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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HELEN AND ARTHUR; OR, MISS THUSA'S SPINNING WHEEL ***

Transcriber's Note

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Obvious typographical errors have been corrected. A list of changes is found at the end of this text. A small number of words were spelled or hyphenated inconsistently. These inconsistencies have been maintained and a list is found at the end of the text.

The following less-common characters have been used. If they do not display properly, please try changing your font.

œ oe ligature
Œ OE ligature

HELEN AND ARTHUR;

OR,

Miss Thusa's Spinning Wheel.

BY

MRS. CAROLINE LEE HENTZ.

AUTHOR OF "LINDA," "COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE," "PLANTER'S NORTHERN BRIDE,"
"LOVE AFTER MARRIAGE," "EOLINE," "RENA," ETC.

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I REMEMBER A TALE, SHE RESUMED

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AUTHOR OF "LINDA," "RENA," "LOVE AFTER MARRIAGE," "ROBERT GRAHAM," "EOLINE," "COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE," ETC.

"—A countenance in which did meet
Sweet records—promises as sweet—
A creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food;
For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears and smiles."—*Wordsworth.*

"I know not, I ask not,
If guilt's in thy heart—
I but know that I love thee,
Whatever thou art."—*Moore.*

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MISS THUSA'S SPINNING-WHEEL.

CHAPTER I.

“First Fear his hand its skill to try,
Amid the chords bewildered laid—
And back recoiled, he knew not why,
E’en at the sound himself had made.”—*Collins*.

LITTLE HELEN sat in her long flannel night-dress, by the side of Miss Thusa, watching the rapid turning of her wheel, and the formation of the flaxen thread, as it glided out, a more and more attenuated filament, betwixt the dexterous fingers of the spinner.

It was a blustering, windy night, and the window-panes rattled every now and then, as if the glass were about to shiver in twain, while the stars sparkled and winked coldly without, and the fire glowed warmly, and crackled within.

Helen was seated on a low stool, so near the wheel, that several times her short, curly hair mingled with the flax of the distaff, and came within a hair’s breadth of being twisted into thread.

“Get a little farther off, child, or I’ll spin you into a spider’s web, as sure as you’re alive,” said Miss Thusa, dipping her fingers into the gourd, which hung at the side of the distaff, while at the same time she stooped down and moistened the fibres, by slipping them through her mouth, as it glided over the dwindling flax.

Helen, wrapped in yellow flannel from head to feet, with her little white face peeping above, looked not unlike a pearl in golden setting. A muslin night-cap perched on the top of her head, below which her hair frisked about in defiance of comb or ribbon. The cheek next to the fire was of a burning red, the other perfectly colorless. Her eyes, which always looked larger and darker by night than by day, were fixed on Miss Thusa’s face with a mixture of reverence and admiration, which its external lineaments did not seem to justify. The outline of that face was grim, and the hair, profusely sprinkled with the ashes of age, was combed back from the brow, in the fashion of the Shakers, adding much to the rigid expression of the features. A pair of dark-rimmed spectacles bestrided her forehead midway, appearing more for ornament than use. Never did Nature provide a more convenient resting-place for twin-glasses, than the ridge of Miss Thusa’s nose, which rose with a sudden, majestic elevation, suggesting the idea of unexpectedness in the mind of the beholder. Every thing was harsh about her face, except the eyes, which had a soft, solemn, misty look, a look of prophecy, mingled with kindness and compassion, as if she pitied the evils her far-reaching vision beheld, but which she had not the power to avert. Those soft, solemn, prophetic eyes had the power of fascination on the imagination of the young Helen, and night after night she would creep to her side, after her mother had prepared her for bed, heard her little Protestant *pater noster*, and left her, as she supposed, just ready to sink into the deep slumbers of childhood. She did not know the strange influence which was acting so powerfully on the mind of her child, *or* rather she did not seem to be aware that her child was old enough to receive impressions, deep and lasting as life itself.

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Miss Thusa was a relic of antiquity, bequeathed by destiny to the neighborhood in which she dwelt,—a lone woman, without a single known relative or connection. Though the title of Aunt is generally given to single ladies, who have passed the meridian of their days, irrespective of the claims of consanguinity, no one dared to call her Aunt Thusa, so great was her antipathy to the name. She had an equal abhorrence to being addressed as *Mrs.*, an honor frequently bestowed on venerable spinsters. She said it did not belong to her, and she disdained to shine in borrowed colors. So she retained her virgin distinction, which she declared no earthly consideration would induce her to resign.

She had formerly lived with a bachelor brother, a sickly misanthropist, who had long shunned the world, and, as a natural consequence, was neglected by it. But when it was known that the invalid was growing weaker and weaker, and entirely dependent on the cares of his lonely sister, the sympathies of strangers were awakened, and forcing their way into the chamber of the sick man, they administered to his sufferings and wants, till Miss Thusa learned to estimate, at its true value, the kindness she at first repelled. After the death of the brother, the families which composed the neighborhood where they dwelt, feeling compassion for her loneliness and sorrow, invited her to divide her time among them, and make their homes her own. One of her eccentricities (and she had more than one,) was a passion for spinning on a little wheel. Its monotonous hum had long been the music of her lonely life; the distaff, with its swaddling bands of flax, the petted child of her affections, and the thread which she manufactured the means of her daily support. Wherever she went, her wheel preceded her, as an *avant courier*, after the fashion of the shields of ancient warriors.

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“Ah! Miss Thusa’s coming—I know it by her wheel!” was the customary exclamation, sometimes uttered in a tone of vexation, but more frequently of satisfaction. She was so original and eccentric, had such an inexhaustible store of ghost stories and fairy tales, sang so many crazy old ballads, that children gathered round her, as a Sibylline oracle, and mothers, who were not troubled with a superfluity of servants, were glad to welcome one to their household who had such a wondrous talent for amusing them, and keeping them still. In spite of all her oddities, she was respected for her industry and simplicity, and a certain quaint, old-fashioned, superstitious piety, that made a streak of light through her character.

Grateful for the kindness and hospitality so liberally extended towards her, she never left a household without a gift of the most beautiful, even, fine, flaxen thread for the family use. Indeed the fame of her spinning spread far and wide, and people from adjoining towns often sent orders for quantities of Miss Thusa's marvelous thread.

She was now the guest of Mrs. Gleason, the mother of Helen, who always appropriated to her use a nice little room in a snug corner of the house, where she could turn her wheel from morning till night, and bend over her beloved distaff. Helen, who was too young to be sent to school by day, or to remain in the family sitting-room at night, as her mother followed the good, healthy rule of *early to bed* and *early to rise*, seemed thrown by fate upon Miss Thusa's miraculous resources for entertainment and instruction. Thus her imagination became preternaturally developed, while the germs of reason and judgment lay latent and unquickened. [16]

"Please stop spinning Miss Thusa, and tell me a story," said the child, venturing to put her little foot on the treadle, and giving the crank a sudden jerk.

"Yes! Don't tease—I must smooth the flax on the distaff and wet the thread on the spindle first. There—that will do. Come, yellow bird, jump into my lap, and say what you want me to tell you. Shall it be the gray kitten, with the big bunch of keys on its neck, that turned into a beautiful princess, or the great ogre, who killed all the little children he could find for breakfast and supper?"

"No," replied Helen, shuddering with a strange mixture of horror and delight. "I want to hear something you never told before."

"Well—I will tell you the story of the *worm-eaten traveler*. It is half singing, half talking, and a powerful story it is. I would act it out, too, if you would sit down in the corner till I've done. Let go of me, if you want to hear it."

"Please Miss Thusa," said the excited child, drawing her stool into the corner, and crouching herself upon it, while Miss Thusa rose up, and putting back her wheel, prepared to commence her heterogeneous performance. She often "*acted out*" her stories and songs, to the great admiration of children and the amusement of older people, but it was very seldom this favor was granted, without earnest and reiterated entreaties. It was the first time she had ever spontaneously offered to personate the Sibyl, whose oracles she uttered, and it was a proof that an unusual fit of inspiration was upon her.

She was very tall and spare. When in the attitude of spinning, she stooped over her distaff, she lost much of her original height, but the moment she pushed aside her wheel, her figure resumed its naturally erect and commanding position. She usually wore a dress of dark gray stuff, with immense pockets, a black silk neckerchief folded over her shoulders, a white tamboured muslin cap, with a black ribbon passed two or three times round the crown. To preserve the purity of the muslin, and the lustre of the ribbon, she always wore a piece of white paper, folded up between her head and the muslin, making the top of the cap appear much more opaque than the rest. [17]

The *worm-eaten traveler*! What an appalling, yet fascinating communication! Helen waited in breathless impatience, watching the movements of the Sibyl, with darkened pupils and heaving bosom.

At length when a sudden gust of wind blew a naked bough, with a sound like the rattling of dry bones against the windows, and a falling brand scattered a shower of red sparks over the hearthstone, Miss Thusa, waving the bony fingers of her right hand, thus began—

"Once there was a woman spinning by the kitchen fire, spinning away for dear life, all living alone, without even a green-eyed cat to keep her from being lonely. The coals were all burnt to cinders, and the shadows were all rolled up in black bundles in the four corners of the room. The woman went on spinning, singing as she spun—

'Oh! if I'd good company—if I'd good company,
Oh! how happy should I be!'

There was a rustling noise in the chimney as if a great chimney-swallow was tumbling down, and the woman stooped and looked up into the black flue."

Here Miss Thusa bowed her tall form, and turned her beaked nose up towards the glowing chimney. Helen, palpitating with excitement followed her motions, expecting to see some horrible monster descend all grim with soot.

"Down came a pair of broad, dusty, skeleton feet," continued Miss Thusa, recoiling a few paces from the hearth, and lowering her voice till it sounded husky and unnatural, "right down the chimney, right in front of the woman, who cried out, while she turned her wheel round and round with her bobbin, 'What makes your feet so big, my friend?' 'Traveling long journeys. Traveling long journeys,' replied the skeleton feet, and again the woman sang— [18]

'Oh! if I'd good company—if I'd good company,
Oh! how happy should I be!'

Rattle—rattle went something in the chimney, and down came a pair of little mouldering ankles. 'What makes your ankles so small?' asked the woman. 'Worm-eaten, worm-eaten,' answered the mouldering ankles, and the wheel went merrily round."

It is unnecessary to repeat the couplet which Miss Thusa sang between every descending *horror*, in a voice which sounded as if it came through a fine-toothed comb, in little trembling wires, though it gave indescribable effect to her gloomy tale.

"In a few moments," continued Miss Thusa, "she heard a shoving, pushing sound in the chimney like something groaning and laboring against the sides of the bricks, and presently a great, big, bloated body came down and set itself on legs that were no larger than a pipe stem. Then a little, scraggy neck, and, last of all, a monstrous skeleton head that grinned from ear to ear. 'You want good company, and you shall have it,' said the figure, and its voice did sound awfully—but the woman put up her wheel and asked the grim thing to take a chair and make himself at home.

"'I can't stay to-night,' said he, 'I've got a journey to take by the moonlight. Come along and let us be company for each other. There is a snug little place where we can rest when we're tired.'"

"Oh! Miss Thusa, she didn't go, did she?" interrupted Helen, whose eyes, which had been gradually enlarging, looked like two full midnight moons.

"Hush, child, if you ask another question, I'll stop short. She didn't do anything else but go, and they must have been a pretty sight walking in the moonlight together. The lonely woman and the worm-eaten traveler. On they went through the woods and over the plains, and up hill and down hill, over bridges made of fallen trees, and streams that had no bridges at all; when at last they came to a kind of uneven ground, and as the moon went behind a cloud, they went stumbling along as if treading over hillocks of corn.

"'Here it is,' cried the worm-eaten traveler, stopping on the brink of a deep, open grave. The moon looked forth from behind a cloud, and showed how awful deep it was. She wanted to turn back then, but the skeleton arms of the figure seized hold of her, and down they both went without ladder or rope, and no mortal ever set eyes on them more. [19]

'Oh! if I'd good company—if I'd good company,
Oh! how happy should I be!'"

It is impossible to describe the intensity with which Helen listened to this wild, dark legend, crouching closer and closer to the chimney corner, while the chillness of superstitious terror quenched the burning fire-rose on her cheek.

"Was the spinning woman *you*, Miss Thusa?" whispered she, afraid of the sound of her own voice; "and did you see *it* with your own eyes?"

"Hush, foolish child!" said Miss Thusa, resuming her natural tone; "ask me no questions, or I'll tell you no tales. 'Tis time for the yellow bird to be in its nest. Hark! I hear your mother calling me, and 'tis long past your bed-time. Come."

And Miss Thusa, sweeping her long right arm around the child, bore her shrinking and resisting towards the nursery room.

"Please, Miss Thusa," she pleaded, "don't leave me alone. Don't leave me in the dark. I'm not one bit sleepy—I never shall go to sleep—I'm afraid of the worm-eaten man."

"I thought the child had more sense," exclaimed the oracle. "I didn't think she was such a little goose as this," continued she, depositing her between the nice warm blankets. "Nobody ever troubles good little girls—the holy angels take care of them. There, good night—shut your eyes and go to sleep."

"Please don't take the light," entreated Helen, "only just leave it till I get to sleep; I'll blow it out as soon as I'm asleep."

"I guess you will," said Miss Thusa, "when you get a chance." Then catching up the lamp, she shot out of the room, repeating to herself, "Poor child! She does hate the dark so! That *was* a powerful story, to be sure. I shouldn't wonder if she dreamed about it. I never did see a child that listens to anything as she does. It's a pleasure to amuse her. Little monkey! She really acts as if 'twas all true. I know that's my master piece; that is the reason I'm so choice of it. It isn't every one that can tell a story as I can—that's certain. It's my *gift*—I mustn't be proud of it. God gives some persons one talent, and some another. We must all give an account of them at last. I hope 'twill never be said I've hid mine in a napkin." [20]

Such was the tenor of Miss Thusa's thoughts as she wended her way down stairs. Had she imagined half the misery she was entailing on this singularly susceptible and imaginative child, instead of exulting in her *gift*, she would have mourned over its influence, in dust and ashes. The fears which Helen expressed, and which she believed would prove as evanescent as they were unreal, were a grateful incense to her genius, which she delighted with unconscious cruelty in awakening. She had an insane passion for relating these dreadful legends, whose indulgence seemed necessary to her existence, and the happiness of the narrator was commensurate with the credulity of the auditor. Without knowing it, she was a vampire, feeding on the life-blood of a young and innocent heart, and drying up the fountain of its joys.

Helen listened till the last sound of Miss Thusa's footsteps died away on the ear, then plunging deeper into the bed, drew the blankets over head and ears, and lay immovable as a snow-drift, with the chill dew of terror oozing from every pore.

"I'm not a good girl," said the child to herself, "and God won't send the angels down to take care of me to-night. I played going to meeting with my dolls last Sunday, and Miss Thusa says that was breaking the commandments. I'll say my prayers over again, and ask God to forgive me."

Little Helen clasped her trembling hands under the bed-cover, and repeated the Lord's Prayer as devoutly and reverentially as mortal lips could utter it, but this act of devotion did not soothe her into slumber, or banish the phantom that flitted round her couch. Finding it impossible to breathe under the bed-cover any longer, and fearing to die of suffocation, she slowly emerged from her burying-clothes till her mouth came in contact with the cool, fresh air. She kept her eyes tightly closed, that she might not see the *darkness*. She remembered hearing her brother, who prided himself upon being a great mathematician, say that if one counted ten, over and over again, till they were very tired, they would fall asleep without knowing it. She tried this experiment, but her heart kept time with its loud, quick beatings; so loud, so quick, she sometimes mistook them for the skeleton foot-tramps of the traveler. She was sure she heard a rustling in the chimney, a clattering against the walls. She thought she felt a chilly breath sweep over her cheek. At length, unable to endure the awful oppression of her fears, she resolved to make a desperate attempt, and rush down stairs to her mother, telling her she should die if she remained where she was. It was horrible to go down alone in the darkness, it was more horrible to remain in that haunted room. So, gathering up all her courage, she jumped from the bed, and sought the door with her nervous, grasping hands. Her little feet turned to ice, as their naked soles scampered over the bare floor, but she did not mind that; she found the door, opened it, and entered a long, dark passage, leading to the stairway. Then she recollected that on the left of that passage there was a lumber-room, running out slantingly to the eaves of the house, with a low entrance into it, which was left without a door. This lumber-room had long been her especial terror. Whenever she passed it, even in broad daylight, it had a strange, mysterious appearance to her. The twilight shadows always gathered there first and lingered last; she never walked by it—she always ran with all her speed, as if the avenger of blood were behind her. Now she would have flown if she could, but her long night dress impeded her motions, and clung adhesively round her ankles. Once she trod upon it, and thinking some one arrested her, she uttered a loud scream and sprang forward through the door, which chanced to be open. This door was directly at the head of the stairs, and it is not at all surprising that Helen, finding it impossible to recover her equilibrium, should pass over the steps in a quicker manner than she intended, swift as her footsteps were. Down she went, tumbling and bumping, till she came against the lower door with a force that burst it open, and in rolled a yellow flannel ball into the centre of the illuminated apartment.

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"My stars!" exclaimed Mrs. Gleason, starting up from the centre table, and dropping a bundle of snowy linen on the floor.

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"What in the name of creation is this?" cried Mr. Gleason, throwing down his book, as the yellow ball rolled violently against his legs.

Louis Gleason, a boy of twelve, who was seated with the fingers of his left hand playing hide and seek among his bright elf locks, while his right danced over a slate, making algebra signs with marvelous rapidity, jumped up three feet in the air, letting his slate fall with a tremendous crash, and destroying many a beautiful equation.

Mittie Gleason, a young girl of about nine, who was deep in the abstractions of grammar, and sat with her fore-fingers in her ears, and her head bent down to her book, so that all disturbing sounds might be excluded, threw her chair backward in the fright, and ran head first against Miss Thusa, who was the only one whose self-possession did not seem shocked by the unceremonious entrance of the little visitor.

"It's nobody in the world but little Helen," said she, gathering up the bundle in her arms and carrying it towards the blazing fire. The child, who had been only stunned, not injured by the fall, began to recover the use of its faculties, and opened its large, wild-looking eyes on the family group we have described.

"She has been walking in her sleep, poor little thing," said her mother, pressing her cold hands in both hers.

Helen knew that this was not the case, and she knew too, that it was wrong to sanction by her silence an erroneous impression, but she was afraid of her father's anger if she confessed the truth, afraid that he would send her back to the dark room and lonely trundle-bed. She expected that Miss Thusa would call her a foolish child, and tell her parents all her terrors of the *worm-eaten traveler*, and she raised her timid eyes to her face, wondering at her silence. There was something in those prophetic orbs, which she could not read. There seemed to be a film over them, baffling her penetration, and she looked down with a long, laboring breath.

Miss Thusa began to feel that her legends might make a deeper impression than she imagined or intended. She experienced an odd mixture of triumph and regret—triumph in her power, and regret for its consequences. She had, too, an instinctive sense that the parents of Helen would be displeased with her, were they aware of the influence she had exerted, and deprive her hereafter of the most admiring auditor that ever hung on her oracular lips. She had *meant* no harm, but she was really sorry she had told that "powerful story" at such a late hour, and pressed the child closer in her arms with a tenderness deepened by self-reproach.

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"I suspect Miss Thusa has been telling her some of her awful ghost stories," said Louis, laughing over the wreck of his slate. "I know what sent the yellow caterpillar crawling down stairs."

"Crawling!" repeated his father, "I think it was leaping, bouncing, more like a catamount than a caterpillar."

"I would be ashamed to be a coward and afraid of ghosts," exclaimed Mittie, with a scornful flash of her bright, black eyes.

"Miss Thusa didn't tell about ghosts," said Helen, bursting into a passion of tears. This was true, in the *letter*, but not in the *spirit*—and, young as she was, she knew and felt it, and the wormwood of remorse gave bitterness to her tears. Never had she felt so wretched, so humiliated. She had fallen in her own estimation. Her father, brother and sister had ridiculed her and *called her names*—a terrible thing for a child. One had called her a *caterpillar*, another a *catamount*, and a third a *coward*. And added to all this was a sudden and unutterable horror of the color of yellow, formerly her favorite hue. She mentally resolved never to wear that horrible yellow night dress, which had drawn upon her so many odious epithets, even though she froze to death without it. She would rather wear her old ones, even if they had ten thousand patches, than that bright, new, golden tinted garment, so late the object of her intense admiration.

"I declare," cried Louis, unconscious of the Spartan resolution his little sister was forming, and good naturedly seeking to turn her tears into smiles, "I do declare, I thought Helen was a pumpkin, bursting into the room with such a noise, wrapped up in this yellow concern. Mother, what in the name of all that's tasteful, makes you clothe her by night in Chinese mourning?"

"It was her own choice," replied Mrs. Gleason, taking the weeping child in her own lap. "She saw a little girl dressed in this style, and thought she would be perfectly happy to be the possessor of such a garment." [24]

"I never will put it on again as long as I live," sobbed Helen. "Every body laughs at it."

"Perhaps somebody else will have a word to say about it," said her mother, in a grave, gentle voice. "When I have taken so much pains to make it, and bind it with soft, bright ribbon, to please my little girl, it seems to me that it is very ungrateful in her to make such a remark as that."

"Oh, mother, don't," was all Helen could utter; and she made as strong a counter resolve that she would wear the most hideous garment, and brave the ridicule of the whole world, rather than expose herself to the displeasure of a mother so kind and so indulgent.

"You had better put her back in bed," said Mr. Gleason; "children acquire such bad habits by indulgence."

Helen trembled and clung close to her mother's bosom.

"I fear she may again rise in her sleep and fall down stairs," said the more anxious mother.

"Turn the key on the outside, till we retire ourselves," observed the father.

To be locked up alone in the darkness! Helen felt as if she had heard her death-warrant, and pale even to *blueness*, she leaned against her mother, incapable of articulating the prayer that trembled on her ashy lips.

"Give her to me," said Miss Thusa, "I will take her up stairs and stay with her till you come."

"Oh, no, there is no fire in the room, and you will be cold. Mr. Gleason, the child is sick and faint. She has scarcely any pulse—and look, what a blue shade round her mouth. Helen, my darling, do tell me what *is* the matter with you."

"Her eyes do look very wild," said her father, catching the infection of his wife's fears; "and her temples are hot and throbbing. I hope she is not threatened with an inflammation of the brain."

"Oh! Mr. Gleason, pray don't suggest such a thought; I cannot bear it," cried Mrs. Gleason, with quivering accents. They had lost one lovely child, the very counterpart of Helen, by that fearful disease, and she felt as if the gleaming sword of the destroying angel were again waving over her household. [25]

"You had better send for the doctor," she continued; "just so suddenly was our lost darling attacked."

Mr. Gleason started up and seized his hat, but Louis sprang to the door first.

"Let me go, father—I can run the fastest."

And those who met the excited boy running through the street, supposed it was a life-errand on which he was dispatched.

The doctor came—not the old family physician, whose age and experience entitled him to the most implicit confidence—but a youthful partner, to whom childhood was a mysterious and somewhat unapproachable thing.

Of what fine, almost imperceptible links is the chain of deception formed! Helen had no intention of acting the part of a dissembler when she formed the desperate resolution of leaving

her lonely chamber. She expected to meet reproaches, perhaps punishment, but anything was preferable to the horrors of her own imagination. But when she found herself greeted as a sleep-walker, she had not the moral courage to close, by an avowal of the truth, the door of escape a mother's gentle hand had unconsciously opened. She did not mean to dissemble sickness, but when her mother pleaded sickness as a reason for not sending her back to the lone, dark chamber, she yielded to the plea, and really began to think herself very ill. Her head did throb and ache, and her eyes burned, as if hot sand were sprinkled over the balls. She was not afraid of the doctor's medicine, for the last time he had prescribed for her, he had given her peppermint, dropped on white sugar, which had a very pleasing and palatable taste. She loved the old doctor, with his frosty hair and sunny smile, and lay quietly in her mother's arms, quite resigned to her fate, surprising as it was. But when she beheld a strange and youthful face bending over her, with a pair of penetrating, dark eyes, that looked as if they could read the deepest secrets of the heart, she shrank back in dismay, assured the mystery of her illness would all be revealed. The next glance reassured her. She was sure he would be kind, and not give her anything nauseous or dreadful. She watched his cheek, as he leaned over her, to feel her pulse, wondering what made such a beautiful color steal over it growing brighter and brighter, till it looked as if the fire had been glowing upon it. She did not know how very young he was, and this was the first time he had ever been called to visit a patient alone, and that she, little child as she was, was a very formidable object to him—considered as a being for whose life he might be in a measure responsible.

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"I would give her a composing mixture," said he, gently releasing the slender wrist of his patient—"her brain seems greatly excited, but I do not apprehend anything like an inflammation need be dreaded. She is very nervous, and must be kept quiet."

Helen felt such inexpressible relief, that forgetting her character of an invalid, she lifted her head, and gave him such a radiant look of gratitude it quite startled him.

"See!" exclaimed Louis, rubbing his hands, "how bright she looks. The doctor's coming has made her well."

"Don't make such a fuss, brother, I can't study," cried Mittie, tossing her hair impatiently from her brow. "I don't believe she's any more sick than I am, she just does it to be petted."

"Mittie!" said her mother, glancing towards the young doctor.

Mittie, with a sudden motion of the head peculiar to herself, brought the hair again over her face, till it touched the leaves of the book, in whose contents she seemed absorbed; but she peeped at the young doctor through her thick, falling locks, and thought if she were sick, she would much rather send for him than old Doctor Sennar.

The next morning Helen was really ill and feverish. The excitement of the previous evening had caused a tension of the brain, which justified the mother's fears. At night she became delirious, and raved incoherently about *the worm-eaten traveler*, the spinning-woman, and the grave-house to which they were bound.

Mrs. Gleason sat on one side of her, holding her restless hand in hers, while Miss Thusa applied wet napkins to her burning temples. The mother shuddered as she listened to the child's wild words, and something of the truth flashed upon her mind.

"I fear," said she, raising her eyes, and fixing them mildly but reproachfully on Miss Thusa's face—"you have been exciting my little girl's imagination in a dangerous manner, by relating tales of dreadful import. I know you have done it in kindness," added she, fearful of giving pain, "but Helen is different from other children, and cannot bear the least excitement."

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"She's always asking me to tell her stories," answered Miss Thusa, "and I love the dear child too well to deny her. There is something very uncommon about her. I never saw a child that would set and listen to old people as she will. I never did think she would live to grow up; she wasn't well last night, or she wouldn't have been scared; I noticed that one cheek was red as a cherry, and the other as white as snow—a sign the fever was in her blood."

Miss Thusa, like many other metaphysicians, mistook the effect for the cause, and thus stilled, with unconscious sophistry, the upbraidings of her conscience.

Helen here tossed upon her feverish couch, and opening her eyes, looked wildly towards the chimney.

"Hark! Miss Thusa," she exclaimed, "it's coming. Don't you hear it clattering down the chimney? Don't leave me—don't leave me in the dark—I'm afraid—I'm afraid."

It was well for Miss Thusa that Mr. Gleason was not present, to hear the ravings of his child, or his doors would hereafter have been barred against her. Mrs. Gleason, while she mourned over the consequences of her admission, would as soon have cut off her own right hand as she would have spoken harshly or unkindly to the poor, lone woman. She warned her, however, from feeding, in this insane manner, the morbid imagination of her child, and gently forbid her ever repeating *that awful story*, which had made, apparently, so dark and deep an impression.

"Above all things, my dear Miss Thusa," said she, repressing a little dry, hacking cough, that often interrupted her speech—"never give her any horrible idea of death. I know that such impressions can never be effaced—I know it by my own experience. The grave has ever been to

me a gloomy subject of contemplation, though I gaze upon it with the lamp of faith in my hand, and the remembrance that the Son of God made His bed in its darkness, that light might be left there for me and mine."

Miss Thusa looked at Mrs. Gleason as she uttered these sentiments, and the glance of her solemn eye grew earnest as she gazed. Such was the usual quietness and reserve of the speaker, she was not prepared for so much depth of thought and feeling. As she gazed, too, she remarked an appearance of emaciation and suffering about her face, which had hitherto escaped her observation. She recollected her as she first saw her, a beautiful and blooming woman, and now there was bloom without beauty, and brightness without beauty, for the color on the cheek and the gleam of the eye, made one wish for pallor and dimness, as less painful and less prophetic. [28]

"Yes, Miss Thusa," resumed Mrs. Gleason, after a long pause, "if my child lives, I wish her guarded most carefully from all gloomy influences. I know that I must soon leave her, for I have an hereditary malady, whose symptoms have lately been much aggravated. I have long since resigned myself to my doom, knowing that my Heavenly Father knows when it is best to call me home. But I cannot bear that my children should shrink from all I shall leave behind, my memory. Louis is a bold and noble boy. I fear not for him. His reason even now has the strength of manhood. Mittie has very little sensibility or imagination; too little of the first I fear to be very lovable. But perhaps it will be better for her in the end. Helen is all sensibility and imagination. I tremble for her. I am haunted by a strange apprehension that my memory will be a ghost that she will seek to shun. Oh! Miss Thusa, you cannot think how painful this idea is to me. I want her to love me when I am gone, to think of me as a guardian angel watching over and blessing her. I want her to think of me as living in Heaven, not mouldering away in the cold ground. Promise me that you will never more give her any terrible idea associated with death and the grave."

Mrs. Gleason paused, and pressing her handkerchief over her eyes, leaned back in her chair with a deep sigh. Was this the quiet, practical housekeeper, who always went with stilly steps so noiselessly about her daily tasks that no one would think she was doing anything if it were not for the results?

Was *she* talking of dying, who had never yet omitted one household duty or one neighborly office? Yes! in the stillness of the night, interrupted only by the delirious moanings of the sick child, she laid aside the mantle of reserve that usually enveloped her, and suffered her soul to be visible—for a little while. [29]

"I will try to remember all you've said, and abide by it," said Miss Thusa, who, in her dark gray dress, and black silk handkerchief tied under her chin, looked something like a cowled friar, of "orders gray," "but when one has a *gift* it's hard to keep it back. I don't always know myself what I'm going to tell, but speak as I'm moved, as the Bible men used to do in old times. Every body has a way and a taste of their own, I know, and some take to one thing, and some to another. Now, I always did take to what some folks think dreadful things. Perhaps it's because I've been a lone woman, and led a sort of spiritual life. I never took any pleasure in merry-making and frolicking. I'd rather go to a funeral than a wedding, any day, and I'd rather look at a shrouded corpse, than a bride tricked out in her laces and flowers. I know it's strange, but it's true—and there's no use in going against the natural grain. You can't do it. If I take up a newspaper, I see the deaths and murders before anything else. They stare one right in the face, and I don't see anything else."

"What a very peculiar temperament," said Mrs. Gleason, thoughtfully. "Were you conscious of the same tastes when a child?"

"I can hardly remember being a child. It seems to me I never was one. I always had such old feelings. My father and mother died when I was a baby. There was nobody left but my brother—and—me. He was the strangest being that ever lived. He locked up his heart and kept the key, so nobody could get a peep inside. I had nobody to love, nobody who loved me, so I got to loving my spinning-wheel and my own thoughts. When brother fell sick and grew nervous and peevish, he didn't like the hum of the wheel, and I had to spin at night in the chimney corner, by the flash of the embers, and the company I was to myself the Lord only knows. I'll tell you what, Mrs. Gleason," added she, taking her spectacles from her forehead, wiping them carefully, and then putting them right on the top of her head, "God didn't mean every body to be alike. Some look up and some look down, but if they've got the right spirit, they're all looking after God and truth. If I talk of the grave more than common, it's because I know it's nothing but an underground passage to eternity." [30]

"I thank God for teaching me to look upward at last," cried Mrs. Gleason, and the quick, panting breath of little Helen was heard distinctly in the silence that followed. Her soul reached forward anxiously into futurity. If it were possible to change Miss Thusa's opinions and peculiarities into something after the similitude of her kind! Change Miss Thusa! As soon might you expect to change the gnarled and rooted oak into the flexible and breeze-bowed willow. Her idiosyncrasy had been so nursed and strengthened by the two great influences, time and solitude, it spread like the banyan tree, making a dark pavilion, where legions of weird spirits gathered and revelled.

Miss Thusa is one instance out of many, of a being with strong mind and warm heart, cheated of objects on which to expend the vigor of the one, or the fervor of the other. The energies of her character, finding no legitimate outlet, beat back upon herself, wearing away by continued friction the fine perception of beauty and susceptibility of true enjoyment. The vine that finds no

support for its *upward* growth, grovels on the earth and covers it with rank, unshapely leaves. The mountain stream, turned back from its course, becomes a dark and stagnant pool. Even if the rank and long-neglected vine is made to twine round some sustaining fabric, it carries with it the dampness and the soil of the earth to which it has been clinging. Its tendrils are heavy, and have a downward tendency.

In a few days the fever-tide subsided in the veins of Helen.

"I will not take it," said she, when the young doctor gave her some bitter draught to swallow; "it tastes too bad."

"You *will* take it," he replied, calmly, holding the glass in his hand, and fixing on her the serene darkness of his eyes. He did not press it to her lips, or use any coercion. He merely looked steadfastly, yet gently into her face, while the deep color she had noticed the first night she saw him came slowly into his cheeks. He did not say "you *must*," but "you *will*," and she felt the difference. She felt the singular union of gentleness and power exhibited in his countenance, and was constrained to yield. Without making farther resistance, she put forth her hand, took the glass, and swallowed the potion at one draught.

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"It will do you good," said he, with a grave smile, but he did not praise her.

"Why didn't you tell me so before?" she asked.

"You must learn to confide in your friends," he replied, passing his hand gently over the child's wan brow. "You must trust them, without asking them for reasons for what they do."

Helen thought she would try to remember this, and it seemed easy to remember what the young doctor said, for the voice of Arthur Hazleton was very sweet and clear, and seemed to vibrate on the ear like a musical instrument.

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CHAPTER II.

—“with burnished neck of verdant gold, erect
Amid his circling spires, that on the grass
Floated redundant,—she busied heard the sound
Of rustling leaves, but minded not, *at first*.”—*Milton*.

HELEN recovered, and the agitation caused by her sickness having subsided, everything went on apparently as it did before. While she was sick, Mrs. Gleason resolved that she would keep her as much as possible from Miss Thusa's influence, and endeavor to counteract it by a closer, more confiding union with herself. But every one knows how quickly the resolutions, formed in the hour of danger, are forgotten in the moment of safety—and how difficult it is to break through daily habits of life. Even when the pulse beats high with health, and the heart glows with conscious energy, it is difficult. How much more so, when the whole head is sick, and the whole spirit is faint—when the lightest duty becomes a burden, and *rest*, nothing but *rest*, is the prayer of the weary soul!

The only perceptible change in the family arrangements was, that Miss Thusa carried her wheel at night into the nursery, and installed herself there as the guardian of Helen's slumbers. The little somnambulist, as she was supposed to be, required a watch, and when Miss Thusa offered to sit by the fire-side till the family retired to rest, Mrs. Gleason could not be so ungrateful as to refuse, though she ventured to reiterate the warning, breathed by the feverish couch of her child. This warning Miss Thusa endeavored to bear in mind, and illumined the gloomy grandeur of her legends by some lambent rays of fancy—but they were lightning flashes playing about ruins, suggesting ideas of desolation and decay.

Let it not be supposed that Helen's life was all shadow. Oh, no! In proportion as she shuddered at darkness, and trembled before the spectres her own imagination created, she rejoiced in sunshine, and revelled in the bright glories of creation. She was all darkness or all light. There was no twilight about her. Never had a child a more exquisite perception of the beautiful, and as at night she delineated to herself the most awful and appalling images that imagination can conceive, by day she beheld forms more lovely than ever visited the poet's dream. She could see angels cradled on the glowing bosom of the sunset clouds, angels braiding the rainbow of the sky. Light to her was peopled with angels, as darkness with phantoms. The brilliant-winged butterflies were the angels of the flowers—the gales that fanned her cheeks the invisible angels of the trees. If Helen had lived in a world all of sunshine, she would have been the happiest being in the world. Moonlight, too, she loved—it seemed like a dream of the sun. But it was only in the presence of others she loved it. She feared to be alone in it—it was so still and holy, and then it made such deep shadows where it did not shine! Yes! Helen would have been happy in a world of sunshine—but we are born for the shadow as well as the sunbeam, and they who cannot walk unfeared through the gloom, as well as the brightness, are ill-fitted for the pilgrimage of life.

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Childhood is naturally prone to superstition and fear. The intensity of suffering it endures from these sources is beyond description.

We remember, when a child, with what chillness of awe we used to listen to the wind sighing through the long branches of the elm trees, as they trailed against the window panes, for nursery legends had associated the sound with the moaning of ghosts, and the flapping of invisible wings. We remember having strange, indescribable dreams, when the mystery of our young existence seemed to press down upon us with the weight of iron, and fill us with nameless horror. When a something seemed swelling and expanding and rolling in our souls, like an immense, fiery globe *within us*, and yet we were carried around with it, and we felt it must forever be rolling and enlarging, and we must forever be rolling along with it. We remember having this dream night after night, and when we awakened, the first thought was *eternity*, and we thought if we went on dreaming, we should find out what eternity meant. We were afraid to tell the dream, from a vague fear that it was wrong, that it might be thought we were trying to pierce into the mystery of God, and it was wicked in a child thus to do.

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Helen used to say, whenever she fell asleep in the day-time under a green tree, or on the shady bank of a stream, as she often did, that she had the brightest, most beautiful dreams—and she wished it was the *fashion* for people to sleep by day instead of night.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly Mrs. Gleason's strength wasted away. She still kept her place at the family board, and continued her labors of love, but the short, dry, hacking cough assumed a more hollow, deeper sound, and every day the red spot on her cheek grew brighter, as the shades of night came on. Mittie heeded not the change in her mother, but the affectionate heart of Louis felt many a sad foreboding, as his subdued steps and hushed laugh plainly told. He was naturally joyous and gay, even to rudeness, always playing some good-natured but teasing prank on his little sister, and making the house ring with his merriment. Now, whenever that hollow cough rung in his ears, he would start as if a knife pierced him, and it would be a long time before his laugh would be heard again. He redoubled his filial attentions, and scarcely ever entered the house without bringing something which he thought would please her taste, or be grateful to her feelings.

"Mother, see what a nice string of fishes. I am sure you will like these."

"Oh! mother, here are the sweetest flowers you ever saw. Do smell of them, they are so reviving."

The tender smile, the fond caress which rewarded these love-offerings were very precious to the warm-hearted boy, though he often ran out of the house to hide the tears they forced into his eyes.

Helen knew that her mother was not well, for she now reclined a great deal on the sofa, and Doctor Sennar came to see her every day, and sometimes the young doctor accompanied him, and when he did, he always took a great deal of notice of her, and said something she could not help remembering. Perhaps it was the peculiar glance of his eye that fixed the impression, as the characters written in indelible ink are pale and illegible till exposed to a slow and gentle fire.

"You ought to do all you can for your mother," said he, while he held her in his lap, and Doctor Sennar counted her mother's pulse by the ticking of his large gold watch.

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"I am too little to do any good," answered she, sighing at her own insignificance.

"You can be very still and gentle."

"But that isn't doing anything, is it?"

"When you are older," said the young doctor, "you will find it is harder to keep from doing wrong than to do what is right."

Helen did not understand the full force of what he said, but the saying remained in her memory.

The next day, and the bloom of early summer was on the plains, and its deep, blue glory on the sky, Helen thought again and again what she should do for her mother. At length she remembered that some one had said that the strawberries were ripe, and that her mother had longed exceedingly for a dish of strawberries and cream. This was something that even Louis had not done for her, and her heart throbbed with joy and exultation in anticipation of the offering she could make.

With a bright tin bucket, that shone like burnished silver in the sunbeams, swinging on her arm, she stole out of the back door, and ran down a narrow lane, till she came to an open field, where the young corn was waving its silken tassels, and potato vines frolicking at its feet. The long, shining leaves of the young corn threw off the sunlight like polished steel, and Helen thought she had never seen anything so beautiful in all her life. She stopped and pulled off the soft, tender, green silken tassels, hanging them over her ears, and twisting some in her hair, as if she were a mermaid, her "sea-green ringlets braiding." Then springing from hillock to hillock, she reached the end of the field, and jumped over a fence that skirted a meadow, along which a clear, blue stream glided like an azure serpent in glittering coils, under the shade of innumerable hickory trees. Helen became so enchanted with the beauty of the landscape, that she forgot her mother and the strawberries, forgot there were such things as night and darkness in the

universe. Taking off her shoes and tying them to the handle of her bucket, she went down to the edge of the stream, and dipping her feet in the cool water, waded along close to the bank, and the little wavelets curled round her ankles as if they loved to play with anything so smooth and white. Then she saw bright specks of mica shining on the sand, and she sprang out of the water to gather them, wondering if pearls and diamonds ever looked half so beautiful.

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"How I wish strawberries grew under water," cried Helen, suddenly recollecting her filial mission. "How I wish they did not grow under the long grass!"

The light faded from her face, and the dimness of fear came over it. She had an unutterable dread of snakes, for they were the *heroes* of some of Miss Thusa's awful legends, and she knew they lurked in the long grass, and were said to be especially fond of strawberries. Strange, in her eager desire to do something for her mother, she had forgotten the ambushed foe she most dreaded by day—now she wondered she had dared to think of coming.

"I will go back," thought she; "I dare not jump over that fence and wade about in grass as high as my head."

"You must do all you can for your mother," echoed in clear, silver accents in her memory; "Louis will gather them if I do not," continued she, "and she will never know how much I love her. All little children pick strawberries for themselves, and I never heard of one being bitten by a snake. If I pick them for my mother instead of myself, I don't believe God will let them hurt me."

While thus meditating, she had reached the fence, and stepping on the lower rails, she peeped over into the deep, green patch. As the wind waved the grass to and fro, she caught glimpses of the reddening berries, and her cheeks glowed with excitement. They were so thick, and looked so rich and delicious! She would keep very near the fence, and if a snake should crawl near her, she could get upon the topmost rails, and it could not reach her there. One jump, and the struggle was over. She plunged in a sea of verdure, while the strawberries glowed like coral beneath. They hung in large, thick clusters, touching each other, so that it would be an easy thing to fill her bucket before the sun went down. She would not pick the whole clusters, because some were green still, and she had heard her mother say, that it was a waste of God's bounty, and a robbery of those who came afterwards, to pluck and destroy unripe fruit. Several times she started, thinking she heard a rustling in the leaves, but it was only the wind whispering to them as it passed. She stained her cheeks and the palms of her hands with the crimson juice, thinking it would make her mother smile, resolving to look at herself in the water as she returned.

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Her bucket, which was standing quietly on the ground, was almost full; she was stooping down, with her sun-bonnet pushed back from her glowing face, to secure the largest and best berries which she had yet seen, when she *did* hear a rustling in the grass very near, and looking round, there was a large, long snake, winding slowly, carefully towards the bucket, with little gleaming eyes, that looked like burning glass set in emerald. It seemed to glow with all the colors of the rainbow, so radiant it was in yellow, green and gold, striped with the blackest jet. For one moment, Helen stood stupefied with terror, fascinated by the terrible beauty of the object on which she was gazing. Then giving a loud, shrill shriek, she bounded to the fence, climbed over it, and jumped to the ground with a momentum so violent that she fell and rolled several paces on the earth. Something cold twined round her feet and ankles. With a gasp of despair, Helen gave herself up for lost, assured she was in the coils of the snake, and that its venom was penetrating through her whole frame.

"I shall die," thought she, "and mother will never know how I came here alone to gather strawberries, that she might eat and be well."

As she felt no sting, no pain, and the snake lay perfectly still, she ventured to steal a glance at her feet, and saw that it was a piece of a vine that she had caught in her flight, and which her fears had converted into the embrace of an adder. Springing up with the velocity of lightning, she darted along, regardless of the beauty of the stream, in whose limpid waters she had thought to behold her crimson-stained cheeks. She ran on, panting, glowing—the perspiration, hot as drops of molten lead, streaming down her face, looking furtively back, every now and then, to see if that gorgeous creature, with glittering coils and burning eyes were not gliding at her heels. At length, blinded and dizzy from the speed with which she had run, she fell against an opposing body just at the entrance of the lane.

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"Why, Helen, what is the matter?" exclaimed a well-known voice, and she knew she was safe. It was the young doctor, who loved to walk on the banks of that beautiful stream, when the shadows of the tall hickories lengthened on the grass.

Helen was too breathless to speak, but he knew, by her clinging hold, that she sought protection from some real or imaginary danger. While he pitied her evident fright, he could not help smiling at her grotesque appearance. The perspiration, dripping from her forehead, had made channels through the crimson dye on her cheeks, and her chin, which had been buried in the ground when she fell, was all covered with mud. Her frock was soiled and torn, her bonnet twisted so that the strings hung dangling over her shoulder. A more forlorn, wild-looking little figure, can scarcely be imagined, and it is not strange that the young doctor found it difficult to suppress a laugh.

"And so you left your strawberries behind," said he, after hearing the history of her fright and flight. "It seems to me I would not have treated the snake so daintily. Suppose we go back and

cheat him of his nice supper, after all."

"Oh! no—no—no," exclaimed Helen, emphatically. "I wouldn't go for all the strawberries in the whole world."

"Not when they would do your sick mother good?" said he, gravely.

"But the snake!" cried she, with a shudder.

"It is perfectly harmless. If you took it in your hand and played with it, it would not hurt you. Those beautiful, bright-striped creatures have no venom in them. Come, let us step down to the edge of the stream and wash the stains from your face and hands, and then you shall show me where your strawberries are waiting for us in the long grass."

He took her hand and attempted to draw her along, but she resisted with astonishing strength, planting her back against the railing that divided the lane from the corn-field.

"Helen, you *will* come with me," said he, in the same tone, and with the same magnetic glance, with which he had once before subdued her. She remained still a few moments, then the rigid muscles began to relax, and hanging down her head, she sobbed aloud. [39]

"You will come," repeated he, leading her gently along towards the bank of the stream, "because you know I would not lead you into danger, and because if you do not try to conquer such fears, they will make you very unhappy through life. Don't you wish to be useful and do good to others, when you grow older?"

"Oh, yes," replied Helen, with animation—"but," added she, despondingly, "I never shall."

"It depends upon yourself," replied her friend; "some of the greatest men that ever lived, were once timid little children. They made themselves great by overcoming their fears, by having a strong will."

They were now close to the water, which, just where they stood, was as still and smooth as glass. Helen saw herself in the clear, blue mirror, and laughed aloud—then she blushed to think how strange and ugly she looked. Eagerly scooping up the water in the hollow of her hand, she bathed her face, and removed the disfiguring stains.

"You have no napkin," said the young doctor, taking a snowy linen handkerchief from his pocket, which emitted a sweet, faint, rose-like perfume. "Will this do?"

He wiped her face, which looked fairer than ever after the ablution, and then first one and then the other of her trembling hands, for they still trembled from nervous agitation.

"How kind, how good he is!" thought Helen, as his hand passed gently over her brow, smoothing back the moist and tangled hair, then glided against her cheek, while he arranged the twisted bonnet and untied the dangling strings, which had tightened into a hard and obstinate knot. "I wonder what makes him so kind and good to me?"

When they came to the fence, surrounding the strawberry-field, Helen's steps involuntarily grew slower, and she hung back heavily on the hand of her companion. Her old fears came rushing over her, drowning her new-born courage.

Arthur laid his hand on the top rail, and vaulted over as lightly as a bird, then held out his arms towards her.

"Climb, and I will catch you," said he, with an encouraging smile. Poor little Helen felt constrained to obey him, though she turned white as snow—and when he took her in his arms, he felt her heart beating and fluttering like the wings of a caged humming-bird. [40]

"Ah, I see the silver bucket," he cried, "all filled with strawberries. The enemy is fled; the coast is clear."

He still held her in his arms, while he stooped and lifted the bucket, then again vaulted over the fence, as if no burden impeded his movements.

"You are safe," said he, "and you can now gladden your mother's heart by this sweet offering. Are you sorry you came?"

"Oh! no," she replied, "I feel happy now." She insisted upon his eating part of the strawberries, but he refused, and as they walked home, he gathered green leaves and flowers, and made a garland round them.

"What makes you so good to me?" she exclaimed, with an irresistible impulse, looking gratefully in his face.

"Because I like you," he replied; "you remind me, too, of a dear little sister of mine, whom I love very tenderly. Poor unfortunate Alice! Your lot is happier than hers."

"What makes *me* happier?" asked Helen, thinking that one who had so kind a brother ought to be happy.

"She is blind," he replied, "she never saw one ray of light."

"Oh! how dreadful!" cried Helen, "to live all the time in the dark! Oh! I should be afraid to live

at all!"

"I said you were happier, Helen; but I recall my words. She is not afraid, though all the time midnight shadows surround her. A sweet smile usually rests upon her face, and her step is light and springy as the grasshopper's leap."

"But it must be so dreadful to be blind!" repeated Helen. "How I do pity her!"

"It is a great misfortune, one of the greatest that can be inflicted upon a human being—but she does not murmur. She confides in the love of those around her, and feels as if their eyes were her own. Were I to ask her to walk over burning coals, she would put her hand in mine, to lead her, so entire is her trust, so undoubting is her faith."

"How I wish I could be like her!" said Helen, in a tone of deep humility.

"You are like her at this moment, for you have gone where you believed great danger was lurking, trusting in my promise of protection and safety,—trusting in me, who am almost a stranger to you." [41]

Helen's heart glowed within her at his approving words, and she rejoiced more than ever that she had obeyed his will. Her sympathies were painfully awakened for the blind child, and she asked him a thousand questions, which he answered with unwearied patience. She repeated over and over again the sweet name of Alice, and wished it were hers, instead of Helen.

At the great double gate, that opened into the wood-yard, Arthur left her, and she hastened on, proud of the victory she had obtained over herself. Mittie was standing in the back door; as Helen came up the steps, she pointed in derision at her soiled and disordered dress.

"I couldn't help it," said Helen, trying to pass her, "I fell down."

"Oh! what nice strawberries!" exclaimed Mittie, "and so many of them. Give me some."

"Don't touch them, Mittie—they are for mother," cried Helen, spreading her hand over the top of the bucket, as Mittie seized the handle and jerked it towards her.

"You little, stingy thing, I *will* have some," cried Mittie, plunging her hand in the midst of them, while the sweet wild flowers which Arthur's hand had scattered over them, and the shining leaves with which he had bordered them, all fell on the steps. Helen felt as if scalding water were pouring into her veins, and in her passion she lifted her hand to strike her, when a hollow cough, issuing from her mother's room, arrested her. She remembered, too, what the young doctor had said, "that it was harder to keep from doing wrong, than to do what was right."

"If he saw me strike Mittie, he would think it wrong," thought she, "though if he knew how bad she treats me, he'd say 'twas hard to keep from it."

Kneeling on one knee, she picked up the scattered flowers, and on every flower a dew drop fell, and sparkled on its petals.

They had a witness of whom they were not aware. The tall, gray figure of Miss Thusa, appeared in the opposite door, at the moment of Mittie's rude and greedy act. The meekness of Helen exasperated her still more against the offender, and striding across the passage, she seized Mittie by the arm, and swung her completely on one side. [42]

"Let me alone, old Madam Thusa," exclaimed Mittie, "I'm not going to mind *you*. That I'm not. You always take her part against me. Every body does—that makes me hate her."

"For shame! for shame!" cried the tall monitor, "to talk so of your little sister. You're like the girl in the fairy tale, who was so spiteful that every time she spoke, toads and vipers crawled out of her mouth. Helen, I'll tell you that story to-night, before you go to sleep."

Helen could have told her that she would rather not hear any thing of vipers that night, but she feared Miss Thusa would be displeased and think her ungrateful. Notwithstanding Mittie's unkindness and violence of temper, she did not like to have such dreadful ideas associated with her. When, however, she heard the whole story, at the usual witching hour, she felt the same fascination which had so often enthralled her. As it was summer, the blazing fire no longer illuminated the hearth, but a little lamp, whose rays flickered in the wind that faintly murmured in the chimney. Miss Thusa sat spinning by the open window, in the light of the solemn stars, and as she waxed more and more eloquent, she seemed to derive inspiration from their beams. She could see one twinkling all the time in the little gourd of water, swinging from her distaff, and in spite of her preference for the dark and the dreadful, she could not help stopping her wheel, to admire the trembling beauty of that solitary star.

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CHAPTER III.

"Pale as the corse o'er which she leaned,
As cold, with stifling breath,
Her spirit sunk before the might,
The majesty of death."

"A man severe he was, and stern to view,
I knew him well, and every truant knew—
Yet he was kind, or if severe in aught,
The love he bore for learning was in fault."

Goldsmith.

THE darkened room, the stilly tread, the muffled knocker and slowly closing door, announced the presence of that kingly guest, who presides over the empire of *terror* and the grave. The long-expected hour was arrived, and Mrs. Gleason lay supported by pillows, whose soft down would never more sink under the pressure of her weary head. The wasting fires of consumption had burned and burned, till nothing but the ashes of life were left, save a few smouldering embers, from which flashed occasionally a transient spark. Mr. Gleason sat at the bed's head, with that grave, stern, yet bitter grief on his countenance which bids defiance to tears. She had been a gentle and devoted wife, and her quiet, home-born virtues, not always fully appreciated, rose before his remembrance, like the angels in Jacob's dream, climbing up to Heaven. Louis stood behind him, his head bowed upon his shoulder, sobbing as if his heart would break. Helen was nestled in her father's arms, with the most profound and unutterable expression of grief and awe and dread, on her young face. She was told that her mother was dying, going away from her, never to return, and the anguish this conviction imparted would have found vent in shrieks, had not the awe with which she beheld the cold, gray shadows of death, slowly, solemnly rolling over the face she loved best on earth, the face which had always seemed to her the perfection of mortal beauty, paralyzed her tongue, and frozen the fountain of her tears. Mittie stood at the foot of the bed, looking at her mother through the opening of the curtain, partly veiled by the long, white fringe that hung heavily from the folds, and which the wind blew to and fro, with something like the sweep of the willow. The windows were all open to admit the air to the faintly heaving lungs of the sufferer, and gradually one curtain after another was lifted, as the struggle for breath and air increased, and the light of departing day streamed in on the sunken and altered features it was never more to illuminate. Mittie was awe struck, but she manifested no tenderness or sensibility. It was astonishing how so young a child could see *anyone* die, and above all a *mother*—a mother, so kind and affectionate, with so little emotion. She was far more oppressed by the realization of her own mortality, for the first time pressed home upon her, than by her impending bereavement. What were the feelings of that speechless, expiring, but fully conscious mother, as she gazed earnestly, wistfully, thrillingly on the group that surrounded her? There was the husband, whom she had so much loved, he, who often, when weary with business, and perplexed with anxiety, had seemed careless and indifferent, but who, as life waned away, had shown the tenderness of love's early day, and who she knew would mourn her deeply and *long*. There was her noble, handsome, warm-hearted, high-souled boy—the object of her pride, as well as her affection—he, who had never willfully given her a moment's pain—and though his irrepressible sighs and suffocating sobs she would have hushed, at the expense of all that remained of life to her—there was still a music in them to her dying ear, that told of love that would not forget, that would twine in perennial garlands round her grave. Poor little Helen, as she looked at her pale, agonized face, and saw the *terror* imprinted there, she remembered what she had once said to Miss Thusa, of being after death an object of *terror* to her child, and she felt a sting that no language could express. She longed to stretch out her feeble arms, to fold them round this child of her prayers and fears, to carry her with her down the dark valley her feet were treading, to save her from trials a nature like hers was so ill-fitted to sustain. She looked from her to Mittie, the cold, insensible Mittie, whose large, black eyes, serious, but not sad, were riveted upon her through the white fringe of the curtain, and another sting sharper still went through her heart.

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"Oh! my child," she would have said, could her thoughts have found utterance, "forget me if you will—mourn not for me, the mother who bore you—but be kind, be loving to your little sister, more young and helpless than yourself. You are strong and fearless—she is a timid, trembling, clinging dove. Oh! be gentle to her, for my sake, gentle as I have ever been to you. And you, too, my child, the time will come when you will *feel*, when your heart will awake from its sleep—and if you only feel for yourself, you will be wretched."

"Why art thou cast down, oh! my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me?" were the meditations of the dying woman, when turning from earth, she raised her soul on high. "I leave my children in the hands of a heavenly Father, as well as a mighty God—in the care of Him who died that man might live forevermore."

But there was one present at this scene, who seemed a priestess presiding over some mystic rite. It was Miss Thusa. Notwithstanding the real kindness of her heart, she felt a strange and intense delight in witnessing the last struggle between vitality and death, in gazing on the marble, soulless features, from which life had departed, and composing the icy limbs for the garniture of the grave. She would have averted suffering and death, if she could, from all, but since every son and daughter of Adam were doomed to bear them, she wanted the privilege of beholding the conflict, and gazing on the ruins. She would sit up night after night, regardless of fatigue, to watch by the pillow of sickness and pain, and yet she felt an unaccountable sensation

of disappointment when her cares were crowned with success, and the hour of danger was over. She would have climbed mountains, if it were required, to carry water to dash on a burning dwelling, yet wished at the same time to see the flames grow redder and broader, and more destructive. She would have liked to live near the smoke and fire of battle, so that she might wander in contemplation among the unburied slain.

The sun went down, but the sun of life still lingered on the verge of the horizon. The dimness of twilight mingled with the shadows of death. [46]

"Take me out," cried Helen, struggling to be released from her father's arms. "Oh! take me from here. It don't seem mother that I see."

"Hush—hush," said Mr. Gleason, sternly, "you disturb her last moments." But Helen, whose feelings were wrought up to a pitch which made stillness impossible, and restraint agonizing, darted from between her father's knees and rushed into the passage. But how dim and lonely it was! How melancholy the cat looked, waiting near the door, with its calm, green eyes turned towards the chamber where its gentle mistress lay! It rubbed its white, silky sides against Helen, purring solemnly and musically, but Helen recollected many a frightful tale of cats, related by Miss Thusa, and recoiled from the contact. She longed to escape from herself, to escape from a world so dark and gloomy. Her mother was going, and why should she stay behind? *Going!* yet lying so still and almost breathless there! She had been told that the angels came down and carried away the souls of the good, but she looked in vain for the track of their silvery wings. One streak of golden ruddiness severed the gray of twilight, but it resembled more a fiery bar, closing the gates of heaven, than a radiant opening to the spirit-land. While she stood pale and trembling, with her hand on the latch of the door, afraid to stay where she was, afraid to return and confront the mystery of death, the gate opened, and Arthur Hazleton came up the steps. He had been there a short time before, and went away for something which it was thought might possibly administer relief. He held out his hand, and Helen clung to it as if it had the power of salvation. He read what was passing in the mind of the child, and pitied her. He did not try to reason with her at that moment, for he saw it would be in vain, but drawing her kindly towards him, he told her he was sorry for her. His words, like "flaky snow in the day of the sun," melted as they fell and sunk into her heart, and she began to weep. He knew that her mother could not live long, and wishing to withdraw her from a scene which might give a shock from which her nerves would long vibrate, he committed her to the care of a neighbor, who took her to her own home. Mrs. Gleason died at midnight, while Helen lay in a deep sleep, unconscious of the deeper slumbers that wrapped the dead. [47]

And now a terrible trial awaited her. She had never looked on the face of death, and she shrunk from the thought with a dread which no language can express. When her father, sad and silent, with knit brow and quivering lip, led her to the chamber where her mother lay, she resisted his guidance, and declared she would never, never go in *there*. It would have been well to have yielded to her wild pleadings, her tears and cries. It would have been well to have waited till reason was stronger and more capable of grappling with terror, before forcing her to read the first awful lesson of mortality. But Mr. Gleason thought it his duty to require of her this act of filial reverence, an act he would have deemed it sacrilegious to omit. He was astonished, grieved, angry at her resistance, and in his excitement he used some harsh and bitter words.

Finding persuasions and threats in vain, he summoned Miss Thusa, telling her he gave into her charge an unnatural, rebellious child, with whose strange temper he was then too weak to contend. It was a pity he summoned such an assistant, for Miss Thusa thought it impious as well as unnatural, and she had bound herself too by a sacred promise, that she would not suffer Helen to *fear* in death the mother whom in life she had so dearly loved. Helen, when she looked into those still, commanding eyes, felt that her doom was sealed, and that she need struggle no more. In despair, rather than submission, she yielded, if it can be called yielding, to suffer herself to be dragged into a room, which she never entered afterwards without dread.

The first glance at the interior of the chamber, struck a chill through her heart. It was so still, so chill, so dim, yet so white. The curtains of white muslin fell in long, slumberous folds down to the floor, their fringes resting lifelessly on the carpet. The tables and chairs were all covered with white linen, and something shrouded in white was stretched out on a table in the centre of the room. The sheet which covered it flapped a moment as the door opened, and then hung motionless. The outline of a human form beneath was visible, and when Miss Thusa lifted her in her arms and carried her to the spot, Helen was conscious of an awful curiosity growing up within her that was stronger than her terrors. Her breath came quick and short, a film came over her eyes, and cold drops of sweat stood upon her forehead, yet she would not now have left the room without penetrating into the mystery of death. Miss Thusa laid her hand upon the sheet and turned it back from the pale and ghastly face, on whose brow the mysterious signet of everlasting rest was set. Still, immovable, solemn, placid—it lay beneath the gaze, with shrouded eye, and cheek like concave marble, and hueless, waxen lips. What depth, what grandeur, what duration in that repose! What inexpressible sadness, yet what sublime tranquillity! Helen held her breath, bending slowly, lower and lower, as if drawn down by a mighty, irresistible power, till her cheek almost touched the clay-cold cheek over which she leaned. Then Miss Thusa folded back the sheet still farther, and exposed the shrouded form, which she had so carefully prepared for its last dread espousals. The fragrance of white roses and geranium leaves profusely scattered over the body, mingled with the cold odor of mortality, and filled the room with a deadly, sickening perfume. White roses were placed in the still, white, emaciated hands, and lay all wilted on the unbreathing bosom. [48]

All at once a revulsion took place in the breast of Helen. It mocked her—that silent, rigid, moveless form. She felt so cold, so deadly cold in its presence, it seemed as if all the warmth of life went out within her. She began to realize the desolation, the loneliness of the future. The cry of orphanage came wailing up from the depths of her heart, and bursting from her lips in a loud piercing shriek, she sprang forward and fell perfectly insensible on the bosom of the dead.

“I wish I had not *forced* her to go in,” exclaimed the father, as he hung with remorseful anguish over the child. “Great Heaven! must I lose all I hold dear at once?”

“No, no,” cried Miss Thusa, making use of the most powerful restoratives as she spoke, “it will not hurt her. She is coming to already. It’s a lesson she must learn, and the sooner the better. She’s got to be hardened—and if we don’t begin to do it the Lord Almighty will. I remember the saying of an old lady, and she was a powerful wise woman, that they who refused to look at a corpse, would see their own every night in the glass.” [49]

“Repeat not such shocking sayings before the child,” cried Mr. Gleason. “I fear she has heard too many already.”

Ah, yes! *she had heard too many*. The warning came too late.

She was restored to animation and—to memory. Her father, now trembling for her health, and feeling his affection and tenderness increase in consequence of a sensibility so remarkable, forbid every one to allude to her mother before her, and kept out of her sight as far as possible the mournful paraphernalia of the grave. But a *cold presence* haunted her, and long after the mother was laid in the bosom of earth, it would come like a sudden cloud over the sun, chilling the warmth of childhood.

She had never yet been sent to school. Her extreme timidity had induced her mother to teach her at home the rudiments of education. She had thus been a kind of *amateur* scholar, studying pictures more than any thing else, and never confined to any particular hours or lessons. About six months after her mother’s death, her father thought it best she should be placed under regular instruction, and she was sent with Mittie to the village school. If she could only have gone with Louis—Louis, so brave, yet tender, so manly, yet so gentle, how much happier she would have been! But Louis went to the large academy, where he studied Greek and Latin and Conic Sections, &c., where none but boys were admitted. The teacher of the village school was a gentleman who had an equal number of little boys and girls under his charge. In summer the institution was under the jurisdiction of a lady—in autumn and winter the Salic law had full sway, and man reigned supreme on the pedagogical throne. It was in winter that Helen entered what was to her a new world.

The little, delicate, pensive looking child, clad in deep mourning, attracted universal interest. The children gathered round her and examined her as they would a wax doll. There was something about her so different from themselves, so different from every body else they had seen, that they looked upon her as a natural curiosity.

“What big eyes she’s got!” cried a little creature, whose eyes were scarcely larger than pin-holes, putting her round, fat face close to Helen’s pale one, and peering under her long lashes. [50]

“Hush!” said another, whose nickname was Cherry-cheeks, so bright and ruddy was her bloom. “She’s a thousand times prettier than you, you little no eyed thing! But what makes her so pale and thin? I wonder—and what makes her look so scared?”

“It is because her mother is dead,” said an orphan child, taking Helen’s hand in one of hers, passing the other softly over her smooth hair.

“Mittie has lost her mother too,” replied Cherry-cheeks, “and she isn’t pale nor thin.”

“Mittie don’t care,” exclaimed several voices at once, “only let her have the head of the class, and she won’t mind what becomes of the rest of the world.”

A scornful glance over her shoulder was all the notice Mittie deigned to take of this acknowledgment of her eagle ambition. Conscious that she was the favorite of the teacher, she disdained to cultivate the love and good-will of her companions. With a keen, bright intelligence, and remarkable retentiveness of memory, she mastered her studies with surprising quickness, and distanced all her competitors. Had she been amiable, her young classmates would have been proud of the honors she acquired, for it is easy to yield the palm to one always in the ascendant, but she looked down with contempt on those of inferior attainments, and claimed as a right the homage they would have spontaneously offered.

Mr. Hightower, or as he was called Master High-tower, was worthy of his commanding name, for he was at least six feet and three inches in height, and of proportional magnitude. It would have looked more in keeping to see him at the head of an embattled host rather than exercising dominion over the little rudiments of humanity arranged around him. His hair was thick and bushy, and he had a habit of combing it with his fingers very suddenly, and making it stand up like military plumes all over his head. His features, though heavily moulded, had no harsh lines. Their predominant expression was good nature, a kind of elephantine docility, which neutralized the awe inspired by his immense size. On his inauguration morning, when the children beheld him marching slowly through the rows of benches on which they were seated, with a long, black ruler under his arm, and enthrone himself behind a tall, green-covered desk, they crouched together and trembled as the frogs did when King Log plunged in their midst. Though his good- [51]

humored countenance dispersed their terror, they found he was far from possessing the inaction of the wooden monarch, and that no one could resist his authority with impunity. He *could* scold, and then his voice thundered and reverberated in the ears of the pale delinquent in such a storm-peal as was never heard before—and he *could* chastise the obstinate offender, when reason could not control, most tremendously. That long, black ruler—what a wand it was! Whenever he was about to use it as an instrument of punishment, he had a peculiar way of handling it, which soon taught them to tremble. He would feel the whole length of it very slowly and carefully as if it were the edge of a razor—then raise it parallel with the eyes, and closing one, looked at it steadily with the other. Then lifting it suddenly above his head, he would extend his broad, left palm, and give himself a blow that would make them all start from their seats. Of all crimes or vices, none excited his indignation so much as laziness. It was with him the unpardonable sin. There was toleration, forgiveness for every one but the *sluggard*. He said Solomon's description of the slothful should be written in letters of gold on the walls of the understanding. He explained it to them as a metaphor, and made them to understand that the field of the sluggard, overgrown with thorns and nettles, was only an image of the neglected and uncultivated mind. He gave them Doctor Watts' versification of it to commit to memory, and repeated it with them in concert. It is not strange that Mittie, who never came to him with a neglected or imperfect lesson, should be a great favorite with him, and that he should make her the *star pupil* of the school.

Mittie was not afraid of being eclipsed by Helen, in the new sphere on which she had entered. At home the latter was more petted and caressed, the object of deeper tenderness, but there she reigned supreme, and the pet of the household would find herself nothing more than a cipher. She was mistaken. It was impossible to look upon Helen without interest, and Master Hightower seemed especially drawn towards her. He bent down till he overshadowed her with his loftiness, then smiling at the quick withdrawal of her soft, wild, shy glances, he took her up in his lap as if she were a plaything, sent for his amusement.

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Mittie was not pleased at this, for though she thought herself entirely too much of a woman to be treated with such endearing familiarity, she could not bear to see such caresses bestowed on another.

"I wonder," she said to herself, with a darkening countenance, "I wonder what any one can see in such a little goose as Helen, to *take on* about? Little simpleton! she's afraid of her own shadow! Never mind! wait awhile! When he finds out how lazy she is, he'll put her on a lower, harder seat than his lap."

It was true that Helen soon lost cast with the uncompromising enemy of idleness. She had fallen into a habit of reverie, which made it impossible for her to fix her mind on a given lesson. Her imagination had acquired so much more strength than her other faculties, that she could not convert the monarch into the vassal. She would try to memorize the page before her, and resolutely set herself to the task, but the wing of a snow-bird fluttering by the window, or the buzzing of a fly round the warm stove, would distract her attention and call up trains of thought as wild as irrelevant. Sometimes she would bend down her head, and press both hands upon it, to keep it in an obedient position; but all in vain!—her vagrant imagination would wander far away to the confines of the spirit-land.

Master Hightower coaxed, reasoned with her, scolded, threatened, did every thing but punish. He could not have the heart to apply the black ruler to that little delicate hand. He could not give a blow to one who looked up in his face with such soft, deprecating, fearful eyes—but he grew vexed with the child, and feeling of the edge of his ruler half-a-dozen times, declared he did not know what to do with her.

One night Mittie lingered behind the rest, and told him that if he would shut up Helen somewhere alone, *in the dark*, he would have no more trouble with her; that her father had said that it was the only way to make her study. It was true that Mr. Gleason had remarked, in a jesting way, when told of Helen's neglect of her lessons, that he must get Mr. Hightower to have a dark closet made, and he would have no more trouble; but he never intended such a cruelty to be inflicted on his child. This Mittie well knew, but as she had no sympathy with her sister's fears, she had no compassion for the sufferings they caused. She thought she deserved punishment, and felt a malicious pleasure in anticipating its infliction.

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Master Hightower had no dark closet, but there was room enough in his high, dark, capacious desk, for a larger body than the slender, delicate Helen. He resolved to act upon Mittie's admirable hint, knowing it would not hurt the child to enclose her awhile in a nice, warm, snug place, with books and manuscripts for her companions.

Helen heard the threat without alarm, for she believed it uttered in sport. The pleasant glance of the eye contradicted the severity of the lips. But Master Hightower was anxious to try the experiment, since all approved methods had failed, and when the little delinquent blushed and hung her head, stammering a faint excuse for her slighted task, he said nothing, but slowly lifting up the lid of his desk, he placed his black ruler in a perpendicular position, letting the lid rest upon it, forming an obtuse angle with the desk. Then he piled the books in the back part, leaving a cavity in front, which looked something like a bower in a greenwood, for it was lined with baize within and without.

"Come my little lady," said he, taking her up in his arms, "I am going to try the effect of a little solitary confinement. They say you are not very fond of the *dark*. Well, I am going to keep you here all night, if you don't promise to study hereafter."

Helen writhed in his strong grasp, but the worm might as well attempt to escape from under the giant's heel, as the child from the powerful hold of the master. He laid her down in the green nest, as if she were a downy feather, then putting a book between the lid and the desk, to admit the fresh air, closed the lid and leaned his heavy elbow upon it. The children laughed at the novelty of the punishment, all but the orphan child; but when they heard suppressed sobs issuing from the desk, they checked their mirth, and tears of sympathy stole down the cheeks of the gentle orphan girl. Mittie's black eyes sparkled with excitement; she was proud because the master had acted upon her suggestion, and inflicted a punishment which, though it involved humiliation, gave no real suffering.

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Burning with shame, and shivering with apprehension, Helen lay in her darkened nook, while the hum of recitation murmured in a dull roaring sound around her. It was a cold winter's day and she was very warmly clad, so that she soon experienced a glowing warmth in the confined air she was breathing. This warmth, so oppressive, and the monotonous sound stealing in through the aperture of the desk, caused an irresistible drowsiness, and her eye-lids heavy with the weight of tears, involuntarily closed. When the master, astonished at the perfect stillness with which, after awhile, she endured the restraint, softly peeped within, she was lying in a deep sleep, her head pillowed on her arm, the tear-drops glittering on her cheeks. Cramped as she was, the unconscious grace of childhood lent a charm to her position, and her sable dress, contrasting with the pallor of her complexion, appealed for compassion and sympathy. The teacher's heart smote him for the coercion he had used.

"I will not disturb her now," thought he; "she is sleeping so sweetly. I will take her out when school is dismissed. I think she will remember this lesson."

Suffering the lid to fall noiselessly on the book, he resumed his tasks, which were not closed till the last beams of the wintry sun glimmered on the landscape. The days were now very short, and in his enthusiastic devotion to his duties, the shades of twilight often gathered around him unawares.

It was his custom to dismiss his scholars one by one, beginning with the largest, and winding up with the smallest. It was one of his rules that they should go directly home, without lingering to play round the door of the school-house, and they knew the Mede and Persian character of his laws too well to disobey them. When Mittie went out, making a demure curtsy at the door, she lingered a little longer than usual, supposing he would release Helen from her prison house; but Master Hightower was one of the most absent men in the world, and he had forgotten the little prisoner in her quiet nest.

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"Well," thought Mittie, "I suppose he is going to keep her a while longer, and she can go home very well without me. I am going to stay all night with Cherry-cheeks, and if Miss Thusa makes a fuss about her darling, I shall not be there to hear it."

Master Hightower generally lingered behind his pupils to see that all was safe, the fire extinguished in the stove, the windows fastened down, and the shutters next to the street closed. After attending deliberately to these things, he took down his hat and cloak, drew on his warm woolen gloves, went out, and locked the door. It was so late that lights were beginning to gleam through the blinds of many a dwelling-house as he walked along.

In the meantime, Helen slumbered, unconscious of the solitude in which she was plunged. When she awoke, she found herself in utter darkness, and in stillness so deep, it was more appalling than the darkness. She knew not at first where she was. When she attempted to move, her limbs ached from their long constraint, and the arm that supported her head was fast asleep. At length, tossing up her right hand, she felt the resisting lid, and remembered the punishment she had been enduring. She tried to spring out, but fell back several times on her sleeping arm, and it was long before she was able to accomplish her release in the darkness. She knew not where she was jumping, and fell head first against the master's high-backed chair. If she was hurt she did not know it, she was so paralyzed by terror. She could not be alone! They would not be so cruel as to leave her there the live-long winter's night. They were only frightening her! Mittie must be hiding there, waiting for her. *She* was not afraid of the dark.

"Sister," she whispered. "Sister," she murmured, in a louder tone. "Where are you? Come and take my hand."

The echo of her own voice sounded fearful, in those silent walls. She dared not call again. Her eyes, accustomed to the gloom, began to distinguish the outline of objects. She could see where the long rows of benches stood, and the windows, all except those next the street, grew whiter and whiter, for the ground was covered with snow, and some of it had been drifted against the glass. All at once Helen remembered the *room*, all dressed in white, and she felt the *cold presence*, which had so often congealed her heart. Her dead mother seemed before her, in the horror, yet grandeur, of her last repose. Unable to remain passive in body, with such travail in her soul, she rushed towards the door—finding the way with her groping hands. It was locked. She tried the windows—they were fastened. She shrieked—but there was none to hear. No! there was no escape—no hope. She must stay there the whole long, dark night, if she lived, to see the morning's dawn. With the conviction of the hopelessness of her situation, there arose a feeling, partly despair and partly resignation. She was very cold, for the fire had long been extinguished, and she could not find her cloak to cover her.

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She was sure she would freeze to death before morning, and Master Hightower, when he came

to open the school, would see her lying stiff and frozen on the floor, and be sorry he had been so cruel. Yes! she would freeze, and it was no matter, for no one cared for her; no one thought of coming to look for her. Father, brother, Miss Thusa, Mittie—all had deserted her. Had her mother lived, *she* would have remembered her little Helen. The young doctor, he who had been so kind and good, who had come to her before in the hour of danger, perhaps he would pity her, if he knew of her being locked up there in loneliness and darkness.

Several times she heard sleighs driving along, the bells ringing merrily and loud, and she thought they were going to stop—but they flew swiftly by. She felt as the mariner feels on a desert island, when he spies a distant sail, and tries in vain to arrest the vessel, that glides on, unheeding his signal of distress.

"I will say my prayers," she said, "if I have no bed to lie down on. If God ever heard me, He will listen now, for I've nobody but Him to go to."

Kneeling down in the darkness, and folding her hands reverently, while she lifted them upwards, she softly repeated the prayer her mother had taught her, and, for the first time, the spirit of it entered her understanding. When she came to the words—"Give us this day our daily bread," she paused. "Thou hast given it," she added, "and oh! God, I thank Thee." When she repeated—"Forgive my sins," she thought of the sin, for which she was suffering so dreadful a punishment. She had sinned in disobeying so kind a teacher. She ought to study, instead of thinking of far-off things. She did not wonder the master was angry with her. It was her own fault, for he had told her what he was going to do with her; and if she had not been idle, she might have been at home by a warm fire, safe in a father's sheltering arms. For the first time she added something original and spontaneous to the ritual she had learned. When she had finished the beautiful and sublime doxology, she bowed her head still lower, and repeated, in accents trembling with penitence and humility—

"Only take care of me to-night, our Father who art in heaven, and I will try and sin no more."

Was she indeed left forgotten there, till morning's dawn?

When Master Hightower bent his steps homeward, he was solving a peripatetic problem of Euclid. When he arrived at his lodgings, seated himself by the blazing fire, and stretched out his massy limbs to meet the genial heat, in the luxurious comfort he enjoyed, the cares, the bustle, the events of the day were forgotten. A smoking supper made him still more luxuriously comfortable, and a deeper oblivion stole over him. It was not likely that the fragrant cigar he then lighted as the crowning blessing of the evening, would recall to his mind the fireless, supperless, comfortless culprit he had left in such "durance vile." Combing his hair suddenly with the fingers of his left hand, and leaning back in a floating position, he watched the smoke-rings, curling above his head, and fell into a reverie on Natural Philosophy. He was interrupted by the entrance of Arthur Hazleton, the young doctor.

"I called for the new work on Chemistry, which I lent you some time since," said Arthur. "Is it perfectly convenient for you to let me have it now?"

"I am very sorry," replied the master, "I left it in the school-room, in my desk."

His desk! yes! and he had left something else there too.

"I will go and get it," he cried, starting up, suddenly, his face reddening to his temples. "I will get it, and carry it over to you."

"No, give me the key of the school-house, and I will spare you the trouble. It is on my homeward way."

"I *must* go myself," he replied, cloaking himself with wonderful celerity, and taking a lantern from the shelf. "You can wait here, till I return."

"No such thing," said Arthur. "Why should I wait here, when I might be so far on my way home?"

The master saw that it was in vain to conceal from him the incarceration of little Helen, an act for which he felt sorry and ashamed; but thinking she might still be asleep, and that he might abstract the book without the young doctor being aware of her presence, he strode on in silence, with a speed almost superhuman.

"You forget what tremendous long limbs you have," exclaimed the young doctor, breathless, and laughing, "or you would have more mercy on your less gifted brethren."

"Yes—yes—I do forget," cried his excited companion, unconsciously betraying his secret, "as that poor little creature knows, to her cost."

"I may as well tell you all about it," he added, answering Arthur's look of surprise and curiosity, seen by the lantern's gleam—"since I couldn't keep it to myself."

He then related the punishment he had inflicted on Helen, and how he had left her, forgotten and alone.

The benevolent heart of the young doctor was not only pained, but alarmed by the recital. He feared for the effects of this long imprisonment on a child so exquisitely sensitive and timid.

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"You don't know the child," said he, hastening his pace, till even the master's long strides did not sweep more rapidly over the snowy ground. "You have made a fatal experiment. I should not be surprised if you made her a maniac or an idiot."

"Heaven forbid!" cried the conscience-stricken teacher, and his huge hand trembled on the lock of the door.

"Go in first," said he to Arthur, giving him the lantern. "She will be less afraid of you than of me."

Arthur opened the door, and shading the lantern, so as to soften its glare, he went in with cautious steps. A little black figure, with white hands and white face, was kneeling between the desk and the stove. The hands were clasped so tightly, they looked as if they had grown together, and the face had a still, marble look—but life, intensely burning life was in the large, wild eyes uplifted to his own. [59]

"Helen, my child!" said he, setting the lantern on the stove, and stooping till his hair, silvered with the night-frost, touched her cheek.

With a faint but thrilling cry, she sprang forward, and threw her arms round his neck; and there she clung, sobbing one moment, and laughing the next, in an ecstasy of joy and gratitude.

"I thought you'd come, if you knew it," she cried.

This implicit confidence in his protection, touched the young man, and he wrapped his arms more closely round her shivering frame.

"How cold you are!" he exclaimed. "Let me fold my cloak about you, and put both your hands in mine, they are like pieces of ice."

"Helen, you poor little forlorn lamb," cried a rough, husky voice—and the sudden eclipse of a great shadow passed over her. "Helen, I did not mean to leave you here—on my soul I did not. I forgot all about you. As I hope to be forgiven for my cruelty, it is true. I only meant to keep you here till school was dismissed—and I have let you stay till you are starved, and frozen, and almost dead."

"It was my fault," replied Helen, in a meek, subdued tone, "but I'll try and study better, if you won't shut me up here any more."

"Bless the child!" exclaimed the master, "what a little angel of goodness she is. You shall have all the sunshine of the broad earth, after this, for all my shutting out one ray from your sweet face. That's right—bring her along, doctor, under your cloak, and don't let the frost bite her nose—I'll carry the lantern."

Wondering that the father had not sought for his lost child, Arthur carried her home, while the master carefully lighted their slippery path.

Great was the astonishment of Mr. Gleason, on seeing his little daughter brought home in such a state, for he imagined her at the fireside of one of her companions, in company with her sister. Her absence had consequently created no alarm. [60]

Not all the regret and compunction expressed by Master Hightower could quell the rising surge of anger in the father's breast. His brow grew dark, and Miss Thusa's darker still.

"To lock up a poor, little motherless thing, such a night as this!" muttered she, putting her spectacles, the thermometer of her anger, on the top of her head. "To leave her there to perish. Why, the wild beasts themselves would be ashamed of such behaviour, let alone a man."

"Don't, Miss Thusa," whispered Helen, "he is sorry as he can be. I was bad, too, for I didn't mind him."

"I do not wonder at your displeasure, sir," said the master, turning to Mr. Gleason, with dignity; "I deserve to feel it, for my unpardonable forgetfulness. But I must say in my defence, I never should have thought of such a punishment, had it not been suggested by yourself."

"Suggested by me!" repeated Mr. Gleason, angrily; "I don't know what you mean, sir!"

"Your eldest daughter brought me a message, to this effect—that you desired me to try solitary confinement in the dark, as the most effectual means to bring her to obedience; having no other dark place, I shut her in my desk, and never having deposited a living bundle there before, I really think I ought to be pardoned for forgetting her."

"Is it possible my daughter carried such a message to you from *me*," cried Mr. Gleason, "I never sent it."

"Just like Mittie," cried Miss Thusa, "she's always doing something to spite Helen. I heard her say myself once, that she despised her, because everybody took her part. Take her part—sure enough. The Lord Almighty knows that a person has to be abused before we *can* take their part."

"Hush!" exclaimed Mr. Gleason, mortified as this disclosure of Mittie's unamiable disposition, and shocked at the instance first made known to him. "This is not a proper time for such remarks; I don't wish to hear them."

"You ought to hear them, whether you want to or not," continued the indomitable spinster, "and I don't see any use in palavering the truth. Master Hightower and Mr. Arthur knows it by this time, and there's no harm in talking before them. Helen's an uncommon child. She's no more like other children, than my fine linen thread is like twisted tow. She won't bear hard pulling or rough handling. Mittie isn't good to her sister. You ought to have heard Helen's mother talk about it before she died. She was afraid of worrying you, she was so tender of your feelings. 'But Miss Thusa,' says she, 'the only thing that keeps me from being willing to die, is this child;' meaning Helen, to be sure. 'But, oh, Miss Thusa,' says she, and her eyes filled up with tears, 'watch over her, for my sake, and see that she is gently dealt by.'"

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A long, deep sigh burst from the heart of the widower, sacred to the memory of his buried wife. Another heaved the ample breast of the master for the disclosure of his favorite pupil's unamiable traits.

The young doctor sighed, for the evils he saw by anticipation impending over his little favorite's head. He thought of his gentle mother, his lovely blind sister, of his sweet, quiet home, and wished that Helen could be embosomed in its hallowed shades. Young as he was, he felt a kind of fatherly interest in the child—she had been so often thrown upon him for sympathy and protection. (His youth may be judged by the epithet attached to his name. There were several young physicians in the town, but he was universally known as *the* young doctor.) From the first, he was singularly drawn towards the child. He pitied her, for he saw she had such deep capacities of suffering—he loved her for her dependence and helplessness, her grateful and confiding disposition. He wished she were placed in the midst of more genial elements. He feared less the unnatural unkindness of Mittie, than the devotion and tenderness of Miss Thusa—for the latter fed, as with burning gas, her too inflammable imagination.

"The next time I visit home," said the young doctor to himself, "I will speak to my mother of this interesting child."

When Mittie was brought face to face with her father; he upbraided her sternly for her falsehood, and for making use of his name as a sanction for her cruelty.

"You did say so, father!" said she, looking him boldly in the face, though the color mounted to her brow. "You did say so—and I can prove it."

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"You know what I said was uttered in jest," replied the justly incensed parent; "that it was never given as a message; that it was said to her, not you."

"I didn't give it as a message," cried Mittie, undauntedly; "I said that I had heard you say so—and so I did. Ask Master Hightower, if you don't believe me."

There was something so insolent in her manner, so defying in her countenance, that Mr. Gleason, who was naturally passionate, became so exasperated that he lifted his hand with a threatening gesture, but the pleading image of his gentle wife rose before him and arrested the chastisement.

"I cannot punish the child whose mother lies in the grave," said he, in an agitated tone, suffering his arm to fall relaxed by his side. "But Mittie, you are making me very unhappy by your misconduct. Tell me why you dislike your innocent little sister, and delight in giving her pain, when she is meek and gentle as a lamb?"

"Because you all love her better than you do me," she answered, her scornful under lip slightly quivering. "Brother Louis don't care for me; he always gives every thing he has to Helen. Miss Thusa pets her all the day long, just because she listens to her ugly old stories; and you—and you, always take her part against me."

"Mittie, don't let me hear you make use of that ridiculous phrase again; it means nothing, and has a low, vulgar sound. Come here, my daughter—I thought you did not care about our love." He took her by the hand and drew her in spite of her resistance, between his knees. Then stroking back the black and shining hair from her high, bold brow, he added,

"You are mistaken, Mittie, if you do not think that we love you. I love you with a father's tender affection; I have never given you reason to doubt it. If I show more love for Helen, it is only because she is younger, smaller, and winds herself more closely around me by her loving, affectionate ways; she seems to love me better, to love us all better. That is the secret, Mittie; it is love; cling to our hearts as Helen does, and we will never cast you off."

"I can't do as Helen does, for I'm not like her," said Mittie, tossing back her hair with her own peculiar motion, "and I don't want to be like her; she's nothing but a coward, though she makes believe half the time, to be petted, I know she does."

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"Incorrigible child;" cried the father, pushing back his chair, rising and walking the room back and forth, with a sad and clouded brow. He had many misgivings for the future. The frank, convivial, generous spirit of Louis would lead him into temptation, when exposed to the influence of seducing companions. Mittie's jealous and unyielding temper would embitter the peace of the household; while Helen's morbid sensibility, like a keen-edged sword in a thin, frail scabbard, threatened to wear away her young life. What firmness—yea, what gentleness—yea, what wisdom, what holy Christian principles were requisite for the responsibilities resting upon him.

"May God guide and sustain me," he cried, pausing and looking upward.

"May I go, sir?" asked Mittie, who had been watching her father's varying countenance, and felt somewhat awed by the deep solemnity and sadness that settled upon it. Her manner, if not affectionate was respectful, and he dismissed her with a gleaming hope that the clue to her heart's labyrinth—that labyrinth which seemed now closed with an immovable rock, might yet be discovered.

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CHAPTER IV.

"Oh, wanton malice! deathful sport!
Could ye not spare my all?
But mark my words, on thy cold heart
A fiery doom will fall."

THE incident recorded in the last chapter, resulted in benefit to two of the actors. It gave a spring to the dormant energies of Helen, and a check to the vengeance of Mittie.

The winter glided imperceptibly away, and as imperceptibly vernal bloom and beauty stole over the face of nature.

In the spring of the year, Miss Thusa always engaged in a very interesting process—that is, bleaching the flaxen thread which she had been spinning during the winter. She now made a permanent home at Mr. Gleason's, and superintended the household concerns, pursuing at the same time the occupation to which she had devoted the strength and intensity of her womanhood.

There was a beautiful grassy lawn extending from the southern side of the building, with a gradual slope towards the sun, whose margin was watered by the clearest, bluest, gayest little singing brook in the world. This was called Miss Thusa's bleaching ground, and nature seemed to have laid it out for her especial use. There was the smooth, fresh, green sward, all ready for her to lay her silky brown thread upon, and there was the pure water running by, where she could fill her watering pot, morning, noon and night, and saturate the fibres exposed to the sun's bleaching rays. And there was a thick row of blossoming lilac bushes shading the lower windows the whole breadth of the building, in which innumerable golden and azure-colored birds made their nests, and beguiled the spinster's labors with their melodious carrolings.

Helen delighted in assisting Miss Thusa in watering her thread, and watching the gradual change from brown to a pale brown, and then to a silver gray, melting away into snowy whiteness, like the bright brown locks of youth, fading away into the dim hoariness of age. When weary of dipping water from the wimpling brook, she would sit under the lilac bushes, and look at Miss Thusa's sybilline figure, moving slowly over the grass, swaying the watering-pot up and down in her right hand, scattering ten thousand liquid diamonds as she moved. Sometimes the rainbows followed her steps, and Helen thought it was a glorious sight.

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One day as Helen tripped up and down the velvet sward by her side, admiring the silky white skeins spread multitudinously there, Miss Thusa, gave an oracular nod, and said she believed that was the last watering, that all they needed was one more night's dew, one more morning sun, and then they could be twisted in little hanks ready to be dispatched in various directions.

"I am proud of that thread," said Miss Thusa, casting back a lingering look of affection and pride as she closed the gate. "It is the best I ever spun—I don't believe there is a rough place in it from beginning to end. It was the best flax I ever had, in the first place. When I pulled it out and wound it round the distaff, it looked like ravelled silk, it was so smooth and fine. Then there's such a powerful quantity of it. Well, it's my winter's work."

Poor Miss Thusa! You had better take one more look on those beautiful, silvery rings—for never more will your eyes be gladdened by their beauty! There is a worm in your gourd, a canker in your flower, a cloud floating darkly over those shining filaments.

It is astonishing how wantonly the spirit of mischief sometimes revels in the bosom of childhood! What wild freaks and excursions its superabundant energies indulge in! And when mischief is led on by malice, it can work wonders in the way of destruction.

It happened that Mittie had a gathering of her school companions in the latter part of the day on which we have just entered. Helen, tired of their rude sports, walked away to some quiet nook, with the orphan child. Mittie played Queen over the rest, in a truly royal style. At last, weary of singing and jumping the rope, and singing "Merry O'Jenny," they launched into bolder amusements. They ran over the flower-beds, leaping from bed to bed, trampling down many a fair, vernal bud, and then trying their gymnastics by climbing the fences and the low trees. A white railing divided Miss Thusa's bleaching ground, with its winding rill, from the garden, and as they peeped at the white thread shining on the grass, thinking the flaming sword of Miss Thusa's anger guarded that enclosure, Mittie suddenly exclaimed:

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"Let us jump over and dance among Miss Thusa's thread. It will be better than all the rest."

"No, no," cried several, drawing back, "it would be wrong. And I'm afraid of her. I wouldn't make her mad for all the world."

"I'll leave the gate open, and she'll think the calves have broken in," cried Mittie, emboldened by the absence of her father, and feeling safety in numbers. "Cowards," repeated she, seeing they still drew back. "Cowards!—just like Helen. I despise to see any one afraid of any thing. I hate old Madam Thusa, and every thing that belongs to her."

Vaulting over the fence, for there would have been no amusement in going through the gate, Mittie led the way to the forbidden ground, and it was not long before her companions, yielding to the influence of her bold, adventurous spirit, followed. Disdaining to cross the rustic bridge that spanned the brook, they took off their shoes and waded over its pebbly bed. They knew Miss Thusa's room was on the opposite side of the house, and while running round it, they had heard the hum of her busy wheel, so they did not fear her watching eye.

"Now," said Mittie, catching one of the skeins with her nimble feet, and tossing it in the air; "who will play cat's cradle with me?"

The idea of playing cat's cradle with the toes, for they had not resumed their shoes and stockings, was so original and laughable, it was received with acclamation, and wild with excitement they rushed in the midst of Miss Thusa's treasures—and such a twist and snarl as they made was never seen before. They tied more Gordian knots than a hundred Alexanders could sever, made more tangles than Princess Graciosa in the fairy tale could untie.

"What shall we do with it now?" they cried, when the novelty of the occupation wore off, and conscience began to give them a few remorseful twinges. [67]

"Roll it up in a ball and throw it in the brook," said Mittie, "she'll think some of her witches have carried it off. I'll pay her for it," she added, with a scornful laugh, "if she finds us out and makes a fuss. It can't be worth more than a dollar—and I would give twice as much as that any time to spite the old thing."

So they wound up the dirty, tangled, ruined thread into a great ball, and plunged it into the stream that had so often laved the whitening filaments. Had Miss Thusa seen it sinking into the blue, sunny water, she would have felt as the mariner does when the corpse of a loved companion is let down into the burying wave.

In a few moments the gate was shut, the green slope smiled in answer to the mellow smile of the setting sun, the yellow birds frightened away by the noisy groups, flew back to their nests, among the fragrant lilacs, and the stream gurgled as calmly as if no costly wreck lay within its bosom.

When the last beam of the sinking sun glanced upon her distaff, turning the fibres to golden filaments, Miss Thusa paused, and the crank gave a sudden, upward jerk, as if rejoiced at the coming rest. Putting her wheel carefully in its accustomed corner, she descended the stairs, and bent her steps to the bleaching ground. She met Helen at the gate, who remembered the trysting hour.

"Bless the child," cried Miss Thusa, with a benevolent relaxation of her harsh features, "she never forgets any thing that's to do for another. Never mind getting the watering-pot now. There'll be a plenty of dew falling."

Taking Helen by the hand she crossed the rustic bridge; but as she approached the green, she slackened her pace and drew her spectacles over her eyes. Then taking them off and rubbing them with her silk handkerchief, she put them on again and stood still, stooping forward, and gazing like one bewildered.

"Where is the thread, Miss Thusa?" exclaimed Helen, running before her, and springing on the slope. "When did you take it away?"

"Take it away!" cried she. "Take it away! I never *did* take it away. But *somebody* has taken it—stolen it, carried it off, every skein of it—not a piece left the length of my finger, my finger nail. The vile thieves!—all my winter's labor—six long months' work—dead and buried! for all me—" [68]

"Poor Miss Thusa!" said Helen, in a pitying accent. She was afraid to say more—there was something so awe-inspiring in the mingled wrath and grief of Miss Thusa's countenance.

"What's the matter?" cried a spirited voice. Louis appeared on the bridge, swinging his hat in the air, his short, thick curls waving in the breeze.

"Somebody's stolen all Miss Thusa's thread," exclaimed Helen, running to meet him, "her nice thread, that was just white enough to put away. Only think, Louis, how wicked!"

"Oh! Miss Thusa, it can't be stolen," said Louis, coming to the spot where she stood, the image of indignant despair; "somebody has hidden it to tease you. I'll help you to find it."

This seemed so natural a supposition, that Miss Thusa's iron features relaxed a little, and she glanced round the enclosure, more in condescension than hope, surveying the boughs of the lilacs, drooping with their weight of purple blossoms, and peering at the gossamer's web.

Louis, in the meantime, turned towards the stream, now partially enveloped in the dusky shade of twilight, but there was one spot sparkling with the rosy light of sunset, and resting snugly 'mid the pebbles at the bottom, he spied a large, dingy ball.

"Ah! what's this big toad-stool, rising up in the water?" said he, seizing a pole that lay under the bridge, and sticking the end in the ball. "Why this looks as if it had been thread, Miss Thusa, but I don't know what you will call it now?"

Miss Thusa snatched the dripping ball from the pole that bent beneath its weight, turned it round several times, bringing it nearer and nearer to her eyes at each revolution, then raised it above her head, as if about to dash it on the ground; but suddenly changing her resolution, she tightened her grasp, and strode into the path leading to the house.

"I know all about it now," she cried, "I heard the children romping and trampling round the house like a drove of wild colts, with Mittie at their head; it is she that has done it, and if I don't punish her, it will be because the Lord Almighty does it for me." [69]

Even Louis could scarcely keep up with her rapid strides. He trembled for the consequences of her anger, just as it was, and followed close to see if Mittie, undaunted as she was, did not shrivel in her gaze.

Mittie was seated in a window, busily studying, or pretending to study, not even turning her head, though Miss Thusa's steps resounded as if she were shod with iron.

"Look round, Miss, if you please, and tell me if you know any thing of this," cried Miss Thusa, laying her left hand on her shoulder, and bringing the ball so close to her face that her nose came in contact with it.

Mittie jerked away from the hand laid upon her with no velvet pressure, without opening her lips, but the guilty blood rising to her face spoke eloquently; though she had a kind of Procrustes bed of her own, according to which she stretched or curtailed the truth, she had not the hardihood to tell an unmitigated falsehood, in the presence of her brother, too, and in the light of his truth-beaming eye.

"You are always accusing *me* of every thing," said she, at length. "I didn't do it—all;" the last syllable was uttered in a low, indistinct tone.

"You are a mean coward," cried the spinster, hurling the ball across the room with such force that it rebounded against the wall. "You're a coward with all your audacity, and do tricks you are ashamed to acknowledge. You've spoiled the honest earnings of the whole winter, and destroyed the beautifullest suit of thread that ever was spun by mortal woman."

"I can pay you for all I spoiled and more too," said Mittie, sullenly.

"Pay me," repeated Miss Thusa, while the scorching fire of her eye slowly went out, leaving an expression of profound sorrow. "Can you pay me for a value you can't even dream of? Can you pay me for the lonely thoughts that twisted themselves up with that thread, day after day, and night after night, because they had nothing else to take hold of? Can you pay me for these grooves in my fingers' ends, made by the flax as I kept drawing it through, till it often turned red with my blood? No, no, that thread was as dear to me as my own heart strings—for they were twined all about it; it was like something living to me—and I loved it in the same way as I do little Helen. I shall never, never spin any more." [70]

"You will spin more merrily than ever," cried Louis, soothingly, "you see if you don't, Miss Thusa."

Miss Thusa shook her head, and though she almost suffocated herself in the effort to repress them, tears actually forced themselves into her eyes, and splashed on her cheeks. Seating herself in a low chair, she took up the corner of her apron to hide what she considered a shame and disgrace, when Helen glided near and wiped away the drops with her own handkerchief.

"Bless you darling," cried the subdued spinster—"and you will be blessed. There's no malice, nor hard-heartedness in *you*. *You* never turned your foot upon a worm. But as for her," continued she, pointing prophetically at Mittie, and fixing upon her her grave and gloomy eyes—"there's no blessing in store. She don't feel now, but if she lives to womanhood she *will*. The heart of stone will turn to flesh then, and every fibre it has got will learn how to quiver, as I've seen twisted wire do, when strong fingers pull it—I *know it will*. She will shed tears one of these days, and no one will wipe them off, as this little angel has done for me. I've done, now. I didn't mean to say what I did, but the Lord put it in my head, and I've spoken according to my gift."

Mittie ran out of the room before the conclusion of the speech, unable to stand the moveless glance, that seemed to burn like heated metal into her conscience.

"Come, Miss Thusa," said Louis, amiably, desirous of turning her thoughts into a new channel, and pitying while he blamed his offending sister, for the humiliation he knew she must endure—"come and tell us a story, while you are inspired. It is so long since I have heard one! Let it be something new and exciting."

"I don't believe I could tell you one to save my life, now," replied Miss Thusa, her countenance lighting up with a gleam of satisfaction—"at least I couldn't act it out."

"Never mind the acting, Miss Thusa, provided we hear the tale. Let it be a *powerful* one."

"Don't tell the *worm-eaten traveler*," whispered Helen. "I never want to hear that again."

[71]

Miss Thusa see-sawed a moment in her low chair, to give a kind of balance to her imagination, and then began:

"Once there was a maiden, who lived in a forest, a deep wild forest, in which there wasn't so much as the sign of a path, and nobody but she could find their way in or out. How this was, I don't know, but it was astonishing how many people got lost in those woods, where she rambled about as easy as if somebody was carrying a torch before her. Perhaps the fairies helped her—perhaps the evil spirits—I rather think the last, for though she was fair to look upon, her heart was as hard as the nether mill-stone."

Miss Thusa caught a glimpse of Mittie, on the porch, through the open doors, and she raised her voice, as she proceeded:

"One night, when the moon was shining large and clear, she was wandering through the forest, all alone, when she heard a little, tender voice behind her, and turning round, she saw a young child, with its hair all loose and wet, as 'twere, calling after her.

"'I've lost my way,' it cried—'pray help me to find a path in the greenwood.'

"'Find it by the moonlight,' answered the maiden, 'it shines for you, as well as for me.'

"'But I'm little,' cried the child, beginning to weep, 'and my feet are all blistered with running. Take me up in your arms a little while, for you are strong, and the Saviour will give you a golden bed in Heaven to lie down on.'

"'I want no golden bed. I had rather sleep on down than gold,' answered the maid, and she mocked the child, and went on, putting her hands to her ears, to keep out the cries of the little one, that came through the thick trees, with a mighty piteous sound—the hard-hearted creature!"

"How cruel!" said Helen, "I hope she got lost herself."

"Don't interrupt, Helen," said Louis, whose eyes were kindling with excitement. "You may be sure she had some punishment."

"Yes, that she did," continued the narrator, "and I tell you it was worse than being lost, bad as that is. By-and-by she came out of the forest, into a smooth road, and a horseman galloped to meet her, that would have scared anybody else in the world but her. Not that he was so ugly, but he was dressed all in black, and he had such a powerful head of black hair, that hung all about him like a cloak, and mixed up with the horse's flowing mane, and that was black too, and so was his horse, and so were his eyes, but his forehead was as white as snow, and his cheeks were fair and ruddy. He rode right up to the young maiden, and reaching down, swung his arm round her, and put her up before him on the saddle, and away they rode, as swift as a weaver's shuttle. I don't believe a horse ever went so fast before. Every little stone his hoofs struck, would blaze up, just for a second, making stars all along the road. As they flew on, his long black hair got twisted all around her, and every time the wind blew, it grew tighter and tighter, till she could scarcely breathe, and she prayed him to stop, and unwind his long black hair, before it reached her throat, for as sure as she was alive then, it would strangle her.

[72]

"'You have hands as well as I,' said he, with a mocking laugh, 'unwind it yourself, fair maiden.'

"Then she remembered what she had said to the poor little lost child, and she cried out as the child did, when she left it alone in the forest. All the time the long locks of hair seemed taking root in her heart, and drawing it every step they went.

"'Now,' said her companion, reining up his black horse, 'I'll release you.'

"And unsheathing a sharp dagger, he cut the hair through and through, so that part of it fell on the ground in a black shower. Then giving her a swing, he let her fall by the way-side, and rode on hurraing by the light of the moon."

Miss Thusa paused to take breath, and wiped her spectacles, as if she had been reading with them all the time she had been talking.

"Is that all?" asked Helen.

"No, indeed, that cannot be the end," said Louis. "Go on Miss Thusa. The black knight ought to be scourged for leaving her there on the ground."

"There she lay," resumed Miss Thusa, "moaning and bewailing, for her heart's blood was oozing out through every wound his dagger had made, for I told you his locks had taken root in her heart, and he cut the cords when he slashed about among his own long, black hair.

[73]

"'I'm dying,' said the maiden. 'Oh, what would I give now for that golden bed of the Saviour, the little child promised me.'

"Just then she heard the patter of little feet among the fallen leaves, and looking up, there was the child, sure enough, right by her side, and there was something bright and shining all around its head. How it found its way out of the woods, the Lord only knows. Well, the child didn't bear one bit of malice, for it was a holy child, and kneeling down, it took a crystal vial from its bosom,

and poured balm on the bleeding heart of the maiden, and healed every wound.

"'You are a holy child,' said the maiden, rising up, and taking the child in her arms, and pressing her close to her bosom. 'I know it by the light around your head. I'll love all little children for your sake, and nevermore mock the cry of sorrow or of want.'

"So they went away together into the deep woods, and one could see the moon shining on them, every now and then, through the trees, and it was a lovely sight."

There was silence for a few moments after Miss Thusa finished her legend, for never had she related any thing so impressively.

"Oh, Miss Thusa," cried Helen, "that is the prettiest story I ever heard you relate. I am glad the child was not lost, and I am glad that the maiden did not die, but was sorry for what she had done."

"Do you make up your tales yourself, Miss Thusa," asked Louis, "or do you remember them? I cannot imagine where they all come from."

"Some are the memories of my childhood;" replied she, "and some the inventions of my own brain; and some are a little of one and a little of the other; and some are the living truth itself. I don't always know what I am going to say myself, when I begin, but speak as the spirit moves. This shows that it is a gift—praise the Lord."

"Well, Miss Thusa, the spirit moves you to say that the little child forgave the cruel maiden, and poured balm upon her bleeding heart," said Louis, with one of his own winning smiles. [74]

"And you think an old woman should forgive likewise!" cried Miss Thusa, looking as benignantly as she *could* look upon the boy. "You are right, you are right, but her heart don't bleed yet—*not yet*."

Mittie, believing herself unseen, had listened to the tale with an interest that chained her to the spot where she stood. She unconsciously identified herself with the cruel maiden, and in after years she remembered the long, sweeping locks of the knight, and the maiden's bleeding heart.

[75]

PART SECOND.

CHAPTER V.

"Thus with the year
Seasons return, but not to me returns
Day, or the sweet approach of even or morn,
Or signs of vernal bloom, or summer's rose,
Or flocks, or herds, or human face divine.
But clouds instead, and ever-during dark
Surround me."

Milton.

"Thou, to whom the world unknown,
With all its shadowy shapes is shown,
Who see'st appalled, th' unreal scene,
While Fancy lifts the veil between,
Ah, Fear! ah, frantic Fear!
I see, I see thee near!"

Collins.

Six years gliding away, have converted the boy of twelve into the collegian of eighteen years, the girl of nine into the boarding-school Miss of fifteen, and the child of seven into the little maiden of thirteen.

Let us give a hasty glance at the most prominent events of these six gliding years, and then let the development of character that has gone on during the period, be shown by the events which follow.

The young doctor did not forget to speak to his mother of the interesting child, whom destiny seemed to have made a protégé of his own. In consequence, a pressing invitation was sent by Mrs. Hazleton, the widowed mother of Arthur, to the young Helen, who, from that time became an annual guest at the Parsonage—such was the name of the home of the young doctor. It was about a day's ride from Mr. Gleason's, and situated in one of the loveliest portions of the lovely valley of the Connecticut. Helen soon ceased to consider herself a visitor, and to look upon the

Parsonage as another and dearer home; for though she dearly loved her father and brother, she found a far lovelier and more lovable sister in the sweet, blind Alice, than the heart-repelling Mittie. [76]

Miss Thusa, whose feelings towards Mittie had been in a kind of volcanic state, since the destruction of her thread, always on the verge of an eruption, determined, during the first absence of her favorite Helen to resume her itinerant mode of existence; so, sending her wheel in advance, the herald cry of "Miss Thusa's coming," once more resounded through the neighborhood.

Louis entered college at a very early age, leaving a dreary blank in the household, which his joyous spirit had filled with sunshine.

It is not strange that under such circumstances the lonely widower should think of a successor to his lost wife, for Mittie needed a mother's restraining influence and guardian care. Nor is it strange, with her indomitable self-will, she should resist the authority of a stranger. When her father announced his intention of bringing home a lady to preside over his establishment, claiming for her all filial respect and obedience, she flew into a violent passion, and declared she would never own her as a mother, never address her as such—that she would leave home and never return, before she would submit to the government of a stranger. Unwilling to expose the woman who had consented to be his wife to scenes of strife and unhappiness, Mr. Gleason, as the only alternative, resolved to send his daughter to a boarding-school, before his mansion received its new mistress. Mittie exulted in this arrangement, for a boarding-school was the Ultima Thule of her ambition, and she boasted to her classmates that her father was afraid of her, and that he dared not marry while she was at home. Amiable boast of a child!—especially a daughter.

Mr. Gleason was anxious to recall Helen, and place her at once under her new mother's guardianship, but Mrs. Hazleton pleaded, and the blind Alice pleaded with the mute eloquence of her sightless eyes, and the young doctor pleaded; and Helen, after being summoned to welcome her new parent, and share in the wedding festivities, was permitted to return to her beloved Parsonage.

It was a beautiful spot—so rural, so retired, so far from the public road, so removed from noise and dust. It had such a serene, religious aspect, the traveler looking up the long avenue of trees, with a gradually ascending glance, to the unambitious, gray-walled mansion, situated at its termination, thought it must be one of the sweetest havens of rest that God ever provided for life's weary pilgrim. [77]

And so it was—and so Helen thought, when wandering with the blind Alice through the sequestered fields and wild groves surrounding the dwelling, or seated within the low, neat, white-washed walls, and listening to the mild, maternal accents of Arthur Hazleton's mother.

It was a mild summer evening. The windows were all open, and the smell of the roses that peeped in through the casements, made sweeter as well as brighter by the dews of night, perfumed the whole apartment. Sometimes the rising breeze would scatter a shower of rose-leaves on the carpet, casting many a one on the heads of the young girls seated at a table, on either side of Mrs. Hazleton. Helen heeded not the petals that nestled in the hazel waves of her short, brown hair, but Alice, whose touch and hearing were made marvelously acute by her blindness, could have counted every rose-leaf that covered her fair, blonde ringlets.

They were both engaged in the same occupation—knitting purses—and no one could have told by the quick, graceful motions of the fingers of Alice, that they moved without one guiding ray from those beautiful blue eyes, that seemed to follow all their intricacies. Neither could any one have known, by gazing on those beautiful eyes, that the *soul* did not look forth from their azure depths. There was a soft dreaminess floating over the opaque orbs, like the dissolving mist of a summer's morning, that appeared but the cloudiness of thought. Alice was uncommonly lovely. Her complexion had a kind of rosy fairness, indicative of the pure under-current which, on every sudden emotion, flowed in bright waves to her cheeks. This was a family peculiarity, and one which Helen remarked in the young doctor the first time she beheld him. Her profuse flaxen hair fell shadingly over her brow, and an acute observer might have detected her blindness by her suffering the fair locks to remain till a breeze swept them aside. They did not *veil her vision*. Mrs. Hazleton, with pardonable maternal vanity, loved to dress her beautiful blind child in a manner decorating to her loveliness. A simple white frock in summer, ornamented with a plain blue ribbon, constituted her usual holiday attire. She could select herself the color she best liked, by passing her hand over the ribbon, and though her garments and Helen's were of the same size, she could tell them apart, from the slightest touch. [78]

Helen was less exquisitely fair, less beautiful than Alice, but hers was an eye of sunbeams and shadows, that gave wonderful expression to her whole face. Some one has observed that "every face is either a history or a prophecy." Child as Helen was, hers was *both*. You could read in those large, pensive, hazel eyes, a history of past sufferings and trials. You could read, too, in their deep, appealing, loving expression, a prophecy of all a woman's heart is capable of feeling or enduring.

"I never saw such eyes in the head of a child," was a common remark upon Helen. "There is something wildly, hauntingly interesting in them; one loves and pities her at the first glance."

Helen was too pale and thin to be a beautiful child, but with such a pair of haunting eyes, soft, silky hair of the same hazel hue, hanging in short curls just below her ears, and a mouth of rare

and winning sweetness, she was sure to be remembered when no longer present. She looked several years older than Alice, though of the same age, for the calm features of the blind child had never known the agitations of terror or the vague apprehensions of unknown evil. Every one said "Helen would be pretty," and felt that she was interesting.

Now, while knitting her purse, and sliding the silver beads along the blue silken thread, she would look up with an eager, listening countenance, as if her thoughts were gone forth to meet some one, who delayed their coming.

Alice, too, was listening with an expecting, waiting heart—one could tell it by the fluttering of the blue ribbon that encircled her neck.

"He will not come to-night, mother," said she, with a sigh. "It is never so late as this, when he rides in through the gate."

"I fear some accident has happened," cried Helen, "he has a very bad bridge to cross, and the stream is deep below." [79]

"How much that sounds like Helen," exclaimed Mrs Hazleton, "so fearful and full of misgivings! I shall not give him up before ten o'clock. If you like, you can both sit up and bear me company—if not, you may leave me to watch alone."

They both eagerly exclaimed that they would far rather sit up with her, and then they were sure they could finish their purses, and have them ready as gifts for the brother and friend so anxiously looked for. Though the distance that separated them from him was short, and his visits frequent, they were ever counted as holidays of the heart, as eras from which all past events were dated—and on which all future ones were dependent.

"When Arthur was here, we did so and so." "When Arthur comes, we will do this and that." A stranger would have thought Arthur the angel of the Parsonage, and that his coming was the advent of peace, and joy, and love. It was ever thus that listening ears and longing eyes and waiting hearts watched his approach. He was an only son and brother, and seldom indeed is it that Heaven vouchsafes such a blessing to a household, as a son and brother like Arthur Hazleton.

"He's coming," cried Alice, jumping up and clapping her hands, "I hear his horse galloping towards the gate. I know the sound of its hoofs from all others."

This was true. The unerring ear of the blind girl never deceived her. Arthur was indeed coming. The gate opened. His rapid footstep was heard passing through the avenue, bounding up the steps, and there they were arrested by the welcoming trio, all ready to greet him. It was a happy moment for Arthur when wrapped in that triune embrace, for Helen, timid as she was, had learned to look upon him as a dear, elder brother, whose cares and affection were divided between her and the sightless Alice; and for whom she felt a love equal to that which she cherished for Louis, mingled with a reverence and admiration that bordered upon worship.

"My dear mother," said he, when they had escorted him into the sitting-room, and in spite of his resistance made him take the best and pleasantest seat in the room, "my dear mother, I hope I have not kept you up too late; I would have been here sooner, but you know I am a servant of the public, and my time is not my own." [80]

"Oh! brother, I am so glad to see you!" cried Alice, pressing her glowing cheek against his hand. It was thus she always said; and she did see him with her spirit's eyes, beautiful as a son of the morning, and radiant as the god of day. She passed her hands softly over his dark, brown locks, over the contour of his cheeks and chin with a kind of lingering, mesmerizing touch, which seemed to delight in tracing the lineaments of symmetry and grace.

"Brother," she said, "your cheeks are reddening—I know it by their warmth. What makes the blood come up to the cheeks when the heart is glad? Helen's are red, too, for I know it by the throbbings of her heart."

"Helen has one pale cheek and one red one," answered Arthur, passing his arm around her and drawing her towards him. "If she were a little older," added he, bending down and kissing the pale cheek, "we might bring a rose to this, and then they would be blooming twins."

The rose did bloom most beautifully at his touch, and a smile of affectionate delight gilded the child's pensive lips.

"Alice, my dear, what have you and Helen been doing since I was here? You are always planning something to surprise me—something to make me glad and grateful."

"We have been knitting a purse for you, brother, each of us; and mother had just finished sewing on the tassel when you came. Tell me which is mine, and which is Helen's," cried she, taking them both from the table and mingling the hues of cerulean and emerald, the glitter of the golden globules which ornamented the one, and the silver beads which starred the other, in her hand.

"The green and gold must be Helen's—the silver and blue yours, Alice. Am I right?"

"No. But will you care if it is exactly the reverse. Helen chose the blue because it was my favorite color, and she thought you would prize it most. Green was left for me, and then, you

know, I was obliged to mix it with gold.”

“But why was green left for you? and why were you *obliged* to mix it with gold, instead of silver?” asked he, interested in tracing the origin of her associations.

“I like but two colors,” she replied, thoughtfully; “blue and green, the blue of the heavens, the green of the earth. It seems that gold is like sunshine, and the golden beads must resemble sunbeams on the green grass. Silver is like moonlight, and Helen’s purse must make you think of moonbeams, shining from the bright blue sky.” [81]

“Why, my sweet Alice, where did the poetry of your thoughts come from? I know not how such charming associations are born, unless of sight. Oh! there must be an inner light, purer and clearer than outward vision knows, in which the great source of light bathes the spirit of the blind.”

He paused a moment, with his eyes intently fixed on the soft, hazy orbs, which gave back no answering rays—then added, in a gayer tone—

“And so I am the owner of these beautiful purses. How proud and happy I ought to be! It will be long, I fear, before I shall fill them with gold—and even if I could, it would be a shame to soil them with the yellow dust of temptation. I will cherish them both. Yours, Alice, will always remind me of all that is beautiful on earth, woven of this brilliant green and gold. And yours, Helen, blue as the sky, of all that is holy in Heaven.

“But while I am thus receiving precious gifts,” he added, “I must not forget that I am the bearer of some also. My saddle-bags are not entirely filled with vials and pills. Here, mother, is a bunch of thread, sent by Miss Thusa, white as the fleece of the unshorn lamb. She says she spun it expressly for you, because of your kindness to Helen.”

“I know by experience the beauty and value of Miss Thusa’s thread,” said Mrs Hazleton, admiring the beautiful white hanks, which her son unrolled; “ever since I knew Helen I have had a yearly supply, such as no other spinster ever made. How shall I make an adequate return?”

“There is a nicely bound book in our library, mother, which would please her beyond expression—a history of all the celebrated murders in the country, within the last ten years. Here, Helen, are some keepsakes for you and Alice, from your mother.”

“How kind, how good,” exclaimed Helen, “and how beautiful! A work-box for me, and a toilet-case for Alice. How nice—and convenient. Surely we ought to love her. Mittie cannot help loving her when she comes. I’m sure she cannot.” [82]

“Your father is going for Mittie soon,” said Arthur. “He bids me tell you that you must be ready to accompany him, and remain in her stead for at least three years.”

A cloud obscured the sunshine of Helen’s countenance. The prospect which Mittie had hailed with exultation, Helen looked forward to with dismay. To be sent to a distant school, among a community of strangers, was to her timid, shrinking spirit, an ordeal of fire. To be separated from Alice, Arthur, and Mrs. Hazleton, seemed like the sentence of death to her loving, clinging heart.

“We must all learn self-reliance, Helen,” said Arthur, “we must all pass through the discipline of life. The time will soon come when you will assume woman’s duties, and it is well that you go forth awhile to gather strength and wisdom, to meet and fulfil them. You need something more bracing and invigorating than the atmosphere of love that surrounds you here.”

Helen always trembled when Arthur looked very grave from the fear that he was displeased with her. When speaking earnestly, he had a remarkable seriousness of expression, implying that he meant all that he uttered. When Arthur Hazleton was first introduced to the reader, he was only eighteen; and consequently was now about twenty-four years of age. There was a blending of firmness and gentleness, of serene gravity and beaming cheerfulness in his character and countenance, which even in early boyhood had given him an ascendancy over his young companions. There was a searching power in the glance of his grave, dark eye, from which one might shrink, were it not often softened by an expression of even womanly sweetness harmonizing with the gentle smile of his lips. He very seldom spoke of his feelings, but the rich, mantling color that ever and anon came glowingly to his cheek, indicated a depth of sensibility he was unwilling words should reveal. Left his own master at a very early age, his *will* had become strong and invincible. As he almost always willed what was right, his mother seldom sought to bend it, and she was the only being in the world whose authority he acknowledged, and to whom he was willing to sacrifice his pride by submission. [83]

An incident which occurred the evening after his arrival, may illustrate his firmness and his power.

It was a lovely summer afternoon, and Arthur rambled with Helen and Alice amid the charming groves and wild glens of his native place. His local attachments were exceedingly strong, for they were cherished by dear and sacred associations. There was a history attached to every rock and tree and waterfall, making it more beautiful and interesting than all others.

“Here, Alice,” he would say, “look at this magnificent tree. Our father used to sit under its shade and sketch the outline of his sermons. Here, in God’s own temple, he worshiped, and his pure thoughts mingled with the incense that arose from the bosom of nature.”

Then Alice would clasp her fair arms round the tree, and laying her soft cheek against the rough bark, consecrate it to the memory of the father, who had died ere she beheld the light. Alas! she never had beheld it; but ere the light had beamed on the sightless azure of her eyes.

"Helen, do you see that beetling rock, half covered with lichens and moss, hanging over the brawling stream? It was there I used to recline, when a little boy, shaded by that gnarled and fantastic looking tree, with book in hand, but studying most of all from the great book of nature. Oh! I love that spot. If I ever live to be an old man, though I may have wandered to the wide world's end, I want to come back and throw myself once more on the shelving rock where I made my boyhood's bed."

While he was speaking, he led Alice and Helen on to the very verge of the rock, and looked down on the waterfall, tumbling below. Alice stood calm and still, holding, with perfect confidence, her brother's hand, but Helen recoiled and shuddered, and her cheek turned visibly paler.

"We are close to the edge, brother—I know it by the sound of your voice," said Alice. "It seems to sink down and mingle with the roar of the water-fall."

"Do you not fear, Alice?" asked her brother, drawing her still a little nearer.

"Oh, no," she answered, with a radiant smile. "How can I fear, when I feel your hand sustaining me? I know, you would not lead me into danger. You would never let me fall." [84]

"Do you hear her?" asked he, looking reproachfully at Helen. "Oh, thou of little faith. When will you learn to confide, with the undoubting trust of this helpless blind girl? Do you believe that I would willingly expose you to danger or suffering?"

He withdrew his hand as he spoke, and Helen believing him seriously displeased, turned away to hide the tears that swelled into her eyes. In the meantime, Arthur led Alice along the edge of the rock to a little, natural bower beyond, which Alice called her bower, and where she and Helen had made a bed of moss, and adorned it with shells. Helen stood a moment alone on the rock, feeling as desolate as if she were the inhabitant of a desert island. She thought Arthur unkind, and the beautiful, embowering trees, gurgling waters, and sweet, singing birds, lost their charms to her. Slowly turning her steps homeward, yet not willing to enter the presence of Mrs. Hazleton without her companions, she lingered in the garden, making a bouquet, which she intended to give as a peace-offering to Arthur, when he returned. She did not enter the house till nearly dark, when she was surprised by seeing Arthur alone.

"Where is Alice?" said he.

"Alice!" repeated she, "I left her in the woods with you."

"Yes! but I left her there also, in the arbor of moss, supposing you would soon return to her."

"Left her alone!" cried Helen, wondering why Arthur, who seemed to idolize his lovely, blind sister, could have been so careless of her safety.

"Alice is not afraid to be alone, Helen, she knows that God is with her. But it will soon be night, and she must not remain in the dark, damp woods much longer. You will go back and accompany her home, Helen, before the night-dew falls?"

Helen's heart died within her at the mere thought of threading alone a path so densely shaded, and of passing over that beetling rock, beneath the gnarled, fantastic looking tree. It would be so dark before she returned! She went to the window, and looked out, then turned towards him with such a timid, wistful look, it was astonishing how he could have resisted the mute appeal. [85]

"Make haste, Helen," said he, gently, "it will be dark if you do not."

"Will you not go with me?" she at length summoned boldness to ask.

"Are you afraid to go, Helen?"

She felt the dark power of his eye to her inmost soul. Death itself seemed preferable to his displeasure.

"I *am* afraid," she answered, "but I will go since you *will* it."

"I do wish it," he replied, "but I leave it to your own will to accomplish it."

Helen could not believe that he really intended she should go alone, when *he* had left his sister behind. She was sure he would follow and overtake her before she reached the narrow path she so much dreaded to traverse. She went on very rapidly, looking back to see if he were not behind, listening to hear if her name were not called by his well-known voice. But she heard not his footsteps, nor the sound of his voice. She heard nothing but the wind sighing through the trees, or the notes of some solitary bird, seeking its nest among the branches.

"Arthur is not kind, to-day," thought she. "I wonder what has changed him so. It was not my place to go after Alice, when he left her himself in the woods. What right has he to command me so? And how foolish I am to obey him, as if he were my master and lord!"

She was at first very angry with Arthur, and anger always gives one strength and power. Any excited passion does. She ran on, almost forgetting her fears, and the shadows lightened up as

she met them face to face. Then she thought of Alice alone in the woods—so blind and helpless. Perhaps she would be frightened at the darkening solitude, and try to find her path homeward, on the edge of that slippery, beetling rock. With no hand to sustain, no eye to guide, how could she help falling into the watery chasm below? In her fears for Alice, she forgot her own imaginary danger, and flew on, sending her voice before her, bearing on its trembling tones the sweet name of Alice.

She reached the rock, and paused under the tree that hung so darkly over it. The waterfall sounded so much louder than when she stood there last, she was sure the waters had accumulated, and were threatening to dash themselves above. They had an angry, turbulent roar, and keeping close in a line with the tree, she hurried on to the silver bower Alice so much loved, and which she had seen her enter, clinging to the hand of Arthur. Helen, had to lift up the hanging boughs and sweeping vines at the entrance of the arbor, and cold shivers of terror ran through her frame, for no voice responded to hers, though she had made the silence all the way vocal with the name of Alice.

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“If she is not here, she is dead,” she cried, “and I will lie down and die, too; for I cannot return without her.”

Creeping slowly in, with suppressed breath and trembling limbs, she discovered something white lying on the bed of moss, so still and white, that it might have been mistaken in the dimness for a snow-drift, were it not a midsummer eve. All the old superstitions implanted in her infant mind by Miss Thusa’s terrific legends, seized upon her imagination. Any thing white and still, reminded her of the never-to-be-forgotten moment when she gazed upon her dead mother, and sunk overpowered by the terror and majesty of death. If it was Alice lying there, she must be dead, and how could she approach nearer and encounter that *cold presence* which had once communicated a death-chill to her young life? Then the thought of Alice’s death was fraught with such anguish, it carried her out of herself. The grief of Arthur, the agony of his mother; it was too terrible to think of. Springing into the arbor, she ran up to the white object, and kneeling down, beheld the fair, clustering ringlets and rosy cheek of Alice dimly defined through the growing shadows. She inhaled her warm breath as she stooped over her, and knew it was sleep, not death, that bound her to the spot. As she came in contact with life, warm, breathing vitality, an instantaneous conviction of the folly, the preposterousness of her own fears, came over her. Alice calmly and quietly had fallen asleep as night came on, not knowing it by its darkness, but its stillness. Helen felt the presence of invisible angels round the slumbering Alice, and her fears melted away. Putting her arms softly round her, and laying her cheek to hers, she called upon her to wake and return, for the woods were getting dark with night.

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“Oh! how I love to sleep on this soft, mossy bed,” cried Alice, sitting up and passing her fingers over her eyes. “I fell asleep on brother’s arm, with the waterfall singing in my ears. Where is he, Helen? I do not hear his voice.”

“He is at home, and sent me after you, Alice,” replied Helen. “How could he leave you alone?” she could not help adding.

“I am never afraid to be left alone,” said Alice, “and he knows it. But I am not alone. I hear some one breathing in the grotto besides you, Helen. I heard it when I first waked.”

Helen started and grasped the hand of Alice closer and closer in her own. Looking wildly round the grotto, she beheld a dark figure crouching in the corner, half-hidden by the shrubbery, and uttering a low scream, was about to fly, when a hoarse laugh arrested her.

“It’s only me,” cried a rough, good-natured voice. “It’s nobody but old Becky. Young master told me to stay and watch Miss Alice, while she slept, till somebody came after her. He knew old Becky wouldn’t let anybody harm the child—not she.”

Old Becky, as she called herself, was a poor, harmless, half-witted woman, who roamed about the neighborhood, subsisting on charity, whom everybody knew and cared for. She was remarkably fond of children, and had always shown great attachment for the blind girl. She had the fidelity and sagacity of a dog, and would never leave any thing confided to her care. She would do any thing in the world for young Master Arthur as she styled him, or Mrs. Hazleton, for at the Parsonage she always found a welcome, and it seemed to her the gate of Heaven. During the life of Mr. Hazleton, she invariably attended public worship, and listened to his sermons with the most reverential attention, though she understood but a small portion of them—and when he died, her chief lamentation was that he could not preach at her funeral. If young master were a minister, that would be next best, but as he was only a doctor, she consoled herself by asking him for medicine whenever he visited home, whether she needed it or not, and Arthur never failed to make up a quantity of bread pills and starch powders to gratify poor, harmless Becky.

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“Walk before us, please, Becky,” cried Helen with a lightened heart, and Becky marched on, proud to be of service, looking back every moment to see if they were safe.

When they reached home, the candles were burning brightly in the sitting-room, and the rose trees at the windows shone with a kind of golden lustre in their beams. Helen suffered Becky to accompany Alice into the house, knowing it would be to her a source of pride and pleasure, and seating herself on the steps, tried to school herself so as to appear with composure, and not allow Arthur to perceive how deeply his apparent unkindness had wounded her feelings. While she thus sat, breathing on the palm of her hand, and pressing it against her moist eyelids to absorb the welling tears, Arthur himself crossed the yard and came rapidly up the steps.

"What are you doing here, my sister?" said he, sitting down by her and drawing away the hand from her showery eyes. Never had he spoken so gently, so kindly. Helen could not answer. She only bowed her head upon her lap.

"My dear Helen," said he, in that grave, earnest tone which always had the effect of command, "raise your head and listen to me. I have wounded my own feelings that I might give you a needed lesson, and prove to yourself that you have moral courage sufficient to triumph over physical and mental weakness. You have thought me cruel. Perhaps I have been so—but I have given present pain for your future joy and good. I followed you, though you knew it not, ready to ward off every real danger from your path. Oh, Helen, I grieve for the sufferings constitutional sensitiveness and inculcated fear occasion you, but I rejoice when I see you struggling with yourself, and triumphing through the strength of an exerted will."

"I deserve no credit for going," sobbed Helen. "I could not help it."

"But no one *forced* you, Helen."

"When you say I *will* do any thing, I feel a force acting upon me as strong as iron."

"It is the force of your own inborn sense of right called into action by me. You knew it was not right to leave our blind Alice in the dark woods alone. If I were cruel enough to desert her, and refuse to seek her, her claim on your kindness and care was not the less commanding. You could not have laid your head upon your pillow, or commended yourself to the guardianship of Providence, thinking of Alice in the lonely woods, damp with the dews of night. Besides, you knew in your secret heart I could not send you on a dangerous mission. Oh! Helen, would that I could inspire you, not so much with implicit confidence in me, as in that Mighty guardian power that is ever around and about you, from whose presence you cannot flee, and in whose protection you are forever safe."

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"Forgive me," cried Helen, in a subdued, humble tone. "I have done you great wrong in thinking you cruel. I wonder you have not given me up long ago, when I am so weak and foolish and distrustful. I thought I was growing brave and strong—but the very first trial proved that I am still the same, and so it will ever be. Neither the example of Alice, nor the counsels of your mother, nor your own efforts, do me any good. I shall always be unworthy of your cares."

"Nay, Helen, you do yourself great injustice. You have shown a heroism this very night in which you may glory. Though you have encountered no real danger, you battled with an imaginary host, which no man could number, and the victory was as honorable to yourself as any that crowns the hero's brow with laurels. Mark me, Helen, the time will come when you will smile at all that now fills you with apprehension, in the development of your future, nobler self."

Helen looked up and smiled through her tears.

"Oh! if I dared to promise," said she, "I would pledge my word never to distrust you, never to be so foolish and weak again. But I think, I believe that I never will."

"Do not promise, my dear Helen, for you know not your own strength. But, remember, that without *faith* you will grope in darkness through the world—faith in your friends—faith in your God—and I will add—faith in yourself. From the time I first saw you a little, terror-stricken child, to the present moment, I have sought only your happiness and good—and yet forgetting all the past, you distrusted my motives even now, and your heart rose up against me. From the first dawn of your being to this sweet, star-lighted moment, God has been to you a tender, watchful parent, tenderer than any earthly parent, kinder than any earthly friend—and yet you fear to trust yourself to His providence, to remain with Him who fills immensity with His presence. You have no faith in yourself, though there is a legion of angels, nestling, with folded wings in that young heart, ready to fly forth at your bidding, and fulfil their celestial mission. Come, Helen," added he, rising, and lifting her at the same time from her lowly seat, "let us go in—but tell me first that I am forgiven."

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"Forgiven!" cried she, fervently. "How can I ever thank you, ever be sufficiently grateful for your goodness?"

"By treasuring up my words, and remembering them when you are far away. I have influence over you now, because you are so very young, and know so little of the world, but a few years hence it will be very different. You may think of me then as a severe mentor, a cold, unfeeling sage, and wonder at the gentleness with which you bore my reproofs, and the docility with which you yielded to my will."

"I shall always think of you as the best and truest friend I ever had in the world," cried Helen, enthusiastically, as they entered the sitting-room, where Mrs. Hazleton and Alice awaited them.

"Because he sent you out into the woods alone?" said Mrs. Hazleton, smiling, "young despot that he is."

"Yes," replied Helen, "for I feel so much better, stronger and happier for having gone. Then, if possible, I love Alice more than ever."

"How do you account for that, Helen?" asked Arthur.

"I don't know," she answered, "unless it is I went through a trial for her sake."

CHAPTER VI.

"And can it be those heavenly eyes
Blue as the blue of starry skies,
Those eyes so clear, so soft so bright,
Have never seen God's blessed light?"

HELEN returned to her father's, to prepare for her departure to the school, which Mittie was about to leave. Arthur had long resolved to place Alice in an Institution for the blind, and as there was a celebrated one in the same city to which Helen was bound, he requested Mr. Gleason to be her guardian on the journey, and suffer her to be the companion of Helen. This arrangement filled the two young girls with rapture, and reconciled them to the prospect of leaving home, and of being cast among strangers in a strange city.

Ever since Alice was old enough to feel the misfortune that rested so darkly upon her, and had heard of those glorious institutions, where the children of night feel the beams of science and benevolence penetrate the closed bars of vision, and receive their illumination in the inner temple of the spirit, she had expressed an earnest wish to be sent where she could enjoy such advantages.

"Oh!" she would repeat a thousand times, unconscious of the pain she inflicted on her mother; "oh! if I could only go where the blind are taught every thing, how happy should I be!"

It is seldom that the widow of a country minister is left with more than the means of subsistence. Mrs. Hazleton was no exception to the general rule. But Arthur treasured up every word his blind sister uttered, and resolved to appropriate to this sacred purpose the first fruits of his profession. It was for this he had anticipated the years of manhood, and commenced the practice of medicine, under the auspices of his father's venerable friend, Doctor Sennar, at an age when most young men are preparing themselves for their public career. Success far transcending his most sanguine hopes having crowned his youthful exertions, he was now enabled to purchase the Parsonage, and present it as a filial offering to his mother, and also to defray the expenses of his sister's education.

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Alice had never before visited the home of Helen, and it was an interesting sight to see with what watchful care and protecting tenderness Helen guided and guarded her steps. Louis, who was at home also passing his summer holidays, beheld for the first time the lovely blind girl of whom Helen had so often spoken and written.

He was now a man in appearance, of noble stature, and most prepossessing countenance. Helen was enthusiastically fond of her brother, and had said to Alice, with unconscious repetition

"Oh! how I wish you could see Louis. He is so handsome and is so good. He has such a brave rejoicing look. Somehow or other, I always feel safe in his presence."

"Is he handsomer than Arthur?" Alice would ask.

"No, not handsomer—but then he's so different, one cannot compare them. Arthur is so much older, you know."

"Arthur doesn't look old, does he?"

"No, not old—but he has such an air of authority sometimes, which gives you such an impression of power, that I would fear him, did he not all at once appear so gentle and so kind. Louis makes you love him all the time, and you never think of his being displeased."

Still, while Helen dwelt on her brother's praise with fond and fluent tongue, she felt without being able to describe her feelings, that he had lost something of his original beauty. The breath of the world had passed over the mind and dimmed its purity. His was the joyous, reckless spirit that gave life to the convivial board; and temptations, which a colder temperament might have resisted, often held him in ignoble vassalage. Now inhaling the hallowed atmosphere of home, all the pure influences of his boyhood resumed their empire over his heart—and he wondered that he could ever have mingled with the grosser elements of society.

"Blind!" repeated he to himself, while gazing on the calm, angelic countenance of Alice, so beautiful in its repose. "Is it possible that a creature so fair and bright, dwells in the darkness of perpetual midnight? Can no electric ray pierce the cloud that is folded over her vision? Is there no power in science to remove the dark fillet that binds those celestial eyes, and pour in upon them the light of a new-born day?"

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While he thus gazed on the unseeing face, so near him that perhaps she might have had a vague consciousness of the intensity, the warmth of the gaze, Helen approached, and taking the hand of Alice, passed it softly over the features of her brother, as well as his profuse and clustering hair.

"Alice has eyes in her fingers, Louis—I want her to *see* you and tell me if I have been a true painter."

Louis felt the blood mounting to his temples, as the soft hand of Alice analyzed the outline of his face, and lingered in his hair. It seemed to him a cherub was fluttering its wings against his cheek, diffusing a peace and balminess that no language could describe.

Alice, who had yielded involuntarily to the movement of Helen, drew her hand blushing away.

"I cannot imagine how any one can see without touching," said Alice, "how they can take in an image into the soul, by looking at it far off. You tell me the eyes feel no pleasure when gazing at any thing—that it is the mind only which perceives. But my fingers thrill with delight when I touch any thing that pleases, long afterwards."

Louis longed to ask her if she felt the vibration then, but he dared not do it. He, in general so reckless in words, experienced a restraining influence he had never felt before. She seemed so set apart, so holy, it would be sacrilegious to address her with levity. He felt a sudden desire to be an oculist, that he might devote himself to the task of restoring to her the blessing of sight. Then he thought how delightful it would be to lead such a sweet creature through the world, to be eyes to her darkness, strength to her helplessness—the sun of her clouded universe. Louis had a natural chivalry about him that invested weakness, not only with a peculiar charm, but with a sacred right to his protection. With the quick, bounding impulses of eighteen, his spirit sprang forward to meet every new attraction. Here was one so novel, so pure, that his soul seemed purified from the soil of temptation, while he involuntarily surrendered himself to it, as Miss Thusa's thread grew white under the bleaching rays of a vernal sun. [94]

Miss Thusa! yes, Miss Thusa came to welcome home her young protégé, unchanged even in dress. It is probable she had had several new garments since she related to Helen the history of the worm-eaten traveler, but they were all of the same gray color, relieved by the black silk neckerchief and white tamboured muslin cap—and under the cap there was the same opaque fold of white paper, carefully placed on the top of the head.

Alice had a great curiosity to *see* Miss Thusa, as she expressed it, and hear some of her wild legends. When she traced the lineaments, of her majestic profile, and her finger suddenly rose on the lofty beak of her nose, she laughed outright. Alice did not often laugh aloud, but when she did, her laugh was the most joyous, ringing, childish burst of silvery music that ever gushed from the fountain of youth. It was impossible not to echo it. Helen feared that Miss Thusa would be offended, especially as Louis joined merrily in the chorus—and she looked at Alice as if her glance had power to check her. But she did not know all the windings of Miss Thusa's heart. Any one like Alice, marked by the Almighty, by some peculiar misfortune, was an object not only of tenderness, but of reverence in her eyes. The blasted tree, the blighted flower, the smitten lamb—all touched by the finger of God, were sacred things—and so were blindness and deafness—and any personal calamity. It was strange, but it was only in the shadows of existence she felt the presence of the Deity.

"Never mind her laughing," said she, in answer to the apprehensive glance of Helen, "it don't hurt me. It does me good to hear her. It sounds like a singing bird in a cage; and, poor thing, she's shut in a dark cage for life."

"No, not for life, Miss Thusa," exclaimed Louis; "I intend to study optics till I have mastered the whole length and breadth of the science, on purpose to unseal those eyes of blue."

Alice turned round so suddenly, and following the sound of his voice, fixed upon him so eagerly those blue eyes, the effect was startling.

"Will you do so?" she cried, "can you do so? oh! do not say it, unless you mean it. But I know it is impossible," she added in a subdued tone, "for I was *born blind*. God made me so, and He has made me very happy too. I sometimes think it would be beautiful to see, but it is beautiful to feel. As brother says, there is an inner-light which keeps us from being *all* dark." [95]

Louis regretted the impulse which urged him to utter his secret wishes. He resolved to be more guarded in future, but he was already in imagination a student in Germany, under some celebrated optician, making discoveries so amazing that he would undoubtedly give a new name to the age in which he lived.

When night came on they gathered round Miss Thusa, entreating her for a farewell legend, not a gloomy one, not one which would give Alice a sad, dark impression, but something that would come to her memory like a ray of light.

"You must let me have my own way," said she, putting her spectacles on the top of her head, and looking around her with remarkable benignity. "If the spirit moves me one way, I cannot go another. But I will try my best, for may-be it's the last time some of you will ever listen to old Thusa's tales. She's never felt just right since they tangled up her heart-strings with that whitened thread. Oh! that was a vile, mean trick!"

"Forget and forgive, Miss Thusa," cried Louis; "I dare say Mittie has repented of it in dust and ashes."

"I have forgiven, long ago," resumed Miss Thusa, "but as for *forgetting*, that is out of the question. Ever since then, when the bleaching time comes, it keeps me perfectly miserable till it is over. I've never had any thread equal to it, for I'm afraid to let it stay long enough to be as powerful white as it used to be. Well, well, let it rest. You want me to tell you a story, do you?"

Miss Thusa had an auditory assembled round her that might have animated a spirit less open to inspiration than hers. There was Mr. and Mrs. Gleason, the latter a fine, dignified-looking lady, and the young doctor, with his countenance of grave sweetness, and Louis, with an expression of resolute credulity, and Helen and Alice, with their arms interlaced, and the locks of their hair mingling like the tendrils of two forest vines. And what perhaps gave a glow to her spirit, deeper than the presence of all these, Mittie, her arch enemy, was *not there*, to mock her with her deriding black eyes. [96]

"You've talked to me so much about not telling you any terrible things," said she, with a troubled look, "that you've made me like a candle under a bushel, instead of a light upon a hill-top. I've never told such stories since, as I used to tell when the first Mrs. Gleason was alive, and I spun in the nursery all the evening, and little Helen was the only one to listen to what I had to say. There was something in the child's eyes that kept me going, for they grew brighter and larger every word I said."

Helen looked up, and met the glance of the young doctor, riveted upon her with so much pity and earnestness, she looked down again with a blending of gratitude and shame. She well knew that, notwithstanding her reason now taught her the folly and madness of her superstitious terrors, the impressions of her early childhood were burnt into her memory and never could be entirely obliterated.

"I remember a story about a blind child, which I heard myself, when a little girl," said Miss Thusa, "and if I should live to the age of Methuselah, I never should forget it. I don't know why it stayed with me so long, for it has nothing terrific in it, but it comes to me many a time when I'm not thinking of it, like an old tune, heard long, long ago."

"Once there was a woman who had an only child, a daughter, whose name was Lily. The woman prayed at the birth of the child that it might be the most beautiful creature that ever the sun shone upon, and she prayed, too, that it might be good, but because she prayed for beauty before goodness, it was accounted to her as a sin. The child grew, and as long as it was a babe in the arms, they never knew that the eyes, which gave so much light to others, took none back again. The mother prayed again, that her child might see, no matter how ugly she might become, no matter how dull and dim her eyes, let them but have the gift of sight. But Lily walked in a cloud, from the cradle to the time when the love-locks began to curl round her forehead, and her cheeks would flush up when the young men told her she was beautiful. When it was sunlight, her mother watched her every step she took, for fear she would get into danger, but she never thought of watching her by night, for she said the *angels took care of her then*. Lily had a little bed of her own, right by the window, for she told her mother she loved to feel the moon shining on her eyelids, making a sort of faintish glimmer, as it were. [97]

"One night she lay down in the moonshine, and fell asleep, and her mother looked upon her for a long time, thinking how beautiful she was, and what a pity the young men could not take her to be a wife, she had such a loving heart, and seemed made so much for love. At last she fell asleep herself, dreaming of Lily, and did not wake till past midnight. Her first thought was of Lily, and she leaned on her elbow, and looked at the little bed, with its white counterpane, that glittered like snow in the moonshine. But Lily was not there, and the window was wide open. The woman jumped up in fright, and ran to the window and looked out, but she could see nothing but the trees and the woods. I wouldn't have been in her place for the gold of Solomon, for she was all alone, and there was no one living within a mile of her house. It was a wild, lonesome place, on a hill-side, and you could hear the roaring of water, all down at the bottom of the hill. Even in the day-time it was mighty dangerous walking among the torrents, let alone the night.

"Well, the woman lifted up her voice, and wept for her blind child, but there was none but God to hear—and she went out into the night, calling after Lily every step she took, but her own voice came back to her, not Lily's. She went on and on, and when she got to a narrow path, leading along to a great waterfall, she stopped to lay her hand on her heart, to keep it from jumping out of her body. There was a tall, blasted pine, that had fallen over that waterfall, making a sort of slippery bridge to pass over. What should she see, right in the middle of the blasted pine tree, as it lay over the roaring stream, but Lily, all in white, walking as if she had a thousand pair of eyes, instead of none, or at least none that did her any good. The mother dared not say a word, any more than if she were dumb, so she stood like a dead woman, that is, as still, looking at her blind daughter, fluttering like a bird with white wings over the black abyss.

"But what was her astonishment to behold a figure approaching Lily, from the opposite side of the stream, all clothed in white, too, with long, fair hair, parted from its brow, and large shining wings on its shoulders. The face was that of a beautiful youth, and he had eyes as soft and glorious as the moon itself, though they looked dark for all that. [98]

"'I come, my beloved,' cried Lily, stretching out her arms over the water. 'I see thee—I know thee. There is no darkness now. Oh, how beautiful thou art! The beams of thy shining wings

touch my eyelids, and little silver arrows come darting in, on every side. Take me over this narrow bridge, lest my feet slide, and I fall into the roaring water.'

"I cannot take thee over the bridge,' replied the youth, 'but when thou hast crossed it, I will bear thee on my wings to a land where there is no blindness or darkness, not even a shadow, beautiful as these shadows are, all round us now. Walk in faith, and look not below. Press on, and fear no evil.'

"Oh! come back, my daughter!' shrieked the poor mother, rousing up from the trance of fear—'come back, my Lily, and leave me not alone. Come back, my poor blind child.'

"Lily turned back a moment, and looked at her mother, who could see her, just as plain as day. Such a look! It was just as if a film had fallen from off her eyes, and a soul had come into them. They were live eyes, and they had been cold and dead before. They smiled with her smiling lips. They had never smiled before, and the mother trembled at their strange intelligence. She dared not call her back any more, but knelt right down on the ground where she was, and held her breath, as one does when they think a spirit is passing by.

"I can't come back, mother,' said Lily, just as she reached the bank, where the angel was waiting for her, for it was nobody else but an angel, as one might know by its wings. 'You will come to me by-and-by—I can see you now, mother. There's no more night for me.'

"Then the angel covered her, as it were, with his wings—or rather, they seemed to have one pair of wings between them, and they began to rise above the earth, slow at first, and easy, just as you've seen the clouds roll up, after a shower. Then they went up faster and higher, till they didn't look bigger than two stars, shining up overhead.

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"The next day a traveler was passing along the banks of the stream, below the great waterfall, and he found the body of the beautiful blind girl, lying among the water-lilies there. Her name was Lily, you know. She looked as white and sweet as they did, and there never was such a smile seen, as there was upon her pale lips. He took her up, and curried her to the nearest house, which happened to be her own mother's. Then the mother knew that Lily had been drowned the night before, and that she had seen her going up to Heaven, with the twin angel, created for her and with her, at the beginning of creation. She felt happy, for she knew Lily was no longer blind."

If we could give an adequate idea of Miss Thusa's manner, so solemn and impressive, of the tones of her voice, monotonous and slightly nasal, yet full of intensity, and, above all, of the expression of her foreboding eye, while in the act of narration, it would be easy to account for the effect which she produced. Helen and Alice were bathed in tears before the conclusion, and a deepening seriousness rested on the countenances of all her auditors.

"You *will* be sad and gloomy, Miss Thusa," cried Louis; "see what you have done; you should not have chosen such a subject."

"I don't think it is sad," exclaimed Alice, raising her head and shaking her ringlets over her eyes to veil her tears. "I did not weep for sorrow, but it is so touching. Oh! I could envy Lily, when the beautiful angel came and bore her away on his shining wings."

"I think with Alice," said the young doctor, "that it is far from being a gloomy tale, and the impression it leaves is salutary. The young girl, walking by faith, over the narrow bridge that spans the abyss of death, the waiting angel, and upward flight, are glorious emblems of the spirit's transit and sublime ascent. We are all blind, and wander in darkness here, but when we look back, like Lily, on the confines of the spirit-land, we shall see with an unclouded vision."

Helen turned to him with a smile that was radiant, beaming through her tears. It seemed to her, at that moment, that all her vague terrors, all her misgivings for the future, her self-distrust and her disquietude melted away and vanished into air.

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Miss Thusa, pleased with the comment of the young doctor, was trying to keep down a rising swell of pride, and look easy and unconcerned, when Louis, taking a newspaper from his pocket, began to unfold it.

"Here is a paper, Miss Thusa," said he, handing it to her as he spoke, "which I put aside on purpose for you. It contains an account of a celebrated murder, which occupies several columns. It is enough to make one's hair stand on end, 'like quills upon the fretted porcupine.' I am sure it will lift the paper crown from your head."

Miss Thusa took the paper graciously, though she called him a "saucy boy," and adjusting her spectacles on the lofty bridge of her nose, she held the paper at an immense distance, and began to read.

At first, they amused themselves observing the excited glance of Miss Thusa, moving rapidly from left to right, her head following it with a quick, jerking motion; but as the article was long, they lost sight of her, in the interest of conversation. All at once, she started up with a sudden exclamation, that galvanized Helen, and brought Louis to his feet.

"What does this mean?" she cried, pointing with her finger to a paragraph in the paper, written in conspicuous characters. "Read it, for I do believe that my glasses are deceiving me."

Louis read aloud, in a clear, emphatic voice, the following advertisement:

"If Lemuel Murrey, or his sister Arathusa, are still living, if he, or in case of his death, she will come immediately to the town of —, and call at office No. 24, information will be given of great interest and importance. Country editors will please insert this paragraph, several times, and send us their account."

"Why, Miss Thusa," cried Louis, flourishing the paper over his head, "somebody must have left you a fortune. Only hear—*of great importance!* Let me be the first to congratulate you," bowing almost to her feet.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Miss Thusa, "I have not a relation, that I know of, this side of the Atlantic, and if I had, they would not be worth a cent in the world. It must be an imposition," and she looked sharply at Louis through her lowered glasses. [101]

"Upon my honor, Miss Thusa, I know nothing about it," asserted Louis. "I never saw it till you pointed it out to me. Whatever it means, it must be genuine. Do you not think so, father?"

"I see no room to imagine any thing like deception here," said Mr. Gleason, after examining the paper. "I think you must obey the summons, Miss Thusa, and ascertain what blessings Providence may have in store for you."

"Well," said Miss Thusa, with decision, "I will go to-morrow. What time does the stage start?"

"Soon after sunrise," replied Mr. Gleason. "But you cannot undertake such a long journey alone. You have no experience in traveling in cars and steamboats, and, at your age, you will find it very fatiguing. We can accompany you as far as New York, but there we must part, for I am compelled to return without any delay. Louis, too, is obliged to resume his college studies. The young doctor cannot leave his patients. Suppose you invest some one with legal authority, Miss Thusa, to investigate the matter?"

"I shall go myself," was the unhesitating answer. "As for going alone, I would not thank the King of England, if there was one, for his company—though I am obliged to you for thinking of my comfort. I know I'm getting old, but I should like to see the man, woman or child in this town, or any other, that can bear more than I can. I always was independent, thank the Lord. After living without the help of man this long, I hope I can get along without it at the eleventh hour. As to its being a money concern, I don't believe a word of it, and I wouldn't walk across the room, if it just concerned myself alone; but when I see the name of my poor, dead brother, I feel a command on me, just as if I saw it printed on tablets of stone, by the finger of the Lord Himself."

The next morning the travelers were to commence their journey, with the unexpected addition of Miss Thusa's company part of the way. When her baggage was brought down, to the consternation of all she had her wheel, arrayed in a traveling costume of green baize, mounted on the top of her trunk, and no reasoning or persuasion could induce her to leave it behind. [102]

"I'm not going to let the Goths and Vandals get possession of it," she said, "when I'm gone. I've locked it up every night since the ruin of my thread, and—"

"You can have it locked up while you are absent," interrupted Mrs. Gleason. "I will promise you that no injury shall happen to it."

"Thank you," said Miss Thusa, nodding her head; "but where I go my wheel must go, too. What in the world shall I do, when I stop at night, without it? and in that idle place, the steamboat, I can spin a powerful quantity while the rest are doing nothing. It is neither big nor heavy, and it can go on the top of the stage very well, and be in nobody's way."

"You can sit there, Miss Thusa, and spin, while you are riding," cried Louis, laughing; "that will have a *powerful* effect."

Helen and Alice felt very sad in parting from the friend and brother so much beloved, but they could not help smiling at Louis's suggestion. The young doctor, glad of an incident which cast a gleam of merriment on their tears, added another, which obviated every difficulty:

"Only imagine it a new fashioned harp or musical instrument, in its green cover, and it will give éclat to the whole party. I am sure it is a harp of industry, on which Miss Thusa has played many a pleasant tune."

The wheel certainly had a very distinguished appearance on the top of the stage, exciting universal curiosity and admiration. Children rushed to the door to look at it, as the wheels went flashing and rolling by, while older heads were seen gazing from the windows, till the verdant wonder disappeared from their view.

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CHAPTER VII.

"What a fair lady!—and beside her
What a handsome, graceful, noble rider."—*Longfellow.*

“Love was to her impassioned soul
Not as with others a mere part
Of its existence—but the whole,
The very life-breath of his heart.”—*Moore*.

WE would like to follow Miss Thusa and her wheel, and relate the manner in which she defended it from many a rude and insolent attack. The Israelites never guarded the Ark of the Covenant with more jealous care and undaunted courage.

But as we have commenced the history of our younger favorites in early childhood, and are following them up the steep of life, we find they have a long journey before them, and we are obliged here and there to make a long step, a bold leap, or the pilgrimage would be too long and weary.

We acknowledge a preference for Miss Thusa. She is a strong, original character, and the sunlight of imagination loves to rest upon its salient angles and projecting lines. When we commenced her sketch, our sole design was to describe her influence on the minds of others, and to make her a warning beacon to the mariners of life, that they might avoid the shoals on which the peace of so many morbidly sensitive minds have been wrecked. But we found a fascination in the subject which we could not resist. A heart naturally warm, defrauded of all natural objects on which to expend its living fervor, a mind naturally strong confined within close and narrow limits, an energy concentrated and unwasting, capable of carrying its possessor through every emergency and every trial—these characteristics of a lonely woman, however poor and unconnected she might be, have sometimes drawn us away from attractive themes.

We do not know that Mittie can be called attractive, but she is young, handsome and intellectual, and there is a charm in youth, beauty and intellect that too often disarms the judgment, and renders it blind to moral defects. [104]

When Mittie returned from school, crowned with the laurels of the institution in which she had graduated, wearing the stature, and exhibiting the manners of a woman, though still in years a child, she appeared to her young companions surrounded with a *prestige*, in whose dazzling rays her childish faults were forgotten.

Mrs. Gleason, who had been looking forward with dread to the hour of her step-daughter's return, met her with every demonstration of affectionate regard. She had never seen Mittie, and as her father always spoke of her as “the child,” palliating her errors on the plea of her motherless childhood, she was not prepared for the splendidly developed, womanly girl, who received her kind advances with a haughty and repelling coldness, which brought an angry flush to the father's brow.

“Mittie,” said he, emphatically, “this is your *mother*. Remember that she is to receive from all my children the respect and affection to which she is eminently entitled.”

“I know she is your wife, sir, and that her name is Mrs. Gleason, but that does not make her a mother of mine,” replied the young girl, with surprising coolness.

“Mittie,” exclaimed the father—what he would have said was averted by a hand laid gently on his arm, and a beseeching look from the eyes of the amiable step-mother.

“Do not constrain her to call me mother,” she said. “I do not despair of gaining her affections in time. I care not for the mere name, unaccompanied by the feelings which make it so dear and holy.”

One would have supposed that a remark like this, uttered in a calm, mild tone, a tone of mingled dignity and affability, would have touched a heart of only fifteen summer's growth, but Mittie knew not yet that she had a heart. She had never yet really loved a human being. Insensible to the sweet tendernesses of nature, it was reserved for the lightning bolt of passion to shiver the hard, bark-like covering, and penetrate to the living core.

She triumphed in the thought that in the struggle for power between her step-mother and herself she had gained the ascendancy, that she had never yielded one iota of her will, never called her *mother*, or acknowledged her legitimate and sacred claims. She began to despise the woman, who was weak enough, as she believed, to be overruled by a young girl like herself. But she did not know Mrs. Gleason—as a scene which occurred just one year after her return will show. [105]

Mittie was seated in her own room, where she always remained, save when company called expressly to see her. She never assisted her mother either in discharging the duties of hospitality or in performing those little household offices which fall so gracefully on the young. Engrossed with her books and studies, pursuits noble and ennobling in themselves, but degraded from their high and holy purpose when cultivated to the exclusion of the lovely, feminine virtues, Mittie was almost a stranger beneath her father's roof.

The chamber in which she was seated bore elegant testimony to the kindness and liberality of her step-mother—who, before Mittie's return from school, had prepared and furnished this apartment expressly for her two young daughters. As Mittie was the eldest, and to be the first occupant, her supposed tastes were consulted, and her imagined wants all anticipated. Mrs. Gleason had a small fortune of her own, so that she was not obliged to draw upon her husband's

purse when she wished to be generous. She had therefore spared no expense in making this room a little sanctum-sanctorum, where youth would delight to dwell.

"Mittie loves books," she said, and she selected some choice and elegant works to fill the shelves of a swinging library—of course she must be fond of paintings, and the walls were adorned with pictures whose gilded frames relieved their soft, neutral tint.

"Young girls love white. It is the appropriate livery of innocence."

Therefore bed-curtains, window-curtains, and counterpane were of the dazzling whiteness of snow. Even the table and washstand were white, ornamented with gilded wreaths.

"Mittie was fond of writing—all school girls are," therefore an elegant writing desk must be ready for her use—and though her love of sewing was more doubtful, a beautiful workbox was ready for her accommodation. She well knew the character of Mittie, and her personal opposition to herself, but she was determined to overcome her prejudices, and bind her to her by every endearing obligation. [106]

"His children *must* love me," she said, "and all that woman can and ought to do shall be done by me before I relinquish my labors of love."

Mittie enjoyed the gift without being grateful to the giver; she basked in the sunshine of comfort, without acknowledging the source from which it emanated. For one year she had been treated with unvarying tenderness, consideration, and regard, in spite of coldness, haughtiness, and occasional insolence, till she began to despise one who could lavish so much on a thankless, unreturning receiver.

She was surprised when her step-mother entered her room at the unusual hour of bed time—and looking up from the book she was reading, her countenance expressed impatience and curiosity. She did not rise or offer her a chair, but after one rude, fixed stare, resumed her reading. Mrs. Gleason seated herself with perfect composure, and taking up a book herself, seemed to be absorbed in its contents. There was something so unusual in her manner that Mittie, in spite of her determination to appear imperturbable and careless, could not help gazing upon her with increasing astonishment. She was dressed in a loose night wrapper, her hair was unbraided, and hanging loose over her shoulders, and there was an air of ease and freedom diffused over her person, that added much to its attractions. Mittie had always thought her stiff and formal—now there was a graceful abandonment about her, as if she had thrown off chains which had galled her, or a burden which oppressed.

"To what am I indebted for the honor of this visit, madam?" asked Mittie, throwing her book on the table with unlady-like force.

"To a desire for a little private conversation," replied Mrs. Gleason, looking steadfastly in Mittie's face.

"I am going to bed," said she, with an unsuppressed yawn, "you had better take a more fitting hour."

"I shall not detain you long," replied her step-mother, "a few words can comprehend all I have to utter. This night is the anniversary of the one which brought us under the same roof. I then made a vow to myself that for one year I would labor with a bigot's zeal and a martyr's enthusiasm, to earn the love and entitle myself to the good opinion of my husband's daughter. I made a vow of self-abnegation, which no Hindoo devotee ever more religiously kept. I had been told that you were cold hearted and selfish; but I said love is invincible and must prevail; youth is susceptible and cannot resist the impressions of gratitude. I said this, Mittie, one year ago, in faith and hope and self-reliance. I have now come to tell you that my vow is fulfilled. I have done all that is due to you, nay, more, far more. It remains for me to fulfill my duties to myself. If I cannot make you *love* me, I will not allow you to *despise* me." [107]

The bold, bright eye of Mittie actually sunk before the calm, rebuking glance, which gave emphasis to every cool, deliberate word. Here was the woman she had dared to treat with disdain, as undeserving her respect, as the usurper of a place to which she had no right, whom she had predetermined to *hate* because she was her *step-mother*, and whom she continued to dislike because she had predetermined to do so, all at once assuming an attitude of commanding self-respect, and asserting her own claims with irresistible dignity and truth. Taken completely by surprise, her usual fluency of language forsook her, and she sat one moment confounded and abashed. *Her claims?* it was the first time the idea of her step-mother having any legitimate claims on her, had assumed the appearance of reality. Something glanced into her mind, foreshadowing the truth that after all she was more dependent on her father's wife, than her father's wife on her. It was like the flashing of lamplight on the picture-frames and golden flower leaves on the table, at which they both were seated.

"I have been alone the whole evening," continued Mrs. Gleason, in a still calmer, more decided tone, "preparing myself for this interview; for the time for a full understanding is come. All the sacrifices I have made during the past year were for your father's peace and your own good. To him I have never complained, nor ever shall I; but I should esteem myself unworthy to be his wife, if I willingly submitted longer to the yoke of humiliation. I tell thee truly, Mittie, when I say, I care not for your love, for which I have so long striven in vain. You do not love your own family, and why should I expect to inspire what they, father, brother and sister have never kindled in [108]

your breast? I care not for your love, but I *will* have your respect. I defy you from this moment ever to treat me with insolence. I defy you henceforth, ever by word, look or thought, to associate me with the idea of *contempt*."

Her eye flashed with long suppressed indignation, and her face reddened with the liberated stream of her emotions. Rising, and gathering up her hair, which was sweeping back from her forehead, she took her lamp and turned to depart. Just as she reached the door she turned back and added, in a softer tone,

"Though you will never more see me in the aspect of a seeker after courtesy and good will, I shall never reject any overtures for reconciliation. If the time should ever come, when you feel the need of counsel and sympathy, the necessity of a friend; if your heart ever awakens, Mittie, and utters the new-born cry of helplessness and pain, you will find me ready to listen and relieve. Good night."

She passed from her presence, and Mittie felt as if she had been in a dream, so strange and unnatural was the impression left upon her mind. She was at first perfectly stunned with amazement, then consciousness, accompanied with some very disagreeable stinging sensations, returned. When a very calm, self-possessed person allows feeling or passion to gain the ascendancy over them, they are invested for the moment with overmastering power.

"I have never done justice to her intellect," thought she, recalling the words of her step-mother, with an involuntary feeling of admiration; "but I want not her love. When it is necessary to my happiness I will seek it. Love! she never cared any thing about me; she does not pretend that she did. She tried to win my good will from policy, not sensibility; and this is the origin of all the comforts and luxuries with which she has surrounded me. Why should I be grateful then? Thank Heaven! I am no hypocrite; I never dissembled, never professed what I do not feel. If every one were as honest and independent as I am, there would be very little of this vapid sentimentality, this love-breath, which comes and goes like a night mist, and leaves nothing behind it."

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The next morning Mittie could not help feeling some embarrassment when she met her step-mother at the breakfast-table, but the lady herself was not in the least disconcerted; she was polite and courteous, but calm and cold. There was a barrier around her which Mittie felt that she could not pass, and she was uncomfortable in the position in which she had placed herself.

And thus time went on—thus the golden opportunities of youth fled. Helen was still at school; Louis at college. But when Louis graduated, he came home, accompanied by a classmate whose name was Bryant Clinton—and his coming was an event in that quiet neighborhood. When Louis announced to his father that he was going to bring with him a young friend and fellow collegian, Mr. Gleason was unprepared for the reception of the dashing and high bred young gentleman who appeared as his guest.

Mittie happened to be standing on the rustic bridge, near the celebrated bleaching ground of Miss Thusa, when her brother and his friend arrived. She was no lover of nature, and there was nothing in the bland, dewy stillness of declining day to woo her abroad amid the glories of a summer's sunset. But from that springing arch, she could look up the high road and see the dust glimmering like particles of gold, telling that life had been busy there—and sometimes, as at the present moment, when something unusually magnificent presented itself to the eye, she surrendered herself to the pleasure of admiration. There had been heavy, dun, rolling clouds all the latter part of the day, and when the sun burst forth behind them, he came with the touch of Midas, instantaneously transmuting every thing into gold. The trunks of the trees were changed to the golden pillars of an antique temple, the foliage was all powdered with gold, here and there deepening into a bronze, and sweeping round those pillars in folds of gorgeous tapestry. The windows of the distant houses were all gleaming like molten gold; and every blade of grass was tipped with the same glittering fluid. Mittie had never beheld any thing so gloriously beautiful. She stood leaning against the light railing, unconscious that she herself was bathed in the same golden light—that it quivered in the dark waves of her hair, and gilt the roses of her glowing cheek. She did not know how bright and resplendent she looked, when two horsemen appeared in the high road, gathering around them in quivers the glittering arrows darting from the sky. As they rapidly approached, she recognized her brother, and knew that the young gentleman who accompanied him must be his friend, Bryant Clinton. The steed on which he was mounted was black as a raven, and the hair of the young man was long, black, and flowing as his horse's sable mane. As he came near, reining in the high mettled animal, while his locks blew back in the breeze, enriched with the same golden lustre with which every thing was shining, Mittie suddenly remembered Miss Thusa's legend of the black horseman, with the jetty hair entwined in the maiden's bleeding heart. Strange, that it should come back to her so vividly and painfully.

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Louis recognized his sister, standing on the airy arch of the bridge, and rode directly to the garden gate. Clinton did the same, but instead of darting through the gate, as Louis did, he only dismounted, lifted his hat gracefully from his head, and bowed with lowly deference—then throwing his arm over the saddle bow, he waited till the greeting was over. Mittie was not the favorite sister of Louis, for she had repelled him as she had all others by her cold and haughty self-concentration—but though he did not *love* her as he did Helen, she was his sister, she appeared to him the personification of home, of womanhood, and his pride was gratified by the full blown flower and splendor of her beauty. She had gained much in height since he had last seen her; her hair, which was then left waving in the wild freedom of childhood, was now gathered into bands, and twisted behind, showing the classic contour of her head and neck. Louis had never thought before whether Mittie was handsome or not. She had not seemed so to him.

He had never spoken of her as such to his friend. Helen, sweet Helen, was the burden of his speech, the one lovely sister of his heart. The idea of being proud of Mittie never occurred to him, but now she flashed upon him like a new revelation, in the glow and freshness and power of her just developed womanly charms. He was glad he had found her in that picturesque spot, graceful attitude, and partaking largely and richly of the glorification of nature. He was glad that Bryant Clinton, the greatest connoisseur in female beauty he had ever seen, should meet her for the first time under circumstances of peculiar personal advantage. He thought, too, there was more than her wonted cordiality in her greeting, and that her cheek grew warm under his hearty, brotherly kiss.

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"Why, Mittie," cried he, "I hardly knew you, you have grown so handsome and stately. I never saw any one so altered in my life—a perfect Juno. I want to introduce my friend to you—a noble hearted, generous, princely spirited fellow. A true Virginian, rather reckless with regard to expenditure, perhaps, but extravagance is a kingly fault—I like it. He is a passionate admirer of beauty, too, Mittie, and his manners are perfectly irresistible. I shall be proud if he admires you, for I assure you his admiration is a compliment of which any maiden may be proud."

While he was speaking, Clinton followed the beckoning motion of his hand, and approached the bridge. It is impossible to describe the ease and grace of his motions, or the wild charm imparted to his countenance by the long, dark, shining, back-flowing locks, that softened their haughty outline. His hair, eye-lashes and eye-brows were of deep, raven black, but his eyes were a dark blue, a union singularly striking, and productive of wonderful expression. As he came nearer and nearer, and Mittie felt those dark blue, black shaded eyes riveted on her face, with a look of unmistakable admiration, she remembered the words of her brother, and the consciousness of beauty, for the first time, gave her a sensation of pride and pleasure. She was too proud to be vain—and what cared she for gifts, destined, like pearls, to be cast before an unvaluing herd? The young doctor was the only young man whose admiration she had ever thought worthy to secure, and having met from him only cold politeness, she had lately felt for him only bitterness and dislike. Living as she had done in a kind of cold abstraction, enjoying only the pleasures of intellect, in all the sufficiency of self, it was a matter of indifference to her what people thought of her. She felt so infinitely above them, looking down like the æronaut, from a colder, more rarefied atmosphere, upon objects lessened to meanness by her own elevation.

She could never look down on such a being as Bryant Clinton. Her first thought was—"Will he dare to look down on me?" There was so much pride, tempered by courtesy, such an air of lofty breeding, softened by grace, so much intellectual power and sleeping passion in his face, that she felt the contact of a strong, controlling spirit, a will to which her own might be constrained to bow.

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They walked to the house together, while Louis gave directions about the horses, and he entered into conversation at once so easily and gracefully, that Mittie threw off the slight embarrassment that oppressed her, and answered him in the same light spirited tone. She was astonished at herself, for she was usually reserved with strangers, and her thoughts seldom effervesced in brilliant sallies or sparkling repartees. But Clinton carried about with him the wand of an enchanter, and every thing he touched, sparkled and shone with newly awakened or reflected brightness. Every one has felt the influence of that indescribable fascination of manner which some individuals possess, and which has the effect of electricity or magnetism. Something that captivates, even against the will, and keeps one enthralled, in spite of the struggling of pride, and the shame attendant on submission. One of these fascinating, electric, magnetic beings was Clinton. Louis had long been one of his captives, but *he* was such a gay, frank, confiding, porous hearted being, it was not strange, but that he should break through the triple bars of coldness, haughtiness and reserve, which Mittie had built around her, so high no mortal had scaled them—this was more than strange—it was miraculous.

When Mittie retired that night, instead of preparing for sleep, she sat down in the window, and tried to analyze the charm which drew her towards this stranger, without any volition of her own. She could not do it—it was intangible, evasive and subtle. The effect of his presence was like the sun-burst on the landscape, the moment of his arrival. The dark places of her soul seemed suddenly illumined; the massy columns of her intellect turned like the tree trunks, into pillars of gold and light; gilded foliage, in new born leaflets, played about the branches. She looked up into the heavens, and thought they had never bent in such grandeur and splendor over her, nor the solemn poetry of night ever addressed her in such deep, earnest language. All her senses appeared to have acquired an acuteness, an exquisiteness that made them susceptible almost to pain. The stars dazzled her like sunbeams, and those low, murmuring, monotonous sounds, the muffled beatings of the heart of night, rung loudly and distinctly on her ear. Alarmed at the strange excitement of her nerves, she rose and looked round the apartment which her step-mother's hand had adorned, and *ingratitude* seemed written in large, dark characters on the soft, grayish colored walls. Why had she never seen this writing before? Why had the debt she owed this long suffering and now alienated benefactress, never before been acknowledged before the tribunal of conscience? Because her heart was awakening out of a life-long sleep, and the light of a new creation was beaming around her.

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She took the lamp, and placing it in front of the mirror, gazed deliberately on her person.

"Am I handsome?" she mentally asked, taking out her comb, whose pressure seemed intolerable, and suffering the dark redundance of her hair to flow, unrestrained, around her. "Louis says that I am, and methinks this mirror reflects a glorious image. Surely I am changed, or

I have never really looked on myself before.”

Yes! she was changed. The light within the cold, alabaster vase was kindled, giving a life and a glow to what was before merely symmetrical and classic. There was a color coming and going in her cheek, a warm lustre coming and going in her eye, and she could not tell whence it came, nor whither it went.

From this evening a new era in her life commenced.

Days and weeks glided by, and Clinton still remained the guest of Louis. He sometimes spoke of going home, but Louis said—“not yet”—and the sudden paleness of Mittie’s cheek spoke volumes. During all this time, they had walked, and rode, and talked together, and the enchantment had become stronger and more pervading Mr. Gleason sometimes thought he ought not to allow so close an intimacy between his daughter and a young man of whose private character he knew so little, but when he reflected how soon he was to depart to his distant home, probably never to return, there seemed little danger to be apprehended from his short sojourn with them. Then Mittie, though she might be susceptible of admiration for his splendid qualities, and though her vanity might be gratified by his apparent devotion—*Mittie had no heart*. If it were Helen, it would be a very different thing, but Mittie was incapable of love, uninflamable as asbestos, and cold as marble.

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Mrs. Gleason, with the quicker perception of woman, penetrated deeper than her husband, and saw that passions were aroused in that hitherto insensible heart which, if opposed, might be terrible in their power. Since her conversation with Mittie, where she yielded up all attempt at maternal influence, and like “Ephraim joined to idols, *let her alone*,” she had never uttered a word of counsel or rebuke. She had been coldly, distantly courteous, and as she had prophesied, met with at least the semblance of respect. It was more than the semblance, it was the reality. Mittie disdained dissimulation, and from the moment her step-mother asserted her own dignity, she felt it. Mrs Gleason would have lifted up her warning voice, but she knew it would be disregarded, and moreover, she had pledged herself to neutrality, unless admonition or counsel were asked.

“Let us go in and see Miss Thusa,” said Louis, as they were returning one evening from a long walk in the woods. “I must show Clinton all the lions in the neighborhood, and Miss Thusa is the queen of the menagerie.”

“It is too late, brother,” cried Mittie, well knowing that she was no favorite of Miss Thusa, who might recall some of the incidents of her childhood, which she now wished buried in oblivion.

“Just the hour to make a fashionable call,” said Clinton. “I should like to see this belle of the wild woods.”

“Oh! she is very old and very ugly,” exclaimed Mittie, “and I assure you, will give you a very uncourteous reception.”

“Youth and beauty and courtesy will only appear more lovely by force of contrast,” said Clinton, offering her his hand to assist her over the stile, with a glance of irresistible persuasion.

Mittie was constrained to yield, but an anxious flush rose to her cheek for the result of this dreaded interview. She had not visited Miss Thusa since her return from school, for she had no pleasing associations connected with her to draw her to her presence. Since her memorable journey with her wheel, Miss Thusa had taken possession of her former abode, and no entreaties could induce her to resume her wandering life. She never revealed the mystery of the advertisement, or the result of her journey, but a female Ixion, bound to the wheel, spun away her solitary hours, and nursed her own peculiar, solemn traits of character.

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The house looked very much like a hermitage, with its low, slanting, wigwam roof, and dark stone walls, planted in the midst of underbrush, through which no visible path was seen. There was no gate, but a stile, made of massy logs, piled in the form of steps, which were beautifully carpeted with moss. A well, whose long sweep was also wreathed with moss, was just visible above the long, rank grass, with its old oaken bucket swinging in the air.

“What a superb old hermitage!” exclaimed Clinton, as they approached the door. “I feel perfectly sublime already. If the lion queen is worthy of her lair, I would make a pilgrimage to visit her.”

“Now, pray, brother,” said Mittie, determined to make as short a stay as possible, “don’t ask her to tell any of her horrible stories. I am sure,” she added, turning to Clinton, “you would find them exceedingly wearisome.”

“They are the most interesting things in the world,” said Louis, with provoking enthusiasm, as opening the door, he bowed his sister in—then taking Clinton’s arm, ushered him into the presence of the stately spinster.

Miss Thusa did not rise, but suffering her foot to pause on the treadle, she pushed her spectacles to the top of her head, and looked round upon her unexpected visitors. Mittie, who felt that the dark shaded eye of Clinton was upon her, accosted her with unwonted politeness, but it was evident the stern hostess returned her greeting with coldness and repulsion. Her features relaxed, when Louis, cordially grasping her hand, expressed his delight at seeing her looking so like the Miss Thusa of his early boyhood. Perceiving the aristocratic stranger, she acknowledged

his graceful, respectful bow, by rising, and her tall figure towered like a column of gray marble in the centre of the low apartment.

"And who is Mr. Bryant Clinton?" said she, scanning him with her eye of prophecy, "that he should visit the cabin of a poor, old, lonely woman like me? I didn't expect such an honor. But I suppose he came for the sake of the company he brought—not what he could find here." [116]

"We brought him, Miss Thusa," said Louis; "we want him to become acquainted with all our friends, and you know we would not forget you."

"We!" repeated Miss Thusa, looking sternly at Mittie, "don't say *we*. It is the first time Mittie ever set foot in my poor cabin, and I know she didn't come now of her own good will. But never mind—sit down," added she, drawing forward a wooden settee, equivalent to three or four chairs, and giving it a sweep with her handkerchief. "It is not often I have such fine company as this to accommodate."

"Or you would have a velvet sofa for us to sit down upon," cried Louis, laughing, while he occupied with the others the wooden seat; "but I like this better, with its lofty back and broad, substantial frame. Every thing around you is in keeping, Miss Thusa, and looks antique and majestic; the walls of gray stone, the old, moss-covered well-sweep, the dear old wheel, your gray colored dress, always the same, yet always looking nice and new. I declare, Miss Thusa, I am tempted to turn hermit myself, and come and live with you, if you would let me. I am beginning to be tired of the world."

He laughed gayly, but a shade passed over his countenance, darkening its sunshine.

"And I am just beginning to be awake to its charms," said Clinton, "just beginning to *live*. I would not now forsake the world; but if disappointment and sorrow be my lot, I must plead with Miss Thusa to receive me into her hermitage, and teach me her admirable philosophy."

Though he addressed Miss Thusa, his glances played lambently on Mittie's face, and told her the meaning of his words.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Miss Thusa, "don't try to make a fool of me, young gentleman. Louis, Master Louis, Mr. Gleason—what shall I call you now, since you're grown so tall, and seem so much farther off than you used to be."

"Call me Louis—nothing but Louis. I cannot bear the thought of being *Mistered*, and put off at a distance. Oh, there is nothing so sweet as the name a mother's angel lips first breathed into our ears."

"I'm glad you have not forgotten your mother, Louis," said Miss Thusa, her countenance softening into an expression of profound sensibility; "she was a woman to be remembered for a life-time; though weak in body, she was a powerful woman for all that. When she died, I lost the best friend I ever had in the world, and I shall love you and Helen as long as I live, for her sake, as well as your own. I won't be unjust to anybody. *You've* always been a good, respectful boy; and as for Helen, Heaven bless the child! she wasn't made for this world nor anybody in it. I never see a young flower, or a tender green leaf, but I think of her, and when they fade away, or are bitten and shrivelled by the frost, I think of her, too, and it makes me melancholy. When is the dear child coming home?" [117]

Before the conclusion of this speech, Mittie had risen and turned her burning cheek towards the window. She felt as if a curse were resting upon her, to be thus excluded from all participation in Miss Thusa's blessing, in the presence of Bryant Clinton. Yes, at that moment she felt the value of Miss Thusa's good opinion—the despised and contemned Miss Thusa. The praises of Helen sounded as so many horrible discords in her ears, and when she heard Louis reply that "Helen would return soon, very soon, with that divine little blind Alice," she wished that years on years might intervene before that period arrived, for might she not supplant her in the heart of Clinton, as she had in every other?

While she thus stood, playing with a hop-vine that climbed a tall pole by the window, and shaded it with its healthy, luxuriant leaves, Clinton manifested the greatest interest in Miss Thusa's wheel, and the manufacture of her thread. He praised the beauty of its texture, the fineness and evenness of its fibres.

"I admire this wheel," said he, "it has such a venerable, antique appearance. Its massy frame and brazen hoops, its grooves and swelling lines are a real study for the architect."

"Why, I never saw those brazen rings before," exclaimed Louis, starting up and joining Clinton, in his study of the instrument. "When did you have them put on, Miss Thusa, and what is their use?"

"I had them made when I took that long journey," replied Miss Thusa, pushing back the wheel with an air of vexation. "It got battered and bruised, and needed something to strengthen it. Those saucy stage drivers made nothing of tossing it from the top of the stage right on the pavement, but the same man never dared to do it but once." [118]

"This must be made of *lignum-vitæ*," said Clinton, "it is so very heavy. Such must have been the instrument that Hercules used, when he bowed his giant strength to the distaff, to gratify a beautiful woman's whim."

"Well, I can't see what there is in an old wheel to attract a young gentleman like you, so!" exclaimed Miss Thusa, interposing her tall figure between it and the collegian. "I don't want Hercules, or any sort of man, to spin at my distaff, I can tell you. It's woman's work, and it's a shame for a man to interfere with it. No, no! it is better for you to ride about the country with your black horse and gold-colored fringes, turning the heads of silly girls and gaping children, than to meddle with an old woman and her wheel."

"Why, Miss Thusa, what makes you so angry?" cried Louis, astonished at the excitement of her manner. "I never knew you impolite before."

"I apologise for my own rudeness," said Clinton, with inexpressible grace and ease. "I was really interested in the subject, and forgot that I might be intrusive. I respect every lady's rights too much to infringe upon them."

"I don't mean to be rude," replied Miss Thusa, giving her glasses a downward jerk, "but I've lived so much by myself, that I don't know any thing about the soft, palavering ways of the world. I say again, I don't want to be rude, and I'm not ashamed to ask pardon if I am so; but I know this fine young gentleman cares no more for me, nor my wheel, than the man in the moon, and I don't like to have any one try to pass off the show for the reality."

She fixed her large, gray eye so steadfastly on Clinton, that his cheek flushed with the hue of resentful sensibility, and Louis thinking Miss Thusa in a singularly repulsive mood, thought it better to depart.

"If it were not so late," said he, approaching the door, "I would ask you for one of your interesting legends, Miss Thusa, but by the long shadow of the well-sweep on the grass, the sun must be almost down. Why do you never come to see us now? My mother would give you a cordial welcome."

[119]

"That's right. I love to hear you call her mother, Louis. She is worthy of the name. She is a lady, a noble hearted lady, that honored the family by coming into it; and they who wouldn't own her, disgrace themselves, not her. Go among the poor, *if* you want to know her worth. Hear *them* talk—but as for my stories, I never can tell them, if there is a scoffing tongue, and an unbelieving ear close by. I cannot feel my *gift*. I cannot glorify the Lord who gave it. When Helen comes, bring her to me, for I've something to tell her that I mustn't carry to my grave. The blind child, too, I should like to see her again. I would give one of my eyes now, to put sight into hers—both of them, I might say, for I shan't use them much longer."

"Why, Miss Thusa, you are a *powerful* woman yet," said Louis, measuring her erect and commanding figure, with an upward glance. "I shouldn't wonder if you lived to preside at all our funerals. I don't think you ever can grow weak and infirm."

Miss Thusa shook her head, and slipped up the sleeve of her left arm, showing the shrunken flesh and shrivelled skin.

"There's weakness and infirmity coming on," said she, "but I don't mind it. This world isn't such a paradise, at the best, that one would want to stay in it forever. And there's one comfort, I shall leave nobody behind to bewail me when I'm gone."

"Ah! Miss Thusa, how unjust you are. *I* shall bewail you; and, as for Helen, I do believe the sweet, tender-hearted soul would cry her eyes out. Even the lovely, blind Alice would weep for your loss. And Mittie—but it seems to me you are not quite kind to Mittie. I should think you had too much magnanimity to remember the idle pranks of childhood against any one. Why, see what a handsome, glorious looking girl she is now."

Mittie turned haughtily away, and stepped out on the mossy door-stone. All her early scorn and hatred of Miss Thusa revived with even added force. Clinton followed her, but lingered on the threshold for Louis, whose hand the ancient sibyl grasped with a cordial farewell pressure.

"Mittie and I never were friends, and never can be," said she, "but I wish her no harm. I wish her better luck than I think is in her path now. As for yourself, if you should get into trouble, and not want to vex those that are kin, you can come to me, and if you don't despise my counsel and assistance, perhaps it may do you good. I have a legend that I've been storing up for your ears, too, and one of these days I should like to tell it to you. But," lowering her voice to a whisper, "leave that long-haired, smooth-tongued gentleman behind."

[120]

"Was I not right," said Mittie, when they had passed the stile, and could no longer discern the ancestral figure of Miss Thusa in the door of her lonely dwelling, "in saying that she is a very rude, disagreeable person? She is so vindictive, too. She never could forgive me, because when a little child I cared not to listen to her terrible tales of ghosts and monsters. Helen believed every word she uttered, till she became the most superstitious, fearful creature in the world."

"You should add, the sweetest, dearest, best," interrupted Louis, "unless we except the angelic blind maiden."

"I should think if you had any affection for me, Louis," said Mittie, turning pale, as his praises of Helen fell on Clinton's ear, "you would resent the rudeness and impertinence to which you have just exposed me. What must your friend think of me? Was it to lower me in his opinion that you carried him to her hovel, and drew forth her spiteful and bitter remarks?"

"Do you think it possible that *she* could alter my opinion of *you*?" said Clinton, in a low, earnest tone. "If any thing could have exalted it, it would be the dignity and forbearance with which you bore her insinuations, and defeated her malice."

"I am sorry, Mittie," cried Louis, touched by her paleness and emotion, and attributing it entirely to wounded feeling, "I am very sorry that I have been the indirect cause of giving you pain. It was certainly unintentional. Miss Thusa was in rather a savage mood this evening, I must acknowledge; but she is not malicious, Clinton. With all her eccentricities, she has some sterling virtues. If you could only see her inspired, and hear one of her *powerful* tales!" [121]

"If you ever induce him to go there a second time!" exclaimed Mittie, withdrawing herself from the arm with which he had encircled her waist, and giving him a glance from her dark, bright eyes, that might have scorched him, it was so intensely, dazzlingly angry.

"Believe me," said Clinton, "no inducement could tempt me again to a place associated with painful remembrances in your mind."

He had not seen the glance, for he was walking on the other side, and when she turned towards him, in answer to his soothing remark, the starry moon of night is not more darkly beautiful or resplendent than her face.

So he told her when Louis left them at the gate leading to their dwelling, and so he told her again when they were walking alone together in the star-bright night.

"Why do they talk to me of Helen?" said he, and his voice stole through the stilly air as gently as the falling dew. "What can she be, in comparison with you? Little did I think Louis had another sister so transcendent, when I saw you standing on the rustic bridge, the most radiant vision that ever beamed on the eye of mortal. You remember that evening. All the sunbeams of Heaven gathered around *you*, the focus of the golden firmament."

"Louis loves me not as he does Helen," replied Mittie, her heart bounding with rapture at his glowing praises, "no one does. Even you, who now profess to love me beyond all created beings, if Helen came, might be lured by *her* attractions to forget all you have been breathing into my ears."

"I confess I should like to see one whose attractions *you* can fear. She must be superlatively lovely."

"She is not beautiful nor lovely, Clinton. No one ever called her so. Fear! I never knew the sensation of fear. It is not fear that she could inspire, but a stronger, deeper passion."

He felt the arm tremble that was closely locked in his, and he could see her lip curl like a rose-leaf fluttering in the breeze.

"Speak, Mittie, and tell me what you mean. I can think of but one passion now, and that the strongest and deepest that ever ruled the heart of man." [122]

"I cannot describe my meaning," replied Mittie, pausing under a tree that shaded their path, and leaning against its trunk; "but I can feel it. Till you came, I knew not what feeling was; I read of it in books. It was the theme of many a fluent tongue, but all was cold and passive *here*," said she, pressing her hand on the throbbing heart that now ached with the intensity of its emotion. "Everybody said I had no heart, and I believed them. You first taught me that there was a vital spark burning within it, and blew upon it with a breath of flame. I tell you, Clinton, you had better tamper with the lightning's chain than the passions of this suddenly awakened heart. I tell you I am a dangerous being. There is a power within me that makes me tremble with its consciousness. I am a young girl, with no experience. I know nothing of the blandishments of art, and if I did I would scorn to exercise them. You have told me a thousand times that you loved me and I have believed you. I would willingly die a thousand times for the rapture of hearing it once; but if I thought the being lived who could supplant me—if I thought you could ever prove false to me—"

Her eye flashed and her cheek glowed in the night-beams that, as Clinton said, made her their focus, so brightly were they reflected from her face. What Clinton said, it is unnecessary to repeat, for the language of passion is commonplace, unless it flows from lips as fresh and unworldly and impulsive as Mittie's.

"Let me put a mark on this tree," she said, stooping down and picking up a sharp fragment of rock at its base. "If you ever forget what you have said to me this night, I will lead you to this spot, and show you the wounded bark—"

She began to carve her own initials, but he insisted upon substituting his penknife and assisting her in the task, to which she consented. As they stood side by side, he guiding her hand, and his long, soft locks playing against her cheek, or mingling with her own, she surrendered herself to a feeling of unalloyed happiness, when all at once Miss Thusa's legend of the Black Knight, with the dark, far-flowing hair, and the maiden with the bleeding heart, came to her remembrance, and she involuntarily shuddered. [123]

"Why am I ever recalling that wild legend?" thought she. "I am getting to be as weak and superstitious as Helen. Why, when it seems to me that the wing of an angel is fluttering against my cheek, should I remember that demon-sprite?"

Underneath her initials he carved his own, in larger, bolder characters.

"Would you believe it," said she, in a light mocking tone, "that I felt every stroke of your knife on that bark? Oh, you do not know how deep you cut! It seems that my life is infused into that tree, and that it is henceforth a part of myself."

"Strange, romantic girl that you are! Supposing the lightning should strike it, think you that you would feel the shaft?"

"Yes, if it shattered the tablet that bears those united names. But the lightning does not often make a channel in the surface of the silver barked beech. There are loftier trees around. The stately oak and branching elm will be more likely to win the fiery crown of electricity than this."

Mittie clasped her arms around the tree, and laid her cheek against the ciphers. The next moment she flitted away, ashamed of her enthusiasm, to hide her blushes and agitation in the solitude of her own chamber.

The next morning she found a wreath of roses round the tablet, and the next, and the next. So day after day the passion of her heart was fed by love-gifts offered at that shrine, where, by the silver starlight, they had met, and ONE at least had worshiped.

[124]

PART THIRD.

CHAPTER VIII.

—A countenance in which did meet
Sweet records,—promises as sweet—
A creature not too bright or good
For human nature's daily food;
For transient sorrows, simple wiles,
Praise, blame, love, kisses, tears and smiles.
Wordsworth.

AND NOW we have arrived at the era, to which we have looked forward with eager anticipation, the return of Helen and Alice, the period when the severed links of the household chain were again united, when the folded bud of childhood began to unclothe its spotless leaves, and expand in the solar rays of love and passion.

We have said but little lately of the young doctor, not that we have forgotten him, but he had so little fellowship with the characters of our last chapter, that we forbore to introduce him in the same group. He did feel a strong interest in Louis, but the young collegian was so fascinated by his new friend, that he unconsciously slighted him whom he had once looked upon as a mentor and an elder brother. Mittie, the handsome, brilliant, haughty, but now impassioned girl, was as little to his taste as Mittie, the cold, selfish and repulsive child. Clinton, the accomplished courtier, the dashing equestrian, the graceful spendthrift—the apparently resistless Clinton had no attraction for him. He sometimes wondered if his little, simple-hearted pupil Helen would be carried away by the same magnetic influence, and longed to see her character exposed to a test so powerful and dangerous.

Mr. Gleason went for the children, as he continued to call them, and when the time for his arrival drew near, there was more than the usual excitement on such occasions. Mittie could never think of her sister's coming without a fluctuating cheek and a throbbing heart. Mrs. Gleason wondered at this sensibility, unknowing its latent source, and rejoiced that all her affections seemed blooming in the fervid atmosphere that now surrounded her. Perhaps even she might yet be loved. But it was to Helen the heart of the step-mother went forth, whom she remembered as so gentle, so timid, so grateful and endearing. Would she return the same sweet child of nature, unspoiled by contact with other grosser elements?

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Clinton felt an eager curiosity to see the sister of Mittie, for whom she cherished such precocious jealousy, yet who, according to her own description, was neither beautiful nor lovely. Louis was all impatience, not only to see his favorite Helen, but the lovely blind girl, who had made such an impression on his young imagination. It is true her image had faded in the sultry, worldly atmosphere to which he had been exposed; but as he thought of the blue, sightless orbs, so beautiful yet soulless, the desire to loosen the fillet of darkness which the hand of God had bound around her brow, and to pour upon her awakening vision the noontide glories of creation, rekindled in his bosom.

For many days Mrs. Gleason had filled the vases with fresh flowers, for she remembered how Helen delighted in their beauty, and Alice in their fragrance. There was a room prepared for

Helen and Alice, while the latter remained her guest, and Mittie resolved that if possible, she would exclude her permanently from the chamber which Mrs. Gleason had so carefully furnished for both. She could not bear the idea of such close companionship with any one. She wanted to indulge in solitude her wild, passionate dreams, her secret, deep, incommunicable thoughts.

At length the travelers arrived; weary, dusty and exhausted from sleepless nights, and hurried, rapid days. No magnificent sun-burst glorified their coming. It was a dull, grayish, dingy day, such as often comes, the herald of approaching autumn. Mittie could not help rejoicing, for she knew the power of first impressions. She knew it by the raptures which Clinton always expressed when he alluded to her first appearance on the rustic bridge, as the youthful goddess of the blooming season. She knew it by her own experience, when she first beheld Clinton in all the witchery of his noble horsemanship. [126]

Helen was unfortunately made very sick by traveling, *sea-sick*, and when she reached home she was exactly in that state of passive endurance which would have caused her to lie under the carriage wheels unresistingly had she been placed perchance in that position. The weather was close and sultry, and the dust gathered on the folds of her riding-dress added to the warmth and discomfort of her appearance. Her father carried her in his arms into the house, her head reclining languidly on his shoulder, her cheeks white as her muslin collar. Mittie caught a glimpse of Clinton's countenance as he stood in the back-ground, and read with exultation an expression of blank disappointment. After gazing fixedly at Helen, he turned towards Mittie, and his glance said as plainly as words could speak—

"You beautiful and radiant creature, can you fear the influence of such a little, spiritless, sickly dowdy as this?"

Relieved of the most intolerable apprehensions, her greeting of Helen was affectionate beyond the most sanguine hopes of the latter. She took off her bonnet with assiduous kindness, (though Helen would have preferred wearing it to her room, to displaying her disordered hair and dusty raiment,) leaving to Mrs. Gleason the task of ministering to the lovely blind girl.

"Where's brother? I do not hear his step," said Alice, looking round as earnestly as if she expected to see his advancing figure.

"He has just been called away," said Louis, "or he would be here to greet you. My poor little Helen, you do indeed look dreadfully used up. You were never made for a traveler. Why Alice's roses are scarcely wilted."

"Nothing but fatigue and a little sea-sickness," cried her father, "a good night's sleep is all she needs. You will see a very different looking girl to-morrow, I assure you."

"Better, far better as she is," thought Mittie, as she assisted the young travelers up stairs.

Ill and weary as she was, Helen could not help noticing the astonishing improvement in Mittie's appearance, the life, the glow, the sunlight of her countenance. She gazed upon her with admiration and delight. [127]

"How handsome you have grown, Mittie," said she, "and I doubt not as good as you are handsome. And you look so much happier than you used to do. Oh! I do hope we shall love each other as sisters ought to do. It is so sweet to have a sister to love."

The exchange of her warm, traveling dress for a loose, light undress, gave inexpressible relief to Helen, who, reclining on her *own delightful bed*, began to feel a soft, living glow stealing over the pallor of her cheek.

"Shall I comb and brush your hair for you?" asked Mittie, sitting down by the side of the bed, and gathering together the tangled tresses of hazel brown, that looked dim in contrast with her own shining raven hair.

"Thank you," said Helen, pressing her hand gratefully in both hers. "You are so kind. Only smooth Alice's first. If her brother comes, she will want to see him immediately—and you don't know what a pleasure it is to arrange her golden ringlets."

"Don't *you* want to see the young doctor, too, Helen?"

"To be sure I do," replied Helen, with a brightening color, "more than any one else in the world, I believe. But do they call him the young doctor, yet?"

"Yes—and will till he is as old as Methuselah, I expect," replied Mittie, laughing.

"Brother is not more than five or six and twenty, now," cried Alice, with emphasis.

"Or seven," added Mittie. "Oh! he is sufficiently youthful, I dare say, but it is amusing to see how that name is fastened upon him. It is seldom we hear Doctor Hazleton mentioned. He does not look a day older than when he prescribed for you, Helen, in your yellow flannel night-gown. He had a look of precocious wisdom then, which becomes him better now."

Mittie began to think Helen very stupid, to say nothing of the dazzling Clinton, to whom she had taken particular pains to introduce her, when she suddenly asked her, "How long that very handsome young gentleman was going to remain?" [128]

"You think him handsome, then," cried Mittie, making a veil of the flaxen ringlets of Alice, so

that Helen could not see the high color that suffused her face.

"I think he is the handsomest person I ever saw," replied Helen, just as if she were speaking of a beautiful picture or statue; "and yet there is something, I cannot tell what, that I do not exactly like about him."

"You are fastidious," said Mittie, coldly, and the sudden gleam of her eye reminding her of the Mittie of other days, Helen closed her weary lips.

The next morning, she sprang from her bed light and early as the sky-lark. All traces of languor, indisposition and fatigue had vanished in the deep, tranquil, refreshing slumbers of the night. She awoke with the joyous consciousness of being at home beneath her father's roof. She was not a boarder, subject to a thousand restraints, necessary but irksome. She was not compelled any more to fashion her movements to the ringing of a bell, nor walk according to the square and compass. She was free. She could wander in the garden without asking permission. She could *run* too, without incurring the imputation of rudeness and impropriety. The gyves and manacles of authority had fallen from her bounding limbs, and the joyous and emancipated school-girl sang in the gladness and glee of her heart.

Alice still slept—the door of Mittie's chamber was closed, and every thing was silent in the household, when she flew down stairs, rather than walked, and went forth into the dewy morn. The sun was not yet risen, but there was a deepening splendor of saffron and crimson above the horizon, fit tapestry for the pavilion of a God. The air was so fresh and balmy, it felt so young and inspiring, Helen could hardly imagine herself more than five years old. Every thing carried her back to the earliest recollections of childhood. There were the swallows flying in and out of their little gothic windows under the beetling barn-eaves; and there were the martins, morning gossips from time immemorial, chattering at the doors of their white pagodas, with their bright red roofs and black thresholds. The old England robin, with its plumage of gorgeous scarlet, dashed with jet, swung in its airy nest, suspended from the topmost boughs of the tall elms, and the blue and yellow birds fluttered with warbling throats among the lilac's now flowerless but verdant boughs. Helen hardly knew which way to turn, she was so full of ecstasy. One moment she wished she had the wings of the bird, the next, the petals of the flower, and then again she felt that the soul within her, capable of loving and admiring all these, was worth a thousand times more. The letters carved on the silver bark of the beech arrested her steps. They were new. She had never seen them before, and when she saw the blended ciphers, a perception of the truth dawned upon her understanding. Perhaps there never was a young maiden of sixteen years, who had more singleness and simplicity of heart than Helen. From her shy and timid habits, she had never formed those close intimacies that so often bind accidentally together the artless and the artful. She was aware of the existence of love, but knew nothing of its varying phases. Its language had never been breathed into her ear, and she never dreamed of inspiring it. Could it be that it was love, which had given such a glow and lustre to Mittie's face, which had softened the harshness of her manners, and made her apparently accessible to sisterly tenderness? [129]

While she stood, contemplating the wedded initials, in a reverie so deep as to forget where she was, she felt something fall gently on her head, and a shower of fragrance bathed her senses. Turning suddenly round, the first rays of the rising sun glittered on her face, and gilt the flower-crown that rested on her brow. Clinton stood directly behind her, and his countenance wore a very different expression from what it did the preceding evening. And certainly it was difficult to recognize the pale, drooping, spiritless traveler of the previous night, in the bright, beaming, blushing, shy, wildly-sweet looking fairy of the morning hour.

Helen was not angry, but she was unaffectedly frightened at finding herself in such close proximity with this very oppressively handsome young man; and without pausing to reflect on the silliness and childishness of the act, she flew away as rapidly as a startled bird. It seemed as if all the reminiscences of her childhood pressed home upon her in the space of a few moments. Just as she had been arrested years before, when fleeing from the snake that invaded her strawberry-bed, so she found herself impeded by a restraining arm; and looking up she beheld her friend, the young doctor, his face radiant with a thousand glad welcomes. [130]

"Oh! I am *so glad* to see you once again," exclaimed Helen, yielding involuntarily to the embrace, which being one moment withheld, only made her heart throb with double joy.

"My sister, my Helen, my own dear pupil," said Arthur Hazleton, and the rich glow of the morning was not deeper nor brighter than the color that mantled his cheek. "How well and blooming you look! They told me you were ill and could not be disturbed last night. I did not hope to see you so brilliant in health and spirits. And who crowned you so gayly, the fair queen of the morning?"

"I don't know," she cried, taking the chaplet from her head and shaking the dew-drops from its leaves, "and yet I suspect it was Mr. Clinton, who came behind me while I was standing by yonder beech tree."

Arthur's serious, dark eye rested on the young girl with a searching, anxious expression, as Clinton approached and paid the compliments of the morning with more than his wonted gracefulness of manner. He apologized for the freedom he had taken so sportively and naturally, that Helen felt it would be ridiculous in her to assume a resentment she did not feel, and yielding to her passionate admiration for flowers, she wreathed them again round her sun-bright locks.

It was thus the trio approached the house. Mittie saw them from the window, and the keenest

pang she had ever known penetrated her heart. She saw the beech tree shorn of its morning garland, that garland which was blooming triumphantly on her sister's brow. She saw Clinton walking by her side, calling up her smiles and blushes according to his own magnetic will.

She accused Helen of deceit and guile. Her languor and illness the preceding evening was all assumed to heighten the blooming contrast of the present moment. Her morning ramble and meeting with Clinton were all premeditated, her seeming artlessness the darkest and deepest hypocrisy. [131]

For a few weeks Mittie had revelled in the joy of an awakened nature. She had reigned alone, with no counter influence to thwart the sudden and luxuriant growth of passion. She, alone, young, beautiful and attractive, had been the magnet to youth, beauty and attraction. She had been the centre of an island world of her own, which she had tried to keep as inaccessible to others as the granite coast in the Arabian Nights.

Poor Mittie! The flower of passion has ever a dark spot on its petals, a dark, purple spot, not always perceptible in the first unfolding and glory of its bloom; but sooner or later it spreads and scorches, and shrivels up the heart of the blossom.

She tried to control her excited feelings. She was proud, and had a conviction that she would degrade herself by the exhibition of jealousy and envy. She tried to call up a bloom to her pale cheek, and a smile to her quivering lip, but she was no adept in the art of dissimulation, and when she entered the sitting room, Helen was the first to notice her altered countenance. It was fortunate for all present that Alice had seated herself at the piano, at the solicitation of Louis, and commenced a brilliant overture.

Alice had always loved music, but now that she had learned it as an art, in all its perfectness, it had become the one passion of her life. She lived in the world of sound, and forgot the midnight that surrounded her. It was impossible to look upon her without feeling the truth, that if God closes with Bastile bars one avenue of the senses, He opens another with widening gates "on golden hinges moving." Alice trembled with ecstasy at her own exquisite melody, like the nightingale whose soft plumage quivers on its breast as it sings. She would raise her sightless eyes to Heaven, following the upward strain with feelings of the most intense devotion. She called music the wind of the soul, the breath of God—and said if it had a color it must be *azure*.

One by one they all gathered round the blind songstress. Arthur stood behind her, and Helen saw tears glistening in his eyes. She did not wonder at his emotion, for accustomed as she was to hear her, she never could hear Alice sing without feeling a desire to weep. [132]

"I feel so many wants," she said, "that I never had before."

While Alice was singing, Helen stole softly behind Mittie, and gently put the flowers on her hair.

"I have stolen your roses," she whispered, "but I do not mean to keep them."

Mittie's first impulse was to toss them upon the floor, but something in the eye of Clinton arrested her. She dared not do it. And looking steadfastly downward, outblushed the roses on her brow.

The cloud appeared to have passed away, and the family party that surrounded the breakfast table was a gay and happy one.

"I told you," said Mr. Gleason, placing Helen beside him, and smiling affectionately on her gladsome countenance, "that we should have a very different looking girl this morning from our poor, little sick traveler. All Helen wants is the air of home to revive her. Who would want to see a more rustic looking lassie than she is now?"

"I should like to see how Helen would look now in a yellow flannel robe," said Louis, mischievously, "and whether she will make as great a sensation on her entrance into society as she did when she burst into this room in such an impromptu manner?"

The remembrance of the *yellow flannel robe*, and the eventful evening to which Louis alluded, was associated with the mother whom she had never ceased to mourn, and Helen bent her head to hide the tears which gathered into her eyes.

"You are not angry, gentle sister?" said Louis, seeking her downcast face.

"Helen was never angry in her life," cried her father, "it is her only fault that she has not anger enough in her nature for self-preservation."

"Is that true, Helen?" asked the young doctor. "Has your father read your nature aright?"

"No," answered Helen, looking up with an ingenuous smile. "I have felt very angry with you, and judged you very harshly several times. Yet I was most angry with myself for doing what you wished in spite of my vexation and rebellion." [133]

"Yet you believed me right all the time?"

"I believe so. At least you always said so."

Helen conversed with Arthur Hazleton with the same freedom and childishness as when an

inmate of his mother's family. She was so completely a child, she could not think of herself as an object of importance in the social circle. She was inexpressibly grateful for kindness, and Arthur Hazleton's kindness had been so constant and so deep, she felt as if her gratitude should be commensurate with the gifts received. It was the moral interest he had manifested in her—the influence he exercised over her mind and heart which she most prized. He was a kind of second conscience to her, and it did not seem possible for her to do any thing which he openly disapproved.

What Mittie could not understand was the playful, unembarrassed manner with which she met the graceful attentions of Clinton, after his fascinations had dispersed her natural shyness and reserve. She neither sought nor avoided him, flattered nor slighted him. She appeared neither dazzled nor charmed. Mittie thought this must be the most consummate art, when it was only the perfection of nature. Because the glass was so clear, so translucent, she imagined she was the victim of an optical illusion.

There was another thing in Helen, which Mittie believed the most studied policy, and that was the affection and respect she manifested for her step-mother. Nothing could be sweeter or more endearing than the "mother!" which fell from her lips, whenever she addressed her—that name which, had never yet passed her own. Mittie had never sought the love of her step-mother. She had rejected it with scorn, and yet she envied Helen the caressing warmth and maternal tenderness which was the natural reward of her own loving nature.

"Poor Miss Thusa!" exclaimed Helen, near the close of the day, "I must go and see her before the sun sets; I know, I am sure she will be glad to see me."

"Supposing we go in a party," said Clinton. "I should like to pay my respects to the original old lady again." [134]

"I should think the rough reception she gave you, would preclude the desire for a second visit," said Mittie.

"Oh! I like to conquer difficulties," he exclaimed. "The greater the obstacles, the greater the triumph."

Perhaps he meant nothing more than met the ear, but Mittie's omnipotent self-love felt wounded. She had been too easy a conquest, whose value was already beginning to lessen.

"Miss Thusa and Helen are such especial friends," she added, without seeming to have heard his remark, "that I should think their first meeting had better be private. I suspect Miss Thusa has manufactured a new set of ghost stories for Helen's peculiar benefit."

"Are you a believer in ghosts?" asked Clinton of Helen. "If so, I envy you."

"Envy me!"

"Yes! There is such a pleasure in credulity. I sigh now over the vanished illusions of my boyhood."

"I once believed in ghosts," replied Helen, "and even now, in solitude and darkness, the memories of childhood come back to me so powerfully, they are appalling. Miss Thusa might tell me a thousand stories now, without inspiring belief, while those told me in childhood can never be forgotten, or their impressions effaced."

"Yet you like Miss Thusa, and seem to remember her with affection."

"She was so kind to me that I could not help loving her—and she seemed so lonely, with so few to love her, it seemed cruel to shut up the heart against her."

"One may be incredulous without being cruel, I should think," said Mittie, with asperity. She felt the reproach, and could not believe it accidental. Poor Mittie! how much she suffered.

Helen, who was really desirous of seeing Miss Thusa, and did not wish for the companionship of Clinton, stole away from the rest and took the path she well remembered, through the woods. The excessive hilarity of the morning had faded from her spirits. There was something indescribable about Mittie that annoyed and pained her. The gleam of kindness with which she had greeted her had all gone out, and left dullness and darkness in its stead. She could not get near her heart. At every avenue it seemed closed against her, and resisted the golden key of affection as effectually as the wrench of violence. [135]

"She must love me," thought Helen, pursuing her way towards Miss Thusa's, and picking up here and there a yellow leaf that came fluttering down at her feet. "I cannot live in coldness and estrangement with one I ought to love so dearly. It must be some fault of mine; I must discover what it is, and if it be my right eye, I would willingly pluck it out to secure her affection. Alice is going home, and how worse than lonely will I be!"

Helen caught a glimpse of the stream where, when a child, she used to wade in the wimpling waters, and gather the diamond mica that sparkled on the sand. She thought of the time when the young doctor had washed the strawberry stains from her face, and wiped it with his nice linen handkerchief, and her heart glowed at the remembrance of his kindness. Mingled with this glow there was the flush of shame, for she could not help starting at every sudden rustling sound, thinking the coiling snake was lurking in ambush.

There was an air of desolation about Miss Thusa's cabin, which she had never noticed before. The stepping-stones of the door looked so much like grave-stones, so damp and mossy, it seemed sacrilege to tread upon them. Helen hardly did touch them, she skipped so lightly over the threshold, and stood before Miss Thusa smiling and out of breath.

There she sat at her wheel, solemn and ancestral, and gray as ever, her foot upon the treadle, her hand upon the distaff, looking so much like a fixture of the place, it seemed strange not to see the moss growing green and damp on her stone-colored garments.

"Miss Thusa!" exclaimed Helen, and the aged spinster started at the sound of that sweet, childish voice. Helen's arms were around her neck in a moment, and without knowing why, she burst into an unexpected fit of weeping.

"I am so foolish," said Helen, after she had dashed away her tears, and squeezed herself into a little seat between Miss Thusa and her wheel, "but I am so glad to get home, so glad to see you all once more." [136]

Miss Thusa's iron nerves seemed quite unstrung by the unexpected delight of greeting her favorite child. She had not heard of her return, and could scarcely realize her presence. She kept wiping her glasses, without seeming conscious that the moisture was in her own eyes, gazed on Helen's upturned face with indescribable tenderness, smoothed back her golden brown hair, and then stooping down, kissed, with an air of benediction, her fair young brow.

"You have not forgotten me, then! You are still nothing but a child, nothing but little Helen. And yet you are grown—and you look healthier and rounder, and a shade more womanly. You are not as handsome as Mittie, and yet where one stops to look at her, ten will turn to gaze on you."

"Oh, no! Mittie is grown so beautiful no one could think of any one else when she is near."

"The young man with the long black hair thinks her beautiful? Does he not?"

"I believe so. Who could help it?"

"Does she love you better than she used to?" asked Miss Thusa.

"I will try to deserve her love," replied Helen, evasively; "but, Miss Thusa, I am coming every day to take spinning lessons of you. I really want to learn to spin. Perhaps father may fail one of these days, and I be thrown on my own resources, and then I could earn my living as you do now. Will you bequeath me your wheel, Miss Thusa?"

The bright smile with which she looked up to Miss Thusa, died away in a kind of awe, as she met the solemn earnestness of her glance.

"Yes, yes, child, I have long intended it as a legacy of love to you. There is a history hanging to it, which I will tell you by and by. For more than forty years that wheel and I have been companions and friends, and it is so much a part of myself, that if any one should cut into the old carved wood, I verily believe the blood-drops would drip from my heart. Things will grow together, powerfully, Helen, after a long, long time. And so you want to learn to spin, child. Well! suppose you sit down and try. These little white fingers will soon be cut by the flax, though, I can tell you." [137]

"May I, Miss Thusa, may I?" cried Helen, seating herself with childish delight at the venerable instrument, and giving it a whirl that might have made the flax smoke. Miss Thusa looked on with a benevolent and patronizing air, while Helen pressed her foot upon the treadle, wondering why it would jerk so, when it went round with Miss Thusa so smoothly, and pulled out the flax at arm's length, wondering why it would run into knots and bunches, when it glided so smooth and even through Miss Thusa's practiced fingers. Helen was so busy, and so excited by the new employment, she did not perceive a shadow cross the window, nor was she aware of the approach of any one, till an unusually gay laugh made her turn her head.

"I thought Miss Thusa looked wonderfully rejuvenated," said Arthur Hazleton, leaning against the window-frame on the outside of the building, "but methinks she is the more graceful spinner, after all."

"This is only my first lesson," cried Helen, jumping up, for the band had slipped from the groove, and hung in a hopeless tangle—"and I fear Miss Thusa will never be willing to give me another."

"Ten thousand, child, if you will take them," cried Miss Thusa, good-naturedly, repairing the mischief her pupil had done.

"Do you know the sun is down?" asked Arthur, "and that your path lies through the woods?"

Helen started, and for the first time became aware that the shadows of twilight were deepening on the landscape. She did not think Arthur Hazleton would accompany her home. He would test her courage as he had done before, and taking a hurried leave of Miss Thusa, promising to stay and hear many a legend next time, she jumped over the stile before Arthur could overtake her and assist her steps.

"Would you prefer walking alone?" said Arthur, "or will you accept of my escort?"

"I did not think you intended coming with me," said Helen, "or I would have waited." [138]

"You thought me as rude and barbarous as ever."

"Perhaps you think me as foolish and timid as ever."

"You have become courageous and fearless then—I congratulate you—I told you that you would one day be a heroine."

"That day will never come," said Helen, blushing. "My fears are hydras—as fast as one is destroyed another is born. Shadows will always be peopled with phantoms, and darkness is to me the shadow of the grave."

"I am sorry to hear you say so, Helen," said the young doctor, taking her hand, and leading her along the shadowy path, "and yet you feel safe with me. You fear not when I am with you."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Helen, involuntarily drawing nearer to him—"I never fear in your presence. Midnight would seem noonday, and all phantoms flee away."

"And yet, Helen," he cried, "you have a friend always near, stronger to protect than legions of angels can be. Do you realize this truth?"

"I trust, I believe I do," answered Helen, looking upward into the dome of darkening blue that seemed resting upon the tall, dark pillars of the woods. "I sometimes think if I were really exposed to a great danger, I could brave it without shrinking—or if danger impended over one I loved, I should forget all selfish apprehensions. Try not to judge me too severely—and I will do my best to correct the faults of my childhood."

They walked on in silence a few moments, for there was something hushing in the soft murmurs of the branches, something like the distant roaring of the ocean surge.

"I must take Alice home to-morrow," said he, at length; "her mother longs to behold her. I wish you were going with her. I fear you will not be happy here."

"I cannot leave my father," said Helen, sadly, "and if I can only keep out of the way of other people's happiness, I will try to be content."

"May I speak to you freely, Helen, as I did several years ago? May I counsel you as a friend— [139] guide you as a brother still?"

"It is all that I wished—more than I dared to ask. I only fear that I shall give you too much trouble."

There was a gray, old rock by the way-side, that looked exactly as if it belonged to Miss Thusa's establishment. Arthur Hazleton seated Helen there, and threw himself on the moss at her feet.

"I am going away to-morrow," said he, "and I feel as if I had much to say. I leave you exposed to temptation; and to put you on your guard, I must say perhaps what you will think unauthorized. You know so little of the world—are so guileless and unsuspecting—I cannot bear to alarm your simplicity; and yet, Helen, you cannot always remain a child."

"Oh, I wish I could," she exclaimed; "I cannot bear the thought of being otherwise. As long as I am a child, I shall be caressed, cherished, and forgiven for all my faults. I never shall be able to act on my own responsibility—never."

"But, Helen, you have attained the stature of womanhood. You are looked upon as a candidate for admiration—as the rival of your beautiful sister. You will be flattered and courted, not as a child, but as a woman. The young man who has become, as it were, domesticated in your family, has extraordinary personal attractions, and every member of the household appears to have yielded to his influence. Were I as sure of his moral worth as of his outward graces, I would not say what I have done. But, with one doubt on my mind, as your early friend, as the self-elected guardian of your happiness, I cannot forbear to caution, to admonish, perhaps to displease, by my too watchful, too officious friendship."

Arthur paused. His voice had become agitated and his manner excited.

"You cannot believe me capable of the meanness of envy," he added. "Were Bryant Clinton less handsome, less fascinating, his sincerity and truth might be a question of less moment."

"How could you envy any one," cried Helen, earnestly, unconscious how much her words and manner expressed. "Displeased! Oh! I thank you so much. But indeed I do not admire Mr. Bryant Clinton at all. He is entirely too handsome and dazzling. I do not like that long, curling, shining hair of his. The first time I saw him, it reminded me of the undulations of that terrible snake in the strawberry patch, and I cannot get over the association. Then he does not admire me at all, only as the sister of Mittie." [140]

"He has paid Mittie very great and peculiar attention, and people look upon them as betrothed lovers. Were you to become an object of jealousy to her, you would be very, very unhappy. The pleasure of gratified vanity would be faint to the stings exasperated and wounded love could inflict."

"For all the universe could offer I would not be my sister's rival," cried Helen, rising impetuously, and looking round her with a wild startled expression. "I will go and tell her so at once. I will ask her to confide in me and trust me. I will go away if she wishes it. If my father is

willing, I will live with Miss Thusa in the wild woods."

"Wait awhile," said Arthur, smiling at her vehemence, "wait Helen, patiently, firmly. When temptations arise, it is time to resist. I fear I have done wrong in giving premature warning, but the impulse was irresistible, in the silence of these twilight woods."

Helen looked up through the soft shadows to thank him again for his counsels, and promise that they should be the guide of her life, but the words died on her lips. There was something so darkly penetrating in the expression of his countenance, so earnest, yet troubled, so opposite to its usual serene gravity, that it infected her. Her heart beat violently, and for the first time in her life she felt embarrassed in his presence.

That night Helen pressed a wakeful pillow. She felt many years older than when she rose in the morning, for the experience of the day had been so oppressive. She could not realize that she had thought and felt and learned so much in twelve short hours.

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CHAPTER IX.

"All other passions have their hour of thinking,
And hear the voice of reason. This alone
Breaks at the first suspicion into frenzy,
And sweeps the soul in tempests."—*Shakspeare*.

THE day that Alice left, Helen felt very sad and lonely, but she struggled with her feelings, and busied herself as much as possible with the household arrangements. Mrs. Gleason took her into the chamber which Mittie had been occupying alone, and showed her every thing that had been prepared for her accommodation as well as her sister's. Helen was unbounded in her gratitude, and thought the room a paradise, with its nice curtains, tasteful furniture and airy structure.

When night came on, Helen retired early to her chamber, leaving Mittie with Clinton. She left the light burning on the hearth, for the memory of the lonely spinster, invoking by her song the horrible being, who descended, piece-meal, down the chimney, had not died away. That was the very chamber in which Miss Thusa used to spin, and recite her dreadful tales, and Helen remembered them all. It had been papered, and painted, and renewed, but the chimney was the same, and the shadows rested there as darkly as ever.

When Mittie entered the room, Helen was already in that luxurious state between sleeping and waking, which admits of the consciousness of enjoyment, without its responsibility. She was reclining on the bed, shaded by the muslin curtains, with such an expression of innocence and peace on her countenance, it was astonishing how any one could have marred the tranquillity of her repose.

The entrance of her sister partially roused her, and the glare of the lamp upon her face completely awakened her.

"Oh! sister!" she cried, "I am so glad you have come. It is so long since we have slept together. I have been thinking how happy we can be, where so much has been done for our comfort and luxury."

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"You can enjoy all the luxuries yourself," said Mittie, "and be welcome to them all. I am going to sleep in the next room, for I prefer being alone, as I have been before."

"Oh! Mittie, you are not going to leave me alone; you will not, surely, be so unkind?"

"I wonder if I were not left alone, while Alice was with you, and I wonder if I complained of unkindness!"

"But *you* did not care. You are not dependent on others. I am sure if you had asked me, I would have spread a pallet on the floor, rather than have left you alone."

"Helen, you are too old now to be such a baby," said Mittie, impatiently; "it is time you were cured of your foolish fears of being alone. You make yourself perfectly ridiculous by such nonsense."

She busied herself gathering her night-clothes as she spoke, and took the lamp from the table.

Helen sprang from the bed, and stood between Mittie and the door.

"No," said she, "if we must separate, I will go. You need not leave the chamber which has so long been yours. I do dread being alone, but alas! I must be lonely wherever I am, unless I have a heart to lean upon. Oh! Mittie, if you knew how I *could* love you, you would let me throw my arms around you, and find a pillow on your sisterly breast."

She looked pleadingly, wistfully at Mittie, while tears glittered in her soft, earnest eyes.

"Foolish, foolish child!" cried Mittie, setting down the lamp petulantly, and tossing her night-dress on the bed—"stay where you are, but do not inflict too much sentiment on me—you know I never liked it."

"No," said Helen, thoughtfully, "I might disturb you, and perhaps if I once conquer my timidity, I shall be victor for life. I should like to make the trial, and I may as well begin to-night as any time. I do not wish to be troublesome, or intrude my company on any one."

Helen's gentle spirit was roused by the arbitrary manner in which Mittie had treated her, and she found courage to act as her better judgment approved. She was sorry she had pleaded so earnestly for what she might have claimed as a right, and resolved to leave her sister to the solitude she so much coveted. [143]

With a low, but cold "good night," she glided from the apartment, closed the door, passed through the passage, entered a lonely chamber, and kneeling down by the bedside, prayed to be delivered from the bondage of fear, and the haunting phantoms of her own imagination. When she laid her head upon the pillow, she felt strong in the resolution she had exercised, glad that she had dared to resist her own weak, irresolute heart. She drew aside the window curtains and let the stars shine down brightly on her face. How could she feel alone, with such a glorious company all round and about her? How could she fear, when so many radiant lamps were lighted to disperse the darkness? Gradually the quick beating of her heart subsided, the moistened lashes shut down over her dazzled eyes, and she slept quietly till the breaking of morn. When she awoke, and recalled the struggles she had gone through, she rejoiced at the conquest she had obtained over herself. She was sure if Arthur Hazleton knew it, he would approve of her conduct, and she was glad that she cherished no vindictive feelings towards Mittie.

"She certainly has a right to her preferences," she said; "if she likes solitude, I ought not to blame her for seeking it, and I dare say my company is dull and insipid to her. I must have seemed weak and foolish to her, she who never knew what fear or weakness is."

As she was leaving her room, with many a vivid resolution to conquer her besetting weaknesses, her step-mother entered, unconscious that the chamber had an occupant. She looked around with surprise, and Helen feared, with displeasure.

"Mittie preferred sleeping alone," she hastened to say, "and I thought she had a prior right to the other apartment."

"Selfish, selfish to the heart's core!" ejaculated Mrs. Gleason. "But, my dear child, I cannot allow you to be the victim of an arbitrary will. The more you yield, the more concessions will be required. You know not, dream not, of Mittie's imperious and exacting nature." [144]

"I begin to believe, dear mother, that the discipline we most need, we receive. I did feel very unhappy last night, and when I entered this room, the dread of remaining all alone, in darkness and silence, almost stopped the beatings of my heart. It was the first time I ever passed a night without some companion, for every one has indulged my weakness, which they believed constitutional. But after the first few moments—a sense of God's presence and protection, of the guardianship of angels, of the nearness of Heaven, hushed all my fears, and filled me with a kind of divine tranquillity. Oh! mother, I feel so much better this morning for the trial, that I thank Mittie for having cast me, as it were, on the bosom of God."

"With such a spirit, Helen," said her step-mother, tenderly embracing her, "you will be able to meet whatever trials the discipline of your life may need. Self-reliance and God-reliance are the two great principles that must sustain us. We must do our duty, and leave the result to Providence. And, believe me, Helen, it is a species of ingratitude to suffer ourselves to be made unhappy by the faults of others, for which we are not responsible, when blessings are clustering richly round us."

Helen felt strengthened by the affectionate counsels of her step-mother, and did not allow the cloud on Mittie's brow to dim the sunshine of hers. Mindful of the warnings of the young doctor, she avoided Clinton as much as possible, whose deep blue eyes with their long sable lashes often rested on her with an expression she could not define, and which she shrunk from meeting. True to her promise she visited Miss Thusa once a day, and took her spinning lessons, till she could turn the wheel like a fairy, and manufacture thread as smooth and silky as her venerable teacher. She insisted on bleaching it also, and flew about among the long grass, with her bright watering pot, like a living flower sprung up in the wilderness.

She was returning one evening from the cabin at a rather later hour than usual, for she was becoming more and more courageous, and could walk through the woods without starting at every sound. The trees were now beginning to assume the magnificent hues of autumn, and glowed with mingled scarlet, orange, emerald, and purple. There was such a brightness, such a glory in these variegated dyes, that they took away all impression of loneliness, and the crumpling of the dry, yellow leaves in the path had a sociable, pleasant sound. She hoped Arthur Hazleton would return before this jewelry of the woods had faded away, that she might walk with him through their gorgeous foliage, and hear from his lips the deep moral of the waning season. She reached the gray rock where Arthur had seated her, and sitting down on a thick cushion of fallen leaves, she remembered every word he had said to her the evening before his departure. [145]

"Why are you sitting so mute and lonely here, fair Helen?" said a musical voice close to her ear, and Clinton suddenly came and took a seat by her side. Helen felt embarrassed by his unexpected presence, and wished that she could free herself from it without rudeness.

"I am gazing on the beauty of the autumnal woods," she replied, her cheeks glowing like the scarlet maple leaves.

"I should think such contemplation better fitted one less young and bright and fair," said Clinton. "Miss Thusa, for instance, in her time-gray home.

"I am sure nothing can be brighter or more glorious than these colors," said Helen, making a motion to rise. It seemed to her she could see the black eyes of Mittie gleaming at her through the rustling foliage.

"Do not go yet," said Clinton. "This is such a sweet, quiet hour—and it is the first time I have seen you alone since the morning after your arrival. What have I done that you shun me as an enemy, and refuse me the slightest token of confidence and regard?"

"I am not conscious of showing such great avoidance," said Helen, more and more embarrassed. "I am so much of a stranger, and it seemed so natural that you should prefer the society of Mittie, I considered my absence a favor to both."

"Till you came," he replied, in a low, persuasive accent, "I did find a charm in her society unknown before, but now I feel every thought and feeling and hope turned into a new channel. Even before you came, I felt you were to be my destiny. Stay, Helen, you shall not leave me till I have told you what my single heart is too narrow to contain."

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"Let me go," cried Helen, struggling to release the hand which he had taken, and springing from her rocky seat. "It is not right to talk to me in this manner, and I will not hear you. It is false to Mittie, and insulting to me."

"I should be false to Mittie should I pretend to love her now, when my whole heart and soul are yours," exclaimed the young man, vehemently. "I can no more resist the impulse that draws me to you, than I can stay the beatings of this wildly throbbing heart. Love, Helen, cannot be forced, neither can it be restrained."

"I know nothing of love," cried Helen, pressing on her homeward path, with a terror she dared not betray, "nor do I wish to know—but one thing I do know—I feel nothing but dread in your presence. You make me wretched and miserable. I am sure if you have the feelings of a gentleman you will leave me after telling you this."

"The more you urge me to flee, the more firmly am I rooted to your side. You do not know your own heart, Helen. You are so young and guileless. It is not dread of me, but your sister's displeasure that makes you tremble with fear. You cannot fear me, Helen—you *must*, you *will*, you *shall* love me."

Helen was now wrought up to a pitch of excitement and terror that was perfectly uncontrollable. Every word uttered by Clinton seemed burned in—on her brain, not her heart, and she pressed both hands on her forehead, as if to put out the flame.

"Oh! that Arthur Hazleton were here," she exclaimed, "he would protect me."

"No danger shall reach you while I am near you, Helen," cried Clinton, again endeavoring to take her hand in his—but Helen darted into a side path and ran as fleetly and wildly as when she believed the glittering, fiery-eyed viper was pursuing her. Sometimes she caught hold of the slender trunk of a tree to give her a quicker momentum, and sometimes she sprang over brooklets, which, in a calmer moment, she would have deemed impossible. She felt that Clinton had slackened his pursuit as she drew near her home, but she never paused till she found herself in her own chamber, where, sinking into a chair, she burst into a passion of tears such as she had never wept before. Shame, dread, resentment, fear—all pressed so crushingly upon her, her soul was bowed even to the dust. The future lowered so darkly before her. Mittie—she could not help looking upon her as a kind of avenging spirit—that would forever haunt her.

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While she was in this state of ungovernable emotion, Mittie came in, with a face as white and rigid as marble, and stood directly in front of her.

"Why have you fled from Clinton so?" she cried, in a strange, harsh tone. "Tell me, for I will know. Tell me, for I have a right to know."

Helen tried to speak, but her breathless lips sought in vain to utter a sound. There was a bright, red spot in the centre of both cheeks, but the rest of her face was as colorless as Mittie's.

"Speak," cried Mittie, stamping her foot, with an imperious gesture, "and tell me the truth, or you had better never have been born."

"Ask me nothing," she said at length, recovering breath to answer, "for the truth will only make you wretched."

"What has he said to you?" repeated Mittie, seizing the arm of Helen with a force of which she was not aware. "Have you dared to let him talk to you about love?"

"Alas! I want not his love. I believe him not," cried Helen; "and, oh! Mittie, trust him not. Think

of him no more. He does not love you—is not worthy of you.”

Mittie tossed Helen’s arm from her with a violence that made her writhe with pain—while her eyes flashed with the bale-fires of passion.

“How dare you tell me such a falsehood?” she exclaimed, “you little, artful, consummate hypocrite. He never told you this. You have been trying to supplant me from the moment of your arrival, trying to make yourself appear a victim, a saint—a martyr to a sister’s jealous and exciting temper. I have seen it all. I have watched the whole, day after day. I have seen you stealing off to Miss Thusa’s—pretending to love that horrible old woman—only that you might have clandestine meetings with Clinton. And now you are seeking to shake my confidence in his faith and truth, that you may alienate him more completely from me.”

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“Oh! Mittie—don’t,” cried Helen, “don’t for Heaven’s sake, talk so dreadfully. You don’t mean what you say. You don’t know what you are doing.”

“I tell you I do know—and you shall know to your cost, you little wolf in lamb’s clothing,” cried Mittie, growing more and more frantic as she yielded to the violence of her passions. “It was not enough, was it, to wind yourself round the young doctor with your subtle, childish ways, till you have made a fool of him with all his wisdom, treating him with a forwardness and familiarity that ought to make you blush at the remembrance—but you must come between me and the only being this side of Heaven I ever cared for? Take care of yourself; get out of my way, for I am growing mad. The sight of you makes me a maniac.”

Helen was indeed terrified at an exhibition of temper so unparalleled. She rose, though her limbs trembled so she could scarcely walk, and took two or three steps towards the door.

“Where are you going?” exclaimed Mittie.

“You told me to leave you,” said Helen, faintly, “and indeed I cannot stay—I ought not to stay, and hear such false and cruel things. I will not stay,” she exclaimed, with a sudden and startling flash of indignation; “I will not stay to be so insulted and trampled on. Let me pass.”

“You shall not go to Clinton.”

“Let me pass, I say,” cried Helen, with a wild vehemence, that contrasted fearfully with her usual gentleness. “I am afraid of you, with such daggers in your tongue.”

She rushed passed Mittie, flew down stairs, into the sitting room, in the presence of her father, step-mother, and Clinton, who was sitting as if perfectly unconscious of the tempest he had roused.

“Father, father,” she exclaimed, throwing herself into his arms. “Oh, father.”

Nothing could be more startling than her appearance. The bright spot on her cheek was now deepened to purple, and her eyes had a strange, feverish lustre.

“Why, what is the meaning of this?” cried Mr. Gleason, turning in alarm to his wife.

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“Something must have terrified her—only feel of her hands, they are as cold as ice; and look at her cheeks.”

“She seems ill, very ill,” observed Clinton, rising, much agitated; “shall I go for a physician?”

“I fear Doctor Hazleton is not yet returned,” said Mrs. Gleason, anxiously. “I think she is indeed ill—alarmingly so.”

“No, no,” cried Helen, clinging closer to her father, “don’t send for Doctor Hazleton—anybody in the world but him. I cannot see him.”

“How strange,” exclaimed Mr. Gleason, “she must be getting delirious. You had better carry her up stairs,” added he, turning to his wife, “and do something to relieve her, while I go for some medical advice. She is subject to sudden nervous attacks.”

“No, no,” cried Helen, still more vehemently, “don’t take me up stairs; I cannot go back; it would kill me. Only let me stay with you.”

Mr. Gleason, who well remembered the terrible fright Helen had suffered in her childhood—her fainting over her mother’s corpse—her imprisonment in the lonely school-house—believed that she had received some sudden shock inflicted by a phantom of her own imagination. Her frantic opposition to being taken up stairs confirmed this belief, and he insisted on his wife’s conveying her to her own room and giving her an anodyne. Clinton felt as if his presence must be intrusive, and left the room—but he divined the cause of Helen’s strange emotion. He heard a quick, passionate tread overhead, and he well knew what the lion-strength of Mittie’s unchained passions must be.

Mrs. Gleason, too, had her suspicions of the truth, having seen Helen’s homeward flight, and heard the voice of Mittie soon afterwards in loud and angry tones. She besought her husband to leave her to her care, assuring him that all she needed was perfect quietude. For more than an hour Mrs. Gleason sat by the side of Helen, holding her hands in one of hers, while she bathed with the other her throbbing temples. Gradually the deep, purple flush faded to a pale hue, and her eyes gently closed. The step-mother thought she slept, and darkened the window—so that the

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rays of the young moon could not glimmer through the casement. Mrs. Gleason looked upon Helen with anguish, seeing before her so much misery in consequence of her sister's jealous and irascible temper. She sighed for the departure of Clinton, whose coming had roused Mittie to such terrible life, and whose fascinations might be deadly to the peace of Helen. She could see no remedy to the evils which every day might increase—for she knew by long experience the indomitable nature of Mittie's temper.

"Mother," said Helen, softly, opening her eyes, "I do not sleep, but I rest, and it is so sweet—I feel as if I had been out in a terrible storm—so shattered and so bruised within. Oh! mother, you cannot think of the shameful accusations she has brought against me. It makes me shudder to think of them. I shall never, never be happy again. They will always be ringing in my ears—always blistering and burning me."

"You should not think her words of such consequence," said Mrs. Gleason, soothingly; "nothing she can say can soil the purity of your nature, or alienate the affections of your friends. She is a most unhappy girl, doomed, I fear, to be the curse of this otherwise happy household."

"I cannot live so," cried Helen, clasping her hands entreatingly, "I would rather die than live in such strife and shame. It makes me wicked and passionate. I cannot help feeling hatred rising in my bosom, and then I loathe myself in dust and ashes. Oh! let me go somewhere, where I may be at peace—anywhere in the world where I shall be in nobody's way. Ask father to send me back to school—I am young enough, and shall be years yet; or I should like to go into a nunnery, that must be such a peaceful place. No stormy passions—no dark, bosom strife."

"No, my dear, we are not going to give up you, the joy and idol of our hearts. You shall not be the sacrifice; I will shield you henceforth from the violence of this lawless girl. Tell me all the events of this evening, Helen, without reserve. Let there be perfect confidence between us, or we are all lost."

Then Helen, though with many a painful and burning blush, told of her interview with Clinton, and all of which Mittie had so frantically accused her. [151]

"When I rushed down stairs, I did not know what I was doing—my brain seemed on fire, and I thought my reason was gone. If I could find a place of shelter from her wrath, a spot where her eye could not blaze upon me! that was my only thought."

"Oh! that this dangerous, and I fear, unprincipled young man had never entered our household!" cried Mrs. Gleason; "and yet I would not judge him too harshly. Mittie's admiration, from the first, was only too manifest, and he must have seen before you arrived, the extraordinary defects of her temper. That he should prefer you, after having seen and known you, seems so natural, I cannot help pitying, while I blame him. If it were possible to accelerate his departure—I must consult with Mr. Gleason, for something must be done to restore the lost peace of the family."

"Let me go, dear mother, and all may yet be well."

"If you would indeed like to visit the Parsonage, and remain till this dark storm subsides, it might perhaps be judicious."

"Not the Parsonage—never, never again shall I be embosomed in its hallowed shades—I would not go there now, for ten thousand worlds."

"It is wrong, Helen, to allow the words of one, insane with passion, to have the least influence on the feelings or conduct. Mrs. Hazleton, Arthur, and Alice, have been your best and truest friends, and you must not allow yourself to be alienated from them."

Helen closed her eyes to hide the tears that gathered on their surface, and it was not long before she sunk into a deep sleep. She had indeed received a terrible shock, and one from which her nerves would long vibrate.

The first time a young girl listens to the language of love, even if it steals into her heart gently and soothingly as the sweet south wind, wakening the sleeping fragrance of a thousand bosom flowers, every feeling flutters and trembles like the leaves of the mimosa, and recoils from the slightest contact. But when she is forced suddenly and rudely to hear the accents of passion, with which she associates the idea of guilt, and treachery, and shame, she feels as if some robber had broken into the temple consecrated to the purest, most innocent emotions, and stolen the golden treasures hidden there. This alone was sufficient to wound and terrify the young and sensitive Helen, but when her sister assailed her with such a temper of wrathful accusations, accusations so shameful and degrading, it is not strange that she was wrought up to the state of partial frenzy which led her to rush to a father's bosom for safety and repose. [152]

And where was Mittie, the unhappy victim of her own wild, ungovernable passion?

She remained in her room with her door locked, seated at the window, looking out into the darkness, which was illuminated by the rays of a waxing moon. She could see the white bark of the beech tree, conspicuous among the other trees, and knowing the spot where the letters were carved, she imagined she could trace them all, and that they were the scarlet color of blood.

She had no light in her room, but feeling in her writing desk for the pen-knife, she stole down stairs the back way and took the path she had so often walked with Clinton. She was obliged to

pass the room where Helen lay, and glancing in at the window when the curtain fluttered, she could see her pale, sad-looking face, and she did not like to look again. She knew she had wronged her, for the moment she had given utterance to her railing words, conscience told her they were false. This conviction, however, did not lessen the rancor and bitterness of her feelings. Hurrying on, she paused in front of the beech tree, and the cyphers glared upon her as if seen through a magnifying glass—they looked so large and fiery. Opening her pen-knife, she smiled as a moonbeam glared on its keen, blue edge. Had any one seen the expression of her features, as she gazed at that shining, open blade, they would have shuddered, and trembled for her purpose.

With a quick, hurried motion, she began to cut the bark from round the letters, till they seemed to melt away into one large cavity. She knew that some one was coming behind her, and she knew, too, by a kind of intuition, that it was Clinton, but she did not pause in her work of destruction. [153]

"Mittie! what are you doing?" he exclaimed. "Good Heavens!—give me that knife."

As she threw up her right hand to elude his grasp, she saw the blood streaming from her fingers. She was not aware that she had cut herself. She suffered no pain. She gazed with pleasure on the flowing blood.

"Let me bind my handkerchief round the wound," said Clinton, in a gentle, sympathizing voice. "You are really enough to drive one frantic."

"*Your handkerchief!*" she exclaimed, in an accent of ineffable scorn. "I would put a bandage of fire round it as soon. *Drive one frantic!* I suppose your conduct must make one very calm, very cool and reasonable. But I can tell you, Bryant Clinton, that when you made me the plaything of your selfish and changing passions, you began a dangerous game. You thought me, perchance, a love-sick maiden, whose heart would break in silence and darkness, but you know me not. I will not suffer alone. If I sink into an abyss of wretchedness, it shall not be alone. I will drag down with me all who have part or lot in my misery and despair."

Clinton's eye quailed before the dark, passionate glance riveted upon him. The moon gave only a pale, doubtful lustre, and its reflection on her face was like the night-light on deep waters—a dark, quivering brightness, giving one an idea of beauty and splendor and danger. Her hair was loose and hung around her in black, massy folds, imparting an air of wild, tragic majesty to her figure. Twisting one of the sable tresses round her bleeding fingers, she pressed them against her heart.

"Mittie," said Clinton. There was something remarkable in the voice of Clinton. Its lowest tones, and they were exceedingly low, were as distinct and clear as the notes of the most exquisitely tuned instrument. "Mittie! why have you wrought yourself up to this terrible pitch of passion? Yet why do I ask? I know but too well. I uttered a few words of gallant seeming to your young sister, which sent her flying like a startled deer through the woods. Your reproaches completed the work my folly began. Between us both we have frightened the poor child almost into spasms. Verily we have been much to blame." [154]

"Deceiver! you told her that you loved me no more. Deny it if you can."

"I will neither assert nor deny any thing. If you have not sufficient confidence in my honor, and reliance on my truth to trust and believe me, my only answer to your reproaches shall be silence. Light indeed must be my hold on your heart, if a breath has power to shake it. The time has been—but, alas!—how sadly are you changed!"

"I changed!" repeated she. "Would to Heaven I could change!"

"Yes, changed. Be not angry, but hear me. Where is the softness, the womanly tenderness and grace that first enchanted me, forming as it did so bewitching a contrast with the dazzling splendor of your beauty? I did not know then that daggers were sheathed in your brilliant eyes, or that scorn lurked in those beautiful lips. Nay, interrupt me not. Where, I say, is the loving, trusting being I loved and adored? You watch me with the vigilance of hatred, the intensity of revenge. Every word and look have been misconstrued, every action warped and perverted by prejudice and passion. You are jealous, frantically jealous of a mere child, with whom I idly amused myself one passing moment. You have made your parents look coldly and suspiciously upon me. You have taught me a bitter lesson."

Every drop of blood forsook the cheeks of Mittie. She felt as if she were congealing—so cold fell the words of Clinton on her burning heart.

"Then I have forever estranged you. You love me no longer!" said she, in a faint, husky voice.

"No, Mittie, I love you still. Constancy is one of the elements of my nature. But love no longer imparts happiness. The chain of gold is transformed to iron, and the links corrode and lacerate the heart. I feel that I have cast a cloud over the household, and it is necessary to depart. I go to-morrow, and may you recover that peace of which I have momentarily deprived you. I shall pass away from your memory like the pebble that ruffles a moment the face of the water then sinks, and is remembered no more."

"What, going—going to-morrow?" she exclaimed, catching hold of his arm for support, for she felt sick and dizzy at the sudden annunciation. [155]

"Yes!" he replied, drawing her arm through his, and retaining her hand, which was as cold as ice. "Your brother Louis will accompany me. It is meet that he should visit my Virginian home, since I have so long trespassed on the hospitality of his. Whether I ever return depends upon yourself. If my presence bring only discord and sorrow, it is better, far better, that I never look upon your face again. If you cannot trust me, let us part forever."

They were now very near the house, very near a large tree, which had a rustic bench leaning against it. Its branches swept against the fence which enclosed Miss Thusa's bleaching ground. The white arch of the bridge spanned the shadows that hung darkly over it. Mittie drew away her arm from Clinton and sank down upon the bench. She felt as if the roots of her heart were all drawing out, so intense was her anguish.

Clinton going away—probably never to return—going, too, cold, altered and estranged. It was in vain he breathed to her words of love, the loving spirit, the vitality was wanting. And this was the dissolving of her wild dreams of love—of her fair visions of felicity. But the keenest pang was imparted by the conviction that it was her own fault. He had told her so, dispassionately and deliberately. It was her own evil temper that had disenchanting him. It was her own dark passions which had destroyed the spell her beauty had wrapped around him.

What the warnings of a father, the admonitions of friends had failed to effect, a few words from the lips of Clinton had suddenly wrought. He had loved. He should love her once more—for she would be soft and gentle and womanly for his sake. She would be kind to Helen, and courteous to all. This flashing moment of introspection gave her a glimpse of her own heart which made her shudder. It was not, however, the sunlight of truth, growing brighter and brighter, that made the startling revelation; it was the lightning glare of excitement glancing into the dark abysses of passion, fiery and transitory, leaving behind a deeper, heavier gloom. Self-abased by the image on which she had been gazing, and subdued by the might of her grief, she covered her face with her hands and wept the bitterest tears that ever fell from the eyes of woman. They were drops of molten pride, hot and blistering, leaving the eyes blood-shot and dim. It was a strange thing to see the haughty Mittie weep. Clinton sat down beside her, and poured the oil of his smooth, seductive words on the troubled waves he had lashed into foam. Soft, low, and sad as the whispers of the autumn wind, his voice murmured in her ear, sad, for it breathed but of parting. She continued to weep, but her tears no longer flowed from the springs of agony.

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"Mittie!" A sterner voice than that of Clinton's breathed her name. "Mittie, you must come in, the night air is too damp."

It was her father who spoke, of whose approach she was not aware. He spoke with an air of authority which he seldom assumed, and taking her hand, led her into the house.

All the father was moved within him, at the sight of his daughter's tears. It was the first time that he had seen them flow, or at least he never remembered to have seen her weep. She had not wept when a child, by the bed of a dying mother—and the tears of childhood are usually an ever-welling spring)—she had not wept over her grave—and now her bosom was laboring with ill-suppressed sobs. What power had blasted the granite rock that covered the fountain of her sensibilities?

He entreated her to confide in him, to tell him the cause of her anguish. If Clinton had been trifling with her happiness, he should not depart without feeling the weight of parental indignation.

"No man dare to trifle with my happiness!" she exclaimed. "Clinton dare not do it. Reserve your indignation for real wrongs. Wait till I ask redress. Have I not a right to weep, if I choose? Helen may shed oceans of tears, without being called to account. All I ask, all I pray for, is to be left alone."

Thus the proud girl closed the avenues of sympathy and consolation, and shut herself up with her own corroding thoughts, for the transient feelings of humility and self-abasement had passed away with the low, sweet echoes of the voice of Clinton, leaving nothing but the sullen memory of her grief. And yet the hope that he still loved her was the vital spark that sustained and warmed her. His last words breathed so much of his early tenderness and devotion, his manner possessed all its wonted fascination.

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A calm succeeded, if not peace.

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CHAPTER X.

An ancient woman there was, who dwelt
In an old gray collage all alone—
She turned her wheel the live long day—
There was music, I ween, in its solemn drone.
As she twisted the flax, the threads of thought

Kept twisting too, dark, mystic threads—
And the tales she told were legends old,
Quaint fancies, woven of lights and shades.

It is said that absence is like death, and that through its softening shadow, faults, and even vices, assume a gentle and unforbidding aspect. But it is not so. Death, the prime minister of God, invests with solemn majesty the individual on whom he impresses his cold, white seal. The weakest, meanest being that ever drew the breath of life is awe-inspiring, wrapped in the mystery of death. It seems as if the invisible spirit might avenge the insult offered to its impassive, deserted companion. But absence has no such commanding power. If the mind has been enthralled by the influence of personal fascination, there is generally a sudden reaction. The judgment, liberated from captivity, exerts its newly recovered strength, and becomes more arbitrary and uncompromising for the bondage it has endured.

Now Bryant Clinton was gone, Mr. Gleason wondered at his own infatuation. No longer spell-bound by the magic of his eye, and the alluring grace of his manners, he could recall a thousand circumstances which had previously made no impression on his mind. He blamed himself for allowing Louis to continue in such close intimacy with one, of whose parentage and early history he knew nothing. He blamed himself still more, for permitting his daughter such unrestricted intercourse with a young man so dangerously attractive. He blamed himself still more, for consenting to the departure of his son with a companion, in whose principles he did not confide, and of whose integrity he had many doubts. Why had he suffered this young man to wind around the household in smooth and shining coils, insinuating himself deeper and deeper into the heart, and binding closer and closer the faculties which might condemn, and the will that might resist his sorcery? [159]

He blushed one moment for his weakness, the next upbraided himself for the harshness of his judgment, for the uncharitableness of his conclusions. The first letter which he received from Louis, did not remove his apprehensions. He said Clinton had changed his plans. He did not intend to return immediately to Virginia, but to travel awhile first, and visit some friends, whom he had neglected for the charming home he had just quitted. Louis dwelt with eloquent diffuseness on the advantages of traveling with such a companion, of the fine opportunity he had of seeing something of the world, after leading the student's monotonous and secluded life. Enclosed in this letter were bills of a large amount, contracted at college, of whose existence the father was perfectly unconscious. No reference was made to these, save in the postscript, most incoherent in expression, and written evidently with an unsteady hand. He begged his father to forgive him for having forgotten—the word *forgotten* was partially erased, and *neglected* substituted in its place—ah! Louis, Louis, you should have said *feared* to present to him before his departure. He threw himself upon the indulgence of a parent, who he knew would be as ready to pardon the errors, as he was able to understand the temptation to which youth was exposed, when deprived of parental guidance.

The letter dropped from Mr. Gleason's hand. A dark cloud gathered on his brow. A sharp pain darted through his heart. His son, his ingenuous, noble, high-minded boy had deceived him—betrayed his confidence, and wasted, with the recklessness of a spendthrift, money to which he had no legitimate claims.

When Louis entered college, and during the whole course of his education there, Mr. Gleason had defrayed his necessary expenses, and supplied him liberally with spending money.

"Keep out of debt, my son," was his constant advice. "In every unexpected emergency apply to me. Debt unnecessarily recurred is both dishonorable and disgraceful. When a boy contracts debts unknown to his parents, they are associated with shame and ruin. Beware of temptation." [160]

Mr. Gleason was not rich. He was engaged in merchandise, and had an income sufficient for the support of his family, sufficient to supply every want, and gratify every wish within the bounds of reason; but he had nothing to throw away, nothing to scatter broadcast beneath the ploughshare of ruin. He did not believe that Louis had fallen into disobedience and error without a guide in sin. Like Eve, he had been beguiled by a serpent, and he had eaten of the fruit of the tree of forbidden knowledge, whose taste

"Brought death into the world,
And all our woe!"

That serpent must be Clinton, that Lucifer, that son of the morning, that seeming angel of light. Thus, in the excitement of his anger, he condemned the young man, who, after all, might be innocent of all guile, and free from all transgression.

Crushing the papers in his hand, he saw a line which had escaped his eye before. It was this—

"I cannot tell you where to address me, as we are now on the wing. I shall write again soon."

"So he places himself beyond the reach of admonition and recall," thought Mr. Gleason. "Oh! Louis, had your mother lived, how would her heart have been wrung by the knowledge of your aberration from rectitude! And how will the kind and noble being who fills that mother's place in our affections and home, mourn over her weak and degenerate boy."

Yes! she did mourn, but not without hope. She had too much faith in the integrity of Louis to

believe him capable of deliberate transgression. She knew his ardent temperament his convivial spirit, and did not think it strange that he should be led into temptation. He must not withdraw his confidence, because it had been once betrayed. Neither would she suffer so dark a cloud of suspicion to rest upon Clinton. It was unjust to suspect him, when he was surrounded by so many young, and doubtless, evil companions. She regretted Clinton's sojourn among them, since it had had so unhappy an influence on Mittie, but it was cowardly to plunge a dagger into the back of one on whose face their hospitable smiles had so lately beamed. We have said that she had a small property of her own. She insisted upon drawing on this for the amount necessary to settle the bills of Louis. She had reserved it for the children's use, and perhaps when Louis was made aware of the source whence pecuniary assistance came, he would blush for the drain, and shame would restrain him from future extravagance. Mr. Gleason listened, hoped and believed. The cloud lighted up, and if it did not entirely pass away, glimpses of sunshine were seen breaking through.

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And this was the woman whom Mittie disdained to honor with the title of *mother!*

Helen had recovered from the double shock she had received the night previous to Clinton's departure, but she was not the same Helen that she was before. Her childhood was gone. The flower leaves of her heart unfolded, not by the soft, genial sunshine, but torn open by the whirlwind's power. Never more could she meet Arthur Hazleton with the innocent freedom which had made their intercourse so delightful. If he took her hand, she trembled and withdrew it. If she met his eye, she blushed and turned away her glance—that eye, which though it flashed not with the fires of passion, had such depth, and strength, and intensity in its expression. Her embarrassment was contagious, and constraint and reserve took the place of confidence and ingenuousness; like the semi-transparent drapery over a beautiful picture, which suffers the lineaments to be traced, while the warm coloring and brightness of life are chilled and obscured.

The sisters were as much estranged as if they were the inmates of different abodes. Mrs. Gleason had prepared a room for Helen adjoining her own, resolved she should be removed as far as possible from Mittie's dagger tongue. Thus Mittie was left to the solitude she courted, and which no one seemed disposed to disturb. She remained the most of her time in her own chamber, seldom joining the family except at table, where she appeared more like a stranger than a daughter or a sister. She seemed to take no interest in any thing around her, nor did she seek to inspire any. She looked paler than formerly, and a purplish shade dimmed the brilliancy of her dazzling eyes.

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"You look pale, my daughter," her father would sometimes say. "I fear you are not well."

"I am perfectly well," she would answer, with a manner so cold and distant, sympathy was at once repelled.

"Will you not sit with us?" Mrs. Gleason would frequently ask, as she and Helen drew near the blazing fire, with their work-baskets or books, for winter was now abroad in the land. "Will you not read to us, or with us?"

"I prefer being in my own room," was the invariable answer; and usually at night, when the curtains were let down, and the lamps lighted in the apartment, warm and glowing with the genialities and comforts of home, the young doctor would come in and occupy Mittie's vacant seat. Notwithstanding the comparative coldness and reserve of Helen's manners, his visits became more and more frequent. He seemed reconciled to the loss of the ingenuous, confiding child, since he had found in its stead the growing charms of womanhood.

Arthur was a fine reader. His voice had that minor key which touches the chords of tenderness and feeling—that voice so sweet at the fireside, so adapted to poetry and all deep and earnest thoughts. He did not read on like a machine, without pausing to make remark or criticism, but his beautiful, eloquent commentaries came in like the symphonies of an organ. He drew forth the latent enthusiasm of Helen, who, forgetting herself and Mittie's withering accusations, expressed her sentiments with a grace, simplicity and fervor peculiar to herself. At the commencement of the evening she generally took her sewing from the basket, and her needle would flash and fly like a shooting arrow, but gradually her hands relaxed, the work fell into her lap, and yielding to the combined charms of genius and music, the divine music of the human voice, she gave herself up completely to the rapture of drinking in

"Those silver sounds, so soft, so dear,
The listener held her breath to hear."

If Arthur lifted his eyes from the page, which he had a habit of doing, he was sure to encounter a glance of bright intelligence and thrilling sensibility, instantaneously withdrawn, and then he often lost his place, skipped over a paragraph, or read the same sentence a second time, while that rich mantling glow, so seldom seen on the cheek of manhood, stole slowly over his face.

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These were happy evenings, and Helen could have exclaimed with little Frank in the primer, "Oh! that winter would last forever!" And yet there were times when she as well as her parents was oppressed with a weight of anxious sorrow that was almost insupportable, on account of Louis. He came not, he wrote not—and the only letter received from him had excited the most painful apprehensions for his moral safety. It contained shameful records of his past deviations from rectitude, and judging of the present by the past, they had every reason to fear that he had become an alien from virtue and home. Mr. Gleason seldom spoke of him, but his long fits of abstraction, the gloom of his brow, and the inquietude of his eye, betrayed the anxiety and grief

rankling within.

Helen knew not the contents of her brother's letter, nor the secret cause of grief that preyed on her father's mind, but his absence and silence were trials over which she openly and daily mourned with deep and increasing sorrow.

"We shall hear from him to-morrow. He will come to-morrow." This was the nightly lullaby to her disappointed and murmuring heart.

Mittie likewise repeated to herself the same refrain "He will come to-morrow. He will write to-morrow." But it was not of Louis that the prophecy was breathed. It was of another, who had become the one thought.

Helen had not forgotten her old friend Miss Thusa, whom the rigors of winter confined more closely than ever to her lonely cabin. Almost every day she visited her, and even if the ground were covered with snow, and icicles hung from the trees, there was a path through the woods, printed with fairy foot-tracks, that showed where Helen had walked. Mr. Gleason supplied the solitary spinster with wood ready out for the hearth, had her cottage banked with dark red tan, and furnished her with many comforts and luxuries. He never forgot her devoted attachment to his dead wife, who had commended to his care and kindness the lone woman on her dying bed. Mrs. Gleason frequently accompanied Helen in her visits, and as Miss Thusa said, "always came with full hands and left a full heart behind her." Helen sometimes playfully asked her to tell her the history of the wheel so long promised, but she put her off with a shake of the head, saying—"she should hear it by and by, when the right time was at hand."

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"But when is the right time, Miss Thusa?" asked Helen. "I begin to think it is to-morrow."

"To-morrow never comes," replied Miss Thusa, solemnly, "but death does. When his footsteps cross the old stile and tramp over the mossy door-stones, I'll tell you all about that ancient machine. It won't do any good till then. You are too young yet. I feel better than I did in autumn, and may last longer than I thought I should—but, perhaps, when the ground thaws in the spring the old tree will loosen and fall—or break off suddenly near the root. I have seen such things in my day."

"Oh! Miss Thusa," said Helen, "I never want to hear any thing about it, if its history is to be bought so dear—indeed I do not."

"Only if you should marry, child, before I die," continued Miss Thusa, musingly, "you shall know then. It is not very probable that such will be the case; but it is astonishing how young girls shoot up into womanhood, now-a-days."

"It will be a long time before I shall think of marrying, Miss Thusa," answered Helen, laughing. "I believe I will live as you do, in a cottage of my own, with my wheel for companion and familiar friend."

"It is not such as you that are born to live alone," said the spinster, passing her hand lovingly over Helen's fair, warm cheek. "You are a love-vine that must have something to grow upon. No, no—don't talk in that way. It don't sound natural. It don't come from the heart. Now *I* was made to be by myself. I never saw the man I wanted to live one day with—much less all the days of my life. They may say this is sour grapes, and call me an old maid, but I don't care for that; I must have my own way, and I know it is a strange one; and there never was a man created that didn't want to have his. You laugh, child. I hope you will never find it out to your cost. But you havn't any will of your own; so it will be all as it should be, after all."

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"Oh, yes I have, Miss Thusa; I like to have my own way as well as any one—when I think I am right."

"What makes your cheeks redden so, and your heart flutter like a bird caught in a snare?" cried the spinster, looking thoughtfully, almost sorrowfully, into Helen's soft, loving, hazel eyes. "*That step* doesn't cross my threshold so often for nothing. You would know it in an army of ten thousand."

The door opened and Arthur Hazleton entered. The day was cold, and a comfortable fire blazed in the chimney. The fire-beams that were reflected from Helen's glowing cheek might account for its burning rose, for it even gave a warmer tint to Miss Thusa's dark, gray form. Arthur drew his chair near Helen, who as usual occupied a little stool in the corner.

"What magnificent strings of coral you have, Miss Thusa?" said he, looking up to a triple garland of red peppers, strung on some of her own unbleached linen thread, and suspended over the fire-place. "I suppose they are more for ornament than use."

"I never had any thing for ornament in my life," said Miss Thusa. "I supply the whole neighborhood with peppers; and I do think a drink of pepper tea helps one powerfully to bear the winter's cold."

"I think I must make you my prime minister, Miss Thusa," said the young doctor, "for I scarcely ever visit a patient, that I don't find some traces of your benevolence, in the shape of balmy herbs and medicinal shrubs. How much good one can do in the world if they only think of it!"

"It is little good that I've ever done," cried the spinster. "All my comfort is that I havn't done a great deal of harm."

Opening the door of a closet, at the right of the chimney, she stooped to lift a log of wood, but Arthur springing up, anticipated her movement, and replenished the already glowing hearth.

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"You keep glorious fires, Miss Thusa," said he, retreating from the hot sparkles that came showering on the hearth, and the magnificent blaze that roared grandly up the chimney.

"It is *her* father that sends me the wood—and if it isn't his daughter that is warmed by my fire-side, let the water turn to ice on these bricks."

"And now, Miss Thusa," said the young doctor, "while we are enjoying this hospitable warmth, tell us one of those good old-fashioned stories, Helen used to love so much to hear. It is a long time since I have heard one—and I am sure Helen will thank me for the suggestion."

"I ought to be at my wheel, instead of fooling with my tongue," replied Miss Thusa, jerking her spectacles down on the bridge of her nose. "I shan't earn the salt of my porridge at this rate; besides there's too much light; somehow or other, I never could feel like reciting them in broad daylight. There must be a sort of a shadow, to make me inspired."

"Please Miss Thusa, oblige the doctor this time," pleaded Helen. "I'll come and spin all day tomorrow for you, and send you a sack of salt beside."

"Set a kitten to spinning!" exclaimed Miss Thusa, her grim features relaxing into a smile—putting at the same time her wheel against the wall, and seating herself in the corner opposite to Helen.

"Thank you," cried Helen, "I knew you would not refuse. Now please tell us something gentle and beautiful—something that will make us better and happier. Ghosts, you know, never appear till darkness comes. The angels do."

Miss Thusa, sat looking into the fire, with a musing, dreamy expression, or rather on the ashes, which formed a gray bed around the burning coals. Her thoughts were, however, evidently wandering inward, through the dim streets and shadowy aisles of that Herculaneum of the soul—memory.

Arthur laid his hand with an admonishing motion on Helen, whose lips parted to speak, and the trio sat in silence for a few moments, waiting the coming inspiration. It has been so often said that we do not like to repeat the expression, but it really would have been a study for a painter—that old, gray room (for the walls being unpainted were of the color of Miss Thusa's dress;) the antique, brass-bound wheel, the scarlet tracery over the chimney, and the three figures illuminated by the flame-light of the blazing chimney. It played, that flame-light, with rich, warm lustre on Helen's soft, brown hair and roseate cheek, quivered with purplish radiance among Arthur's darker locks—and lighted up with a sunset glow, Miss Thusa's hoary tresses.

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"Gentle and beautiful!" repeated the oracle. "Yes! every thing seems beautiful to the young. If I could remember ever feeling young, I dare say beautiful memories would come back to me. 'Tis very strange, though, that the older I grow, the pleasanter are the pictures that are reflected on my mind. The way grows smoother and clearer. I suppose it is like going out on a dark night—at first you can hardly see the hand before you, but as you go groping along, it lightens up more and more."

She paused, looked from Arthur Hazleton to Helen, then from Helen to Arthur, as if she were endeavoring to embue her spirit with the grace and beauty of youth.

"I remember a tale," she resumed, "which I heard or read, long, long ago—which perhaps I've never told. It is about a young Prince, who was heir to a great kingdom, somewhere near the place where the garden of Eden once was. When the King, his father, was on his death bed, he called his son to him, and told him that he was going to die.

"'And now, my son,' he said, 'remember my parting words. I leave you all alone, without father or mother, brother or sister—without any one to love or love you. Last night I had a dream, and you know God's will was made known in dreams, to holy men of old. There came, in my dream, an aged man, with a beard as white as ermine, that hung down like a mantle over his breast, with a wand in his right hand, and stood beside my bed.

"'Hear my words,' he exclaimed, in a solemn voice, 'and tell them to your son. When you are dead and gone, let him gird himself for a long pilgrimage. If he stay here, he will be turned into a marble statue. To avert this doom, he must travel through the world till he finds a young maiden's warm, living heart—and the maiden must be fair and good, and be willing to let the knife enter her bosom, and her heart be taken bleeding thence. And then he must travel farther still, till a white dove shall come from the East, and fold its wings on his breast. If you would save your kingdom and your son, command him to do this. It is the will of the Most High.'

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"The old man departed, but his words echoed like thunder in my ears. Obey him, my son, the vision came from above.

"The young Prince saw his father laid in the tomb, then prepared himself for his pilgrimage. He did not like the idea of being turned into marble, neither did he like the thought of taking the heart of a young and innocent maiden, if he should find one willing to make the offering—which he did not believe. The Prince had a bright eye and a light step, and he was dressed in brave attire. The maidens looked out of the windows as he passed along, and the young men sighed

with envy. He came to a great palace, and being a King's son, he thought he had a right to enter it; and there he saw a young and beautiful lady, all shining with diamonds and pearls. There was a great feast waiting in the hall, and she asked him to stay, and pressed him to eat and drink, and gave him many glasses of wine, as red as rubies. After the feast was over, and he felt most awfully as he did it, he begged for her heart, the tears glittering in his eyes for sorrow. She smiled, and told him it was already his—but—when with a shaking hand he took a knife, and aimed it at her breast, she screamed and rushed out of the hall, as if the evil one was behind her—Don't interrupt me, child—don't—I shall forget it all if you do. Well, the Prince went on his way, thinking the old man had sent him on a fool's errand—but he dared not disobey his dead father, seeing he was a King. It would take me from sun to sun to tell of all the places where he stopped, and of all the screaming and threatening that followed him wherever he went. It is a wonder he did not turn deaf as an adder. At last he got very tired and sorrowful, and sat down by the wayside and wept, thinking he would rather turn to marble at once, than live by such a horrible remedy. He saw a little cabin close by, but he had hardly strength to reach it, and he thought he would stay there and die.

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"What makes you weep?" said a voice so sweet he thought it was music itself, and looking up, he saw a young maiden, who had come up a path behind him, with a pitcher of water on her head. She was beautiful and fair to look upon, though her dress was as plain as could be. She offered him water to drink, and told him if he would go with her to the little cabin, her mother would give him something to eat, and a bed to lie upon, for the night dew was beginning to fall. He had not on his fine dress at this time, having changed it for that of a young peasant, thinking perhaps he would succeed better in disguise. So he followed her steps, and they gave him milk, and bread, and honey, and a nice bed to sleep upon, though it was somewhat hard and coarse. And there he fell sick, and they nursed him day after day, and brought him back to health. The young maiden grew more lovely in his eye, and her voice sounded more and more sweet in his ear. Sometimes he thought of the sacrifice he was to ask, but he could not do it. No, he would die first. One night, the old man with the long, white beard, came in his dream, to his bedside. He looked dark and frowning.

"This is the maiden," he cried, "your pilgrimage is ended here. Do as thou art bidden, and then depart."

"When the morning came, he was pale and sad, and the young girl was pale and sad from sympathy. Then the Prince knelt down at her feet, and told her the history of his father's dream and his own, and of his exceeding great and bitter sorrow. He wept, but the maiden smiled, and she looked like an angel with that sweet smile on her face.

"My heart is yours," she said, "I give it willingly and cheerfully. Drain from it every drop of blood, if you will—I care not, so it save *you* from perishing."

"Then the eyes of the young Prince shone out like the sun after a storm, and drawing his dagger from his bosom, he—"

"Stop, Miss Thusa—don't go on," interrupted Helen, pale with emotion. "I cannot bear to hear it. It is too awful. I asked you for something beautiful, and you have chosen the most terrible theme. Don't finish it."

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"Is there not something beautiful," said the young doctor, bending down, and addressing her in a low voice—"is there not something beautiful in such pure and self-sacrificing love? Is there no chord in your heart that thrills responsive as you listen? Oh, Helen—I am sure *you* could devote yourself for one you loved."

"Oh, yes!" she answered, forgetting, in her excitement, all her natural timidity. "I could do it joyfully, glorying in the sacrifice. But he, so selfish, so cruel, so sanguinary—it is from him I shrink. His heart is already marble—it cannot change."

"Wait, child—wait till you hear the end," cried Miss Thusa, inspired by the effect of her words. "He drew a dagger from his bosom, and was about to plunge it in his *own* heart, and die at her feet, when the old man of his dream entered and caught hold of his arm."

"'Tis enough," he cried. "The trial is over. She has given you her heart, her warm, living heart—take it and cherish it. Without love, man turns to stone—and thus becomes a marble statue. You have proved your own love and hers, since you are willing to die for each other. Put up your dagger, and if you ever wound that heart of hers, the vengeance of Heaven rest upon you."

"Thus saying, he departed, but strange to tell, as he was speaking, his face was all the time growing younger and fairer, his white beard gradually disappeared, and as he went through the door, a pair of white wings, tipped with gold, began to flutter on his shoulders. Then they knew it was an angel that had been with them, and they bowed themselves down to the floor and trembled. Is there any need of my telling you, that the Prince married the young maiden, and carried her to his kingdom, and set her on his throne? Is there any need of my saying how beautiful she looked, with a golden crown on her head, and a golden chain on her neck, and how meek and good she was all the time, in spite of her finery? No, I am sure there isn't. Now, I must go to spinning."

"That *is* beautiful!" cried Helen, the color coming back to her cheeks, "but the white dove, Miss Thusa, that was to fold its wings on his bosom. You have forgotten that."

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"Have I? Yes—yes. Sure enough, I am getting old and forgetful. The white dove that was to come from the east! I remember it all now:—After he had reigned awhile he dreamed again that he was commanded to go in quest of the dove, and take his young Queen with him. They were to go on foot as pilgrims, and leave all their pomp and state behind them, with their faces towards the east, and their eyes lifted to Heaven. While they were journeying on, the young Queen began to languish, and grow pale and wan. At last she sunk down at his feet, and told him that she was going to die, and leave him alone in his pilgrimage. The young King smote his breast, and throwing himself down by her side, prayed to God that he might die too. Then she comforted him, and told him to live for his people, and bow to the will of the Most High.

"'You were willing to die for me,' she cried, 'show greater love by being willing to live when I am gone—love to God and me.'

"'The will of God be done,' he exclaimed, prostrating himself before the Lord. Then a soft flutter was heard above his head, and a beautiful white dove flew into his bosom. At the same time an angel appeared, whom he knew was the old man of his dream, all glorified as it were, and the moment he breathed on her, the dying Queen revived and smiled on her husband, just as she did in her mother's cabin.

"'You were willing to give your own life for hers,' said the angel to the young King, 'and that was love. You were willing to give her up to God, and that was greater love to a greater being. Thou hast been weighed in the balance and not found wanting. Return and carry in thy bosom the milk-white dove, and never let it flee from thy dwelling.'

"The angel went up into Heaven—the young King and Queen returned to their palace, where they had a long, happy, and godly reign."

The logs in the chimney had burned down to a bed of mingled scarlet and jet, that threw out a still more intense heat, and the sun had rolled down the west, leaving a bed of scarlet behind it, while Miss Thusa related the history of the young Prince of the East. [172]

Helen, in the intensity of her interest, had forgotten the gliding hours, and wondered where the day had flown.

"I think if you related me such stories, Miss Thusa, every day," said the young doctor, "I should be a wiser and better man. I shall not forget this soon."

"I do not believe I shall tell another story as long as I live," replied she, shaking her head oracularly. "I had to exert myself powerfully to remember and put that together as I wanted to. Well, well—all the gifts of God are only loans after all, and He has a right to take them away whenever He chooses. We mustn't murmur and complain about it."

"Dear Miss Thusa, this is the best story you ever told," cried Helen, while she muffled herself for her cold, evening walk. "There is something so touching in its close—and the moral sinks deep in the heart. No, no; I hope to hear a hundred more at least, like this. I am glad you have given up ghosts for angels."

The wind blew in strong, wintry gusts, as they passed through the leafless woods. Helen shivered with cold, in spite of the warm garments that sheltered her. The scarlet of the horizon had faded into a chill, darkening gray, and as they moved through the shadows, they were scarcely distinguishable themselves from the trees whose dry branches creaked above their heads. Arthur folded his cloak around Helen to protect her from the inclemency of the air, and the warmth of summer stole into her heart. They talked of Miss Thusa, of the story she had told, of its interest and its moral, and Arthur said he would be willing to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, over burning coals, for such a heart as the maiden offered to the young Prince. That very heart was throbbing close, very close to his, but its deep emotions found no utterance through the lips. Helen remarked that she would willingly travel with bleeding feet from end to end of the universe, for the beautiful white dove, which was the emblem of God's holy spirit.

"Helen, that dove is nestling in your bosom already," cried Arthur Hazleton; "but the heart I sigh for, will it indeed ever be mine?"

Helen could not answer, for she dared not interpret the words which, though addressed to herself, might have reference to another. With the humility and self-depreciation usually the accompaniment of deep reverence and devotion, she could not believe it possible that one so exalted in intellect, so noble in character, so beloved and honored by all who knew him, so much older than herself; one, too, who knew all her weaknesses and faults, could ever look upon her otherwise than with brotherly kindness and regard. Then she contrasted his manner with that of Clinton, for his were the only love-words that ever were breathed into her ear, and she was sure that if Clinton's was the language of love, Arthur's was that of friendship only. Perhaps her silence chilled, it certainly hushed the expression of his thoughts, for he spoke not till they reached the threshold of her home. The bright light gleaming through the blinds, showed them how dark it had grown abroad since they left Miss Thusa's cottage. Helen was conscious then how very slowly they must have walked. [173]

"Thank you," said she, releasing herself from the sheltering folds that had enveloped her. "Hark!" she suddenly exclaimed, "whose voice is that I hear within? It is—it must be Louis. Dear, dear Louis!—so long absent!—so anxiously looked for!"

Even in that moment of joy, while bounding over the threshold with the fleetness of a fawn, the

dreaded form of Clinton rose before the eye of her imagination, and arrested for a moment her flying steps. Again she heard the voice of Louis, and Clinton was forgotten.

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CHAPTER XI.

“Go, sin no more! Thy penance o’er,
A new and better life begin!
God maketh thee forever free
From the dominion of thy sin!
Go, sin no more! He will restore
The peace that filled thy heart before,
And pardon thine iniquity.”—*Longfellow*.

“I am glad you came *alone*, brother,” cried Helen, when, after the supper was over, they all drew around the blazing hearth. Louis turned abruptly towards her, and as the strong firelight fell full upon his face, she was shocked even more than at first, with his altered appearance. The bloom, the brightness, the joyousness of youth were gone, leaving in their stead, paleness, and dimness, and gloom. He looked several years older than when he left home, but his was not the maturity of the flower, but its premature wilting. There was a worm in the calyx, preying on the vitality of the blossom, and withering up its beauty.

Yes! Louis had been feeding on the husks of dissipation, though in his father’s house there was food enough and to spare. He had been selling his immortal birth-right for that which man has in common with the brutes that perish, and the reptiles that crawl in the dust. Slowly, reluctantly at first, had he stepped into the downward path, looking back with agonies of remorse to the smooth, green, flowery plains he had left behind, striving to return, but driven forward by the gravitating power of sin. The passionate resolutions he formed from day to day of amendment, were broken, like the light twigs that grow by the mountain wayside.

He had looked upon the wine when it was red, and found in its dregs the sting of the adder. He had participated in the maddening excitement of the gaming-table, from which remorse and horror pursued him with scorpion lash. He had entered the “chambers of death”—though avenging demons guarded its threshold. Poor, tempted Louis! poor, fallen Louis! In how short a space has the whiteness of thy innocence been sullied, the glory of thy promise been obscured! But the flame fed by oxygen soon wastes away by its own intensity, and ardent passions once kindled, burn with self-consuming rapidity.

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We have not followed Louis in his wild and reckless course since he left his father’s mansion. It was too painful to witness the degeneracy of our early favorite. But the whole history of the past was written on his haggard brow and pallid cheek. It need not be recorded here. He had thought himself a life-long alien from the home he had disgraced, for never could he encounter his father’s indignant frown, or call up the blush of shame on Helen’s spotless cheek.

But one of those mighty drawings of the spirit—stronger than chains of triple steel—that thirst of the heart for pure domestic joy, which the foaming goblet can never quench—that immortal longing which rises up from the lowest abysses of sin, that yearning for pardon which stirred the bosom of the Hebrew prodigal, constrained the transgressing Louis to burst asunder the bonds of iniquity, and return to his father’s house.

“I am glad you have come alone, brother,” repeated Helen, repressing the sigh that quivered on her lips.

“Who did you expect would be my companion?” asked Louis, putting back the long, neglected locks, that fell darkly over his temples.

“I feared Bryant Clinton would return with you,” replied Helen, regretting the next moment that she had uttered a name which seemed to have the effect of galvanism on Mittie—who started spasmodically, and lifted the screen before her face. No one had asked for Clinton, yet all had been thinking of him more or less.

“I have not seen him for several weeks,” he replied, “he had business that called him in another direction, but he will probably be here soon.”

Again Mittie gave a spasmodic start, and held the screen closer to her face. Helen sighed, and looked anxiously towards her mother. The announcement excited very contradictory emotions.

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“Do you mean to imply that he is coming again as the guest of your parents, as the inmate of this home?” asked Mr. Gleason, sternly.

“Yes, sir,” replied Louis, a red streak flashing across his face. “How could it be otherwise?”

“But it *shall* be otherwise,” exclaimed Mr. Gleason, rising abruptly from his chair, and speaking

with a vehemence so unwonted that it inspired awe. "That young man shall never again, with my consent, sit down at my board, or sleep under my roof. I believe him a false, unprincipled, dangerous companion—whom my doors shall never more be opened to receive. Had it not been for him, that pale, stone-like, petrified girl, might have been brilliant and blooming, yet. Had it not been for him, I should not have the anguish, the humiliation, the shame of seeing my son, my only son, the darling of his dead mother's heart, the pride and hope of mine, a blighted being, shorn of the brightness of youth, and the glory of advancing manhood. Talk not to me of bringing the destroyer here. This fireside shall never more be darkened by his presence."

Mr. Gleason paused, but from his eye, fixed steadfastly on Louis, the long sleeping lightning darted. Mittie, who had sprung from her chair while her father was speaking, stood with white cheeks and parted lips, and eyes from which fire seemed to coruscate, gazing first at him, and then at her brother.

"Father," cried Louis, "you wrong him. My sins and transgressions are my own. Mountain high as they are, they shall not crush another. Mine is the sorrow and guilt, and mine be the penalty. I do not extenuate my own offences, but I will not criminate others. I beseech you, sir, to recall what you have just uttered, for how can I close those doors upon a friend, which have so lately been opened for him with ungrudging hospitality?"

Mittie's countenance lighted up with an indescribable expression. She caught her brother's hand, and pressing it in both hers, exclaimed—

"Nobly said, Louis. He who can hear an absent friend defamed, without defending him, is worthy of everlasting scorn." [177]

But Helen, terrified at the outburst of her father's anger, and overwhelmed with grief for her brother's humiliation, bowed her head and wept in silence.

Mr. Gleason turned his eyes, where the lightning still gleamed, from Louis to Mittie, as if trying to read her inscrutable countenance.

"Tell me, Mittie," he cried, "the whole length and breadth of the interest you have in this young man. I have suffered you to elude this subject too long. I have borne with your proud and sullen reserve too long. I have been weak and irresolute in times past, but thoroughly aroused to a sense of my authority and responsibility as a father, as well as my duty as a man, I command you to tell me all that has passed between you and Bryant Clinton. Has he proffered you marriage? Has he exchanged with you the vows of betrothal? Have you gone so far without my knowledge or approval?"

"I cannot answer such questions, sir," she haughtily replied, the hot blood rushing into her face and filling her forehead veins with purple. "You have no right to ask them in this presence. There are some subjects too sacred for investigation, and this is one. There are limits even to a father's authority, and I protest against its encroachments."

Those who are slow to arouse to anger are slow to be appeased. The flame that is long in kindling generally burns with long enduring heat. Mr. Gleason had borne, with unexampled patience, Mittie's strange and wayward temper. For the sake of family peace he had sacrificed his own self-respect, which required deference and obedience in a child. But having once broken the spell which had chained his tongue, and meeting a resisting will, his own grew stronger and more determined.

"Do you dare thus to reply to *me*, your father?" cried he; "you will find there are limits to a father's indulgence, too. Trifle not with my anger, but give me the answer I require."

"Never, sir, never," cried she, with a mien as undaunted as Charlotte Corday's, that "angel of assassination," when arraigned before the tribunal of justice. [178]

"Did you never hear of a discarded child?" said he, his voice sinking almost to a whisper, it was so choked with passion.

"Yes, sir."

"And do you not fear such a doom?"

"No, sir."

"My husband," exclaimed Mrs. Gleason, laying her hand imploringly on his shoulder, "be calm. Seek not by violence to break the stubborn will which kindness cannot bend. Let not our fireside be a scene of domestic contention, which we shall blush to recall. Leave her to the dark and sullen secrecy she prefers to our tenderness and sympathy. And, one thing I beseech you, my husband, suspend your judgment of the character of Clinton till Louis is able to explain all that is doubtful and mysterious. He is weary now, and needs rest instead of excitement."

There was magic in the touch of that gentle hand, in the tones of that persuasive voice. The father's stern brow relaxed, and a cloud of the deepest sadness extinguished the fiery anger of his glance. The cloud condensed and melted away in tears. Helen saw them, though he turned away, and shaded his face with his hand, and putting her arms round him, she kissed the hand which hung loosely at his side. This act, so tender and respectful, touched him to the heart's core.

"My child, my darling, my own sweet Helen," he cried, pressing her fondly to his bosom. "You

have always been gentle, loving and obedient. You have never wilfully given me one moment's sorrow. In the name of thy beautiful mother I bless thee, and thou shalt be blessed."

The excitement of his feelings gave an exalted tone to his voice and words, and as the benediction stole solemnly into her heart, Helen felt as if the plumage of the white dove was folded in downy softness there. In the meantime Mittie had quitted the room, and Mrs. Gleason drawing near Louis, sat down by him, and addressed him in a kind, cheering manner.

"These heavy locks must be shorn to-morrow," said she, passing her hand over his long, dark hair. "They sadden your countenance too much. A night's sleep, too, will bring back the color to your face. You are over weary now. Retire, my son, and banish every emotion but gratitude for your return. You are safe now, and all will yet be well." [179]

"Oh, mother," he answered, suffering his head to droop upon her shoulder, then suddenly lifting it, "I am not worthy to rest on this sacred pillow. I am not worthy to touch the hem of your garments, but if the deepest repentance—the keenest remorse," he paused, for his voice faltered, then added, passionately, "oh, mother—

'Not poppy, nor mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy sirups of the world
Can ever medicine me to the sweet sleep'

I once slept beneath this hallowed roof."

"No, my son—but there is a remedy more balmy and powerful than all the drugs of the East, which you can obtain without money and without price."

Louis shook his head mournfully.

"I will give you an anodyne to-night, prepared by my own hand, and to-morrow—"

"Give me the anodyne, kindest and best of mothers, but don't, for Heaven's sake, talk of to-morrow."

But whether man speak or be silent, Time, the unresting traveler, presses on. Never but once have its chariot wheels been stayed, when the sun stood still on the plains of Gibeon, and the moon hung pale and immovable over the vale of Ajalon. Sorrow and remorse are great prophets, but Time is greater still, and they can no more arrest or accelerate its progress than the breath of a new-born infant can move the eternal mountains from their base.

Louis slept, thanks to his step-mother's anodyne, and the dreaded morrow came, when the broad light of day must reveal all the inroads the indulgence of guilty passions had caused. Another revelation must be made. He knew his father would demand a full history of his conduct, and it was a relief to his burdened conscience, that had so long groaned under the weight of secret transgressions, to cast itself prostrate at the feet of parental authority in the dust and ashes of humiliation. But while he acknowledged and deplored his own vices, he could not criminate Clinton. He implored his father to inflict upon him any penalty, however severe, he knew, he felt it to be just, but not to require of him to treat his friend with ingratitude and insult. His stay would not be long. He must return very soon to Virginia. He had been prevented from doing so by a fatal and contagious disease that had been raging in the neighborhood of his home, and when that subsided, other accidental causes had constantly interfered with his design. Must the high-spirited Virginian go back to his native regions with the story so oft repeated of New England coldness and inhospitality verified in his own experience? [180]

"Say no more," said his father. "I will reflect on all you have said, and you shall know the result. Now, come with me to the counting-house, and let me see if you can put your mathematics to any practical use. Employment is the greatest safeguard against temptation."

There was one revelation which Louis did not make, and that was the amount of his debts. He dared not do it, though again and again he had opened his lips to tell it.

"To-morrow I will do it," thought he—but before the morrow came he recollected the words of Miss Thusa, uttered the last time he had visited her cabin—"If you should get into trouble and not want to vex those that are kin, you can come to me, and if you don't despise my counsel and assistance perhaps it may do you good." This had made but little impression on him at the time, but it came back to him now "*powerfully*" as Miss Thusa would say; and he thought it possible there was more meant than reached the ear. He remembered how meaningly, how even commandingly her gray eye had fixed itself on him as she spoke, and he believed in the great love which the ancient spinster bore him. At any rate he knew she would be gratified by such a proof of confidence on his part, and that with Spartan integrity she would guard the trust. It would be a relief to confide in her.

He waited till twilight and then appeared an unexpected but welcome visitor at the Hermitage, as Helen called the old gray cottage. The light in the chimney was dim, and she was hastening to kindle a more cheering blaze.

"No, Miss Thusa," said he, "I love this soft gloom. There's no need of a blaze to talk by, you know." [181]

"But I want to see you, Louis. It is long since we've watched your coming. Many a time has Helen sat where you are now, and talked about you till the tears would run down her cheeks,

wondering why you didn't come, and fearing some evil had befallen you. I've had my misgivings, too, though I never breathed them to mortal ear, ever since you went off with that long-haired upstart, who fumbled so about my wheel, trying to fool me with his soft nonsense. What has become of him?"

"He is at home, I believe—but you are too harsh in your judgment, Miss Thusa. It is strange what prejudiced you so against him."

"Something *here*," cried the spinster, striking her hand against her heart; "something that God put here, not man. I'm glad you and he have parted company; and I'm glad for more sakes than one. I never loved Mittie, but she's her mother's child, and I don't like the thought of her being miserable for life. And now, Louis, what do you want me to do for you? I can see you are in trouble, though you don't want the fire to blaze on your face. You forget I wear glasses, though they are not always at home, where they ought to be, on the bridge of my nose."

"You told me if I needed counsel or assistance, to come to you and not trouble my kindred. I am in distress, Miss Thusa, and it is my own fault. I'm in debt. I owe money that I cannot raise; I cannot tax my father again to pay the wages of sin. Tell me now how you can aid me; *you*, poor and lonely, earning only a scanty pittance by the flax on your distaff, and as ignorant of the world as simple-hearted Helen herself?"

Miss Thusa leaned her head forward on both hands, swaying her body slowly backward and forward for a few seconds; then taking the poker, she gave the coals a great flourish, which made the sparks fly to the top of the chimney.

"I'll try to help you," said she, "but if you have been doing wrong and been led away by evil companions, he, your father, ought to know it. Better find it out from yourself than anybody else."

"He knows all my misconduct," replied Louis, raising his head with an air of pride. "I would scorn to deceive him. And yet," he added, with a conscious blush, "you may accuse me of deception in this instance. He has not asked me the sum I owe—and Heaven knows I could not go and thrust my bills in his face. I thought perhaps there was some usurer, whom you had heard of, who could let me have the money. They are debts of honor, and must be paid." [182]

"Of *honor!*" repeated Miss Thusa, with a tone of ineffable contempt. "I thought you had more sense, Louis, than to talk in that nonsensical way. It's more—it's downright wicked. I know what it all means, well enough. They're debts you are ashamed of, that you had no business to make, that you dare not let your father know of; and yet you call them debts of honor."

Louis rose from his seat with a haughty and offended air.

"I was a fool to come," he muttered to himself; "I might have known better. The Evil Spirit surely prompted me."

Then walking rapidly to the door, he said—

"I came here for comfort and advice, Miss Thusa, according to your own bidding, not to listen to railings that can do no good to you or to me. I had been to you so often in my boyish difficulties, and found sympathy and kindness, I thought I should find it now. I know I do not deserve it, but I nevertheless expected it from you. But it is no matter. I may as well brave the worst at once."

Snatching up his hat and pulling it over his brows, he was about to shoot through the door, when the long arm of Miss Thusa was interposed as a barrier against him.

"There is no use in being angry with an old woman like me," said she, in a pacifying tone, just as she would soothe a fretful child. "I always speak what I think, and it is the truth, too—Gospel truth, and you know it. But come, come, sit down like a good boy, and let us talk it all over. There—I won't say another cross word to-night."

The first smile which had lighted up the face of Louis since his return, flitted over his lip, as Miss Thusa pushed him down into the chair he had quitted, and drew her own close to it.

"Now," said she, "tell me how much money you want, and I'll try to get it for you. Have faith in me. That can work wonders." [183]

After Louis had made an unreserved communication of the whole, she told him to come the next day.

"I can do nothing now," said she, "but who knows what the morrow may bring forth?"

"Who, indeed!" thought Louis, as he wended his solitary way homeward. "I know not why it is, but I cannot help having some reliance on the promises of this singular old woman. It was my perfect confidence in her truth and integrity that drew me to her. What her resources are, I know not; I fear they exist only in her own imagination; but if she should befriend me in this, mine extremity, may the holy angels guard and bless her. Alas! it is mockery for me to invoke them."

The next day when he returned to her cabin, he found her spinning with all her accustomed solemnity. He blushed with shame, as he looked round on the appearance of poverty that met his eye, respectable and comfortable poverty, it is true—but for him to seek assistance of the inmate of such a dwelling! He must have thought her a sorceress, to have believed in the existence of such a thing. He must have been maddened to have admitted such an idea.

"Forgive me, Miss Thusa," said he, with the frankness of the *boy* Louis, "forgive me for plaguing you with my troubles. I was not in my right senses yesterday, or I should not have done it. I have resolved to have no concealments from my father, and to tell him all."

Miss Thusa dipped her hand in a pocket as deep as a well, which she wore at her right side, and taking out a well-filled and heavy purse, she put it in the hand of Louis.

"There is something to help you a little," said she, without looking him in the face. "You must take it as a present from old Miss Thusa, and never say a word about it to a human being. That is all I ask of you—and it is not much. Don't thank me. Don't question me. The money was mine, honestly got and righteously given. One of these days I'll tell you where it came from, but I can't now."

Louis held the purse with a bewildered air, his fingers trembling with emotion. Never before had he felt all the ignominy and all the shame which he had brought upon himself. A hot, scalding tide came rushing with the cataract's speed through his veins, and spreading with burning hue over his face. [184]

"No! I cannot, I cannot!" he exclaimed, dropping the purse, and clenching his hands on his brow. "I did not mean to beg of your bounty. I am not so lost as to wrench from your aged hand, the gold that may purchase comfort and luxuries for all your remaining years. No, Miss Thusa, my reason has returned—my sense of honor, too—I were worse than a robber, to take advantage of your generous offer."

"Louis—Louis Gleason," cried Miss Thusa, rising from her seat, her tall, ancestral-looking figure assuming an air of majesty and command—"listen to me; if you cast that purse from you, I will never make use of it as long as I live, which won't be long. It will do no good to a human being. What do I want of money? I had rather live in this little, old, gray hut than the palace of the Queen of England. I had rather earn my bread by this wheel, than eat the food of idleness. Your father gives me fuel in winter, and his heart is warmed by the fire that he kindles for me. It does him good. It does everybody good to befriend another. What do I want of money? To whom in the wide world should I give it, but you and Helen? I have as much and more for her. My heart is drawn powerfully towards you two children, and it will continue to draw, while there is life in its fibres or blood in its veins. Take it, I say—and in the name of your mother in heaven, go, and sin no more."

"I take it," said Louis, awed into submission and humility by her prophetic solemnity, "I take it as a loan, which I will labor day and night to return. What would my father say, if he knew of this?"

"He will not know it, unless you break your word," said Miss Thusa, setting her wheel in motion, and wetting her fingers in the gourd. "You may go, now, if you will not talk of something else. I must go and get some more flax. I can see all the ribs of my distaff."

Louis knew that this was an excuse to escape his thanks, and giving her hand a reverent and silent pressure, he left the cabin. Heavy as lead lay the purse in his pocket—heavy as lead lay the heart in his bosom. [185]

Helen met him at the door, with a radiant countenance.

"Who do you think is come, brother?" she asked.

"Is it Clinton?" said he.

"Oh! no—it is Alice. A friend of her brother was coming directly here, and she accompanied him. Come and see her."

"Thank God! *she* cannot see!" exclaimed Louis, as he passed into the presence of the blind girl.

Though no beam of pleasure irradiated her sightless eyes, her bright and heightening color, the eager yet tremulous tones of her voice assured him of a joyous welcome. Alice remembered the thousand acts of kindness by which he had endeared to her the very helplessness which had called them forth. His was the hand every ready to guide her, the arm offered for her support. His were the cheering accents most welcome to her ears, and his steps had a music which belonged to no steps but his. His image, reflected on the retina of the soul, was beautiful as the dream of imagination, an image on which time could cast no shadow, being without variableness or change.

"Thank God," again repeated Louis to himself, "that she cannot see. I can read no reproach in those blue and silent orbs. I can drink in her pure and holy loveliness, till my spirit grows purer and holier as I gaze. Blessings on thee for coming, sweet and gentle Alice. As David charmed the evil spirit in the haunted breast of Saul, so shall thy divine strains lull to rest the fiends of remorse that are wrestling and gnawing in my bosom. The time has been when I dreamed of being thy guide through life, a lamp to thy blindness, and a stay and support to thy helpless innocence. The dream is past—I wake to the dread reality of my own utter unworthiness."

These thoughts rose tumultuously in the breast of the young man, in the moment of greeting, while the soft hand of the blind girl lingered tremblingly in his. Without thinking of the influence it might have on her feelings, he sought her presence as a balm to his chafed and tortured heart, as a repose to his worn and weary spirit, as an anodyne to the agonies of remorse. The grave, sad [186]

glance of his father; the serious, yet tender and pitying look of his step-mother; and the pensive, melting, sympathizing eye of Helen, were all daggers to his conscience. But Alice could not see. No daggers of reproach were sheathed in those reposing eyes. Oh! how remorse and shame shrink from being arraigned before that throne of light where the immortal spirit sits enthroned—the human eye! If thus conscious guilt recoils from the gaze of man, weak, fallible, erring man, how can it stand the consuming fire of that Eternal Eye, in whose sight the heavens are not clean, and before which archangels bend, veiling their brows with their refulgent wings!

It was about a week after the arrival of Louis and the coming of Alice, that, as the family were assembled round the evening fireside, a note was brought to Louis.

"Clinton is come," cried he, in an agitated voice, "he waits me at the hotel."

"What shall I say to him, father?" asked he, turning to Mr. Gleason, whose folded arms gave an air of determination to his person, which Louis did not like.

"Come with me into the next room, Louis," said Mr. Gleason, and Louis followed with a firm step but a sinking heart.

"I have reflected deeply, deliberately, prayerfully on this subject, my son, since we last discussed it, and the result is this: I cannot, while such dark doubts disturb my mind, I cannot, consistent with my duty as a father and a Christian, allow this young man to be domesticated in my family again. If I wrong him, may God forgive me—but if I wrong my own household, I fear He never will."

"I cannot go—I will not go!" exclaimed Louis, dashing the note on the floor. "This is the last brimming drop in the cup of humiliation, bitterer than all the rest."

"Louis, Louis, have you not merited humiliation? Have *you* a right to murmur at the decree? Have I upbraided you for the anxious days and sleepless nights you have occasioned me? For my blasted hopes and embittered joys? No, Louis. I saw that your own heart condemned you, and I left you to your God, who is greater than your own heart and mine!"

"Oh, father!" cried Louis, melted at once by this pathetic and solemn appeal, "I know I have no right to claim any thing at your hands, but I beg, I supplicate—not for myself—but another!" [187]

"'Tis in vain, Louis. Urge me no more. On this point I am inflexible. But, since it is so painful to you, I will go myself and openly avow the reasons of my conduct."

"No, sir," exclaimed Louis, "not for the world. I will go at once."

He turned suddenly and quitted the apartment, and then the house, with a half-formed resolution of fleeing to the wild woods, and never more returning.

Mittie, who was fortunately in her room above, (fortunately, we say, for her presence would have been as fuel to flame,) heard the quick opening and shutting of doors, and the sound of rapid steps on the flag-stones of the yard.

"Louis, Louis," she cried, opening the window and recognizing his figure in the star-lit night, "whither are you going?"

"To perdition!" was the passionate reply.

"Oh, Louis, speak and tell me truly, is Clinton come?"

"He is."

"And you are going to bring him here?"

"No, never, never! Now shut the window. You have heard enough."

Yes, she had heard enough! The sash fell from her hand, and a pane of glass, shivered by the fall, flew partly in shining particles against her dress, and partly lay scattered on the snowy ground. A fragment rebounded, and glanced upon her forehead, making the blood-drops trickle down her cheek. Wiping them off with her handkerchief, she gazed on the crimson stain, and remembering her bleeding fingers when they parted, and Miss Thusa's legend of the Maiden's Bleeding Heart, she involuntarily put her hand to her own to feel if it were not bleeding, too. All the strong and passionate love which had been smouldering there, beneath the ashes of sullen pride, struggling for vent, heaved the bosom where it was concealed. And with this love there blazed a fiercer flame, indignation against her father for the prohibition that raised a barrier between herself and Bryant Clinton. One moment she resolved to rush down stairs and give utterance to the vehement anger that threatened to suffocate her by repression; the next, the image of a stern, rebuking father, inflexible in his will, checked her rash design. Had she been in his presence and heard the interdiction repeated, her resentful feelings would have burst forth; but, daring as she was, there was some restraining influence over her passions. [188]

Then she reflected that parental prohibitions were as the gossamer web before the strength of real love,—that though Clinton was forbidden to meet her in her father's house, the world was wide enough to furnish a trysting-place elsewhere. Let him but breathe the word, she was ready to fly with him from zone to zone, believing that even the frozen regions of Lapland would be converted into a blooming Paradise by the magic of his love. But what if he loved her no more, as Helen had asserted? What if Helen had indeed supplanted her?

"No, no!" cried she, aloud, shrinking from the dark and evil thoughts that came gliding into her soul; "no, no, I will not think of it! It would drive me mad!"

It was past midnight when Louis returned, and the light still burned in Mittie's chamber. The moment she heard his step on the flag-stones, she sprang to the window and opened it. The cold night air blew chill on her feverish and burning face, but she heeded it not.

"Louis," she said, "wait. I will come down and open the door."

"It is not fastened," he replied; "it is not likely that I am barred out also. Go to bed, Mittie—for Heaven's sake, go to bed."

But, throwing off her slippers, she flew down stairs, the carpet muffling the sound of her footsteps, and met her brother on the threshold.

"Why will you do this, Mittie?" cried he, impatiently. "Do go back—I am cold and weary, and want to go to bed."

"Only tell me one thing—have you no message for me?"

"None."

"When does he go away?"

"I don't know. But one thing I can tell you; if you value your peace and happiness, let not your heart anchor its hopes on him. Look upon all that is past as mere gallantry on his side, and the natural drawing of youth to youth on yours. Come this way," drawing her into the sitting-room, where the dying embers still communicated warmth to the apartment, and shed a dim, lurid light on their faces. "Though my head aches as if red-hot wires were passing through it, I must guard you at once against this folly. You know so little of the world, Mittie, you don't understand the manners of young men, especially when first released from college. There is a chivalry about them which converts every young lady into an angel, and they address them as such. Their attentions seldom admit a more serious construction. Besides—but no matter—I have said enough, I hope, to rouse the pride of your sex, and to induce you to banish Clinton from your thoughts. Good-night." [189]

Though he tried to speak carelessly, he was evidently much agitated.

"Good-night," he again repeated, but Mittie stood motionless as a statue, looking steadfastly on the glimmering embers. "Go up stairs," he cried, taking her cold hand, and leading her to the door, "you will be frozen if you stay here much longer."

"I am frozen already," she answered, shuddering, "good night."

The next morning, when the housemaid went into her room to kindle a fire, she was startled by the appearance of a muffled figure seated at the window, with the head leaning against the casement; the face was as white as the snow on the landscape. It was Mittie. She had not laid her head upon the pillow the whole live-long night.

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CHAPTER XII.

"Beautiful tyrant—fiend angelical—
Dove-feathered raven!—wolf-devouring lamb—
Oh, serpent heart—hid in a flowering cave,
Did e'er deceit dwell in so fair a mansion!"—*Shakspeare.*

"Pray for the dead.
Why for the dead, who are at rest?
Pray for the living, in whose breast
The struggle between right and wrong
Is raging terrible and strong."—*Longfellow.*

"ARE you willing to remain with her alone, all night?" asked the young doctor.

Helen glanced towards the figure reclining on the bed, whose length appeared almost supernatural, and whose appearance was rendered more gloomy by the dun-colored counterpane that enveloped it—and though her countenance changed, she answered, "Yes."

"Have you no fears that the old superstitions of your childhood will resume their influence over your imagination, in the stillness of the midnight hour?"

"I wish to subject myself to the trial. I am not quite sure of myself. I know there is no real danger, and it is time that I should battle single-handed with all imaginary foes."

"But supposing your parents should object?"

"You must tell them how very ill she is, and how much she wishes me to remain with her. I think they will rejoice in my determination—rejoice that their poor, weak Helen has any energy of purpose, any will or power to be useful."

"If you knew half your strength, half your power, Helen, I fear you would abuse it."

A bright flame flashed up from the dark, serene depths of his eyes, and played on Helen's downcast face. She had seen its kindling, and now felt its warmth glowing in her cheek, and in her inmost heart. The large, old clock behind the door, struck the hour loudly, with its metallic hands. Arthur started and looked at his watch. [191]

"I did not think it was so late," he exclaimed, rising in haste. "I have a patient to visit, whom I promised to be with before this time. Do you know, Helen, we have been talking at least two hours by this fireside? Miss Thusa slumbers long."

He went to the bedside, felt of the sleeper's pulse, listened attentively to her deep, irregular breathing, and then returned to Helen.

"The opiate she has taken will probably keep her in a quiet state during the night—if not, you will recollect the directions I have given—and administer the proper remedies. Does not your courage fail, now I am about to leave you? Have you no misgivings now?"

"I don't know. If I have, I will not express them. I am resolved on self-conquest, and your doubts of my courage only serve to strengthen my resolution."

Arthur smiled—"I see you have a will of your own, Helen, under that gentle, child-like exterior, to which mine is forced to bend. But I will not suffer you to be beyond the reach of assistance. I will send a woman to sleep in the kitchen, whom you can call, if you require her aid. As I told you before, I do not apprehend any immediate danger, though I do not think she will rise from that bed again."

Helen sighed, and tears gathered in her eyes. She accompanied Arthur to the door, that she might put the strong bar across it, which was Miss Thusa's substitute for a lock.

"Perhaps I may call on my return," said he, "but it is very doubtful. Take care of yourself and keep warm. And if any unfavorable change takes place, send the woman for me. And now good-night—dear, good, brave Helen. May God bless, and angels watch over you."

He pressed her hand, wrapped his cloak around him, and left Helen to her solitary vigils. She lifted the massy bar with trembling hands, and slid it into the iron hooks, fitted to receive it. Her hands trembled, but not from fear, but delight. Arthur had called her "dear and brave"—and long after she had reseated herself by the lonely hearth, the echo of his gentle, manly accents, seemed floating round the walls. [192]

The illness of Miss Thusa was very sudden. She had risen in the morning in usual health, and pursued until noon her customary occupation—when, all at once, as she told the young doctor, "it seemed as if a knife went through her heart, and a wedge into her brain—and she was sure it was a death-stroke." For the first time, in the course of her long life, she was obliged to take her bed, and there she lay in helplessness and loneliness, unable to summon relief. The young doctor called in the afternoon as a friend, and found his services imperatively required as a physician. The only wish she expressed was to have Helen with her, and as soon as he had relieved the sufferings of his patient, Arthur brought Helen to the Hermitage. When she arrived, Miss Thusa was under the influence of an opiate, but opening her heavy eyes, a ray of light emanated from the dim, gray orbs, as Helen, pale and awe-struck, approached her bedside. She was appalled at seeing that powerful frame so suddenly prostrated—she was shocked at the change a few hours had wrought in those rough, but commanding features. The large eye-balls looked sunken, and darkly shaded below, while a wan, gray tint, melting off into a bluish white on the temples, was spread over the face.

"You will stay with me to-night, my child," said she, in a voice strangely altered. "I've got something to tell you—and the time is come."

"Yes. I will stay with you as long as you wish, Miss Thusa," replied Helen, passing her hand softly over the hoary looks that shaded the brow of the sufferer. "I will nurse you so tenderly, that you will soon be well again."

"Good child—blessed child!" murmured she, closing her eyes beneath the slumberous weight of the anodyne, and sinking into a deep sleep.

And now Helen sat alone, watching the aged friend, whose strongly-marked and peculiar character had had so great an influence on her own. For awhile the echo of Arthur's parting words made so much music in her ear, it drowned the harsh, solemn ticking of the old clock, and stole like a sweet lullaby over her spirit. But gradually the ticking sounded louder and louder, and her loneliness pressed heavily upon her. There was a little, dark, walnut table, standing on three curiously wrought legs, in a corner of the room. On this a large Bible, covered with dark, linen cloth, was laid, and on the top of this Miss Thusa's spectacles, with the bows crossing each other, like the stiffened arms of a corpse. Helen could not bear to look upon those spectacles, which had always seemed to her an inseparable part of Miss Thusa, lying so still and melancholy there. She [193]

took them up reverently, and laid them on a shelf, then drawing the table near the fire, or rather carrying it, so as not to awaken the sleeper, she opened the sacred book. The first words which happened to meet her eye, were—

“Where is God, my Maker, who giveth me songs in the night?”

The pious heart of the young girl thrilled as she read this beautiful and appropriate text.

“Surely, oh God, Thou art here,” was the unspoken language of that young, believing heart, “here in this lonely cottage, here by this bed of sickness, and here also in this trembling, fearing, yet trusting spirit. In every life-beat throbbing in my veins, Thy awful steps I hear. Yet Thou canst not come, Thou canst not go, for Thou art ever near, unseen, yet felt, an all pervading, glorious presence.”

Had any one seen Helen, seated by that solitary hearth, with her hands clasped over those holy pages, her mild, devotional eyes raised to Heaven, the light quivering in a halo round her brow, they might have imagined her a young Saint, or a young Sister of Charity, ministering to the sufferings of that world whose pleasures she had abjured.

A low knock was heard at the door. It must be the young doctor, for who else would call at such an hour? Yet Helen hesitated and trembled, holding her breath to listen, thinking it possible it was but the pressure of the wind, or some rat tramping within the walls. But when the knock was repeated, with a little more emphasis, she took the lamp, entered the narrow passage, closing the door softly after her, removed the massy bar, certain of beholding the countenance which was the sunlight of her soul. What was her astonishment and terror, on seeing instead the never-to-be-forgotten face and form of Bryant Clinton. Had she seen one of those awful figures which Miss Thusa used to describe, she would scarcely have been more appalled than by the unexpected sight of this transcendently handsome young man.

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“Is terror the only emotion I can inspire—after so long an absence, too?” he asked, seizing her hand in both his, and riveting upon her his wonderfully expressive, dark blue eyes. “Forgive me if I have alarmed you, but forbidden your father’s house, and knowing your presence here, I have dared to come hither that I might see you one moment before I leave these regions, perhaps forever.”

“Impossible, Mr. Clinton,” cried Helen, recovering, in some measure, from her consternation, though her color came and went like the beacon’s revolving flame. “I cannot see you at this unseasonable hour. There is a sick, a very sick person in the nest room with whom I am watching. I cannot ask you to come in. Besides,” she added, with a dignity that enchanted the bold intruder, “if I cannot see you in my father’s house, it is not proper that I see you at all.” She drew back quickly, uttering a hasty “Good-night,” and was about to close the door, when Clinton glided in, shutting the door after him.

“You must hear me, Helen,” said he, in that sweet, low voice, peculiar to himself. “Had it not been for you I should never have returned. I told you once that I loved you, but if I loved you then I must adore you now. You are ten thousand times more lovely. Helen, you do not know how charming, how beautiful you are. You do not know the enthusiastic devotion, the deathless passion you have inspired.”

“I cannot conceive of such depths of falsehood,” exclaimed Helen, her timid eyes kindling with indignation; “all this have you said to Mittie, and far more, and she, mistaken girl, believes you true.”

“I deceived myself, alas!” cried he, in a tone of bitter sorrow. “I thought I loved her, for I had not yet seen and known her gentler, lovelier sister. Forgive me, Helen—love is not the growth of our will. ’Tis a flower that springs spontaneously in the human heart, of celestial fragrance, and destined to immortal bloom.”

“If I thought you really loved me,” said Helen, in a softened tone, shrinking from the fascination of his glance, and the sorcery of his voice, “I should feel great and exceeding sorrow—for it would be in vain. But the love that I have imagined is of a very different nature. Slowly kindled, it burns with steady and unceasing glory, unchanging as the sun, and eternal as the soul.”

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Helen paused with a burning flush, fearful that she had revealed the one secret of her heart so lately revealed to herself, and Clinton resumed his passionate declarations.

“If you will not go,” said she, all her terror returning at the vehemence of his suit, “if you will not go,” looking wildly at the door that separated her from the sick room, “I will leave you here. You dare not follow me. The destroying angel guards this threshold.”

In her excitement she knew not what she uttered. The words came unbidden from her lips. She laid her hand on the latch, but Clinton caught hold of it ere she had time to lift it.

“You shall not leave me, by heaven, you shall not, till you have answered one question. Is it for the cold, calculating Arthur Hazleton you reject such love as mine?”

Instead of uttering an indignant denial to this sudden and vehement interrogation, Helen trembled and turned pale. Her natural timidity and sensitiveness returned with overpowering influence; and added to these, a keen sense of shame at being accused of an unsolicited attachment, a charge she could not with truth repel, humbled and oppressed her.

"A murderous guilt shows not itself more soon
Than love that would seem hid."

So thought Helen, while shrinking from the glance that gleamed upon her, like blue steel flashing in the sunbeams. Yes! Arthur Hazleton *was* cold compared to Clinton. He loved her even as he did Alice, with a calm, brotherly affection, and that was all. He had never praised her beauty or attractions—never offered the slightest incense to her vanity or pride. Sometimes he had uttered indirect expressions, which had made her bosom throb wildly with hope, but humility soon chastened the emotion which delicacy taught her to conceal. Cold indeed sounded the warmest phrase he had ever addressed her, "God bless you, dear, good, brave Helen," to Clinton's romantic and impassioned language, though, when it fell from his lips, it passed with such melting warmth into her heart. Swift as a swallow's flight these thoughts darted through Helen's mind, and gave an indecision and embarrassment to her manner, which emboldened Clinton with hopes of success. All at once her countenance changed. The strangeness of her situation, the lateness of the hour, the impropriety of receiving such a visitor in that little dark, narrow passage—the dread of Arthur's coming in, and finding her alone with her dreaded though splendid companion—the fear that Miss Thusa might waken and require her assistance—the vision of her father's displeasure and Mittie's jealous wrath—all swept in a stormy gust before her, driving away every consideration but one—the desire for escape, and the determination to effect it. The apprehension of awaking Miss Thusa, by rushing into her room, died in the grasp of a greater terror.

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"Let me go," she exclaimed, wrenching her hand from his tightening hold. "Let me go. You madden me."

In her haste to open the door the latch rattled, and the door swung to with a violence that called forth a groan from the awakening sleeper. Turning the wooden button that fastened it on the inside, she sunk down into the first seat in her reach, and a dark shadow, flecked with sparks of fire, floated before her eyes. Chill and dizzy, she thought she was going to faint, when her name, pronounced distinctly by Miss Thusa, recalled her bewildered senses. She rose, and it seemed as if the bed came to her, for she was not conscious of walking to it, but she found herself bending over the patient and looking steadfastly into her clouded eyes.

"Helen, my dear," said she, "I feel a great deal better. I must have slept a long time. Have I not? Give me a little water. There, now sit down close by my bed and listen. If that knife cuts my breath again, I shall have to give up talking. Just raise my head a little, and hand me my spectacles off the big Bible. I can't talk without them. But how dim the glasses are. Wipe them for me, child. There's dust settled on them."

Helen took the glasses and wiped them with her soft linen handkerchief, but she sighed as she did so, well knowing that it was the eyes that were growing dim instead of the crystal that covered them.

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"A little better—a little better," said the spinster, looking wistfully towards the candle. "Now, Helen, my dear, just step into the other room and bring here my wheel. It is heavy, but not beyond your strength. I always bring it in here at night, but I can't do it now. I was taken sick so sudden, I forgot it. It's my stay-by and stand-by—you know."

Helen looked so startled and wild, that Miss Thusa imagined her struck with superstitious terror at the thought of going alone into another room.

"I'm sorry to see you've not outgrown your weaknesses," said she. "It's my fault, I'm afraid, but I hope the Lord will forgive me for it."

Helen was not afraid of the lonely room, so near and so lately occupied, but she was afraid of encountering Clinton, who might be lingering by the open door. But Miss Thusa's request, sick and helpless as she was, had the authority of a command, and she rose to obey her. She barred the outer door without catching the gleam of Clinton's dark, shining hair, and having brought the wheel, with panting breath, for it was indeed very heavy, sat down with a feeling of security and relief, since the enemy was now shut out by double barriers. One window was partly raised to admit the air to Miss Thusa's oppressed lungs, but they were both fastened above.

"You had better not exert yourself, Miss Thusa," said Helen, after giving her the medicine which the doctor had prescribed. "You are not strong enough to talk much now."

"I shall never be stronger, my child. My day is almost spent, and the night cometh, wherein no man can work. I always thought I should have a sudden call, and when I was struck with that sharp pain, I knew my Master was knocking at the door. The Lord be praised, I don't want to bar him out. I'm ready and willing to go, willing to close my long and lonely life. I have had few to love, and few to care for me, but, thank God, the one I love best of all does not forsake me in my last hour. Helen, darling, God bless you—God bless you, my blessed child."

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The voice of the aged spinster faltered, and tear after tear trickled like wintry rain down her furrowed cheeks. All the affections of a naturally warm and generous heart lingered round the young girl, who was still to her the little child whom she had cradled in her arms, and hushed into the stillness of awe by her ghostly legends. Helen, inexpressibly affected, leaned her head on Miss Thusa's pillow, and wept and sobbed audibly. She did not know, till this moment, how strong and deep-rooted was her attachment for this singular and isolated being. There was an individuality, a grandeur in her character, to which Helen's timid, upward-looking spirit paid

spontaneous homage. The wild sweep of her imagination, always kept within the limits of the purest morality, her stern sense of justice, tempered by sympathy and compassion, and the tenderness and sensibility that so often softened her harsh and severe lineaments, commanded her respect and admiration. Even her person, which was generally deemed ungainly and unattractive, was invested with majesty and a certain grace in Helen's partial eyes. She was old—but hers was the sublimity of age without its infirmity, the hoariness of winter without its chillness. It seemed impossible to associate with her the idea of dissolution. Yet there she lay, helpless as an infant, with no more strength to resist the Almighty's will, than a feather to hurl back the force of the whirlwind.

"You see that wheel, Helen," said she, recovering her usual calmness—"I told you that I should bequeath it, as a legacy, to you. Don't despise the homely gift. You see those brass bands, with grooves in them—just screw them to the right as hard as you can—a little harder."

Helen screwed and twisted till her slender wrists ached, when the brass suddenly parted, and a number of gold pieces rolled upon the floor.

"Pick them up, and put them back," said Miss Thusa, "and screw it up again—all the joints will open in that way. The wood is hollowed out and filled with gold, which I bequeath to you. My will is in there, too, made by the lawyers where I found the money. You remember when that advertisement was put in the papers, and I went on that journey, part of the way with you. Well, I must tell you the shortest way, though it's a long story. It was written by a lady, on her death-bed, a widow lady, who had no children, and a large property of her own. You don't remember my brother, but your father does. He was a hater of the world, and almost made me one. Well, it seemed he had a cause for his misanthropy which I never knew of, for when he was a young man he went away from home, and we didn't hear from him for years. When he came back, he was sad and sickly, and wanted to get into some little quiet place, where nobody would molest him. Then it was we came to this little cabin, where he died, in this very room, and this very bed, too." [199]

Miss Thusa paused, and the room and the bed seemed all at once clothed with supernatural solemnity, by the sad consecration of death. Death had been there—death was waiting there.

"Oh! Miss Thusa, you are faint and weary. Do stop and rest, I pray you," cried Helen, bathing her forehead with camphor, and holding a glass of water to her lips.

But the unnatural strength which opium gives, sustained her, and she continued her narrative.

"This lady, when young, had loved and been betrothed to my brother, and then forsook him for a wealthier man. It was that which ruined him, and I never knew it. He had one of those still natures, where the waters of sorrow lie deep as a well. They never overflow. She told me that she never had had one happy moment from the time she married, and that her conscience gnawed her for her broken faith. Her husband died, and left her a rich widow, without a child to leave her property to. After a while she fell sick of a long and lingering disease, for which there is no cure. Then she thought if she could leave her money to my brother, or he being dead, to some of his kin, she could die with more comfort. So, she put the advertisement in the paper, which you all saw. I didn't want the money, and wanted to come away without it, but she sent for a lawyer, and had it all fastened upon me by deeds and writings, whether I was willing or not. She didn't live but a few days after I got there. The lawyer was very kind, and assisted me in my plans, though he thought them very odd. There is no need of wasting my breath in telling how I had the money changed into gold, and the wheel fixed in the way you see it, after a fashion of my own. I would not have touched one cent of it, had it not been for you, and next to you, that poor boy, Louis. I didn't want any one to know it, and be dinning in my ears about money from morning to night. I had no use for it myself, for habits don't change when the winter of life is begun. There is no use for it in the dark grave to which I am hastening. There is no use for it near the great white throne of God, where I shall shortly stand. When I am dead and gone, Helen, take that wheel home, and give it a place wherever you are, for old Miss Thusa's sake. I really think—I'm a strange, foolish old woman—but I really think I should like to have its likeness painted on my coffin lid. A kind of coat-of-arms, you know, child." [200]

Miss Thusa did not relate all this without pausing many times for breath, and when she concluded she closed her eyes, exhausted by the effort she had made. In a short time she again slept, and Helen sat pondering in mute amazement over the disclosure made by one whom she had imagined so very indigent. The gold weighed heavy on her mind. It did not seem real, so strangely acquired, so mysteriously concealed. It reminded her of the tales of the genii, more than of the actualities of every day life. She prayed that Miss Thusa might live and take care of it herself for long years to come.

Several times during the recital, she thought she heard a sound at the window, but when she turned her head to ascertain the cause, she saw nothing but the curtain slightly fluttering in the wind that crept in at the opening, with a soft, sighing sound.

It was the first time she had ever watched with the sick, and she found it a very solemn thing. Yet with all the solemnity and gloom brooding over her, she felt inexpressible gratitude that she was not haunted by the spectral illusions of her childhood. Reason was no longer the vassal, but the monarch of imagination, and though the latter often proved a restless and wayward subject, it acknowledged the former as its legitimate sovereign. [201]

Miss Thusa, lying so rigid and immovable on her back, with her hands crossed on her breast, a white linen handkerchief folded over her head and fastened under the chin, looked so resembling

death, that it was difficult to think of her as a living, breathing thing. Helen gazed upon her with indescribable awe, sometimes believing it was nothing but soulless clay before her, but even then she gazed without horror. Her exceeding terror of death was gone, without her being conscious of its departure. It was like the closing of a dark abyss—there was *terra firma*, where an awful chasm had been. There was more terror to her in the vitality burning in her own heart, than in that poor, enfeebled form. How strong were its pulsations! how loud they sounded in the midnight stillness!—louder than the death-watch that ticked by the hearth. To escape from the beatings of “this muffled drum” of life, she went to the window, and partly drawing aside the curtain, breathed on a pane of glass, so that the gauzy web the frost had woven might melt away and admit the vertical rays of the midnight moon. How beautiful, how resplendent was the scene that was spread out before her! She had not thought before of looking abroad, and it was the first time the solemn glories of the noon of night had unfolded to her view. In the morning a drizzling rain had fallen, which had frozen as it fell on the branches of the leafless trees, and now on every little twig hung pendant diamonds, glittering in the moonbeams. The ground was partially covered with snow, but where it lay bare, it was powdered with diamond dust. A silvery net-work was drawn over the windows, save one clear spot, which her melting breath had made. She looked up to the moon, shining so high, so lone on the pale azure of a wintry heaven, and felt an impulse to kneel down and worship it, as the loveliest, holiest image of the Creator’s goodness and love. How tranquil, how serene, how soft, yet glorious it shone forth from the still depths of ether! What a divine melancholy it diffused over the sleeping earth! Helen felt as she often did when looking up into the eyes of Arthur Hazleton. So tranquil, so serene, yet so glorious were their beams to her, and so silently and holily did they sink into the soul. [202]

In the morning the young doctor found his patient in the same feeble, slumberous state. There was no apparent change either for better or worse, and he thought it probable she might linger days and even weeks, gradually sinking, till she slept the last great sleep.

“You look weary and languid, Helen,” said he, anxiously regarding the young watcher, “I hope nothing disturbed your lonely vigils. I endeavored to return, that I might relieve you, in some measure, of your fatiguing duty, but was detained the whole night.”

Helen thought of the terror she had suffered from Clinton’s intrusion, but she did not like to speak of it. Perhaps he had already left the neighborhood, and it seemed ungenerous and useless to betray him.

“I certainly had no ghostly visitors,” said she, “and what is more, I did not fear them. All unreal phantasies fled before that sad reality,” looking on the wan features of Miss Thusa.

“I see you have profited by the discipline of the last twelve hours,” cried Arthur, “and it was most severe, for one of your temperament and early habits. I have heard it said,” he added, thoughtfully, “that those who follow my profession, become callous and indifferent to human suffering—that their nerves are steeled, and their hearts indurated—but I do not find it the case with me; I never approach the bedside of the sick and the dying without deep and solemn emotion. I feel nearer the grave, nearer to Heaven and God.”

“No—I am sure it cannot be said of you,” said Helen, earnestly, “you are always kind and sympathizing—quick to relieve, and slow to inflict pain.”

“Ah, Helen, you forget how cruel I was in forcing you back, where the deadly viper had been coiled; in making you take that dark, solitary walk in search of the sleeping Alice; and even last night I might have spared you your lonely night watch, if I would. Had I told you that you were too inexperienced and inefficient to be a good nurse, you would have believed me and yielded your place, or at least shared it with another. Do you still think me kind?” [203]

“Most kind, even when most exacting,” she replied. Whenever her feelings were excited, her deep feelings of joy as well as sorrow, Helen’s eyes always glistened. This peculiarity gave a soft, pensive expression to her countenance that was indescribably winning, and made her smile from the effect of contrast enchantingly sweet.

The glistening eye and the enchanting smile that followed these words, or rather accompanied them, were not altogether lost on Arthur.

Mrs. Gleason came to relieve Helen from the care of nursing, and insisted upon her immediate return home. Helen obeyed with reluctance, claiming the privilege of resuming her watch again at night. She wanted to be with Miss Thusa in her last moments. She had a sublime curiosity to witness the last strife of body and soul, the separation of the visible and the invisible; but when night came on, exhausted nature sought renovation in the deepest slumbers that had ever wrapped her. Arthur, perceiving some change in his patient, resolved to remain with her himself, having hired a woman to act as subordinate nurse during Miss Thusa’s sickness. She occupied the kitchen as bed-room—an apartment running directly back of the sick chamber.

Miss Thusa’s strength was slowly, gently wasting. Disease had struck her at first like a sharp poignard, but life flowed away from the wound without much after suffering. The greater part of the time she lay in a comatose state, from which it was difficult to rouse her.

Arthur sat by the fire, with a book in his hand, which at times seemed deeply to interest him, and at others, he dropped it in his lap, and gazing intently into the glowing coals, appeared absorbed in the mysteries of thought.

About midnight, when reverie had deepened into slumber, he was startled by a low knock at the door. He had not fastened it as elaborately as Helen had done, and quickly and noiselessly opening it, he demanded who was there. It was a young boy, bearing him a note from the family he had visited the preceding night. His patient was attacked with some very alarming symptoms, and begged his immediate attendance. Having wakened the woman and commissioned her to watch during his absence, Arthur departed, surprised at the unexpected summons, as he had seen the patient at twilight, who then appeared in a fair way of recovery. His surprise was still greater, when arriving at the house he found that no summons had been sent for him, no note written, but the whole household were wrapped in peaceful slumbers. The note, which he carried in his pocket, was pronounced a forgery, and must have been written with some dark and evil design. But what could it be? Who could wish to draw him away from that poor, lone cottage, that poor sick, dying woman? It was strange, inexplicable.

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Mr. Mason, the gentleman in whose name the note had been written, and who fortunately happened to be the sheriff of the county, insisted upon accompanying him back to the cottage, and aiding him to discover its mysterious purpose. It might be a silly plot of some silly boy, but that did not seem at all probable, as Arthur was so universally respected and beloved—and such was the dignity and affability of his character, that no one would think of playing upon him a foolish and insulting trick.

The distance was not great, and they walked with rapid footsteps over the crisp and frozen ground. Around the cabin, the snow formed a thick carpet, which, lying in shade, had not been glazed, like the general surface of the landscape. Their steps did not resound on this white covering, and instead of crossing the stile in front of the cabin, they vaulted over the fence and approached the door by a side path. The moment Arthur laid his hand upon the latch he knew some one had entered the house during his absence, for he had closed the door, and now it was ajar. With one bound he cleared the passage, and Mr. Mason, who was a tall and strong man, was not left much in the rear. The inner door was not latched, and opened at the touch. The current of air which rushed in with their sudden entrance rolled into the chimney, and the fire flashed up and roared, illuminating every object within. Near the centre of the room stood a man, wrapped in a dark cloak that completely concealed his figure, a dark mask covering his face, and a fur cap pulled deep over his forehead. He stood by the side of Miss Thusa's wheel, which presented the appearance of a ruin, with its brazen bands wrenched asunder, and its fragments strewn upon the floor. He was evidently arrested in the act of destruction, for one hand grasped the distaff, the other clinched something which he sought to conceal in the folds of his cloak.

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Miss Thusa, partly raised on her elbow, which shook and trembled from the weight it supported, was gazing with impotent despair on her dismembered wheel. A dim fire quivered in her sunken eyes, and her sharpened and prominent features were made still more ghastly by the opaque frame-work of white linen that surrounded them. She was uttering faint and broken ejaculations.

"Monster—robber!—my treasure! Take the gold—take it, but spare my wheel! Poor Helen! I gave it to her! Poor child! It's she you are robbing, not me! Oh, my God! my heart-strings are breaking! My wheel, that I loved like a human being! Lord, Lord, have mercy upon me!"

These piteous exclamations met the ear of Arthur as he entered the room, and roused all the latent wrath of his nature. He forgot every thing but the dark, masked figure which, gathering up its cloak, sprang towards the door, with the intention of escaping, but an iron grasp held it back. Seldom, indeed, were the strong but subdued passions of Arthur Hazleton suffered to master him, but now they had the ascendancy. He never thought of calling on Mr. Mason to assist him quietly in securing the robber, as he might have done, but yielding to an irresistible impulse of vengeance, he grappled fiercely with the mask, who writhed and struggled in his unclenching hold. Something fell rattling on the floor, and continued to rattle as the strife went on. Mr. Mason, knowing that by virtue of his authority he could arrest the offender at once, looked on with that strange pleasure which men feel in witnessing scenes of conflict. He was astonished at the transformation of the young doctor. He had always seen him so calm and gentle in the chamber of sickness, so peaceful in his intercourse with his fellow-men, that he did not know the lamb could be thus changed into the lion.

Arthur had now effected his object, in unmasking and uncloaking his antagonist, and he found himself face to face with—Bryant Clinton. The young men stood gazing at each other for a few moments in perfect silence. They were both of an ashy paleness, and their eyes glittered under the shadow of their darkened brows. But Clinton could not long sustain that steadfast, victor glance. His own wavered and fell, and the blood swept over his face in a reddening wave.

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"Let me go," said he, in a low, husky voice, "I am in your power; but be magnanimous and release me. I throw myself on your generosity, not your justice."

Arthur's sternly upbraiding eye softened into an expression of the deepest sorrow, not unmingled with contempt, on beholding the degradation of this splendidly endowed young man. He reminded him of a fallen angel, with his glorious plumage all soiled and polluted with the mire and corruption of earth. He never had had faith in his integrity; he believed him to be the tempter of Louis, the deceiver of Mittie, reckless and unprincipled where pleasure was concerned, but he did not believe him capable of such a daring transgression. Had he been alone, he would have released him, for his magnanimity and generosity would have triumphed over his sense of justice, but legal authority was present, and to that he was forced to submit.

"I arrest you, sir, in virtue of my authority as sheriff of the county," exclaimed Mr. Mason; "empty your pockets of the gold you have purloined from this woman, and then follow me. Quick, or I'll give you rough aid."

The pomp and aristocracy of Clinton's appearance and manners had made him unpopular in the neighborhood, and it is not strange that a man whom he had never condescended to notice should triumph in his disgrace. He looked on with vindictive pleasure while Clinton, after a useless resistance, produced the gold he had secreted, but Arthur turned away his head in shame. He could not bear to witness the depth of his degradation. His cheek burned with painful blushes, as the gold clinked on the table, ringing forth the tale of Clinton's guilt.

"Now, sir, come along," cried the stern voice of the sheriff. "Doctor, I leave the care of this to you."

While he was speaking, he drew a pair of hand-cuffs from his pocket, which he had slipped in before leaving home, thinking they might come in use. [207]

"You shall not degrade me thus!" exclaimed Clinton, haughtily, writhing in his grasp; "you shall never put those vile things on me!"

"Softly, softly, young gentleman," cried the sheriff, "I shall hurt your fair wrists if you don't stand still. There, that will do. Come along. No halting."

Arthur gave one glance towards the retreating form of Clinton, as he passed through the door, with his haughty head now drooping on his breast, wearing the iron badge of crime, and groaned in spirit, that so fair a temple should not be occupied by a nobler indwelling guest. So rapidly had the scene passed, so still and lone seemed the apartment, for Miss Thusa had sunk back on her pillow mute and exhausted, that he was tempted to believe that it was nothing but a dream. But the wheel lay in fragments at his feet, the gold lay in shining heaps upon the table, and a dark mask grinned from the floor. That gold, too!—how dream-like its existence! Was Miss Thusa a female Midas or Aladdin? Was the dull brass lamp burning on the table, the gift of the genii? Was the old gray cabin a witch's magic home?

Rousing himself with a strong effort, he examined the condition of his patient, and was grieved to find how greatly this shock had accelerated the work of disease. Her pulse was faint and flickering, her skin cold and clammy, but after swallowing a cordial, and inhaling the strong odor of hartshorn, a reaction took place, and she revived astonishingly; but when she spoke, her mind evidently wandered, sometimes into the shadows of the past, sometimes into the light of the future.

"What shall I do with this?" asked Arthur, pointing to the gold, anxious to bring her thoughts to some central point; "and these, too?" stooping down and picking up a fragment of the wheel.

"Screw it up again—screw it up," she replied, quickly, "and put the gold back in it. 'Tis Helen's—all little Helen's. Don't let them rob her after I'm dead."

Rejoicing to hear her speak so rationally, though wondering if what she said of Helen was not the imagining of a disordered brain, he began to examine the pieces of the wheel, and found that with the exertion of a little skill he could put them together again, and that it was only some slender parts of the machine which were broken. He placed the money in its hollow receptacles, united the brazen rings, and smoothed the tangled flax that twined the distaff. Ever and anon Miss Thusa turned her fading glance towards him, and murmured, [208]

"It is good. It is good!"

For more than an hour she lay perfectly still, when suddenly moving, she exclaimed,

"Put away the curtain—it's too dark."

Arthur drew aside the curtain from the window nearest the bed, and the pale, cold moonlight came in, in white, shining bars, and striped the dark counterpane. One fell across Miss Thusa's face, and illuminated it with a strange and ghastly lustre.

"Has the moon gone down?" she asked. "I thought it stayed till morning in the sky. But my glasses are getting wondrous dim. I must have a new pair, doctor. How slow the wheel turns round; the band keeps slipping off, and the crank goes creaking, creaking, for want of oil. Little Helen, take your feet off the treadle, and don't sit so close, darling. I can't breathe."

She panted a few moments, catching her breath with difficulty, then tossing her arms above the bed-cover, said, in a fainter voice,

"The great wheel of eternity keeps rolling on, and we are all bound upon it. How grandly it moves, and all the time the flax on the distaff is smoking. God says in the Bible He will not quench it, but blow it to a flame. You've read the Bible, haven't you, doctor? It is a powerful book. It tells about Moses and the Lamb. I'll tell you a story, Helen, about a Lamb that was slain. I've told you a great many, but never one like this. Come nearer, for I can't speak very loud. Take care, the thread is sliding off the spool. Cut it, doctor, cut it; it's winding round my heart so tight! Oh, my God! it snaps in two!"

These were the last words the aged spinster ever uttered. The main-spring of life was broken. When the cold, gray light of morning had extinguished the pallid splendor of the moon, and one [209]

by one the objects in the little room came forth from the dimness of shade, which a single lamp had not power to disperse, a great change was visible. The dark covering of the bed was removed, the bed itself was gone—but through a snowy white sheet that was spread over the frame, the outline of a tall form was visible. All was silent as the grave. A woman sat by the hearth, with a grave and solemn countenance—so grave and so solemn she seemed a fixture in that still apartment. The wheel stood still by the bed-frame, the spectacles lay still on the Bible, and a dark, gray dress hung in still, dreary folds against the wall.

After a while the woman rose, and walking on tiptoe, holding her breath as she walked, pulled the sheet a little further one side. Foolish woman! had she stepped with the thunderer's tread, she could not have disturbed the cold sleeper, covered with that snowy sheet.

Two or three hours after, the door opened and the young doctor entered with a young girl clinging to his arm. She was weeping, and as soon as she caught a glimpse of the white sheet she burst into loud sobs.

"We will relieve you of your watch a short time," said Arthur; and the woman left the room. He led Helen to the bedside, and turning back the sheet, exposed the venerable features composed into everlasting repose. Helen did not recoil or tremble as she gazed. She even hushed her sobs, as if fearing to ruffle the inexpressible placidity of that dreamless rest. Every trace of harshness was removed from the countenance, and a serene melancholy reigned in its stead. A smile far more gentle than she ever wore in life, lingered on the wan and frozen lips.

"How benign she looks," ejaculated Helen, "how happy! I could gaze forever on that peaceful, silent face—and yet I once thought death so terrible."

"Life is far more fearful, Helen. Life, with all its feverish unrest, its sinful strife, its storms of passion and its waves of sorrow. Oh, had you beheld the scene which I last night witnessed in this very room—a scene in which life revelled in wildest power, you would tremble at the thought of possessing a vitality capable of such unholy excitement—you would envy the quietude of that unbreathing bosom." [210]

"And yet," said Helen, "I have often heard you speak of life as an inestimable, a glorious gift, as so rich a blessing that the single heart had not room to contain the gratitude due."

"And so it is, Helen, if rightly used. I am wrong to give it so dark a coloring—ungrateful, because my own experience is bright beyond the common lot—unwise, for I should not sadden your views by anticipation. Yes, if life is fearful from its responsibilities, it *is* glorious in its hopes and rich in its joys. Its mysteries only increase its grandeur, and prove its divine origin."

Thus Arthur continued to talk to Helen, sustaining and elevating her thoughts, till she forgot that she came in sorrow and tears.

There was another, who came, when he thought none was near, to pay the last tribute of sorrow over the remains of Miss Thusa, and that was Louis. He thought of his last interview with her, and her last words reverberated in his ear in the silence of that lonely room—"In the name of your mother in Heaven, go and sin no more."

Louis sunk upon his knees by that cold and voiceless form, and vowed, in the strength of the Lord, to obey her parting injunction. He could never now repay the debt he owed, but he could do more—he could be just to himself and the memory of her who had opened her lips wisely to reprove, and her hand kindly to relieve.

Peace be to thee, ancient sibyl, lonely dweller of the old gray cottage. No more shall thy busy fingers twist with curious skill the flaxen fibres that wreath thy distaff—no more shall the hum of thy wheel mingle in chorus with the buzzing of the fly and the chirping of the cricket. But as thou didst say in thy dying hour, "the great wheel of eternity keeps rolling on," and thou art borne along with it, no longer a solitary, weary pilgrim, without an arm to sustain or kindred heart to cheer, but we humbly trust, one of that innumerable, glorious company, who, clothed in white robes and bearing branching palms, sing the great praise-song that never shall end, "Allelulia—the Lord God omnipotent reigneth."

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CHAPTER XIII.

"Come, madness! come unto me senseless death,
I cannot suffer this! here, rocky wall,
Scatter these brains, or dull them."—*Baillie*.

"I know not, I ask not,
If guilt's in thy heart—
I but know that I love thee,
Whatever thou art."—*Moore*.

In a dark and gloomy apartment, whose grated windows and dreary walls were hung here and there with blackening cobwebs—and whose darkness and gloom were made visible by the pale rays of a glimmering lamp, sat the young, the handsome, the graceful, the fascinating Bryant Clinton. He sat, or rather partly reclined on the straw pallet, spread in a corner of the room, propped on one elbow, with his head drooping downward, and his long hair hanging darkly over his face, as if seeking to veil his misery and shame.

It was a poor place for such an occupant. He was a young man of leisure now, and had time to reflect on the past, the present, and the future.

The past!—golden opportunities, lost by neglect, swept away by temptation, or sold to sin. The present!—detection, humiliation, and ignominy. The future!—long and dreary imprisonment—companionship with the vilest of the vile, his home a tomb-like cell in the penitentiary—his food, bread and water—his bed, a handful of straw—his dress, the felon's garb of shame—his magnificent hair shorn close as the slaughtered sheep's—his soft white hands condemned to perpetual labor!

As this black scroll slowly unrolled before his spirit's eye, this black scroll, on which the characters and images gleamed forth so red and fiery, it is no wonder that he writhed and groaned and gnashed his teeth—it is no wonder that he started up and trod the narrow cell with the step of a maniac—that he stopped and ground his heel in the dust—that he rushed to the window and shook the iron bars, with unavailing rage—that he called on God to help him—not in the fervor of faith, but the recklessness of frenzy, the impotence of despair. [212]

Suddenly a deadly sickness came over him, and reeling back to his pallet, he buried his face in his hands and wept aloud—and the wail of his soul was that of the first doomed transgressor, "My punishment is greater than I can bear."

While there he lies, a prey to keen and unavailing agonies, we will take a backward glance at the romance of his childhood, and the temptations of his youth.

Bryant Clinton was the son of obscure parents. When a little boy, his remarkable beauty attracted the admiration of every beholder. He was the pet of the village school, the favorite on the village green. His intelligence and grace were equal to his beauty, and all of these attributes combined in one of his lowly birth, seemed so miraculous, he was universally admitted to be a prodigy—a nonpareil. When he was about ten years of age, a gentleman of wealth and high social standing, was passing through the town, and, like all strangers, was struck by the remarkable appearance of the boy. This gentleman was unmarried, though in the meridian of life, and of course, uncontrolled master of all his movements. He was very peculiar in character, and his impulses, rather than his principles, guided his actions. He did not love his relatives, because he thought their attentions were venal, and resolved to adopt this beautiful boy, not so much from feelings of benevolence towards him, as a desire to disappoint his mercenary kindred. Bryant's natural affections were not strong enough to prove any impediment to the stranger's wish, and his parents were willing to sacrifice theirs, for the brilliant advantages offered to their son. Behold our young prodigy transplanted to a richer soil, and a more genial atmosphere. His benefactor resided in a great city, far from the little village where he was born, so that all the associations of his childhood were broken up and destroyed. He even took the name of his adopted father, thus losing his own identity. Had Mr. Clinton been a man of pure and upright principles, had he been faithful to the guardianship he had assumed, and educated his *heart*, as well as his mind, Bryant might have been the ornament instead of the disgrace, the blessing instead of the bane of society. He had no salient propensities to evil, no faults which righteous wisdom might not have disciplined. But indulged, caressed, praised and admired by all around him, the selfishness inherent in our nature, acquired a hot-bed growth from the sultry moral atmosphere which he breathed. [213]

The gentle, yet restraining influence which woman, in her purity and excellence, ever exerts, was unfortunately denied him. Mr. Clinton was a bachelor, and the careful, bustling housekeeper, who kept his servants and house in order, was not likely to burden herself with the charge of young Bryant's morals. All that Mr. Clinton supervised, was his progress at school, which surpassed even his most sanguine expectations. He was still the prodigy—the nonpareil—and as he had the most winning, insinuating manners—he was still the favorite of teachers and pupils. As he grew older, he was taken much into society, and young as he was, inhaled, with the most intense delight, the incense of female adulation. The smiles and caresses bestowed upon the boy—paragon by beautiful and charming women, instead of fostering his affections, as they would have done, had they been lavished upon him for his virtues rather than his graces, gave precocious growth and vigor to his vanity, till, like the cedar of Lebanon, it towered above all other passions. This vanity was only visible to others in an earnest desire to please—it only made him appear more amiable and gentle, but it was so strong, so vital, that it could not, "but by annihilating, die."

Another fatal influence acted upon him. Mr. Clinton, like most rich bachelors, was fond of having convivial suppers, where wine and mirth abounded. To these young Bryant was often admitted, for his beauty and talents were the pride and boast of his adopted father. Here he was initiated into the secrets of the gaming-table, not by practice, (for he was not allowed to play himself,) but by observation, a medium of instruction sufficiently transparent to his acute and subtle mind. Here he was accustomed to hear the name of God uttered either in irreverence or blasphemy, and the cold sneer of infidelity withered the germs of piety a mother's hand had planted in his bosom. Better, far better had it been for him, never to have left his parent's humble [214]

but honest dwelling.

Just as he was about to enter college, Mr. Clinton suddenly died of a stroke of apoplexy, leaving the youth whom he had adopted, exposed to the persecutions of his worldly and venal relatives. He had resolved to make a will, bequeathing his property to Bryant, as his sole heir; but having a great horror of death, he could not bear to perform the act which would remind him too painfully of his mortality.

"Time enough when I am taken sick," he would say, "to attend to these things;" but the blow which announced the coming of death, crushed the citadel of thought. There was no time for making wills, and Bryant was left far poorer than his adopted father had found him, for he had acquired all the tastes which wealth alone can gratify, and all the vices, too.

When he returned, reluctant and disappointed, with alienated feelings, to his native home, he found that his father was dead, and his mother a solitary widow. By selling the little farm which had served them for a support, and restricting herself of every luxury, and many comforts, she could defray the expenses of a collegiate education, and this she resolved to do. Bryant accepted the sacrifice without hesitation, deeming it his legitimate right.

On his way to the university, which was still more remote from his native village than that was from the home of his adopted father, he conceived the design of imposing upon his new companions the story of his Virginian birth—though born in reality in one of the Middle States. He had heard so much of Virginian aristocracy, of the pride of tracing one's descent from one of the *first families* of Virginia, that he thought it a pardonable deception if it increased his dignity and consequence. He was ashamed of his parentage, which was concealed under the somewhat patrician name of Clinton, and as he chose to change his birth-place, it was not very probable that his real origin would be discovered. He had previously ascertained that no boys were members of the college, who had ever seen him before, or who knew any thing of the region [215] where he had dwelt. He soon became a star-scholar, from the brilliancy of his talents, and a favorite, too, from the graceful pliancy of his manners, and apparent sweetness of his disposition. But with all his grace and sweetness, he was unprincipled and dissolute, and exerted the commanding influence he had acquired over the minds of his companions, to lead them into temptation, and lure them to sin. Yet he had the art to appear himself the tempted, as well as they. His agency was as invisible as it was powerful, and as fatal, too. When, with seeming reluctance, he took his seat at the gaming-table and won, as he invariably did, from his unsuspecting comrades, he manifested the deepest regret and keenest remorse. No one suspected that it was through his instrumentality they were seduced into error and ruin.

Louis, the impulsive, warm-hearted, and confiding Louis Gleason, was drawn as if by fascination towards this young man. There was a luminous atmosphere around him, that dazzled the judgment, and rendered it blind to his moral defects. Dissipation appeared covered with a golden tissue, that concealed all its deformity; and reckless prodigality received the honors due to princely generosity.

When Clinton accompanied Louis to his father's house, and beheld the beautiful Mittie, gilt, as he first saw her by the rays of the setting sun, he gave her the spontaneous homage which beauty ever received from him. He admired and for a little time imagined he loved her. But she was too easy a conquest to elate his vanity, and he soon wearied of her too exacting love. Helen, the shy, child-like, simple hearted Helen, baffled and interested him. She shunned and feared him, and therefore he pursued her with increasing fervor of feeling and earnestness of purpose. Finding himself terribly annoyed by Mittie's frantic jealousy, he resolved to absent himself awhile till the tempest he had raised was lulled, and urging Louis to be his companion, that he might have a plea for returning, departed, as has been described, not to his pretended home, but to haunts of guilty pleasure, where the deluded Louis followed, believing in his infatuation that he was only walking side by side with one sorely tempted, reluctantly transgressing, and as oft repenting as himself.

With the native chivalry of his character, he refused to criminate his *friend*, and justify his father's anger. It was to Clinton *his debts of honor* were chiefly due, and it was for this reason he shrunk from revealing them to his father. [216]

When Clinton found himself excluded from the presence of Helen, whose love he was resolved to win, his indignation and mortification were indescribable; but acknowledging no obstacles to his designs, he watched his opportunity and entered Miss Thusa's cabin, as we have related in the last chapter. He was no actor in that interview, for he really felt for Helen, emotions purer, deeper and stronger than he had ever before cherished for woman. He had likewise all the stimulus of rivalry, for he believed that Arthur Hazleton loved her, that calm, self-possessed and inscrutable being, whose dark, spirit-reaching eye his own had ever shunned. Helen's unaffected terror, her repulsion and flight were wormwood and gall to his pampered vanity and starving love. Her undisguised emotion at the mention of Arthur, convinced him of his ascendancy over her heart, and the hopelessness of his present pursuit. Still he lingered near the spot, unwilling to relinquish an object that seemed more and more precious as the difficulty of obtaining it increased. He stood by the window, watching, at times, glimpses of Helen's sweet, yet troubled countenance, as the curtain flapped in the wintry wind. It was then he heard Miss Thusa relate the secret of her hidden wealth, and the demon of temptation whispered in his ear that the hidden gold might be his. Helen cared not for it—she knew not its value, she needed it not. Very likely when the wheel should come into her possession, and she examined its mystery, if the legacy were missing, she would believe its history the dream of an excited imagination, and think

of it no more. He had never stolen, and it did seem low and ungentlemanlike to steal, but this was more like finding some buried treasure, something cast up from the ocean's bed. It was not so criminal after all as cheating at the gaming-table, which he was in the constant habit of doing. Then why should he hesitate if opportunity favored his design? Mr. Gleason had insulted him in the grossest manner, Helen had rejected him, Louis had released himself from his thralldom. There was no motive for him to remain longer where he was, and he was assured suspicion would never rest on him, though he took his immediate departure. The next night he attempted to execute his shameful purpose by forging the note, sending it by an unsuspecting messenger, thus despatching the young doctor, on a professional errand. Every thing seemed to favor him. The woman whom Arthur had commanded to keep watch during his absence had sunk back into a heavy sleep as soon as his voice died on her ear—so there was nothing to impede the robber's entrance. Clinton waited till he thought Arthur had had time to reach the place of his destination, and then stole into the sick chamber with noiseless steps. Miss Thusa was awakened by a metallic, grating sound, and beheld, with unspeakable horror, her beloved wheel lying in fragments at the feet of the spoiler. The detection, the arrest, the imprisonment are already known.

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And now the unhappy young man lay on his bed of straw, in an ignominious cell, cursing the gold that had tempted, and the weakness and folly that had yielded and rushed into the snare. Louis had visited him, but his visit had afforded no consolation. What was pity or sympathy without the power to release him? Nothing, yea, worse than nothing. He could not tell the hour, for time, counted by the throbs of an agonized heart, seems to have the attribute of eternity—endless duration. He knew it was night by the lamp which had been brought in with the bread and water, which stood untasted by him. He had not noticed the darkening shadow stealing over the grated windows, his soul was so dark within. He knew, too, that it must be somewhat late, for the lamp grew dimmer and dimmer, capped by a long, black wick, with a hard, fiery crest.

He heard the key twisting in the rusted lock, the door swinging heavily open, and supposed the jailor was examining the cells before retiring to rest. He was confirmed in this belief by seeing his figure through the opening, but when another figure glided in, and the jailor retreated, locking the door behind him, he knew that his prison had received an unexpected guest. He could not imagine what young boy had thought of visiting his cell, for he knew not one of the age this youth appeared to be. He was wrapped in a dark cloak, so long that it swept the prison floor, and a dark fur cap pulled far over the forehead, shaded his face.

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Clinton raised himself on his elbow and called out, in a gloomy tone, "Who is there?"

The youth advanced with slow steps, gathering up the sweeping folds of his cloak as he walked, and sunk down upon the wooden bench placed against the damp brick wall. Lifting his hands and clasping them together, he bowed his face upon them, while his frame shook with imprisoned emotion. The hands clasped over his face gleamed like snow in the dim cell, and they were small and delicate in shape, as a woman's. The dejected and drooping attitude, the downcast face, the shrouded and trembling form, the feminine shame visible through the disguise, awakened a wild hope in his heart. Springing up from his pallet, he eagerly approached the seeming boy, and exclaimed—

"Helen, Helen—have you relented at last? Do you pity and forgive me? Do you indeed love me?"

"Ungrateful wretch!" cried a voice far different from Helen's. The drooping head was quickly raised, the cap dashed from the head, and the cloak hurled from the shoulders. "Ungrateful wretch, as false as vile, do you know me now?"

"Mittie! is it indeed you?" said Clinton, involuntarily recoiling a few steps from the fiery glance that flashed through her tears. "I am not worthy of this condescension."

"Condescension!" repeated she, disdainfully. "Condescension! Yes—you say well. You did not expect me!" continued she, in a tone of withering sarcasm. "I am sorry for your disappointment. I am sorry the gentle Helen did not see fit to leave her downy bed, and warm room, braving the inclemency of the wintry blast, to minister to her waiting lover. It is a wondrous pity."

Then changing her accent, and bursting into a strain of the most impassioned emotion—

"Oh, my soul! was it for this I came forth alone, in darkness and stealth, like the felon whose den I sought? Is it on such a being as this, I have wasted such boundless wealth of love? Father, mother, brother, sister—all vainly urged their claims upon my heart. It was marble—it was ice to them. They thought I was made of stone, granite; would to Heaven I were. But you, Clinton; but you breathed upon the rock, you softened, you warmed; and now, wretch, you grind it into powder. You melted the ice—and having drained the waters, you have left a dry and burning channel—here."

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Mittie pressed her hand upon her heart, with a gesture of pain, and began to traverse wildly the narrow cell; her cloak, which had fallen back from her shoulders, sweeping in the dust. Every passion was wrestling for mastery in her bosom.

"Why," she exclaimed, suddenly stopping and gazing fixedly upon him, "why did you make me conscious of this terrible vitality? What motive had you for crossing my path, and like Attila, the destroyer, withering every green blade beneath my feet? I had never wronged you. What motive, I ask, had you for deceiving and mocking me, who so madly trusted, so blindly worshipped?"

"Spare me, Mittie," exclaimed the humbled and convicted Clinton. "Trample not on a fallen wretch, who has nothing to say in his defence. But one thing I will say, I have not intended to deceive you. I did love you, and felt at the time all that I professed. Had you loved me less, I had been more constant. But why, let me ask, have you sought me here, to upbraid me for my inconstancy? What good can it do to you or to me? You call me a wretch: and I acknowledge myself to be one, a vile, ungrateful wretch. Call me a thief, if you will, if the word does not blister your tongue to utter it. I confess it all. Now leave me to my fate."

"Confess one thing more," said Mittie, "speak to me as if it were your dying hour—for you will soon be dead to me, and tell me, if it is for the love of Helen you abandon mine?"

Clinton hesitated, a red color flushed his pallid cheek. He could not at that moment, in the presence of such deep and true passion, utter a falsehood; and degraded as he was, he could not bear to inflict the pain an avowal of the truth might cause.

"Speak," she urged, "and speak truly. It is all the atonement I ask."

"My love can only reflect disgrace on its object. Rejoice that it rests on her, rather than yourself. But she has avenged your wrongs. She rejected me before my hand was polluted with this last foul crime. She upbraided me for my perfidy to you, and fled from my sight with horror. Had she loved me, I might have been saved—but I am lost now." [220]

Mittie stood immovable as a statue. Her eyes were fixed upon the floor, her brow contracted and her lips firmly closed. She appeared to be going through a petrifying process, so marble was her complexion, so rigid her features, so unchanging her attitude.

"'Twas but a moment o'er her soul
Winters of memory seemed to roll,"

congealing her as they rolled. As Clinton looked upon her and contrasted that pale and altered form, with the resplendent figure that he had beheld like an embodied rainbow on the sun-gilded arch, his conscience stung him with a scorpion sting. He had said to himself, while parlying with the tempter about the gold, that he had never *stolen*. He now felt convicted of a far worse robbery, of a more inexpiable crime—for which God, if not man, would judge him—the theft of a young and trusting heart, of its peace, its confidence and hope, leaving behind a cold and dreary void. He could not bear the sight of that desolate figure, so lately quickened with glowing passions.

"Clinton," said Mittie, breaking the silence in a low, oppressed voice, "I see you have one virtue left, of the wreck of all others. I honor that one. You asked me why I came. I will tell you. I knew you guilty, steeped in ignominy, the scorn and by-word of the town, guilty too of a crime more vile than murder, for murder may be committed from the wild impulse of exasperated passion—but theft is a cold, deliberate, selfish, coward act. Yet knowing all this, I felt willing to brave every danger, to face death itself, if it were necessary, to release you from the horrid doom that awaits you—to save you from the living grave which yawns to receive you. I am willing still, in spite of your alienated affection, your perjured vows and broken faith—so mighty and all-conquering is even the memory of the love of woman. Here, wrap this cloak about you, pull this cap over your brows—your long, dark hair will aid the disguise. The jailer will not detect it, or mark your taller figure, by this dim and gloomy light. He is sleepy and weary, and I know his senses are deadened by brandy; I perceived its burning fumes as we walked that close and narrow passage. Clinton, there is no danger to myself in this release, you know there is not. The moment they discover me, they will let me go. Hasten, for he will soon be here." [221]

"Impossible," exclaimed Clinton, "I cannot consent; I cannot leave you in this cell—this cold, fireless cell, on such a night as this. I cannot expose you to your father's displeasure, to the censures of the world. No, Mittie, I am not worthy of this generous devotion; but from my soul I bless you for it. Besides, it would be all in vain. A discovery would be inevitable."

"Escape would be certain," she cried, with increasing energy. "I marked that jailer well—his senses are too much blunted for the exercise of clear perception. You are slender and not very tall; your face is as fair as mine, your hair of the same color. If you refuse, I will seek a colder couch than that pallet of straw; I will pass the night under the leafless trees, and my pillow shall be the snowy ground. As for my father's displeasure, I have incurred it already. As for the censures of the world, I scorn them. What do you call the world? This village, this town, this little, narrow sphere? I live in a world of my own, as high above it as the heavens are above the earth."

Clinton's opposition weakened before her commanding energy. The hope of freedom kindled in his breast, and lighted up his countenance.

"But you," said he, irresolutely, "even if you could endure the horrors of the night, cannot be concealed on his entrance. How can you pass for me?" he cried, looking down on her woman's apparel, for she had thrown the cloak over his arm, and stood in her own flowing robes.

"I will throw myself on the pallet, and draw the blankets over me. My sable locks," gathering them back in her hand, for they hung loosely round her face—"are almost the counterpart of yours. I can conceal their length thus." Untying the scarf which passed over her shoulders and encircled her waist, she folded it over her flowing hair. "When the blanket is over me," she added, "I shall escape detection. Hasten! Think of the long years of imprisonment, the solitary dungeon, the clanking chains, the iron that will daily enter your soul. Think of all this, and fly!" [222]

Hark! I hear footsteps in the passage. Don't you hear them? My God! it will be too late!"

Seizing the cloak, she threw it over his shoulders, snatched up the cap, and put it upon his head, which involuntarily bent to receive it, and wildly tearing herself from the arms that wrapped her in a parting embrace, sprang to the pallet, and shrouded herself in the dismal folds from which Clinton had shrunk in disgust.

Clinton drew near the door. It opened, and Arthur Hazleton entered the cell. The jailer stood on the outside, fumbling at the lock, turning the massy key backward and forward, making a harsh, creaking sound. His head was bent close to the lock, in which there appeared to be some impediment. The noise which he made with the grating key, the stooping position he had assumed, favored the escape of Clinton.

As Arthur entered, he glided out, unperceived by him, for the jailer had brought no light, and the prisoner was standing in the shadow of the wall.

"There," grumbled the jailer, "I believe that will do—I must have this lock fixed to-morrow. Here, doctor, take the key, I can trust *you*, I know. When you are ready to go, drop it in my room, just underneath this. I mean drop in, and give it to me, I am sick to-night. I am obliged to go to bed."

Arthur assured him that he would attend faithfully to his directions, and that he might retire in perfect security. Then locking the door within, he walked towards the pallet, where the supposed form of the prisoner lay, in the stillness of dissembled sleep. His face was turned towards the straw, the bed cover was drawn up over his neck, nothing was distinctly visible in the obscurity but a mass of dark, gleaming hair, reflecting back the dim light from its jetty mirror.

Arthur did not like to banish from his couch, that

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"Friend to the wretch, whom every friend forsakes."

He seated himself on the bench, folded his cloak around him, and awaited in silence the awakening of the prisoner. He had come, in obedience to the commands of his Divine Master, to visit those who are in prison, and minister unto them. Not as Mittie had done, to assist him in eluding the just penalty of the offended majesty of the laws. He did not believe the perpetrator of such a crime as Clinton's entitled to pardon, but he looked upon every son of Adam as a brother, and as such an object of pity and kindness.

While he sat gazing on the pallet, watching for the first motion that would indicate the dispersion of slumber, he heard a cough issuing from it, which his practiced ear at once recognized as proceeding from a woman's lungs. A suspicion of the truth flashed into his mind. He rose, bent over the couch, and taking hold of the covering, endeavored to draw it back from the face it shrouded. He could see the white hands that clinched it, and a tress of long, waving hair, loosened by the motion, floated on his sight.

"Mittie—Mittie Gleason!" he exclaimed, bending on one knee, and trying to raise her—"how came you here? Yet, why do I ask? I know but too well—Clinton has escaped—and you—"

"*I am here!*" she cried, starting to her feet, and shaking back her hair, which fell in a sable mantle over her shoulders, flowing far below the waist. "I am here. What do you wish of me? I am not prepared to receive company just yet," she added, deridingly; "my room is rather unfurnished."

She looked so wild and unnatural, her tone was so mocking, her glance so defying, Arthur began to fear that her reason was disordered. Fever was burning on her cheeks, and it might be the fire of delirium that sparkled in her eyes. He took her hand very gently, and tried to count the beatings of her pulse, but she snatched it from him with violence, and commanded him to leave her.

"This is my sanctuary," she cried. "You have no right to intrude into it. Begone!—I will be alone."

"Mittie, I will not leave you here—you must return with me to your father's house. Think of the obloquy you may incur by remaining. Come, before another enters."

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"If I go, *you* will be suspected of releasing the prisoner, and suffer the penalty due for such an act. No, no, I have braved all consequences, and I dare to meet them."

"Then I leave you to inform the jailer of the flight of the prisoner. It is my duty."

"You will not do so mean and unmanly a deed!" springing between him and the door, and pressing her back against it. "You will not basely inform of him whom a young girl has had the courage to release. *You*—a man, will not do it. *Will you?*"

"An act of justice is never base or cowardly. Clinton is a convicted thief, and deserves the doom impending over such transgressors. He is an unprincipled and profligate young man, and unworthy the love of a pure-hearted woman. He has tempted your brother from the paths of virtue, repaid your confidence with the coldest treachery, violated the laws of God and man, and yet, unparalleled infatuation—you love him still, and expose yourself to slander and disgrace for his sake."

He spoke sternly, commandingly. He had tried reason and persuasion, he now spoke with

authority, but it was equally in vain.

"Who told you that I love him?" she repeated. "'Tis false. I hate him. I hate him!" she again repeated, but her lips quivered, and her voice choked.

Arthur hailed this symptom of sensibility as a favorable omen. He had never intended to inform the jailer of Clinton's escape. He would not be instrumental to such an event himself, knowing, as he did, his guilt, but since it had been effected by another, he could not help rejoicing in heart. Perhaps Clinton might profit by this bitter lesson, and "reformation glittering over his faults"—efface by its lustre the dark stain upon his name. And while he condemned the rashness and mourned for the misguided feelings of Mittie, he could not repress an involuntary thrill of admiration for her deep, self-sacrificing love. What a pity that a passion so sublime in its strength and despair should be inspired by a being so unworthy. [225]

"Will you not let me pass?" said he.

"Never, for such a purpose."

"I disclaim it altogether, I never intended to put in execution the threat I breathed. It was to induce you to leave this horrible place that I uttered it. I am ashamed of the subterfuge, though the motive was pure. Mittie, I entreat you to come with me; I entreat you with the sincerity of a friend, the earnestness of a brother. I will never breathe to a human being the mystery of Clinton's escape. I will guard your reputation with the most jealous vigilance. Not even my blind Alice shall be considered a more sacred trust than you, if you confide yourself to my protecting care."

"Are you indeed my friend?" she asked, in a softened voice, with a remarkable change in the expression of her countenance. "I thought you hated me."

"Hated you! What a suspicion!"

"You have always been cold and distant—never sought my friendship, or manifested for me the least regard. When I was but a child, and you first visited our family, I was attracted towards you, less by your gentle manners than your strong, controlling will. Had you shown as much interest in me as you did in Helen, you might have had a wondrous influence on my character. You might have saved me from that which is destroying me. But it is all past. You slighted me, and lavished all your care on Helen. Every one cared for Helen more than me, and my heart grew colder and colder to her and all who loved her. What I have since felt, and why I have felt it for others, God only knows. Others! Why should I say others? There never was but one—and that one, the false felon, whom I once believed an angel of light. And he, even he has thrown my heart back bleeding at my feet, for the love he bears to Helen."

"Which Helen values not," said the young doctor, half in assertion and half in interrogation.

"No, no," she replied, "a counter influence has saved her from the misery and shame."

Mittie paused, clasped her hands together, and pressed them tightly on her bosom.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "it is no metaphor, when they talk of arrows piercing the breast. I feel them here." [226]

Her countenance expressed physical suffering as well as mental agony. She shivered with cold one moment, the next glowed with feverish heat.

Arthur took off his cloak, and folded it round her, and she offered no resistance. She was sinking into that passive state, which often succeeds too high-wrought emotion.

"You are very kind," said she, "but *you* will suffer."

"No—I am accustomed to brave the elements. But if you think I suffer, let us hasten to a warmer region. Give me your hand."

Firmly grasping it, he extinguished the lamp, and in total darkness they left the cell, groped through the long, narrow passage, down the winding stairs, at the foot of which was the jailer's room. Arthur was familiar with this gloomy dwelling, so often had he visited it on errands of mercy and compassion. It was not the first time he had been entrusted with the key of the cells, though he suspected that it would be the last. The keeper, only half awakened, received the key, locked his own door, and went back to his bed, muttering that "there were not many men to be trusted, but the young doctor was one."

When Arthur and Mittie emerged from the dark prison-house into the clear, still moonlight, (for the moon had risen, and over the night had thrown a veil of silvery gauze,) Arthur's excited spirit subsided into peace, beneath its pale, celestial glory. Mittie thought of the fugitive, and shrunk from the beams that might betray his flight. The sudden barking of the watch-dog made her tremble. Even their own shadows on the white, frozen ground, she mistook for the avengers of crime, in the act of pursuit.

"What shall we do?" said Arthur, when, having arrived at Mr. Gleason's door, they found it fastened. "I wish you could enter unobserved."

Mittie's solitary habits made her departure easy, and her absence unsuspected, but she could not steal in through the bolts and locks that impeded her admission.

"No matter," she cried, "leave me here—I will lie down by the threshold, and wait the morning. All places are alike to me." [227]

Louis, whose chamber was opposite to Mittie's, in the front part of the house, and who now had many a sleepless night, heard voices in the portico, and opening the window, demanded "who was there?"

"Come down softly and open the door," said Arthur, "I wish to speak to you."

Louis hastily descended, and unlocked the door.

His astonishment, on seeing his sister with Arthur Hazleton, at that hour, when he supposed her in her own room, was so great that he held the door in his hand, without speaking or offering to admit them.

"Let us in as noiselessly as possible," said Arthur. "Take her directly to her chamber, kindle a fire, give her a generous glass of Port wine, and question her not to-night. Let no servant be roused. Wait upon her yourself, and be silent on the morrow. Good-night."

"It is too bright," whispered she, as Louis half carried her up stairs, stepping over the checker-work the moon made on the carpet.

"What is too bright, Mittie?"

"Nothing. Make haste—I am very cold."

Louis led Mittie to a chair, then lighting a candle, he knelt down and gathered together the still smoking brands. A bright fire soon blazed on the hearth, and illuminated the apartment.

"Now for the wine," said he.

"He is gone, Louis," said she, laying her hand on his arm. "He is fled. I released him. Was it not noble in me, when he loves Helen, and he a thief, too?"

Louis thought she spoke very strangely, and he looked earnestly at her glittering eyes.

"I am glad of it!" he exclaimed—"he is a villain, but I am glad he is escaped. But you, Mittie—you should not have done this. How could you do it? Did Arthur Hazleton help you?"

"Oh, no! I did it very easily—I gave him your cloak and cap. You must not be angry, you shall have new ones. They fitted him very nicely. He would run faster, if my heart-strings did not get tangled round his feet, all bleeding, too. Don't you remember, Miss Thusa told you about it, long ago?" [228]

"My God, Mittie! what makes you talk in that way? Don't talk so. Don't look so. For Heaven's sake, don't look so wild."

"I can't help it, Louis," said she, pressing her hands on the top of her head, "I feel so strange here. I do believe I'm mad."

She was indeed delirious. The fever which for many days had been burning in her veins, now lighted its flames in her brain, and raged for more than a week with increasing violence.

She did not know, while she lay tossing in delirious agony, that the fugitive, Clinton, had been overtaken, and brought back in chains to a more hopeless, because doubly guarded captivity.

Justice triumphed over love.

He who sows the wind, must expect to reap the whirlwind.

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CHAPTER XIV.

"High minds of native pride and force,
Most deeply feel thy pangs, remorse."—*Scott*.

"Lord, at Thy feet ashamed I lie,
Upward I dare not look—
Pardon my sins before I die,
And blot them from Thy book."—*Hymn*.

WHEN Mittie awoke from the wild dream of delirium, she was weak as a new-born infant. For a few moments she imagined herself the inhabitant of another world. The deep quietude of the apartment, its soft, subdued, slumberous light, the still, watching figures seated by her bedside, formed so strong a contrast to the gloomy cell, with its chill, damp air, and glimmering lamp—its rough keeper and agitated inmate—that cell which, it appeared to her, she had just quitted. Two

fair young forms, with arms interlaced, and heads inclined towards each other, the one with locks of rippling gold, the other of soft, wavy brown, seemed watching angels to her unclosing eyes. She felt a soft pressure on her faintly throbbing pulse, and knew that on the other side, opposite the watching angels, a manly figure was bending over her. She could not turn her head to gaze upon it, but there was a benignity in its presence which soothed and comforted her. Other forms were there also, but they faded away in a soft, hazy atmosphere, and her drooping eye-lids again closed.

In the long, tranquil slumber that followed, she passed the crisis of her disease, and the strife-worn, wandering spirit returned to the throne it had abdicated.

And now Mittie became conscious of the unbounded tenderness and care lavished upon her by every member of the household, and of the unwearied attentions of Arthur Hazleton. Helen herself could not have been more kindly, anxiously nursed. She, who had believed herself an object of indifference or dislike to all, was the central point of solicitude now. If she slept, every one moved as if shod with velvet, the curtains were gently let down, all occupation suspended, lest it should disturb the pale slumberer;—if she waked, some kind hand was ever ready to smooth her pillow, wipe the dew of weakness from her brow, and administer the cordial to her wan lips. [230]

“Why do you all nurse me so tenderly?” asked she of her step-mother, one night, when she was watching by her. “Me, who have never done any thing for others?”

“You are sick and helpless, and dependent on our care. The hand of God is laid upon you, and whosoever He smites, becomes a sacred object in the Christian’s eyes.”

“Then it is not from love you minister to my weakness. I thought it could not be.”

“Yes, Mittie. It is from love. We always love those who depend on us for life. Your sufferings have been great, and great is our sympathy. Pity, sympathy, tenderness, all flow towards you, and no remembrance of the past mingles bitterness with their balm.”

“But, mother, I do not wish to live. It were far kinder to let me die.”

It was the first time Mittie had ever addressed her thus. The name seemed to glide unconsciously from her lips, breathed by her softened spirit.

Mrs. Gleason was moved even to tears. She felt repaid for all her forbearance, all her trials, by the utterance of this one little word, so long and so ungratefully withheld. Bending forward, with an involuntary movement, she kissed the faded lips, which, when rosy with health, had always repelled her maternal caresses. She felt the feeble arm of the invalid pass round her neck, and draw her still closer. She felt, too, tears which did not *all* flow from her own eyes moisten her cheek.

“I do not wish to live, mother,” repeated Mittie, after this ebullition of sensibility had subsided. “I can never again be happy. I never can make others happy. I am willing to die. Every time I close my eyes I pray that my sleep may be death, my bed my grave.” [231]

“Ah! my child, pray not for death because you have been saved from the curse of a granted prayer. Pray rather that you may live to atone by a life of meekness and humility for past errors. You ought not to be willing to die with so great a purpose unaccomplished, since God does not now *will* you to depart. You mistake physical debility for resignation, weariness of life for desire for heaven. Oh, Mittie, not in the sackcloth and ashes of *selfish* sorrow should the spirit be clothed to meet its God.”

Mittie lay for some time without speaking, then lifting her melancholy black eyes, once so haughty and brilliant, she said—

“I will tell you why I wish to die. I am now humbled and subdued—conscious and ashamed of my errors, grateful for your unexampled goodness. If I die now, you will shed some tears over my grave, and perhaps say, ‘Poor girl! she was so young, and so unhappy—we remember her faults only to forgive them.’ But if I live to be strong and healthy as I have been before, I fear my heart will harden, and my evil temper recover all its terrible power. It seems to me now as if I had been possessed by one of those fiends which we read of in the Bible, which tore and rent the bosom that they entered. It is not cast out—it only sleeps—and I fear—oh!—I dread its wakening.”

“Oh, Mittie, only cry, ‘Thou Son of David, have mercy on me—’ only cry out, from the depths of a contrite spirit—and it will depart, though its name be legion.”

“But I fear this contrition may be transitory. I do pray, I do cry out for mercy now, but tomorrow my heart may harden into stone. You, who are so perfect and pious, think it easy to be good, and so it is, on a sick bed—when gentle, watching eyes and stilly steps are round you, and the air you breathe is embalmed with blessings. With returning health the bosom strife will begin. Your thoughts will no longer centre on me. Helen will once more absorb your affections, and then the serpent envy will come gliding back, so cold and venomous, to coil itself in my heart.”

“My child—there is room enough in the world, room enough in our hearts, and room enough in Heaven, for you and Helen too.” [232]

She spoke with solemnity, and she continued to speak soothingly and persuasively till the eyes

of the invalid were closed in slumber, and then her thoughts rose in silent prayer for that sin-sick and life-weary soul.

Mittie never alluded to Clinton in her conversation with her mother. There was only one being to whom she now felt willing to breathe his name, and that was Arthur Hazleton. The first time she was alone with him, she asked the question that had long been hovering on her lips. She was sitting in an easy chair, supported by pillows, her head resting on her wasted hand. The reflection of the crimson curtains gave a glow to the chill whiteness of her face, and softened the gloom of her sable eyes. She looked earnestly at Arthur, who knew all that she wished to ask. The color mounted to his cheek. He could not frame a falsehood, and he feared to reveal the truth.

"Are there any tidings of him?" said she; "is he safe—or has his flight been discovered? But," continued she in a lower voice, "you need not speak. Your looks reveal the whole. He is again imprisoned."

Arthur bowed his head, glad to be spared the painful task of asserting the fact.

"And there is no hope of pardon or acquittal?" she asked.

"None. He *must* meet his doom. And, Mittie, sad as it is—it is just. Your own sense of rectitude and justice will in time sanction the decree. You may, you must pity him—but love, unsupported by esteem, must expire. You are mourning now over a bright illusion—a fallen idol—a deserted temple; but believe me, your mourning will change to joy. The illusion is dispelled, that truth may shine forth in all its splendor; the idol thrown down that the living God may be enthroned upon the altar; the temple deserted that it may be filled with the glory of the Lord."

"You are right, Arthur, in one thing—would to God you were in all. It is not love I now feel, but despair. It is dreadful to look forward to a cold, unloving existence. I shudder to think how young I am, and how long I may have yet to live."

"Yours is the natural language of disappointed youth. You have passed through a fiery ordeal. The sore and quivering heart shrinks from the contact even of sympathy. You fear the application of even Gilead's balm. You are weak and languid, and I will not weary you with discussion; but spring will soon be here; genial, rejoicing spring. You will revive with its flowers, and your spirit warble with its singing birds. Then we will walk abroad in the hush of twilight—and if you will promise to listen, I will preach you a daily sermon, with nature for my text and inspiration too."

[233]

"Ah! such sermons should be breathed to Helen only. She can understand and profit by them."

"There is room enough in God's temple for you and Helen too," replied Arthur. Mittie remembered the words of her step-mother, so similar, and was struck by the coincidence. Her own views seemed very selfish and narrow, by contrast.

The flowers of spring unfolded, and Mittie did indeed revive and bloom again, but it was as the lily, not the rose. The love tint of the latter had faded, never to blush again.

There was a subdued happiness in the household, which had long been a stranger there.

Louis, though his brow still wore the traces of remorse, was happy in the consciousness of errors forgiven, confidence restored, and good resolutions strengthened and confirmed. He devoted himself to his father's business with an industry and zeal more worthy of praise, because he was obliged to struggle with his natural inclinations. He believed it his father's wish to keep him with him, and he made it his law to obey him, thinking his future life too short for expiation. There was another object, for which he also thought life too short, and that was to secure the happiness of Alice—whom he loved with a purity and intensity that was deepened by her helplessness and almost infantine artlessness. He knew that her blindness was hopeless, but it seemed to him that he loved her the more for her blindness, her entire dependence on his care. It would be such a holy task to protect and cherish her, and to throw around her darkened life the illuminating influence of love.

She was still with them, and Mrs. Hazleton had been induced to leave the seclusion of the Parsonage, and become the guest of Mrs. Gleason. It must have been a strong motive that tempted her from the hallowed shades, which she had never quitted since her husband's death. Reader, can you conjecture what that motive was?

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A very handsome new house, built in the cottage style, had been lately erected in the vicinity of Mr. Gleason's, under the superintendence of the young doctor, and rumor said that he was shortly to be married to Helen Gleason. Every one thought it was time for *him* to be married, if he ever intended to be, but many objected to her extreme youth. That, however, was the only objection urged, as Helen was a universal favorite, and Arthur Hazleton the idol of the town.

Arthur had never made Helen a formal declaration of love. He had never asked her in so many words, "Will you be my wife?" As imperceptibly and gracefully as the morning twilight brightens into the fervor and glory of noonday, had the watchfulness and tenderness of friendship deepened into the warmth and devotion of perfect love. Helen could not look back to any particular scene, where the character of the friend was merged into that of the lover. She felt the blessed assurance that she was beloved, yet had any one asked her how and when she first received it, she would have found it difficult to answer. He talked to her of the happiness of the future, of *their* future, of the heaven of mutual trust and faith and love, begun on earth, in the kingdom of their hearts, till it seemed as if her individual existence ceased, and life with him

became a heavenly identity. There were other life interests, too, twining together, as the following scene will show.

The evening before the wedding-day of Arthur and Helen, as Mrs. Hazleton was walking in the garden, gathering flowers and evergreens for bridal garlands to decorate the room, Louis approached her, hand in hand with her blind child.

"Mrs. Hazleton," said he with trembling eagerness, "will you give me your daughter, and let us hallow the morrow by a double wedding?"

"What, Alice, my poor blind Alice!" exclaimed Mrs. Hazleton, dropping in astonishment the flowers she had gathered. "You cannot mean what you say—and her misfortune should make her sacred from levity." [235]

"I do mean it. I have long and ardently wished it. The consciousness of my unworthiness has till now sealed my lips, but I cannot keep silence longer. My affection has grown too strong for the restraints imposed upon it. Give me your daughter, dearer to me for her blindness, more precious for her helplessness, and I will guard her as the richest treasure ever bestowed on man."

Mrs. Hazleton was greatly agitated. She had always looked on Alice as excluded by her misfortune from the usual destiny of her sex, as consecrated from her birth for a vestal's lot. She had never thought of her being wooed as a wife, and she repelled the idea as something sacrilegious.

"Impossible, Louis," she answered. "You know not what you ask. My Alice is set apart, by her Maker's will, from the sympathies of love. I have disciplined her for a life of loneliness. She looks forward to no other. Disturb not, I pray thee, the holy simplicity of her feelings, by inspiring hopes which never can be realized."

"Speak, Alice," cried Louis, "and tell your mother all you just now said to me. Let me be justified in her eyes."

Alice lifted her downcast, blushing face, while the tears rolled gently from her beautiful, sightless eyes.

"Mother, dear mother, forgive me if I have done wrong, but I cannot help my heart's throbbing more quickly at the echo of his footsteps or the music of his voice. And when he asked me to be his wife and be ever with him, I could not help feeling that it would make me the happiest of human beings. Oh, mother, you cannot know how kind, how good, how tender he has been to me. The world never looks dark when he is near."

Alice bowed her head on the shoulder of Louis, while her fair ringlets swept in shining wreaths over her face.

"This is so unexpected!" cried Mrs. Hazleton. "I must speak with your parents."

"I come with their full consent and approbation. Alice will take the place of Helen in the household, and prevent the aching void that would be left." [236]

"Alas! what can Alice do?"

"I can love him and pray for him, mother, live to bless him, and die, too, for his sake, if God requires such a sacrifice."

"Is not hers a heavenly mission?" cried Louis, taking the hand which rested on his arm, and laying it gently against his heart. "This little hand, whose touch quickens the pulsations of my being, will be a shield from temptation, a safeguard from sin. What can I do for her half so precious as her blessings and her prayers? If I am a lamp to her path, she will be a light to my soul. 'What can Alice do?' She can do every thing that a guardian angel can do. Give her to me, for I need her watchful cares."

"I see she is yours already," cried the now weeping mother, "I cannot take away what God has given. May He bless you, and sanctify this peculiar and solemn union."

Thus there was a double wedding on the morrow.

"But she had no wedding dress prepared!" says one

A robe of pure white muslin was all the lovely blind bride wished, and that she had always ready. A wreath of white rose-buds encircling her hair, completed her bridal attire. Helen wore no richer decoration. Spotless white, adorned with sweet, opening flowers, what could be more appropriate for youth and innocence like theirs?

Mittie wore the same fair, youthful livery, and a stranger might have mistaken her for one of the brides of the evening—but no love-light beamed in her large, dark, melancholy eyes. She would gladly have absented herself from a scene in which her blighted heart had no sympathy, but she believed it her *duty* to be present, and when she congratulated the wedded pairs, she tried to smile, though her smile was as cold as a moonbeam on snow.

Helen's eyes filled with tears at the sight of that faint, cold smile. She thought of Clinton, as he had first appeared among them, splendid in youthful beauty, and then of Clinton, languishing in chains, and doomed to long imprisonment in a lonely dungeon. She thought of her sister's wasted

affections, betrayed confidence, and blasted hopes, and contrasting *her* lot with her own blissful destiny, she turned aside her head and wept. [237]

“Weep not, Helen,” said Arthur, in a low voice, divining the cause of her emotion, and fixing on the retiring form of Mittie his own glistening eye; “she now sows in tears, but she may yet reap in joy. Hers is a mighty struggle, for her character is composed of strong and warring elements. Her mind has grasped the sublime truths of religion, and when once her heart embraces them, it will kindle with the fire of martyrdom. I have studied her deeply, intensely, and believe me, my own dear Helen, my too sad and tearful bride, though she is now wading through cold and troubled waters, her feet will rest on the green margin of the promised land.”

And this prophecy was indeed fulfilled. Mittie never became gentle, amiable and loving, like Helen, for as Arthur had justly said, her character was composed of strong and warring elements—but after a long and agonizing strife, she did become a zealous and devoted Christian. The hard, metallic materials of her nature were at last fused by the flame of divine love. She had passed through a baptism of fire, and though it had blistered and scarred, it had purified her heart. Christianity, in her, never wore a serene and joyous aspect. Its diadem was the crown of thorns, its drink often the vinegar and gall. It was on the Mount of Calvary, not of Transfiguration, that she beheld her Saviour, and her God.

Had she been a Catholic, she would have worn the vesture of sackcloth, and slept upon the bed of iron, and even used the knotted scourge in expiation of her sins, but as the severe simplicity of her Protestant faith forbade such penances, she manifested, by the most rigid self-denial and strictest devotion, the sincerity of her penitence and the fervor of her faith.

Was Miss Thusa forgotten? Did she sleep in her lonely grave unhonored and unmourned?

In a corner of Helen’s own room, conspicuous in the mids of the elegant, modern furniture that adorns it, there stands an ancient brass-bound wheel. The brass shines with the lustre of burnished gold, and the dark wood-work has the polish of old mahogany. Nothing in Helen’s possession is so carefully preserved, so reverently guarded as that ancestral machine. [238]

Nor is this the only memento of the aged spinster. In the grave-yard is a simple monument of gray marble, which gratitude and affection have erected to her memory. Instead of the willow, with weeping branches, the usual badge of grief—a wheel carved in bas relief perpetuates the remembrance of her life-long occupation. Below this is written the inscription—

“She laid her hands to the spindle, and her hands held the distaff.”

“She opened her mouth with wisdom, and in her tongue was the law of kindness.”

THE END.

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Transcriber's Note

The following typographical errors have been corrected.

Page Error

13 *Collins* changed to *Collins*.

14 ornament than use changed to ornament than use.

17 I be!" changed to I be!'

18 few moments" changed to few moments,"

20 and God wont changed to and God won't

29 merry-making and frolicking changed to merry-making and frolicking.

32 *Milton* changed to *Milton*.

40 repeated Helen, changed to repeated Helen.

50 and she wont changed to and she won't

52 than a cipher changed to than a cipher.

53 study hereafter. changed to study hereafter."

54 she is sleeping changed to "she is sleeping

55 waiting for her changed to waiting for her.

71 whispered Helen changed to whispered Helen.

71 in or out changed to in or out.

72 "'Now," changed to "'Now,'

73 child did'nt changed to child didn't

77 mild summer evening, changed to mild summer evening.

82 to love her changed to to love her.

86 It's nobody but changed to "It's nobody but

90 the young doctor changed to the young doctor.

91 blessed light? changed to blessed light?"

113 and more pervading changed to and more pervading.

116 dissappointment changed to disappointment

119 gloriou changed to glorious

120 ancestral figure of Misss changed to ancestral figure of Miss

128 deep,tranquil,refreshing changed to deep, tranquil, refreshing
128 joyious changed to joyous
133 to see me. changed to to see me."
139 It is all changed to "It is all
148 he had roused, changed to he had roused.
149 said Mrs. leason changed to said Mrs. Gleason
155 going tomorrow changed to going to-morrow
162 withering changed to withering
164 I believe I changed to "I believe I
166 shant changed to shan't
176 corruscate changed to coruscate
179 "'Not poppy, changed to 'Not poppy,
180 his own experience?" changed to his own experience?
184 which wont be changed to which won't be
190 *Shakspeare* changed to *Shakspeare*.
205 Poor child!. changed to Poor child!
217 absence changed to absence
221 not very call changed to not very

229 *Hymn* changed to *Hymn*.
233 disappointed changed to disappointed
241 OLIVER TWIST changed to OLIVER TWIST,
243 INDA; changed to LINDA;
243 etter books changed to better books
245 with many Husbands changed to with many Husbands.
245 PASSION AND PRINCIPLE changed to PASSION AND PRINCIPLE.
245 HE BARONET'S changed to THE BARONET'S
247 OUISE LA VALLIERE changed to LOUISE LA VALLIERE
247 538 pages, wit changed to 538 pages, with
249 Love." etc. changed to Love," etc.
253 equal to th changed to equal to the
259 *the* Lamplighter.'" changed to *The Lamplighter*."
262 Philadelphia, changed to Philadelphia.

The following words had inconsistent spelling and hyphenation.

ecstasy / ecstasy
eyelids / eye-lids
fireside / fire-side
jailer / jailor
needlework / needle-work
penknife / pen-knife
waterfall / water-fall
wayside / way-side
workbox / work-box

Other inconsistencies found in the text:

Prices on the advertising pages were printed with a period or a space or a comma between the dollars and cents. This inconsistency has been maintained.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK HELEN AND ARTHUR; OR, MISS THUSA'S
SPINNING WHEEL ***

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