Miss Mortimers.

As soon, therefore, as the singers were dispersed, the young people crowded round the great hall fire, and discussed plans and proposals, told of former triumphs, and detailed

scenes in which they had formed conspicuous parts; the Murrays were wild to act something, but they had no idea of anything but dressed charades, and audiences; for what was the use of acting, if there was nobody to see them and applaud?

Although nothing was even attempted that evening, and it seemed probable that the whole affair would not proceed further than the present conversation, still it helped to pass away the time, and prevented any approach to the heaviness and dulness Mr. Mortimer had so dreaded.

Those of the party who were bent on the amusement they were discussing, began eagerly asking who would volunteer assistance; Kate Murray declaring that all who did not intend to do more than look on, must instantly withdraw, on pain of being treated as spies, and forthwith sent to Coventry.

Mr. Murray thereupon called on "Mamma" to return to the drawing-room, only saying they

might call him if his help was wanted ; Nora moved to go too, and Lady Fanny accompanied her. M. de Veri appealed to them to remain, but Mrs. Mortimer said that as hostess she should have too much to do to take any part in the amusements, except providing what they needed ; and Lady Fanny, after a glance at her brother, decidedly declined.

The Marquis let them go without further remonstrance ; but when Blanche also seemed about to follow them, he exclaimed loudly—

“ Miss Mortimer could not be so cruel ; she must remain ; with her *taille de princesse*, and *voix d’ange*, with all her grace and beauty, she could not mean to withdraw her assistance ; and then her wit, her taste, her judgment were all wanted too ; Mr. Mortimer must speak for them, he must entreat his beautiful daughter to be of their party.”

Blanche coloured ; not the blush of gratified vanity, but the glow of indignant pride, at being thus addressed ; and coldly answered that

she was entirely incapable of acting any part whatever.

M. de Veri, still unconvinced, seized her hand, and bending on one knee, repeated his entreaties, with more enthusiasm and flattery than before.

Still Blanche refused ; and Lord Clarence, who had been standing by, watching the scene with an interest which he could not disguise, now interposed and said—

“We will make our retreat together, Miss Mortimer, shall we? for acting is not within the compass of my abilities either ; and after what Miss Murray said, I dare not remain !”

There was a slight tremor in the hand with which Blanche took his offered arm ; and there was still a deep carnation on her cheeks, as they walked across the hall and antechamber, towards the state drawing-rooms. Perhaps it was the remains of her excitement in refusing M. de Veri's petition ; perhaps it had a softer cause for its origin. It might be pleasure which

made her droop her long eye-lashes, and which occasioned that half smile on the corner of her usually haughty mouth.

It was well, perhaps, that nobody observed the face of the Marquis, as he looked after that handsome pair ; for it wore the expression of a fiend.

CHAPTER VI.

Thou, who with eye too sad and wan,
Dost on the memory gaze
Of evil days.—
Who day by day, and year by year,
Survey'st the past with deepening fear.

It was midnight, and the family had retired to rest, all save the master of the mansion and his foreign guest. They stood together by the fire-place in deep and earnest conversation. They spoke in French.

“When I accepted your hospitality, Mr. Mortimer—a hospitality, you must allow, rather pressed on me than sought on my own part—

it was certainly on the condition that I should be received as a friend, alike by you and your family. You cannot have forgotten that I expressly stipulated for this."

"And have I not kept to it faithfully?" retorted the Englishman, hastily; "in what have I failed—in what has any one failed towards you? Have I not introduced you as my friend to those who would little thank me if they knew all?—brought you side by side with members of the best family our peerage can boast; allowed my own daughters, descendants of a house which might match with any but a sovereign prince, to receive your addresses, and smile on your flatteries? Mrs. Mortimer, my servants, all are instructed to treat you as an honoured guest, what more can you require?"

"It is of your eldest daughter, sir, that I would speak; it is true that I mix in a seeming equality with your titled guests; that the mistress of the Hall is attentive, your daughters assiduous, your servants indefatigable in their

courtesies—all this is true—but what avails it to me, whilst I see, sitting on Miss Mortimer's countenance, that proud, unbending look of haughty scorn and cold contempt? What signifies the father's homage, whilst his favourite daughter sets me openly at defiance?"

"But indeed, my dear sir, you mistake—you misapprehend Miss Mortimer's looks—it is her way; she is ever thus to men, especially those who are so little known to her. It is nothing personal."

"If I am little known to her, why not make her know me better; bid her meet me with a smile, and receive my advances with favour; you, as her father, I presume can compel or control her so far."

"Indeed, I could not answer for my power; and although, when you said you would willingly aspire to Bertha's hand, I made no objection, I could not promise you the smallest chance with Blanche. English fathers cannot compel a daughter's choice when she is of age;

and, so far as I know of my daughter, if she inclined to leave me for any other establishment—mind, I only say *if*—I think her choice would fall on another.”

A dark shadow flitted over the Frenchman’s brow, then he laughed loud and bitterly.

“Do not alarm yourself, my dear sir, lest I should covet the hand of your fair daughter. I am not quite so bold as to dare ally myself with such a beautiful fiend. I have no wish for fetters so heavy, which all the gilding of your Bank of England could scarcely make endurable. No, if, as you assure me, your daughters’ fortunes are of necessity equal, give me Bertha for my wife, that, at least, the yoke may be made easy, if possible.”

“Then why should you care for Blanche’s looks, or expect her to alter her usual manners in your favour?” asked the other, anxiously.

“Because I choose to have the homage of the household, Mr. Mortimer ; because what she refuses becomes instantly of value in my

eyes ; because, in proportion to her usual coldness and pride, will be my triumph in seeing this haughty beauty humble herself to me.”

“ But, M. de Veri, when I say I cannot help it—that I have no power——”

“ Then, I tell you, I do not believe you—and look you, Mr. Mortimer, grant me my request—teach this fair Blanche to stoop her lofty pride at my bidding, or I leave your house to-morrow—and then——!”

“ I assure you, on my honour, on the word of a gentleman, I will do my best—but—tell me exactly how far she must go ; what is it you wish ?”

“ That she should smile as women smile on those they love, Mr. Mortimer ; that she should seek my presence, receive my attentions, listen to my conversation ; that she should be ready to oblige me, eager to do what I ask—for instance, in acting these charades—and not turn a deaf ear and a stony eye to my homage, Mr. Mortimer. Let her look to it, and look to it

yourself, that she do this, or you may abide the consequences."

"Less than this—less than this you must require—for this is what I cannot ensure. For Blanche Mortimer to practice dissimulation—to assume sentiments which she does not feel—to wear looks which her heart belies, is absolutely, entirely impossible. Do not ask this, Monsieur."

"But less than this will not content me! and why should it be assumption or dissimulation? Can you not teach her that to please me is her real interest? can you not make it a matter of joy, of readiness to become my friend?"

"You are not reasonable. How could I control her, or make that pleasing which in its own nature is entirely indifferent?"

"How? By telling her how much depends on her behaviour. Tell her that her father's honour is engaged in the matter. Teach her the weighty consequences which are attached to my approval, my contentment; and then see if

the fair lady will not be satisfied to lay aside her pride, and court my good will as assiduously for the sake of peace and a good name as her sisters do for their own flattered vanity."

"You would not have me tell her—you will not reveal to her yourself—" Mr. Mortimer's face turned of a ghastly white.

"I will reveal nothing, sir, if you secure me what I ask. Everything, if you refuse!"

"I will do my best, on the honour of an English gentleman."

De Veri's lip curled in scorn.

"And if I fail," continued he, unwilling to notice what he dared not resent, "you will believe that it is want of power, not want of will on my part!"

"You must *not* fail, sir. I have no other conclusion to make. Women are but puppets in the hands of men, and there are wires to move all puppets; and if you will not, or cannot pull these wires yourself, remember that I both will and can."

“You little know the strong, manly determination of my daughter. And, M. de Veri, I think it but fair to warn you, that I believe there is one circumstance, one motive which will make it more difficult, more unpleasant to her to give such encouragement to you, besides the natural frankness of her character. This is, that I think it just possible that there is a preference to another, which would check such demonstrations.”

“Do I not know that, sir? do I not really see through all your low, shuffling, English excuses, and perfidy? am I blind, not to notice that this English milord is admired by, as well as admires your daughter? or am I made of stone or brass, to be insensible to his affronts? Did he not expose me before your guests, with his smooth, artful manner? does he not every moment show his scorn and contempt of me? can I not see the sneer on his haughty brow? and do you think I do not hate him, and will scruple to seek revenge when and how I can? Bertha told me

he was your daughter's lover; and from that moment I saw my way, and triumphed in the prospect. And will I be balked now by your excuses? Never! Give me my own way, Mr. Mortimer, or take the consequences."

Mr. Mortimer paused and hesitated. He weighed chances and probabilities. On the one side, if Blanche excited the jealousy of Lord Clarence by encouragement to the Frenchman, it might drive him away, or it might produce an instant explanation. Even should the first occur, it would be but a temporary estrangement. He never doubted Lord Clarence's real devotion; and when the engagement to Bertha was announced, he would see that he had no rival in M. de Veri. It might not injure Blanche—it might even do her good!

On the other hand, should De Veri leave them, incensed and affronted—all there was a dark, tremendous mist, a black chasm into which he dared not look!

Yes, it was better, far better for Blanche to

yield to this hated enemy's wishes than to brave his anger. *He* would have sacrificed much for her; surely she would sacrifice something for him, for herself, for them all!

"It shall be done, De Veri," said he. "I think I may promise that it shall be done. Blanche, at least, shall join your party for these charades; and after what passed this evening, surely you can expect no greater triumph over Lord Clarence."

"Very well, sir; I trust to your word. You are, as I supposed, open to reason, and see how rational my proposals are. By the bye, my dear sir, yours is a charming little wife. There is something irresistible in her innocent blush and smile; something artlessly captivating in her gentle, amiable manners. That simplicity is a grace which few can catch successfully, but it is beyond all others. It is the very dew-drop on the bosom of the rose. No wonder you value her so highly."

"I am glad you find Mrs. Mortimer agreeable,"

replied the other, struggling to force an easy laugh. "You see I find it easier to rule my wife's than my daughter's tastes. Mrs. Mortimer has seen few, I should imagine, to compare in address with you."

"Probably not—she is of a *naïveté* quite delicious. Trust me, whilst I inhale the odour of this half-open rose-bud, I will do my best *not* to injure its beauty by robbing it of the dew-drop I spoke of. I know your English prejudices! I will respect them! I trust I may never cause her a moment's concern or heart-ache!"

There was but one thing which at that moment prevented Mr. Mortimer strangling the speaker; and this was neither scruples of religion nor morality, neither humanity nor hospitality; it was simply the fear of the strong arm of the law, and the unpleasant consequences immediate on a verdict of "guilty" from an English jury.

He could, however, endure no more; and

with an observation totally inaudible, and a scarcely intelligible "*bon soir*," he moved to open the door for his guest to pass.

It was but little sleep that came to him that night; and the long, waking hours were entirely occupied in considering how he should best persuade his eldest daughter to adopt the line of conduct which M. de Veri desired.

It was necessary to see her before breakfast; and he was quite uncertain how to commence, when, at his own request, he was admitted to her dressing-room.

"Blanche," said he, standing with his back to the window, that his face might reveal the less, "I have something of the greatest importance to say to you."

"Say it, then, my dear father; surely from you to me, words need no prelude."

"I have a request to make, Blanche."

"It is granted, then, if I can with honour and with truth comply with it."

“What if it should involve your present happiness, Blanche?”

“If it should involve all I hold dearest on earth, father, except my honour. There is not the thing I would not do or sacrifice for you.”

She advanced and took his hand as she spoke, looking in his face with her piercing eyes, and waiting for him to say his will,

“With locks thrown back, and lips apart,
Like monument of Grecian art.”

“My dear child,” said he, turning away with real genuine feeling; he could not just then go on.

“Why should you hesitate?” said she again.
“Are you not my own brave, noble father? you who sprang undauntedly from the cliff into the sea, surely need not pause now in speaking a few words to me.”

“Ah, who told you that, Blanche?” said he;
“Lord Clarence?” The allusion evidently startled him.

“No ; Mrs. Mortimer ; but do not trifle now with me—speak !”

“Well—you do not like this Frenchman, nor do I ; and yet, for private reasons which I dare not—that is, which I am not at liberty to reveal, it becomes a matter of importance to please him. My love, can you not condescend so far as to assume a softer tone, a sweeter smile towards him ; to listen to his conversation with something more than patience ; to conceal your real and natural, and justifiable contempt under an outward appearance of complacency ?”

“And so act the hypocrite, father,” said Blanche, with a deepening colour. “Father, do *you* ask this of *me* ?—do you expect it ?”

“I knew you would answer me in this way, Blanche ; I was perfectly prepared for this objection, but I do not admit its force. For a little while to be courteous and kind to a man who is our guest, is not to conceal the opinion you really entertain of him, but to allow it to be overbalanced and over-ruled by a more

powerful one. It is only the hospitality of the Arab, who would calmly entertain and safely dismiss the guest who has eaten his salt and rested under his tent, even though the visitor had murdered the host's own father."

Blanche did not answer ; she was apparently pondering deeply.

"I am sure you must see the force of this argument," continued her father, "and I may presume, after your promise, that you will act upon it."

"Stop! stop!" cried she, hurriedly, as he seemed to consider the matter settled, "tell me why you speak at all about this? tell me the truth—has he complained?"

"He has ; he expressed himself hurt by your haughty and careless manner. I promised him you would alter."

"He did, did he? Well, what does he expect? Tell me how he would wish to be received."

"As a friend ; smile, encourage him, listen

to his gallantries, and do not look as if you would cut his head off in return ; lay aside your coldness ; allow the poor man to think himself pleasant, and consider himself welcome ;—in short, exert yourself to make it agreeable to him,” replied Mr. Mortimer, trying to speak lightly and gaily.

“And suppose I were to do all this, would he not draw false conclusions ? Could you promise me that he would appreciate the exact reason of my conduct ?—Could you assure me that he would not say—‘ Here is my hand, take it, you have encouraged my addresses ?’ Should I not expose myself to a just imputation of disgraceful coquetry if I did all this and then drew back ?”

“I can guarantee you, Blanche, from such a chance.”

“How ?”

“Because he is seeking for Bertha’s hand ; he has asked my consent to become her suitor.”

“Bertha?” exclaimed Blanche;—“but surely you did not say yes?”

“I did; why not?”

“And are you sure that he is what he says he is? Are you certain that he is not some base adventurer seeking a fortune amongst us?”

“I know very well who he is, Blanche, and if he chooses, he may take Bertha.”

“Then let him leave me in peace. Father, I cannot do this; I cannot look as I do not feel; I cannot encourage a man whom I despise. Do not ask me.”

“Blanche, your promise.”

“My promise was conditional, and honour forbids this.”

“Honour would not forbid it, if you love me, Blanche. I ask you to try to please him, not because you like him, but for my sake.”

“Why, what good can deceiving him do to you? I cannot.”

“It would not be deceiving him; he would know and understand your motives.”

“What !” cried Blanche, starting back, “would he know that I covered contempt with courtesy, concealed loathing under a smile, hid mistrust behind pleasant words, and yet would the courtesy, the smile, the words please him ? Impossible !”

“Indeed they would. It is appearances alone which touch him. His vanity is hurt by neglect or contempt openly manifested ; but only let the world think you esteem him, and the same vanity will be amply satisfied.”

“Impossible ! If he is so miserably mean, so absurdly the slave of appearances, my contempt is increased tenfold, and has grown beyond concealment.”

“Blanche, Blanche, this is madness ! Listen to me. Would I ask this, think you, for a trifle ?—Would I put the smallest constraint upon you unnecessarily ?—Would I not tell you all, every thing, if it were good for you to know

it? Believe me, my dearest daughter, there are reasons, great, important reasons, why I ask this; and if it is a sacrifice, I ask it of your love for me; I implore it for my sake."

"Father," said Blanche, "from love to you I would lay down my life, I would endure any suffering or privation, but deceit and subterfuge can never, *never* do good to any one; and therefore, though I would rather grasp a red-hot iron than refuse you anything you ask, I *do* refuse this, because I cannot believe that come what may, anything can be so bad as a loss of honour and self-respect; and you and I should each forfeit both if I complied."

"Dearest Blanche, you do not know what you are saying. I must speak out. Years ago, circumstances occurred which have placed my peace, happiness, honour, in this man's power; how he obtained this knowledge do not ask; but to divulge it now, would be ruin—absolute ruin to your happiness, Blanche, to mine, to many others. With this secret in his power,

he asks to be treated as a friend, and it must be. Look at it in its true light, then, and you will see that to conciliate him is not to play a double part ; it is no hypocrisy, it is an act of love and duty to me. Consider it as such, and surely you will not hesitate to sacrifice personal feeling and proud independence to a desire to save me from a gulf of dishonour, which you, who know me well, may know I would not survive.”

Blanche had turned deadly pale as her father spoke, and she sat down on the sofa, for she had no strength to support herself. She was silent now. Mr. Mortimer seated himself beside her, and taking her cold, white fingers in his, he said—

“Blanche, were it only myself, I would not ask you to do this ; but for others, for yourself, for your own happiness and peace,—no, when I think of that, I cannot say it matters not ; I cannot release you from your promise, I cannot withdraw my request.” Still she was passive

and silent, as he kissed her cheek. "Is it so very hard," he went on, "to smile on this Frenchman, to join in his projects, to listen to his words, idle though they are; to help him act in these charades?—surely, surely you might grant me this request; and on this day of all the year, this day of gladness, of peace, and mirth, will not my own Blanche do for her father what he has so humbled himself to ask, Blanche?"

She drew a little away, and then with white, quivering lips, and a face of pallor, startling in its change, she said slowly—

"Yes, I promise—it shall be done; all, all that you ask."

He tried to thank and bless her, pretending not to see what an effort this extorted promise cost her, and then he left her hastily, only saying it was getting near breakfast-time. Blanche remained alone, stupified and overwhelmed.

It was not that she was grieving at the task assigned her; it was not the evil of having to

seem to encourage a man whom she disliked ; it was not even the question of whether she should not thereby forfeit every probability of regaining the esteem of Lord Clarence which occupied her mind, and caused that trance of horror ; it was that her father, her own father, should have owned that his peace, his honour, were in the power of another, and that she should have lived to hear it.

How could she ever raise her head again ? how could she look a fellow-being in the face ? how could she walk about the world as she had been used to do, when she knew that there was *that* existing, *that* in the power of another to make known which might blast their honour, perhaps tread them down into the dust of shame and abasement ?

Oh ! that she could from that moment have hidden her head from the light—that she could have vanished from her place on earth—that she could have subsided into entire annihilation ! Such were her wild thoughts ; such the rebel

murmurs of her strong but undisciplined mind !

She saw why her father sacrificed Bertha so readily ; for sacrificed she surely was, to quiet the voice of this dangerous guest : and lightly as Blanche had spoken of such an idea, when in conversing with her step-mother it had been suggested, she could not really contemplate it as a certainty, without a different feeling Little love or sympathy she had for her most uncongenial sister—yet she *was* her sister, and her fate could not be altogether a matter of indifference.

How could she bear this sudden discovery, this blasting revelation ? how could she smooth her brow and steady her voice, and act in opposition to every wish and feeling, whilst her heart was palpitating, and her brain throbbing with the words of confession which had so poisoned her happiness ? It was a hard, a heavy task, but it *must* be done ; it was an absolute, stern

necessity, and necessity effects wonders of which taste and choice little dream.

Half an hour afterwards, Blanche was at the breakfast-table; and who could have seen in her dark eyes, or on her polished brow, the shadow of the grief which was rankling in her heart? Even her father was deceived; and, as he gazed at her, fancied the blow had fallen less heavily than he had expected.

The day was one of full employment—that was a comfort. Breakfast was scarcely over, before the cheerful church-bells, sounding in the air, reminded the party of their first duties, and all, even M. de Veri, prepared to attend Divine service.

Which of all that party found there the “peace and goodwill” which that commemorative service was intended to call forth?

Not the scornful, disbelieving Frenchman, who would, had he dared, have made a mock of the whole, but whose instinct, rather than any

other reason, taught him to whisper his levities to no ear but Bertha's.

Not the haughty Margherite, with her head filled by cobwebs of malice and prejudice, whose insidious meshes entangled and choked to death all better thoughts. Nor yet Mr. Mortimer, with his harassed mind, crowded by dread and fear, and haunting spectral forms of past sins ; dreary visions which filled him with remorse, but left no room for repentance.

Hardly even did Blanche herself ; for her heart, though bent and crushed, was still possessed by pride. Pride rose, and swelled and struggled against the humbling feelings which had come upon her ; pride rebelled and beat back the better thoughts her conscience would suggest. Alas ! it was of outward seeming that she thought most ; it was to preserve an appearance of what was fair and true, that she controlled herself : it was the eye of the world which she dreaded ; and whilst she thought so much of shunning the reproachful gaze of that

unpitying and scornful eye, so cold and hard to those who transgress its rules, no wonder that the tidings of the manger in Bethlehem should fall unheeded on her ear.

But there were those who could listen and rejoice that day. The sister whose heart swelled with grateful emotion, as she remembered how her brother had been enabled to fulfil the most self-denying duties for His sake of whom they heard to-day—His sake, who had said that a cup of cold water given in His name should not be unrewarded. That brother, too, himself found comfort there, even though renouncing, from a sense of stern, uncompromising duty, the hopes which he had so long, so constantly treasured : he, too, remembered that life was not made for self-indulgence, for idle luxury, or proud display ; and that not only must wealth and state be dedicated to a higher, better service than self, but that intellect, the purifying gum which preserves life from stagnation and decay, and love, the sweet incense

of the heart, whose intoxicating fumes, too largely inhaled, disturb the brain, must be freely offered in devotion to Him who so lovingly deigns to accept this poor unworthy homage, ere they can be safely enjoyed by mortals here.

But most of all did the frightened, weary heart of the young wife find the comfort and the strength she needed ; and clearer than ever did she learn to see, that though she could not, must not hope at once to escape from the toilsome, dreary path of life into which she had so unwisely and unwarily entered, yet that even here there was consolation in trouble, and support in danger, and a kind and fatherly blessing in the very trials which taught her the hollowness and worthlessness of wealth.

The luncheon which followed the service was in its turn succeeded by the necessity of going to see the labourers' Christmas dinner. This ceremony had been one of Pierrepont Mortimer's earliest pleasures ; and although his kind

face, and cheerful voice, and radiant smile no longer graced the feast, Blanche and her father would not now have omitted it for the world.

All the workmen employed upon the park or pleasure-grounds, with their wives and children assembled in a large back antechamber, forming a sort of vestibule between the offices and the magnificent apartment known as "the Great Hall." Here the ruddy gleam of the huge logs, burning on the hearthstone, fell on groups of white smocks, and scarlet cloaks, and modern shawls, gay cotton prints, and good substantial broad-cloth, and thence darted upward to the white walls adorned by the branching antlers of stags, which from time immemorial had blackened there in rows, and which now were gaily wreathed with holly, and other evergreens, making the whole place look almost like some forest bower. In the middle of the room was the long table, laid out with the noble sirloins, and the goodly puddings, whose black and

smoking sides gladdened the eyes of the boys and girls.

The murmur of rough voices, and unconstrained laughter, was hushed as the grand company entered the hall ; and women curtsied, and men drew back, and children stared, as the gay silk-and-velvet-clad spectators, rustled and fluttered in amongst them. There were many of that rough assemblage who missed the young heir's cordial welcome, and still mourned their loss in him, with a truth and steadiness to which their homely words were scarcely capable of giving expression : but if Pierrepont was regretted, the present mistress of the mansion was deeply beloved ; and if anything could make up to the guests for the absence of the one, it was the presence of the other. Mrs. Mortimer had won their hearts to a degree of which she was hardly herself conscious ; and whilst Blanche was endeavouring to soften her tones and suit her manners to the occasion, and to think of topics appropriate to their relative situations, her step-

mother moved amongst them, like Evangeline, "all forgetful of self," and by her words and smiles set them gradually at ease.

Margherite and Bertha looked on and whispered to each other; the Murrays goodnaturedly noticed some of the children, and asked questions of their mothers. Lord Clarence and his sister stood arm-in-arm gazing at the scene: there was a cloud upon his brow; perhaps it was regretful thoughts of his lost friend whom this scene recalled, the promise of whose early years had been so bright; perhaps it was the bitter disappointment of finding that friend's sister had, as he supposed, fallen so far short of his expectations, and shown herself unworthy of the estimation in which he had once held her.

Pierrepont, the bright, the brave, the noble, full of the high chivalry, the generous self-devotion, the expansive kindness which only true Christianity inspires, might perchance be spared from earth to Heaven; and while survivors mourned his vacant place, they might yet re-

joice that he had lived to be happy for a little while, and died to be happy for ever ; unblighted by sorrow, unscathed by dishonour. But if the spirit of truth, of kindness, of charity had indeed fled from the fair form of his sister ; if her soul had been withered and deformed by pride and passion, whilst youth and beauty still reigned over her features, what consolation was there for such a death ? a moral death, compared to which the fate of her brother was a happiness indeed.

Such were his thoughts, as his eyes unconsciously followed Blanche ; he knew how she had failed in her first duties ; he knew not how she had repented and endeavoured to amend : he was aware she had slighted and tyrannised over one of whom he thought so highly, and in her present conduct he saw only a continuation of the same cold neglect, or total disregard ; and in the courtesy with which she listened to the Frenchman's whispers, and the apparent encouragement which she seemed to

extend to him, he read a mean and disgraceful coquetry, totally unworthy of a generous woman, speaking of a declension from right-mindedness and truth, which it was well that Pierrepont had not lived to see.

When Mr. Armytage had said "grace" for the assembled villagers, and the whole party were seated at table, the drawing-room visitors withdrew, that they might lay no constraint upon the enjoyment. But Nora's occupations were not yet over, for there were all the Christmas prizes to be distributed to the school-children, and then followed the evening service in the church, which was deferred till after dusk, but which most of the ladies from the Park chose to attend.

Short as it was, it was indeed a pleasant rest, after the bustle of a day, of which so many hours were devoted to making others happy. The partially-lighted church, with its green wreaths and scarlet clusters of holly, but half-visible, the darkened atmosphere without, the

sweet voices of the village choir, the stillness and apparent devotion of the small congregation, produced a sensation of refreshment as comforting to those minds which were susceptible of external impressions, as the still hour of twilight to the weary traveller on a burning day.

Nora returned invigorated and strengthened, and as she leant upon the arm of Lord Clarence in the short walk from the church to the house, she was able to answer quite cheerfully to his fears that she was doing too much ; and her voice was so steady and well-regulated, as to leave him no room to guess how her mind was even then racked and tormented, by the perplexing intrigues which were passing around her.

Very, very much distressed she certainly was. Her husband's wildness alarmed her ; she even feared his mind was affected, so strange, so incoherent, so disturbed he seemed : and Blanche, to whom alone she could have ventured to whisper

her fears, had shunned her all day ; had looked cold and distant as formerly, and, worse even than that, had allowed her attention to be engrossed and her smiles won by the very man whom she knew was distrusted by each.

Oh, what was Blanche doing, what was she thinking of, thus madly to trifle with her future happiness ; and not her own only, but that of another also ? For Nora was sure now of the secret devotion of Lord Clarence to Miss Mortimer, and she read the glance of bitter disapproval with which he watched her present conduct towards M. de Veri. She longed for the power to protest, the right, at least, to remonstrate ; she longed to point out all the sorrow and disappointment which must follow a departure from straight-forward bearing. What would she not have given to tear the veil from the eyes of both, to enable these two hearts to read each other aright, and appreciate their mutual feelings ?

Blanche was incapable of idle coquetry—that

Nora^{*} knew right well: and whatever were her motives for the perceptible change towards M. de Veri, they were not based on vanity or a contemptible love of power.

There was a mystery around Mrs. Mortimer; a mystery which broke her husband's rest, and made him sometimes wildly give utterance to words of passionate love, sometimes more gloomily irritable than ever; a mystery which clouded Blanche's brow, and chained up all the more kindly feelings of her heart; a mystery which detained the Frenchman in the house, and made his wish a law, and gave him, as it were, the power of ruling over all.

Every hour seemed to increase her distrust of this foreign guest, as every hour his conduct was more questionable and dubious in its meaning. At one time he would devote all his attention to Bertha; and short as had been their acquaintance, there was already an evident understanding between them. Then he would address himself to Blanche, with a courtesy

which appeared feigned, mocking, or at least satirical; a sort of insolent triumph of air and manner, implying, that do what he would, he knew he could do no wrong. This was peculiarly evident when Lord Clarence was present, towards whom he directed glances of such gratified scorn, as could hardly have failed to provoke a man whose temper was not under perfect control.

More than once during the intervals when the family were compelled to be together, such words were uttered, and such looks interchanged, as brought symptoms of unutterable uneasiness to Mr. Mortimer's countenance, and crimsoned his eldest daughter's cheeks with emotions she dared not express; and set Nora's heart wildly throbbing, lest some strange and terrible outbreak should immediately occur.

More than once, even the Murrays had seemed slightly surprised, and Lady Fanny had betrayed alarm which she would gladly have concealed, as the conviction had been forced on

her that some evil spirit of bitterness and discord was wandering among the party, and threatening their peace.

Such was Nora's miserable anxiety for her companions—for her husband more than all—that the manners of M. de Veri to herself, which at another time would have raised her warmest indignation, now passed almost unnoticed.

Whispered words of gallantry which occasionally greeted her, or even expressions of admiration which he ventured to utter, when once or twice he found her disengaged and alone, were scarcely listened to, and not at all regarded. It was his way, she thought—his idle, wicked way, and did not deserve a serious reproof. Perhaps even it was only intended to provoke her husband, and make him more miserable; she would say nothing then, but let this folly pass as folly alone.

On Thursday morning the subject of charades had been renewed by those who were eager for

it ; and, much to Nora's amazement, this time Blanche agreed to join the party.

Miss Mortimer's cold, impassive face as she made this promise, gave no indication of her mental struggle. M. de Veri was reduced to guess the degree of mortification under which that proud spirit was suffering ; and it chanced that at the moment, Lord Clarence was in such a position that *his* face was concealed from all except Nora herself. She could not help looking at him, and trying to read the feelings with which he heard this announcement ; and he, suddenly raising his eyes, caught her inquiring glance, and read there such volumes of sympathy and concern, anxiety, suffering, and fear, as completely convinced him that his sentiments were understood, Blanche's character appreciated, and that Mrs. Mortimer, as well as himself, felt that this last act ought at once and for ever to decide him for the future.

It was unmanly weakness to cherish this lingering love for a woman, who plainly showed, who

evidently endeavoured to demonstrate her complete indifference to him ; to love against his conscience and his sense of right, one who, with all her lofty qualities and her noble disposition, had made it apparent that she wanted the true guiding principle which alone could keep her safe ; this was what he would have blamed in another, and what he despised in himself.

He would not do it. Anything was better than exposing himself to the irritating influence of such grievous provocation.

M. de Veri was intolerable. Mr. Mortimer did not interfere. To continue the guest of a man who could allow the covert insults which he had already endured, was impossible ; and whilst the greater number of the young people were merrily laughing and chatting, Lord Clarence spent his time in revolving in silence what would be the best, safest, and most civil manner of carrying off his sister in his retreat from

hospitality, which was become unbearable in its details. An explanation with Blanche, a final farewell, and he would leave the hall to-morrow.

CHAPTER VII.

“ Yon dark-eyed maid, her bearing scan ;
The tear that from beneath her quivering eyelids stole ;
The shade that hangs e’en now upon her wistful brow,—
It comes not all of shame or pain,
But she with pitying heart full fain
Would twice the penance burthen bear,
Might she the chastening arm, so lov’d and loving,
spare.”

BLANCHE MORTIMER was sitting in one of the recesses in the library, on Friday morning, plunged in a profound reverie, when the opening of the door roused her attention.

She knew the step which advanced up the

room ; I believe she had known directly whose hand it was that turned the lock, and was at least not startled when Lord Clarence appeared. He walked up to the hearth-rug, and stood for several minutes with his back to her, quite unconscious of her vicinity ; whilst she sat quietly behind a library table, her head resting on her hand, and her eyes abstractedly contemplating his form, with a hesitating desire to let him know she was there, and yet a strange unwillingness to call his attention.

Presently he turned slowly round, and, of course, his eyes immediately fell on her figure ; and, with a start of surprise, he exclaimed—

“ Miss Mortimer,—I really beg your pardon—I was quite unaware of your presence.”

“ So I perceived,” said Blanche, with a very slight smile ; “ but my presence need not drive you away, surely ;” for she saw that he seemed preparing to go.

“I am much obliged—I will not interrupt you,” he answered, coldly.

“You need not,” was her reply, in a more constrained voice, “the room, like the world, is wide enough for us to follow our own tastes and employments without jostling each other. You came here, I suppose, for your own pleasure and accommodation ; my present pursuit need not in the smallest degree disturb or distract you in yours.”

She bent her eyes on her book, and seemed resolved to say no more.

He thought it would appear rude to run away directly, so drawing a chair on one side of the fire, he took up “the Quarterly,” and tried to read also. But the effort was vain ; he could not fix his attention ; and hardly had five minutes elapsed, when she heard him pronounce her name. She looked up.

“Miss Mortimer, you are quite right in saying that the world is wide enough for us to follow our separate paths, our own pursuits ;

henceforth I will remember and act on this principle; henceforth our paths *shall* be separate."

He was not looking at her as he spoke, his eyes were fixed on a portrait hanging on the wall; but his voice was evidently commanded with an effort, and she listened to him with an emotion, in which surprise was not the governing principle.

She answered, when he paused, simply by saying, "Why?"

Now he turned his eyes on her, and said,—

"Because, I am now, at length, awakened to a consciousness of the vanity and folly of certain hopes, which from my boyhood I had ventured too constantly to cherish."

She coloured deeply, and bent her eyes down, with a look of bashfulness and softness almost enough to shake his purpose, and change the current of his thoughts. Almost! but condemning himself for a weakness he despised, he

turned his eyes again to the picture, and hardened his feelings.

“And yet it was no boyish fancy—no merely idle vanity ; it was a real, true, earnest intention—yes, and presumptuous as you may think me, Miss Mortimer, it was more than *my* wish only—it was the project of *him*—the warmly-cherished hope of that dear friend whose like I shall not look on again on earth. *He* wished—he planned it.”

The eyes which Blanche raised and fixed on the portrait before her, were dimmed with tears ; but hoping to disperse them, without their overflowing the long fringes round the lids, she continued to gaze upwards, even though unable to discern the features represented on the canvas. He did not look at her again.

There was a short silence between them ; which, finding he did not speak again, Blanche broke by remarking, in a clear and steady voice, “I have been expecting you, Lord Clarence, to say something which would explain your mean-

ing; at present, so far as I have caught your words, they appear to me rather enigmatical. At least, I do not very well know how to fashion a reply to them."

"Do you not understand me, Miss Mortimer?"

"No," she answered, steadily, "I do not. I am puzzled either for your meaning or your object in speaking thus. One or other is to me a mystery."

"You do not understand me?" repeated he, rising and coming close to the table. "Is that true? but, indeed, I cannot — ought not to doubt your word. Changed as you are in many things, you cannot be so changed as to say aught but truth. I must believe you."

"I am certainly much obliged to you," replied she, with a tinge of haughtiness in her tone and manner. "Since you are willing to do me the small justice of believing my words, perhaps you will proceed to explain your own."

He leant against the book-case, and spoke in

low, rapid, hurried words, and with his eyes still averted from her.

“ Miss Mortimer, ever since, as a school-boy, your brother introduced me here, I believe I have had one idea ruling my life, that was, admiration, regard, love for you. Your image was my idol at Eton, my incentive to exertion at Oxford, my guardian angel in the idle dissipation of after-life. Your image, such as you then seemed to me, lofty-minded, true, generous ; with affections as warm as they were pure, with principles as lovely as your person. What to others wore the semblance of pride, to me seemed only the natural effect of the moral elevation from which you looked down on ordinary characters. I can speak of it now : once I should not have dared. Whilst this devotion ruled my life, I might have wanted words to express my feelings ; now that the delusion has ceased, I can analyse and understand them.”

When Blanche had allowed her companion to

she certainly had been expecting some declaration of affection, but his mode of addressing her startled and surprised her; and to hear him thus resolutely speak of his attachment in the past tense, for a minute so completely confounded her, that when there came a pause, she continued silent, for she hardly knew how to answer.

She did, however, break the silence herself, by observing, "I believe I now understand your meaning, Lord Clarence. May I ask your motive in thus addressing me? I have not much experience, but it appears to me a little extraordinary for a gentleman to lay such stress on an extinct affection; to make a declaration of inconstancy: but as no doubt you have some sufficient reason, perhaps you will impart that to me also?"

The effort with which Blanche spoke these words was not apparent, unless it might be seen in the firm clasp of her slender fingers, which, interlaced together, were pressed with

unconscious energy upon the open book before her.

But there was a deadly weight upon her heart, a burning sensation in her breast, of which words can give a poor idea. Blank desolation had fallen on her life ; her future had been suddenly blotted out by the cold and dreary cloud which two days back had settled on it, and now she found that she must walk away by herself into this dismal and unknown waste, carrying her secret feeling with her, without hope, without sympathy, without even a word of friendly pity from the only one to whom her proud spirit would have stooped to receive it.

She had intended to renounce his love, but she had not expected to be herself renounced.

Now as she glanced at this mental picture, she realised for the first time how deeply she loved Lord Clarence ; how the consciousness of his attachment had been her consolation and support : how she had flattered herself that if her father's former wrong doing compelled them

to part, she should at least have carried with her his pity and his love.

“You have a right to know, and I will tell you. I believed that my feelings were so evident as to have been understood and appreciated by some of your family, at least, if not by yourself. You, perhaps, know whether I judged right or wrong ; you know, probably, with certainty, what I only surmise ; you might say, if you would, whether the assertion that I had loved you long and well, took you entirely by surprise.”

He paused, but she did not speak. He looked at her then, but she could not return his glance : he saw that he had been understood ; and he asked no more.

“Thinking this, as I did, could I leave you now to draw false inferences from a sudden change of views and feelings ? could I expose myself to charges of base, mercenary motives ? could I allow you to suppose me capricious, trifling, unmeaning in my actions ? No, I have

resolved on an explanation with you, on telling you all, everything, before we part, as we must do after this, to meet no more."

"Then go on," said she, quite calmly.

"Long, long ago I should have declared my feelings for you, Miss Mortimer, but for the resolute coldness with which you repressed all demonstration of affection. There was not a day, not an hour of meeting, in which you did not make me feel, that although admitting me as your brother's friend, you would give me no higher, dearer title. I thought you saw and understood my wishes, and Pierrepont told me that you would not listen to the wooing of one who had not won you by worth and noble deeds. *Then* I felt half inclined to murmur at your coldness ; *now* I thank you for it from my heart. Yes, you judged better than I did ; you saw more truly how incompatible were our different natures. I thank you that you thwarted my youthful wishes, and enforced on me the prudence to which I was little inclined. No,

we never could have been happy together, I see and admit it now."

She raised her eyes again, slowly and steadily, and said, in a cold voice, as if the whole conversation had concerned some one else,—

"How did you discover that?"

"Circumstances have removed the veil from my eyes; I see my delusion—I see that it was an ideal character which I had been so long worshipping; that the generosity, the feeling, the nobleness of which I thought your beauty only an outward type, was a fiction of my imagination. The woman who could fail as Miss Mortimer has done in the sacred duty of a daughter to her father's wife; who could show herself so careless, or so wilfully cruel towards one of the gentlest and most unassuming of her own sex; who could trample on her rights, slight her claims, and then triumph in her own proud position over one who never dreamt of rivalry,—such a woman does well to keep herself unfettered by matrimonial ties, for she is inca-

pable of submitting to a bond so pure and holy !”

He stopped, and she drew a long breath as if about to speak, then pressing her hands upon her breast, she evidently by an effort repressed the words she was going to utter. After a moment of silence, he went on in the same rapid, energetic manner—

“Unjust, ungenerous, cruel, cold-hearted as you have proved yourself to be, I think even you would have been moved had you heard the terms in which she spoke of you! Could you have awakened your better soul to a consciousness of her worth! Power, the love of power, and the possession of power, have been the fatal causes of the change in your character—for you are changed;—but, oh! the bitter grief it has been to me to see it! To observe the blight which has fallen on you: to think that Pierrepont’s sister has shown herself unworthy of him, has been a sadder blow than to believe you captivated by the false, meretricious

attractions of another. Had you been what I supposed you, I should have been unworthy of you ; but if for that reason I had never won you, I could at least have kept the memory of you still, as my standard for women. All *that* is at an end—but, Miss Mortimer, I believe I would have resigned everything else for the right of esteeming you still !”

He started from the position in which he had been standing, and drew himself upright before her as he spoke the last words ; and then, after a pause, turned away, seeming about to quit her.

She rose at once, and said—

“ Stop, Lord Clarence, it is my turn to speak now.”

They both stood face to face, with the library-table between them, on which she rested one of her delicate hands, perhaps to steady herself, as she spoke.

The crimson blood came up into her cheeks, and ebbed away again, as she began—

"I have no wish, no intention to deny that I knew your attachment to me, Lord Clarence ; it was, as you are apparently aware, evident to others, and had been commented on to me. You read me rightly too, in supposing I did not wish to encourage it. You had much which might have won a woman's love ; advantages of person, family, fortune ; rank, education, temper, talents ; I saw and acknowledged all this ; but I saw you too, an idle man, without an aim in life, or a definite employment ; with a profession encouraging careless, indolent habits, such as must hurt a man's character. If I had ever loved, it must have been one who had proved himself capable of high deeds ; whose mind commanded my respect, before whom I could bow in esteem. It was these opinions, of which I became conscious as soon as I was old enough to think at all on the subject, which prevented my extending to you more than a friendly regard. Forgive me, that I did not rightly estimate your worth. The sincerity of your language to me,

entitles me at least to speak my mind explicitly ; and I pardon your severity on account of your candour. In return for what you have said, let me tell you that the generous self-devotion of your recent conduct at Mineton, has convinced me that you are capable of the most heroic and chivalrous actions ; and the boldness with which you have ventured to remonstrate with me on the present occasion, shows a moral courage, which must command my warmest esteem. Thank you for your candour ; and if my opinion can be any value, take it as your reward. And now, farewell ; I suppose, after this explanation, I need hardly say, I do not wish for further intercourse. Make your own reason ; but find one for leaving Brierly to-day !”

She turned from him, and left the room.

To rush into the open air, to cool his feelings and arrange his thoughts, was the first impulse of the young man ; he hurried out, away through the park, towards the village. There was a violent

controversy within him ; his feelings arraying themselves in opposing parties each as it rose, and made itself heard, like orators in the House of Commons, giving a totally different colour to the subject under discussion.

The power of Blanche upon his heart might have been shaken, but it was not annihilated ; far from it : at this moment he felt he loved her better than ever. There are men, no doubt, with whom an attachment to a woman is but a passing incident, which may be at any time succeeded by another equally engrossing ; but there are others whose whole future life, whose course of thought and action are coloured by one early, sincere, disinterested love ; who having once bestowed their affections, cannot reclaim them, or rekindle before another altar the flame which circumstances have obliged them once to extinguish or conceal. There is something noble in a love which may be resigned, but cannot be replaced ; and of this species was the devotion of Lord Clarence to Miss Mortimer.

In giving up all hopes and plans connected with her, he gave up all ideas of forming a matrimonial connection: he neither expected, nor wished to find a successor to her.

But had he done right in giving her up? that was now the question. What had her words implied? not an avowal of attachment, certainly, but such a degree of esteem, such an acknowledgment of regard, as might once have led to something dearer still. And should he renounce her now?

Idiot! he had not left her for her indifference, but for her misconduct; and ought her opinion of him to alter his opinion of her? Was he not a consummate idiot, if he could allow her few words of commendation to weigh against the recently acquired knowledge of her character? did he not show himself an insufferable compound of conceited vanity, and weak selfishness, if he could contemplate retracting a resolution formed as a point of duty, because she had told him she believed him brave and candid?

But, was all he feared true? Might not there be some exaggeration, some misunderstanding, some blame falsely attached? Who could see behind the veil of domestic privacy? who could discern where the censure ought to lie? what warrant had he to certify that she was the transgressor, or that in her noble self-devotion she was not screening others more culpable, even at the expense of her own happiness.

She had made no effort at self-justification, in reply to his harsh censures; she had not even been angry or indignant; she had thanked him for his sincerity, not ironically, as she might have done had she been wounded, but gravely, calmly, with the look and accent of truth.

What but perfect innocence could have brought her so to behave—innocence and the steadfast resolution of a martyr to endure all for some high purpose?

He had been deceived, misled, and so induced to be unjust, and even cruel.

But yet this could not be so either ; he had himself witnessed the coldness of her conduct, the unkind indifference, the total want of sympathy and feeling, existing between her and her step-mother. Mr. Armytage, too, had admitted that she had been to blame—it could not be all a mistake.

What could he do?—Go once more to Blanche herself, and ask a further explanation ? No, she would not see him now ; she had said so, and she would keep her word.

He would go to Nora, tell her what had occurred, and see what she would say ; perhaps she could set matters right. He turned in his hurried walk to retrace his steps, and had hardly gone a hundred yards, when he encountered Mr. Armytage. .

They stopped, of course, to speak, and after exchanging the ordinary greetings, the clergyman asked if his lordship was going back to the park, and whether he would allow him to bear him company for a short time ?

A ready assent was given ; and then Lord Clarence, who could not help observing that his old friend looked much graver than usual, enquired whether anything was going wrong ?

“ I have been grieved and disturbed,” replied Mr. Armytage, “ and wished particularly to speak to you this morning, my lord.”

“ To me ?” exclaimed the other, looking round quickly, and a little embarrassed ; his head being full of one idea, he supposed that his companion was thinking of it also.

“ Yes, to you ! Look here ! If you are really the writer of this note, I hope the knowledge that it has fallen into my hands, may be some punishment for your fault.”

He put a small note, in a delicately-tinted and highly-perfumed envelope, into the young man’s hands, who received it with such a look of utter astonishment, and contemplated the address with so complete an appearance of innocent bewilderment, as almost justified him in the clergyman’s eyes.

“What is this to me?” said he, without attempting to open it. “I do not know the person to whom it is addressed. Who is Miss Rosa Martin? and what am I to do with her notes?”

“Then you did not write that?—do not know its contents? yet it bears your signature; look at the inside.”

“My signature!” exclaimed Lord Clarence, warmly, and with a heightened colour,—“I write it?—I have anything to do or say to a person I never saw or heard of in my life? What does this mean?”

“You have seen her; she is the sister of the schoolmaster; and you saw and noticed her uncommon beauty, my lord,” replied Mr. Armytage.

“I remember! but I did not know her name. May I read this document, since you say it bears my name?” enquired Lord Clarence, who had hitherto only held the little billet in his hands, and turned it over without unfolding it.

“I wish you to do so.”

The contents of the note were some high-flown compliments, hints at the writer's rank and riches, professions of affection, and a request for a meeting after dusk, at a spot in the park. But the document was signed with his own name.

The hand-writing was evidently disguised; and the absurdity of assuming a feigned hand, and yet affixing a name full length to the note, struck Lord Clarence immediately, and so forcibly, that he could hardly understand any one for a moment supposing him guilty of such preposterous folly.

“My dear Mr. Armytage, you do not believe that is mine, do you?” said he, as he returned it to the envelope and gave them back to him.

“I should not have expected it of you.”

“On my honour as a gentleman, on my faith as a Christian, Mr. Armytage, I never wrote or spoke one word, good or bad, to this

young woman ; nor, so far as I remember, have I ever, till now, thought twice about her." He spoke earnestly and gravely.

"I believe you. This note you see was dated Tuesday. Of course, she did not take any notice of the appointment, for she is as good as she is pretty ; and she has since received another, which unfortunately one of the French women up at the park got hold of and carried off. Rose does not know whether on purpose or by mistake. I have been angry with her, poor thing ; for instead of telling me at once she allowed this woman to get her secret out of her, and then was persuaded by her to write an answer, which I suppose you will have. She kept a copy of her answer ; and it was a very proper, simple, modest reply ; but she should have taken wiser, better counsellors than she did. Poor girl ! she was afraid we should think she had been trying to attract you ; and as you had been several times at the school, she thought appearances would be against her. This morn-

ing she told me all. She is terribly afraid of her brother hearing it, and calling you to account ; and she thought if he got into a quarrel with you, they would certainly be disgraced and turned away. She was in an agony of distress, and begged me to speak to you."

"Poor thing!" said Lord Clarence. "Can you imagine who is the author of this double-edged mischief? Who could have dared so to abuse my name? Let me look at the writing again, perhaps that may tell something."

He examined it carefully, but derived no satisfaction from that ; and there was no denying that the note-paper had been his, for it was embossed with his crest and family motto, together with the distinctive label, which marked him as a younger son. This, however, as he observed, was nothing. He had quantities of similar paper in his possession, and certainly had left it on the library table, within the reach of any one who chose to take it.

"What can I do?" said he ; "I was intend-

ing to leave Brierly to-day—this very afternoon ; but if I go without getting this explained, who knows what slanders may be raised at my expense ? And yet I *must* go too.”

“ Is not that a sudden resolve ? ”

“ Rather,” replied Lord Clarence, quietly.

“ May I ask, is it the result of anything unpleasant which has passed ? ” enquired Mr. Armytage, with much earnestness.

“ What makes you think that ? ” said the other, quickly, and with a conscious look.

“ Because I have observed that you and M. de Veri do not seem on comfortable terms, and I thought perhaps there might have been some decided disagreement : there certainly is ill-will on his part : and it strikes me that this intrigue, and the French maid meddling in it, is more like the act of this foreigner than any one I know besides in the neighbourhood.”

“ Yes,” said Lord Clarence ; “ it may be so ; but what good is it to him ? He could not persuade this young woman, if they met, that

he was me, and why should he try to deceive her?"

"It was Miss Mortimer's maid who took the note and its answer away," said the clergyman, emphatically.

Lord Clarence started; then recovered himself, and said—

"It does not signify. I really must go home now. If anything come of this, or you learn any more, let me know; and if possible, I will contrive to stay another day at Brierly."

They parted, for they had reached the Park gate, and Lord Clarence hurried to the house. His first wish, now, was to have some communication with Blanche, and obtain her permission to remain at the Park, until the mystery of these notes was cleared up. He remembered that he had taken no measures to comply with her injunction, and the only idea that had presented itself to his imagination, was to set off immediately, on pretence of urgent business, to London; intending, if his sister would not accompany him,

to return the next day, and meet her at the station, from whence they were to start on their next visit.

How to get at Blanche he did not know. He must go to Mrs. Mortimer, and see if she could help him.

Fortunately, Nora was alone in her own room, when Lord Clarence sought her there. She did not tell him that she was trying by rest and silence to get rid of a headache brought on by terror and anxiety after a fearfully disturbed night. Perhaps her pale cheeks said something of the kind; but the cause of her sufferings could not be even alluded to. Her husband's distracted ravings during the few intervals when natural sleep overpowered him, were hardly less terrific than the discovery that at other times his heavy slumber was procured only by the use of powerful narcotics.

Lord Clarence told her he had come to ask her advice and assistance; but he looked so exceedingly puzzled and embarrassed, and had

such evident difficulty in finding words, that Nora had an intuitive perception that it was something concerning Blanche. Eager for the happiness of both, but especially of Blanche, she longed to launch at once into the subject, and spare him the difficulty of beginning ; and after a little hesitation and silence, seeing that he made no progress beyond saying, "I wanted to speak to you about Miss Mortimer!" she ventured to make a little opening.

"May I guess? perhaps I know more than you think I do. There are tongues in this house, which whisper all they gather by their eyes or ears."

"That is hardly fair," said he, with a smile of embarrassment, and half-hiding his face behind a paper which he had taken from the table. "But whatever they might tell, they could not, at least none but Blanche could, tell the truth, as it really happened, Mrs. Mortimer—she has asked me to leave the house!"

Nora started upright in her chair, and looked

up at him, as he stood leaning against the chimney-piece, with incredulous eyes.

"Yes," continued he; "and as I particularly want to stay a little longer, I came to ask how I could best make such a request acceptable."

"Do you want me to intercede for you?" said Nora, still looking all amazement.

"Would you? Could you?"

"I would and I could, if I knew what grounds to go on: for though Blanche has never alluded in the remotest way to your conduct, she is so good, and kind, and frank with me, that I think I might venture even on that topic."

"She good, and kind, and frank with you?" exclaimed Lord Clarence, eagerly; "she, who never, almost never speaks to you. Oh, Mrs. Mortimer, you are joking."

"Seriously, no! Blanche is undemonstrative in public; but could you doubt her goodness? it was unworthy of you, Lord Clarence!"

"Could I doubt my own eyes and ears, Mrs. Mortimer, or the report of others, not her ene-

mies certainly? I have witnessed many, too many exhibitions of her unkind feelings towards you, not to be aware of her injustice. Perhaps I am taking too great a liberty in alluding to this topic," for Nora's face had crimsoned over, and her features betrayed that she was disturbed by his words; "but you will forgive me, I am sure, when you know how deeply my happiness is concerned in it. It is on this account, for her harshness and improper conduct to you, that we have come to a decisive explanation, and resolved to part. I could not ask the hand of a woman who so little appreciated what was due to the feelings of a wife; who so transgressed towards one of her own sex. What happiness could there be with such a temper?"

"Oh! Lord Clarence," cried Nora, with tears in her eyes, "what has made you act thus? it is not just, nor right. Am I to blame? Have I ever complained, or said, or done what made you think me ill-used? I did not mean it; and

yet it must be my fault, if such an impression is given."

"No, indeed," said he, sitting down beside her; "very far, indeed, from your fault. You have borne neglect and unkindness with a martyr's patience." She made a motion of disapproval. "Well, it is not my wish to offend you; but tell me now, sincerely, as you know my happiness dependent on your answer, am I wrong in blaming Miss Mortimer?"

Nora hesitated, and looked down.

"The first evening I was here her manner was rude, almost insulting in her caprice."

"I do not recollect," replied she, reluctantly.

"About the music," suggested he.

"Ah, I remember; but oh, Lord Clarence, she made me such a frank and graceful apology, that had I even been hurt, I should have been amply repaid."

"Did she?" cried he. "That is the Blanche I knew formerly. But, Mrs. Mortimer, was that the only time an apology was due?"

“ I will not pretend to say,” replied Nora, reluctantly speaking, after a thoughtful pause, “ that Blanche and I have always been on confidential terms. It could not be expected. What could be more unwelcome to a woman in her situation, than a step-mother like myself? Too young, and ignorant, and weak to command respect, with no claim to the situation to which I was raised so unexpectedly ; neither connection, nor rank, nor wealth, nor talent on my side, to help to soften the evil of a relationship always dreaded ; she and her sisters must have been * more than mortal, could they have received me with cordiality. What could be more unpleasant, more galling to a woman of Blanche’s mind and character, than to have raised over her, into her place, both at home and abroad, a stranger, younger than her youngest sister, and no more to be compared to the woman whom she superseded, than a daisy is to a white lily. Could you, under such circumstances, with every feeling, every recollection armed against me, expect

her cordially to submit, or immediately to coalesce with an intruder like myself? It is much that she has at last opened her generous mind, to the belief that I would gladly be her friend ; that she has laid aside the natural prejudices which formed a gulf between us, and that now, at length, we are on such terms as you must approve. It is for the sake of your mutual happiness that I speak thus openly, Lord Clarence ; for no object less important would I have owned that there had been ever a cause of grief * between my husband's daughters and myself. Now retract your hasty judgment, and do her justice."

He sat silent, resting his head on his hands, and she could see, although his countenance was partially concealed, that he was suffering mentally, in an acute degree.

"What is the matter?" said she kindly ; "it cannot pain you to be obliged to retract a hasty and unjust opinion."

"The pain arises from having formed and

acted on it," said he, without looking up. "Listen, and I will tell you what I have done."

He repeated, in a tone of emotion, the conversation which had passed between him and Blanche that morning, all except her final answer; and then, turning to Nora, he asked what she would think of a man who could speak thus? how she would feel towards him? what value she would set on any professions of affection from him?

"Can you doubt?" exclaimed she, with energy. "The very highest! Surely the attachment which is based on esteem, and which, surviving coldness and disregard, yields only to a strong sense of right, is worth far more than any amount of unreasoning passion or that blind admiration, which in its own nature soon consumes itself. Yes, a love which would sacrifice even itself for the welfare of its object, is the only love of any value, the only affection which can be depended on. Without mutual esteem and congeniality of tastes and tempers, how

soon the most violent passion expires, leaving nothing but sad traces of what has been ; such as mark the progress of a ruinous conflagration."

Lord Clarence looked at her with sympathy and emotion ; for the expression of her countenance, and the mournful pathos of her voice, indicated a depth of feeling indescribably affecting ; as if she knew, only too well, from painful experience, how bitter were the ashes of extinguished passion.

There was a pause ; and at length he said, half speaking to himself—

" Those horrid charades ! I wish she would not act."

" I believe Blanche does not altogether like it, but thought it right to yield. But why should you mind it in her ? The Miss Murrays do it, and her sisters. What harm is there ?"

" The Miss Murrays have their father and brother," replied he, hastily. " You do not

know the familiarity which such things lead to."

"I know nothing about it, certainly, but I should imagine nobody would venture to be familiar with Miss Mortimer, and her presence may probably keep them all in order. I cannot help thinking that your extreme annoyance has some foundation in—what shall I call it?—jealousy of the Marquis."

He coloured, and tried to laugh, then grew grave, and said—

"Yes, it seemed as if it were done to give him a triumph over me ; to show how little she concerned herself for my opinion ; or from coquetry."

"For shame ! you do not deserve to know the truth ; yet I will tell you one thing, on condition that you ask no more, nor seek to know the reason why. Do you promise on your honour?" She laid her hand as she spoke on his arm.

"I do," said he, surprised at her manner ;

taking her hand, he added, "I give you my word to ask nothing."

"She was compelled," whispered Nora; then holding up her finger to enforce silence, which his eager glances seemed to indicate he was about to break. "No fault of her's—you must trust her if you love her."

"If I love!" exclaimed he, with a pressure of the hand he still held, which was perhaps in his mind intended for Blanche, "I assure you my attachment is unabated; even principle and prudence could not extinguish it. When I had no hope, it was still unwavering, and is now stronger than ever.—My affection is unalterable."

"Bravo!" said a voice behind them, which made them both start; and at the same moment M. de Veri stepped carelessly up to the hearth-rug. He stood a moment surveying the pair with a look of insolence which disconcerted Nora, and made it a difficult matter with Lord Clarence to refrain from ejecting him from the

room. Nora crimsoned, and with an effort just commanded herself enough not to run away. She was immediately conscious of the interpretation which might be put on her companion's words by one who had not heard the preceding sentence. She felt that appearances were against her, and could hardly help dreading that this mischief-working Frenchman might bring additional evil from this circumstance.

M. de Veri broke the silence by observing with a sneer, that he was afraid his presence was very inopportune; he had interrupted a most tender scene. He had thought, however, that it was not the fashion for English wives to indulge in these little amusements; he should be wiser in future.

"Neither is it the fashion for gentlemen of any nation to intrude where they are not welcome," replied Lord Clarence, indignantly, and rising as he spoke, "nor to play the listener to conversation not intended for their ears."

Nora cried—"Oh, hush, Lord Clarence!"

At the same moment, by a dexterous movement, the Frenchman threw himself into the chair which the other had vacated, and said, with an insolent laugh—

"Well, then, go, for you are certainly not wanted; Mrs. Mortimer and I can do without you. *N'est-ce pas, ma belle amie.*"

Then he added, in French, a flourishing speech, accusing her of coquetting with him, and protesting that she should trifle with him no longer.

That Lord Clarence's demonstrations of indignation did not proceed to action at that moment, was entirely owing to the deprecating glance Nora threw on him. With quiet gravity she rose from her chair, and replied—

"I beg your pardon, M. de Veri, but I am not sufficiently mistress of the French tongue to answer you in your own language. If you wish to remain here, you are quite welcome. I am going down to the drawing-room myself, where

I think my visitors must be wanting me. Your lordship," turning to the other, "had better go to your sister, and settle with her what you wish to have done."

"No, stay here, Madam," said de Veri, taking her hand, and drawing her towards a chair, "I want to talk to you."

"I cannot now, Monsieur," replied she, quite composedly.

"You must, or it will be the worse for you, the worse for your husband, for all your family. Ah, you know you must."

"You are mistaken," said she, very gravely. "I know no right that you have to command my movements; and I am sure, that did such a right exist, M. de Veri is too courteous to employ it to contradict my will."

"Take your hands off Mrs. Mortimer this moment, sir," exclaimed Lord Clarence, interposing, for de Veri still kept a firm grasp of her wrist. "Let her go, or you shall repent your insolence."

"Tell your friend he had better not provoke me," replied de Veri to Nora; "tell him that you are in my power; reputation, station, name, all that is dear to woman—tell him this, and bid him hold his tongue and be gone."

"I shall tell him no such thing, for it is not true," replied Nora, indignantly; "you have no such power over me. I will not allow you to remain here *now*, and I will tell Mr. Mortimer the reason why I speak so."

"*A quoi bonne cette belle passion ?*" said the Frenchman, with cool insolence. "You know very well you would not dare! You know that Mr. Mortimer has sold you and his daughters, all three to me, and that none of you may venture to contradict me. You, Blanche, all, are my slaves!"

"Let me protect you, Mrs. Mortimer, from the unmanly insolence of this miserable wretch," exclaimed Lord Clarence, whose indignation now could no longer be restrained. "Come away with me, and leave him to make his mean, dis-

graceful boasts to himself. Surely, when your husband hears the language he has dared to use, he will no longer be permitted to pollute this house with his presence."

He tried to draw her away.

Nora trembled and turned pale; her husband's warnings were ringing in her ears, and she felt that she was treading on ground already undermined, where, at any moment, a fatal spark might produce ruin and desolation around her.

"Her husband!" repeated de Veri, with a scornful laugh. "Oh, yes, tell her *husband*, and see whether you or I, my lord, will be ordered to leave the house. Do you doubt my power? look at Miss Mortimer; see whose company she seeks, whose will she follows; *la belle Blanche* herself has owned my sway—a triumph which you, my Lord Clarence, have never yet effected. Ah, you do not know me!"

"I do as much as I care to," said Lord Cla-

rence; "I know you to be an impostor, trying to pass off for a man of family and fortune: I know that your knowledge of society was never derived from mixing in it yourself; and I have little doubt but that all your other boasts and threats are as empty as your claims to the title of Marquis de Veri."

"For mercy's sake forbear," cried Nora; "what is the use of provoking this man? It is too true that he has some strange and dangerous power over my husband: if he had not said so, I should not have dared to mention it. Let this knowledge be the clue to what you have not hitherto understood; and Lord Clarence, leave us, leave the house as you proposed to do; leave me to set your character clear, and trust to our all seeing better and happier days. Go, please."

Before Lord Clarence could answer by more than a perplexed look, Miss Mortimer's French maid suddenly ran into the room, exclaiming,

in an agitated voice “ *Oh, madame, venez vite, Mamselle Mortimer se trouve mal. Oh, ciel-
mais c’est affreuse de la voir. C’est par trop
fort ; je m’évanouie moi.*”

CHAPTER VIII. *

“ Clos’d eyelids, limbs supine, and breath .
So still, you scarce can calm the doubt
If life can be so like to death—
’Tis life—but all of earth shut out.”

“ WHERE is Miss Mortimer ?” cried Nora in alarm, for the terror of the Frenchwoman was inevitably communicated to those who heard her.

The answer was no sooner given than Nora darted away, followed by Lord Clarence ; they reached her morning room, and as the door was partly open, they entered without ceremony. Blanche was sitting in a chair, perfectly upright,

and her eyes wide open, but her face was colourless, and her expression one of horror and fear.

Nora approached softly, and tried to take her hand—it was rigid, and the fingers were firmly clenched; her dilated eye-balls never moved, and it was evident that she did not perceive any thing around her.

Nora uttered an exclamation of terror, and Lord Clarence sprang to her side. The stony composure of attitude, the ghastly look of her features never varied, as he passionately clasped her cold fingers in his hands, and called on her by name, in accents of despairing tenderness.

“Hush, hush!” said Mrs. Mortimer, “this is no time for idle exclamation. We must have help;” as she spoke she rang the bell with violence. “Lay her on the sofa.” Support her, she is falling,” for the rigid figure seemed to have suddenly lost its equilibrium, and sank forwards from the seat.

Lord Clarence caught her in his arms and lifted her to the sofa; Nora, having procured

cold water from the adjoining dressing-room; bedewed her face and hands, whilst waiting impatiently for the appearance of a servant to answer the bell, which, owing to the great size of the house, always required a considerable time.

“Will no one come?” said she, in despair.
“Go and call help, please, Lord Clarence.”

“I don’t know where—I cannot leave you,” replied he, as he was kneeling beside the sofa, endeavouring to unclasp her hands, to chafe the palms.

He succeeded just enough to release from those clenched fingers two crumpled notes, on one of which the signature of his own name catching his eye, he thrust them both hurriedly into his pocket. At this moment a footman appeared.

Mrs. Mortimer sent for the housekeeper, and her own maid Juliette; ordered some one immediately to find Mr. Mortimer, and dispatched a groom on horseback, to summon the doctor. At the same moment, Mrs. Ellison, the house-

keeper, entered hurriedly, having been alarmed by Stephanie, Miss Mortimer's own attendant ; and as she was accompanied by two or three maids much more useful and less affected than Stephanie, Nora had now help enough.

Lord Clarence was then obliged to leave the room, and he retired in a state of alarm, bewilderment, and grief, not to be told.

The sounds of hurry and bustle in the house, the search and enquiry made in all directions for Mr. Mortimer, and the half-incoherent way in which Lady Fanny was called out of the drawing-room by her brother, spread the alarm ; and before long, nearly all the female inhabitants of the house, sisters, guests, and servants, rushed confusedly to the sitting-room. As Blanche had been carried to her bed, at the suggestion of Mrs. Ellison, the ladies were allowed to congregate in the puter apartment, but none except her sisters were permitted to enter the bed-room where the sufferer was.

Bertha, too much terrified to be of any use, as

soon as she cast her eyes on the pale and fearful face before her, burst into tears of terror, and sobbing violently, escaped from the room by another door, flying to take refuge, she knew not where.

Margherite remained beside her sister. Her deep hatred to her step-mother made her view every action of hers with mistrust, and she would gladly have ordered her from the room. Though she did not actually proceed to this length, she evinced plainly enough by her manner, her cold suspicion: and her mode of enquiring why a doctor was not sent for? why her father was not summoned? and other such questions, implied that she hardly supposed any one but herself would take the smallest measure of prudence. Especially harsh and suspicious was her demand—what had occasioned this illness?—who could account for it?—who had first known it?

Nora said Stephanie had called her.

Turning to the frightened Frenchwoman,

Margherite proceeded to interrogate her in her own language as to what she knew on the subject.

Stephanie, with hesitation and circumlocution, named M. de Veri as having been the last person with her : and Margherite, eagerly questioning, with an interest much quickened by curiosity respecting him, extracted from her the following facts :—

It appeared that at the suggestion of De Veri, she had given to Miss Mortimer's care two notes, one directed to Lord Clarence,—one from him to Rosa Martin. Miss Mortimer was angry, and made her confess that M. de Veri had prompted an action which she naturally considered as an impertinent liberty. She had sent for the Marquis, and Stephanie, being in the inner room, where she did not mention she had placed herself to listen, had heard an indignant conversation between them, which, passing in French, she had, of course, completely understood.

Miss Mortimer, she said, charged the Marquis with attempts to deceive and seduce the schoolmaster's sister, under the name of one who was incapable of an act of indecorum, much less deliberate villainy. Monsieur had at first denied the charge, then accused Mademoiselle of affection for Lord Clarence, and when she had become angry, had first threatened her with some terrible evil, and then whispered something to her, which Stephanie had not heard; after which he ran out of the room.

Some time passed; the waiting woman became uneasy at the profound stillness of the room, invented an excuse for knocking, received no answer, entered, and alarmed at what she saw, immediately ran to Madame. That was all she knew.

"And these notes, where are they?" enquired Margherite.

No one could tell; and a search for them was, of course, unavailing, as at that very time,

Lord Clarence was talking over them with his sister in private.

After a most tedious hour, the doctor arrived. Blanche was still lying in the same state of coma as at first. Mr. Barker speedily decided that she had received some severe mental shock, and was rather precise in his enquiries as to its nature. Fortunately, the benefit of his remedies did not depend altogether on his knowledge of the exact cause of the illness; but he shook his head, looked very grave, and preserved an ominous silence as to the probable result.

Meanwhile the brother and sister sat together in silent suspense, or in agitated and broken conversation. After his first rapid and startling announcement, Lady Fanny had hurried to see if she could be of any use to her friend in this sudden distress; but finding that she could not even see her, and having no wish to increase the alarmed group who were clustered in the outer room, where maids and mistresses were coming

and going confusedly, she returned to her brother, who required her presence.

He had much to tell her. All the events which had been crowded into that morning had to be narrated; and the mention of Mr. Armytage's name brought back the recollection of the mysterious notes which had been charged on Lord Clarence. At the same moment, those which he had taken from the close grasp of Blanche herself recurred to his remembrance, and he eagerly produced them.

* One was sealed, and directed to himself; and with a heart throbbing with the idea that it was some communication from Blanche, he hastily opened it. He was bitterly disappointed at finding that it was only from Rosa Martin, containing a request that he would discontinue addresses dishonourable alike to them both, and a very modest reproof for the letter he had ventured to send her.

He threw it down with an impatient exclamation, and looked at the other. It bore his name,

and nearly resembled the one Mr. Armytage had that morning shown him.

“And Blanche saw these,” cried he, “and believed I had written them.—Oh, Fanny!”

“Poor Clarence! what can be the meaning of them?” said his sister.

“Do you think, Fanny—but no! this could not have grieved her so. She would not have cared so much for me.”

“I don’t know; perhaps it was several things together. She has not been like herself since Christmas-day.”

“I can never forget her face, Fanny,” said he, with a shudder, and covering his eyes with his hands. “It was awful in its ghastly horror. And the fearfulness of that rigid figure! I wonder how they are going on now? I must go and hear, and find out if the doctor is coming.”

They went together, and finding that Mr. Barker had just entered the room, they lingered in the vestibule to hear his opinion as soon as possible.

*

THE RIVAL SUITORS.

There was a large bay-window at the end of the corridor, with broad seats, and here they stationed themselves, forgetful of the cold which increased as the evening advanced, thinking only of Blanche, and conversing only in low, agitated whispers.

By-and-bye Mr. Armytage himself appeared, and catching sight of these two as they sat there, he quitted the door where he was about to knock, and came towards them.

The vague report which he had heard in the village had been confirmed by Mr. Murray in the house, and he now had only to enquire, "How is she?" as he clasped the hands of his two young friends.

"We have not heard for a long time," said Lord Clarence.

"Just the same half-an-hour ago," said his sister at the same moment. "Please go in and see yourself; perhaps Mrs. Mortimer may speak to you."

After a few more questions he complied, and the two sat down again.

“Oh, Fanny, it is my fate ; this is the third time my visits have been fearfully interrupted,” whispered he. “Surely it is some strange fatality.”

“Never think so, dear Clarence,” cried she, eagerly ; “a strange coincidence, but it is nothing more. Do not dwell on such an idea.”

He shook his head sadly, and seemed too much distressed to be able to reply. After a while, the clergyman returned to them.

“Does nobody know anything of Mr. Mortimer ?” asked he anxiously. “Mrs. Mortimer is in great distress at his non-appearance, and even Margherite is uneasy. She entreated me to make inquiries for him.”

“How is Blanche ?” asked Lady Fanny, without answering.

“No change yet ; the remedies have had no effect ; but Mr. Barker thinks, in another hour

or two the last applications will begin to do good. Lady Fanny, you are shivering with cold. Why do you stay here?"

"I don't feel it, and what can I do?"

"Put on a bonnet and cloak, and come out with your brother and me, to search for Mr. Mortimer, or, at least, to ascertain which way he is gone."

Lady Fanny agreed; glad to do anything which might help to rouse her brother, she hurried away, and returned so quickly, that the gentlemen had not broken the silence into which they had lapsed at her departure.

Lord Clarence seemed unwilling to stir; but his sister taking his arm drew him on, and he followed in a state of passive wretchedness. It was the suspense and inactivity which so unnerved him; had there been anything to do for Blanche, he would have suffered less; and although at first not fully entering into his companions' solicitude about Mr. Mortimer, the mere action of walking did him good, and

presently he roused himself enough to comprehend what Mr. Armytage wanted.

They went round to the stable-yard, where the clergyman wished to begin his investigations ; and here it appeared, that, although at first, they could find nobody who had seen him go out, one of his riding-horses being missing also, he had probably taken it. One of the under-grooms was at last discovered, who said that he had saddled the horse for his master about eleven o'clock ; that he had seemed in a tremendous hurry, and quite flustered like. That he had mounted and ridden rapidly away ; but whether he had turned to the right or left after leaving the stable-yard, the witness did not know, and could not guess.

The party turned away, and were questioning what next to do, when at the moment a man appeared leading Mr. Mortimer's horse to the stable. They hurried to meet him, and so also did the grooms and stable-boys, surprised to see the horse in the care of a man whom they im-

mediately recognised as the gate-keeper at the side of the park farthest from the village.

“Has Mr. Mortimer gone to the house?” cried Mr. Armytage; “when did he arrive?”

The man looked puzzled, pulled his hair, and then rubbing his chin, he said he had seen nothing of the Squire, except his horse, which he had brought home.

“But, my friend, where did you find the horse?” exclaimed Lord Clarence, now fully roused to the greatness of the perplexity.

The man said the creature had come and whinnied at the gate to be let in, and that his wife, seeing it, had managed to catch and confine him. She was alone at the time, and could not leave the gate, or her baby; and so she had waited for some one to come by, or her husband to return home. Besides, knowing the Squire’s horse, she had thought his master could not be far off, and had been expecting him every moment to appear himself. At last, when the husband returned, he had, after much doubt, deter-

mined to bring the animal back, and see what their lady would say : it was odd the horse should come back without the rider.

Here was a new cause of alarm : he must have been thrown, and was, perhaps, lying helpless, suffering, senseless, or worse ; no one could tell where. The horse had not been down, but it was evident that he had been ridden violently, for the foam had scarcely now dried upon his winter-coat, and had left dark stains, which told how hard he had been pressed.

What was to be done ? to send out men in every direction to search for the lost man, seemed the only resource ; but this appeared almost a hopeless one, seeing that evening was approaching, and they had so little clue to guide them. That he had not left the park by either of the lodge-gates was certain, and a small postern, of which he had a key, was the only other means of exit. This was all the knowledge they had to assist their search, and having, in the

name of Mrs. Mortimer, given the necessary directions to the men at the stable, Mr. Armytage hastened to the village to find additional assistance in the search ; whilst the others, after accompanying him part of the way, returned to the house with an increase of anxiety on their minds.

• They repaired once more to the gallery, and were pacing slowly up and down, conversing in low whispers, when the door of Blanche's room opened, and Nora looked out. On seeing them she sprang towards them, tears streaming down her cheeks, and throwing herself into Lady Fanny's arms, she exclaimed, in a voice half-suffocated with sobs,—

“ She lives—oh ! Fanny, she has regained her consciousness.” •

• Then turning to Lord Clarence, Nora clasped his hand, and could only testify her thankful congratulations by that warm and eloquent pressure. He had no words at command ; there were too many emotions swelling in his

heart : but both his sister and his friend understood him, and Lady Fanny's kiss was as expressive as Nora's silent greeting.

Blanche had sighed, closed her eyes ; the rigidity of her limbs had relaxed, and the words " Father, father," had been faintly whispered.

After a few minutes she had sunk again into unconsciousness ; but now it was more like a natural sleep, and Mr. Barker hoped that the crisis was past, and that if allowed to enjoy unbroken repose, she would wake to the clear possession of her faculties.

All these particulars Nora whispered to her friends, as they stood there in the dim twilight of the gallery, as if there was danger that her voice should rouse the sleeper within, and break the precious slumber on which so much depended.

" But where is her father ?" again repeated Nora, anxiously ; " has nothing been heard of him ? It is incomprehensible."

Lord Clarence asked some further question

about Blanche, intended to turn Mrs. Mortimer's attention from the other topic; his mind was too much agitated and distressed to be able to tell clearly what he might reveal, or what ought to be hidden concerning Mr. Mortimer's mysterious absence. But Lady Fanny, who believed that at all events truth was best, and it would prepare her for a catastrophe, if she knew it, presently said, "All we know is, that he rode out this morning, and is not yet returned."

The anxious wife reflected a minute, then said thoughtfully, "Can he be gone to London on some important business?"

"What! without telling you?" exclaimed her companions, in surprise.

"Perhaps he told Blanche; [I did not see him after the post came in. He has been much harassed by some troublesome affairs lately, and it is not impossible that he may have been summoned away. He did so once before, and only Blanche knew where he was gone."

The brother and sister looked at each other;

struck even at that moment by such a picture of the want of conjugal confidence which had been shown to Nora.

“ You will, of course, hear then, in a short time ?” said Lord Clarence, glad that she should have this hope to support her, until the more terrible reality, which he fully expected was impending, should be made absolutely certain.

Nora said she must go back to her patient, whom she did not intend to leave again for the rest of the evening ; but she hoped that her visitors would have Margherite and Bertha’s company at dinner, in which case her own absence could be easily excused.

As soon as she withdrew, Lady Fanny suggested to her brother, that they should run down together to the parsonage, and not only carry the intelligence of Blanche’s partial revival, but learn what measures had been taken for tracing Mr. Mortimer.

“ You well know,” said she, “ how Blanche adores her father ; to help in aiding or rescuing

him, would be the thing of all others for which she would be most grateful."

It was the most powerful appeal that she could make; he immediately assented, and they set off at once.

They met Mr. Armytage just returning to his house, accompanied by the steward and some more men, whom he had collected in the village, and to whom he was giving such instructions as he could devise, for continuing the search for their employer. All was eager bustle and energetic haste to set off; and whilst surrounded by men thus full of enthusiasm, Lord Clarence could not remain a useless and moping mourner for ills he could in no degree remedy. The desire to be of use seized him; he threw off the depression which had overwhelmed his powers of mind, and resolved at once to accompany the searchers.

Lady Fanny, delighted to see him once more like himself, refrained from reminding him that she should be left to find her way back in the

dusk through the Park ; and when he, just before starting, recollected his sister's presence, she made it all easy by saying, she would ask the keeper's wife to walk back with her, if he was afraid to trust her alone.

Plans for an organised search having been concocted, the men started on their expedition, whilst the lady remained some time to converse with the clergyman, to relate the hopes for Blanche, the conjectures concerning Mr. Mortimer, and such other notions as occurred to her.

The clergyman started up : if he was gone to London, it would be known at the station ; what blunderers they had been not to send there first ! Perhaps it was some accident by which his horse had escaped from its keeper ; he might have trusted it to the ostler at the Railway tavern, who, having been formerly groom at the Park, was not unfrequently employed by the family. If he could find a messenger, he would send at once and enquire. It was not

more than a mile from the village, and that point would soon be settled.

After a little delay, the schoolmaster, who had not accompanied the party of searchers, undertook to go over on the clergyman's pony, and the two others sat down to wait with what patience they could the return of this messenger.

"Mr. Mortimer is so strange," said Mr. Armytage, "that nothing he does ought to surprise any one; he has not acted altogether like a rational man ever since he married."

"He makes me think of a man with a heavy crime on his mind," said Lady Fanny. "He starts and looks aghast at trifles, and never seems easy unless he knows what everybody is saying round him."

Mr. Armytage answered only by a sigh.*

"But oh, Mr. Armytage, what is the meaning of those shocking notes which Clarence found in Miss Mortimer's hands, when she was first ill? What horrid plot and mystery is

this? Who is this Rosa Martin, who pretends to think my brother would make improper appointments with her? and what does it all mean?"

"My dear, it is beyond a doubt that it is M. de Veri's doing. I have ascertained that last night he kept the rendezvous, although she did not, of course. Two young women from the neighbourhood, daughters of the farmer at the Toft, passed that way and fell in with him there. They came to me since I spoke with your brother, to complain of the rudeness with which they had been treated, and their father, who was with them here, threatens to prosecute the Marquis. Whether he used your brother's name from malice towards him, or merely as a snare to Rose, I cannot tell. How came the notes in the hands of Blanche?"

Of course Lady Fanny did not know; and on this point, as on so many others, they were left to the vaguest conjectures. The perplexity was varied, not ended, by the return of Martin, who

brought them no intelligence to lighten their anxiety.

Mr. Mortimer had certainly not been at the station that day : Green, the tavern-keeper, knew nothing of him or his horse ; and the station-master was positive that he had not applied for a ticket, either for an up or down train.

They were thrown back on their original conjecture that he must have met with some terrible, perhaps fatal accident, and wild presentiments of horror filled their minds.

Lady Fanny returned to the house, under the escort of the schoolmaster, and having, with sickness of heart, gone through the forms of the toilette, met the other guests as they slowly assembled round the drawing-room fire.

The Murrays were talking of their departure next day. It had always been intended that they should go on Saturday, on which account the charades were to have been acted that very evening. Suddenly it occurred to the party, that in the hurry and distress of that day, probably

no one had thought of sending notice to the guests who were expected to dinner, and perhaps they might find a large circle assembled, while the mistress was unavoidably engaged, the master unaccountably absent, and the eldest daughter lying in a dangerous state of insensibility.

Whilst the Murrays were amusing themselves with these conjectures, with a suppressed merriment, such as people exhibit when elastic spirits will rebound even against the voice of conscience, and Lady Fanny, too seriously alarmed to be amused at all, was silently wondering at them, Margherite and Bertha appeared. The temptation to act the mistress of the house had drawn the one from her sister's bedside ; as to the other, she wanted her dinner.

Margherite assured them that proper precautions had been taken with regard to the invited guests ; and she had just rung to order dinner to be served, when Bertha observed that M. de Veri was not there. The servant who

answered the bell was thereupon ordered to send to his apartment, and enquire if the Marquis was ready for dinner. But the butler replied, with the slightest trace of surprise in his tone, that the Marquis had left the house that afternoon.

It was with almost a scream that Bertha repeated the words, whilst Margherite haughtily asked what he meant.

Mr. Winters, the butler, gravely repeated the assertion, and so far amplified on it as to prove its truth. The Marquis had made one of the footmen pack up his portmanteau, had ordered a carriage, and had been driven to the station, where the groom, who had accompanied him, had seen him get into a London train, but did not know for what place he had taken his ticket.

He was gone then!

What next? What new act of the wonderful drama in which they seemed involved would appear? So thought Lady Fanny. As to the

others, Margherite ordered dinner more haughtily than usual ; the Murrays whispered and guessed ; Bertha nearly cried. Dinner passed in very sober silence. No questions were asked about Lord Clarence, after his sister had briefly announced that he would not appear. People thought what they pleased, but nobody guessed the truth.

About nine o'clock a message was brought to Lady Fanny that her brother wanted to speak to her. He would not come into the drawing-room. The search had been quite unsuccessful ; no one had seen him ; no one knew which way he had gone ; and though one of the men had tracked the horse's hoofs on the thin sprinkling of snow for a considerable way from the postern gate, they had eventually been lost on a wide, open common, which the wind had swept bare, and all trace of him had disappeared. They had spread out their parties over the country, and had gone on examining roads, ditches, and all possible hiding-places, but entirely without effect ; and although some continued on their

search, many had given up, and persisted in the opinion that the squire, who was always odd, had gone off on purpose, and would not thank them even if they found him.

Perhaps so ! It might be a purposed evasion, and the departure of M. de Veri might be connected with it. That he had not gone to the nearest station they knew : perhaps, however, he had ridden to another railway on the opposite side of the country, where he might more readily escape unnoticed. Such were the conjectures of the brother and sister, who found it easier to imagine the manner than the motive of his disappearance.

Whilst they were conversing, they heard wheels on the gravel in front of the house ; and with imaginations wound up to the highest point of anxiety, they paused to listen to what should come next. The house-door was unclosed ; steps were heard — talking — bustle ; what could it be ?

The new-comers were shown into the library,

at that time usually unoccupied, and then there was a hush ! Anxiety overpowering all restraint, Lord Clarence and his sister looked out into the vestibule. They saw Winters approaching ; he came up to them with some alacrity, and said that some gentlemen had come to see Mrs. Mortimer. She was in Miss Mortimer's room, and he understood that any disturbance there might be dangerous ; would her ladyship tell him what he had better do ; for Mrs. Ellisson and Mamselle. Juliette were also with Miss Mortimer. He was evidently afraid of responsibility.

Lady Fanny said she would carry the message ; the brother and sister went together : they were convinced that it was some tidings respecting Mr. Mortimer ; and their hearts nearly failed them as they softly entered the outer room.

The lowest, gentlest tap, and a whispered entreaty to speak to Mrs. Mortimer, sent the watcher in the dressing-room to the bed-room

door. Nora came out trembling to hear their errand.

"Come with me," said she, looking distressed, "my nerves fail me. I dare not go alone."

Lord Clarence gave her his arm, and led her out of the room. Winters met them, and ushered them down stairs. He opened the door of the library. The large apartment was only partially lighted, and beyond the lamp, by a table at a distance, they could see the new comers. The next moment one turned round and advanced.

Pale with agitation, with a countenance such as might become the Angel of Fate about to strike a final blow, Gerard Barton stood before his cousin.

END OF VOL. II.

