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Title: A Noble Woman

Author: Ann S. Stephens

Release Date: September 27, 2009 [EBook #30111]

Language: English

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A NOBLE WOMAN ***

A NOBLE WOMAN.

BY MRS. ANN S. STEPHENS.

AUTHOR OF "PALACES AND PRISONS," "FASHION AND FAMINE,"
"MARRIED IN HASTE," "MABEL'S MISTAKE," "DOUBLY FALSE," "WIVES
AND WIDOWS," "MARY DERWENT," "THE HEIRESS," "THE REJECTED
WIFE," "THE SOLDIER'S ORPHANS," "THE OLD HOMESTEAD," "RUBY
GRAY'S STRATEGY," "THE CURSE OF GOLD," "THE WIFE'S SECRET,"
"THE GOLD BRICK," "SILENT STRUGGLES," ETC.

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"A Noble Woman," is the name of the new novel written by Mrs. Ann S. Stephens. Its pages are replete with incidents of absorbing interest, and her admirers will read it with avidity, and with a zest which would indicate that the freshness and interest of each of her new novels are still as potent as were her earliest productions. The leading characters are carried through a series of exciting adventures, all of which are narrated and drawn out with such ingenuity that the reader's attention is kept on a tension of interest from the opening page to the close of the volume. This is the great secret of Mrs. Stephens' success—her readers cannot get out of her influence. She does not fatigue them with the subtleties of metaphysics or philosophy. She gives you a thrilling story, pure and simple, sensational if you please, and she leaves the whole affair in the hands of her readers, feeling quite secure of a favorable verdict on every new emanation from her pen. "A Noble Woman" will prove to be the most popular novel that she has ever written.

PHILADELPHIA:
T. B. PETERSON & BROTHERS;
306 CHESTNUT STREET.

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[MRS. ANN S. STEPHENS' WORKS.](#)

A NOBLE WOMAN.

CHAPTER I.

A PROPOSAL.

She was eighteen years old and would graduate in a few weeks, yet Elsie looked like a child, lying there in that little white bed, with her golden curls scattered on the pillow and the soft whiteness of her neck and hands shaded by the delicate Valenciennes with which her night robe was profusely decorated. A quantity of hot house flowers lay scattered on the counterpane, where the girl had flung them, one by one, from a bouquet she was still tearing to pieces. A frown was on her pretty forehead, and her large violet eyes shone feverishly. It was seldom anything half so lovely appeared in the confined sleeping rooms of that highly fashionable boarding school. Indeed, since its foundation it is doubtful if a creature half so beautiful as Elsie Mellen had ever slept within its walls.

Just as the girl had littered the whole bed with flowers, which she broke and crushed as a child breaks the toys he is weary of, the door of the room opened, and a young lady entered, with a plate of hot-house grapes in her hand. She was older than the sick girl by two or three years, and in all respects a grave and most womanly contrast. Calm, gracious and dignified, she came forward with an air of protection and sat down by the bed, holding out her grapes.

"See what your brother has sent you."

The girl started up and flung back the hair from her face.

"From Piney Bend," she exclaimed, lifting one of the purple clusters in her hand, and crowding two or three of the grapes into her mouth at once, with the delicious greed of a naughty child. "Oh, how cool and nice. Dear old Grant, I wonder when he is coming."

"Sometime to-day, the messenger said," answered the young lady, and a soft peach-like bloom swept over her face as she spoke.

Elsie was looking at her friend; and a quick, mischievous light came into her own face.

"Bessie," she murmured, in a voice mellowed and muffled by the grapes in her mouth. "Don't tell me anything—only I think—I think—oh! wouldn't it be fun?—there, there, how you are blushing."

"Blushing, how foolish! But I am glad to see you well enough even to talk nonsense."

"Nonsense! look here, Miss Prim: if you're not in love with my brother Grantley Mellen, I never was in love with anybody in my life."

"Elsie!"

"There, there! I shan't believe a word you say—more than that, I believe he's in love with you."

No blushes burned that noble face now, for it grew white with a great surprise, and for a moment Elizabeth Fuller's heart ceased to beat.

Could this be true! These light, careless words from a young girl seemed to shake the foundation of her life. Did she love the man, who for three weeks had been a daily visitor in that sick room, whose voice had been music to her, whose eyes had been so often lifted to hers in tender gratitude. Could her heart have proved so cruelly rebellious? Then the other impossible things the girl had hinted at. Elsie had not meant it for cruelty, but still it was very cruel, to startle her with glimpses of a heaven she never must enter. What was she but a poor orphan girl, teaching in that school in order to pay for the tuition which had refined and educated her into the noble woman she unconsciously was. Of course Mr. Mellen was grateful for the care she had taken of his beautiful sister, and that was all. Elsie was almost well now, and would leave the school that term. After that there was little chance that she would ever see Grantley Mellen again.

"What on earth are you thinking about?" questioned Elsie, still busy with her grapes. "Just tell me if we are to be sisters,—and I'm set on it—you shall know all my secrets; it'll be so nice to have some one that won't tell,—and I'll know yours. To begin, dear old Bessie: *somebody* sent me these flowers, and I hate 'em. It's my way. So many at once, it stifles me. I wish he could see 'em now; wouldn't he just long to box my ears—there, that's my first secret."

"But who is the man, Elsie?" enquired Miss Fuller, really disturbed by this first confidence; for the girl was her room-mate, and had been placed particularly under her care.

"Oh, that's my second secret—I'll tell you that when you're Grant's wife. You haven't told me about your own adorer yet."

"How could I? One does not talk of lovers till they come."

"Oh Bessie Fuller; what a fraud you are! Just as if he hadn't been under this very window again and again: just as if the flowers that get into our room, no one can guess how, did not come from

him. Why, half the girls in school have seen him prowling round here like a great, handsome, splendid tiger!"

"What are you talking of, Elsie?"

"No matter; I shan't tell Grant, he must think himself first and foremost—what a lovely sister-in-law you will make."

"Elsie, my dear girl——"

"Don't interrupt me—don't say you wouldn't have him: that you like the other fellow better, and all that. I tell you Grant is a prince, and you shall be his princess. He's awful rich, too; our horrid old uncle left him everything. I haven't got the value of a hair bracelet all my own—that's another secret. The girls all think we share and share alike, and I want them to keep up the idea; but you are different. Don't you see it would be horrid hard for me if my brother should marry some close, stingy thing, that might even grudge me a home at Piney Bend; but with you—oh Bessie! Promise me that you will marry him."

Here Elsie flung down the stem of her grapes, and reaching out her arms, threw them lovingly around Elizabeth's neck.

"Promise me, promise me!"

"You foolish darling! Lie down and be quiet, or I shall think you light-headed again."

"But you shall, I declare you shall!—Hush! there is some one at the door. Come in!"

A servant opened the door and informed the young ladies that Mr. Mellen was in the parlor.

"Tell him to come up," said Elsie.

The servant went out, and Elsie sat up among her pillows, twisting that splendid mass of hair around her head. As she stooped forward, her eyes fell on the litter of broken flowers, and she called out eagerly,

"Oh Bessie, do sweep them up; throw them out of the window, under the bed, anywhere, so that he does not know about them. There would be no end to his questions, if he saw so much as a broken rose bud."

Elizabeth swept up the scattered flowers with her hands and cast them through the open window, scarcely heeding what the girl said about them, in the agitation of the moment. As she turned from the open sash, Grantley Mellen came into the room. He was indeed a grand and noble looking man, with dignity in his manner, and character in his face; evidently possessed of strong but subdued passions, and a power of concentration that might engender prejudices difficult to overcome. That he was upright and honorable, you saw at a glance. When he sat down by that fair young creature, and took her hand in his, the tenderness in his voice and eyes thrilled Elizabeth to the heart. Elsie it simply gratified.

"Why Bessie," she said, with threatening mischief in her eyes, "you haven't spoken to Grant yet."

"Because he was occupied with you," answered Elizabeth with grave dignity, that kept down the rebellious spirit in Elsie's eyes. "Now I will shake hands with Mr. Mellen and go down to my class."

With a gentle, but not altogether unembarrassed greeting, the young lady went out of the room, leaving the brother and sister together.

Two days after this scene in Elsie's chamber, Elizabeth Fuller stood in one of the parlors of the establishment with her hand locked in that of Grantley Mellen; startled, trembling, almost terrified by the great happiness that had fallen upon her. He had asked her tenderly, earnestly, and with a thrill of passion in his voice, to become his wife.

The girl had not answered him: she literally could not speak; her large gray eyes were lifted to his, wild with astonishment one moment, soft with exquisite love light the next.

"Will you not speak to me?"

She attempted to answer him, but smiles rather than words parted her lips; and tears, soft as dew, flooded the joy in her eyes. What did the man want of words after that?

They sat down together on the nearest couch, and scarcely knowing how, she found her heart so close to his, that the two seemed beating together in a wild, sweet tumult. The glow of his first kiss was on her lips; he was telling her in earnest, broken words, how fondly, how dearly he loved her. Nobly would she feel herself mated when she became the mistress of his home.

There was something besides smiles on those beautiful lips now. The heart has its own language, and in that she had answered him.

"Do I love you?" she said; "who could help it? Is there a woman on earth who could refuse such happiness? I forget myself, forget everything, even the poor pride that might have struggled a little against the disparity between us which seems lost to me now. I did not think it would be so sweet to accept everything and give nothing."

"You certainly love me and no other living man!" he said in answer to her sweet trustfulness. "Tell me that in words! tell me in looks! Make me sure of it."

"Love you! Indeed, indeed I do. Never in my life have I given a thought of such feelings to any man. If you can find happiness in owning every pulse of a human soul, it is yours."

"I believe it and accept the happiness; now my wife—for in a few weeks you must be that—let us go up to Elsie. She must be made happy also, for the dear child loves you scarcely less than I do."

A thought of something like shame shot through the joy of the moment, with Elizabeth. Had Elsie suggested this?

"Will she be pleased? Will she be surprised?"

"I hope so, I think so!" was Mellen's frank answer; "for hereafter, my sweet wife must be a guardian angel to the dear child, for she has been, till now, the dearest creature to me on earth."

"I, too, have loved her better than anything," said Elizabeth.

"Have I not seen that? Yes, I am sure we shall make Elsie perfectly happy. She has dreaded the loneliness of my home. Now it will be bright as heaven for her and for me."

CHAPTER II.

TOM THE GROOMSMAN.

Music in the Central Park! Such music as made the flowering thicket, covered with late May blossoms, thrill in the soft air and glow out more richly from the sweet disturbance. It was a glorious afternoon, the lawns were as green as an English meadow, and my observation of beautiful things has no higher comparison. All the irregular hills, ravines, and rocky projections were so broken up with trailing vines and sweet masses of spring-flowers, that every corner and nook your eye turned upon, was like a glimpse of paradise.

This was the still life of the scene, but above and beyond was congregated that active, cheerful bustle which springs out of a great multitude bent on enjoyment—cheerful, luxurious, refined, or otherwise, as humanity is always found. Carriages dashed in and out of the crowd, the inmates listening to the music or chatting together in subdued voices: groups of smiling pedestrians wandered through the labyrinths of blooming thickets, or sat tranquilly on rustic seats sheltered by such forest trees as art had spared to nature. The whole scene was one of brilliant confusion; but out of the constantly shifting groups, forms so lovely that you longed to gaze on them forever, were now and then given to the beholder; and equipages vied with each other that might have graced the royal parks of London or Paris without fear of criticism.

Just as the sun began to turn its silver gleams into gold, the music ceased with a grand crash. The final melody was over, and the swarm of carriages broke up, whirled off in different directions, and began to course about the ring again, or drive through the various outlets towards Harlem, Bloomingdale, or the city, which lay in the soft gathering haze of the distance.

Among the stylish equipages that disentangled themselves from the crowd was a light barouche, cushioned with a rich shade of drab which had a pink flush running through it, and drawn by a pair of jet-black horses. The carriage was so perfect in its proportions and so exquisitely neat in its appointments, that it would have been an object of general admiration during the whole concert, had not its inmates carried off public attention before it had time to settle on the vehicle.

The eldest, a woman of thirty-two or three, elegantly dressed and generally recognized, seemed to be the mistress, for it was her gloved hand which gave the signal for moving, and the coachman always looked to her for directions.

A slight gesture indicated home, the moment she saw her equipage free from the crowd, but the lovely young creature on the front seat uttered a merry protest and gave a laughing counter-order, threatening the elder lady with her half-closed parasol, till the point lace which covered it fluttered like the fringed leaves of a great white-hearted poppy.

"Only a short drive," she said; "you can't want to go into the house, dear Mrs. Harrington, such a heavenly day as this."

"But, my love, I have forty things to do!"

"All the more reason why you should neglect every one of them, since it is not possible for you to do them all," replied the young girl, with a laugh and a pretty wilful air that few people could have resisted. "Elizabeth, are you tired?"

The young lady whom she addressed had been leaning back in her seat by Mrs. Harrington, quite regardless of this laughing contention, looking straight before her in a smiling, dreamy way, which proved that the brightness of the scene and the spell of the music had wiled her into some deep and pleasant train of thought.

Her friend spoke twice before she heard, laughing gayly at her abstraction, and Mrs. Harrington

added—

"Do come out of dreamland, dear Miss Fuller; I am sure I cannot manage this wilful little thing without your help."

The young girl shook her parasol again in a pretty, threatening way as she said—

"You are not tired, Elizabeth?"

"Tired! Oh no; it is very pleasant," she replied, in a voice that was low and musical with the sweetness of her broken reverie.

"See, you are in the minority, Mrs. Harrington," cried Elsie Mellen. "You had better submit with a good grace."

"Oh, I knew Elizabeth dared not side against you; she spoils you worse than anybody, even your brother."

"But it's so nice to be spoiled," said Elsie, gayly; "and you must help in it, or I shall do something dreadful to you just here before everybody's eyes."

She clenched her hand playfully, as if to carry her threat into instant execution, and Mrs. Harrington cried out—

"I promise! I promise! James, take another turn."

The man turned his horses with a broad sweep, taking the road around the largest lake. Here the spoiled beauty ordered him to stop. She wanted to look at the swans, "such great, white, lovely drifting snowballs as they were." Mrs. Harrington made no objection, but leaned back with a resigned smile on her lips.

A person possessed of far more imagination than Elsie Mellen ever dreamed of, might have stopped on the very road to paradise to gaze on that pretty, Arcadian scene.

The lake was one glow of silver, broken up in long, glittering swaths by troops of swans that sailed over it with leisurely gracefulness, now pausing to crop the short grass from the sloping banks, or ruffling their short white plumage, and stretching their arched necks for payments of fruit whenever they came near a group of children, or saw a rustic from the country, who was sure to delight in seeing the birds feed.

The sunshine came slanting in from the west, cooling half the park with shadows, and lighting the rest with gleams of purplish gold. The paths around the margin of the lake, and all the sloping banks were alive with gayly dressed people, and a single boat, over which a flock of gay parasols hovered like tropical birds, mirrored itself in the water.

"Now see what you have gained by obeying my orders," exclaimed Elsie, casting her merry eyes over the scene. "I declare the swans look like a fleet of fairy boats. How I would like to sail about on one! There, that will do James, drive on."

"Home?" inquired the man.

Before his mistress could answer, Elsie broke in—"Yes, Mrs. Harrington, since you are properly submissive, we will go home, if you wish."

"Oh, I only proposed it because we have so much to do. I should enjoy a longer drive. Indeed, now that you have suggested it, we will take at least one turn."

"That's a darling," cried Elsie; and, without further ceremony, she ordered the coachman to take the Bloomingdale road, laughing out something about dying for old sheep instead of lambs. "But I want to stop at Maillard's," protested Mrs. Harrington, "and I then must see about—"

"Oh, never mind, we shall have time enough," exclaimed Elsie. "Drive like the wind, James, the moment you get beyond these horrid policemen. I wouldn't have anybody pass us for the world."

The coachman obeyed, and directly those two black horses were dashing along the road in splendid style, leaving care and prudence far behind them.

Elsie was in her element, wild as a bird and gay as the sunset. She talked and laughed incessantly, saying all sorts of merry things in a childish fashion, that kept Mrs. Harrington in explosions of laughter, more natural than she often indulged in, while Elizabeth Fuller leaned back in her seat, listening, absently sometimes, to their graceful banter, glancing at the young girl with affectionate admiration of her youthful loveliness, but oftener losing herself in the pleasant train of thought which had absorbed her all the afternoon.

Three persons more unlike in appearance than these ladies, it would have been difficult to find; but a casual observer would probably have been most attracted by the buoyant loveliness of Elsie Mellen.

She was eighteen,—but seemed younger with her fair curls, her brilliant bloom, and the childish rapidity with which smiles chased each other across her face. She looked the very personification of happiness, with a bewitching *naïveté* in every word or movement, that made her very childishness more captivating than the wisdom of older and more sensible women.

Mrs. Harrington was a stylish, dashing widow, with a suspicion of rouge on her somewhat faded cheeks, and an affectation of fashionable listlessness which a look of real amiability somewhat belied. She was one of those frivolous, good-natured women, who go through life without ever being moved by an actual pleasure or pain, so engrossed by their petty round of amusement, that if they originally possessed faculties capable of development into something better, no warning of it ever touches their souls.

Really the most noble and imposing person present was Miss Fuller. The contrast between her grave, sweet beauty and the frivolous loveliness of the other two, was striking indeed. Sometimes her large gray eyes seemed dull and cold under their long black lashes, and the dark hair was banded smoothly away from a forehead that betokened intellectual strength; the mouth was a little compressed, giving token of the reticence and self-repose of her nature, and a classical correctness of profile added to the quiet gravity of her countenance.

But it was quite another face when deep feeling kindled the gray eyes into sudden splendor, or some merry thought softened the mouth into a smile—then she looked almost as girlish as Elsie herself.

But grave or smiling, it was not a face easy to read, nor was her character more facile of comprehension, even to those who knew her best and loved her most.

She looked very stately and queen-like, wrapped in her ample shawl and leaning back in her seat with a quiet grace which Mrs. Harrington attempted in vain to imitate. Indeed, the effort only made the ambitious little woman appear more fussy and affected than ever.

"Here comes Tom Fuller," cried Elsie, suddenly. "Was there ever such an ungraceful rider! Just look at him, Bessie, and laugh, if he is your cousin. I insist upon it!"

"Oh, I think he's such a love!" cried Mrs. Harrington. "Deliciously odd."

"I'll tell him you said that," cried Elsie; "just to see him blush."

"Oh, don't!" exclaimed the widow, clasping her hands as if she thought Elsie was about to stop the carriage and inform him then and there. "What would he think?"

The young man at whom Elsie was laughing quite unrestrainedly, rode rapidly towards them, and when he saw Elsie, his face glowed with a mingled expression of pleasure and embarrassment that made her laugh more recklessly than ever.

He made a bow almost to the saddle, nearly lost his hat, and did not recover his presence of mind until the carriage had dashed on, and he was left far behind to grumble at his own stupidity.

"It is too bad of you to laugh at him," said Elizabeth Fuller, a little reproachfully.

"Why, darling, he likes it," cried Elsie, "and it does him good."

"I am sure his devotion to you is plain enough," said Mrs. Harrington, with a sentimental shake of the head. "Hearts are too rare in this world to be treated so carelessly."

"Oh, don't!" exclaimed Elsie. "You'll be repeating poetry next! Tom is a nice man, just a great awkward lump of goodness; but I must laugh at him. Dear me, what a groomsman he will make! Bessie, I know he will step on my dress."

"I hope so," Elizabeth replied, good naturedly; "I shall consider you served right."

"Oh," cried Mrs. Harrington, roused by a fear she was fully capable of appreciating, "it would be such a pity to have all that beautiful Brussels point torn—do caution him, my dear."

"No," said Elsie, with mock resignation, "Bessie insists upon having him for groomsman, and I shall let him put his foot through my flounces with perfect equanimity, by way of showing my affection for her. Talk of giving your life for your friends, what is that in comparison to seeing your flounces torn!"

Her companions both laughed, but Elizabeth said seriously, "When you know Tom better, you cannot help respecting him; he is my one relative, and I love him dearly."

"Of course," said Elsie, "and I mean to be his cousin, too; but it is my cousinly privilege to laugh at him."

"Perhaps he will not be content with a cousinly regard," said Mrs. Harrington, mysteriously.

Elizabeth glanced quickly at Elsie, with a little trouble in her face, but the girl laughed, and replied—

"Oh yes, he will; Bessie is his ideal—he will never think of poor little me."

"Family affection is so sweet!" added Mrs. Harrington. Elsie made a grimace, and hastened to change the conversation, for there was nothing she dreaded so much as the widow's attempt at romance and sentiment.

CHAPTER III.

A FRIGHT AND A RESCUE.

For some time the ladies rode on in silence. Then Elsie broke into a fit of ecstasy over the horses.

"They are so perfectly matched," she said. "Brother Grant needn't have been doubtful about them; he sha'n't persuade you to change them, shall he?"

"They are beautiful creatures," Bessie observed, absently.

"Naturally, Mr. Mellen was anxious that they should be entirely safe," said Mrs. Harrington, theatrically, "for he has trusted his dearest treasures—his sister and his betrothed wife—to me; and if there is danger, it is for them as well as me."

"What a pretty speech!" said Elsie. "I know you got it out of a novel!"

Elsie had a gay scarf wound about her neck, and began complaining of the warmth.

"I would not take it off," Mrs. Harrington urged, "you will be certain to get cold."

"There is no danger," replied Elsie; "I shall smother, wrapped up in this way."

"But you must keep it on!"

"Indeed, I won't; there!"

They had a playful contention for an instant, then Elsie snatched the scarf from her neck with a triumphant laugh, and held it up beyond Mrs. Harrington's reach.

A sudden rush of wind carried the light fabric out of her hand, and it sailed away like a gorgeous streamer. Elsie gave a little cry, but it was frozen on her lips. One of the horses had been restive from the first. The scarf floated over his head, curved downward, and one end got entangled with his bridle. The shy, spirited creature gave a wild bound, communicated like terror to his companion, and away the frenzied pair dashed, taking the coachman so completely by surprise, that he was helpless as a child. It was one of those brief occurrences which pass like lightning to lookers-on, but seem an eternity to the persons in danger. Mrs. Harrington's shrieks rang out sharp and shrill; Elsie gave one shuddering moan, and crouched down in the bottom of the carriage, hiding her face in Elizabeth's dress.

Elizabeth Fuller was deathly pale. She realized the full terror of their situation. She uttered no shriek, but clasped her arms around Elsie, and strove to speak a few reassuring words to Mrs. Harrington, which were drowned by the woman's terrified shrieks.

Elizabeth looked desperately down the road over which the horses were rushing like wild desert steeds. The carriages in sight were turned quickly on one side, and their inmates seemed uncertain how to assist them. Any attempt to stop the frightened and infuriated animals threatened certain death.

Elizabeth saw this, and her heart died within her. They were now at the top of a long hill, keeping the road, but hurled onward like lightning. At the foot of the hill was a loaded cart, its driver vainly striving to whip his team out of the way. The brave girl saw this new danger, and fell back with a groan. She knew that the carriage would be whirled against that ponderous load, and dashed to atoms. Effort was hopeless, she could only stretch forth her arms, draw Elsie close, close to her cold heart, and pray dumbly that she might in mercy be permitted to die for *his* sister.

Still, in her anguish and terror, she looked out beyond the leaping horses, as they thundered down the hill. The man had sprung from his cart, and, with his whip in both hands, was lashing his overtaken beasts in frantic terror. Beyond him came a person on horseback, riding furiously. But they were close to the cart now. It was still more than half across the road. Sick with dread, she closed her eyes, holding Elsie close, and turning, as it were, to stone, with the shrieking young coward in her arms.

In another instant there was a shock which threw them all off their seats; and when Elizabeth could realize anything, or recover from the deafening effect of Mrs. Harrington's cries, she knew that the horses had been stopped—the peril was over.

The gentleman she had discovered through blinding clouds of dust, riding swiftly towards the hill, had seen their danger, dismounted, and with ready presence of mind, prepared to seize the horses the instant the carriage struck against the cart.

One wheel was forced partially off, but there was no other harm done. Elsie and Mrs. Harrington had both flung themselves on Elizabeth, so that she could neither see nor hear; but the widow discovering that she was still alive, made a little moan, and began to shake out her flounces when she saw the gentleman who had rescued them standing by the side of the carriage.

"You are safe, ladies," he said, opening the door; "you had better get out and walk on to the hotel—it is only a few steps."

"How can we ever thank you!" sobbed Mrs. Harrington. "You are our preserver—we owe you our

lives!"

He smiled a little at her exaggerated manner, which would break out in spite of her real terror, and helped her to alight from the carriage.

"We are saved," moaned Elsie, lifting herself from Elizabeth's bosom. "I'm not hurt—I'm not hurt!"

She was lifted out of the carriage, and stood trembling by Mrs. Harrington. For the first time, relieved of their weight, Elizabeth was able to move and look up.

The stranger was standing by the carriage with his arm extended to assist her. She partially rose—then, and without the slightest warning, beyond a deep, shuddering breath, sank back insensible.

Elsie and Mrs. Harrington gave a simultaneous cry, but there was no opportunity for the widow to go into hysterics, as she had intended, since the stranger and the footman were fully occupied in lifting Elizabeth from the broken carriage. Elsie was crying wildly, "Bessie! Bessie!" and wringing her hands in real affright.

"She has only fainted," said the stranger hurriedly; "we will carry her on to the hotel."

He raised the insensible girl in his arms, and carried her down towards the inn, as if she had been a child; while her companions followed, sobbing off their terror as they went.

Once in the house, and the stranger out of the way, Mrs. Harrington recovered her wits sufficiently to give Elizabeth assistance, and restore her to consciousness.

Elizabeth opened her eyes, gave one glance around, and closed them again.

"Are you hurt?" cried Elsie.

She shook her head.

"What made you faint so suddenly?" demanded Mrs. Harrington. "The danger was over."

Elizabeth made a strong effort at self-control, sat upright, and tried to answer.

"I can't tell—I—"

"Do you know that gentleman?" asked Mrs. Harrington.

"Why, how can she?" said Elsie.

"Well, she fainted just as she looked at him."

Elizabeth controlled herself, found strength to rise, saying in reply to Mrs. Harrington's repeated inquiries—

"How should I know him?—what folly!"

But she was trembling so violently, that they forced her to lie down again.

"Stay with her, Elsie," said the widow, "I will go and see how we are to get home."

She went out of the room, and in the hall encountered the gentleman just as she had expected.

She overwhelmed him with protestations of gratitude, to which he listened with no great appearance of interest, though Mrs. Harrington was too completely dazzled by his brilliant appearance and manner to perceive the absent, preoccupied way in which he received her.

"I don't know how we are to get home," she said.

"Your coachman has engaged a carriage from the hotel-keeper," he replied; "it will be ready in a few moments. Your own horses are not hurt, luckily."

"I don't know what Mr. Mellen will say!" she exclaimed. "He warned me not to keep the horses."

The stranger turned quickly toward her, with a sudden flush on his face.

"May I know whom I have had the pleasure of assisting?" he asked.

"I am Mrs. Harrington," she replied, "of — street. I am so—"

"And your friends?"

"Miss Mellen, the sister of Grantley Mellen; and the other lady is his betrothed wife."

"She! That—"

"Yes, yes! Dear me, if any accident had occurred, how terrible it would have been! They are to be married next week," continued the widow, hurriedly. "Mr. Mellen is out of town, and will not be back till just before his wedding. Oh, I shudder to think! Dear, dear sir, how can I thank you!"

The servant came up that moment to say that a carriage was ready to take the ladies back to the city, and the gentleman escaped from her flood of meaningless gratitude.

Mrs. Harrington ran back to call her friends, and found Elizabeth quite composed and strong again.

"He's the most magnificent creature!" exclaimed the widow. "And you don't know him, Elizabeth?"

"Have I not said so? Come, Elsie."

As she passed into the hall, Elizabeth hurried on, leaving Mrs. Harrington to repeat her thanks, and Elsie to utter a few low, and apparently thankful words, to which he listened with more interest than he had done to all the widow's raptures.

They were in the carriage: the door closed; the stranger gave his parting bow, Elizabeth leaned further back in her seat, and they drove on, leaving him standing in the road.

"His name is North," said Mrs. Harrington. "Such an adventure! What will Mr. Mellen say?"

"We won't tell him yet," Elsie replied; "it would only frighten him. Be sure and not mention it, dear Mrs. Harrington."

"Oh, of course not,—just as you like. But what a handsome man that was! North—North? Who can he be? I have never met him!"

"Whoever he is, he has saved our lives," said Elsie.

"Yes, yes! But, dear Miss Fuller, how oddly you acted!"

"Do put up your veil, Bessie," added Elsie.

Elizabeth obeyed, showing her face, pale and tremulous still.

"I was very much frightened," she said; "I think my side was hurt a little—that was why I fainted."

She made no other answer to their wondering questions, and they drove rapidly back to Mrs. Harrington's house.

The stranger stood upon the porch of the hotel, looking after the carriage so long as it was in sight, with a strange, inexplicable expression upon his handsome face.

After a time, he roused himself, mounted his horse, and rode slowly back to the city.

CHAPTER IV.

HIGH FESTIVAL AT PINEY COVE.

On the shores of Long Island, where the ocean heaves in its wildest and most crystalline surf, a small cove had broken itself into the slopes of an irregular hill, after generations of beating storms and crumbling earth, taking a crescent shape, and forming one of the most picturesque bits of landscape to be found along the coast. The two points or promontories that stretched their green arms to the ocean, were clothed with thickly growing white pines, scattered with chestnuts, and a few grand old oaks. The country sloped beautifully down to this bright sheet of water, and swept around it in rocky points and broken groves, giving glimpses of rich grass-land, more luxuriantly cultivated than is usual to that portion of the island. As you looked on the scene from the water, a house was visible on the hillside, and came in full view as the shore was approached. It was a noble stone mansion, old as the hills, people were used to say, and solid as their foundations. The house had been a stately residence before the Revolution, and, without an earthquake or a ton of powder, would remain such for a century to come.

Whatever the body of the house had been in the good old times, when ornament was little thought of, it was now rendered picturesque by lofty towers, and additional wings with oriel windows and carved balconies in one direction; while the other wing clasped in a conservatory, of which nothing could be seen from the distance but wave upon wave of rolling crystal emerald, tinted like the ocean by the wealth of green plants they covered.

This was the residence Grantley Mellen had inherited from a maternal uncle just after his first struggle in life commenced. It was backed by many a fruitful field and broad stretch of timberland, which altogether went under the title of Piney Cove.

Grantley Mellen, since he became possessed of the estate, had completed the work his uncle commenced when he built the two grand towers, and a more picturesque building could not well be imagined, with its broad lawn, its clumps of forest trees, and that magnificent ocean view, which was broken only by the pine groves on the two points.

This was by no means the only house visible from the cove. As you turned the southern point, a village was seen down the coast; and about half way between that and the pines was a wooden house, brown and weather-beaten, standing unsheltered on the bleak shore. Back of this house, shutting out all prospect but that of the ocean, was a tall cliff, covered with ragged yellow pines and stunted cedars, from which on stormy nights many a quivering flame had shot upward, luring

ships to their ruin. Still, with this grim protest against the name looming behind it, the lonely old house was called "The Sailor's Safe Anchor," and was known all along the coast as a fishing-lodge and small tavern.

But once within the cove, you saw no sign of habitation save the mansion house and its appurtenances.

Grantley Mellen had been some weeks at the cove, renovating and preparing the house for the reception of his bride; for it was understood that he intended henceforth to make it his permanent residence. But the wedding-day was near, and he had gone up to the city, leaving the last preparations to the care of a singular class of household servants, one of his uncle's philanthropic importations from the South, where he had owned a plantation, and emancipated all its slaves except a half dozen, that would only accept liberty on condition that they might follow the old man to his northern home.

Grantley had accepted this sable household with the general inheritance; for, spoiled and pampered as family negroes are apt to be, they had proved generally faithful and obedient.

Though a very reverential and submissive person when her master was present, Clorinda, who had appointed herself housekeeper of the establishment, was apt to get on to a very high horse indeed when there was no superior authority to hold her in check; and, on this particular occasion, she was absolutely what she declared herself—"chief cook and bottle-washer."

This sable functionary was very busy two or three mornings before the time set for her master's wedding, not only in the general preparations for that event, but with a grand idea of her own, which she was earnestly carrying into effect. If the house was going into the hands of a new mistress, the colored persons of the establishment had resolved to commemorate the event in advance with a grand entertainment.

To this end, Clorinda, who appointed herself lady patroness in general, had betaken herself to Mr. Mellen's library with Caleb Benson, the high-shouldered, bald-headed occupant of "The Sailor's Safe Anchor," and the person whose prerogative it had been to supply fresh fish to the family at Piney Cove. Besides this, he performed a good deal of work in the grounds, and made himself generally useful.

This morning Benson had come up to the house at Miss Clorinda's special request, in order to assist in the literary department of the coming entertainment. Neither Clorinda nor any of her dark compeers could read or write, but invitations must be sent out after the most approved fashion; and Clorinda had a fancy that the neighborhood of so many books would be a great help, so she led Caleb with august ceremony into the spacious library, and laid a quantity of pink note-paper and yellow envelopes, all covered and embossed with silver, on the table before him.

"Jes set down, Mr. Caleb, and write dem tings out special," she said, rolling up a great leathern chair, and patting its glossy green cushions enticingly. "Set down, Caleb, an' write, for I know yer kin."

Caleb laid his cap on one chair, and his stout walking-stick across another. Then he rubbed the hard palms of his hands fiercely together, and sat down on the edge of Mr. Mellen's chair, that threatened to roll from under him each moment.

"Now, Miss Clo, what is it you want of me? I'm on hand for a'most anything."

"I knows you is, and ales wuz, Caleb; that's why I trusted yer wid de delicatest part ob dis entertainment. 'Member its premptry to de weddin'."

"Preparatory, isn't that the correct word, Miss Clo?"

"Well, take yer chice, if you ain't suited, Caleb Benson."

"Wal, wal; don't git out to sea afore the tide's up, old woman."

"Ole woman! Ole woman yerself, Caleb Benson!" retorted Clorinda.

"Jes so!" answered the fisherman, seizing upon the largest steel pen to be found, and grinding it on the bottom of a bronze inkstand. Clorinda put both hands to her mouth, and would have cried out; but, remembering how few teeth she had to be set on edge, thought better of it, and stood in glum silence while Caleb made his preparations.

That remarkable functionary had a piece of business before him which threatened to task the resources of his genius to their full extent, but he was not the man to shrink from the responsibility which his desire to retain a high place in the powerful Clorinda's good-will had induced him to accept.

"Now, then," said Caleb, giving his chair another hitch, dipping his pen afresh into the inkstand, and holding it suspended over the paper, with a threatening drop slowly collecting on the nib. "Now we'll get under weigh just as soon as you give the signal."

"Tak car ob de ink!" shrieked Clorinda, pulling the paper from under his hand in time to preserve it from the great blot of ink that descended on the table-cover instead. "Dat's a purty splotch, now, ain't it; yer a nice hand, Caleb Benson!"

"Taint much, nobody'll ever notice it," said Caleb, wiping it off with his coat-sleeve. "Don't raise a

breeze about nothin', Clorindy."

"Don't talk to me 'bout breezes," she retorted, in an irritated tone, for Clorinda, I am sorry to say, had not even a fair portion of the small stock of patience which usually falls to our sex. "I 'clar to goodness dere ain't nothin' so stupid as a man. I jis hate de hull sect like pison, I duz."

"Oh, no you don't, Clorindy," he replied, "you hain't got so old yet but what you can hold your own with the youngest of 'em when there's a fancy mulatter chap round."

"What doz yer mean by ole!" cried Clorinda. "I tells you what, Caleb Benson, ef yer only undertuk this job to be a aggrawatin' and insultin' me, you and I's done! I ain't gwine to stand sich trash, now I tells yer! Is dis yer thanks fur all I'se done? Who got ye de run ob de house, I'd like to know; who sot ye up for selling better fish than anybody in de neighborhood; who nebber said nothin' when de soap-fat all disappeared, and you said it had melted in de sun; who fixed up mince-pies fur you; who—"

There is no telling to what extent Clorinda might have carried her revelations, but the old man interrupted her with all the excuses he could think of at so short notice.

"I was just funning, Clorindy; don't go off the handle. In course I want to obleege you. Thar, thar! Now what do you want to have wrote? We ain't going to quarrel—old friends like us."

"Ain't we!" cried Clorinda, folding her arms. "Then jis you keep a civil tongue, dat's all. Times is changed, and der's a new misses a comin'; but you may all onderstand dat I rules de kitchen yet, and I'se gwine to."

"Sartin, sartin! Wal now, about these here billet ducks," said Caleb, cunningly; "I must hurry up, you see, or I shan't get round afore night."

Clorinda forgot her injured feelings in excitement about the party, and ordered him to commence work without farther delay.

"Wal," said Caleb, spreading out the paper again, "I'll leave a blank for the names, that'll save trouble. I reckon you want somethin' like this—'Miss Clorindy and Miss Victory's compliments—'"

"What's Vic got to do wid it, I'd like to know?" Clo burst in; "it's my party, just 'member dat. It's enough to hev her company, widout her settin' up for a hostage."

"Any thing to suit," said Caleb, patiently. "Wal, then I'll say that Miss Clorindy hopes to have the pleasure of Mr. so and so's company, and wants to see you to a little tea drinkin' this evening."

"Lord!" cried Clo. "If ye hain't got no more larnin' dan dat, I'd better find somebody else! Do yer tink I got pink paper and silver-sprigged 'welopers to write sich trash on? Tea drinkin' indeed! Why dis here's to be a rigler scrumptious, fash'nable 'tainment! I want yer to say, 'Miss Clorindy consents her most excruciating compliments, and begs to state that, owing to de 'picious ewent ob de master's weddin', she takes dis opportunity to 'quest de 'stinguished company ob Mr. Otheller Jones for dis evenin', to a reparatory 'tainment; and she would funder mention dat dare will be plenty ob weddin'-cake, wid a ring in it, ice cream in pinnacles, red and white, and a dance in de laundry to fiddles.' Dar, dat's somethin' like."

"Yes," said Caleb, quite breathless; "now tell it to me as I get ahead, 'cause it's a mighty long rigmarole."

"Oh," added Clorinda, "den at the bottom you must put—' P. S.—Yaller gloves and 'rocur pumps, if convenient."

That last touch of elegance quite upset Caleb, and he began to think that if Clorinda was black, and couldn't write her name, she really was a wonderful woman. Clo was so softened by his applause that they got on very harmoniously, and the invitations were written out in Clorinda's peculiar phraseology and in Caleb's largest hand. As it was an affair of importance, he put capitals at the beginning of nearly every word, sometimes in the middle and altogether the writing made such a show, that Clorinda was delighted.

"Don't forget de P. S.," said she.

"Yes," said Caleb, making a tremendous flourish. "P. S.—Yaller gloves and 'rocur pumps, if convenient."

Clo inspected the first note as carefully as if she could read, expressed her approbation, and urged him on, till, with much labor, Caleb completed the requisite number, put them safely in their gorgeous envelopes, and directed them to the persons Clorinda mentioned.

"Now, jis be as quick as you kin," she said; "I'se got to go back to see to tings—can't trust dat Vic, no how! Wal, I guess Mr. Dolf'll see de difference 'tween folks and folks."

Benson knew that Dolf, Mr. Mellen's own man, was a special weakness of Clorinda's, though it was only her reputation for accumulated wages which induced that dashing yellow individual to treat her with any attention.

Caleb received his last instructions, and started on his mission, which was successfully fulfilled. Then he took his way homeward after going back to the house to acquaint Clorinda with the result, which was equal to her expectations, and that was saying a great deal.

As he approached the little tavern, he saw a gentleman standing on the steps, with a colored servant guarding a pile of guns, fishing-rods, and other tackle, with which idle men frequently came down from the city to endure Caleb's humble fare for a while, and gratify their masculine propensity for destruction.

But this gentleman was a stranger to Caleb, and he looked at him enviously, though with the approbation which his appearance would have elicited from more refined judges.

"I suppose you are Caleb Benson," the gentleman said, throwing away the end of a cigar, as the old man mounted the steps.

"Wal, they call me so, sometimes," replied Caleb; for the instincts of his New England birthplace had not deserted him, and he never answered a question in a straightforward manner, if he could help it.

"Some friends of mine told me I could find very comfortable quarters with you," pursued the stranger. "I have run down to see the place, and take a day's duck shooting. I want to engage rooms, and leave my traps here, so that I can come over whenever I feel like it."

"I want to know,—mean to have a good long shute do you!" said Caleb. "Wal, I guess I could fix you up, if you ain't too particular."

"I am not at all particular what I pay," replied the gentleman; "I suppose that is satisfactory."

"I ain't going to say 'tain't," returned Caleb, his eyes beginning to twinkle at the prospect of a liberal guest, who meant to come frequently.

"I reckon you'd like to see what I can do in the way of rooms, Mr., Mr.—Wal, I don't think I quite ketched your name."

"Mr. North," said the stranger, smiling at the man's shrewdness.

He stood for a few moments talking with Caleb, and though the old fellow was not easily pleased, he was quite fascinated by the stranger's manner; and, having a very vague idea of princes, was almost inclined to think that this splendid-looking creature might be one who had strayed over from his native kingdom on a fishing excursion.

"Now let me see the rooms," said Mr. North. "I suppose my man may as well carry the traps up stairs now—the place is certain to suit me."

Caleb looked at the stylish colored individual who was leaning, in a graceful attitude, over the luggage, and a brilliant idea struck him.

"I say you," he called, "I've got a ticket that'll just suit you, Mr.—What's your name?"

"If you are redressing me," replied the sable gentleman, majestically, "my name is Mr. Julius Hannibal."

"Want to know!" said Caleb. "Wal, here's an invite that was just meant for a fine-looking chap like you."

Caleb drew one of the notes from his pocket, and held it out. Hannibal took it with considerable dignity, doubtful how to receive such unceremonious compliments.

"You are in luck, Ju," said his master. "What's it all about, Mr. Benson?"

"Why, Mr. Mellen—he's one of our rich men down here—is going to be married this week, so his servants thought they'd have a blow-out to-night, for fear they wouldn't get the chance after the new mistress comes."

"Go, by all means," said North, almost eagerly. "Make all the friends you can, Ju, for we shall be here a good deal—go, certainly."

Hannibal drew himself up, bowed to his master, and said to Caleb in a stately way—

"I shall be most happy to mixture in the festive throng, but would most 'spectfully state to Miss Clorindy that morocur pumps is banished from polite society, and only patting leathers is worn—but these is trifles."

North took the note from his servant's hand, and could not repress his merriment as he read it; but Caleb received that as a compliment, and looked so conscious, that it was easy to discover what share he had taken in the matter.

"Pinnacles of ice cream, and a dance in the landing," read Mr. North. "Why choose the landing, Mr. Benson?"

"Laundry, laundry! I guess it's blotted a leetle."

"Oh yes—I see! Upon my word, quite magnificent! So Mr.—Mellen, did you call him?—is to be married this week. Well, well, that fate overtakes most of us, sooner or later. We will go up stairs now, if you please, Mr. Benson."

The old man led the way up to the room, which was kept in readiness for visitors of importance, and which had been made quite comfortable by the various articles of furniture that the different

occupants had presented to Caleb, on leaving his house.

The bargain was not a difficult one, as Mr. North appeared quite willing to pay Benson his own price, and the old fellow was only in doubt as to the extent to which he might safely carry his extortion.

When they went down stairs again, the steamboat had just come in to the landing, and Dolf, Mr. Mellen's man, was making his way to the tavern, having come to the island to see that the house was in readiness, and dazzle the eyes of the females by the wonderful new clothes which had fallen to his share of the wedding perquisites.

"That's just the ticket," said Caleb; "Mellen's man'll take you over to the place, Mr. Julius, and set you a goin'. I'm going there myself now, but you'll have to fix your master up first, so you can come with Dolf."

While Julius was going through the ceremonies of an introduction, Mr. North called him away, and seemed to be giving him some very particular directions. When he came back, Dolf, who was greatly rejoiced at this acquisition, said, anxiously,

"Won't he let you go?"

"Of course," answered Hannibal, but a little uneasily. "It was only about a fishing-rod I left behind."

CHAPTER V.

A BALL IN THE BASEMENT.

The day wore on. Everything was in a state of preparation in the old mansion-house. The last ovenful of cake had been placed by an open window in the pantry, that its frosted surface might harden into beauty. The ice-cream freezers, ready to yield up their precious contents, were set away in a cool place, and Victoria, a pretty mulatto girl who had come to the house an orphan child, was busy carving red and white roses out of a little pile of turnips and delicately shaped blood-beets, intended to ornament divers plates of cold turkey and chicken salad. This pretty fancy work was carried on in the front basement or housekeeper's room, while a bustle of preparation gave promise of great things from the kitchen. Clorinda, the moving spirit of all this commotion, rushed from basement to kitchen, and then to pantry and store-room, in a state of exhilaration that set fresh currents of air in circulation wherever she went. This was the great day of the faithful servant's life, and she felt its importance in every cord of her heart.

"Now," she called out, addressing Victoria with a pompous lift of the head, "yer can come up stairs and help about thar. Them roseys ain't so bad but that I've seen wuss; but there's 'nuff of 'em, so cum 'long o' me, and shut up de draw'n'-room winder-blinds."

Victoria ran up stairs, two steps at a leap, and, in a breath, was shutting out the beautiful sunset, and quenching a thousand flashes of arrowy rays that scattered gold over the plate-glass.

"Now," said Clorinda, as the last shutter was closed, "yer can take the spy-glass and see if any pusson is comin' up from the pint."

Victoria was only too glad. She sprang across the tessellated pavement of the hall, and seizing the glass, swept the shore with a slow movement of her slender person from right to left.

"Nary a pusson coming," she said, laying down the glass, with a disappointed air.

"Don't talk," snapped Clorinda, snatching up the glass and levelling it fiercely at the ocean. "Jes like yer, now—can't see yer hand afore yer face. There's a boat put inter the cove whilst yer was looken, and here am Caleb Benson."

"So thar am," cried Victoria, snatching the glass, "acomin' full split across the medder. Now for it!"

The lithe limbed mulatto gave a hop on to the portico, and another bound to the soft grass of the lawn, whence she ran, like a deer, to meet our sea-loving friend, with the high shoulders, who was crossing towards the house at a far brisker pace than was usual to him.

"Hav yer give the instergations?" cried Victoria, out of breath with swift running. "Am the folks a coming to our party?"

Caleb looked wonderfully grave, and attempted to shake his head; but Vic saw, by the gleam in his eyes, that it was all pretence, and clapping her hands like a little gypsy as she was, dashed into a break-down on the grass, calling out, "Hi, dic-a-dory, I told yer so—I told yer so!"

"Well, what am all dis muss 'bout?" exclaimed Clorinda, sailing out to the lawn with a broad straw flat overshadowing her like an umbrella. "Well, Caleb, I 'low ebbery ting am pernicious 'bout de party."

Caleb, who was ah old fisherman, reared at Cape Cod, and not to be put out of his way easily,

occupied plenty of time before he answered. The afternoon was warm, so he took the oil-cloth cap from his head, and wiped its baldness vigorously with an old silk handkerchief. Then he deposited the handkerchief in the crown of his cap, and settled himself into his garments with a shake, sailor fashion.

Clorinda's broad flat vibrated with its wearer's impatience, and Victoria was stamping down the grass, and menacing the old man with her fist during the whole of his slow performance.

"Now," she said, "now."

"Wal, the long and the short of it is, they're all a coming, especially from Squir Rhodes. Miss Jemima wasn't willing at first, but the Squir sot in and said his colored people hadn't much chance for fun anyhow, and shouldn't be kept back from what come along in a nat'ral way."

"Squir Rhodes was ales a pusson as I s'pected," said Clorinda. "Let's see how many of 'em will count up."

She made rather bungling work in counting her fingers, going over them three or four times, and getting terribly puzzled in the end.

In the midst of her confusion, Victoria gave a little cry of dismay, and made a rush for the house, where she frantically tore off her apron and tucked it under one of the hall mats.

Clorinda, filled with indignation by this strange proceeding, turned in search of the cause, and lo! there was Dolf, Mr. Mellen's own man, crossing the lawn, with two other gentlemen of color, evidently from the city.

Clorinda snatched the broad straw flat from her head, and began to arrange her Madras turban with both hands, thus unhappily exposing some tufts of frosty gray that had managed to creep, year after year, into her wool. After this rather abrupt toilet, she drew herself up with a grand air, and marched forward to receive the strangers in a glorious state of self-complacency.

"Mr. Dolf, yer welcome as hot-house peaches—and these gemmen, may I 'quest an interdiction?"

Dolf had just been informing his companions that the lady approaching them was not to be sneezed at in any particular whatever, as she ruled the roost of Piney Cove, and had, everybody said, laid up lots of rocks; besides, as for cooking—well, he said nothing, it was not necessary; they would see what Clorinda was in that line when the supper came on. She had learned down South where people knew how to live.

This speech prepared the strangers to receive their sable hostess with great distinction, and when she launched a stupendous courtesy at them in acknowledgment of their elaborate bows, the mutual admiration that sprang up among the whole group then and there, was an oasis in the desert of human nature.

"Miss Clorinda—Mr. Sparks, of the Metropolitan Hotel; Mr. Hannibal, private attendant of an upper-crust gentleman, who is going to stop at the Sailor's Safe Anchor, fishing and shooting."

Clorinda had just recovered herself from one courtesy, but she took the wind in her garments and fluttered off into a couple more without loss of time.

"I 'low de neighborhood am obligated to any gemmen as brings sich pussons inter de serciety ob Piney Cove. If yer hasn't had deceived an invite from Mr. Benson, dat white pusson yer sees up yunder, remit me de ferlicity."

Clorinda took two buff envelopes from her bosom as she spoke, and gave them to Mr. Sparks, of the Metropolitan, and Mr. Julius Hannibal, private, with a smile that flitted across her face like smoke from a furnace.

"It speaks ob pumps and yeller gloves as bein' indispenserable, but dem as comes promiscus as yer friends dus, Dolphus, can't be spected ter imply."

The gentlemen smiled in bland thankfulness, exhibiting a superb display of ivory and second-hand white kids in the operation.

"You didn't expect me," whispered Dolf, joining Clorinda when she turned to conduct the party to the house, "but the hart will pant after clear water. I couldn't stand it three days longer; so when the master told me to come over and see that every thing was ready, I jumped at it. Hope you're not offended at my bringing these fellows?"

"Fended!" exclaimed Clorinda, stepping upon the grass as if it had been egg-shells, that she had resolved not to crush. "When was yer Clo ebber fended wid yer, Dolphus?"

"Poor fellows," said Dolf, looking back at his friends, "They see my ferlicity and are ready to burst with envy."

"Am dey?" exclaimed Clorinda, bridling—"poor souls; but no pusson can be spected to cut up inter half a dozen, so dey am bound ter suffer."

The whole group had reached the front portico by this time. Vic, who had stolen behind the hall-door and stood watching their approach through the crevice, came forth now, blushing till the golden bronze on her cheeks burned red. Clorinda flamed up at the sight.

"What hab yer done wid yer apron, chile? jes march right 'bout an' get it ter once. Who ebber hearn bout a chile ob yer age widout apron?"

Victoria's black eyes flashed like diamonds; she drew aside, leaning against the wall, with the grace of a bronze-figure, half-frightened out of her wits, but defiant still. What right had Clorinda to tell about her apron, or drive her down stairs? She cast an imploring glance at Dolf, but he looked resolutely away.

"Come in, gemmen, out ob sight ob dis obstinit chile," cried Clorinda, almost sweeping poor little Vic down with a flourish of her skirts.

"No," interposed gentlemanly Dolf, who had a genius for keeping out of storms. "The gentlemen were just saying, as we came up, how much they would like a walk towards the woods. So with your permission, Miss Clorinda, we will leave you to the feminine duties of the toilet; though beauty when unadorned is most adorned."

"Cept when de gray hairs will peek out. Hi! hi! look dar!"

These audacious words were uttered by Victoria, whose pouting wrath could no longer be restrained.

The two city gentlemen fell to examining their gloves with great earnestness. Dolf made a hasty retreat through the door, calling on them to follow him, and Clorinda left five handsomely defined finger-marks on Victoria's hot cheek before she darted off to a looking-glass, and fell into a great burst of tears over the state of her treacherous turban.

"Now," said Vic, gathering herself up from the wall, and rubbing her cheek, down which great hot tears were leaping with passionate violence—"Now I'se gone and done it, sure; she won't let me —"

"Vic! Vic!"

It was the treacherous voice of Dolf, who came stealing in from the portico.

"Vic, don't be so audacious, you lovely spitfire; go this minute and make up with her, or we've lost all chance of that new cotillion I was learning you."

"I can't! I won't!" burst forth the pretty, bronze fury, stamping down the mat and her apron under it. "She's a—a—she's fat cattle, thar!"

Dolf snatched the little sprite from the rug, and stopped her mouth with—no, it wasn't with his *hand*. And I'd rather say no more about it.

Five minutes after, Victoria went demurely in search of Clorinda, found her sitting before the glass in utter humiliation, and protested that the whole thing was nonsense. That she hadn't seen a gray hair, and if the turban was awry, it must have happened when Clorinda ran up stairs in such hot haste. Victoria was sorry: oh, very, very sorry. Would Miss Clo only overlook it this once, and begin to dress for the ball?

Clorinda's heart swelled like a rising tide under Vic's hypocritical condolence, but she could not be quite convinced about the turban; she was a woman of resources, however, and felt that the evil was not without its remedy. So she kindled an immense quantity of wax-lights, crowded them before her looking-glass, and at once commenced the mysteries of a full toilet. The result was so satisfactory when she took a survey of her pink barege dress, covered with innumerable small flounces, and the gorgeous white gauze scarf, glittering with silver, which formed a turban, with long sweeping ends falling to the left shoulder—that she melted at once towards the girl who had helped to make her so resplendent.

"Jes see what splendiferous idees that chile Miss Elsie hab, Vic," she cried, shaking the flounces into place over her enormous crinoline. "Now 'serve she never wore dis sumptious dress more en once, but sent it down here good as new; 'sides de turban, jes see it shine. Yes, Vic, I forgives yer, so don't rub dem knuckles in yer eyes no more."

Vic darted away, and in a marvellously short time came back glorious, her hair braided in with scarlet ribbons, and a dress of several gorgeous colors fluttering with every joyous movement of her slender person. She was pluming herself before the glass when Clorinda started up.

"What am dat?"

"Dat? why it am a carriage. Oh, golly, golly, they'm coming," cried Vic, wild with delight; and away the two darkies went down the great staircase and into the hall, where the honors of the house were extended with astonishing elegance.

Two or three wagons sat down their sable loads, and directly the sounds of a brace of fiddles rang though the basement story, and the laundry floor vibrated to the elastic tread of dancers, whose natural love of music gave grace and spirit to every movement. The two fiddles poured out triumphant strains of music, and in every particular Clorinda's ball was a success.

At last Clorinda disappeared from the laundry, and Dolf followed her into the supper-room, where he fell into raptures over the gorgeousness of the table.

"Yes," said the housekeeper, modestly, "but how am we to get 'long without wine; Marse Mellen

carried off de keys, and without dat—"

"Jes look here!" cried Dolf, holding up a key which had been resting in his pocket; "catch me unprepared; I thought about the wine."

Clorinda almost embraced Dolf in her delight, but in his haste to reach the wine-cellar, he did not seem to observe the demonstration.

When her lover came back with his arms full of long-necked bottles, Clorinda's happiness was supreme, and directly after there was a rush of feet and abrupt silence with the two fiddlers. The company had gone in to supper.

After the rush and bustle had subsided a little, Dolf placed himself at the head of the table, with a corkscrew in one hand and a bottle in the other.

"Oh, my!" whispered Virginia, "I hope dar's lots of pop in it."

A rushing explosion, and the rich gurgle of amber wine into the crowding goblets satisfied her completely.

Dolf lifted his glass and prepared himself for a speech.

"Ladies of the fair sect and gentlemen—"

That moment Mr. Julius Hannibal, who had allowed himself to be crowded towards the door, stole out and went softly up stairs. With the stealthy motion of a cat, he crept along the hall and opened the front door.

A man came out from the shadows of the portico, and glided into the hall. It was Mr. North, Hannibal's master.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WEDDING.

A crowd of carriages stood in front of the church—a throng of richly-dressed persons filled it, with such life and bustle as sacred walls never witness, save on the occasion of a grand wedding. Mrs. Harrington had done her pleasant work famously. Not a fashionable person among her own friends, or a distinguished one known to bridegroom or bride, had been omitted. Thus the stately church was crowded. Snowy feathers waved over gossamer bonnets; lace, glittering silks, and a flash of jewels were seen on every hand, fluttering in the dim religious light around smiling faces and gracefully bending figures.

A buzz of whispered conversations rose from nave to gallery; for a large portion of that brilliant throng had never seen the bride, and curiosity was on the *qui vive* regarding a person so utterly unknown to society, who had carried off the greatest match of the season.

In one of the front pews a friend of Mrs. Harrington was sitting with a group of her own confidential acquaintances. Of course she knew all about it, and could tell them why Mr. Mellen had chosen a wife so utterly unknown to their set.

Certainly Mrs. C. knew all about it—had the particulars from her sweet friend, Mrs. Harrington, who was, they all knew, a sort of lady patroness to the affair. Would she tell? Of course—why not? There was no secret about it now, and it might be ten minutes before the bridal party came in.

"Well, this was it. Mr. Mellen was—"

Oh they all knew about Mr. Mellen; he had been in business down town before that worthy old gentleman his uncle died, and left him so enormously rich that there was no guessing how many millions he was worth. Did they know his sister? Of course: what a sweet pretty creature she was! Strange that the old uncle forgot to make her an heiress,—cut off a relative whom he had almost adopted, and left everything to Mellen, who did not expect it. Sweet Elsie was quite overlooked, and had nothing on earth but her beauty. But the bride, the bride, what about her?

"Well," said Mrs. C—, coming out of this storm of whispers smiling and flushed, "there is no great mystery in the bride. Indeed, so far as she was concerned, everything was rather commonplace—such people had been done up so often in romances that it was tiresome."

"You don't mean to say that she was that eternal governess who is continually travelling through magazines and marrying the rich young gentleman of the house?" cried a voice, almost out loud.

"No, no, nothing quite so bad as that," answered Mrs. C—, with a low soothing "hush," and shaking her head till all the pink roses on her bonnet fluttered again. "She came from somewhere in New England. The father was thought to be a rich man. At any rate he gave her a splendid education, and travelled with her in Europe nearly two years, when she was quite a missish girl. He also educated her cousin, the young man who is to be groomsman, and gave him a handsome setting out in life; but when the father died there was nothing left—all his property mortgaged or

something—at any rate Elizabeth never got a cent, and her cousin would have been poor as a church-mouse but for the money which had set him up in a splendid business. He wanted to make that over to her at once."

"Generous fellow!"

"You may well say that," continued Mrs. C—, hushing down the enthusiasm of her friends with a wave of her whitely gloved hand. "She would not take a cent of his money, but came here to the very school where she had been educated, and hired out as a teacher; it is said—but I do not vouch for it—that her bills at the school were left unpaid, and she worked the debt out."

"Is it possible!"

"Dear me, how noble!"

"But how did she get acquainted with Mr. Mellen?" cried a third voice; "make haste, or they will be upon us before we know a word about it."

"His sister, Miss Elsie Mellen, was a pupil in the school. Her love for Miss Fuller was perfect infatuation. The brother worshiped her—sweet creature, who could help it?—and so the acquaintance began in the parlor of a boarding school, and ends—Hush, hush!"

There was a slight commotion at the door, followed by the soft rustling of silks and turning of heads. Then a gentleman of noble presence, calm and self-possessed, as if he were quite unconscious of all the eyes bent upon him, came slowly up the broad aisle with the object of all this conversation leaning on his arm.

Certainly the bride gave no evidence of her low estate in that rustling white silk, which shone like crusted snow through a sheen of tulle; or in the veil of Brussels lace that fell around her like a fabric of cobwebs overrun with frostwork. You could detect intense emotion from the shiver of the clematis spray, mingled with snowy roses, in her black hair; but otherwise she seemed quiet and remarkably self-sustained.

Following close upon this noble pair, came a tall, loose-jointed young man, glowing with pride of the lovely creature on his arm; and, really, any thing more beautiful, in a material sense, could not well be imagined than that youthful bridesmaid. Like the stately girl who had passed before her, she moved in a cloud of shimmering white, with just enough of blue in the golden hair and on the bosom to match the violet of her eyes.

Once or twice Tom Fuller missed step as they were going up the aisle, when Elsie would make a pause, look ruefully at her gossamer skirts, and only seem relieved when her partner stumbled into place again. Then she followed the bride, her cheeks one glow of roses and smiles dimpling her fresh, young mouth, as if she were the Queen of May approaching her throne.

The bridal-pair knelt at the altar, and a solemn stillness fell upon that brilliant multitude as the vows which were to unite that man and woman for all time were uttered. Even Elsie looked on with shadowy sadness in her eyes; as for Tom—the noble-hearted fellow made a fool of himself of course, and was compelled to shake the tears surreptitiously from his eyes, before he dared to look up from the long survey he had been taking of his patent-leather boots.

It is almost frightful to remember how few moments it takes to bind immortal souls together in a union which may be for happiness, and, alas, may be for such misery as eternal bondage alone can give.

The feeling of awe befitting that sacred place had scarcely settled on the gay assembly, when the altar was deserted, and Grantley Mellen led his wife out of the church. Agitation had brought a faint glow of color to her cheek, softened the mouth into its sweetest smile, and whenever the clear gray eyes were lifted, one could see the timid, shrinking happiness, which made their depths so misty and dark.

Grantley Mellen was a proud, somewhat stern man, and at the church-door he betrayed, in spite of himself, some annoyance at the *eclat* which Mrs. Harrington had given to the affair, in spite of his express wishes. But whenever he looked at the lovely girl at his side, or felt the clinging touch of her hand upon his arm, his face cleared and softened into an expression of such tenderness as changed its entire character.

Elsie followed close, dexterously keeping her dress from under Tom's feet; indeed, she looked so lovely and fairy-like, that it made the awkwardness and embarrassment of her great, honest-hearted companion more apparent.

Tom Fuller knew that he appeared dreadfully out of place playing a part at this imposing ceremony, but he had never in all his life refused a request that Elizabeth made, and during the last three months, the mischievous sprite by his side had kept his blundering head in a state of such constant bewilderment, and so stirred every chord in his great, manly heart, that he would not have minded in the least stumbling over red hot ploughshares for the pleasure of walking with her even the length of a church aisle.

The group had reached the porch and lingered there a moment, waiting for the carriages to draw up. The shadows were all gone from Grantley Mellen's face now; he bent his head and whispered a few words, that made Elizabeth's cheek glow into new beauty. Suddenly her glance wandered towards the crowd on her left—a sudden pallor swept the roses from her cheek—her hand closed

convulsively on Mellen's arm; but in an instant, before even he had noticed her agitation, it had passed—she walked on to the carriage graceful and queen-like as ever.

Standing among the throng at which she had cast that one glance, stood the man who had rescued her from danger only a few days before. He was gazing eagerly into the faces of the newly made husband and wife, with an expression upon his features which it was not easy to understand. But after that quick look, Elizabeth never again turned her head, and the stranger shrank back among the crowd and disappeared.

The guests were gathered about the sumptuous table which Mrs. Harrington had prepared, and the fair widow herself, in a dress which would have been youthful even for Elsie, was in a state of flutter and excitement which baffles description.

She was gay and coquettish as a girl of sixteen; but there was enough of real kindness in her character to make those who knew her forgive these girlish affectations and the little delusion under which she labored—that certain specially-favored people, like herself, never did get beyond eighteen, being so sensitive and fresh of soul, that age never reached them.

I doubt if there ever was a wedding reception that did not prove a somewhat dull affair, and though this was as nearly an exception as possible, Mellen seized the first opportunity to whisper Elizabeth that it was time to prepare for their departure.

"And so I shan't see you for a whole week," said Tom Fuller, ruefully, as he accompanied Elsie out of the room, when she followed Elizabeth up stairs to change her dress. "What shall I do with myself all that time?"

"A whole week!" repeated she, laughing merrily; "it's quite dreadful to contemplate—I only hope you won't die, and put poor Bessie into mourning before the honeymoon is over."

"Oh, you are laughing at me," said Tom, heaving a sigh that was a perfect blast of grief.

"How can you fancy that?" cried Elsie; "I thought I was showing great sympathy."

"You always do laugh at me," urged Tom, "and it's downright cruel! I know I am awkward, and always do the wrong thing at the wrong moment, but you needn't be so hard on a fellow."

"There, there!" said Elsie, patting his arm as she might have smoothed a great Newfoundland dog; "don't quarrel with me now! Next week you are coming down to Piney Cove, and you shall see how nicely I will entertain you."

"Shall you be glad to see me—really glad?" pleaded Tom, red to the very temples.

"Oh, of course," cried Elsie, laughing; "you are a sort of cousin now—it will be my duty, you know."

Elsie danced away, leaving him to pull his white glove in a perplexed sort of way, by no means certain that he was satisfied with being considered a relation, and treated in this cavalier manner.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FIRST CLOUD.

Mrs. Harrington had run up stairs for an instant, and stopped Mellen and his bride on the landing for a few last words.

"I hope you are satisfied, Grantley," she said; "I have done my best; I do hope you are pleased."

"My dear friend, everything has been perfect," he answered.

"I can't thank you for all your kindness to me," Elizabeth said, holding out her hand; "but believe me, I feel it deeply."

"My dear, don't speak of it! Grantley and Elsie are like relatives to me," cried Mrs. Harrington, "and I love you so much already! You looked lovely—what a mercy we came off so well from our fright—"

"There is no time for pretty speeches," broke in Elsie, giving her a warning glance, and pulling Elizabeth towards their dressing-room; "go back to your guests, Mary Harrington; what will they do without you. Besides, you must cover our retreat. We don't want to be stared at when we go out."

But Mellen stood still after they had entered the chamber, and detained Mrs. Harrington.

"What fright?" he demanded; "what did you mean?"

She was too thoroughly confused to remember her promise.

"Oh, nothing, nothing!" she said; "I have sold the horses, so it doesn't make any difference."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "Have you had an accident?"

"No, no; the gentleman saved us—such a splendid creature! But it was so odd. The moment Elizabeth looked in his face she fainted dead away—courageous as a lion till then—just like a novel, you know. But she said she never saw him before; it was really quite interesting."

Grantley Mellen turned suddenly pale; doubt and suspicion had been his familiar demons for years, and it never required more than a word or look to call them up.

He controlled himself sufficiently to speak with calmness, and Mrs. Harrington was not observant; but he did not permit her to return to her guests until he had heard the whole story.

"Don't mention it," she entreated; "I promised Elizabeth not to tell; she thought you would be frightened, and perhaps displeased."

Mrs. Harrington hurried down stairs, and Mellen passed on to the chamber which had been appropriated for his use. But his face had not recovered its serenity, and Master Dolf, who presided over his toilet, did not at all approve of such gravity on a man's wedding-day—having drunk quite champagne enough in the kitchen to feel in as exuberant spirits as was desirable, himself.

The leave-takings were over; Tom Fuller had given his last tempestuous sigh as Mellen drove off with his sister and his bride towards the home where they were to begin their new life.

The journey was not a tedious one; the swift train bore them for a couple of hours along one of the Long Island railroads, to a way station, where a carriage waited to carry them to the quiet old house in which they were to spend the honeymoon.

There was to be no journey, both Mellen and Elizabeth wished to go quietly to the beautiful spot which was to be their future home, and spend the first weeks of their happiness in complete seclusion.

The drive was a charming one, and the brightness of the Spring day would have chased even a deeper gloom from Mellen's mind than the shadow which Mrs. Harrington's careless words had brought over it.

From the eminence along which the road wound, they caught occasional glimpses of the silvery beach and the long sparkling line of ocean beyond; then a sudden descent would shut them out, and they drove through beautiful groves with pleasant homesteads peeping through the trees, and distant villages nestled like flocks of birds in the golden distance.

The apple-trees were in blossom, and the breeze was laden with their delicious fragrance; the grass in the pastures wore its freshest green, the young grain was sprouting in the fields, troops of robins and thrushes darted about, filling the air with melody, and over all the blue sky looked down, flecked with its white, fleecy clouds. The sunlight played warm and beautiful over this lovely scene, and through the early loveliness of the season, the married pair drove on towards their new life.

At a sudden curve in the road, they came out full upon the ocean, and Elizabeth, unacquainted with the scene, uttered an exclamation of wonder at its dazzling loveliness.

Below them stretched a crescent-shaped bay, with a line of woodland running far out into the sea; away to the right, at the extremity of the bay, a little village peeped out; its picturesque dwellings were dotted here and there, giving a home look to the whole scene. At the end of the shady avenue into which they had turned, the tall roofs and stately towers of the Piney Cove mansion were visible through the trees.

"The dear old house!" cried Elsie, clapping her hands. "The dear old house!"

Grantley Mellen was watching his wife, and a pleased smile lighted his face when he saw how thoroughly she appreciated the beauty of the place. He did not speak, but clasped her hand gently in his, and held it, while Elsie uttered her wild exclamations of delight. They drove up to the entrance of the house.

"Welcome home!" exclaimed Mellen, and his face glowed with tenderness as he lifted his wife from the carriage and conducted her up the steps, Elsie following, and the servants pressing forward with their congratulations, headed by Clorinda: and for the first few moments, Elizabeth was conscious of nothing but a pleasant confusion.

From the hall where they stood, she could look out upon the ocean which rolled and sparkled under the sunshine. She could even hear the waves lapsing up to the grounds which sloped down to the water's edge in a closely shaven lawn, broken by stately old trees and blossoming flower-beds. The view so charmed her with its loveliness, that at first she hardly heeded the magnificence of the different apartments through which they led her.

There were quaint, shadowy old rooms, full of odd nooks and corners, and heavy with antique furniture, where one could idle away a morning so pleasantly; and in the modern portion of the dwelling, a long suite of drawing-rooms, with a library beyond, which had been fitted up with every luxury that wealth and refined taste could devise.

"Be happy," Grantley Mellen whispered, when his wife tried to find words to express her delight. "Be happy—peace, rest and affection is all I ask."

He looked in her face, eager for the smiling surprise which he had expected to find there. It was sadly grave. She too had her after thought.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BRIDE'S WELCOME HOME.

Elsie took Elizabeth up the broad flight of steps which led from the hall, and conducted her to the suite of rooms that had been prepared for her reception. "I had them arranged close to my little nest," she said, "because I knew Grantley would never be content unless I was within call. I hope you will like them, Elizabeth?"

Elizabeth answered that they were beautiful, as indeed they were. But it was a grand, lonely splendor that she looked upon, which almost chilled her. The chamber was large and richly furnished. Every thing was massive and costly. The carpet soft as a flower-bed and as brilliant in tints. Wherever she turned, her eyes fell on exquisite carvings reflected by limpid mirrors; curtains of richly tinted satin shut out a perfect view of the ocean, and Elizabeth could not help remarking that the principal windows faced northward, away from the bloom and glory of the grounds. Even her dressing-room, which was in one of the octagon towers, looked out on the only barren spot in view—a storm-beaten grove of cedars that stood, ragged and bristling with dead limbs, on the beach.

Spite of herself, Elizabeth was chilled. She loved the morning sunshine like a worshiper, and felt as if all the grandeur which surrounded her was shutting it out from her own portion of this new home.

"Did Mr. Mellen arrange these rooms?" she asked in a faltering voice. "Was it his taste?"

"Dear me, not at all," answered Elsie. "He exhausted himself in fitting up my snugery. The rest was left to me. I had *carte blanche*, you know, as to money; and it was splendid fun going about and ordering things. Don't you remember how much I used to be away from school?"

Elizabeth smiled, and made an effort to appear thankful and pleased.

"See what close neighbors we are," said Elsie, lifting a curtain that seemed to drape a window, but revealing a door which she pushed open.

Elizabeth stepped forward, and in contrast with the rich gloom of her own chamber, saw a suite of the brightest, sunniest rooms, that ever a capricious beauty inhabited.

The dressing-room which she entered, was hung with bright, cerulean blue, overrun with what seemed to be a delicate pattern of point-lace. The carpet was thick, soft, and almost as white as ermine, with a tangled vine of golden water-lilies and broad, green leaves running over it, as if the water they grew in had been crusted with snow, and the blossoms, soft, fresh, and bright, frozen upon the surface. The couch, easy-chair, and general furniture, were of polished satin-wood, cushioned with delicate azure silk shot and starred with silver. A luxurious number of silken cushions lay upon the couch, chairs, and even on the floor; for two or three were heaped against the pedestal, on which a basket of flowers stood, and upon them lay a guitar, with its broad, pink ribbon hanging loose. Every table was loaded with some exquisitely feminine object of use or beauty, till the very profusion was oppressive, light and graceful as every thing was.

Two of the windows were open, and their lace curtains held back, one by a marble Hebe that mingled her cold stone flowers with the lace; the other by a Bacchante, whose garland of snow-white grapes was seen dimly, through the transparent folds it gathered away from the glass.

Through these open windows came glimpses of the flower-garden, green slopes on the lawn, and farther off the wind swept up perfumes from a distant orchard, and sifted it almost imperceptibly through the delicate network of the curtains. Back of this boudoir was a bed-chamber, and beyond that a dressing-room. Elizabeth could see through the open door a bed with hangings of blue and white, with all the objects of luxury which could please the taste of a pampered and fanciful girl.

"Grantley chose these rooms for me long ago, before he went to Europe," said Elsie, looking around with quiet complacency. "He would not hear of my giving them up; besides, I knew you would like something a little darker and more stately," she said. "Are you pleased with the house, Bessie?"

"Very, very much. I did not expect any thing so magnificent," she answered. "It overpowers me."

"I had not seen it for years," said Elsie, "till I came down with Grant to decide about the new furniture. Now you must be happy here. You ought to be! Just contrast this place with that old barn of a school; it makes one shudder to think of it! You must be happy, Bessie, for I hate discontented people."

"I trust so, dear; I believe so; we shall all be happy."

"Oh, you can't help it," pursued Elsie; "Grant is always a darling! But you must love and pet me,

you know, just as he does."

"You exacting little thing!" said Elizabeth, lightly.

"Yes, but you must," she urged; "you never would have had all this but for me."

"No," murmured Elizabeth; "I should never have known Grantley but for you."

"I told him that day, you know, just what I had set my heart on," pursued Elsie, shaking her curls about, and chattering in her careless, graceful way. "I said I loved you like a sister, and I should die if I was separated from you. That settled it."

Elizabeth had seated herself in a low chair, with her back towards the window; she looked up quickly as Elsie paused.

"Settled it?" she repeated.

"Yes, exactly!"

Elsie flung herself on the carpet at her sister's feet, and caught one of her hands, playing with the wedding ring so lately put on that delicate finger, in her caressing fashion.

"How do you mean?" asked Elizabeth, quietly, though there was a sudden change in her face which might have struck Elsie could she have seen it. "Settled it; how do you mean?"

"Why he never had refused me anything in all his life," said Elsie; "it was not likely he would begin so late! Nobody ever does refuse me anything; now, remember that, Bess."

"Yes, dear! So you told Grantley you were very fond of me—"

"And that I wanted him to marry you—of course I did."

It was only Elsie's childish nonsense; Elizabeth felt how foolish it was to heed it, and yet she could not repress a desire to question further.

"That was long after he came home, Elsie?"

"Yes; but I had written him all sorts of things about you; and you remember when he came to the school to visit me, how I made you go down without telling you who was there."

"Yes—I remember."

"He praised you very highly, and I told him what a dear you were; and how sad it was for you to have lost all your fortune and be obliged to teach."

The color slightly deepened on Elizabeth's cheek; was it possible that in the beginning Grantley Mellen had been interested in her from a feeling of pity and commiseration?

Her engagement had been a brief one; during it, the days had passed in a constant whirl of excitement and happiness, and she had found little time to question or reflect: up to the last hour there had been no shadow on her enjoyment—she had resolutely swept aside everything but her deep happiness.

But it was strange that in the very first flush of her married life this conversation with Elsie should come up. She knew it was only the girl's heedlessness and pretty egotism that made her talk in this really cruel fashion, she was sure of that; still her nature was too proud and self-reliant, for the idea that Mellen had been first attracted towards her from sympathy at her lonely condition, to be at all pleasant.

But Elsie was going on with her careless revelations, playing with the rings which Mellen had put one after another on those delicate fingers during their engagement, making each one precious with kisses and loving words.

"So, when I saw how sorry he was for you, I knew that I should have my own way. I longed to see this dear old house open once more; it had been given up to the servants ever since he hurried off to Europe; and I wanted you for my companion always, you darling."

"It was fortunate for your wishes that Grantley's heart inclined in the direction you had marked out," said Elizabeth.

"Oh," exclaimed Elsie with hasty recklessness, and her usual want of thought, "Grant had no heart to give anybody; all his love was centred on me; after the experience he had years ago, I don't suppose he could ever love any woman again—he is just that odd sort of character."

Elizabeth gave no sign of the blow which struck her this time cruelly on the heart; she drew her hand away from Elsie, lest its sudden coldness should rouse some suspicion of the truth in the girl's mind, and asked in a singularly quiet voice—

"What experience, Elsie?"

"Oh, I didn't mean to say that," she replied; "I am always letting things out by mistake; Grant would be really angry with me; don't ever mention it to him."

"I will not; but what experience has he had that can prevent a husband's giving his heart even to his own wife?"

"Dear me, I oughtn't to tell you; but you'd surely find it out sometime; only promise me not to open your lips."

"I promise," replied Elizabeth, a cold, gray shadow settling over her face, out of which all the bloom had faded.

"He had a friend, a cousin you know, that our rich old uncle had partly adopted, whom he was very, very fond of," pursued Elsie, "and he was engaged to be married into the bargain. This man treated him dreadfully—ran off with the girl Grant loved, and cheated him out of a great deal of money—money that he could not afford to lose, for he was not rich then. Grant was nearly mad. I was a little thing, but I remember it perfectly. When his uncle died he sent me to school, and started to Europe; he has been there all these four long years; but his cousin was punished; his uncle gave everything to Grant."

And of all this grief, this disappointment, he had never told her one word. Elsie spoke the truth—he had married her that his sister might have a companion, and his house a mistress.

A prouder woman than Elizabeth Mellen never existed; but she sat motionless and gave no sign, while her brief dream of happiness fell crushed and broken at her feet under this revelation.

"There," cried Elsie, "that's all, so don't ever think about the thing again. What a fortunate creature you are! how happy we shall be, shan't we, dear?"

She attempted to throw her arms about Elizabeth in her demonstrative way, but the woman rose quickly, and avoided the caresses which would have stifled her.

"It is time to dress," she said; "I am going to my room."

She passed into her chamber with that dreary chill at heart, which, it seemed to her, would never leave it again! How could she endure that fearful pang of humiliation and self-abasement that wrung her soul, and would grow stronger with every proof of kindness that her husband could give?

No love—no heart to give her under all his goodness and attention. She kept repeating such words to herself—they would never cease to ring in her ears—there could be no pleasure so entrancing that they would not mar it by their whispers—no grief so deep that they would not torture her with the recollection that she was powerless to comfort or aid the man who had made her his wife.

But she must bear it all in silence; hers was one of those deep, reticent natures which could resolve on a painful thing and carry out her determination to the very end. She would weary him with no sign of affection.

The playful exactions of a young wife, which are so pleasant to a loving husband, must be carefully avoided. He must be allowed to endure her without revolt—not finding her much in his way.

That was the first thought upon which she settled, even while this earliest whirl of pain and tremble made her head dizzy and her heart sick.

She heard Elsie's voice ringing out in a gay song: she went mechanically on with her dressing, listening to that merry song in the midst of her bewildering thoughts with a dreary feeling of desolation.

If she could have sat down in the midst of her new life, and died without further trouble or pain—that became her one thought! If that man who was her husband, and his sister could enter the room and find her dead, they might feel regret for a time, but very soon even her memory would pass away from that old house, and out of their hearts, where she had so shallow a resting-place, and in the grave she might find quiet.

Elsie came dancing in, and exclaimed—

"Oh, you are dressed! I hear Grant on the stairs. May I open the door?"

Elizabeth was seemingly quiet, but the change in her manner would have been apparent to any one less self-engrossed than Elsie.

"Open it," she answered; "I am ready."

Grantley Mellen entered the room, and led them both away down stairs; but he felt the sudden tremor in his young wife's hand, the sort of shrinking from his side, and his suspicious mind caught fire instantly. He noted every change in her face, every sad inflexion in her voice, and at once there came back to him the conversation he had held with Mrs. Harrington.

Could Elizabeth have known this man? Was there a secret in her past of which he was ignorant? The bare idea made his head reel; though he might banish it from his mind for a season, the slightest recurrence would bring it back to torture him with inexplicable fear and dread.

So their new life began with this shadow upon it—a shadow imperceptible to all lookers on, but lying cold and dim on their hearts nevertheless, slowly to gather substance day by day till it should become a chill, heavy mist, through which their two souls could not distinguish each other.

CHAPTER IX.

COUSIN TOM VISITS PINEY COVE.

Grantley Mellen was still a young man, only thirty-three, though the natural gravity of his character, increased by certain events in his life, made him appear somewhat older.

His father had died many years before, and as Elsie had told his bride, an uncle had left him in the possession of a fine property, which had increased in value, till he was now a very wealthy man.

His mother died when Elsie was a girl of about fourteen, and on her death-bed Grantley Mellen had promised to act the part of parent as well as brother to the young girl. He had never once wavered in his trust, and the love and tenderness he felt for her were beautiful and touching to witness.

He was never suspicious, never severe with her, though these were the worst failings of his character. Elsie was to be treated as a child; be petted, and indulged, and allowed to live in the sunshine, whatever else might befall himself or others.

Although her health was good, she had always been rather delicate in appearance, and that made him more careful of her. He was haunted with the fear that she was to fade under their family scourge, consumption, though in reality she was one of those frail looking creatures who are all nerves—nerves, too, elastic as tempered steel; and who always outlive the people who have watched them so carefully.

It was true Grantley Mellen had met with a humiliating disappointment in his early youth, which had embittered all his after years, and increased the natural jealousy of a reticent disposition almost to a monomania. These were the facts of his history:

He had a college friend of his own age, a cousin twice removed, whom from boyhood he had loved with all the strength and passion which made the undercurrent of his grave, reserved character. He had helped this young man in every way—befriended him in college, been to him what few brothers ever are.

The time came when Mellen found the realization of those dreams which fill every youthful soul: he loved, with all the fire and intensity of a first passion. His cousin was made the confidant of this love; he shared Mellen's every thought, and seemed heartily to sympathize with his feelings.

It is an old story, so I need not dwell upon it. Both friend and betrothed wife proved false. There came a day when Grantley Mellen found himself alone with a terrible misery, with no faith left, no trust in humanity to give a ray of light in the darkness of his betrayal.

The friend whom he had trusted eloped with his affianced bride, and cheated him out of a large sum of money. With that sudden treachery and bitter grief, Mellen's youth ended.

He left Elsie at school and went away to Europe, wandering about for years, and growing more saddened and misanthropic all the while.

He returned at last. Elsie was eighteen then. She had a school-friend, to whom she had been greatly attached; a girl older than herself, and so different in every respect, that it was a wonder Elsie's volatile character had been attracted to her, or that her liking had been reciprocated.

This was the state of events when Mellen returned from Europe. Elsie's account of her friend interested him in the unfortunate girl. When he made her acquaintance that sympathy deepened into a feeling which he had never thought to have for any woman again,—he loved her, and she was now his wife.

It was a restless, craving affection, which threatened great trouble both to himself and its object. He had no cause for jealousy, but his suspicious mind was always on the alert—he was jealous even of her friends, her favorite studies—he wanted every look and thought his own, yet he was too proud to betray these feelings.

Elizabeth's character was not one easy to understand, nor shall I enter into its details here. The progress of my story must show her as she really was, and leave you to judge for yourself concerning it, and the effect it had upon her life.

She was singularly reticent and reserved, but impetuous and warm-hearted beyond any thing that the man who loved her dreamed of. He saw her gay, brilliant, fond of society, yet apparently content with the quiet life he was determined to lead. Still there was something wanting. He felt in the depths of his heart that he was not master of her whole being. That sometimes his very kisses seemed frozen on her lips, and she turned from his protestations of love with sad smiles, that seemed mocking him. And she, alas, the woman who believes herself unloved by her husband, is always in danger—always unhappy.

The first weeks of this strange honeymoon had passed, and Tom Fuller was able to gratify the chief desire of his honest soul, and rush down to the island to bewilder himself more hopelessly in the spell of Elsie's fascinations, like a great foolish moth whirling about a dazzling light.

She had never scrupled to laugh at him and his devotion, even to Elizabeth herself; but just now she was not sorry to see him. The stillness of the house and the seclusion of those slow love weeks, was not at all in unison with her taste, and she was already regretting that Mellen had not allowed her to accept Mrs. Harrington's invitation to remain with her during the first period of that dreary honeymoon.

Mellen and Elsie were standing on the porch when Fuller drove up to the house, and dashed in upon them with such an outpouring of confusion and delight that it might have softened the most obdurate heart.

"I couldn't stop away another day," he cried, wringing Mellen's hand till it ached for half an hour after.

"We are very glad to see you," replied Mellen; "very glad."

"I am much obliged, I'm sure," exclaimed Tom, "and you're just a trump, that's the truth."

"I suppose that's the reason you keep him so carefully in your hand," interposed Elsie, laughing.

Tom was instantly covered with confusion, and let Mellen's hand drop. He knew there was a joke somewhere, but for the life of him he could not see where it come in.

"You are beginning to laugh at me before you have even said 'How do you do?'" cried he, ruefully.

"And am I not to laugh at you, if I please?" exclaimed Elsie. "Shake hands, you cross-grained old thing, and don't begin to quarrel the moment we meet."

Tom blushed like a girl while he bent over the little hand she laid in his, holding it carefully, and looking down on it with a sort of delighted wonder, as if it had been some rare rose-tinted shell that his fingers might break at the slightest touch.

But Mellen was not looking at them; he stood there wondering if this man could have been of any consequence in Elizabeth's past. Could she have loved him, and been prevented from marrying him in some way? No, it was impossible; he felt, he knew that it was so; but the idea would come into his mind nevertheless.

"When you have done examining my hand, Mr. Tom Fuller, please give it back," said Elsie. "It don't amount to much, but, as the Scotchwoman observed of her clergyman's head, 'it's some good to the owner.'"

Tom dropped the little hand as if the pink fingers had burned his palm.

"I'm always the awkwardest fellow alive!" cried he, dismally. "And how is Bessie, dear girl?"

Mellen roused himself.

"I will call her," he said; "she is quite well, and will be delighted to see you."

He went into the house in search of his wife, and Elsie began to tease her unfortunate victim, a pastime of which she never wearied. It seemed to her the funniest thing in the world to make that great creature blush and stammer, to lead him on to the perpetration of absurd things, to laugh at him, to bewilder his honest head; for any pain he might suffer, she considered it no more than she did the sorrows of a Fejee Islander, or the chirp of her canary.

"Have you come down here prepared to be agreeable?" she asked. "Remember, I expect you to devote yourself completely to my service—to wait on me like the most devoted of knights."

"I'd stand on my head if you asked it," answered Tom, impetuously.

"How deliciously odd you would look!" cried Elsie; "you shall try it some day; I only hope it won't leave you with a brain fever, but then it couldn't, Tom,—where is the capital for such a disease to come from?"

"You may tease me as much as you like," said Tom, "if you'll only say you are glad to see me."

"Oh, you will be invaluable," replied Elsie; "I was getting bored with watching other people's love-making. Can you row a boat and teach me to play billiards, and be generally nice and useful?"

"Just try me, that's all!" said Tom.

"Don't be afraid. I shall put you to every possible use; you may be quite certain that your position will not be a sinecure."

"Then you'll make me the happiest fellow alive!"

"You don't know what you are saying; you don't know what your words mean," cried Elsie, with one of her bewildering glances.

"Indeed I do! Oh, Miss Elsie, if you only could—"

Elsie interrupted him, as her sister came out on the portico, followed by Mellen. "There is Bessie!"

Elizabeth was rejoiced to see honest Tom; he was the only relative she possessed, and she loved him like a sister. She was thoroughly acquainted with his character, and honored him for the

sterling goodness concealed by eccentricities of manner which made him so open to laughter and misconception.

"I'm so glad to see you!" cried Tom, shaking hands all round again, and growing redder and redder, to Elsie's intense delight. "I've been like a fish out of water since you all came away; I just begin to feel like myself again. Bessie, old girl, are you glad to see me?"

"We shall always be glad to see you, Tom," Elizabeth said, glancing at her husband.

"Indeed we shall," he said; "you will always find a room at your service, and a sincere welcome."

No, Elizabeth never could have cared for him—the idea was simply absurd—he would never think of it again, never!

"I can't tell you how much obliged I am," said Tom, twisting about as if his joints were out of order, and he was trying to set them straight.

"Your chamber is ready," said Elizabeth; "we expected you to-day."

"He doesn't need to go up now," interposed Elsie; "that checked coat is bewitching, and he is going to take me out to row. Come along, Don Quixote—come this instant!"

Elsie ran off, and he followed, obedient as a great Newfoundland dog.

Elizabeth looked after them a little sadly, and smothered a sigh of anxiety. She saw what Elsie was so heedlessly doing, and knew Tom well enough to understand how acute his sufferings would be once roused from his entrancing dream.

So things went on during the whole time of his stay, and there was no help for it. Elsie made him a perfect slave, and Tom no more thought of disputing her wildest caprice, than if he had been some untutored fawn, made captive to the spells of a Dryad.

Elsie saw plainly enough that he loved her, but she regarded that part of the affair very lightly. She was accustomed to being loved and petted—it was her right. The idea that it could be cruel or unprincipled to encourage this young fellow as she did, never entered her mind. Indeed, if the misery she was bringing upon him had been pointed out to her, she would only have laughed at it as a capital jest, a source of infinite amusement.

When Tom Fuller went back to town, Elsie was taken with a strong desire to visit dear Mrs. Harrington. Tom was a sort of cousin, now, and would make a capital escort. Besides, she was sure Grantley and Elizabeth would be much happier alone. Perhaps Mellen thought so too. At any rate, he made no objections, and Elsie went.

The husband and wife were alone. The days were so pleasant—those long, golden, June days!—they might have been so happy in the solitude of that beautiful spot, but for the chasm which lay between the souls of these married people, scarcely perceptible as yet, but widening every hour!

Elizabeth watched her husband incessantly. She tortured every evidence of affection into a forced kindness, an attempt to hide his want of love; he was trying to make all the atonement in his power, to give her everything that could make life pleasant, except the place in his heart which was her right. How her soul revolted against the thought!

She was mortally hurt and grieved that he could have deceived her. If he had only spoken the truth, only left her to decide whether she could be content to accept an outer place in his regard, to make his home happy, to guard and cherish his sister—if he had only left this decision in her hands, the matter would have worn a different aspect.

But that he should have been silent—that even now he should guard his secret, practising this daily deception, and meaning to let it lie between them all through life—was a never-ceasing thorn in her heart.

Mellen, in turn, was watching her; watching her with that morbid suspicion which made the groundwork of his character. Observant of the change in her manner, and trying always to account for it, but only making himself restless and anxious to no purpose.

He had loved her, he did love her, and the only reason she was, as he supposed, ignorant of the humiliating story of his past, was because he had put it resolutely out of his mind; and it hurt his pride too much to go over the detail of the deceit and treachery from which he had suffered, even in his own thoughts.

Elsie's absence was prolonged to a fortnight, and when she returned, Mrs. Harrington and Tom Fuller came back with her.

The girl was in more joyous spirits than ever; more bewitching and beautiful, if possible; and Elizabeth could see plainly that Mellen's love for her fell little short of absolute idolatry.

She was not jealous. If Elsie had been her own sister, she could not have become more attached to her than she had grown during their year of companionship. But it was very hard to see of what love her husband was capable, and to remember that no part of it could be won for her; that between her soul and his, rose the image of that false woman, whose treachery had steeled his heart against such love as she thirsted for.

Tom Fuller was a more hopeless lunatic than ever; but Elsie had begun to grow impatient of his

devotion. She often treated him cruelly now. The poor fellow bore it all with patience, and still clung to his beautiful dream, unable to realize that it was a baseless delusion, which must pass away with the summer that had warmed it to its prime.

The weeks passed on with all-seeming pleasantness, and in many respects they were pleasant to both husband and wife, though the secret thoughts in the minds of both, kept them aloof from the perfect rest and happiness to which they had looked forward during that brief courtship.

But a sudden change and a great break were nearing their lives, and unexpectedly enough they came.

Mellen owned a large mining property in California, an immense fortune in itself, and ever since his return from Europe, he had been much occupied with a lawsuit that had sprung up concerning the title. He had sent out his man of business, but the case did not go on satisfactorily, and letters came which made his presence there appear absolutely imperative.

He could not take his wife and sister; the discomforts to which they would be exposed, the dreadful fears where Elsie was concerned, from her apparent delicacy, entirely prevented that idea.

He informed them that he might be obliged to go; he had written other letters by the steamer; the answer he might receive would decide.

Elizabeth pleaded to go with him, but Elsie frankly owned that she could not even think of a sea voyage without deathly horror. Mellen pointed out to his wife the necessity there was that she should remain with Elsie, and she submitted in silence.

"He married me to take care of her," she thought; "I will do my duty—I will stay. Perhaps this absence will change him: but no, I am mad to hope it. Elsie says he never changes. That woman's memory must always lie between his heart and mine." So she turned to her dull weary path of duty, and gave no sign.

CHAPTER X.

SHADOWS OF A SEPARATION.

October comes, and scarcely four months after his marriage, Mellen was compelled to leave his wife and home, it might be for a year. Elizabeth grew white and cold when this certainty was forced upon her, yet she made no protestation, and uttered nothing like regret or complaint. Grantley was chilled through and through the heart by this. He had been so lonely, had longed for the warmth and happiness of love with such intense yearnings, that her calm stillness wounded him terribly. Was she of marble? Would nothing kindle affection in that proud heart? Had he married a beautiful statue?

No wonder Elizabeth was proudly cold. She did not believe in the necessity of this journey. His indifference had grown into dislike, she thought, and, yielding to inevitable repulsion, he was going away to avoid her.

But Elsie was loud in her expressions of grief. She had floods of tears to give—protestations and caresses without end. Her sweet voice was constantly reproaching Elizabeth for want of feeling. She was forever hovering about her brother in atonement, as she said, for his wife's coldness. But the roses on her cheek were always fresh, and her blue eyes never lost a gleam of their brightness, while Elizabeth grew thin and white beneath the withering ache of a famished heart.

"Oh, the desert of these months! Oh, my God, my God, I shall perish without him! Alone here—all alone with this child—what will become of me! How shall I endure, how resist this wild clamor of the heart?"

Elizabeth had flung herself upon the couch in her own room, her face was buried in the purple cushion, and she strove to smother the words, which sprang out of a terrible pain which had no business in that young heart. As she lay, convulsed and sobbing, on the couch, the door opened, and her husband came into the room. The thick carpet smothered his footsteps, and he stood by the couch before she knew it—stood there a moment, then fell upon his knees, and softly wound his arm around her.

"Elizabeth, my wife."

She started up with a cry; her face was wet with tears; her large grey eyes wild with sorrow. He lifted her to his bosom, put back the thick waves of hair that had fallen over her face, and kissed her forehead and her lips with gentle violence.

The pride went out from her heart as she felt these passionate kisses rained on her face. She clung to him, trembling from the new joy that possessed her.

"Is it for me that you are weeping, sweet wife? are you sorry to part with me?"

"Oh, yes, yes! you are my life, my salvation."

"Ah, how hard you make it for me to go!"

"And you must? you must?"

"It is inevitable; my duty to others demands it; but it shall not be for long."

The door of Elsie's boudoir was opened, the curtains held back, and the smiling young creature looked in. Elizabeth saw her, struggled out of her husband's arms, and sat with the wet eyelashes sweeping her cheek, which was hot with blushes.

"Oh, ho! one too many, am I?" she cried, entering without ceremony. "Why, sister Bessie, I haven't seen you blush so since that day when Mrs. Harrington would insist on it that you recognised a certain person."

Elizabeth was so confused by the sudden rush of joy sweeping through her whole being, that she did not remark this speech; but her husband did, and withdrew his arm gently from her support. She looked up, and saw that he was changed within the minute.

"I'm glad to find you looking so amiable," said Elsie, going up to the glass, and threading her curls out into fluffy and beautiful confusion; "for I've thought of something that would make this place delightful, just as you are going away, Grant. Besides," she added, looking down and coloring a little, "people will get such ideas into their heads, and say such things. It is quite necessary to let them see how very happy you and Bessie are together, or they never will believe that you are not running away from her."

"What!" demanded Mellen almost sternly,— "What are you saying, Elsie?"

"Oh, it's dreadful; I've been crying about it half the night; but a splendid ball, or something of that sort, will put everything on velvet. Nothing like champagne and the *et ceteras* to stop people's mouths."

"A ball! Why, Elsie, what is your mind running on?"

"The idea is dreadful, I know; and just as you are leaving us, when every moment is precious as a grain of gold. But it's really necessary. If you go off without seeing people, Grant, they will be sure to say that you and Bessie have quarreled, and all sorts of horrid things about her being melancholy, and you—well it's no use repeating these speeches, but the ball we must have. Bessie shall entertain them like a princess; as for poor little me, I'm good for nothing but dancing."

She gave a waltzing step or two, and whirled herself before the mirror again.

"Well, who shall we invite?" she said, gazing at the pretty image that smiled back her admiration. "I made out a list this morning in my room; shall I bring it?"

She ran into her room and came out again with a handful of engraved cards, some of them already filled in.

"I knew, of course, that the ball was to be, so had the cards struck off. Tom Fuller brought them down. Just add what names you please, Bessie, and we will leave the rest to Mrs. Harrington."

"Why, Elsie!" began Mrs. Mellen.

"Well, what is it?"

"How can you think of—"

"Oh, it's settled, so don't discuss it. What! looking cross? Why, Grant dear, I—I—did not think you would be offended."

"But I am, Elsie."

She dropped into a chair, pressed both hands to her side, and shrunk away into a grieved, feeble little thing, that had been crushed by a single blow.

"Why, Elsie!"

Her eyes filled with tears, and she covered them with both hands.

"I am not angry, child, only surprised."

"But you will be—you will be very angry when I tell you that some of the invitations are sent out. Oh, I wish I were dead!"

Her lips quivered like those of a grieved and half-frightened child. Her cheeks were wet, and their color had left them.

"Oh, Grantley, Grantley, don't—don't look at me in that way. Dear Bessie, tell him how sorry I am."

Mellen was walking the floor in considerable agitation. He had hoped for a little peace in his own home—a few days of tranquil confidence with his wife. Now everything was broken in upon. There would be nothing but confusion up to the very hour of his starting.

Elsie watched him furtively, and with sidelong glances. She knew how terrible his anger was

when once aroused.

"Oh, if my poor mother had lived."

"Peace, Elsie! I will not have that sacred name dragged into an affair like this. Have your way, but remember it is the last time that you must venture on the prerogatives of my wife."

Elsie left the room really frightened, and sobbing piteously, but the moment she found herself in her boudoir a smile broke through her tears, and she laughed out.

"Well, I don't care, we shall have the ball. I wonder if Bessie put him up to that. Hateful thing, he never scolded me so before. Her prerogatives, indeed."

As for Grantley Mellen, this untoward intrusion had broken up the happy moment which might have given him an insight into all that his wife felt and suffered. The interview which had promised such gentle confidence only ended in mutual irritation.

CHAPTER XI.

THE BALL.

The evening of the ball arrived; the house was crowded, and for the scores it was impossible to accommodate, Mellen had made arrangements in his usual lavish way, for a conveyance back and forth in a steamer chartered for the occasion.

The old house was a beautiful sight that evening. The long suite of drawing-rooms were flung open, and in the far distance a noble conservatory, half greenness, half crystal, terminated the view like some South Sea island flooded with moonlight.

It was not alone that these noble rooms were shaded with richly-tinted draperies, and filled with costly furniture; any wealthy man's house may offer those things; but Mellen had thrown his fine individual taste into the adornments of his home. Antique and modern statues gleamed out of the general luxuriousness. Pictures that made your breath come unsteadily broke up the walls, and groups of bronze gave you surprises at every turn. The works of art, sometimes arrayed in one long dreary gallery, were here scattered in nooks and corners, completing each room with their beauty.

And all this was kindled up into one brilliant whole. There was no crowding in those rooms. Each rare object had its peculiar light and appropriate space. A master mind had arranged every thing.

In these almost palatial saloons Elizabeth stood by her husband, receiving their guests as they came in.

Elsie was in brilliant spirits that night, and her buoyant gayety formed a singular contrast with the quiet repose of Elizabeth.

Tom Fuller followed the pretty elf about everywhere in spite of her cruel rebuffs, for he was sadly in her way that night; and when she refused to dance with him, peremptorily ordering him away to entertain dowagers, or perform any similar heavy work, he would take the post she assigned him, and watch her with fascinated eyes as she floated down the dance or practised her wiles on every man who approached, just as she had once thought it worth while to entrance him.

On that evening Tom Fuller woke to a consciousness of the truth; he understood the confusion and bewilderment which had been in his mind for weeks past; he loved this bright young creature with the whole force of his rugged nature, and began dimly to comprehend that she cared no more for him or his sufferings than if his heart had been a football or shuttlecock.

He captured Elizabeth, and there, in the midst of the lights and gayety, told her of his wrongs, with such energy that it required her constant effort to prevent him from attracting general attention.

"I love her," he burst out, "I do love her! She might run my heart through with a rusty bayonet, if she would only care for me."

The beginning was not at all coherent, but Elizabeth perfectly understood what he meant. Several times during the past weeks she had attempted to open his eyes to the truth; but he would neither see nor hear, and had insisted upon rushing on to his fate like a great blundering bluebottle into a spider's web.

"Do you think there's any hope, Bessie, do you? I ain't handsome, and I ain't disgustingly rich; but I'll give her all my heart! I'll work for her, die for her; I'd lay my own soul down for her to walk over, only to keep her little feet dry, upon my honor I would."

Elizabeth drew him into a window recess, and tried to soothe his agitation.

"Poor old Tom!" she whispered; "poor dear old Tom!"

"I know what that means," he said, choking desperately; "you don't think there is any hope. You

know there is not!"

"I have tried to talk to you, Tom, but you wouldn't listen—"

"Yes, I know, I know! It's my own fault—I'll—I'll turn up jolly in a little while—it's only the f-first that's hard!"

And Tom blew and whistled in his efforts to keep his composure, in a way that was irresistibly ludicrous. In the midst of his distress the poor fellow could not help being comical. Even in the suffering which was so terribly real to him he made Elizabeth smile.

"I'm a great fool!" he exclaimed. "Just pitch in and abuse me like smoke, Bessie, I think it would do me good."

"Only wait till to-morrow," she said, "I will talk with you then—we shall be overheard now."

"Oh, I can't help it if the whole world hears," he groaned; "I can't wait! The way she's going on with those dashing young fellows drives me mad! Why couldn't I have been a dashing fellow too, instead of such a great live-oak hulk! I can't stir without stumbling over somebody, and as for saying those dainty things that they are pouring into her ears, and be hanged to 'em—I can't do it. No wonder she scorns me!"

Tom dealt his unfortunate forehead a blow that made it scarlet for several moments, and quieted him down somewhat.

"What would you advise me to do, Bessie?" he asked. "You're so sensible and so good—just give a fellow a hint."

"Dear Tom, there is nothing for it but to wait—"

"That's pretty advice!" he burst in. "You might as well tell a person in a blaze of fire to wait! No, I shan't wait—I shan't, I say!"

Tom ran his hands through his hair till it stood up, quivering as if he had received an electric shock.

"Oh, you needn't look so black at me, Bessie; I know just what a humbug I am as well as you."

"I wasn't looking black at you; I am very, very sorry, Tom."

"Don't pity me; I shall break right down if you do."

"I must go back, Tom," she said; "I can't stay here any longer."

"I know it; of course you can't. I'll just wait a minute and then—there, go! What a nuisance I am!"

Elizabeth went back into the ball-room, where she saw Elsie whirling through a waltz, looking as happy and unconscious as if she had not just crushed a warm, loving human heart under her pretty foot.

Mrs. Mellen stood a moment arrested; no one seemed to heed her.

She saw Mrs. Harrington forcing Mellen to walk through a quadrille, and felt certain that he was as restless as herself.

"But it is for Elsie," she thought; "he will not mind so long as it is for her. None of them will miss me."

Tom Fuller stood in the bay window for some time trying to collect his scattered faculties. Any thing like rational thought was quite out of the question with him; he felt as if a great humming-top were spinning about in his ears, and his heart was in a state of palpitation that utterly defies description.

Finally he passed through the drawing-rooms where people were busy over their cards or their small-talk, and entered the ball-room from which he had rushed in such frenzy.

There was a pause in the music, and Elsie was standing surrounded by a group of gentlemen, not even seeing Tom as he approached. He managed to edge himself into the circle at last, and stood watching Elsie very much like a sheep-dog that wanted dreadfully to worry something, but knew that he would get himself into difficulty if he even ventured on a bark.

But speak with her, he would; Tom had reached that point where his feelings must find vent or explode, and scatter mischief all around.

Finally a brilliant idea struck him, and he got near enough to whisper—

"Bessie wants to see you a moment."

Elsie turned away impatiently.

"Now, this moment," added Tom, growing very red at his own fib, but following it up courageously.

He knew very well that the dandies were quizzing him; he saw that Elsie was provoked; but

though he trembled in every joint, and his face had heat enough in it to have kept a poor family comfortably warm from the reflection, he resolutely held out his arm, and the young lady took it, pouting and flinging back smiles to her forsaken admirers.

"My sister wants me," she said, in explanation to her friends. "Tiresome, isn't it? for there is no guessing when she will let me come back."

Tom led his captive away, but he was dreadfully frightened at the success of his own manoeuvre.

"Where is Bessie?" asked Elsie, impatiently, as they walked down the ball-room.

"This way," faltered Tom; "we shall find her in a moment."

Elsie never deigned him another word; she was very angry, as she could be with any thing or anybody that marred her selfish enjoyment, and Tom walked on towards one of the parlors which he knew was empty, feeling like a man about to charge a battery single handed, but determined to persevere nevertheless.

CHAPTER XII.

TOM MAKES A DECLARATION.

Tom led his captive into the parlor. Elsie looked about in surprise—there was not a soul visible.

"Are you crazy, Tom Fuller?" cried she; "Bessie is not here."

"She shall be here in a minute," stammered Tom; "just wait, please."

"Indeed I will do no such thing," returned Elsie, sharply, snatching her hand from his arm. "Did she send you for me, Tom Fuller?"

"No," cried Tom, with sudden energy, "I told a lie! I couldn't stand it any longer; I must speak with you; waiting was impossible!"

Elsie turned on him like a little kingbird darting on a hawk.

"What do you mean by this unwarrantable liberty!" she exclaimed. "Have you no idea of the common usages of society? Don't come near me again to-night; don't speak to me."

She was darting away, but Tom caught her hand.

"Oh, wait, Elsie, wait!"

"You ridiculous creature!" said Elsie, beginning to laugh in spite of her vexation. "What on earth do you want?"

"Laugh at me!" groaned Tom; "I deserve it—I expect it—but I can't live this way any longer! You are driving me crazy. I love you, Elsie! Only speak one kind word—just say you don't hate me."

He was holding out his two hands, looking so exceedingly energetic in his wretchedness, that Elsie burst into perfect shrieks of laughter.

"You silly old goose!" she said; "don't you know you mustn't talk in that way to me! You have no right, and it is very impertinent! There, go along—I forgive you."

Tom stared at her with his astonished eyes wide open.

"You can laugh at me!" he exclaimed. "Why, all these weeks you have let me go on loving you, and never hinted that it was so very disagreeable."

"Now, Tom, don't be tiresome!"

Tom groaned aloud.

"Why I never saw such conduct!" cried Elsie, impatiently. "It's too bad of you to behave so—you are spoiling my whole evening! You are just as disagreeable as you can be. Oh, I hate you!"

"Elsie! Elsie!"

"Let go my hand; suppose anybody should come in! Oh, you old goose of a Tom—let me go, I say."

"Just one minute, Elsie—"

"To-morrow—any time! Don't you know civilized beings never behave in this way at a ball."

"I don't know—I can't think! I only feel I love you, Elsie, and must speak out. I will speak out."

A few weeks earlier Elsie would only have been amused at all this from general lack of amusement, but now it vexed and irritated her. Girl-like she had not the slightest pity on his pain. He was keeping her sorely against her wishes.

"I am served right for treating you as a friend," she said; "I looked upon you as a relation, and

thought you understood it; now you are trying to make me unhappy. Bessie will be angry, and tell Grant. Oh, you ought to be ashamed."

"I won't make you any trouble," shivered Tom; "I won't distress you! There—I beg your pardon, Elsie, I am sorry! And you don't—you never can, Elsie, Elsie—"

"No, no, you silly old fellow, of course not! Now be good, and I'll forget all about this folly. Let me go, Tom, I can't stay here any longer—let me go."

Tom still held her hand.

"This is earnest!" he said.

"Yes, yes! Tom, if you don't let me go I'll scream! You are absurd—why, you ought to be put in a straight jacket."

Tom dropped her hand, and stood like a man overpowered by some sudden blow.

Elsie saw only the comical side of the matter, and began to laugh again.

"Don't laugh," he said, passionately; "for mercy's sake don't laugh!"

There was a depth of suffering in his tone which forced itself to be realized even by that selfish creature; but it only made her begin to consider herself exceedingly ill-used, and to blame Tom for spoiling her pleasure.

"Now you want to blame me," she said, angrily, "and I haven't done a thing to encourage you."

"No, no; I don't blame you, Elsie," he said; "it's all my own fault—all mine."

"Yes, to be sure," cried Elsie. "Who could think you would be so foolish. There, shake hands, Tom, for I'm in a hurry. You are not angry?"

"Angry—no," said Tom, drearily.

"That's right! Good-by—you'll be wiser to-morrow."

Elsie glided away, and Tom watched her go out of the room, and realized that she was floating out of his life forever, that the dream of the past was at an end, and he was left alone in the darkness.

Poor old Tom! It was very hard, but no one could have resisted a smile at his appearance! When Elsie left him, he dashed out of the room, and hid himself in the most out of the way corner he could find.

As he crossed the hall, he heard Elizabeth call—

"Tom, Tom!"

He stopped, and she came towards him. One look at his face revealed the whole truth. She did not speak, but took his hand in hers, with a mute expression of sympathy which overpowered him.

"Don't! don't!" he said. "Let me go, Bessie! I'm a fool—it's all over now! There, don't mind me—I'll be better soon! I've got a chance to go to Europe for awhile, in fact it's to Calcutta. I shall be all right when I come back."

"Oh, my poor old Tom! Elsie is a wicked girl to have trifled with you so."

"She didn't!" he exclaimed, indignantly. "Don't blame her. I won't have it. There's nobody in fault but me. I deserve it all! I'm a blundering, wrong-headed donkey, and she's lovely as—as—"

Here Tom broke down, and going to a window looked resolutely out.

"But you won't go away, Tom?" said Elizabeth following him.

"Yes, I will. I shan't be gone but a few months. Don't try to keep me. I'll be all right when we meet again."

"Oh, Tom, Tom!" said Elizabeth.

"Now, be still; that's a good girl; I don't want to be pitied. It's of no consequence, not the slightest."

He broke abruptly away, and disappeared, leaving Elizabeth full of sympathy for his distress, and regret at the idea of losing her old playmate—she had depended on him so much during her husband's absence.

There had been a lull in the music, but it struck up again now, and the saloons reverberated with a stirring waltz. Elizabeth stood a moment listening to the crash of sound and the tread of light feet, but her heart was full and her brow anxious. She went to the window and looked out. It was a lovely night, but the eternal roll and sweep of the ocean seemed to depress her with some terrible dread. In all that splendid tumult she was alone. As she stood by the window her husband came down the hall smiling upon the lady who hung upon his arm. He had not missed her, would not miss her. There was no fear of that. She glided away with this dreary thought in her mind.

Mellen almost touched her as she turned into a little room opening upon the conservatory, but she went on unnoticed.

Tom Fuller had retreated into the conservatory, and was sitting disconsolately in an iron garden chair, sheltered by a small tree, drooping with yellow fringe-like blossoms, when a lady entered from one of the side doors, and passed out towards the gardens.

Tom started up, and called out, "Bessie! Why, Bessie, is that you? What on earth—"

The lady made no response, but looked over her shoulder, and sprang forward like a deer, causing a tumult among the plants as she rushed through them.

Tom stood motionless, lost in amazement; for over a ball dress which seemed white—he could discover nothing more,—the lady was shrouded head and person, in a blanket shawl, which he knew to be Elizabeth's, from the broad crimson stripes that ran across it.

After his first amazement Tom sat down again, heaving a deep sigh, and retreated further behind the flowering branches, that no one might look upon his unmanly sorrow.

"Poor Bessie, poor thing," he muttered, "I suppose she feels just as I do, like a fish out of water, in all these fine doings. I'd follow her, and we'd take a melancholy walk together in the moonlight, if it was not that Elsie might happen to get tired of dancing with those fellows, and come in here to rest a minute, when I could hide away and look at her through the plants."

Tom had in reality startled the lady shrouded in that great travelling shawl, for once out of doors she stood full half a minute listening with bated breath, and one foot advanced, ready to spring away if any sound reached her. Then she walked on with less desperate haste, bending her course through the shrubberies towards a grove of trees that lay between the open grounds and the shore.

It was a balmy October evening, moonlight, but shadowed by hosts of white scudding clouds. The wind blew up freshly from the water, scattered storms of gorgeous leaves around her as she approached the grove which was still heavy with foliage, perfectly splendid in the sunlight, but now all shadows and blackness. On the edge of the grove, just under a vast old oak, whose great limbs scarcely swayed in the wind, the lady paused and uttered some name in a low, cautious voice.

A spark of fire flashed down to the earth, as if some one had flung away his cigar in haste, and instantly footsteps rustled in the dead leaves. The branches of the oak bent low, and behind it was a thicket of young trees. The lady did not feel safe, even in the darkness, but moved on to meet the person who advanced in the deeper shadows, where even the edges of her white dress, which fell below the shawl, were lost to the eye.

As she stood panting in the shelter, a man's voice addressed her, and his hand was laid upon her shoulder.

"How you tremble!"

The voice sounded, in that balmy October night, sweet and mellow as the dropping of its over-ripe leaves. The female did indeed tremble violently.

"Look, look! I am followed," she whispered.

The man stepped a pace forward, peered through the oak branches, and stole cautiously to her side again.

"It is Mellen!"

She darted away, dragging her shawl from the grasp that man had fastened upon it,—away under the old oak, and along the outskirts of the grove. She paused a moment in breathless terror at the narrowest point of the lawn, then darted across it, huddling the skirt of her ball dress up with one hand, and sweeping the dead leaves in winrows after her with the fringes of her shawl. She avoided the conservatory, for Tom was still visible through its rolling waves of glass—and, turning to the servants' entrance, ran up a flight of dark stairs into the shaded lights of a chamber. She flung the heavy shawl breathlessly on a couch, shook the snowy masses of her dress into decorous folds, and stole to the window on tip-toe, where she stood, white and panting for breath, watching the lawn and grove, with wild, eager eyes, as if she feared her footsteps in the leaves might have been detected even in the darkness.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHO COULD IT HAVE BEEN?

The evening passed drearily enough to Grantley Mellen. He was in no spirits for society and the gay bustle; the lights, the music, the constraint he was forced to put upon himself, and the cheerfulness he was obliged to assume, only wearied him.

A strange and unaccountable dread of his approaching journey possessed him. It had grown

stronger as the days passed on, and that night was more powerful than ever.

Sometimes he was almost ready to think it a presentiment; perhaps he was never to return from that voyage; some unseen danger awaited him in that distant land, and he should die there, far from the sound of every voice, the touch of every hand that was dear to him.

He was vexed with himself for indulging in this superstitious weakness; but, in spite of all his efforts, the thought would recur again and again, oppressing him with a dreary sense of desolation that made the brilliant scene around absolutely repulsive.

He left the lighted rooms at last, and passed through the hall on to the piazza which overlooked the sea.

It was a beautiful evening; the moonlight, escaping from under a bank of clouds, lay silvery and broad upon the lawn, and broke a path of diamonds across the rippling waters, lighting them up to wonderful splendor. The air was balmy and soft as spring, the wind rippled pleasantly among the trees, but there was no melody in its tones to his ear; it seemed only a repetition of the mournful warning which had haunted his thoughts.

He walked on across the lawn, anxious to get beyond the sound of the music and gayety which followed him from the house, for it jarred upon his ears with deafening discordance.

He entered a little thicket of bushes and young trees, in the midst of which rose up a dark, funereal-looking cypress, that always waved its branches tremulously, however still the air might be, and seemed to be oppressed with a trouble which it could only utter in faint moaning whispers.

As he stood there, looking into the gloom, with a sense of relief at finding some object more in unison with his dark thoughts, he saw a figure glide away from the foot of the cypress, and disappear in the shrubbery beyond.

It was a woman wrapped in some dark garment—in movement and form like his wife—could it be his wife wandering about the grounds at that hour?

"Elizabeth!" he called; but there was no answer.

He hurried forward among the trees, but there was no object visible, no response to the summons he repeated several times.

It might be some guest who had stolen out there for a few minutes' quiet; yet that was not probable. Besides, the movements of the slender form appeared familiar to him. In height and shape Elsie and Elizabeth resembled each other; it was possibly one of them, but which?

Elsie it could not be, she had a nervous dread of darkness and could not be persuaded to stir off the piazza after nightfall. It must have been Elizabeth, then; but what was she doing there!

He started towards the house with some vague thought in his mind, to which he could have given no expression.

His wife was not in any of the rooms through which he passed, and he hurried into the ball-room. The music had just struck up anew; he saw Elsie whirling through a waltz; but Elizabeth was nowhere visible.

He drew near enough to Elsie to whisper—

"Where is Bessie?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I have been dancing all the while, and have not seen her for some time."

He turned away; but, just then, Mrs. Harrington captured him, and it was several moments before he could escape from her tiresome loquacity.

The moment he was at liberty Mellen hurried through the parlors and up the stairs, opened the door of Elizabeth's dressing-room, and entered. There she was, standing at the window, looking out. She turned quickly, and in some confusion at his sudden entrance.

"Is it you?" she asked.

"Yes; I have been looking for you everywhere!"

"I came up here for a moment's quiet," she answered. "I am very, very tired; I wish it was all over, Grantley."

"Have you been out?" he asked.

It seemed to him that she hesitated a little, as she answered—

"Out? No; where—what do you mean?"

"I thought I saw you in the grounds a little while ago."

"I should not be likely to go out in this dress," she replied, glancing down at the point lace flounces that floated over the snowy satin of her train. "Come, we must go down stairs; our guests will think us careless hosts."

Mellen felt and looked dissatisfied, but could not well press the matter farther.

"Are you coming down?" she asked.

"Yes; of course," he replied, coldly. "Don't wait for me."

She walked away without another word.

"She avoids me," he thought. "I see it more and more."

The ball was over at last. Even Elsie was completely tired out, and glad to nestle away under the azure curtains of her bed when the guests had departed.

With the next morning began preparations for Mellen's departure; and during the bustle of the following week, no one found much time for thought or reflection.

Tom Fuller came down suddenly, and opened his heart to Elizabeth. He was going to Europe; he did not ask to see Elsie; lacking the courage to meet her again for the present—once more, perhaps, before he went away; but not yet.

Elizabeth did not reproach the girl for her share in the honest fellow's unhappiness. She merely said—

"Tom is going to Europe on business; he sails next week."

"Oh, the foolish old fellow," replied Elsie; "and he never could learn to speak a French word correctly—what fun it would be to be with him in France."

"You will miss him," Mellen said, quietly.

"Oh," replied his wife, with a forced smile, "I must make up my mind to be lonely. I shall live through the coming dreary months as I best can."

"It's horrid of you to go, Grant!" cried Elsie.

"I know it, dear; but there is no use in fighting the unavoidable."

"Mind you write to me as often as you do to Bessie," she said. "If she gets one letter the most, I never will forgive either of you."

As she said this, the girl ran up to her brother, and stood leaning against his shoulder, with a playful caress, while he looked down at her with such entire love and trust in his face, that Elizabeth crept quietly away, and left them together.

The few days left to Mellen passed in a tumult of preparation. Sad doubts were at his heart, vague and so formless that he could not have expressed them in words, but painful as proven realities.

Elizabeth was greatly disturbed also; her fine color had almost entirely disappeared. She trembled at the slightest shock, and her very lips would turn white when she spoke of her husband's departure. She seemed stricken with a mortal terror of his going, yet made no effort to detain him. She, too, had presentiments of evil that shocked her whole system, and made her brightest smile something mournful to look upon.

But the husband and wife had little opportunity to observe or understand the feelings that tortured them both. Elsie's cries, and tears, and hysterical spasms, kept the whole household in commotion. She should never see her brother again—never, never. Elizabeth might not be good to her. Sisters-in-law and school-friends were different creatures; she had found that out already. If she could only have died with her mother!

These cries broke out vehemently on the night before Mellen's departure. The spoiled child would not allow her brother to spend one moment from her side. So all that night Elizabeth, pale, still, and bowed down by a terrible heart-ache, watched with her husband by the azure couch which Elsie preferred to her bed. It was a sad, mournful night to them both.

At daylight, Elsie's egotism was exhausted, and she fell asleep. The first sunshine came stealing up from its silvery play on the water, and shimmering through the lace curtains, fell on the young girl as she slept. There was trouble on that sweet face—genuine trouble; for Elsie loved her brother dearly, and his departure agitated her more deeply than he had ever known her moved before.

How lovely she looked with the drops trembling on those long, golden lashes, and staining the warm flush of her cheeks! One arm, from which the muslin sleeve had fallen back, lay under her head, half-buried in a tangle of curls; sobs broke at intervals through her parted lips, ending in long, troubled sighs.

Mellen was deeply touched. Elizabeth bent her head against the end of the couch, and wept unheeded drops of anguish. The heart ached in her bosom.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE HUSBAND'S LAST CHARGE.

Elizabeth Mellen shuddered visibly when the first sunbeam fell through the curtains. Only a few moments were left to them. Sick and faint, she lifted her head and turned her imploring eyes on her husband's face—eyes so full of yearning agony, that his heart must have leaped through all its doubts to meet hers, had not his glance been fixed upon Elsie. The long, black lashes drooped over those gray eyes when she found their appeal disregarded, and the young wife shrunk within herself, shuddering at her own loneliness.

A servant came to the room, and by a sign announced breakfast. It was the last meal they might ever take together. This thought struck them both, and brought their hands in contact with a thrilling clasp. He drew her arm through his, and led her down stairs. She felt his heart beating against her arm, looked up, and saw that he was regarding her with glances of searching tenderness. Her eyes filled; her bosom heaved; and, but for a wild struggle, she would have burst into a passion of tears before the servant, who held the door open for them to pass into the breakfast-room.

How bright and cheerful it all looked—the crusted snow of the linen; the delicately chased silver, and more delicate china; and this was their last meal. She sat down and poured out his coffee. Her hand trembled, but she tried to smile when he took the cup and praised its aroma. She drank some herself, for the chill at her heart was spreading to her face and hands.

Little was said during the meal, and less was eaten. Elizabeth looked at the clock as a convict gazes on the axe that is to slay him. She counted the moments as they crept away, devouring the brief time yet given to them, while he glanced at his watch, nervously every few minutes.

Then the husband and wife went up stairs again. Elizabeth turned from Elsie's door and went into her own dressing-room. With all her magnanimity she could not give her husband up to his sister during the last moments of his stay. He followed her into the room, but directly lifted the curtain and went into Elsie's boudoir, where the young girl lay profoundly sleeping. Elizabeth would not follow. Her heart was swelling too painfully. She sat down, clasped both hands in her lap, and waited like a statue.

He had only crossed the boudoir, bent over Elsie, and pressed a cautious but most loving kiss on her forehead. She did not move, but smiled softly in her sleep, and he stole away, blessing her.

Elizabeth's heart gave a sudden leap when he came into her room again and sat down by her side. He felt how cold her hand was, and kissed it.

"Elizabeth!"

She turned, frightened by the tone of his voice. It was hoarse with emotion.

"Elizabeth, I have one charge to give before we part."

She bent her head in sorrowful submission.

"Elsie, my sister!"

He did not notice the red flame that shot up to her cheek, or the shrinking of her whole frame, but went on.

"The child is so precious to me. The dearest human being I have on earth—" He hesitated a moment, and added, "Except—except you, my wife."

She was grateful even for this. Was it that she was conscious of deserving nothing more, or did the hungry yearning of her heart seize on this sweet aliment with thankfulness after the famine of her recent life?

He saw the tears spring into her eyes, and drew her closer to his side.

"Be careful of her for my sake, Elizabeth. She was given me in solemn charge at my mother's death-bed. She has been the sweetest solace of my barren life. Let no harm come near her—no evil thing taint the mind which I leave in your hands pure as snow. Guard her, love her, and give her back to me, gentle, guileless, and good, as she lies now, in the sweetest and most innocent sleep I ever witnessed."

"I will! I will!" answered Elizabeth, conquering a sharp spasm of pain with the spirit of a martyr. "If human care, or human sacrifice can insure her welfare, I will not be found wanting."

Grantley bent down and kissed his wife gratefully.

"Remember, Elizabeth, my happiness and honor are left in your keeping."

Did he mean that honor and happiness both were bound up in Elsie, or had he really thought of her rightful share in his life?

This question flashed through the young wife's mind, but she would not accept it in a bitter sense then. The parting hour was close at hand. She trembled as each moment left them.

"I will be kind to Elsie as you can desire; indeed I will," she said. "You can trust me."

"If I doubted that, harassing as the voyage is, I would take her with me."

"Oh, if you only could take us both! It terrifies me to be left alone, surrounded with—"

"That is out of the question now. But when I come back, we will try and make this life of ours happier than it has been."

She looked at him—her great, mournful eyes widening with pain.

"Have you been very unhappy, then, Grantley," she faltered.

"Unhappy! I did not say that; but hereafter our bliss must be more perfect. We shall understand each other better."

"Shall we—shall we ever? Oh, Grantley, without love what perfect understanding can exist?"

Her fine eyes were flooded with tears; every feature in her face quivered with emotion.

A clock on the mantel-piece chimed out the hour of his departure. On the instant Dolf knocked at the door.

Elizabeth started up, trembling like a wounded bird that struggles away from a second shot.

"So soon! so soon!" she cried, wringing her hands. "I had so much to ask; everything to say, and now there is no time."

Grantley took her in his arms, and kissed her very hurriedly, for the servant was standing in sight.

"God bless you, Elizabeth, I must go!"

She flung her arms wildly around him. Her pale face was lifted to his in mute appeal. Was it for pardon of some unknown offence, or the deep craving of a true heart for love?

Grantley put her away, and went hurriedly into Elsie's room. He came out pale and troubled. Elizabeth stood by the door gasping her breath; he wrung the hand she held forth to stop him, and was gone. She heard his steps as they went down the walnut-staircase, and they fell upon her like distinct blows. The great hall-door closed with a sharp noise that made her start, and with a burst of bitter, bitter anguish, cry out. Then came the sound of carriage-wheels grinding through gravel, and the beat of hoofs that seemed trampling down the heart in her bosom. As these sounds died off, she attempted to reach the window and look out, but only fell upon the couch which stood near it, and fainted without a moan.

CHAPTER XV.

MRS. HARRINGTON'S FRIENDS.

A day or two after Mellen's departure, Elizabeth, who was taking her solitary promenade on the veranda, was surprised by a visit from Mrs. Harrington, who came fluttering across the lawn between two gentlemen, with whom she seemed carrying on a right and left flirtation. She came up the steps with her flounces all in commotion, her face wreathed with insipid smiles, and her hair done up in a marvellous combination of puffs, curls and braids under a tiny bonnet, that hovered over them like a butterfly just ready to take wing.

"I knew that you would be moping yourself to death," she cried, floating down upon Elizabeth with both hands extended; "so I gave up everything and came in the first train. Now do acknowledge that I am the kindest friend in the world."

Elizabeth received her cordially, and with a great effort shook off the gloomy thoughts that had oppressed her all the morning. Mrs. Harrington did not heed this, she was always ready to welcome herself, and in haste to secure her full share of the conversation, and before Elizabeth could finish her rather halting attempts at a compliment she presented her companions.

Elizabeth had hardly glanced at the gentlemen till then, but now she recognized the elder and more stately of the two as the person who had probably saved her life on the Bloomingdale road.

"I need not ask a welcome for this gentleman, I am sure," said Mrs. Harrington, clasping both hands over Mr. North's arm, and leaning coquettishly upon him. "He is our preserver, Mrs. Mellen,—our hero."

North smiled, but rejected these compliments with an impatient lift of the head.

"Pray allow Mrs. Mellen to forget that this is not our first meeting," he said; "so small a service is not worth mentioning."

He looked steadily at Elizabeth as he spoke. She seemed to shrink from his glance, but answered,

"No, no; it was a service I can never forget—never hope to repay."

"Now let me beg a welcome for my other friend," interposed Mrs. Harrington. "Mr. Hawkins. I told him it was quite a charity to come with me and rouse you up a little, besides, he is dying to see your lovely sister-in-law."

Mr. Hawkins, a very young Englishman, was leaning against a pillar of the veranda in an attitude which displayed his very stylish dress to the best possible advantage. He appeared mildly conscious that he had performed a solemn duty in making a perambulating tailor's block of himself, and ready to receive any amount of feminine admiration without resistance. He came forward half a step and fell back again.

"Such a charming place you have here—quite a paradise," he drawled, caressing the head of his cane, which was constantly between his lips. "I trust—aw—the other angel of this retreat is visible?"

Elizabeth replied with a faint smile. She had borne a good many similar afflictions from Mrs. Harrington's friends, but it was too much that they should be forced upon her just then.

"Where is Elsie?" cried the widow, with vivacious affection, shaking her gay plumage like a canary bird in the sun.

"In her own room," replied Elizabeth. "Pray walk in, and I will call her."

"Oh, never mind, I'll go!" said Mrs. Harrington. "Gentlemen, I leave you with Mrs. Mellen; but no flirtation, remember that!"

She fluttered, laughed a little, and shook her finger at the very young man, who said "Aw!" while North seemed absorbed in the scenery. Then away she flew, kissing her hand to them, and leaving Elizabeth to gather up her weary thoughts and make an effort at entertaining these unwelcome guests.

Mrs. Harrington found Elsie yawning over a new novel, and quite prepared to be enlivened by the prospect of company.

"But I can't go down such a figure," she said; "just wait a minute. One gets so careless in a house without gentlemen."

"Poor dear! I am sure you are moped."

"Oh, to death. It's dreadful!" sighed Elsie. "I feel things so acutely. If I only had a little of Bessie's stoicism!"

"Yes, it's all very well; but you are made up of feeling," said the widow. "Change your dress, dear. Oh, you've made a conquest of a certain gentleman."

"What, that Hawkins! He's a fearful idiot!" cried Elsie. "But he'll do, for want of a better."

The sensitive young creature had quite forgotten her low spirits, but dressed herself in the most becoming morning attire possible, and floated down to greet the guests and quite bewilder them with her loveliness.

Hawkins had been mortally afraid of Mrs. Mellen, but with Elsie he could talk, and Elizabeth sat quite stunned by the flood of frivolous nonsense and the peals of senseless laughter which went on about her. As for Mr. North, Elsie scarcely gave him a word after the first general salutation.

After awhile Elizabeth managed to escape, on the plea that household duties required her presence, and stole up to her room for a little quiet. All at once she heard Tom Fuller's voice in the hall; opened her dressing-room door, and there he stood in his usual disordered state.

"I've come to say good-bye," were his first words.

"Then you are really going, Tom?" she said, sorrowfully, taking his hand and leading him into the chamber. "Oh, how sorry I am."

"Yes, I'm off to-morrow," he said, resolutely, running both hands through his hair, and trying to keep his courage up. "A trip to Europe is a splendid thing, Bess—I'm a lucky fellow to get it."

"I shall be all alone," she said, mournfully; "and I had depended on you so much."

"Oh," cried Tom, "It's good of you to miss me—nobody else will! But there, Bessie, don't you set me off! I wanted to bid you good-bye—I—I—well, I'm a confounded fool, but I thought I'd like to see her just once more."

"And those tiresome people are here," said Elizabeth.

"Who do you mean?"

"Oh, Mrs. Harrington and two men she has brought to spend the day—one of them is the person who checked our horses that day."

"I thought I heard the widow's voice as I came through the hall," said Tom. "Well, well, it's better so! You see I don't want to make a donkey of myself."

"Tom, you are the best creature in the world," cried Elizabeth.

"Oh, Lord bless you, no," said Tom, rubbing his forehead in a disconsolate way; "I ain't good;

there's nothing like that about me. 'Pon my word, I'm quite shocked lately to see what an envious, bad-hearted old wretch I'm getting to be."

"We won't go downstairs yet," said Elizabeth; "sit down here and let's have a comfortable talk, like old times, Tom."

"Well, no, I guess not, thank you—it's very kind of you," returned he, getting very red. "You see I can't stay but an hour—I must take the next train, for I've lots of things to do."

"Oh, I thought you would spend the night."

"Now, don't ask me—I can't—it wouldn't be wise if I could," cried Tom, giving his hair an unmerciful combing with his fingers.

"No," she replied, regarding him with womanly pity; "perhaps not. And you would like to go down stairs?"

"I'm a fool to wish it," he answered; "those fine people will only laugh at me, and I know when I see that magnifico and his popinjay friend about Elsie I shall want to wring their conceited necks. But I'll go—oh, it's no use telling lies! You understand just what a fool I am—I came because I feel as if I must see her once more!"

Tom was twisting his hat in both hands, his features worked in the attempt he made to control his agitation; but Elizabeth loved him too well for any notice of his odd manner—she was entirely absorbed in sympathy for his trouble.

"Oh, Tom, Tom!" she said, "I do hope absence—the change—will do you good."

"Yes," he broke in, with a strangled whistle that began as a groan; "yes, of course, thank you—oh, no doubt! You see, there's no knowing what good may come. But Lord bless you, Bess, if the old ship would only sink and land me safe as many fathoms under salt water as was convenient, it would be about the best thing that could happen to me."

"Don't talk so, Tom; you can't think how it pains me."

"Well, I won't—there, I'm all right now! Ti-rol-de-rol!" and Tom actually tried to sing. "I say, Bessie, she never—she don't seem, you know—?"

"What, Tom?"

"To be sorry I was going, you know?"

"Elsie? She has been so engrossed with her brother's journey——"

"Yes, of course," Tom broke in; "oh, it's not to be expected—nobody that wasn't a flounder ever would have asked! Ri-tol-de-rol! I'm a little hoarse this morning, but it's no matter—I only want to show I'm not put about, you know—that is, not much."

He moved uneasily about the chamber, upset light chairs and committed disasters generally; but all the while looked resolute as possible, and kept up his attempt at a song in a mournful quaver.

"Well, I can't stay," he said; "I mustn't lose the train! Now, don't feel uncomfortable, Bessie; Lord bless you, I shall soon be all right—sea-sickness is good for my disease, you know," and Tom tried to laugh, but it was a dismal failure compared with his former light-heartedness.

Elizabeth saw that he was restless to get once more into Elsie's presence, painful as the interview must be to him, so she smoothed his hair, straightened his necktie and accompanied him downstairs.

"Oh, you dear, delightful Tom Fuller!" cried Mrs. Harrington, pleased to see any man arrive, for Elsie had carried off both her victims into the window-seat, and was making them dizzy with her smiles and brilliant nonsense.

"I—I'm delighted to see you," cried Tom, frantically, thrusting his hat in her face, in a wild delusion that he was offering his hand, for he was so upset by the sight of Elsie that he felt as if rapidly going up in an unmanageable balloon.

"I'll just say good-bye at the same time," pursued Tom; "for I'm rather in a hurry, thank you."

"Why, you're not going away directly!" cried the widow. "Oh, you must stay and entertain me. Elsie has left me quite desolate."

"Thank you; it's of no importance; I'm not quite on my sea legs yet," gasped Tom, growing so dizzy that he was possessed of a mad idea he was already on shipboard.

"Why, you look quite white and ill," said the widow.

"Yes; oh, not any, thank you," cried Tom, stepping on the widow's dress, dancing off it and dealing Elizabeth a blow with his hat.

Mrs. Mellen felt herself grow sick at heart; she glanced at Elsie; the girl was laughing gaily, and chatting away with young Hawkins, regardless of Tom's presence. North stood by, looking at her with his deep, earnest eyes, as if searching her character in all its shallow depths. Elizabeth felt bitterly indignant, and exclaimed—

"Elsie, my cousin has come to wish us good-bye, if you can spare him a moment."

"So you are really going?" called Elsie. "You oughtn't to run away so. It's so unkind of you."

Tom lifted his eyes mournfully to her face.

"My lap is so full of flowers," cried Elsie, glancing down at a mass of roses that glowed in the folds of her morning dress, "I can't possibly get up; come and shake hands with me."

It was well for Tom that Mrs. Harrington seized his arm, and afforded him a few instants to regain his composure, while she asked all sorts of questions about his journey and its object.

"Mary Harrington," said Elsie. "Just let Mr. Fuller come here; you mustn't assault peaceable men in that way."

"La, dear, what odd things you do say! I was just talking with Mr. Fuller about his journey."

Elsie glanced at North and whispered to his companion, who laughed in a very polite way. Tom knew it was at him, and grew more red and awkward. Elizabeth recognised the silly insult, and darted a look of such indignation towards the offender that the youth was quite subdued, although it had no effect whatever on Elsie.

She rose, dropping her flowers over the carpet, put her hand in Mr. North's arm, left Hawkins to follow, and caress his cane in peace, and moved towards the group.

"Good-bye, Mr. Fuller," said she, touching his shoulder with the tips of her fingers. "If you bring me a beautiful lava bracelet perhaps I'll forgive you for going away,—and some pink coral,—don't forget."

Tom was a sight to behold between confusion, distress, and his superhuman efforts to be calm.

"I'll bring you twenty," said he, recklessly.

"Oh, that would be overpowering," laughed Elsie. "Good-bye. I'm sure you'll look touching when you are seasick."

"He! he!" giggled Hawkins, as well as he could for the cane.

Tom turned on him like a tiger.

"You'll ruin your digestion if you laugh so much over that tough meal," said he, and for once Tom had the laugh on his side.

"Good-bye, Miss Elsie," he continued, determined to get away while he could still preserve a decent show of composure; "good-bye."

"Good-bye, Tom Fuller, good-bye!"

She flung some of the flowers she was holding, at him. Tom caught them and hurried out of the room, pressing the fragrant blossoms against his waistcoat, and smothering a mortal pang.

Elizabeth followed him into the hall, but their parting was a brief one, spoken amid bursts of laughter from within, and in a broken voice by the warm hearted young fellow.

"Good-bye, Bessie—God bless you."

"You'll write to me, Tom? I shall miss you so."

"Oh, don't; it ain't worth while! I'll write of course; good-bye."

Tom dashed down the steps and fled along the avenue in mad haste, and Elizabeth returned to her guests.

It seemed to her that the day would never come to an end. Mrs. Harrington and Elsie scarcely heeded her, but fluttered from room to room with the two guests, doing the honors with great spirit, and urging them to extend their visit some days. Elizabeth was offended at the reckless offer of hospitality.

Elsie saw this and whispered, "It wasn't my fault; don't blame me, dear! Grant is gone, and he told you not to be cross with me."

So Elizabeth controlled herself; perhaps the girl had done all this harm unconsciously. She would believe so, at least; no cloud must come between them. These almost strange men were invited, and must remain if they so decided.

As if she had not enough to bear already, Elizabeth's inflictions were increased towards the dinner hour by the arrival of a Mr. Rhodes and his daughter, who lived at an easy distance, and thought it a neighborly and kind thing for them to drop in to dinner with Mrs. Mellen, and console her in her loneliness.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE WIDOW'S FLIRTATION.

Mrs. Harrington plunged into her natural element at once; Mr. Rhodes was a rich widower, vulgar and pompous as could well be imagined; but that made no difference, the lady spread her flimsy net in that direction and put on all her fascinations at once, leaving the younger men to their fate. This was splendid sport to Elsie, for Miss Jemima, the daughter, a gaunt, peaked-nosed female, had been Miss Jemima a good many more years than she found agreeable, and when any woman ventured even to look at her stout parent, she was up in arms at once and ready to do battle against the threatened danger, resolved that one man at least should own her undivided dominion, even if that man was her pompous old father. Mr. Rhodes was at once captivated by the widow's flattery, and Elsie mischievously increased Jemima's growing irritation by whispers full of honied malice, that almost drove that single lady distracted.

"Quite a flirtation, I declare," said she; "really, Miss Jemima, widows are very dangerous, and she is so fascinating."

"It's ridiculous for a woman to go on so," returned the spinster, shaking her head in vehement agitation; "you may just tell her it's no use, my pa isn't likely to be caught with chaff like that."

"Oh, but Mrs. Harrington is considered irresistible."

"Well, I can't see it for my part," retorted Jemima; "She's a tolerable specimen of antique painting; but my pa isn't given to the fine arts."

"Oh! Mrs. Harrington," called Elsie, "I wish you could induce Mr. Rhodes to give us a picnic in his woods before the weather gets too cold—they are delightful. I daren't ask him, but you might venture, I'm sure."

Miss Jemima looked as if she had three minds to strangle the pretty torment on the spot.

"Excuse me, dear," said Mrs. Harrington, "I am sure I could have no influence."

"Oh, you painted humbug!" muttered Jemima.

"I should be delighted—charmed!" exclaimed Mr. Rhodes. "Madam, it would be a day never to be forgotten that honored my poor house with your presence," he broke off, puffing till the brass buttons on his coat shook like hailstones.

"Oh, you are a dreadful flatterer, I see!" answered the widow, quite aware of Jemima's rage, and delighted to increase it.

"Madam," said the stout man, "on the honor of a gentleman, I never flatter. Miss Elsie, defend me."

"Not unless you promise to get up the picnic," said the little witch. "Miss Jemima is anxious to have it—"

"Me," broke in the acid damsel, unable to endure anything more, "I am sure I never thought of such a thing, don't speak for me, if you please."

"But you will be delighted, you know you will."

"Pa's got to go to Philadelphia," said Jemima, sharply.

"But I could defer the trip, Mimy," said her parent, appealingly.

"Business is business, you always say," retorted the damsel.

Elsie gave a little scream.

"Why, how odd," said she. "Mrs. Harrington goes to Philadelphia next week you can escort her, Mr. Rhodes, she is a sad coward about travelling alone."

"I shall be delighted," said the widower, "delighted."

Jemima fairly groaned; she made a strangling effort to turn her agony into a cough, but it began as a groan; both Elsie and Mrs. Harrington were convinced of that, and it delighted them beyond measure.

"It would be very, very kind of Mr. Rhodes," said the widow, "but Elsie, you are inconsiderate, to think of him taking so much trouble only for us, and I a stranger."

"It would be an honor and delight to me," insisted Rhodes.

Jemima resolutely arose from her chair, and planted herself in a seat directly in front of her parent—he could not avoid her eye then—the wrath burning there made him hesitate and stammer.

"Miss Jemima," said Elsie, "come and look at my geraniums; I think they are finer even than yours."

But nothing short of a torpedo exploding under her chair would have made the heroic damsel quit her post, not for one instant would she leave her parent exposed to the wiles of that abominable widow.

"My dear, I am so tired," said she, "you must excuse me."

"Perhaps you'd like to go and lie down," persisted Elsie.

"You look fatigued," said Mrs. Harrington.

"Do I, ma'am; you're kind, I'm sure," snapped the spinster, trying to smile. "I never lie down in the daytime; I'm very comfortable where I am, thank you."

She might be very perfectly at ease herself, but she made her father very uncomfortable, while Elsie and the widow never gave over teasing for a single instant, till Elizabeth returned to the room.

Luckily dinner was announced, and the asperity of Miss Jemima's feelings softened a little by that, especially as she reflected that her father would be obliged to lead Mrs. Mellen into the dining-room. But that dreadful Elsie destroyed even that forlorn hope.

"Bessie," said she, "we must ask Mr. Rhodes to play host and sit at the foot of the table, so he shall lead Mrs. Harrington in."

Even Elizabeth could not repress a smile at the little elf's malicious craft, and there was nothing to be said. The wretched Jemima grew fairly white with rage, but she was obliged to control herself, and the dinner passed off in the most social, neighborly fashion.

At a very early hour Miss Jemima insisted upon returning home, but Elsie had a parting shaft ready for her.

"I have persuaded Mrs. Harrington and these gentlemen to stay over to-morrow," said she. "May I promise them that we'll all drive to your house and take luncheon, Miss Jemima, by way of returning your visit."

The spinster was compelled to express her gratification. She could do no less, after having invited herself and her father to dinner at Piney Cove, but her face was a perfect study while the pleasant words fell from her compressed lips, like bullets from a mould.

"We shall be in ecstasy," said Mr. Rhodes.

"You will be in New York," retorted Jemima; "you have to go early in the morning."

"My dear, the day after will do as well."

"Now, pa, you know you said——"

"Oh, Miss Jemima," broke in Elsie, "I shall think you don't want us to come!"

"And I," said the widow, "shall be mortally offended if Mr. Rhodes runs away the very first time I have the pleasure of visiting his house."

"Of course, of course!" said the stout man. "My daughter, Mimy, is a great business woman—girl, I mean—but on an occasion like this even business must wait. Ladies, I go home to dream of the honor to-morrow will bring."

"Well, pa, if we're going at all, I think we'd better start," cried the spinster; "we are keeping the horses in the cold."

She made her farewells very brief and carried off her parent in triumph, darting a last defiant look at the widow as she passed.

The moment they were gone Elsie went into convulsions of laughter, and clapping her pretty white hands like a child, cried out:

"She'll poison you, Mary Harrington, I know she will."

"My dear, I'll eat luncheon before I go."

Even Elizabeth was forced to laugh at the absurd scene. Elsie mimicked the spinster, and turned the affair in so many ridiculous ways that it afforded general amusement for the rest of the evening.

The whole party did drive over to Mr. Rhodes's house the next day, and Miss Jemima was tormented out of her very senses; while Mr. Rhodes was made to appear ridiculous as only a pompous old widower, with a keen appetite for flattery, can be made look.

The question of the picnic came up again, but Elizabeth settled that matter by refusing to have any share in it. She was in no spirits for such amusement, and had decided to refuse all invitations during Mr. Mellen's absence.

From that day Miss Jemima always felt a liking for Mrs. Mellen, who had so quietly come to her rescue, and she was the only one of the party to whom the claret would not have proved a fatal dose if the spinster's sharp glances or secret wishes could have had their due effect.

From some caprice Mrs. Harrington prolonged her stay at Piney Cove for an entire week, and all this time she protested against either of the gentlemen who had accompanied her there returning without her. Elsie, in her careless, childish way, seconded the widow, so these two men dropped into such easy relations with the family that it seemed difficult to assign any period to their visit.

Nothing could be quieter than Mr. North's mode of life during his sojourn at the house. If he joined in the light conversation so prevalent at all times, it was with a quiet grace that modified it without offering rebuke. He seemed to give no preference to the society of any one of the three ladies, but most frequently attended Mrs. Harrington in her walks and rides. To Elsie he was reserved, almost paternal, and in his society the young girl would become grave, sometimes thoughtful, as if his presence depressed her childish flow of spirits.

If North ever had more than ordinary intercourse with his hostess no one witnessed it, yet a close observer might have seen that he watched her with a quiet vigilance that bespoke some deep interest in her movements. Those who have seen this very man creep into the mansion house at night and wander cautiously from room to room, as if to fix a plan of the dwelling in his mind, will understand that his visit, which seemed so purely accidental, had its object; but no one could have discovered, by look or movement, what that object was.

At last the party broke up and returned to the city. Elsie went with them. At first Mrs. Mellen opposed her going, but the pretty creature was resolute enough when her own wishes were concerned, and would listen to no opposition.

"I am not going to live in this stupid place, like a nun in a convent, just because my brother desires to amuse himself in California," she said, when Elizabeth would have dissuaded her from leaving home. "I tell you, Grant would not wish it. I am not married and obliged to shut myself up and play proper like you. It's downright cruel of you wanting me to stay here. I'm half dead with grieving already. The house isn't like home without Grant. At any rate, I'm going; you are not my mother!"

She carried her point; Elizabeth had no absolute authority which could enforce obedience on a creature at once so stubborn and so volatile. So she made no further opposition, fearing that anything like violent measures might prove distasteful to her husband.

CHAPTER XVII.

STARTING FOR THE PIC-NIC.

But one day now remained of Mrs. Harrington's unwelcome visit. The whole party, except Elizabeth, were to start for New York in the morning, where Mrs. Harrington had resolved to open a splendid succession of receptions and parties in Elsie's behalf.

This last day Elsie declared should be the crowning pleasure of Mrs. Harrington's visit. They would ride down to the sea-side tavern on horseback, have a chowder party on the precipice behind it, looking out upon the ocean, and return home at dusk or by moonlight, as caprice might determine. Mr. Rhodes and Miss Jemima were to be included, and some of the colored servants were forwarded early in the morning to superintend the arrangements.

The dew was hanging thick and bright on the lawn when Mr. Rhodes and his daughter rode up to the Piney Cove mansion. A group of horses were gathered in front of the veranda, and a little crowd of ladies, in long sweeping dresses, gauntlet gloves and pretty hats, stood chatting around the door.

Mr. Rhodes preferred to sit on his handsome bay horse, and wait for the party to arrange itself, for it was rather inconvenient for him to mount and dismount the high-stepping beast oftener than was absolutely necessary. As for Jemima, she rode a long-limbed, slender-bodied horse, and sat him in grim dignity, as the dames of old occupied their high-backed chairs. Her beaver hat towered high, and the stiff tuft of feathers that rose from it in front gave a dash of the military to her usually defiant aspect, grimly imposing.

She drew her horse up to the front steps, and sat viciously regarding the city widow, as that lady shook out the folds of her riding-skirt, pulled the gauntlets to a tighter fit on her shapely hands, and kept her cornelian-headed riding-whip in a constant state of vibration, for the benefit of that evidently too admiring widower on the great bay horse.

The party mounted at last, and cantered in a gay cavalcade across the lawn, leaving the mansion behind them almost in solitude. It was a lovely day, bright with sunshine, and freshened by a cool breeze from the ocean. Mrs. Mellen that day seemed among the most joyous of the party. Whatever care had hitherto possessed her she evidently threw off; her sweet voice rang out pleasantly, and her face grew beautiful in the animation of the moment.

For a while the party moved on at random; but when the road branched off into a long tract of the woodland the equestrians naturally broke up into pairs, and, either by chance or design, Mr. North joined Elizabeth, who was riding a little in advance. It was almost the first time that he had seemed to prefer her society during his whole visit, and this movement naturally created a little observation. Elsie looked after the splendid pair as they rode under the overhanging trees, with an expression of subdued wonder in her blue eyes, which amounted almost to dismay. Mrs. Harrington laughed with as much meaning as her small share of intellect could concentrate on one idea, and said in a low voice to Elsie:

"Did I not tell you they had met before? She has been playing dutiful like a martyr. See how she breaks out now. Look! look! she is turning down a cross road; it is a mile farther round."

"We will go on direct," said Elsie. "If my brother's wife chooses to ride off alone with any man through the woods, let her. It was decided that we should take the highway, and we will."

Elsie spoke with decision, a cold light came into her blue eyes, and the expression about her lips was almost stern; for a moment the girl was transfigured before her friend.

At the cross roads there was a little debate. Miss Jemima turned her horse in the direction Elizabeth had taken. The generally obedient papa was following this lead, when Mr. Hawkins was sent forward to arrest him.

"Straight ahead, that's the programme," he called out, taking the gold head of his riding-whip from his mouth long enough to speak clearly, "Miss Elsie told me to call you back."

"And the—the other lady," stammered Rhodes, flushing red, to the intense scorn of the spinster.

"Oh, she's gone ahead."

"Then I take this way," exclaimed Jemima, with emphasis; "come, pa."

Mr. Rhodes had wheeled his horse half round, and was casting irresolute looks towards the two ladies riding slowly along the shady road.

"But, daughter, we cannot leave them to ride on alone."

"This—this—person is with them, and they seem to count him as a man," answered Jemima, with a gesture of intense scorn.

Mrs. Harrington here was seen to draw up her horse in the shade of a huge chestnut, and playfully beckon the widower with her whip.

"Jemima, I must. It would be underbred," cried the desperate man, riding away to the enemy.

Jemima sat upon her horse, petrified with amazement. Her father looked anxiously back when he reached the widow, with sad forebodings of the tempest that would follow, but there the spinster sat at the cross roads like an equestrian statue.

"Come, come," said the widow, touching him playfully with her whip. "Elsie is getting impatient. Now for a race."

Her spirited horse dashed forward at a run. The ponderous steed of the widower thundered after, making the forest reverberate with the heavy fall of his hoofs.

Mr. Hawkins fell into a dainty amble, and away the whole party swept into the green shadows of the woods.

Jemima looked right and she looked left. Should she ride on and leave her pa in the hands of that designing creature? Perish the thought, better anything than that! She touched her horse. It turned sharply, and swept down the highway like a greyhound. She struck him on the flank, then the tiny lash of her whip quivered about his ears till he dashed on, flinging back dust and stones with his hoofs.

The party was riding fast. Mr. Hawkins by Elsie, Mr. Rhodes close to the widow—so close, that somehow her right hand, whip and all, had got entangled with his. They were on a curve of the road, around which Jemima came sweeping like a torrent. With a single bound her horse rushed in between them, leaving the widow's gauntlet glove in the grasp of that frightened man, and the cornelian-headed whip deep in the mud of the highway.

Not a word was spoken. The widower sank abjectly down in his saddle, and with his apprehensive eyes turned sideways on the spinster, surreptitiously thrust the stray glove into the depths of his pocket. The widow, convulsed with mingled laughter and rage, gave no doubt of genuine color now, for her face was crimson. Thus, like two prisoners under military guard, they moved on, with Jemima riding in grim vigilance between them.

The spot chosen for the chowder-party commanded a splendid sea view and a broad landscape in the background, of which the distant mansion of Piney Cove was a principal object. It was an abrupt precipice, clothed, except in the very front, with a rich growth of trees; splendid masses of white pine and clumps of hemlock darkened with the deep green of their foliage such forest trees as cast their leaves from autumn till spring time. The broken precipice in front was tufted here and there with clumps of barberry bushes and other wild shrubs, which might have aided a daring adventurer to climb up it, had the temptation been sufficient.

Between this precipice and the shores of the ocean, stood the little tavern we have before spoken of, from which the negroes of Piney Point were now bringing up a huge iron pot wherein to cook the chowder, which would be nothing if not culminated in the open air, over a fire of sticks, and eaten beneath the hemlock trees.

A bridle path led to the top of this precipice, winding along the back slope of the hill, and by this route the highway party rode to the summit, some fifteen minutes before Elizabeth and Mr. North joined them. Whatever evil feelings had sprung up on the road, at least a majority of the company resolved to enjoy themselves now. Jemima entered heart and soul into the preparations, keeping

a sharp eye on her father all the time. He, poor man, scarcely required her vigilance, for when a chowder was to be concocted, the stout man forgot all his gallant weaknesses, and gave his whole being up to the important subject.

Mrs. Harrington had no great talent for cookery, and feeling beaten and awed by Jemima's dashing generalship, hovered around the outskirts of the preparations, and flirting a little with Hawkins, from languid habit, rather than any special regard for the young gentleman.

CHAPTER XVIII.

FACE TO FACE.

During the bustle of these preparations, Elizabeth, Mr. North and Elsie had dropped out of the party and wandered off, no doubt, into the shady places of the woods; no one had observed how or where they went. Hawkins had been with Elsie at first, but she had sent him down a ravine for some tinted ash leaves, and when he came back to the stone on which she had been sitting, it was vacant. Probably she had become tired of waiting, and had gone in search of the forest leaves herself; as for Mrs. Mellen and North, of course they were all right somewhere, and would be on hand safe enough when the chowder was ready.

While Mrs. Harrington and Hawkins were talking in this idle fashion, they sat on a large ledge of rock that crowned the very brink of the precipice; and chancing to look down, saw two persons near the foot moving towards the tavern. One they recognised, even from that distance, to be Mr. North, for his tall, grand figure was not to be mistaken. The other was a lady; the dark riding-dress and floating plumes might belong to any female of the party, there was no individuality in a dress like that. The couple had evidently found some passage down the brow of the precipice, for it would have been impossible to reach the spot where they stood by any other route.

"Well," said Mrs. Harrington, "if that isn't a sly proceeding; what on earth does it mean? How Mrs. Mellen can drag her long skirts down that hill, just to look at a common tavern, which she's seen a hundred times, I cannot imagine."

"Perhaps they are going down to the beach," said Hawkins, who had no more malice in his composition than a swallow.

"No, no! they are turning toward the house," said the widow, considerably excited. "What can they want there?"

"Oh, very likely they have gone in to rest. You know North lives there when he comes on the island to fish or shoot."

"What! Mr. North, he live there and never tell me! I thought he was a perfect stranger on the island."

"As to that," answered Hawkins, a little startled by her earnestness, "he only comes down for a day now and then. It's nothing permanent, I assure you."

"There! there! they have gone in!" exclaimed the lady. "I wonder where Elsie is; I must tell Elsie."

"Why, what nonsense!" answered Hawkins, with some spirit; "can't Mrs. Mellen step into a house to rest herself a moment without troubling her friends so terribly?"

"Just be quiet, Hawkins, you don't know what you are talking about," answered the lady, keeping her gaze fastened on the tavern. "Turn an eye on the house while I look at the time. It must be five minutes since they went in. Dear, dear, what a world we live in!"

Mrs. Harrington kept the little enamelled watch, sparkling with diamonds, in her ungloved hand full ten minutes, only glancing from it to the door of the tavern in her vigilance. At the end of that time Mr. North and his companion came out of the house and disappeared in the undergrowth which lay between that and the precipice.

Mrs. Harrington watched some time for them to appear again, but her curiosity was baffled, and her attention soon directed to other objects. At last she was aroused by Elsie coming suddenly upon the ledge, flushed, panting for breath and glowing with anger. She turned upon Hawkins like a spiteful mockingbird.

"A pretty escort you are, Mr. Hawkins, to leave a lady all alone in the woods. I declare, Mrs. Harrington, he lost me in one of those dreadful ravines, and I scrambled up the wrong bank and have been wandering everywhere, climbing rocks and tiring myself to death. Only think of dragging this long skirt over my arm and tearing my way through the bushes. I heard the servants laugh and that guided me, or I might have been roaming the woods now."

"My poor dear," said the widow, full of compassion, "how heated and wearied you look! Hawkins, can't you find something to fan her with?"

Hawkins broke off a branch full of leaves and offered to fan her with it. But she snatched it out of his hand and flung it over the precipice.

"Where is Elizabeth? Go tell Elizabeth I wish to speak with her, if you want to make up with me."

"We have not seen Mrs. Mellen since you went away; nor Mr. North either. They have finished that ride by strolling off together," said Mrs. Harrington.

Elsie started, and the warm color faded from her face.

"What! Elizabeth; has she been roaming about? and—and——"

"With Mr. North, Elsie."

The tone in which this was conveyed said more than the words. At first Elsie looked bewildered; then, as if her gentle spirit had received the shock of a painful idea, she fell into troubled thought.

"And you saw her go away," she said, in a low voice. "In what direction?"

"We did not know how or when she went, but certainly did see her and Mr. North together."

"Where?"

"Down yonder, going into that low tavern."

Elsie gazed into her friend's face, startled and astonished.

"She would not go there. You must be mistaken, Mrs. Harrington. No person could be recognised from this distance—it's all nonsense."

"Ask her," said Mrs. Harrington, "for here she comes."

Elizabeth came up from a hollow in the woods and joined the party. She seemed completely worn out, and sat down on a fragment of rock, panting for breath. She was very pale, as if some great exertion had left the weariness of reaction upon her. She had evidently rested somewhere before joining them.

"Elizabeth, where have you been?" said Elsie, looking anxiously at her sister-in-law.

"Down in the woods."

Elizabeth pointed to the forest that sloped back from the precipice.

Before Elsie could resume her questions Mrs. Harrington broke in with a faint sneer on her lips.

"And where did you leave Mr. North?" she said, fixing a cunning, sidelong glance on Elizabeth.

"I have not seen Mr. North," answered Mrs. Mellen, with apparent indifference, though the hot color mounted to her face, brought there either by some inward consciousness or the perceptible sneer leveled at her in the form of a question.

"Not seen Mr. North," exclaimed the widow, "dear me what things optical delusions are!"

Elizabeth did not hear or heed this, for that instant Mr. North came up to them very quietly and sat down near the widow.

"Have you had a pleasant ramble?" he said, addressing Elsie. "I saw you and Hawkins in the woods and had half a mind to join you."

"But changed your mind, and went—may I ask where?" said Elsie, with a shade of pallor on her face; for it seemed as if the man had surprised her with bitter thoughts of his deception in her mind, and she could not refrain from revealing something of distrust.

"Oh, I took a ramble around the brow of the precipice," he answered, carelessly, "and went into the tavern for a glass of water."

"And the lady," said Elsie, looking steadily in his face. "What lady was it in a riding-dress who bore you company? Mrs. Harrington saw one from her perch here on the ledge."

North cast a quick glance on Elizabeth, who did not speak, but sat looking from him to her sister-in-law, as if stricken by some sudden terror.

"It was a mistake. No lady shared my rambles," said North.

"But there was a lady," cried Mrs. Harrington, a good deal excited. "I saw her with my own eyes. Mr. Hawkins remarked her too."

North smiled and shook his head.

"She had on a riding-habit and an upright plume like——"

"Well, well," said North, gently, "it is useless going on with the subject. I assure you that I went down the precipice alone and came up alone."

Mrs. Harrington looked at Elsie and smiled.

"Of course he is in honor bound to say that," she whispered.

Elsie seemed disturbed and answered quickly, "I, for one, believe that he speaks the truth. It is

folly to say that you saw any one in that dress; besides, it was just as likely to be me as Elizabeth—our habits are alike."

"Poor generous dove!" whispered the widow, "you know better; but if you are satisfied it's no business of mine, only if Mellen asks me about it I must tell the truth."

"Mary Harrington, you must have better proof than this before you dare to make mischief between my brother and his wife," said Elsie, with a force of expression that made the widow open her eyes wide. "Don't be slanderous and wicked, for I won't bear that, especially against Elizabeth."

"Dear me, what a storm I have raised. Well, well, I did not see a lady, that's enough. And there comes that wonderful colored person of yours, to say that the feast is spread and the chowder perfect. Come, come, one and all."

The whole party had assembled on the ledge by this time. At Mrs. Harrington's invitation, it moved off, and went laughing and chatting towards a large flat rock, that gleamed out from among the surrounding grass and mosses, like a crusted snow bank, so white and crisp was the linen spread over it. Here a dainty repast presented itself, for the smoking dish of chowder that stood in the centre gave its name to what was, in fact, a sumptuous feast. Directly the noise of flying corks and the gurgle of amber-hued wines, with bursts of laughter and flashes of wit, frightened the birds from their haunt in the great maple-tree overhead, and made its rich yellow leaves tremble again in the sunshine that came quivering over the forest, and rippled up the broad ocean with silvery outbursts.

Whatever had gone before, all was hilarity and cordial good-humor now. North, for one, came out resplendently; such graceful compliments, such bright flashes of wit no one had ever heard from his lips till then. It aroused the best talent of every one present. When the party broke up and its members went to the covert where their horses had been fed, it was joyously, like birds flying home to their nests.

A ride through the golden coolness of a lovely sunset brought the party back to Piney Cove, and all that had gone wrong during the day seemed forgotten.

The visitors were to start for New York early in the morning, and, as all were somewhat fatigued, the house was closed somewhat earlier than usual.

Elsie had retired earlier than the rest, having some preparations to make for her little journey. She busied herself awhile about her boudoir and bed-room, selecting a few articles of jewelry and so on to be packed, then sat down and read awhile; tired of that, she turned down the lights in the alabaster lily cups, which one of the statues held, sat down in the faint moonshine, with which she had thus flooded the room, and fell into a train of restless thought; a pale gleam darted up now and then from the lilies, and trembled through the floss-like curls under which she had thrust her hand, revealing a face more earnest and thoughtful than was usual to the gay young creature. Whether it was that she had become anxious from the dart of suspicion that had been that day cast at her brother's wife, or was disturbed by some other cause I cannot say, but her eyes shone bright and clear in the pale radiance that surrounded her; now and then she would start up and listen at Elizabeth's door, as if about to enter and question her of the things that evidently troubled her mind. At last she fell into quiet, and lying on the couch, scarcely seemed to breathe. It was almost midnight then. The house was still, and she could hear the distant waves beating against the shore. She closed her eyes and listened dreamily, reluctant to seek any other place of rest, yet changing the azure cushions of her couch impatiently from time to time.

At last, as she half rose for this purpose, a noise from the outer room, which was a square passage or hall, in which were placed some bronze statues and antique shields, arrested her attention. Resting on her elbow, she held her breath and listened.

The noise came again more distinctly. It seemed as if a door had been opened with caution. Elsie arose, stole softly across the carpet, turned the lock of her dressing-room door and entered the passage, carrying a little night-lamp in her hand, which she had kindled among the alabaster lilies. She had half crossed the hall, casting frightened looks around, when a cry of dismay broke from her lips, for close by the door which led to her sister-in-law's apartments she saw Elizabeth standing, pale as death, but with her eyes burning like fire, turned upon a man who stood leaning against one of the statues. It was Mr. North.

The two women stood face to face, regarding each other in dead silence, while North smiled upon them both. The lamp trembled in Elsie's hand, her face became white as snow. Without uttering a word she turned, entered her room and locked the door.

The next day she left Piney Point with Mrs. Harrington. Mr. North left also, but he went alone.

CHAPTER XIX.

LETTERS.

Months had passed since Grantley Mellen's departure for California; the winter had gone, the

summer faded, and though his absence had been prolonged almost two years, there was little hope of his speedy return.

The business upon which he had gone out was not yet settled, and however great his anxiety to meet his family, he would not endanger his worldly interests so vitally as he would have done by any neglect or reckless inattention in that affair.

Since the night of that unpleasant scene in the hall at Piney Cove, Elsie Mellen had been at home so irregularly that all intimate relations had died out between her and her sister-in-law. Some dark thought seemed to possess the young girl, since the night of that strange adventure; and, though the subject was never mentioned between her and Elizabeth, Elsie's demeanor towards her brother's wife was one of cold, almost hateful distrust, while Elizabeth grew more pensively sad each day, and seemed to shrink from any explanation with painful sensitiveness.

At last Elsie almost entirely absented herself from the house. The very premises seemed to have become hateful to her. Without deigning to consult Elizabeth, she had been visiting about among her former schoolmates, making Mrs. Harrington's house her headquarters. This was all the announcement of her movements that she chose to make to the woman who had been left her guardian.

How this fair, thoughtless girl lost all respect for her brother's wife so completely that she refused to remain accountable to her for anything, no one could tell, for she never mentioned the affair of that night to her nearest friend. It evidently worked in her heart, but never found utterance.

So the winter wore away drearily enough at Piney Cove; for with all her waywardness, Elsie had been like a sunbeam in the house; and Elizabeth pined in her absence till the dark circles widened under her eyes, and her voice always had a sound of pain in it. But with the most sorrowful, time moves on, and even grief cannot retain one phase of mournfulness for ever.

The second spring began to scatter a little brightness about the old house, and in this fresh outbloom of nature Elizabeth found some sources of enjoyment. Since her virtual separation from Elsie she had received no company, but lived in utter seclusion. Letters from her husband came regularly, but her replies were studied, and written with restraint. She never folded one of these missives without tears in her eyes, and when his letters spoke of coming home, she would ponder over the writing with a look of strange dread in her face.

One lovely spring morning Elizabeth Mellen was alone in that quiet old mansion. Elsie had not been home for months, and only brief notes announcing some change of place, or anticipated movements, had warned Elizabeth of her mode of existence. These notes were cold as ice, and the young wife always shivered with dread when she opened them.

It might have been a package of these letters that she had been reviewing. She was alone in the library; quite alone, of course, but the repose and silence about her brought no rest to her soul. Her whole appearance was in strange contrast to the quiet of the scene; her face so changed by the thoughts which kept her company, and forced themselves upon her solitude, that it hardly seemed the same.

She walked up and down the room in nervous haste, her head bent, her eyes looking straight before her, full of wild bewilderment which follows an effort at reflection when the mind is in a fever of unrest. Sometimes she stopped before the table, on which lay a package of open letters; she would glance at them with a shudder of horror, wringing her hands passionately together at the time, and uttering low moans which sounded scarcely human in their smothered intensity.

Then she would glance towards the mantel, upon which lay a letter with the seal still unbroken, though it had reached her early that morning. It was from her husband, and she had not yet dared to read its contents!

She had been thus for hours, walking to and fro, sometimes sweeping the package on the table away, as if unable longer to endure it before her eyes, only an instant after to recover it as if there were danger in allowing it out of her sight. Then she would take up her husband's letter and attempt to open it, but each time her courage failed, and she would lay it down, while that sickening trouble at her heart sent a new pallor across her face, and left her trembling and weak, like a person just risen from a sick bed.

It was growing late in the afternoon; the sunlight played in at the windows, and cast a pleasant glow through the room; but the glad beams only made her shiver, as if they had been human witnesses that might betray her fear and misery.

At last she took up the package, resolved to put it resolutely away where she could no longer look at it; as she raised it a miniature fell from among the papers, and struck the floor with a ringing sound. She snatched it up quickly, crushed the whole into a drawer, locked it and put the key in her bosom.

Then, with a sudden struggle she started forward to the mantel, caught up her husband's letter, and began to read. A sharp cry broke from her lips; she dropped slowly to her knees, and went on reading in that attitude, as if it were the only one in which she could venture to glance at those kindly words:

"Not coming quite yet," she gasped at length; "thank God, not yet—not yet."

She allowed the letter to drop from her hand, and for a few moments gave herself completely up to the horrible agitation which consumed her.

It would have been a piteous sight to the coldest or most injured heart to have seen that beautiful woman crouched on the floor, in the extremity of her anguish, writhing to and fro, and moaning in mortal agony, which could find no relief in tears.

She remained thus for a long time; at last some sudden thought appeared to strike her, which brought with it an absolute necessity for self-control and immediate action.

She rose to her feet, muttering:

"He will be here again soon; he must not find me like this!"

She walked to the mirror, arranged her disordered dress and hair, and stood gazing at her own features in a sort of wondering pity; they were so death-like and contracted, with suffering that she felt almost as if looking into the face of a stranger.

At length she caught up a cloak which lay on the sofa, wrapped herself in it and went out of the house.

She took her way through the woods, walking rapidly, quite regardless that the moisture from the damp earth was penetrating her thin shoes, not feeling the keenness of the wind, which was growing chill with the approach of evening.

The expression of her face changed; she was deadly pale still, but a look of resolution had settled over her features, and a naturally strong will had begun to assert itself.

Beyond the shrubbery that thick grove of evergreens extended to the very shore, and into their shadow Elizabeth walked with a determined step.

Evidently waiting for some one she paced up and down among the trees, the dry leaves rustling under her tread and making her start, as if she feared being surprised in that solitary spot by some curious wanderer.

It was growing almost twilight, but still she kept up that dreary promenade, struggling bravely with herself, and trying to restrain the agonizing thoughts which threatened to overwhelm her forced composure.

"He will not come," she muttered; "I must wait—wait—he will not come to-day."

She shuddered at the very sound of her own voice, but it seemed to have disturbed some one else; for a step sounded on the grass, and a man came out from the deeper recesses of the grove, and paused for a moment, glancing on either side as if uncertain which path to pursue.

It was Mr. North.

CHAPTER XX.

AN INTERVIEW IN THE WOODS.

Elizabeth saw the man and yet neither moved or spoke, but remained standing there in dumb silence, gazing at him with an expression in which so many diverse emotions struggled, that it would have been difficult to decide which feeling was paramount.

The flutter of her cloak caught his attention, and he came hurriedly forward with a smile on his lips, holding out his hand in an easy, reckless fashion.

"Ten thousand pardons," he exclaimed, "I fear that I have kept you waiting—I shall never forgive myself."

She put up her hand as if to check him, feeling, perhaps, some mockery in these words which was not apparent in his voice.

"We need not make excuses to each other," she said, in a cold, hard tone, "neither you nor I came here for that."

"Scarcely, I believe," and he laughed in a reckless way, which appeared natural to him.

Elizabeth Mellen shuddered in every limb at that repulsive sound; an absolute spasm of pain contracted her features, she gave no other sign of emotion, but clenched her hands hard together, forcing herself to be calm.

"I only received your letter this morning," he continued, watching her every movement carefully, while standing there with his back against a tree with apparent unconcern; "I should have been earlier, had it been possible."

She made an impatient gesture.

"No more of that," she exclaimed, "enough!"

He looked at her with the same careless smile that lighted up his somewhat worn face into an expression of absolute youthfulness. He was still a splendidly handsome man; a type of rare beauty which could not have failed to attract general observation wherever he appeared.

He was tall; the shoulders and limbs might have served as a model for a sculptor; the neck was white almost as a woman's; the magnificent head set with perfect grace upon it, and was carried with a haughty air that was absolutely noble. He might have been thirty-eight, perhaps even older than that, but he was one of those men concerning whose age even a physiognomist would be puzzled to decide.

The face was almost faultless in its contour; the mouth, shaded by a long silken moustache, which relieved his paleness admirably, and lent new splendor to his eyes, which possessed a strange magnetic power that had worked ill in more than one unfortunate destiny.

It was a face trained to concealment, and yet so carefully tutored that at the first glance one only thought what an open, pleasant expression it had. Even after long intercourse and a thorough knowledge of the man's character, that face would have puzzled the most skillful observer.

Elizabeth Mellen was looking at him in a strange silence; whatever might have been in the past there was no spell now in those glorious eyes which could dazzle her soul into forgetfulness; shade after shade of repressed emotion passed over her features as she gazed, leaving them at last white and fixed as marble.

"You are pale," he said, "so changed."

She started as if he had struck her.

"I did not come here to talk of my appearance," she said.

"True," he replied, "very true; but I cannot help wondering. I think of that day when I saved your life—"

"If you had only let me die then!" she broke in passionately. "If God had only mercifully deprived you of all strength!"

"You were blooming and gay," he went on as if he had not heard her words. "Yes, you are changed since then."

"I will not hear these things," she cried; "I will not be made to look back upon what we all were then."

She closed her eyes in blind anguish; his words brought back with such terrible force the time of that meeting—the day but one before her marriage, when he had started up so fatally in her path, and never left it till this terrible moment.

"Then to change the subject," he said. "In our brief conversation the other day we arrived at no conclusion whatever, nor was your letter any more satisfactory; will you tell me exactly what you have decided upon?"

A sudden flash of anger leaped into her eyes above all the suffering that dilated them.

"Now you are talking naturally," she said, "now you are your real self!"

He bowed in graceful, almost insulting mockery.

"It is your turn to pay compliments," he answered; "but I shall not receive them so ungraciously as you did mine."

She passed her hand across her throat as if something were choking her, then she said in a hard, measured tone:

"Have you considered the proposition I made you—will you go away from this country, and remain away for ever?"

He stood playing with his watchchain in an easy, careless way, as he replied:

"It is cruel to banish me—very cruel!"

"Listen!" she exclaimed passionately; "I know more than you think—your residence here is not safe!"

He only bowed again.

"It may be so, but I leave few traces in my path. If you do indeed know anything which could affect me, I am very certain that in you I have a friend who will be silent."

He opened his vest slightly and drew forth from an inner pocket a small paper, at the sight of which Elizabeth grew whiter than before. She made a gesture as if she would have snatched it from him, but he thrust it back in its hiding-place with a sarcastic smile.

"Secret for secret," said he; "but never mind that. After all, you treat me very badly. I wonder I am in the least inclined to be friends with you."

"Don't mock me!" she exclaimed. "Friends! There is no creature living that I loathe as I do you! No matter what the danger may be, I will speak the truth; tell you how utterly abhorrent you are

to me, and brave the result."

"Yet once——"

She interrupted him with an insane gesture; perhaps he knew her too well for any attempt at trifling further with her just then, for his manner changed, and he said:

"You will take cold here; it is growing dark and the wind is very chill."

"It doesn't matter," she replied, recklessly. "Let us finish what there is to say, then I will go."

The wretched woman could stand upon her feet no longer, she was shaking so with agitation and exhaustion that she was forced to sit down on a fallen log. He seated himself by her side, regardless of her recoiling gesture, and began to talk earnestly.

For a full hour that strange interview went on, their voices rising at times in sudden passion, then sinking to a low tone, as if the speakers remembered that they spoke words which must not be overheard.

At last Elizabeth arose from her seat, folded her cloak about her, and said, quickly:

"Be here to-morrow at the same hour."

Without giving him time to answer, or making the least sign of farewell, she darted rapidly through the darkening woods and disappeared in the direction of the house.

North rose, began whistling a careless air, and walked slowly back along the path by which he had entered the grove.

When Elizabeth came in sight of the house she saw a light in the library window.

"Elsie is back at last. God help us all!" she muttered.

She moved near the low casement, looked in and saw the girl standing on the hearth, and hurried towards the entrance.

Elsie had returned home a full hour before, and had searched for Elizabeth vainly about the house. She entered the library, and was walking restlessly about the spacious room, slowly and sadly, as if oppressed by this cold welcome home.

Suddenly her eye caught sight of a paper lying under the table; it was one of the letters which had fallen unnoticed by Elizabeth when she put away the package.

Elsie caught it up, glanced her eyes over it, uttered a faint cry, then read it in a sort of horrified stupor.

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth!" broke from her lips.

The discovery which she had made froze the very blood in her veins, and left her incapable of thought or action. She sat shivering, as if struck with a mortal chill, and at last crept close to the fire, clutching the letter in her hands, but holding them out for warmth. Sometimes her sister's name broke from her lips in a horrified whisper, and low words died in her throat, the very sound of which made her shudder.

At length the darkness and the solitude seemed to become insupportable to her; she started forward and opened the door, with the intention of fleeing from the room. It had suddenly become odious to her. She took one step into the hall and met Elizabeth face to face. The woman saw the letter which Elsie held in her hand, caught the recoiling gesture which she instinctively made, then for an instant they both stood still, staring at each other.

Suddenly Elizabeth caught Elsie's hand, drew her back into the library, and, once there, closed and locked the door.

For more than an hour the pair were alone in that darkened apartment. When at last they emerged from it they were both deadly white, and exhausted as if by passionate weeping. Not a word was spoken between them, but they turned away from each other like ghosts that had no resting-place on earth.

CHAPTER XXI.

FIRE AND WATER.

When North left Mrs. Mellen in the woods he took a moment for consideration, and then walked quickly towards the shore tavern. As he turned a point which led from Piney Point to the bluff which overhung it, his servant, the young mulatto, who had spent most of the season at this retreat, came to meet him with a letter in his hand.

"It had a foreign postmark," said the man; "so I started to meet you the moment it came in, according to orders."

"Right, boy, you are very right," cried North, tearing at the envelope as a hawk rends its prey; "never let a scrap of writing from abroad rest a moment out of my hands."

The man read the letter—only a few lines—and his hands shook till the paper rattled again.

"Boy—boy, what day of the month is this?" he questioned, trying to fold the letter, which he crushed instead.

"The tenth, sir."

North went into a mental calculation, then the cloud on his face broke away and he almost shouted:

"It is in time—it is in time! Any other letters?"

"One for the Cove. Shall I slip it into the old man's parcel or would you rather——"

"Give it to me," said North, cutting the servant short, and snatching at the letter, which was in Mr. Mellen's handwriting and bore the California postmark.

He was too eager for caution, and broke the seal recklessly.

"He, too—he coming, too! By Jove, this is glorious sport! Made his will before sailing, ha!—provident man!—one half to his dear wife, the other to his darling sister, Elsie Mellen. A safe precaution, for ships will get lost at sea."

North crushed the two letters into his pocket, and walked with rapid steps towards the tavern. But he only remained long enough to get a telescope, with which he reappeared, and turned into a path leading to the bluff. Once upon the ledge, high above the house, he levelled his glass and took a hasty sweep of the ocean with it. Nothing was in sight that seemed to interest him, so he turned the glass a little landward and levelled it on the Piney Cove mansion, which made an imposing feature in the landscape. From the eminence on which the mansion stood the grounds sloped down to the water's edge in a closely-shaven lawn, pleasantly broken up by flower-beds, and knots of old trees that looked aged and mysterious enough to have watched that distant sweep of sea for whole centuries.

North seemed to be counting every clump of trees, and calculating the value of each broad field that stretched back from the crescent-like Cove.

"It is a glorious old place, and we might live there like monarchs. If I could only command the winds and waves for one week, now, we might defy the rest. Half his property! Why, it is splendid; and the will safe."

With these words he turned his glass again. On a clear morning there was a glorious view from the bluff, showing the full extent of the curving bay, with its long line of steep woodlands stretching along the coast and the bright rush of waters beyond, till the eye was lost in the white line of the distant ocean.

Other mansions peeped out from among the trees, or stood boldly down on the shore, and on the right hand a small village nestled in at the furthest extremity of the bay, forming a pleasant life picture. The man cared nothing for these things, but turned his glass directly oceanward, and searched the horizon with keen interest.

A ship hove in sight, like a great white bird, beating up from its nest in mid-ocean. The heart in that bad man's bosom made a great bound, and the blasphemy of a thanksgiving sprang to his lips; but the joy was only for a moment. Dropping his glass, he muttered:

"Madman! to suppose, of all the ships on the ocean, it must be this one. But if it should—if it should!"

He sat down on a fragment of rock, rested his glass on the drooping branch of a tree, and watched the ship as it swept through a bank of luminous fog and took a more definite form. Hitherto it had seemed floating between a curve of the sky and the blue line of water, but now it came out clearly, and as North looked he saw a dark pile of storm-clouds muster up behind it with slow, threatening danger.

Hour after hour the man sat and watched that one object. The glass was a powerful one, and seconded his keen vigilance. At length he was rewarded, a burst of sunshine fell upon the vessel, the last that illuminated the horizon that day, and he saw her name on the stern. The telescope dropped from his hand, his face turned pale; the cry that leaped to his lips perished there. The man was frightened by the completion of his own wishes. Had some evil spirit performed a miracle for him?

All the time this man had been watching, a tempest blackly followed the homeward-bound ship. The ocean began to dash and torment itself into a fury of wrath. A high wind came roaring up from the bosom of the waters, and over all gathered a world of lurid gloom, kindled fiercely red by the sun when it went down, and slowly engulfed the ship, which was last seen struggling fearfully in the wild upheaving of the elements.

North seemed possessed of a demon that night. He left his telescope on the earth, and went desperately to work, gathering up dry wood and brush, which he stacked on the overhanging ledge, never pausing till a great mound was created sufficiently large to keep a fire blazing all

night. By the time this was done the darkness became profound. Now and then he could see drifts of foam tossed upwards, like the fluttering garments of a ghost fleeing from the storm. The little tavern at the foot of the rock was lost in the overwhelming darkness. The lights from the village seemed put out, and there was no vestige of Piney Cove visible. No rain, as yet had fallen; and at this North rejoiced, for his stock of wood was like tinder in its dryness, and the wind came fiercely from the ocean, so fiercely that it threatened the death of any vessel approaching the shore.

With all these elements of terror surrounding him, North worked till the perspiration dropped from his forehead like rain. That cliff had been blackened before with wreckers' fires, but never had a man heaped wood upon wood with so vivid a conviction of the crime he meditated, with such earnest desire for death to follow his toil.

When the evening had reached its darkest gloom, this man struck a match, which he took from his pocket in a little case of enamelled gold—for even in his crimes he was dainty—and thrust it among the yellow pine splinters with which he had laid the foundation of his deathfire. The blue light of the match flashed close to his face, revealing it white as death, but smiling.

Directly a column of flame shot upward, first in fine quivering flashes, then in long, curling wreaths of fire, that the wind seized upon and tore into hot, red tatters, laughing and wrangling among them with fearful grotesqueness.

North retreated from the blaze, and ran back into the woods, hiding himself, for he feared to be seen from the tavern below. Now and then he would start forth, toss a handful of fuel on the flames, and plunge back into the darkness, where he listened greedily for some token to come out of the storm and prove that his evil work was well done.

It came at last—a gun boomed out from the tempest. The man started and began to tremble. Still he listened. Another gun, with loud cries cutting sharply through the storm, then dead silence, followed by a tumult upon the shore, as if men were gathering in haste.

North was not surprised at this. When a vessel struck in these days on the Long Island shore, wreckers appeared in dozens, not eager for death, for they would rather have avoided that, but keen for plunder. Now the cries of these men made the storm terrible. Blue lights from the stricken ship revealed her struggling fiercely among the breakers, which were rending her like wild beasts.

Then North trampled out his death fire and went down to the beach among the crowd of wreckers that stood waiting, with horrid patience, for the ship to go to pieces and give its treasures into their greedy keeping.

"No boat could live among the breakers three minutes, I tell you," said old Benson with gruff decision, when North, horrified by the terrible shrieks that rang up from the sinking ship, was seized with an awful fit of remorse, and cried out fiercely for help which no man could give. He would have undone his work then had it been possible, for the last faint light that went up from the wreck revealed a woman, with outstretched arms and hair streaming back on the storm, pleading so wildly for help that a fiend would have pitied her. It was this woman's life he had sought, but with the sight of her his heart failed utterly.

But an evil deed once written in the eternal book of God cannot be recalled. While this man stood in dumb helplessness on the beach, the ship sunk. Out of the whirlpool which it made, the wretched woman was tossed back among the breakers, that seized upon her, fiercely hurled her to and fro against the rocks, then gave her over to a great inheaving wave, which left her shrouded in a drift of seaweed almost at her murderer's feet.

Daylight had broken on the wreck before it went down. Lead and cold it fell over the corpse of that poor woman as it was borne up to the tavern, with the seaweed trailing from it and the wet garments clinging to the limbs like cerements. Two rude seamen carried her away, for North fled from the first sight of his work and plunged madly into the water, where many a poor wretch was buffeting with the waves. He called on the wreckers to help him, and dragged two or three exhausted creatures to the beach, for he was ready to brave death in any shape rather than look upon that cold form again.

They carried the lifeless woman up to the tavern, and, careless of ceremony, laid her on the bed in North's room. Here they left her, with the salt sea-water dripping in a heavy rain from her garments, soaking the bed and forming dreary rivulets along the uncarpeted floor.

Deep in the morning North came up from the beach pale and staggering from exhaustion. He went into his chamber and was about to cast himself on the bed, when, lo! that face on the pillow met his gaze, ghastly and cold. The heavy dropping of the water struck upon his ear like the fall of leaden bullets. He stood paralyzed yet fascinated. A shudder colder than spray from his garments shook his form from head to foot; and, turning, he fled down the stairs again out upon the beach, and helped the wreckers to haul in their plunder, till he fell utterly exhausted on the sands.

CHAPTER XXII.

AMONG THE BREAKERS.

The storm had abated, but still the sea rose tempestuously, and broken clouds filled the sky as with great whirlpools and drifts of smoke. A good deal of rain had fallen, and this calmed the waters somewhat; but the disturbed elements of the tempest made the most experienced seaman look anxious when his face was turned oceanwards. An assistant pilot, whose duty lay in that range of the shore, had been injured in helping to save the crew of that ill-fated vessel. His comrades had carried him up to the tavern, and laid him on a settee in the bar-room, where he grew worse and worse, till it became dangerous to remove him to more comfortable quarters.

In this state North found the man on the second day after the wreck, when he came up from the village, where he had sought accommodations till the coroner's inquest should be over, and his room cleared of its mournful incumbrance.

Independent of his personal hurt, the boatman was suffering from intense anxiety regarding the duties of his occupation. It had been his employer's pride to be always first in the incoming course of the California steamers, and now his little craft lay with its sails furled in a cove below the house, waiting for a signal to put to sea. The man had been very anxious to intercept the steamers of that month, because it was thought that Mr. Mellen might possibly be on board, and he was sure of a good round sum, in that case, for bringing this gentleman on shore, while his superior, the pilot, took the steamer into port.

North heard all these muttered regrets as he sat gloomily in the bar-room, and they seemed to affect him more than so unimportant a subject should have done. It was now drawing towards night, and the man became terribly restless, for the pilot was expected every moment, and from vague conjecture the poor fellow worked his mind up into a certainty that Mellen would come, and the reward for bringing him on shore be lost.

"If there was only a man about that could take care of the craft," he said, "I'd divide with him a fair half to take my place, but there isn't, and ten chances to one the boss loses his chance with the steamer, all because of this confounded foot of mine. I wish we'd let the passengers drown; well, not quite so bad as that, but it's plaguery hard on a fellow to give up his luck in this way."

The bar-room happened to be empty just then, with the exception of North and the injured man. North aroused himself and looked around. Seeing no listeners near, he went up to the grumbler, and began to condole with him.

"Is there no one who can take your place?" he questioned.

"Not a man. These fellows do well enough in fishing boats that can hug the shore, but sometimes the boss runs his craft clear out to sea. Besides, this weather is enough to frighten a fresh hand," was the impatient answer.

"What if I should make an offer to go."

"You!"

The man laughed in spite of his pain and annoyance.

"You. I like that."

"But I can handle a boat in pretty rough waters, let me tell you, my man."

"But you look too much of a gentleman. The boss would never trust you."

"Oh, a suit of your clothes, which I see they have had sense enough to dry, and a few things I have on hand will make that all right."

"But, how much? how much?" inquired the man, anxiously.

"Why, nothing; I shall go for the fun of it, or not at all."

"That's the idea," answered the seaman, rubbing his hands—which still trembled with weakness—in sudden delight, "a real gentleman and no mistake, but bear a hand at once. It won't do for the commodore to find you in this rig."

"Aye, aye," answered North, sailor fashion, and in a voice that seemed hoarse from years of sea service.

The man started up on the settee, aroused to dangerous enthusiasm by astonishment.

"That's the time o' day," he cried in high glee.

North snatched up the seaman's clothes, and retired with them into a little room back of the bar. He had got over the first shock of nervousness regarding the dead body lying upstairs, but still shrunk from looking on it again with shuddering terror. The remembrance of his crime did not prevent the contemplation of another equally atrocious, but he did not care to look on that sight again. After a little he came out from the room, so completely changed that the sick man stared wildly at him, and called out,

"Where away, messmate; are you one of the fellows we saved from the wreck?"

North laughed, settled himself in his loose clothes sailor fashion, and walked with wide steps

across the floor, as if it had been a quarter-deck. A dawning conviction of the truth seized upon the man. He fell back upon the settee, uttering broken ejaculations of delight intermingled with groans.

"That'll do. It's all right. He'll take you for one of the chaps we saved from the wreck, and ask no questions," he panted out.

"It's going to be a roughish night," said North. "I hope your Mr. Mellen can swim, if we happen to get into any trouble."

"No, no, don't depend on that, but he knows the coast, and is as brave as a lion; still I shouldn't like him to be brought into danger, remember that."

"It's not at all likely that he'll be on board," answered North, carelessly.

"Hush up," cried the seaman, "don't you hear the commodore coming? They've just told him about this confounded foot. Hear him swear."

The pilot came in while his assistant was speaking.

"What the thunder is all this about? just when I wanted you most, too, and a rough night. They'll get ahead of us, and all through this confounded wrecking business. Couldn't you keep out of it for once, you rascal?"

"Keep a stiff upper lip, commodore. It's all right," cried the man, pointing to North; "here's a chap I have done a service to, who is willing to take my night's work on himself, just out of gratitude. He's a safe hand."

"Let him bear away, then," cried the pilot, casting a glance at North, which seemed to prove satisfactory; "come on, my man, we have no time to lose."

North followed the pilot in silence, only stopping by the sick man long enough to whisper, "Don't mention this to a living soul!"

The man promised, and kept his word.

The pilot boat was soon unmoored and flying out to sea like a stormy petrel. North performed his duty well, and received a word or two of commendation from the superior, which proved the efficacy of his disguise, for he had seen this person more than once at the shore tavern.

At last they came in sight of a large steamer laboring heavily with a roughish sea and uncertain wind. She hailed them, and the little boat bore down upon her. The steamer lay to, and the pilot mounted her side, after giving some directions to his man. A crowd of persons met him as he leaped over the bulwarks, and among them North searched with burning eagerness for that one face. It appeared at last, looking down upon the boat from over the bulwarks. The bad man's heart rose to his mouth; he watched every movement on deck with keen interest.

The pilot came to Mellen's side, and made a signal for the boat to wait. Then some luggage was lowered and Grantley Mellen came down the side of the steamer, and took his seat in the little craft, which flew away with him towards the clouded shore. The wind increased as they sped along, and though not so terrible as it had been when that other vessel was wrecked, it gradually rose to a degree of violence that threatened the little pilot boat with destruction. But the gale blew shoreward, and urged the boat on till it fairly leaped over the hissing waves.

A dismal twilight came on, and the storm was rapidly increasing to its full power as they drew near the shore. The wind roared among the hills, and lashed the waters into foam, the rain beat heavily and chill as sleet, but Mr. Mellen sat cold and firm on his luggage, neither heeding the disguised boatman's ejaculations or offering to aid him in his difficult task.

It was a position to test the courage of the strongest man, and many a time it seemed that the wind and waves must conquer and swamp the light craft completely; but no matter how rude or sudden the shock, Mr. Mellen neither betrayed any anxiety, nor gave any more sympathy to the toiling boatman, than if he had been a wooden machine.

The disguised seaman now and then cast a furtive look at his passenger, who seemed almost unconscious of the increasing gale. A heavy gust sometimes seized his cloak and sent it sweeping out like the wings of a great bird, but he only pulled it impatiently about him and sat quiet again, looking out through the stern night.

This perilous voyage was a long one, and its difficulties grew fearfully as they neared the end. The wind seemed to come from every point at once, and tossed the boat about till it fairly leaped in the water, as if trying to escape from its combined enemies.

Suddenly the rain almost ceased, the clouds parted, and the moon cast a frightened glare over the scene. In the distance Mr. Mellen could see his own dwelling, with the broad sweep of woods and waters in front; then a sharp exclamation from his companion aroused him to the new dangers that threatened him.

The boat had been swept in near the shore, where a ring of sunken rocks girdled the beach, breaking the waves into whirlpools, and sending the white foam out into the storm. In this spot that good ship had gone down, yet the boatman made no effort to veer his little craft from the awful danger, but with a furious light in his eyes and a horrid smile on his lips, bore down upon

the breakers. True, it required almost superhuman strength to turn the course of that light craft, for the blast was dashing it forward like a battalion of fiends.

They were close upon the breakers, when Mellen sprang up, pushed the boatman back with a violence that sent him headlong into the bottom of the boat, and seized the helm himself. Mr. Mellen struggled with all the power desperation gives a man, but his efforts were futile as those of a child. The boat spun round and round till they were fairly dizzy; another fierce blast and they were blown directly into the breakers.

Mellen's agonized cry was answered by a hoarse murmur from his companion, which sounded like a malediction. Before either could think or act, a more violent blast raging up from the sea, struck the skiff and whirled it in among the rocks.

Now Mellen's eyes kindled, and all the reserved force of his character came out. He knew every inch of the coast for miles each way. Through these boiling white breakers was a channel wide enough to carry them over, and towards that he forced the little craft, which seemed absolutely to leap through the breakers into the leaden current, where she rested one moment, trembling from stem to stern like a great crippled bird hunted to death by the elements.

North saw that they were in possible safety. He had not anticipated a storm so terrible as that, but had intended to swamp his boat in the breakers and swim ashore, leaving Mellen, who could not swim, as he supposed, to his fate. But now everything else was forgotten in a cowardly thirst for life. No man could exist for a moment in that awful riot of waters. He watched Mellen as he kept the boat steadily in the current, with the keen anxiety of a man to whom death is the terror of terrors.

The little craft swept on, reeling and recoiling along the narrow path into comparatively smooth waters. Mellen, still with one hand bearing down the helm, seized the cable and flung it towards the disguised boatman, who lifted his wild face for the orders he had not the power to ask.

"Be ready," cried Mellen, with the quick resolution which marked his character, "jump out as she nears that rock—we are safe then."

They both stood upright in the boat, swaying to and fro, but managing to retain a firm position.

Again the hope of safety seemed a delusive one; the skiff swooped away from the rock, spun more giddily about, and threw both men upon their knees. Another instant that seemed endless,—an instant which decided the fate of both, as far as this world was concerned,—these men trembled on the brink of eternity. If the skiff obeyed the counter blast that was upon them and swept towards the breakers, they were lost; still there was a hope, if it veered upon the rock which loomed out from the shore.

The moon gave light enough to enable them to watch the scene and see their danger. Again the conflicting blasts struck them; the boat reeled, righted itself and was dashing by the rock, upon which the two men sprang by a simultaneous movement. A few more vigorous leaps and they reached the shore, standing there for a moment in breathless awe. Then they commenced hauling in the crippled boat, which the blast had seized upon and was tearing out to sea.

"Safe!" cried Mellen, in a tone of hearty thanksgiving. "I did think that the brave little craft would go down, but thank God, we are on dry land."

"Safe and defeated!" muttered North, turning his face from the wind. "The storm that helped me two days ago proves treacherous now."

"Come!" shouted Mellen, lashing the cable to a stunted pine that grew in a cleft of the rock, "come up to the house, we shall find a fire there and a glass of brandy. The old man will send some of his people for the luggage."

North made no answer, but moved off towards the house, which he passed, walking moodily towards the village. Mellen went up to the tavern.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DEAD AND GONE.

Lights shone cheerfully through the uncurtained windows of the Sailor's Safe Anchor, and the stranger could see the inmates of the dwelling gathered about the tea-table, looking comfortable enough to make a strong contrast to the chill and darkness without.

"There is not the least change," he muttered, drawing his cloak more closely about him; "I could almost think I had been gone only since morning, instead of two years."

He hurried on to the house, and hardly waiting for his imperative knock to be answered, pushed open the door and entered the kitchen. The old fisherman looked tranquilly up at the intruder, keeping his knife poised in one hand, not easily ruffled in his serenity, while the younger members of the family stared with all their might at the tall man, whose garments were dripping wet, driven by the storm into their dwelling.

"Good evenin', sir," said the old man; "it's a dark, wet night—wont you sit down?"

"I want a horse and a man," said Mellen, betraying by the haste in which he spoke, and his impatient movements, that he was too hurried for much attention to the old man's attempt at civility. "I want to go to the other end of the bay—can you let me have a horse and some one to look after my luggage?"

"What, to-night?" demanded the old man. "Why you can't want to go round the bay to-night."

"I should not have come for a horse if I had not wished to get home," said Mellen, impatiently. "Get one out at once, Benson; I am in great haste."

"'Taint a decent night to put a dog out o' doors," returned the fisherman; "it's a good deal mor'n likely you'd get swamped in the marsh, if I let the hoss go."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mellen. "I know this part of the country too well for that. There is no more risk than in this room."

The old man's obstinacy was roused, and he had a full share of that unpleasant quality when he chose to call it into action.

"Mebby you know more about it than I do," he grumbled; "but I've lived here a goin' on thirty years, and ort to be acquainted with this coast, and I say I ain't a going to risk my critters sich a night. If there ain't no danger 'taint fit to send any horse out in a storm like this anyhow."

"I can't stand arguing here," Mellen began, but the old man unceremoniously interrupted him.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked.

"Over to Piney Cove."

"Mr. Mellen's place! Why it's good three miles, and he ain't to hum, nor hasn't been, nigh on to two years."

"Don't you know me, old friend?" exclaimed Mellen throwing back his cloak.

The old fisherman rose in astonishment, while his married daughter, who kept his house and owned the flock of children, called out:

"Why, pa, if it ain't Mr. Mellen!"

"I thought I knowed your voice, but couldn't make out who it belonged to; but Californy ain't so nigh as some other places," said the fisherman. "So you've got back! Wal, wal! You've been gone a good while."

"So you can't wonder at my impatience when I find myself so near home," said Mellen.

"In course, in course," replied the old man. "But, dear me, you'll have to wait till Jake comes in, and I expect he'll grumble awful at having to start out agin."

"I will pay him his own price——"

"Oh, you allays was freehanded enough, I'll say that, Mr. Mellen. But sit down by the stove; Jake'll come in a few minutes. Mebby you'd try a cup of tea?"

But Mr. Mellen refused the proffered hospitality, and though he walked up to the fire, neither sat down or paid much attention to the questions the old man hazarded.

As Mellen stood there, though his restless movements betrayed great impatience, there was little trace of it visible in his face, whose cold pride seldom revealed the emotions which might be stirring at his heart. He was dressed in his sea clothes, which hung about him in wet masses. His face was bronzed by the exposure of a long sea voyage, but he was still a man of imposing presence, and retained his old, proud manner so thoroughly, that even the old man in his fever of curiosity, felt the same hesitation at questioning him too far which had always awed the villagers when Mr. Mellen formerly dwelt among them.

"I s'pose you've seen a sight sence you went away," said the old man, as he pushed his chair towards the fire. "All them gold mines; though I don't s'pose you went to work at them. People will talk you know, and they wondered at your going off in such a hurry——"

"Do you think that man will be here soon?" interrupted Mr. Mellen.

The fisherman felt ruffled and injured at having his gossiping propensities cut short in that manner, but that instant a step sounded on the stone porch without, and he said, grumblingly:

"There he is. I 'spect there'll be a touse about getting him to go."

But Mr. Mellon took the matter in his own hands when the man entered, and the liberal offer he made speedily put Jake in excellent spirits for the expedition.

"My baggage must be disposed of first," said Mr. Mellen. "Some one must get it from the pilot-boat."

"Jake and I'll fetch it in here," returned the old man.

"I will send for it in the morning," observed Mr. Mellen.

While they went down to the shore and were bringing in the trunks Mr. Mellen stood by the fire, quite regardless of the curiosity with which the children regarded him, and unconscious of several modest attempts at conversation made by the old man's daughter:

"Your clothes are wringing wet; hadn't you better get some things of father's and start dry?"

"No," answered Mellen, glancing at the water-proof carpet-bag which he had seized on leaving the boat, remembering that it contained important papers. "I have some things in here, and they will find my macintosh in the boat."

He left the room while speaking, and, knowing the house well, went upstairs, in order to change his wet garments. The young woman uttered a little cry of dismay and ran a step or two after him, but turned back, seized with terror of the dead body, about which she would gladly have given warning.

Mellen had taken a candle from the table when he left the kitchen, and entered the little room upstairs with it flaring in his hand. It did not illuminate the whole chamber, but a cold feeling of awe crept over the man as he stepped over the threshold, and a shudder, which sprang from neither cold nor wet, passed to his heart.

With a trembling hand he set the light on a little pine table and looked around. A bed stood in the further corner of the room, a great and coldly white bed, on which a human form was lying in such awful stillness as death alone knows.

Breathless and obeying a terrible fascination, he went up to the bed and drew down the coarse linen sheet. A beautiful face, chiselled from the marble of death, lay before him, with a cold smile on the lips, and the blue of the eyes, that had been like violets, tinging the white lids that covered them. Masses of rich chestnut hair were gathered back from the face; and over the bosom, struck cold in the bloom of life, two white hands were folded in an attitude of solemn prayerfulness.

As Mellen gazed on this cold vision his lips grew white with terrible emotions, for he knew that face, notwithstanding all the changes that years and an awful death had left upon it. Moment after moment crept by and he did not move. At last, reaching forth his hand, he touched the woman's hair, then a convulsion of grief swept over him, his eyes filled, his lips quivered and he fell upon his knees crying out:

"Oh, woman, woman, has he driven you to this?"

The stillness, which was his only answer, crept to his heart. He arose, covered the face of his false love, and quitted the room, leaving the candle behind. He could not bear to think of her lying alone in that grim darkness.

"Oh, sir, I am so sorry. It was dreadful to let you go upstairs to dress and find *that*," cried the woman, in a tumult of self-reproach.

"When did it happen?" he questioned, in a hoarse voice. "When and how?"

"Day before yesterday. It was washed ashore from the wreck."

Mellen turned away and asked no more questions. Enough for him that the woman he had once loved to idolatry, had passed out of his life forever and ever.

CHAPTER XXIV.

HOME IN A STORM.

The storm was still raging upon the ocean and sweeping its cold way across the island; but Mellen was not a man to rest within sight of his own dwelling, after a long absence, without an effort to reach it in defiance of wind or weather. So, heedless of all protestations, he mounted his horse and rode forward, with the wind howling around him and the rain beating in his face. His temporary attendant grumbled a little at the violence of the storm, while the darkness was so intense that both the horses went stumbling on their way like blind creatures on an unknown path. But Mellen scarcely heeded the danger or discomfort. His eyes were fixed on the lights of his own home, which twinkled now and then through the fog and rain, like stars striving to break through a cloud.

Their road ran along the coast, and they had the rushing winds and roar of the ocean all the way. Before they reached the Piney Cove grounds the blackness of the tempest began to break away overhead; the wind had lulled a little, but the rain still beat, and at intervals the moon would burst through the clouds and add to the ghostly effect of boiling foam in the distance.

They passed through the strip of woodland which extended down to the water's edge, and at last reached the grounds connected with the dwelling upon that side, and came out upon the broad lawn.

"Home at last!" cried Mellen, as a warm glow of lights shone out from his dwelling. "Ride on, my

man; you shall sleep here to-night, and return in the morning."

In his exultation Mellen dashed forward, urging his horse across the open space till he was considerably in advance of his attendant. The moon shivered out again for an instant, and Mr. Mellen saw a woman shrouded in a long cloak rushing towards the house. Some instinct, rather than any real recognition of her person, made him cry out, as he leaped from the horse and left him free:

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth!"

The figure paused. There was a faint cry; at the same instant Mellen heard a violent rustle in the shrubbery, with a sudden downpour of raindrops, scarcely noticed, as he hurried towards the lady, but well remembered afterwards. She was standing upright and still, as if that unexpected voice had changed her to stone; her hair had broken loose and was streaming wildly over her shoulders; one hand was lifted above her eyes, as she strained her sight through the gloom.

"Elizabeth!" he called again.

"Who is it?" she cried, in a suppressed voice, that had all the sharpness of an agonised shriek. "Who calls to me?"

He reached her side as she spoke.

"Don't you know me?" he exclaimed. "My wife! my wife! I have come back at last!"

There was one wild look—one heavy breath—he heard a low exclamation:

"My God! oh, my God!"

Before he could discover whether this was a cry of thanksgiving or not, she fell forward and lay motionless at his feet.

After that first second of stupefaction, Mr. Mellen checked the wonderment of the man—who by this time had come up—and between them they carried the senseless woman to the house.

The servant who met them in the hall gave a cry of dismay at the sight of her master thus suddenly entering the house with his wife lying like a dead woman in his arms, and was ready to believe that the whole sight was a ghostly illusion.

"Bring some wine," called Mellen; "is there a fire? Are you deaf and blind, girl?"

"It is the mather!" exclaimed the frightened creature. "It's the mather come back—oh, I thought I'd seed ghosts at last!"

Her cries brought the whole household up from the basement; but regardless of their wonder and alarm, Grantley Mellen carried his wife away towards the library, and laid her upon a couch.

It was some moments before Elizabeth Mellen opened her eyes, then she glanced about with a vacant, startled look, as if unable to comprehend what had happened.

Her husband was standing in the shadow, gazing down at her with the strange, moody look so unlike the active alarm which would have filled the mind of most men, and she did not at first perceive his presence.

"I thought I saw Grantley," she murmured. "I—I have gone mad at last."

"Elizabeth!"

She struggled up on the couch, and looked towards him with a wild expression of the eyes, forced out by recent terror or sudden joy at finding that she had not been deceived by some mental illusion.

"Is it you, Grantley?" she exclaimed. "Is it really you?"

"It is I," he said; "but it is a strange welcome home to a man when he finds his wife wandering about in the storm, and sees her faint at the sound of his voice."

Elizabeth Mellen forced her physical strength back by a sheer exercise of will. She sat upright—a singular expression passed over her face—an inward struggle to appear like herself and act as was natural under the circumstances.

"I was so frightened," she gasped; "I did not expect you for a fortnight—perhaps a month. When I heard your voice I can't tell what I thought—a dread—a terror of something terrible—something supernatural, I mean, came over me."

"But what could have taken you out of doors on a night like this?" he persisted.

She did not hesitate; she hurried to answer, but it was like a person repeating words studied for the occasion, and all the while her two hands clutched hard at the arm of the sofa.

"I don't know what drove me out, the storm made me wild. I thought of the sea—you on it, perhaps—I don't know why I went."

"You are wet," he said—"thoroughly drenched. You must change your dress."

She seemed to grasp at the opportunity to go away, and started up with such eagerness that his suspicious eyes noticed it.

"This is a singular meeting," he said, bitterly; "two years apart, and not a word of welcome."

She turned impulsively towards him, and threw her arms about his neck, with a burst of passionate tears.

"I do love you, Grantley," she cried; "I do love you! I am so glad to see you; but this fright—it was so sudden—so——"

Her voice died away in a sob, and she clung more closely to him, while he kept his arm about her waist, pressed his lips on her forehead and gave himself respite from the whirl of dark thoughts which had been in his jealous mind. The joy of reunion and the pleasure of finding himself at home after that long absence, broke through it all.

He felt her shiver all over, and remembered the danger they both ran standing there in their wet clothing.

"You are cold—shivering—and I am keeping you in these wet things!" cried Grantley, gathering her in his arms and mounting the stairs. "You are drenched, my sweet child. It was wrong to go out in a storm like this. Indeed, indeed it was, dear one."

She made no answer, but was seized with a cold shivering fit in his arms. He carried her into the little sitting-room, and, seating her in an easy chair, took off her hood and cloak, speaking soft, tender words as he removed the garments, and smoothed her hair with a caressing movement of the hand.

"You must change your dress, Elizabeth," he said. "Do it at once. I have some dry clothes in my room, I suppose, which I shall put on."

"Yes," she returned, hurriedly; "go—go at once. You are glad to get home, are you not—glad to see me, Grantley?"

There was a tone of almost piteous entreaty in her voice; she was so disturbed by the shock of his sudden presence that her nerves could not recover their firmness at once.

Grantley Mellen held his wife to his heart and whispered fond and loving words, such as he had breathed during their brief courtship before a shadow clouded over the beauty of their lives.

"There shall be no more clouds," he whispered, "no more trouble. Look up, Elizabeth! Say that you love me—that you are glad as I am."

"I do love you, my husband—with all my heart and soul I love you! I *am* glad—very, very glad."

"And I love you, Bessie. I did not know how well until I went away. But we shall never part any more—never more."

Elizabeth was weeping drops as cold as the rain on her face. It was unusual for her to allow any feeling of joy or pain to overcome her so completely.

"You are weak and nervous to-night, Bessie," he said, tenderly. "I was wrong to come upon you so suddenly."

"No, no!" she cried, vehemently. But even in her denial she shuddered, remembering whom she had just left and how she had met her husband.

Then she arose to go, but staggered in her walk and held herself up with difficulty. He looked at her with such tender love in his eyes that she held out her arms to him. He drew her close to his bosom:

"Elizabeth, we will be happy now."

"Yes, yes," she said, in the same hurried manner, "we will be happy now—quite happy."

She went out of the room as she said these words and entered her chamber, locking the door carefully behind her, as if she feared that he might intrude upon her.

Half an hour after the newly-united husband and wife met at the supper-table, and Grantley Mellen saw that Elizabeth had quite recovered from the sudden shock of his arrival in that unexpected way.

"I cannot realize it yet," she said, coming into the room and walking up to the hearth where he stood; "I cannot believe you are actually here."

She stole close to his side and folded his hand in hers. For an instant there was a slight hesitation amounting almost to timidity, as if she were doing something or assuming a place to which she had no right, but it passed quickly. She was looking up into his face with a pleasant smile, a little pale yet from her recent emotion, or else those two years which had elapsed since their parting had robbed her of a portion of her girlish bloom,—but self-possessed and full of happiness.

Grantley Mellen looked at her more closely as she stood there in the cheerful light. Two years had changed her, but that was natural; he was altered too.

"Do I look very different, Elizabeth?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"You are browned, you look a little older, perhaps; but you are not really changed—you are Grantley still."

"I cannot tell if you are altered," he said; "I must wait till I have seen you a day or two. You seem paler—thinner."

She shivered a little, but quickly regained her self-control and cheerfulness.

"You cannot judge how I look to-night," she said. "I am sorry Elsie is gone."

"When did she go away, Elizabeth?"

"Only yesterday; she seemed to be getting low spirited, so I advised her to visit Mrs. Harrington for a while."

"I suppose she has not left you often—you two kept together?" he asked, the old jealousy creeping through his voice.

"Of course; she has visited a little," replied his wife, quietly, but she turned away to the table as she spoke.

A servant brought in the supper, and they sat down opposite to each other at the board; but even during those first hours of reunion the strange greeting which his return had met would linger in Grantley Mellen's suspicious mind, and, in spite of Elizabeth's cheerful manner, her color would come and go with tremulous fitfulness. Sometimes there was a restless expression in her eyes, and she seemed with difficulty to repress a nervous start at any sudden sound—she had not recovered wholly, it appeared, from her surprise.

"You will send for Elsie in the morning," he said.

"Oh, yes. One of the men will go to town early."

"Don't tell her I have come."

Elizabeth hesitated.

"She would be so startled if I did not," she said. "I really think her happiness will be greater if she expects to meet you."

"As you please," he returned, a little coldly. "I believe you are right. Surprises generally are failures."

"Where is Dolf?" Elizabeth asked.

"I sent him on with the steamer to deliver some letters I had brought for various people; he will be up in the morning. He is just the same remarkable darkey as ever. His language is even grander, I think."

When they were sitting over the fire again, Mr. Mellen said:

"Now, tell me everything that has happened; your letters were all so vague."

"I had nothing of importance to write, you know," she answered; "we were very quiet here."

"Has Elsie changed much?" he asked.

"Not at all; gay and thoughtless as ever."

There seemed a suppressed bitterness in her voice. Perhaps that gayety and frivolity had sometimes jarred upon the deeper chords in her own nature.

"Little darling!" he said, fondly, "I feel more attached to her than ever since I went away—she seems more like my daughter than my sister."

"And she loves you very dearly, you may be sure of that."

"Oh, yes; nothing could ever come between Elsie and me! I have thought of the promise I made our dying mother; I have kept it, Elizabeth—wherever else I have erred, I have kept that vow."

"Yes," she said; "yes."

But the tone grew a little absent, her eyes wandered about the room as if she were perplexed anew by some thought far away from the subject of their conversation.

"You have been happy and content here, Elizabeth?"

"Not happy," she answered, "I forced myself to be patient; but the time seemed very long."

"Then you do love me?" he cried, suddenly.

She looked at him reproachfully, with some pain stirring under that reproach.

"Can you ask me such questions now?"

"No, no; you do love me. I believe it. But you know what a morbid, suspicious character mine is."

"I had hoped—"

She did not finish her sentence, but sat twisting the links of her chatelaine about her fingers, and looking almost timidly away from his face.

"Go on," he said, "what did you hope?"

"That this long absence might have—that—I hardly know how to say it without offending you."

"You hoped I had learned to accept life more like a reasonable being, isn't that it? I think I have, Bessie; we will be happy now, very happy; you and Elsie and I."

He took her hand and held it in his own; was it true that it trembled, or only his fancy that made him think so?

"We shall be happy, Elizabeth?" he repeated, this time making the words an inquiry.

"I hope so—oh, I do hope so!" she exclaimed with sudden passion; "I want to be happy, oh, my husband! I want to be happy."

She threw her arms about his neck, and her head dropped on his shoulder; but the face which he could not see wore a strained, frightened look, as if she saw some dark shadow rise between her and its fulfilment.

Mellen strained her to his heart, and showered kisses down upon her cold face,—kisses, so warm from the heart, that her cheeks kindled into scarlet under them, and she began to weep those gentle tears that drop from a loving heart like dew from a flower.

"Our lives shall go on quietly and pleasantly now," he continued, giving himself to the full happiness of this reunion; "we will have one long summer, Bessie, and warm our hearts in it."

"I have been in the cold so long," she murmured.

"But that is over—over for ever! We will be trustful Bessie: we will be patient and loving always; can't we promise each other this, my wife?" he said, drawing her closer to his bosom.

"I can, Grantley; I do!"

"And I promise, Elizabeth, I will never be suspicious or harsh again. You and I could be so happy now."

"You will love me and trust me!" she cried, almost hysterically.

"Always, Bessie, always!"

Again he clasped her in his arms, pressing kisses upon her forehead, and murmuring words which, from a husband's lips are sweeter and holier than the romance of courtship could ever be, even in the first glow of its loveliest mystery.

Elizabeth nestled closer to his heart, and a feeling of rest and serenity stole over her so inexpressibly soothing and sweet, that she almost longed to float away for ever from the care and dimness of this world upon the sacred hush of that hour.

There was a sound without which startled them both, making Mellen turn hastily, and sending the sickly pallor anew across Elizabeth's face.

"Only the wind," he said, "blowing one of the shutters to with a crash."

"That is all, it——"

She did not finish; her eyes were fixed upon the window; she made one movement; tried to control herself; looked in the other direction before her husband could observe the eagerness with which her eyes had been strained out into the night; but all her attempts at self-control were in vain; she gave one heavy sigh, and sank lower and perfectly helpless in his arms.

For the second time that evening Elizabeth Mellen had swooned completely away.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SUNSHINE OF THE HOUSE.

The day was so bright and beautiful that the preceding storm seemed only to have added freshness to both the earth and sky.

The hills rose up majestic in their richest verdure, the lovely bay was at rest in the sunshine, and the long white line of distant water shone out tranquilly, as if no treacherous wind would ever again lash it into fury.

Grantley Mellen stood with his wife on the broad stone portico, looking towards the ocean. They

had been wandering over the house and grounds that the master might see what changes had taken place in his absence, talking pleasantly and gaily, though even in the midst of his happiness the old restless suspicion would intrude. Grantley Mellen could not understand the strange agitation of his wife at his return. It troubled him even in his newborn joy. She was quite herself this morning; so lovely in her delicate mauvé morning dress, with the soft lace relieving her neck and wrists. Her dark hair was banded smoothly back from the grave, earnest face, and fell behind in heavy braids, rich and glossy as the plumage of a raven. Her mouth was tremulous with gladness and her whole face kindled into smiles and blushes under her husband's gaze. She was so calm that it seemed folly to vex his heart with vague fancies, instead of yielding to the full, rich joy of the occasion.

But she was changed: his jealous eyes took note of that. She was paler, thinner; there was a single line between the dark brows that had gathered there during his absence; an added gravity about the mouth, a slight compression of the lips, as if they had grown accustomed to keeping secrets back.

Then with one of those quick transitions of feeling peculiar to a mind like his, he reproached himself for that change. Why search for other reasons when he remembered many things which had preceded their parting; the last restless year of their married life, disturbed by jealousy and suspicion; the long months of loneliness which she had spent during his absence. There was answer enough for all the questions with which he had vexed himself all the morning.

"Of course Elsie will come home in the afternoon boat," he said.

"Oh, yes; I don't think it is in yet—I have not heard the whistle," replied Elizabeth. "Our people will send her across the bay in a sail-boat, no doubt. It is shameful of them to leave the shore road in the state it is; we must either go to the village by water, or take that long out-of-the-way back road."

"There is a sail-boat now," exclaimed Mellen, pointing across the bay.

Elizabeth looked and saw the tiny streamers shining like silver trceries in the sun.

"It must be Elsie," she said, bringing a glass from the hall, which Mr. Mellen took eagerly from her hand.

"Yes," he said. "I can see a woman in the boat—it is Elsie."

His face was all aglow with brotherly love; a sweet expectation kept him restless. He walked up and down the porch talking of his sister, asking a thousand trivial questions, and complaining of the slowness of the little boat.

Elizabeth stood leaning against one of the pillars, her eyes shaded with her hand, looking over the bright waters. The tranquillity and bloom faded out of her countenance, while her husband talked so eagerly of his desire to see the child—as he called her. Sometimes her face grew almost hard and stern, as if she could not endure that even this beloved sister should come between her heart and his in the first hours of their reunion.

The little sail-boat flew swiftly on before the wind—drawing nearer and nearer each instant—they could distinctly see the young girl half lying back in the stern, allowing her hand to fall in the water with an indolent enjoyment of the scene.

She saw them at last, fluttered her handkerchief in the air by way of a signal, and after that they could see how full of eager impatience she was. Every instant her handkerchief fluttered out, and when the wind took that, she unwound an azure scarf from her neck and flung it on the breeze.

When the boat neared the landing, Mr. Mellen ran across the lawn and received his sister in his arms as she sprang on shore.

Standing on the portico where he had left her, Elizabeth regarded the pair; she heard Elsie's eager exclamation of joy—her husband's deep voice—then the two blended in confused and eager conversation. An absolute spasm of pain contracted the wife's features; her eyes dilated, and a moan broke from her lips.

"He loves her so! he loves her so! He will believe anything she says," muttered Elizabeth in a tone which trembled with passionate emotions.

The sound of her own voice seemed to recall her recollection and the necessity of concealing these turbulent feelings. With that power of self-control which she was striving so hard to strengthen, in order to bear her life with calmness, she forced her features into repose, and stood quietly waiting for them to come up. There was nothing in her appearance now to betray agitation; her pallor seemed only the reflection of her mauvé draperies, and her lips forced themselves into a smile.

"There is Bessie," cried Elsie, coming up the lawn, clinging to her brother's arm with both hands, and shaking her long curls in the sunshine, till the sight of her loveliness and grace might have softened for the time even that heart filled with fear of her sisterly influence, and jealous of the love which she received with such caressing warmth.

"Oh, Bessie!" she cried, as they reached the steps, "I am so happy! When I got the news this morning I felt as if I must fly here directly. Oh, you darling brother, to come back at all; but you

deserve to be punished for staying away so long!"

She raised herself on tip-toe to kiss him anew, allowed her bonnet to fall off, and her curls to trail in bright confusion over her shoulders; then she flew towards Elizabeth and showered a greeting of warm kisses on her face.

"Never mind that dark subject," she whispered; "we'll be happy now in spite of everything."

Again that singular look passed over Elizabeth Mellen's face; she listened and endured rather than returned the young girl's caress, but Mr. Mellen was watching his sister and did not observe it.

"And isn't he brown?" cried Elsie, rushing over to her brother again; "he looks like an Indian, don't he, Bess? Oh, you bad, bad boy, to stay so long."

Thus Elsie laughed and talked incessantly, begun a dozen sentences without finishing one of them, and was so demonstrative in her expressions of affection to both, so lovely in her youth and brilliant happiness, that it was no wonder her brother regarded her with that proud look; it seemed almost impossible that Elizabeth herself could help being won into happiness by her caressing ways.

"You'll never go away again—shall he, Bess? But isn't it luncheon-time? I could eat no breakfast for joy, but I do think I am hungry now."

Mr. Mellen laughed, and Elsie went on again.

"Oh, Grantley, I saw Dolf on the steamboat; he is coming over with your luggage. The ridiculous creature has more airs than ever. I wish you had forced him to come ashore in the pilot-boat, it would have been such fun, when he got among the breakers; but, oh dear! how frightened I was, hearing how near you were to getting in. It makes me feel pale now!"

Here Elsie gathered up her bonnet and shawl, tossed her curls back, kissed her brother again, and ran, off, saying:

"I must go upstairs and brush my hair. Do come, Bessie; I never can do it myself."

"I must go and see what the servants are doing," Elizabeth said.

"Nonsense! Come with me."

Elsie caught her sister-in-law about the waist, waltzed away towards the stairs and forced her to ascend, while Mr. Mellen stood looking after them with a pleasant smile on his lips.

CHAPTER XXVI.

SUNSHINE AND STORMS.

When they reached Elsie's room the girl drew Elizabeth in and closed the door. Mrs. Mellen sank wearily into a seat, as if glad to escape from the restraint she had been putting upon herself all that day.

"Your note frightened me so!" cried Elsie. "It was wicked of you to write like that."

"He came upon me so suddenly," gasped Elizabeth. "I was out in the grounds in the rain—I had gone to—"

"And Grantley came upon you there?" interrupted Elsie. "What did you do? what did you do?"

"I fainted in the end."

"Good heavens!"

"Oh, you would have been worse in my place," returned Elizabeth. "It was so sudden; how could I tell what he had seen?"

"But you are yourself now. You will not give way again?"

"I must not," said Elizabeth drearily. "I must bear up now."

"Don't talk in that dreadful voice," shivered Elsie; "it sounds as if you were dying. I thought you had more courage. Don't be afraid of me; if he held a bowl of poison to my lips I wouldn't tell."

"Oh, Elsie, what would death be compared to the agony of discovery?"

"Do stop!" pleaded Elsie, pressing both rosy little palms to her ears, with a piteous, shrinking movement. "We mustn't talk. I won't talk, I tell you! I can put everything out of my head if you will only let me; but if you look and talk like that I shall give way. Why can't you try and forget it? I will. Be sure of that!"

Elizabeth rose from her seat; a wan, hopeless look came over her face.

"You are right; let us be silent. But, oh, if I only could forget—but I can't, Elsie—I can't! The thought is with me day and night. The dread—the fear!"

"Be still!" shrieked Elsie, breaking into a passion of which no one would have believed her capable, and stamping her foot upon the carpet. "You'll drive me mad. I shall go into spasms, and then who knows what may happen! I won't promise not to speak if you drive me crazy."

All the youthful brilliancy was frightened out of her face, her lips turned blue, her whole frame shook so violently that Elizabeth saw absolute danger unless the girl were soothed back to calmness.

"I won't torment you any more, Elsie," she said. "I'll bear it alone—I'll bear it alone."

"One can always forget if one is determined," said Elsie; "but you won't—you will brood over things—"

"I shall be more myself, now," interrupted Elizabeth. "It was from seeing Grantley so unexpectedly, just when I was waiting for—"

"Be still!" interrupted Elsie, sharply. "I won't hear that—I won't hear anything; you shall not force unpleasant things upon me."

The sister and the sister-in-law stood opposite each other, oppressed by the same secret, but bearing it so differently. Elsie's share seemed to be only a burdensome knowledge of some mystery; no evil seemed to threaten her in its discovery, but deep sympathy appeared to have broken through her careless nature, moulding it into something grand. She was the first to recover from the cold, shivering distress which had come over both; the volatile, impressible creature could not dwell long enough upon one subject, however painful it might be, to produce the effect which even slight trouble had upon a character like Elizabeth's.

"You look like a ghost," she cried, in sudden irritation. "It is cruel, Bessie, to frighten me in this way. You know what a weak, nervous little thing I am. It is wicked of you!"

Elizabeth turned slowly towards the door.

"Be at peace, if you can," she said; "I will trouble you no more."

"Now you are angry!" cried Elsie.

"No, dear, not angry."

"Kiss me, then, and make up," said Elsie, with a return of childish playfulness. "I'll help you all I can, but you mustn't put too much on me; you know I'm not strong, like you."

Elizabeth trembled under the touch of those fresh young lips, but she answered, patiently:

"I will bear up alone; don't think about it."

"Oh, I shouldn't," cried Elsie, frankly, "only you make me."

Elizabeth looked at her in astonishment.

"You needn't stare so," said Elsie, in an injured tone; "I know I am not a deep, strong character, like you. But let me rest—let me enjoy my little mite of sunshine!"

"I will not overshadow it," Elizabeth answered, "be certain of that. But, oh, Elsie, it's so dreadful to bear this constant fear! If Grantley should find out anything—he is so suspicious—"

"There you go again!" broke in Elsie. "I vow I won't live in the house with you if you act in this way! Just as one is getting a little comfortable you begin all this again. I can't stand it; and I won't."

Elizabeth did not reply. She looked at Elsie again with a mingled expression of astonishment and fear; but a strange sort of pity softened the glance.

"There shall be no more of it, Elsie," she said, after a long silence, during which Elsie had shivered herself quiet once more. "I ought to have borne this trouble alone from the first."

"That's a nice darling!" cried Elsie. "Nothing will happen, I am sure of it. Just hope for the best; look at everything as settled and over with. Things don't keep coming up to one as they do in a novel."

Elizabeth said no more, she stood leaning against the window frame and watched Elsie as she arranged her ringlets before the glass, and called back the brilliant smiles which softened her face into something so youthful and pretty. Then they heard a voice from below, which made them both start.

"It's Grantley," said Elsie. "It sounds so odd to hear his voice! Open the door, Bessie; I am ready."

She ran to the head of the stairs, while Elizabeth followed slowly.

"Are you calling, Grant?" demanded Elsie, looking down at him as he stood at the foot of the stairs.

"Calling! I should think so! Are you both going to stay up there for ever? Dinner is ready."

"And so are we," cried Elsie, "and coming, Mr. Impatience."

Downstairs she tripped, humming a tune and making a little spring into her brother's arms when she reached the lower step.

She was such a dainty little thing, so light and graceful in all her movements, with such childish ways, such power of persuasion and coquetry, so light-hearted and frivolous, that it was quite impossible not to love her and treat her as if she were some blithe fairy, that would be frightened out of sight by a harsh word or look.

She was just one of those creatures whom everybody fondles and pets, who have sacrifices made for them which they are never capable of appreciating. The loves and fears and hates of these flimsy creatures are shallow and transient, though capable of leading them to great lengths during their first fever; creatures whom we miss as we do sunshine and flowers, or any other pretty thing; for they seem born to feed upon the froth and honey-dew of life, and from that very fact take with them, even towards middle age, a fund of light-heartedness and joyous spirits, which is, in some sort, a return for the demands they make upon others.

It seemed hard that a creature like this should have her youth burdened with any secret; it was scarcely wonderful that she grew impatient and spoke harshly to Elizabeth when she insisted upon forcing trouble on her mind, which left to itself she was able, out of the very shallowness of her nature, to throw aside so completely.

Wrong and cruel it seemed in Elizabeth to burden her thus—she should have kept Elsie aloof from all domestic mysteries, whatever they might be, and have borne her sorrow, her fears, perhaps her remorse, alone. It was not easy to tell from her face or her words all that lay back of her half-uttered despair. But she should have endured in silence things to be held as far away from Elsie's joyousness and Elsie's youth as the deep undercurrent of her character was apart from the bird-like blitheness which made the girl so pleasant. Thus the world would have judged had they seen these women standing there together.

CHAPTER XXVII.

COURTSHIP IN THE KITCHEN.

While they were still seated at the luncheon-table the door opened, and Dolf came in with a flourish of bows to report his return to the master.

"So, there you are, Dolf," said Mr. Mellen, carelessly. "Did you lose half the letters I gave you to deliver?"

Dolf drew himself up with a great deal of dignity.

"Master knows I'se trusty as Solomon's seal," he said. "De'pistles is safe in de honorable hands for which dey was originally intended."

"I'm glad they went off at the right moment," said Elsie, laughing.

Dolf rather missed her play upon his mispronunciation of the word, but he gave another magnificent flourish.

"Jes so, Miss Elsie; you've 'spressed it beautiful."

"How do you do, Dolf?" asked Mrs. Mellen, kindly, rousing herself from the abstraction into which she had fallen while Elsie and her brother had been chatting together. "Are you glad to get back?"

"I'se ebery reason to be satisfactory with my health, and am much 'bliged by de 'quiry," replied 'Dolf, with a bow so profound that it seemed by a miracle he recovered his balance, "I'se bery glad to see de ole place again, Miss Mellen, and de faces of yerself and young Miss Elsie is like de sunshine to me."

"Bless me, Dolf," cried Elsie, "that's poetry."

Dolf gave a deprecatory wave of the hand, as if the poetry had been unavoidable, and a smile which insinuated that he was capable of still higher flights of fancy, as he said:

"Mebbe, mebbe, Miss Elsie—I didn't reserve partic'lar—dese tings takes a pusson onawares mostly."

"Now, Dolf," said his master, "try and put my things in some sort of order before the day is over."

"Yes, marster; ebery ting dat's wanting shall be toppermost."

Elsie laughed unrestrainedly, but Dolf only took that as a compliment, and was immensely satisfied with the impression he had produced.

"Don't get up another flirtation with the cook," she said; "she is old enough to be your mother, so old that she's growing rich with hoarding, Dolf."

Dolf bowed himself out of the room with much ceremony, and took his way straight towards the lower regions. His brain had always formed numerous projects on the strength of Clorinda's wealth, and he felt it incumbent upon him to have an interview as soon as possible with this elderly heiress.

He came upon her in the kitchen hall; she was walking upright as a ramrod with a large tin dish-pan in her hands, and looking forbidding as if she had been the eldest daughter of Erebus.

"Dat's de time o' day," thought Dolf; "she is parsimmony just now and no mistake, but here goes for de power of 'suasion."

He made her a bow which flattered the sable spinster into a broad smile, and almost made her drop the dish-pan, in the flutter of her delight.

"Dolf, Dolf, am dat you?" she exclaimed, growing a shade darker.

"Permit me," said Dolf, gracefully, taking the pan from her hand; "it's my expressive delight to serve de fair, and I'se most happy, through dis instrumentation, to renew your honorable acquaintance."

He followed this up with another tremendous bow; Clorinda thought it quite time that she should make a show of high breeding likewise. She gave her body a bend and a duck, but unfortunately, Dolf was bowing at the same moment, and their heads met with a loud concussion.

A wild giggle from the kitchen door completed Dolf's confusion. He looked that way, and there stood Victoria, the chambermaid, now a spruce mulatto of eighteen, enjoying Clorinda's discomfiture.

"De fault was mine," cried Dolf, in his gallantry; "all mine, so dat imperent yaller gal need'n larf herself quite to death."

"Imperent yaller gal? am no more yaller den yer is," answered Vic.

"Any how yer needn't stand dar a grinning like a monkey, Vic," exclaimed Clorinda, in wrath.

"Accidents will recur," said Dolf. "But, laws, Miss Victory, is dat you? I had de pleasure of yer 'quaintance afore me and marster started on our trabels."

"I've been alone here eber since," explained Victoria, not proof against his fascinations. "I'm sure yer haint altered a bit, Mr. Dolf."

"I guess if yer don't go upstairs miss'll know why," cried Clorinda, sharply. "Jes give me dat pan, Mr. Dolf; I kint wait all day for you to empty it."

Dolf was recalled to wisdom at once—he could not afford to make a misstep on the very day of his return. He emptied the pan, followed Clorinda into the kitchen, making a sign of farewell to Vic which the old maid did not observe. Once in Clorinda's own dominion, the darkey so improved the impression already produced that he was soon discussing a delicate luncheon with great relish, and so disturbing Clorinda's equanimity by his compliments, that she greatly endangered the pie-crust she was industriously rolling out on one end of the table where he sat.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE DEAD SECRET.

The morning after Elsie's return Grantley Mellen mounted his horse, and rode off towards the shore tavern, a sad and heavy-hearted man. The woman whom he had loved so devotedly with the first passion of his youth, lay in that little chamber waiting for burial. Where destined when she met her fate, or how much she suffered, he could only guess. But there she was, after years of separation, thrown upon his charity even for a grave, with no one to mourn her death, no one to care how or where she was buried. He had not mentioned her to his wife or sister, an aching memory at heart forbade that, but underneath the joy of his return home lay this dead secret, haunting him with funereal shadows.

The woman was in her coffin when he entered the little chamber, which was now so desolately clean; for he had given orders regarding her interment before leaving the house that stormy night, and they had been well obeyed. A veil of delicate gauze covered the face, softening it into singular loveliness. Mellen did not lift this veil, which neutralised the coldness of death so beautifully, but his breast heaved with a farewell sigh, while tears blinded his last look, which carried deep and eternal forgiveness with it.

A noise in the next room disturbed him. He turned hastily, and went down stairs, shrinking from observation.

Scarcely had Mellen disappeared when the door which connected the death chamber with a small inner room was pushed open, and a pale, wild face looked in. It was that of North; after a quick survey of the room, he darted towards the door leading to the stairs and shot the bolt. Then he went up to the coffin, flung back the gauze from that marble face, and looked down upon it.

Those black eyes burned too hotly for tears, but the raven beard trembled about his mouth, his hand was clenched, the burning consciousness of a great crime was upon him, and he felt it in every nerve and pulse of his system. If North had ever loved this woman, all the force of that passion came back upon his soul now in an agony of remorse. As he gazed, his hand released its iron grip, his strong limbs shook like reeds, and flinging himself down by the coffin he cursed himself, his crime, and that living woman for whose sake it had been committed.

They were coming upstairs. He heard the heavy blundering footsteps of two men, and knew what they were after. Creeping softly to the door he drew the bolt back with intense caution, and stealing into the little chamber, fell upon the floor and held his breath, listening.

He heard the coffin-lid closed; the slow turning of the screws; a sudden jar, and then the footsteps again, broken and disturbed by the mournful burden those two men carried. Then all was still for a moment, and up through the passage, vibrating like electricity through that evil soul, came the sound of a clear, solemn voice, reading the burial service.

Still he listened, with his head lifted from the floor, and supporting himself by one arm like a worn-out gladiator. A sort of terror had seized upon him with the sweet low sound of that voice. Great drops gathered upon his forehead and grew cold there. He was like an evil spirit looking through the gates of Paradise. Then came another pause, followed by the slow roll of wheels and the tramp of horses. North leaped to his feet, and threw up the window. A hearse was moving heavily down the street, and close behind it rode Grantley Mellen, alone.

Near the Piney Cove mansion was an ancient burying-ground, with the graves of many generations crowded around a little stone church, which rose up in solemn stillness among a grove of cypress trees and wild cedars. In one of the sunniest corners of the ground a grave was dug, and a pile of blossoming turf was laid ready to cover that hapless woman in her place of rest. While the men performed their sad work, Mellen stood by, with his head bared reverentially, and the heart in his bosom standing still. When he turned away it was with a deep, solemn sigh of relief. The bitterness and the pain of his first love was buried forever. Henceforth Elizabeth would have no rival, even in his memory.

Mellen went home a calmer and a better man, after laying his lost one down in her grave. Hitherto her memory had been an aching bitterness, but with death came forgiveness, and out of that his spirit arose chastened, gentle and tending towards a healthy cheerfulness.

Elizabeth was too deeply observant not to remark the softened seriousness of her husband's manner when he came home that day, but every look of tenderness that he gave her was a pang, and smote her worse than reproaches. Could the wife who deceived her husband find joy in the confidence which was but a mockery of her deceit. Many times during those few days Elizabeth wished that her husband would be harsh and cruel again.

CHAPTER XXIX.

TOM FULLER'S LETTER.

As they were sitting at dinner the next day, Mellen inquired about Fuller.

"I have quite forgotten to ask you about Tom," he said; "he was in France when you last wrote to me."

"He has not come yet," Elizabeth replied; "the house in which he was employed, concluded to keep him at Bordeaux for a time; in his last letter he wrote that he might be gone another year."

"Poor old Tom," Elsie said, laughingly.

Elizabeth's brows contracted a little; she had never been able entirely to forget the suffering this girl had caused the young man. Whenever she heard her mention his name in that trifling way, it jarred upon her feelings and irritated her greatly.

"Bessie doesn't like any one to laugh at Tom," said Mellen, noticing the expression of her face.

"I confess I do not," she replied; "he is such a noble fellow at the bottom, with an honest, kindly heart, and it seems to me that no one really acquainted with Tom can help respecting him, in spite of his eccentricities."

"But you need not be so heroic, Bessie," returned Elsie; "Tom always allowed me to laugh at him as much as I pleased; you know I don't mean to be ill-natured."

"No one would ever suspect you of that, Birdie," added Mellen, with a fond glance.

Elizabeth said nothing more, and the conversation "We shall have the house crowded with visitors, I suppose," Elsie said; "Mary Harrington told me she should only give us one day for family affection—"

"I hope she won't come to stay any time just yet," said Elizabeth.

"I hope so, too," added Mellen; "I should like a little enjoyment of my home, if possible, for a week

or two at least."

"But people will come," said Elsie; "you must expect it. They look for all sorts of invitations, and you must give them or mortally offend everybody."

Perhaps the idea of the gayety that would ensue was not unpleasant to Elsie, in spite of her joy at Mellen's return; it was quite natural at her age, and to her character, which drooped in solitude like a flower deprived of the sun.

"Oh," said Mellen, "we will give them as many dinners and parties as they like, provided they won't domicile themselves with us, Elizabeth."

"Yes; I don't mind that so much."

"Shall you take a house in town, Grant?" asked Elsie.

"Do you particularly wish it?"

"Oh, it would be pleasant, of course."

"Just as you and Elizabeth choose," he said.

"For my part I would rather stay here," exclaimed Elizabeth.

"And so would I," said Mellen.

Elsie looked a little disappointed, but she concealed the feeling with her usual quickness.

"I have not told you what Doctor Peters said," she continued.

"What?" her brother asked, anxious at once.

"He thinks the sea air too strong for me in the winter; but, I dare say, it is only his fancy; I would not have either you or Elizabeth disturbed on my account."

"My dear child," cried Mellen, "that settles the matter at once; we will certainly go away from here before the cold weather comes; any where you like; Bessie will gladly give up Piney Cove, I'm sure."

"Certainly," answered the wife, quietly.

Elsie looked triumphant; she was always elated at having her own way, whether the thing was of importance or not.

"We need not think about it now," she said, demurely; "it will be warm and pleasant for several weeks yet."

"But you must be careful," returned Mellen, "dear child; I cannot reach home safely only to see your health give way."

"Oh, nonsense, Grant, don't begin to fidget! I am ever so well; make him believe it, Bessie."

"I think so," Bessie replied; "you are stronger than you look."

"Elsie requires great care," said Mellen, decidedly.

Elsie did not look displeased; she liked being considered weak and delicate; it made her more petted and at liberty to indulge her numberless caprices in the most interesting manner.

The family had that evening entirely to themselves, and it passed off very pleasantly. Elizabeth and Elsie joined in the old songs Mellen loved, and they all talked and laughed gaily, forgetful of the clouds that lowered above that house.

The next morning when the family met in the breakfast-room the post had arrived, and Dolf presented Elsie and Elizabeth with several letters; only the journals were left for Mellen, and he said, laughingly:

"The division is not just—Bessie having two letters; you might give me one."

"I'm too selfish," she answered.

"Mine is from Mary Harrington," observed Elsie. "Bess, you shall not read yours till you have given us our coffee. I'll just see what the widow says."

Elizabeth poured out the coffee while Elsie opened her note.

"She is coming to-day," she exclaimed; "I told you so. She sends all sorts of messages to you, Grant; calls you a god-like, wonderful creature, and is dying to see you."

"Oh, of course," said Mellen.

"She asks after Mr. Rhodes, Bessie—poor old fellow—she has quite turned his head."

"What is that?" asked Mellen.

So Elsie explained how the widow delighted in worrying Miss Jemima, had made desperate love to the stout man on every occasion; and in laughing at her quaint speeches Elizabeth quite forgot

her own epistles.

"Why, where are your letters?" asked Elsie.

"I forgot them," returned Elizabeth, drawing them from under her plate, and adding as she glanced at the superscription of the upper one, "it is only from the dressmaker."

Elsie snatched the other, and cried out:

"Why, this is from Tom Fuller; oh, see what it says."

"From Tom? oh, I am so glad; I have been expecting a letter for a week past."

Elizabeth took the letter, and her face lighted up joyously as she broke the seal and began to read.

"Well," said Elsie, impatiently, "what does he say? read it out."

Elizabeth uttered an exclamation of delight.

"Oh, you provoking creature," cried Elsie, "do tell us what it is?"

"Tom must have found a diamond mine," said Mellen.

"He has," returned Elizabeth.

"Bless me," said Elsie, "will he go about covered with diamonds?"

"His old uncle has left him a fortune," explained Elizabeth.

Elsie fairly screamed, and clapped her little hands with graceful fury.

"Who would have thought it! Only fancy Tom Fuller rich! Why he'll be robbed every day of his life."

"How much is it?" asked Mellen. "I am very glad. Tom is a good fellow and deserves it."

He had entirely got over any suspicion that Elizabeth might ever have cared for her cousin, and was prepared to rejoice in Tom's good fortune.

"How much—how much?" broke in Elsie.

"Thirty thousand a year," replied Elizabeth; "Tom is in a state of bewilderment that makes his letter sadly incoherent; he never expected a penny; his uncle changed his will at the last moment."

"But wasn't he your uncle, too?" asked Elsie.

"No; he was aunt Fuller's brother."

"Oh, do let me see the letter," said Elsie.

Elizabeth gave it to her, but between excitement and his usual odd penmanship Tom's epistle was quite a puzzle to unpractised eyes, and Elsie went into shrieks over it.

"He promised to bring me a bracelet," said she, "diamonds it shall be now. If he brings anything less I'll send him straight back."

"But when is he coming?" Mellen asked.

"I can't make out," said Elsie; "here is something at the end about I shall burn—no return—at the—the—can that be Millennium?"

"Scarcely, I should think," said Mellen, laughingly.

"Try and make it out, Bess," said Elsie, giving her the letter.

Elizabeth took it, examined the lines to which she pointed, and after a moment's study read it correctly.

"I shall return by the Hammonia."

"Why that's due now," said Elsie.

Elizabeth glanced at the date.

"The letter has been delayed," she said; "he may be here already."

"Oh, it will be beautiful to see him," said Elsie; "why, he will give all he is worth to the person that asks first. Won't it be fun!"

"You shall not tease him, Elsie, as you formerly did," said Elizabeth; "I will not have it."

"But I will," said Elsie. "Thirty thousand a year! Good gracious, it will seem as if he had fallen from the moon. Of course I'll tease him half to death."

CHAPTER XXX.

THE WIDOW'S FASCINATIONS.

About midday Mrs. Harrington arrived with a little party of friends; she would not allow Mellen to escape her till she had overwhelmed him with compliments and congratulations, all of which he received with becoming resignation. When they went upstairs she said to Elsie:

"I haven't seen anything of that mysterious creature, North, in an age; what can have become of him?"

"Horrid creature," cried Elsie, "don't mention his name! Now, Mary Harrington, don't forget for once in your life! If Grant knew that we had even one visit from a stranger he would be furious; if you let it out neither Elizabeth or I will ever speak to you again."

"My dear, I won't open my lips."

"Mind you don't, that's all; if you do, I'll be even with you, as sure as my name is Elsie."

"You need not be so ferocious."

"Oh, I hate to be scolded, and Grant would be dreadfully angry! I promised Bessie I would warn you, so be sure and remember."

"I'll swear it if you like."

"Bless me, don't be tragic! The matter is of no consequence to me, only Bess makes such a point of it; besides that, I dread to see Grant angry."

"He never could be angry with you," said Mrs. Harrington.

"Well, it would be just as bad if he scolded her."

"How good you are!" cried the widow. "You are just the dearest thing in the world."

"Of course I am; but there's no use in standing here to say pretty things to each other, for there is no one to hear."

"Oh, you odd creature!" laughed Mrs. Harrington. "But, really, that man was the strangest, fascinating person—"

"There you go!" interrupted Elsie angrily.

"My dear, there is no one in the room but ourselves."

"I don't care if there is not; I don't want to hear that man's name."

"I can't see why you dislike him so," pursued the widow. "It always seemed to me that he and Elizabeth treated each other oddly—"

Elsie interrupted her, quite pale with anger.

"Mary Harrington," said she, "if you and I are to remain friends, stop this instant. I won't hear another word, nor must the subject come up again."

Mrs. Harrington was quite subdued by her friend's vehemence, and dropped the matter without another allusion to the forbidden subject.

When they went downstairs after the rest of the party were assembled, Mellen began laughing at the widow about the conquest she had made of Mr. Rhodes.

"Isn't it delicious?" she cried. "I just want you to see us together—it is better than a play."

"And Jemima's spite is something to witness," added Elsie. "I know she will poison you yet, Mary Harrington."

"I am on the watch constantly," replied the widow. "I don't even engage a strange servant now for fear it should be one of the old maid's secret emissaries."

"You are as badly off as the Duke of Buckingham," said Mellen, laughing at Mrs. Harrington's pretended distress.

"It is dreadful, I assure you," she said, shaking her plumage of lace and gauze; "but it is very amusing, nevertheless."

"Of course, if you can annoy somebody," answered Mellen; "that is the very acme of female happiness."

"Oh, you barbarous creature!" cried the widow. "Ain't you ashamed to utter such atrocious sentiments! Mrs. Mellen, your husband has come back a perfect savage."

Everybody laughed—it never occurred to the widow it could be at her own airs and affectations, which were a very clumsy imitation of Elsie's childish grace; she was too thoroughly satisfied with her own powers of fascination to suppose it possible, even for an instant, that she could

become a subject of amusement.

"After all, it is tiresome to inspire a *grande passion*," said she, with a theatrical drawl.

"No woman ought to be better able to decide," cried Elsie; "you have made enough in all conscience."

"Oh, dear, no!" said the widow.

"Don't deny it," said Elsie, who never scrupled to make sport of her most intimate friends, and with all her fondness for Mrs. Harrington was always leading her on to do and say the most absurd things.

Elsie was in the most extravagant spirits, and had been ever since her brother's return. She flitted about the house like a beautiful elf, and Elizabeth could see that Mellen watched her every movement, his face kindling with affection and each look a caress.

"He has not changed," she thought, sadly; "all his tender words to me came only from the first pleasure of finding himself at home."

Then she began to shudder, as she often did now when the icy chill of some stern thought crept over her.

"Better so," she muttered; "what should I do with love and affection—what right have I to expect them from him or any one on earth. Is not my whole life a lie."

But she banished these reflections quickly, determined to have at least a few days of perfect freedom from anxieties, a little season of peace and rest, in which her tired soul might restore its strength, like a seabird reposing on the sunlit bosom of some inland lake after the exhaustion of a long and perilous flight amid storms and tempests.

Mellen, too, had laid by the suspicions which the strange circumstances connected with his return had caused, and appeared, as he could always, when so disposed, the most charming host possible.

Elizabeth sunned her heart in the smile which lighted up his face whenever their eyes met, and kept the dark shadows resolutely aloof from her mind. She was determined to be happy in spite of fate.

"Peace and rest!" she murmured. "I need them so much. I will have them at any cost."

The day passed as such days usually do, when all parties are amused; and though the conversation might not have been such as altogether suited the intellectual tastes of Mellen and his wife, they were too well-bred for any expression of distaste, and Elsie made even nonsense charming by her brilliant sallies and buoyant spirits.

The widow had not forgotten her old ambition to fascinate Mellen, and her efforts were highly amusing to the lookers-on. She was in doubt whether he preferred the queenly manner and repose of Elizabeth or the arch grace and exuberant gayety of his sister, and attempted airs which she considered a happy medium between the two, and a most fortunate result followed. Her efforts to support the double character delighted Elsie immensely, who, with the usual good-nature of intimate friends, made as much sport of her before her very face as she dared to venture on in Mellen's presence.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE HEIR COMES HOME.

They were all assembled in the library before dinner, tired with laughing and roaming about, tired of rowing over the sunny waters, and glad to rest a little before the important business of dining should commence.

Suddenly there was a bustle in the hall, followed by a loud good-natured voice that made Elizabeth start to her feet.

"It's my cousin Tom," she cried. "Grantley, Tom Fuller has come."

She rushed into the hall, and sure enough, there stood her cousin; sunburned, a little thin from sea-sickness, but the same droll old Tom as ever.

He caught Elizabeth in his arms and uttered his first incoherent expressions of delight when Mellen came up, and Tom commenced shaking his two hands with immense energy, as if they had been pump handles, and nothing but the greatest exertion on his part could save the ship.

"I'm so glad to see you!" he cried. "I'm so glad to get back. I declare I can't say a word."

"And I'm glad; very, very glad," replied Elizabeth.

"And we congratulate you heartily on your new fortune," said the widow, joining in and extending

both hands.

"Oh, don't speak of it," cried Tom; "it's no end of a bother to me already. God bless you, I don't know what to do with it! How—how is your sister?" he stammered, addressing Mellen with desperate energy; for Elsie's name came up from his heart with a jerk.

"She is quite well," Mellen answered, "and will be charmed to see you; we were expecting you."

"That's nice of you. So you've only just got back! Well, it's good to get home, isn't it? that is, if I had any home—but it's dreary for a solitary chap like me, now isn't it?"

"This house will always seem like home to you, I hope," said Mellen, kindly.

"Always," added Elizabeth; "don't forget that, Tom."

"You're too good to me," cried the soft-hearted fellow; "you always were!"

"Of course they were," said a laughing voice, that made Tom start, and appeared to take every particle of strength out of his limbs.

Elsie suddenly appeared before Tom in her brilliant evening dress and cloud-like loveliness, reducing him to a pitiable state at once.

"Don't you intend to speak to me?" pursued Elsie.

"Of—of course!" said Tom. "I'm so glad to see you—will you shake hands—will you—be—be glad to see me?"

"There is my hand," replied Elsie; "the pleasure depends on how agreeable you make yourself. I suppose you have come back with such fine foreign manners that you will hardly deign to notice us poor plain untravelled people."

"Oh, you don't think that!" said Tom. "You are laughing at me just as usual."

"Did you bring me my bracelet?" demanded Elsie.

"Indeed I did; I'd have brought all Paris if I had thought it would please you."

Elizabeth now plainly thought poor Tom had returned no wiser than when he went away; but Mellen, man-like, never perceived the state in which Elsie's fascinations had thrown the honest fellow, and would not have thought seriously of the matter if he had.

"Of course you speak French like a native—Iroquois, I mean," pursued the pitiless Elsie.

"Just about," replied Tom, as ready as ever to laugh at his own blunders.

"So you did not forget the bracelet?" urged Elsie.

"Indeed I did not; it's in my carpet-bag."

"Then I will be good natured to you all the evening," said she, "and won't tease you the least mite."

Tom was quite in ecstasies at the prospect; but Mellen said:

"She can't keep her promise, no matter how hard she tries—don't trust her, Fuller."

Elsie made a gesture of playful menace and carried Tom off into the drawing-room, quite regardless of the fact that Elizabeth had, as yet, found hardly an opportunity of speaking to him.

Mrs. Harrington was excessively cordial to the new comer; as a poor man she had always liked Tom for his extreme good-nature and willingness to wait on her caprices to any extent; but now that he made his appearance in the character of a semi-millionaire, it was perfectly natural that she should look upon him in a totally different light, being of the world, worldly.

Tom's awkwardness would only be a pleasant eccentricity now; his unfortunate taste in dress must pass readily as the carelessness of wealth, and all his good qualities, which had been quite overshadowed during his days of poverty, would now be brought to the foreground with glowing tints.

Not that Tom ever thought of this result to his heirship, he was too unsuspecting even for a thought of the kind. When people bestowed more interest on him than before, he would only wonder at their kindness and think what a pleasant world this was after all, and what scores of good-natured people there were in it, despite of the grumblers and misanthropes.

Elsie kept her word; she did not tease Tom in the least, but deliberately bewildered him with her arts and coquetry—which set Elizabeth to wondering what her motive could be—but perhaps she had none at all, and was only obeying the whim of the moment.

Tom produced the gold humming-bird for Elsie's hair, and a lovely little ornament it was, with the gorget in its throat composed of emeralds and rubies, and the long, slender bill and delicate wings formed of the most beautiful enamel.

Elsie perched it among her curls and was happy as a child with her new toy. Nobody in the world was ever so much delighted with novel ornaments, and few persons ever allowed the gloss to

wear off them so quickly. In all probability she would rave over Tom's gift for a week, and by that time, if she did not lose it, would break the wings, by way of amusement, or tear the bill off to make the point of a stiletto, or ruin it in some other way, just to gratify her caprice, and an odd love of destruction which was in her very nature.

Tom Fuller spent the first happy evening he had known for months at Piney Cove, and he was so deliciously good-natured and noisy in his pleasure, that he could have supplied any lack of merriment on the part of the other guests if it had been necessary. But it was not.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE GAUNTLET BRACELETS.

No man with any wisdom whatever thinks of returning from a journey without gladdening all the feminine hearts in his sphere with goodly presents. Mellen had by no means forgotten his duty in this respect. He had brought all sorts of curious Chinese ornaments, wonderful pagodas for glove boxes, scented sandal wood repositories for laces, exquisitely carved ivory boxes, and such costly trifles, which kept Elsie in perfect shrieks of delight during the first glow of possession. He had also brought stores of valuable ornaments which had once belonged to wealthy Mexican families, their value increased by the quaint, old time setting, and the romance connected with them; and Elsie consumed hours in adorning herself with them, laughing at her own fantastic appearance, and dancing about like a regular Queen Mab.

Among these presents were a pair of very valuable bracelets, made after a fashion prevalent in Spain two hundred years ago—you may see such things even now preserved among the old Castilian grandees, to be kept through all changes of time and fortune, aired on festive occasions only, and at last, if parted with at all, left in a fit of devotion before some Catholic shrine, as a bribe for some Heavenly privilege.

When Louis XIV. was a youth and in love with Marie Mencini, he once offended her mortally by bestowing a similar bracelet upon a young stranger at the court. I dare wager it required a whole set of jewels to put the haughty Marie in good humor and satisfy her Italian cupidity.

These bracelets Mellen brought with him, and gave one to his wife, the other to Elsie. They were made of a gauntlet-shaped piece of gold, widening at the back of the wrist, and covered with delicate chasing; the gold was so fine and pure that they were supple as a bit of kid. A double row of pearls and emeralds ran about the edge, and the clasps were of large diamonds, arranged in the shape of a shield.

The jewels were exceeding valuable, though to anybody possessing the least fancy, that made their least charm; they were ornaments that had undoubtedly owned a history, and one might have woven a thousand romances concerning the lives of those who had once worn them—that is, one who is not ashamed of being a dreamer in this rushing, practical age.

These were the last gifts Mellen displayed, and they certainly made a very splendid climax to the costly exhibition.

As I said, the first fortnight passed off delightfully, then the visitors departed, and there were a few days of quiet. The Mellens renewed the gayeties then by giving a dinner-party to several families in the neighborhood to whom they owed civility.

"They are stupid people to be sure," Elsie observed, "but then it's a little change from our own special dullness, and we have been alone for three days."

"You are such a foolish child!" returned Mellen.

"Oh, that's all very well," laughed Elsie; "but I don't wish to make a female Robinson Crusoe of myself, I do assure you. Bessie, old Mrs. Thompson will wear that wonderful new head-dress, and her son will ask me to sing and be so scarlet and fluttered when I look at him. Yes, yes, there is some fun to be got out of a dinner-party."

She mimicked the expected guests in turn, and did it so cleverly that her companions were both obliged to laugh, so everybody prepared for the infliction of a country dinner in the best possible spirits. It was rather stupid to be sure, but Elsie so lighted up the room with her radiance, and Elizabeth was so pleasant a hostess in her stately beauty, that everything passed off tolerably, and even the most common-place of the party brightened up a little under the influence of their hosts.

The ladies had risen from the table, giving the gentlemen an opportunity to enjoy their cigars in comfort, and were passing through the hall towards the drawing-room.

The moon shone broad and full through the windows of the hall, and somebody remarked on the beauty of the night. Elsie darted away and flung open the hall door.

"You will get cold; don't stand there," said Elizabeth.

Elsie danced out upon the portico in playful defiance of her sister, and the other ladies went after

her, expostulating with true feminine eagerness.

As Elsie ran away to the other end of the veranda something fell upon the stones with a ringing noise, followed by a little shriek which she uttered in starting back.

"What is the matter?" called out several voices, but before they reached her Elsie stooped, picked something up and ran towards them.

"I dropped my brooch," she said; "come in. Elizabeth was right. I am chilled through and through."

She drove them playfully before her, and they all entered the parlors laughing gayly—all but Elizabeth. It was a trifling thing to disturb any one, and her nerves must have been in a strange state from constant watchfulness when this little event could move her so greatly. She leaned against the door-frame quite cold and chill. As Elsie passed her the girl slipped something in her hand, unperceived by the others.

Elizabeth stood motionless until they had all gone, then she started forward with something like desperation, and moved towards the hanging lamp. She opened her hand and looked down at a slip of paper carefully folded about a broken bit of iron, as if to give it weight enough to be thrown with sure aim. She shut her hand quickly as if the sight of the harmless paper filled her with loathing, conquered the convulsion which shook her from head to foot, unfolded the note and read the brief lines it contained.

Then she tore the paper into fragments and thrust them down into the hall fire, watching till even the ashes were gone, fearful that a trace should be left.

"I must!" she muttered, "I must go—I must not wait!" She looked eagerly about; the gay laughter of the men rang up from the dining-room; she could distinguish her husband's voice; through the closed doors of the parlors came the sound of the piano and a bird-like song, gleeful and joyous, with which Elsie was amusing the ladies.

Elizabeth flung her arms aloft with sudden passion.

"Laughing, singing, all enjoying themselves!" she moaned, "and I here with this horrible suffering! I must go—I must go!"

Elizabeth took up a shawl which lay on a chair, opened the outer door softly, hurried down the steps and disappeared among the trees.

Mr. Mellen did not give his male guests a very lengthy opportunity to enjoy their claret and cigars; he had no interest in their talk about the political affairs of the country, a recent bankruptcy, the price of corn, or any of the topics which came up, and some time before it might have been expected, he rose, anxious to counteract the dullness by the presence of his wife and sister, both of whom he had regarded all the evening with new tenderness and admiration, as they sat like a couple of rare birds among all those fussy, ill-dressed women. Elsie was still at the piano when the gentlemen entered. Mr. Mellen looked about for Elizabeth, but she was not there.

"She has not come in yet," said old Mrs. Thompson, in answer to his inquiry.

Elsie heard the words—she had ears keen as a little beast of prey.

"One of the servants stopped her," she called out; "servants always are stopping her—mine will be better regulated. Come here, Grantley, and help me in this old song you like so much."

"In a moment, dear," he replied.

Mellen left the room, fearing that Elizabeth might be drawn away by a headache. He had never felt so tenderly solicitous about her. These last weeks of sunshine had made his proud nature kindly genial. He was anxious to atone for all his old suspicions and little neglects of her comfort.

He was crossing the hall, when the outer door opened, and Elizabeth entered. She did not observe him, and he saw her in all her unrestrained emotion. She was deadly white, and rushed in as if seeking escape from some danger.

"Elizabeth!" he called out.

She started as if he had struck her, but she was accustomed now to controlling herself, and after that first trembling fit, threw off her shawl and forced her face into composure.

"Where have you been?" he inquired.

"Only on the veranda," she said, a little too hurriedly; "I was so tired and my head ached—I wanted air."

He looked at her, dissatisfied and suspicious.

"You might have caught your death," he said; "I wonder at you."

"It was foolish," she returned, trying to laugh, "but the dinner was so tedious. Come into the drawing-room."

She made an effort to speak playfully, as Elsie might have done, but it was a failure.

"Your shoes are damp," he exclaimed suddenly; "you have been on the grass—pray what could take you there?"

"I—I just ran down the steps—I won't do so again."

Elsie heard their voices—she always heard everything—and opened the door.

"Come in here, you naughty people," she cried, laughing and speaking lightly, though there was a gleam in her eyes. "Oh! Mrs. Thompson, husbands and wives who have been separated are worse than lovers."

She forced them to enter, talking in her excited way, and making everybody laugh so much that neither the frown on Mellen's brow nor his wife's paleness were observed.

"You have been out," she found an opportunity to whisper to Elizabeth; "you must be mad!"

"I shall be!" groaned the woman; "I shall be!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

SEARCHING FOR THE BRACELET.

The very sight of her sister's carelessness and gayety, made Elizabeth feel how necessary it was to be composed; her husband was watching her still. Some one asked her to play; she took her seat at the piano and played one of her most brilliant pieces—to sing, and her rich contralto voice rang out with new passion and power. I tell you even women can only marvel at the power many of the sex preserve over themselves when playing for a great stake, and the least betrayal of look or movement might be full of danger.

The evening passed off without further incident, and the guests went away delighted with their reception, thinking what agreeable people the Mellens were, and how happy they must be in their beautiful home.

"Oh—oh—oh!" cried Elsie, flinging up her arms with a yawn that distorted her pretty mouth out of all proportion. "Thank heaven, they are gone! I am sure another half hour would have killed me."

"You deceitful little thing!" said her brother, who had nearly recovered his cheerfulness. "I heard you tell poor young Thompson that you had never enjoyed yourself so thoroughly."

"Of course I did; what else could I say."

Mr. Mellen laughed and went out of the room.

Elsie was standing by the fire, she was always complaining of cold, and Elizabeth walked towards her as the door closed.

"Don't!" whispered Elsie, "you are going to talk—don't!"

Elizabeth dropped into a seat with a wearied look, such as a person wears after hours of self-restraint.

"It's of no use to talk," said Elsie, with an impatient gesture. "You ought not to have gone out——"

"I know; but I dared not wait. Oh, Elsie! such a scene——"

"Be still!" exclaimed Elsie, with the old passion which seemed so foreign to her nature. "I can't hear—I won't! Grantley saw you!"

"Yes; he was in the hall when I entered," she replied, with the same dreary despair in her voice. "I know, I feel that something will happen at last."

"There must not—there shall not!" broke in Elsie.

"Such madness—such greedy selfishness——"

"Don't tell me," shivered Elsie; "please don't!"

Elizabeth dropped her hands into her lap with a gesture full of weariness and desolation; as they fell apart she lifted them up to Elsie, with a look of helpless distress.

"What is it?" cried Elsie. "Don't frighten me!"

"My bracelet!" moaned Elizabeth. "My bracelet!"

"You have lost it?"

"Gone, I tell you! He would have money—I was nearly mad—I pulled it off to pacify him."

"Which bracelet—not the new one?"

"Yes; the one Grantley brought me. Oh, what shall I do?"

"He won't notice it," said Elsie; "you can wear mine."

"He will notice it," returned Elizabeth. "It may be sold—he may find it."

"You can say that you lost it."

"But your brother is so suspicious."

"You ought to have had your wits about you," said Elsie, fretfully.

"It is easy for you to talk!" exclaimed Elizabeth. "If you had been in my place, listening to those threats——"

"Stop, stop!" Elsie almost shrieked, hiding her face in her hands. "I am going into spasms—I shall choke!"

"But a crisis is near!" exclaimed Elizabeth. "You don't know all that a bad, desperate creature is capable of, to accomplish his ends."

"I can't do anything," moaned Elsie. "What am I in all this? You promised to leave me in peace."

"So I will, Elsie—I will. God knows I am ready to bear my burthen alone; but sometimes I must speak."

"It does no good," said Elsie, beginning to cry. "I'd rather be dead than live in this way!"

"Be a woman, with some feeling for a sister woman!" cried Elizabeth, aroused into severity.

"It's all very well for you to talk, you are a great strong thing; I don't mean that you are big, but your nerves are like iron and I am so weak. Grantley says he believes the least thing would kill me; he knows how frail my health is."

Passionate indignation lighted up Elizabeth's face for an instant, but it softened into pity, like that with which she might have regarded a pet animal whimpering under a hurt.

"Be good to me," said Elsie. "I can't help you. I don't mean to be selfish, but I must have my sunshine. I don't dare even to talk about it at all. If Grant ever should find out anything, even my talking to you about it would enrage him so!"

"And what would become of me?" demanded Elizabeth. "Do you never think of what would happen to me?"

"Oh, but he won't find out anything," urged Elsie, changing her tone at once. "Just let things rest. The wretch will be quiet for a time."

"No, no; I tell you money must be raised."

"More money?"

"I promised it; there was no other way. But heaven knows where I shall get it."

"Well, tell Grant about some family or hospital——"

"Lies!" interrupted Elizabeth; "always lies! Sinking deeper into the pit every day. I tell you this constant deceit makes me hate myself!"

"Now you are going off again! Oh, my head!"

"Hush, I say! You are safe, at any rate!"

"Whatever comes, I shall not be dragged into it?" pleaded Elsie.

"No, no; have I not promised?" returned Elizabeth, in her anguish and her bitterness, hardly noticing the girl's selfish fears.

Elsie threw both arms about her neck and kissed her.

"You are so good!" she said. "Oh, I wish I wasn't such a weak little thing! Don't despise me, Bessie, because I can't do anything to help you."

"I don't—I don't. Your arm hurts me!" Elizabeth pushed the girl's caressing arm away, struggling hard to be calm.

"If I had never known——"

But Elizabeth checked the selfish wail.

"It is too late now to think of that. I tell you I shall not trouble you any more."

"When the paper fell on the stones," said Elsie, "I was so frightened."

Elizabeth gasped for breath at the very thought.

"But I managed cleverly. I am very weak and nervous, but I have my wits about me sometimes."

Elizabeth was shivering from head to foot, whether with remorse at the knowledge of evil which this young girl had gained through her, or some hidden fear, no one could tell.

"I must go to town," she said; "but what excuse can I make?"

"Oh, anything! Tell Grant we want to make purchases. I'll do it. But why must you go?"

"The money, I tell you the money! I have those stocks; if I could sell them. I might tell Mr. Hinchley I was in debt and feared to have my husband know it. Another lie—another lie!"

"Oh," groaned Elsie, "the lying is the least part of it! if that could do you any good!"

"You don't know the worst. If you had to face him! Oh, Elsie, the shame, the remorse!"

Elizabeth wrung her hands again with the same passionate fury she had displayed after reading the note. Then Elsie began to grow hysterical and cry out:

"You must stop! you must stop!"

Elizabeth made an effort to control her own suffering and soothe the girl's nervous paroxysm, to which Elsie gave way with wilful abandonment, half because she felt it, and half to escape a scene.

By the time they were both quieted Mr. Mellen returned to the room, and by one of those evil chances that often happen he began speaking of the very subject that had aroused their fears.

"Those bracelets are the admiration of everybody," he said.

Elizabeth glanced at Elsie. Her first impulse was to hide her hands, but she checked that and forced herself to utter some sort of answer to his remark.

Elsie gave another long yawn.

"I am going to bed," she exclaimed; "I advise you both to do the same."

"I wish I understood the meaning of the device. Let me see your bracelet, Bessie," he continued, without heeding his sister and bent on his own train of thought. "Just let me look——"

Elsie thrust out her arm.

"Look at mine," she said.

"No, no; Bessie's has a different design. I want to see that. Show me yours, Elizabeth."

Elizabeth did not stir. Whiter she could not grow, but a hopeless despair settled over her face, pitiful to witness.

"Can't you show me your bracelet?" demanded her husband, with natural impatience.

"I haven't it," she faltered.

"Why, I saw it on your arm at dinner!"

"Oh, don't bother, Grant," interposed Elsie; "talking about devices, when one is half asleep."

"Elizabeth, where is your bracelet?" demanded her husband, imperiously.

The exigency of the case gave her courage.

"I have lost it," she said, her voice sounding fairly indifferent from the effort she made at composure.

"Lost it!" he repeated. "How? Where?"

"While I was out——"

"She was just beginning to tell me when you came in," interrupted Elsie. "We are both frightened to death, so don't scold."

"Such unpardonable carelessness," continued Mr. Mellen. "At least, Elizabeth, you need not appear so indifferent."

"I am sorry, very sorry," she answered coldly.

"Oh, if I had lost mine, I should be wretched," cried Elsie, kissing hers. "You dear old bracelet!"

Elizabeth shot one terrible look at her, but was silent.

"I am glad that you at least prize my gift," said Mr. Mellen. "I suppose you have not taken the trouble to search, Elizabeth?"

"I have had no time——"

"The moon is down," said Elsie.

"There are lanterns, I suppose."

He rang and ordered a servant to bring a lantern, went out and searched for the missing ornament, while Elsie cowered over the hall fire and Elizabeth stood, cold and white, in the way.

Clorinda came out of her domain while Mr. Mellen and Dolf were searching the hall.

"Lost something marster?" she demanded, with the coolness peculiar to her race.

"Missis has lost her bracelet," interposed Dolf.

"Laws!" cried Clorinda, not perceiving her mistress on the veranda. "I neber seed nobody lose tings so; 'taint a month since she lost a di'mond ring, and all she said, when her maid missed it, was, 'It can't be helped.'"

This was an aside to Dolf, but Mr. Mellen heard the words plainly, so did Elizabeth.

"I'll bet yer don't find it," pursued Clorinda. "I heerd steps early in de evenin'; I knows I did, though missis called me a foolish cullud pusson once when I told her of hearing 'em. Dar's thieves about, now; member I tells yer!"

"Clorinda," called Elizabeth, "go into the house. The next time you venture any remark on me you will leave my service."

Clorinda sallied back as if she had been shot, and darted into her own dominions, less favorably disposed than ever towards the mistress for reproving her before Dolf.

Mr. Mellen dismissed the man, walked into the veranda and confronted his wife. He was pale as death, in the moonlight. His agitation made Elizabeth more sternly cold; she knew that look, she had borne it in his suspicious, jealous moments in the old time.

"Did you lose that bracelet, Elizabeth?" he asked.

"Did I not say so?" she retorted.

"I can't understand it," he went on; "these sudden frights and tremors, these mysterious losses —"

"The old suspicions," she broke in, goaded into defiance by the actual danger. "You promised me to have done with all those things, Grantley."

"Admit at least——"

"I will admit nothing. I will not talk to you when you speak in that tone. I am sorry the bracelet is gone, but I am not a child to be threatened."

Elsie heard it all, and when the dialogue reached that point she crept quietly upstairs, determined that at least she would be beyond even the sound of their difficulty.

For a few moments they retorted bitterly upon each other. Formerly it had been Elizabeth's resolution to bear in silence, but it is hard to be patient when one has a fatal wrong to conceal.

It was very unsatisfactory, but there the matter ended.

The next morning Mr. Mellen made another thorough search for the bracelet. Still no signs of it was discovered, but he did find traces of footsteps in the grass, which proved the truth of Clorinda's suspicions.

"It's over, at all events," said Elsie, as she met Elizabeth on the stairs.

"Over!" repeated the half-distracted woman, desperately; "who can tell how or when it may come up again?"

Elsie kissed her and flew away, leaving Elizabeth to seek safety in the solitude of her chamber, while she went in search of her brother, not with the object of benefiting Elizabeth, but anxious to impress upon his mind that she at least did nothing to distress or vex him.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BELOW STAIRS.

While matters were moving on thus excitedly above stairs there was an unusual commotion in the lower regions, effected by the machinations and deceptions of that arch-flirt, Dolf. He had succeeded in accomplishing what no sable gallant had ever done before; he had softened Clorinda's obdurate heart, and made her think it possible that at some future time she might be persuaded to place her fair self, and what she prized more, her money, in Dolf's keeping.

But the worst of it was, Dolf's susceptible fancy led him strongly in another direction, even while his discretion warned him to follow up the success he had achieved with the culinary nymph. Victoria was a stylish, handsome young mulatto, and Clorinda was, undoubtedly, pure African to the very root of her genealogical tree. African from the soul of her broad foot to the end, I cannot say point, of her flat nose. Indeed, it is quite possible that Dolf's yellow skin went for something in her admiration; but unfortunately Dolf preferred the café-au-lait complexion also, and had a masculine weakness in favor of youth and good looks.

Poor Clorinda certainly did present a rather dry and withered aspect; her hands bore rough

evidence of the toil with which she had earned the money her sable lover coveted, and their clasp was very unsatisfactory to a man whose flirtations had hitherto been with ladies' maids. She was sadly destitute of the airs and graces with which Victoria fascinated the grand sex so freely upon all occasions; Clo's curly tresses held quantities of whiteness, and she could only hide it under gorgeous bandannas, which were now woefully out of fashion among the colored aristocrats, and gaze enviously at Victoria's long curls, feeling her fingers quiver to give them a pull when that damsel fluttered them too jauntily in her eyes.

There had always been trouble enough between the two, but after Dolf's arrival the kitchen department grew very hot and uncomfortable, and even the wary Dolf himself, skilled as he was in Lotharian practices, frequently had great difficulty in steering clear of both Scylla and Charybdis.

Clorinda was much given to devotional exercises, and went to meeting on every possible occasion; while Victoria, with the flightiness of her years, laughed at Clo's psalm-singing, and interrupted her prayers in the most fervid part by polka steps and profane redowas. In order to propitiate Clorinda, Dolf had accompanied her to meeting much oftener than his inclinations prompted, expressing the utmost desire to be remembered in her prayers, all the while denouncing himself as a miserable sinner not worth saving.

But good women with a weakness for helping masculine sinners are alike in one thing, no matter what their color may be—wickedness has a strange attraction for them. It was the peril in which she considered Dolf, that made Clo so lenient towards him; it would be such a triumph to win him from his wicked ways, and lead him up to a height where he would be secure from the craft of the evil one, and what was more important, beyond the wiles of that yellow girl Victoria, who was regarded by her fellow-servants as a direct emissary of the prince of darkness.

Clo labored faithfully with 'Dolf, though it must be confessed she allowed her religious instructions to be diversified with a little more love-making than would have been quite sanctioned by her class leader, and for the first time in her life became extravagant in the matter of dress, wearing the most gorgeous bandannas every day, and even adopting an immense crinoline, which she managed so badly that it was constantly bringing her into grotesque difficulties, to Victoria's intense delight.

Of course these females, like their betters, never quarreled openly about Dolf, but they found endless subjects of dispute to improve upon, and sometimes that adroit fellow got into serious difficulty with both by attempting to mediate between them.

On occasions the sable rivals would hide their bitterness under smiles and good nature, and appear almost affectionate after the influence of a sudden truce; but Dolf learned to dread those seasons of deceitful calm, for they were the sure precursors of an unusually fierce tempest, which, blowing in opposite directions, it was impossible for him to escape.

These three restless persons went out one evening to pay a visit to some sable friends in the neighborhood, where the colored gentry often met and had choice little entertainments; where the eatables came from perhaps it would not have been wise for their employers to inquire.

Old Mrs. Hopkins and her fascinating daughter, Miss Dinah, were the possessors of this abode, and Clo and Victoria had for some time been promising Dolf a visit there. That night seemed a favorable occasion for the expedition, as a store of fruit pies, blanc mange and chicken salad, had that day been moulded by Clo's own expert hands, and half a jelly cake set aside in the closet ready for the basket which took so many mysterious journeys in Mrs. Hopkins' direction.

"I nebber sends back pieces to de table," said Clo; "it's vulgar."

"In course it is," returned Dolf; "I'se sure nothing would orrritate master more."

Vic attempted no deceptions on her conscience; she liked jelly cake, and did not trouble herself about the manner in which it was obtained; since her earliest remembrance stolen delicacies had never given her a moment's indigestion, or the least approach to moral nightmare.

They went over to visit Mrs. Hopkins and Miss Dinah, and the evening was made a festive one, with Clo's pies, the hard cider which Mrs. Hopkins provided, and other delicacies which composed a sumptuous entertainment.

But as ill-luck would have it, two or three other friends strayed in, and among them was a young woman as much given to coquetry as Dolf himself; and before a great while Dolf's love of flirtation got the better of his prudence, and plentiful doses of the hard cider rendered him reckless. In spite of the indignation which both Clo and Victoria displayed, he was exerting all his fascinations on the newcomer, while her neglected beau sat looking like a modern Othello, with every glance expressive of bowie-knives at least.

When the damsel went out with Miss Dinah, for an extra bench from the wash-house, Dolf accompanied them, and directly the company were startled by a direful commingling of laughter and doleful shrieks.

Clo flew to the door and opened it; Victoria peeped over her shoulder; there was that perfidious Dolf encircling the stranger damsel with his right arm, and making bold efforts to lay hold of the wash-bench with his left.

Dolf looked up and saw Clo; he was not so much under the excitement of the cider that he could not understand the risk he ran.

"Dare is pretty conducts!" exclaimed Clo.

"I shud tink so," chimed in Victoria. "If you please, Miss Clorinda, I tink I will locomote home; I ain't accustomed to sich goings on myself; dey isn't de fashion in de Piney Cove basement."

Clorinda got her bonnet and tied it on her head with an indignant jerk.

The outraged damsels would hear no persuasions, and Dolf was forced to accompany them back, and a very uncomfortable time he had of it.

First they abused the impudent young pusson they had left behind, and nearly annihilated Dolf when he attempted a word in the young woman's favor.

"I 'clar," cried Clo at last; "Mr. Dolf, yer go 'long as crooked as a rail fence; what am de matter, are yer jest done gone and no 'count nigger any how?"

Dolf only gave a racy chuckle.

"I guess goin' into the wash-room turned his head," said Vic.

"De siety I'se enjoyin' at dis minit," said deceitful Dolf, "is enough to turn de head of any gemman."

"Oh, we know all 'bout dat," said Vic.

"In course you does," returned Dolf, forgetting Clorinda, and trying to seize Vic's hand, but so uncertain were his movements that she readily escaped him.

Clorinda saw it all; it was fuel to the flame which consumed her.

"Miss Victory," said she, "yer needn't push me into de brook."

"Who's a pushin' of yer?" retorted Victoria, with equal acidity.

"Yer was, yer own self."

"I didn't—so dar! Guess somethin' ails yer head too, de way yer go on—pushin' indeed."

"I scorns yer insinivations," said Clorinda, "and despises yer actuations!"

"Jis' don't go pitchin' into me and callin' me names," retorted Vic; "'cause I won't stand it."

"Ladies, ladies!" interposed Dolf. "Don't resturb de harmonium of our walk by any onpleasant words."

"I ain't a sayin' nothin'," said Vic.

"Yer've said more'n I," returned Clo, "and I ain't gwine to be pushed inter de ditch by nobody—thar!"

Clorinda was naturally more irritated than Vic, because Dolf had made no effort to seize upon her hand, which trembled to give him a pardoning clasp.

"Nobody wants ter push yer," said Vic.

"I don' know 'bout dat," said Clo, solemnly; "I b'lieve if I was murdered in my bed I shud know whar ter look for de murderer."

"Sich subjects, Miss Clorinda, is not fit for yer lubly lips," said Dolf; "don' gib dem houserom, I begs."

"Mr. Dolf," returned Clorinda, with a severity that pierced like a warning through the elation of Lothario's brain; "don' try none ob dem flightinesses wid me; I ain't one ob dat sort."

"What sort?" asked Victoria.

"Neber yer mind," said Clo, with majesty; "neber yer mind, miss; children don' comprehensianise sich like."

"I onderstands Miss Clorinda, and I venerates her sentiments," observed Dolf; "but when a gemman finds hissself in sich siety as dis, de language of compliments flows as naturally ter his lips as—as—cider from a junk bottle."

This well-rounded period softened both the damsels a little; Dolf got Clo on his right arm and Vic on his left; the support was not unwelcome to himself just then; and he managed to keep them both in tolerable humor until they nearly reached the house.

Whether Dolf stumbled, or Victoria gave a sly, vicious push, it was difficult to tell in the darkness, but Clorinda went suddenly down full length in the path.

Victoria gave a laugh of derision, and this gratification of her malicious feelings in the misfortune of her rival, put her in high good-humor.

Dolf hastened to help Clorinda up, but his movements were a little uncertain, and the first thing

he did was to set his foot through the crown of her bonnet, which had fallen back from her head.

"I'se killed," shrieked Clo.

"Do scream low, like a 'spectable ole woman!" cried the unsympathising Vic; "yer'll hab de whole house out."

"I don't keer," moaned Clorinda: "I don't keer."

"Why don' yer get up?" demanded Victoria.

"I'll 'sist yer, I'll 'sist yer," said Dolf, making another sidelong movement.

Clorinda endeavored to help herself, but the effort was a failure, and there she lay covered with confusion, for she could not think of giving the real cause of her continued prostration. The truth was she had knocked one high heel from a pair of Mrs. Harrington's French boots, which that lady was not likely to miss before morning; and had sprained her ankle in the process, a very unpleasant situation for a modest and churchgoing darkey to find herself in, late at night, and her lover looking on.

"Be yer gwine to lay dar all night!" asked Vic.

"I kin't get up, I tell yer," said Clo.

"Is yer bones broke?"

"Smashed. One of 'em am smashed," answered Clo, ruefully.

"No, no; Miss Clory, not as bad as dat," said Dolf; "don't petrificate us wid sich a idee. Jis let me sist yer now."

"No, no," cried Clorinda; "wait a minit—my foot—my foot!"

"Hev yer hurt it?" demanded Vic; "let me zamine."

"It's my ankle; can't yer understand?"

"No, I kin't onderstand nothin' 'bout it, only yer makin' a outrageous ole fool o' yerself, and freezin' us to death. Mr. Dolf, 'spozen we go in."

"Yer wouldn't desart a sister in distress," said Dolf, dancing about the prostrate form, unable to comprehend why Clo would not permit him to assist her; while she huddled herself in a heap, in true spinster fear of showing her ankles or exposing the borrowed boot.

"Now, Clo," cried Victoria, "jis git up; I won't stand dis fooling no longer."

"Help me," said Clo; "do help me."

"Hain't Mr. Dolf ben a tryin' dese ten minits!"

"No, no! Bend down here, Vic. Mr. Dolf, if yer's a gemman I ax yer to shut yer eyes."

"My duty is to sarve de fair," said Dolf, turning his back and peeping over his shoulder, very curious to know what could be the difficulty.

Clo whispered in Victoria's ear with agonised sharpness,

"Dem boots am so high, an' my ankle is guv out, jes ondo de buttons!"

A stone might have sympathised with her maidenly distress, but that wicked Victoria burst into absolute shrieks of laughter.

"Oh, oh, oh! yer ole fool!" she cried, between her shouts of merriment. "Yer too ole for new fashions—telled yer so!"

Clorinda's outraged modesty was forgotten in the fury which Victoria's lack of sympathy caused.

"Jis let me git up!" cried she. "I'll fix yer; I'll frizzle dem long beaucatchers like a door mat, an' stamp on 'em."

"What am it?" demanded Dolf.

As well as she could speak for laughing, Victoria began "She's just choked up her foot in Miss Harrington's high pincerled boots!"

"Hush up!" interrupted Clo. "I'll pisen yer if yer don't shut yer impudent mouth."

"Ki! ki! ki! oh, laws, I shall die! Ole folks hadn't orter try to be young uns. I've telled yer so, Clo, fifty times," shrieked the yellow maiden; "'tain't no wonder yer snickered, Dolf; borrered feathers! he, he! Vic!"

Clorinda sprang to her feet with a yell of triumph and rage, and limping toward Victoria, caught that yellow maiden by her much-prized tresses, and for a few moments the battle between the rivals raged furiously.

Clo quite forgot her religion in the excitement, and her language might have shocked the elders had they heard it, while Victoria struggled bravely to save her tresses from extermination.

"De hall door's a openin'," cried Dolf, struck with a brilliant thought; "I believe it's marster comin' out."

The battle ceased. Dolf ran towards the house and the combatants after him; Clorinda limping like a returned soldier, but Dolf never stopped till he was safe in his own dormitory, not caring to trust himself in the presence of either of the infuriated damsels.

Indeed, the next morning it required the special interference of Mrs. Mellen herself to settle the matter, and several days passed before perfect harmony was restored in the lower regions at Piney Cove.

CHAPTER XXXV.

MRS. MELLEN AND HER COUSIN.

The next afternoon Tom Fuller came down to the island again.

Elizabeth and Elsie were quite alone, for Mellen had driven over to the village on some matter of business; but the sisters were not taking advantage of their solitude to indulge in one of those long, cozy, confidential chats which had been their habit in former years.

Elsie was in the upper part of the house amusing herself after her own fashion, and Elizabeth sat in the little morning-room which had become her favorite apartment of late.

It was a small room in the old part of the house, somewhat sombre in its character, but on a bright day relieved by a beautiful view of the sea which was afforded from the French windows, the only modern feature which Mellen had added to it.

On a dark morning the apartment was gloomy enough; the ceilings were low, crossed with heavy carved beams that made their want of height still more apparent; the upper portion of the walls were hung with dark crimson cloth, met half way down by a wainscoating of unpolished oak, dark and stained with age.

The furniture had been in the house since the Revolution; the massive chairs, each one of which was a weight to lift, had been covered with a fabric to match the hangings. The whole room had a quaint aspect, and was filled with a store of relics and curiosities which would have delighted a lover of the antique.

Elsie detested the apartment and never would occupy it, but when alone Elizabeth sought it from choice; the darker and drearier the day the more pertinaciously she clung to the old room, where the shadows lay heavy and grim, and every sound was echoed with preternatural sharpness.

But this day was bright and beautiful as summer itself. The apartment looked cheerful and picturesque, and Elizabeth made a pretty picture, seated by one of the open windows, with her light dress forming an agreeable contrast to the sombre draperies about her.

She had a work-basket on the little spider-legged table by her side and a mass of embroidery on her lap, but the needle had fallen from her hold, her hands lay idly upon her knee, and she was looking out over the bright waters with a dreamy, wistful gaze, which had become habitual with her whenever the necessity for self-restraint was removed and she was free to suffer, unobserved.

Tom entered the room in his usual haste, and found her sitting in this dreamy attitude; she started at the sound of his tread, and with the caution she was daily acquiring changed her listless position, and threw the mask of a smile over her face, which it was so dangerous to lift even for an instant.

"Here I am," cried Tom; "back again, like a bad penny. I hope you are not beginning to hate the sight of my ugly face."

He rushed towards her, upset the spider-legged table that was always ready to topple over on the least provocation, made a hopeless labyrinth of her embroidery silks, gave her a kiss of greeting, and hurried on with numberless questions, just as if he were in the greatest possible haste, and it was a necessity of life and death that he should throw off everything that happened to be on his mind before he dashed away.

"And you are not tired of seeing me, Bessie, you are sure of that?" he repeated.

"You are a silly fellow to ask such questions," she replied; "you know how glad I am to have you come."

"You're a darling old girl," cried Tom, "and there's no more to be said about it."

"Then, if you have finished, please pick up my unfortunate table. See what a state these poor silks are in."

"I'm always in mischief," said Tom, contritely, restoring the table to its equilibrium with great difficulty; "I'm more out of place in a lady's parlor than an owl in a canary bird's cage."

"Your mistakes are better than other men's elegancies," said Elizabeth, heartily.

It rested her to be in Tom's society; with him she was not forced constantly to play a part, and he had been a great resource to her ever since his return.

Many times she said to herself:

"He would love me, whatever came—I can always depend on him."

She was thinking something of the kind, just then, while she began assorting her silks; and Tom stood meekly by, longing to repair the mischief he had occasioned, but perfectly certain that he should only do a good deal more harm if he attempted it.

Besides that, something else was in his mind—there always was before he had been five minutes in the house if Elsie did not make her appearance.

He shuffled about, answered Elizabeth's questions haltingly, and at last burst out:

"Where is the little fairy—has she gone out, too?"

"Elsie, do you mean?"

"Who else, of course? Where is she?"

"Up in her room, I fancy," replied Elizabeth.

"I don't see how you can bear her out of your sight for an instant," cried Tom; "I'm sure I couldn't if I lived in the house with her."

"Nonsense, Tom!"

"There is no nonsense about it; it's just the truth."

Several times Elizabeth had attempted to point out to him the folly of going on in his old insane fashion, but either he would not listen or something interrupted their conversation. Now she determined to take advantage of the present opportunity and speak seriously with him.

"I have brought her a paper of Maillard's sweet things," said Tom; "might I call or send for her?"

He darted towards the door as he spoke, but Elizabeth stopped him.

"Wait a moment, Tom," she said; "come back here."

"Yes, of course; I'll be back in a flash—I'll just send her these traps," and he pulled a couple of tempting packages from his pocket, nattily tied with pink ribbons and got up generally in the exquisite taste which distinguishes everything from our Frenchman's establishment.

"No," urged Elizabeth, "come here first; I have something to say to you, Tom—Elsie can eat her bon-bons after."

Tom came back, rather unwillingly though, and stood leaning against the window like a criminal.

"Sit down," said Elizabeth.

"No, no! I like to stand! Well, what is it, Bessie?"

"Tom," she said, seriously, "I am afraid you have forgotten the experience which cost you so much pain and drove you off to Europe; I fear you are making other and deeper trouble for yourself."

"Oh, no, Bessie—it's of no consequence any way," returned Tom, turning fifty different shades of red at once, "What a pretty green that silk is."

"It is bright blue, but no matter! So you wont listen to me, Tom?" continued Elizabeth.

"My dear girl, did I ever refuse to listen in all my life!" cried Tom. "But you see, you're a little mistaken, Bessie; I'm not such a goney as I used to be."

"That has nothing to do with the matter."

"Oh, yes, it has; I mean, I don't allow myself to be such a dunce, even in my own thoughts. I never even think about—about—you know what I mean."

Tom broke down and made a somewhat lame conclusion.

"Oh, Tom, Tom!" Elizabeth said.

"Well, there!" cried he, with sudden energy; "there is no use in standing here and telling you fibs! I do love her—I must love her—I always shall love her—hang me if I shan't!"

He was in a state of great agitation now, and trembled all over as if he had been addressing Elsie herself.

Elizabeth sighed wearily.

"I thought so," she said; "I feared so."

"You mean the dear girl will never care for me. How could any one expect her to—I couldn't—'tisn't in reason."

"Then, Tom, she certainly ought not to treat you as she does and lead you on."

"She doesn't lead me on."

"But her manner does not forbid your attentions, and you are too worthy, dear cousin, for anything but honest dealing."

"It's my fault—all my fault."

Elizabeth shook her head.

"You have the best heart and the worst head in the world," said she.

"You musn't blame her," continued Tom; "I can't stand that! Pitch into me as often and as hard as you like, you never can say enough, but don't blame her."

"Let us leave her share in the matter, then, out of the question," continued Elizabeth. "If you believe what you say, is it wise to run into danger as you do?"

"There's no help for it, Bessie; I should die if I could not see her dear little face! Oh, you can't think what I suffered while I was gone—I didn't talk about it—I don't even want to think of it; but, Bessie, dear, sometimes I used to think I should go out of my senses."

He was speaking seriously now; his face was absolutely pale with emotion, and his eyes—the one fine feature of his face—were misty with a remembrance of old pain.

"Poor Tom," murmured Elizabeth, in her pitying way, always full of sympathy for the trouble of others, whatever her own might be; "poor, dear Tom, I know how hard it is."

"No; you can't know, Bessie; you can't have the least idea! You don't know what it is to have something to hide—to go about with a secret gnawing at your heart—never able to open your lips—suffering night and day—"

He stopped suddenly and looked at his cousin with wonder; she was leaning back in her chair, her face was pale as death, and her lips parted in a dreary sigh.

Tom drew close to her chair and bent over her, with a look of anxious surprise on his disturbed features.

"Are you sick, Bessie?" he asked.

"No, no," she answered, controlling herself.

His words brought up her own secret burden so vividly before her that for an instant she had been dreadfully shaken.

"You look so pale; I'm afraid you are going to be ill."

"Indeed, I am not," she answered.

Tom knelt down by her on both knees, played with her embroidery silks, and finally said:

"Bessie, since we're talking plainly, may I say something?"

"Yes, Tom."

"Somehow, since I came back from Europe, you don't seem so happy as you used—maybe it's only one of my blunders—but I have thought you looked troubled—like a person that was always expecting something dreadful to happen."

She forced a smile upon her lips and then compelled them to answer him:

"Oh, you foolish Tom!"

"Then it is not so!" he urged. "You are not unhappy?"

"How could I be unhappy—is not my life pleasant, prosperous beyond anything I could ever have hoped for?"

"It seems so; that made me think it must be just one of my silly fancies."

"Nothing more, Tom."

"Mellen's the most splendid fellow in the world," pursued he; "and you couldn't well be sad with that little darling about you."

Elizabeth took up her silks again.

"Dismiss all such thoughts from your mind, Tom."

"I shall be only too glad. But tell me once more that I am an over-anxious busybody, minding everybody's concerns but my own. You see, Bessie, I love you like a sister, and will stand by you, by Jupiter, always. But these stupid ideas of mine, there's no foundation for them?"

"How could there be?"

"That's what I say to myself always," cried Tom. "Well, dear, I won't think such nonsense again."

"Do not, I beg; and never mention it to anybody."

"There's no danger of that," said Tom. "But you know, if you should get unhappy or in trouble, there is always one old chap you could lean on."

"I believe that, Tom; I do indeed."

"And you would come to me, Bessie?"

"If you could help me, yes. But trouble must come to all, Tom; and, generally, we must each bear our burdens alone."

"How sad your voice sounds, Bessie."

She made an effort to speak playfully:

"You are getting all sorts of ridiculous fancies in your head; don't be so foolish."

Tom was relieved by her manner, and began to laugh at his own ridiculous mistakes, rising from his knees and brushing the dust away with his handkerchief.

"My head is a poor old trap," he said. "Well, well, I am glad you are happy—very glad."

"And I want you to be happy, Tom."

"I am, upon my word, I am! I don't allow myself to think any more or to look forward, but just live on, glad to be in the sunshine. 'Tisn't a bad world, after all, Bess; things usually come right in the end."

If she could only believe it—if she could but accept his cheerful philosophy and his unwavering trust; but, alas! the sleepless dread at her heart prevented that.

"And about my stupid self, Bessie," added Tom.

"Yes, about your dear, good self," answered Elizabeth, glad to remove the subject from any connection with her secret dread.

"And my useless bits of affairs," pursued Tom; "just let things rest as they are, it's the best way."

"I don't wish to do anything to annoy you," she replied; "and you know very well I am the last person in the world to interfere——"

"Oh, don't talk like that, or I shall think you are offended."

"Not in the least, Tom; I only meant to say that it was my regard for your happiness that made me speak."

"I know—I feel that, Bessie; but just let things go on! Perhaps I am asleep and dreaming, but the slumber is pleasant, so don't wake me; it's cruel kindness, dear."

Elizabeth said nothing more; it was useless to pursue the subject; where Tom was concerned she saw plainly that it could do no good, his heart was fixed.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

LURED INTO DANGER.

Just as Elizabeth was thinking over this conversation, and giving another little sigh for Tom and what she feared for him, a blithe young voice rang in the hall, carolling like a bird.

"There she is!" exclaimed Tom.

His face lighted up, his whole frame seemed to expand with delight. Elizabeth watched him. She knew better than ever that his heartstrings were twined about that young creature, that his very soul had gone out in worship at her feet.

"And where are you hidden, Lady Bess?" sang Elsie, gayly.

Tom rushed to the door and flung it open, upsetting the table again, and this time leaving Elizabeth to pick it up herself.

"Here she is, my fairy princess!" he called, standing in the doorway and looking up at her as she paused on the stairs.

"In that dismal den and guarded by a dragon," cried Elsie, peeping at him through the banisters, mischievously. "Pray where did you come from, C[oe]ur de Lion?"

"If you knew what I had brought for my lady-bird, you would be on your prettiest behavior and

give me your best welcome," said Tom.

"It's bon-bons!" cried Elsie with a shriek of delight. "The ogre means pralines and caramels and marons glacés!"

"Come down and see," said Tom, mysteriously.

Elsie danced downstairs and entered the room where her sister sat.

"Ugh, the ugly place!" said she. "It makes me shiver!"

"Better come into the den than lose the sweets," said Tom, opening the papers and pretending to eat greedily.

"He won't leave a drop!" cried Elsie, darting upon him.

Tom prolonged the playful struggle artfully enough; and when a truce was concluded it was only on condition that he should feed her with the sugarplums, and as he did not satisfy her greediness fast enough, there was a great deal of sport and laughter between the pair.

Elizabeth sat in the window and watched them, sighing sometimes and regarding Elsie with a strange pain in her eyes, as if annoyed and troubled that the happy creature could not leave her the full affection of this one heart.

"I want to go out on the water," said Elsie. "Will you take me, you ugly giant?"

"Won't I!" said Tom. "I'd take you to the moon if you liked."

"But I don't wish to try the moon, thank you; a nice long row will satisfy me. Come along, Bessie!"

"Not to-day," answered Elizabeth coldly.

"You're a hateful, poky thing!" cried Elsie. "Well, I shall go, the sun is lovely."

"I'll run down to the shore and get the boat ready," said Tom, ecstatically.

He darted away, and Elsie stood for a few moments crushing the candies between her white teeth and looking at Elizabeth, half frightened, half defiant.

"You are very busy," said she.

"One can't be idle," replied Elizabeth.

"Oh, can't one? It just suits me, thank you."

"Elsie," said her sister, suddenly, "I want to say something."

"If it is anything unpleasant, I won't hear. I won't hear. I want to be happy. Let me alone!"

"It is about yourself; don't be alarmed."

"Well, say it; but you are going to scold or something else dreadful, I know by your voice."

"Don't be such a baby," said Elizabeth, impatiently.

"There! I knew you were cross! How can I help being a baby? I like it, and I will be one."

"Do you think you are acting honestly with Tom?" said Elizabeth.

"I'm not acting at all," replied Elsie fretfully. "I can't help his coming here constantly. You wouldn't have me rude to your own cousin?"

"You know what I mean. He loves you, in spite of your conduct before he went abroad——"

"I can't help it," Elsie broke in again. "If people will fall in love with me it's their own fault; I don't ask them."

"But you can help encouraging him and leading him on to greater pain."

Elsie pouted.

"How do you know I shall?"

"You would not marry him," exclaimed Elizabeth, suddenly. "You—you—you——"

"You don't know anything about it. Let Tom and me alone. I think you are growing a cross old thing."

"Oh, Elsie, do be serious for one moment."

"Let me alone!" she repeated. "You are always spoiling my sunshine. I believe you hate me!"

"Don't talk so wildly, Elsie. But you cannot blame me for being anxious about Tom's happiness."

"And, pray, should I make him wretched if I married him?" she exclaimed defiantly.

"You won't do that. You——"

"I'll do what I please; and don't you meddle with me, just remember that!"

The voice was sharp and unlike Elsie's usual tone, but she quickly resumed her childish manner, and added:

"I'll be good—don't scold. There, I'm going now—good-bye!"

She danced out of the room and through the house, and Elizabeth heard her voice on the lawn, calling to Tom, to know if the boat was ready.

Elizabeth kept her seat, looking absently across the water. Presently she saw the little skiff shoot out from the shore, under the impetus of Tom's muscular arms, while Elsie leaned back in the stern, wrapped in a pale blue shawl, and reminding Elizabeth of the old German legend of the Lurlei.

She sat there a long time, with her former mournful thoughts all trooping back, like ravens to a desolated nest. The gloom upon her spirits waxed deeper, and the chill that had begun during the past days to creep about her heart tightened and grew cold, as if it were changing to an icy band, which would freeze her pulses in its tightening clasp. She looked out through the sunshine, watching the light boat till it became a mere speck in the distance, and finally disappeared among the windings of the long curve of land which stretched out into the ocean.

Thinking, thinking, always the same dreary round, till she grew so weary with the ceaseless anxiety, the constant necessity for plots and plans, the need of reflection, even, in slightest act, and, worse than all, the sleepless fear of discovery which hovered over her, asleep or awake, that it seemed sometimes that she could no longer uphold the burden, but must allow it to fall and crush her.

The afternoon was passing, but the little boat had not yet appeared in sight again. There was no danger that Tom would think of fatigue while he could sit looking in the face of his syren, listening to her low, sweet songs; nor was there the slightest possibility of her ever remembering that the strongest muscles must at last feel a little need of relaxation. Just as long as it pleased her to float over the sunlit waters, carolling her pretty melodies or talking gay nonsense to Tom, and blinding him utterly with the wicked lightning of her eyes, she would think of nothing else.

At last Mr. Mellen's step sounded in the hall. Elizabeth heard it, and immediately gathered up her embroidery silks, making a great pretence of being busy, lest he should enter suddenly, and pierce her with one of his dark, suspicious glances, which made her heart actually stand still with apprehension.

He came on towards the room, looked in at the door and saw his wife sitting there apparently quiet, comfortable, and wholly occupied with her pretty task.

She glanced up and nodded a welcome.

"So you have come back," she said; "I have been wishing for you."

He smiled, came forward and stood by her, saying:

"I thought you had given up any such weakness. You seem very busy."

"This tiresome embroidery has been lying about so long that I am working on it for very shame," she replied.

"Elsie began it and was delighted with it for three days, but she has not touched it since."

"Very like the little fairy," he said, with a smile any reference to the young girl always brought to his lips.

Elizabeth did not wish to talk, it was important that she should hide the real feelings that oppressed her even under an appearance of playfulness. She looked up and smiled:

"If you were good-natured you would sit down here and read to me. There is Bulwer's new book."

"I will, with pleasure; but where is Elsie?"

"Oh, Tom Fuller came, and she made him take her out for a row; so I have been alone in my den, as she calls it."

"The child can't bear the least approach to a shadow," he said; "she must have her sunshine undisturbed."

He drew an easy chair near the window where Elizabeth sat, took up the novel she had asked him to read, and began the splendid story.

He read beautifully, and Elizabeth was glad to forget her unquiet reflections in the melody of his voice and the rare interest of the tale. Mellen himself was in a mood to be comfortable and at rest.

The brightness of the sunset was flooding the waters before either of them looked up again. Then Mellen said:

"Those careless creatures ought to come back; it grows chilly on the water as evening comes on, and the least thing gives Elsie cold."

Elizabeth shaded her eyes with her hand and looked over the bay.

"They are coming," she said; "I can see them."

Mellen looked in the direction to which she pointed, and saw the boat rounding a point of land and making swiftly up the bay.

"Tom is as strong as a young Hercules," he said, watching the little skiff as it fairly flew through the water under the impulse of that powerful arm, and aided by the inward rush of the tide.

They remained watching it till it approached near enough for them to distinguish Elsie's white wrappings. Suddenly Mellen said:

"She is rocking the boat dreadfully! She is standing up—The girl is crazy to run such risks!"

Elizabeth looked and saw Elsie erect in the skiff, her shawl floating around her, rocking the boat to and fro with reckless force, while she could see by Tom's gestures that he was vainly expostulating with her upon her imprudence.

Mellen went into the hall and out on the veranda, with some vague idea of trying to attract the imprudent girl's attention by signals; but the skiff was far off, and Elsie too much occupied to observe them.

Elizabeth threw down her work and followed him, standing by his side in silent apprehension.

"She is mad!" exclaimed Mellen, "absolutely mad!"

Elsie's gay laugh rang over the waters, and they could see Tom expostulating with more animated gestures.

"She will fall overboard, as sure as fate!" cried Mellen. "Oh! Elsie, Elsie!"

But the exclamation could not reach the reckless creature; probably she would have paid no attention had she heard it.

"Oh, see how it rocks!" cried Elizabeth with a shiver.

"She is frightened at her own recklessness," said Mellen, "but will not stop, because it disturbs Tom."

"Perhaps there is less danger than we think," began Elizabeth, but a cry from her husband checked the words.

She looked—the boat had tipped till the edge was even with the water; suddenly Elsie tottered, lost her balance—there was a smothered shriek from the distance—then she disappeared under the crested waves.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE AFTER STRUGGLE.

Mellen sprang down the steps and rushed across the lawn, with some mad idea of trying to rescue his sister; and, following as well as her trembling limbs would permit, Elizabeth saw Tom throw off his coat and plunge into the water.

"He will save her!" she cried; "he will save her!"

Mellen only answered by a groan; he was looking wildly about for a boat, but there was none in sight; thus powerless to aid his darling—he could only stand and watch the struggles of another to rescue her from that death peril. They saw an object rise above the waves—saw Tom swim towards it—seize it—he had caught the girl in his arms. The couple on the lawn could neither move nor cry out; but stood in breathless expectation, and watched him support his burthen with one arm, while with the other he swam towards the skiff, which the tide was bearing in towards the shore. It was a long pull; they could see that he began to falter after his exertions in rowing; a deathly fear crept over both those hearts, but they did not speak—scarcely breathed.

Suddenly an outgoing wave washed the helpless girl from Tom's grasp; she was sinking again. Strong man as he was, Grantley Mellen's courage gave way; then covering his face with his hands he sallied back, resting against a tree, afraid to look again. White and cold, Elizabeth watched the boat drift one way, and saw Tom snatch at the girl's dress and get her again in the grasp of his strong arm.

"He has caught her!" she gasped. "He has almost reached the boat. Grantley! Grantley! she is safe!"

Mellen looked up. Tom had just put his hand on the side of the skiff, and was lifting Elsie in. It was evidently the last effort of his mighty strength, for he floated for some distance, holding on to the boat before he had power to attempt more. The husband and wife watched him while he got into the boat himself, lifted Elsie's head on his knee, and allowed the tide almost entirely to wash them towards the beach.

As they approached the bank Elsie began to recover consciousness. As Tom took her in his arms and sprang with a staggering bound on shore, she opened her eyes and saw her brother and Elizabeth.

"I'm safe," she said, faintly, "quite safe. Don't be afraid."

It was not a moment for many words. With an exclamation of thankfulness, Mellen snatched Elsie from Tom's arms and carried her into the house. In a few moments their united exertions brought the reckless girl completely to herself. She looked up and saw the anxious faces bent over her.

"Don't scold," she cried, "Tom saved me, Grant, Tom saved me!"

Mellen grasped Fuller's hands.

"I can't thank you, I can't," he said. "God bless you, my friend."

Tom was shaking from head to foot, his drenched garments dripping like a river god's, but he answered as soon as his chattering teeth would permit:

"Don't say a word. I'd have drowned myself, if I hadn't saved her."

Elizabeth insisted upon Elsie's being carried upstairs to her room, and sent Tom off to change his dress; luckily, in his frequent visits, he had always forgotten some portion of his baggage, so dry clothes were found in his room.

Before Mellen had recovered from the shock sufficiently to be at all composed, Elsie was dressed and lying on the sofa in her own room, quite restored, with the exception of her unusual pallor. She had been wrapped in a rose-colored morning robe, trimmed with swansdown, and lay in delicate relief on the blue couch of her boudoir. Mellen was bending over her and holding her hands, as if he feared to let her free for an instant; while Elizabeth stood near, finding time, now that her labors were over, to watch her husband and wonder if danger to her would have brought a pang like this to his heart.

"I am quite well now," said Elsie, "and I didn't feel much frightened."

"Oh, child!" said her brother, "promise me never to run such risks again."

"But you mustn't scold," she pleaded; "think of the danger I was in! Oh! it was horrible to feel the water closing over my head—to go down—down!"

"Don't think of it," cried Elizabeth, making a sudden effort to change the conversation, from a fear that dwelling upon the danger which she had incurred might bring on one of Elsie's nervous attacks.

"No," added Mellen; "it is all over now, quite over—don't think of it any more."

"You look pale, Grant."

"No wonder, no wonder!"

The girl gave him one of her wilful smiles.

"Perhaps I tried the experiment to see how much you loved me?"

Mellen lifted her in his arms and rested her head upon his shoulder, while many emotions struggled across his face.

"Child!" he said, in a tremulous voice, "you knew before—you have always known. My mother's treasure—my pride—my blessing!"

There Elizabeth stood, forgotten, disregarded—so it seemed to her; but she made no sign which could betray the bitter anguish at her heart.

There came a knock at the door.

"That's Tom Fuller," said Elsie; "tell him to come in, Bessie."

Mellen started up and opened the door himself. There stood Tom, clad in dry garments, but still greatly agitated.

"How is she?" he asked. "Is she better?"

"You have saved her life!" exclaimed Mellen, grasping his two hands; "you have saved her life!"

"But is she better?" he repeated, quite too anxious for any thought of the credit due himself, and too unselfish to desire it even if he had remembered.

"Come in and see," called Elsie, in a tender voice from her sofa.

Tom brushed by Mellen, and down he went on his knees by the couch, exclaiming:

"She looks all right now. Oh, thank God!"

Mellen had been too profoundly disturbed himself for conjecture regarding this passionate outburst; to him it seemed natural that every one should be agitated, and Elsie soon brought them back to safer common-places by her gayety, which not even the peril from which she had

been so recently rescued could entirely subdue.

"I declare, Tom," said she, "you are useful in a household located near the water, as a Newfoundland dog."

"Oh, I can't laugh," cried Tom.

"But you must!" said the wilful creature. "You will not put on long faces because I am saved, I suppose?"

"Elsie," said her brother, "you ought to sleep awhile; Tom and I will go out."

"No, no," she persisted, "I am not in the least sleepy—you must not go away—I shall only get nervous if you leave me alone; I shall be quite well by dinner-time. Tom Fuller, don't go!"

They did not oppose her; every one there knew that it was of no use, for in the end they would surely yield to her caprices.

"I haven't thanked you yet, Tom," she said.

"I don't know what there is to thank me for."

"Indeed!" said Elsie; "so you don't think my life of enough importance to have the saving of it a matter of consequence?"

"You know that wasn't what I meant," said Tom, rubbing his damp hair with one hand.

"You are too bad," said Mellen, laughing, "too bad, Elsie."

"Indeed, I shall tease him more than ever," replied Elsie; "he will grow conceited if I don't. Tell him how much you like me to tease you, old Tom."

"Well," said he, a little ruefully, "you have always done it, and I suppose you always will—I shouldn't think it was you if you stopped now."

Even Elizabeth laughed, and Elsie said:

"There, there, old Tom, don't get sentimental. Perhaps I'll be good-natured for three days by way of reward for pulling me out of the water."

"I'd like to save your life every day in the week at that rate," cried Tom in ecstasy.

"No, no!" added Mellen; "I think one such exploit is quite enough."

Elsie seized Tom's hand, and said with real feeling:

"Tom, I do thank you—I can't tell you how much."

"Don't, don't!" he pleaded. "If you say another word I'll run off and never show my face again."

Elsie began to laugh once more, and the lingering trace of seriousness died quite out of her face.

"Tom is good at a catastrophe," said she, "but he can't carry on the blank verse proper to the after situation."

"Blank enough it would be," rejoined Tom, and then he was so much astonished to find that he had made a sort of joke, that the idea covered him with fresh confusion.

Elsie's disaster passed off without dangerous consequences to the reckless girl, and she had half forgotten the occurrence long before Mellen recovered composure enough to thank, with sufficient fervor, the noble-hearted man who had saved her life.

From that day Tom Fuller took a place in Mellen's esteem which he had never held before; his gratitude was unbounded, and as he learned to know and appreciate the young man, he found a thousand noble qualities to admire under that rugged exterior. And as Elsie softened into gentler earnestness, and drew closer to him day by day, Tom became so completely engrossed in his happy love-dream that he had not a single thought beyond it. In her loneliness and her anxieties which separated her so completely from those three hearts, Elizabeth Mellen watched, sighed sometimes, whispering to herself:

"She has taken even Tom from me. I have nothing left—husband—relative—all, all abandon me for her."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A HALF UNDERSTANDING.

Elsie was twenty now, but looking younger from her fragile form and the extreme delicacy of her complexion. The reader knows how winsome and playful her manners were; how she was loved and cherished by her brother, and it seemed hard that a creature like her, so innocent and winsome, should have even a knowledge of the secret which oppressed Elizabeth. It seemed to

prove more depth of character than one would have expected, that she was in any way able or willing to help her sister-in-law to bear her secret burthen, let that burthen be what it might.

The vague thoughts which had troubled Grantley Mellen on the night of his arrival, had died out. On calm reflection he could understand that it was quite in keeping with the restrained intensity of Elizabeth's nature, that the very violence of the storm should have forced her into it. That the sudden sound of his voice and step should have brought on the nervous weakness to which she so seldom gave way, was equally natural after so much excitement.

Then Elsie came back so blithe and blooming, brought so much sunshine into the house, and drew them both so much into her amusements, that the first days of Mellen's return were pleasant indeed.

The weather had been delightful; they enjoyed rides and drives, moonlight excursions upon the water; there had been visits to receive and return among neighbors and friends; people had heard of Mellen's return, and came uninvited from New York, bringing all that festal bustle and change which puts holidays every now and then into the ordinary routine of our lives.

The first days passed and still the sky was unclouded. Grantley Mellen began to think that he was at last to be happy, and grew cheerful with the thought. So for a time love cast out all fear in the husband's heart.

There had been no further return of that inexplicable nervousness in Elizabeth; the strained, anxious look almost entirely left her face; she was even more lively than was customary with her. It was not that the fear and dread had left her mind, but she was on her guard, and there was a reticence and strength in her character which even those who knew her best did not fully understand. A stern, settled purpose would keep her through her course, whatever might lie behind.

During those happy days there had been no more confidences between her and Elsie; indeed it seemed almost as if Elizabeth avoided the girl—not in a way to be noticed even by Mellen's quick eyes—if it was so, Elsie on her side did not attempt to break through these little restraints that had fallen around them. It was natural that she should be glad to escape from the gloom which surrounded Elizabeth, and in this respect the fickleness of her character was fortunate; from her lack of concentrativeness, the girl was able to throw off any trouble the moment its actual danger was removed from her path.

Thus the first days had passed, allowing them to settle down into tolerable quiet, but not too much of it, for Elsie could not endure that. Society was her element; trifle and champagne seemed her natural nourishment, and she drooped so quickly if compelled to seclusion, that, with his usual weakness where she was concerned, Mellen relinquished his own desires to gratify her caprices.

You may think this not in keeping with his character and habits, but reflect a little and you will see that it was perfectly natural. The promise which he had made to his mother was always in his mind; he never forgot his fears for Elsie's health; she was more like a daughter than a sister to him, and her very childishness was a great charm to a man of his grave nature. The very servants delighted in waiting on her, though her requirements were numerous; but they did it all willingly, and put a great deal more heart into her service than they ever exhibited in obeying Elizabeth's moderate and reasonable requests. They mistook Mrs. Mellen's quiet manners for pride, and held her in slight favor in consequence; so dazzled by Elsie's manner, that when she gave them a cast-off garment or a worthless ornament, it seemed a much greater boon than the real kindness Elizabeth invariably displayed when they were in sickness or trouble.

Elizabeth humored her sister-in-law with the rest, but there was a soreness at her heart all the while; for sometimes when she saw this young creature clinging about her husband, her face wore the strange expression it had done while she watched their meeting after his return.

The domestic life at Piney Cove was nearly happiness at this time. But for Elizabeth's hidden anxieties, Mellen's return would have made that old house almost like heaven. As it was, this haunted woman would sometimes forget her causes of dread, and break out into gleams of loving cheerfulness in spite of them.

After the night on which the bracelet was lost, the sunshine which had brightened the little household at Piney Cove was dimmed by a thousand intangible shadows. In spite of all his efforts, Grantley Mellen's suspicions were aroused and kept on the alert, searching for proofs that could only bring unhappiness when found.

You would not have said that he was suffering from jealousy; there was nothing upon which his mind settled itself that gave rise to that feeling, but he fretted absolutely because he had no power to discover every thought of Elizabeth's soul during his absence. Then as he reflected upon the mystery connected with his arrival, came up afresh the disappearance of the bracelet, and he lost himself in a maze of irritating conjecture, of which his fine judgment often grew ashamed.

Elizabeth wore her old proud look for several days after the night of the dinner-party. Grantley felt that the ice of the past was freezing between them once more, and the idea caused him acute pain.

He sat watching her one day as she bent over her needlework, talking a little at intervals, listening occasionally to passages from his book; oftener sitting there with her fingers moving

hurriedly, as if she were pressed for time, but her anxious face proving how far from this occupation her thoughts had wandered.

More than once Mellen saw the dark brows contract as if under actual distress, and as he ceased to speak, and seemed wholly absorbed in his book, he could see that her reverie became more absorbing and painful.

"Elizabeth!" he said suddenly.

His wife started. In her preoccupation she had forgotten that he was in the room—forgotten that she was not alone with those dark reflections which cast their shadow over her face.

"Did you speak, Grantley?"

"Yes; how you started!"

"Did I start?" she asked, trying to laugh. "I don't know how it is that I grow so nervous."

"You never were so afflicted formerly."

"No; I don't remember," she replied quickly. "But you know I had a good deal of care and responsibility during your absence; it may be that which has shaken me a little."

"Do you believe it?" he asked, in a constrained voice.

She shot one glance of indignant pride at him; for an instant she looked inclined to leave the room, as had frequently been her habit during the first months of their marriage, when he irritated her beyond endurance.

But if Elizabeth had the inclination she controlled it. After a moment's silence she laid down her work and approached the sofa where he was lying.

"Don't be severe with me, Grantley," she said, with a degree of humility unknown to the past; "my head aches dreadfully—I don't think I am well."

His feelings changed as he looked at her; she was not well; he could see the traces of pain in the languid eyes and the contracted forehead, but whether the suffering was mental or physical even a physiognomist could not have told.

He reached out his hand and drew her towards him; she sat down on the sofa and leaned her head against his shoulder with a little sigh of weariness.

"I can rest here," she whispered; "it is my place, isn't it, Grantley?"

There was tender, almost childish pleading in her voice; he lifted her face, looked into her eyes and saw tears there.

"What is it, Bessie?" he asked. "Have I hurt you?"

The recollection of all the doubts and suspicious thoughts which had been in his mind came back, and forgetful of his idea that some recent anxiety made the change in her manner, he reproached himself with having brought a cloud between them by his own actions.

"Have I pained you in anything, Bessie?" he repeated.

"I feared the old trouble was coming back," she whispered.

"No, no; it must not, it shall not, Bessie! I am to blame—but if you knew what this wretched disposition makes me suffer! Every heart I trusted in my early life deceived me. I have only you left now—you and Elsie."

Perhaps it was natural that she should feel a little wifely jealousy at having his sister forced in, even to their closest confidence; her face was overclouded for an instant, but she subdued the feeling and said, kindly:

"I know what you have suffered, dear; I can understand the effect it has had upon your character—but you may trust me—indeed you may."

"I know that, dear wife; I believe that!"

He drew her closer to him; for a few moments she sat with her hand among the short, dark curls of his hair, then she said, abruptly:

"Grantley?"

"What is it, dear?"

"I want to ask you something."

"It can't be anything very terrible; you need not hesitate so."

"Only because it sounds foolish!"

"Nothing ever can seem foolish from your lips," he said, softly; and she blushed like a girl at his praise.

"That woman you—you loved once," she said; "was she dearer to you than I am?"

Grantley Mellen's face darkened.

"Let me blot out all thought of that time," he exclaimed, passionately; "I would like to burn out of my soul every trace of those years in which she had a part. I loved her with the passion of youth—no, Bessie, it was not a feeling so deep and holy as my love for you, and it is over for ever."

His face softened, and his voice trembled with a more gentle emotion, for he thought of that lone grave on the hillside, which he had so lately seen closed over his first love.

"Then you do love me?" whispered his wife; "you do love me?"

"What a question, darling!"

"Yes, I know it is silly."

"Bessie," he exclaimed, after a moment's thought; "I cannot help the feeling—you seem changed."

"I—changed, Grantley?"

"It may be my fault; but I feel as if there was a something which kept us apart—a mystery which I cannot penetrate—a gulf which no effort of mine can bridge."

She was a little agitated at first, but that passed.

"What mystery could there be?" she asked. "I don't understand you, Grantley."

"I hardly know what I mean myself. Is it my fault, Elizabeth? Are you angry still at what I said the night you lost your bracelet?"

She did not stir; she kept the hand he held even from quivering, but the face he could not see grew white and contracted under a sterner pain.

"Were you angry, Bessie?" he repeated.

"Not angry," she said, in a low voice, hesitating somewhat. "I was hurt and indignant—you ought to trust me, my husband."

"I do, dearest, I do trust you! Why should I not? There is no secret between us, Bessie—no mystery—nothing which keeps our hearts asunder!"

She was silent—she was struggling for power to speak, knowing that every second of hesitation told against her in a way which volumes of protestation could never counteract.

"There is no such cloud between us?" he said again.

"No, Grantley, no!"

She spoke almost sharply.

"Don't be angry with me, Elizabeth."

"I am not, indeed I am not!"

She was speaking firmly now—her voice was a little hard, like that of a person making an effort to appear natural.

"I am not angry, but I ask you to reason—to reflect. What secret could I have—what mystery?"

"None, wife, none; I know that!"

"And yet you cannot be at rest?"

"I am—I will be."

For a few moments they sat together in silence, then Mellen said:

"Even in your past, Bessie, you have no secret!"

"None," she answered, and her voice was perfectly open and sincere now. "There is not in all my girlhood the least thing that I could wish to conceal from you; it passed quietly, it was growing very dreary and cold when you came with your love and carried me away to a brighter life."

"It is so sweet to hear this, Bessie!" he whispered, as his face grew gentle with the tenderness which warmed his heart. "We have been separated so much, had so little time to realize our happiness, that neither of us have quite learned to receive it quietly—don't you think it is so, dear child?"

"It may be," she exclaimed, and her voice deepened with sudden intensity. "Only trust me, my husband; trust and love me always. I will deserve it. Only trust me!"

"Always, Bessie, always! My darling, I have only you in the whole world—all my hopes, my love, centre upon you—I am like a miser with one treasure which he fears to lose."

"Only a treasure to you," she said, playfully; "you would be astonished to see what a commonplace pebble it is to other people."

"That is not so; you know it, Bessie."

"Never mind how it may be; if I am precious in your eyes it is all I ask."

So they talked each other into serenity for the time. Their married life had been so broken up that it was natural that much of the enthusiasm of lovers should remain—even in their old difficulties there had been none of the common-place quarrels which degrade love, and wear it out much more quickly than a trouble which strikes deeper ever does.

"Since I came back," Grantley said, "I have sometimes thought it might be a little feeling towards Elsie which made you so strange."

"What feeling but kindness could I have?" she asked.

"True; it would not be like you, Bessie. You love her, don't you? It was through her we knew each other—remember that!"

"I do, and very pleasantly; but I have no need to think of that to be kind and gentle with her—when have you seen me otherwise?"

"Never; I can honestly say never!"

"Has Elsie complained?"

"No, dear, and never had such a thought, I am certain."

"When I married you, Grantley, your sister became mine—I could not be more anxious for her, more willing to guard and cherish her, if she had been a legacy from my own dead mother, than I am now."

"I am certain of that, and I love and honor you for it. But in your place I should perhaps be annoyed even to have a sister share affection with me."

"It is not like your love for me?"

"No, no; no love could be like that! But Elsie is such a child, such a happy, innocent creature, and I never look at her without remembering my dying mother's last words. If any harm came to her, Bessie, I think I could not even venture to meet that lost mother in heaven."

"No harm will come to her, Grantley—none shall!"

"I think she is one of those creatures born to be happy; I trust she may never have a great trial in all her life. I don't believe she could endure it; she would fade like a flower."

"It is impossible to tell how any one would receive suffering," Elizabeth replied; "sometimes those very fragile natures are best able to bear up, and find an elasticity which prevents sorrow taking deep root."

"It may be so; but I could not bear to have any pain come near her—It would strike my own heart."

"Could any one be more light-hearted and careless than she is?"

"Oh, she is happy as a bird—only let us keep her so."

Even into the utmost sacredness of their affection, that sister's image must be brought—it did cause Elizabeth pain in spite of all her denials—Mellen might have discovered that if he had seen her face. But the feeling passed swiftly, the face cleared, and while it brightened under his loving words the strength of a great resolution settled down upon it.

They sat in that old fashioned room talking for a long time. It was the happiest, most peaceful day they had spent since Mellen's return.

After a time, Mellen proposed that they should go out to ride, for the afternoon was sunny and delightful.

"A long gallop over the hills will do you good," he said; "it is a shame to spend such weather in the house."

While he ordered the horses, Elizabeth went up to her dressing-room to put on her habit.

She dressed herself without assistance, and with a feverish haste which brought the color to her face and light to her eyes.

"I will be happy," she muttered; "I will not think. There is no looking back now; it is too late; only let me keep the past shut close and go on toward the future."

As she stood before the glass, gazing absently at the reflection of her own face and repeating those thoughts aloud, her husband's voice called her from the hall below.

"Bessie, come down—the horses are at the door."

She broke away from her reverie and hurried downstairs, where he met her with a fond smile and a new pride in her unusual beauty.

"The very thought of the fresh air has done you good," he said.

"It is not that, Grantley—not that."

He looked at her tenderly, understanding all that her words meant.

"Because we are happy?" he whispered.

"With your love and confidence to bless my life I have all the happiness I can ask," she said, earnestly.

He led her down the steps, seated her upon her horse, and they rode away down the hill, and dashed out upon the pleasant road.

"We will go over the hills," Grantley said; "the air is so delightful there, and one has such a magnificent view of the ocean."

"I believe you would be wretched away from the boisterous old sea," said Elizabeth, laughing.

"I do love it; when I was a boy my one desire was to be a sailor. Some time, Bessie, we will have a yacht and go cruising about to our heart's content; after Elsie is married though, for she suffers so dreadfully from fright and illness."

"It would be very pleasant, Grantley."

"Would it not? Just you and I alone; it would be like having a little world all to ourselves. *Allons*, Bessie; here is a nice level place for a gallop; wake Gipsy up."

They rode on swiftly, growing so light-hearted and joyous that they were laughing and talking like a pair of happy children, seeming quite out of reach of all the shadows which had darkened their hearts during the past days.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TRIFLES LIGHT AS AIR.

While Mellen and Elizabeth rode off through the golden afternoon, Elsie and Tom Fuller came in from a stroll about the grounds. They had seen the husband and wife galloping down the avenue, and as they entered the hall, Elsie said:

"They have left us to amuse ourselves the best way we can; what shall we do, Tom Fuller?"

"I'm ready for anything."

"We might go out rowing."

"Oh, Elsie!"

"Only Grant would be angry, and you have grown afraid of the water."

"No wonder, where you are concerned," cried Tom. "I can't think of that dreadful day without a shudder."

"I don't allow myself to think of it at all," said Elsie.

She led the way into the library and sat down in a low chair, throwing off her garden-hat, and beginning to arrange the wild flowers which she held in her hands around the crown.

"What color is this, Tom?" she asked, holding up a delicate purple blossom that drooped its head, as if faint with its own perfume.

Tom's ignorance of color was a never-failing source of amusement to her. He looked at the flower very seriously; then after reflection said, in the tone of a man who was certain of being perfectly correct for once:

"That's blue, of course; I am not quite blind, whatever you may think."

Elsie screamed with delight.

"Oh, you delicious old goose! I suppose you call this one pink?"

"Yes," said Tom, confident that he must be right this time; "I suppose the most prejudiced person would have to call that pink."

"It's the most delicate lavender," cried Elsie, in fresh shrieks of ecstasy at Tom's blindness. "Oh, I never saw such a stupid in all my life."

Tom rubbed his forehead for an instant, then Elsie's laughter proved so contagious that he burst into merriment as hearty as her own.

"I don't suppose," said Tom, "there's such an idiot on the face of the earth as I am."

"I really don't suppose there is," replied Elsie, candidly.

"It is absolutely beyond belief," said Tom.

"It is," answered Elsie.

"And I shall never be any better," cried Tom.

"I have told you so a thousand times," rejoined Elsie, humming a tune, inclined to perfect truthfulness for once.

Tom's face lengthened for an instant, he gave his hair another unmerciful combing with his fingers.

"And you think there's not the least help for it?"

"Not the very least in the world, Tom, not a gleam of hope! But don't feel bad about it; I am tired of brilliant men; everybody is something wonderful now-a-days; it's really fatiguing."

"Do you think so?" demanded he; "do you really?"

"Upon my honor."

"Then I'm glad I am a donkey," said Tom, energetically.

"And so am I," returned Elsie. "There, see, isn't that a lovely wreath?"

She held up the hat for Tom to scent the delicious fragrance of the garland twisted around it.

"You take the color quite out of them, holding them near your cheeks," said Tom, with a glance of admiration.

"I declare you are getting complimentary! You shall have a wild rosebud for your button-hole in payment; kneel down here, while I put it in."

Tom dropped on his knees while Elsie leisurely selected the flower. She was talking all the while, and Tom on his part would have been glad to prolong the situation indefinitely, for the pleasure of having her little face so close to his, and her hands flirting the blossoms about his lips was entrancing.

"No," pursued she, "I am tired of brilliant men; they always make my head ache with their grand talk. You know I'm a childish little thing, Tom, and learned discussions don't suit me."

"You're a fairy, a witch, an enchanted princess!" cried Tom.

"Exactly," replied Elsie. "Perhaps a verbena would look better than a rosebud, Tom."

Tom cared very little what she put in his button-hole; a thistle, thorns and all, would have been precious to him if her hands had touched it, and he would have torn his fingers against the prickles with an exquisite sense of enjoyment.

"No, the rose is the prettiest," said Elsie, and she threw the verbena away, and began her task again.

"Are you tired; do you want to get up, Tom?"

"You know I'd rather be here than in heaven!" he exclaimed.

Elsie gave him one of her bewildering glances.

"You don't mean that," said she; "you know you don't!"

"I do, I do! Oh, Elsie!"

"Keep still, keep still. You jump about so that I can't fasten the rose; there, I've lost the pin; no, here it is."

She was so busy with her work now that her face bent quite close to his, her fair curls touched his cheeks, her breath stirred the hair on his temples; the intoxication of the moment carried Tom beyond all power of self-restraint.

He snatched Elsie's two hands and cried out:

"I must speak; I shall die if I don't! I haven't said a word since I came back; I know it's useless; but I love you, Elsie, I do love you."

She struggled faintly for an instant, then allowed him to keep her hands, and looked down into his face through her drooping lashes with an expression that made Tom's head fairly reel.

"Don't be angry with me," he pleaded; "don't drive me away! I'll never open my lips; just let me speak now! You can't think how much I love you, Elsie. I'd cut myself into inch pieces if it would do you any good. I'd die for you."

"I would rather you lived," whispered Elsie.

Tom caught the words; a mad hope sprang up in his honest heart; he knew that it was folly, but he could not subdue it then.

"If you could only learn to love me," he went on, hurriedly; "I'd be a slave to you, Elsie! I am rich

now; I could give you everything your heart desired; if you could only care for me; such lots of candies and pretty things."

"You saved my life, Tom," she returned, in that same thrilling whisper which shook the very heart in his bosom.

"Oh, don't bring that up as a claim," he said; "what was I born for except to be useful to you? But I love you so; if you could only make up your mind to endure my ugliness and my awkward ways, and—and——"

"You are a great big fellow and I like that, and don't think you ugly," said Elsie; "and I don't care if you are awkward. I am sick of men that walk about like ballet-dancers."

"You only say that out of good-nature," said Tom; "you are afraid of hurting my feelings."

"Don't I always say what I think?" rejoined she.

"But you don't care for me—you couldn't love me!"

"You have told me so three times already," said Elsie.

But all the while there was something in her face and voice which made him persevere. He had never thought to speak of his love to her again. This was the last, last time; but he would open his whole heart now, she should see the exact truth.

In his great excitement, Tom forgot all bashfulness; he did not halt in his speech, but poured out his story in strong, manly words, that must have awakened at least a feeling of respect in any woman's bosom.

"I tried to cure myself," continued Tom. "I thought absence—entire change—might make a difference in my feelings. But when the two years ended I came back, only to find my love grown deeper from the lapse of time, with every feeling more firmly centred there. You speak kindly to me sometimes. You pity me—at least you pity me! But you couldn't love me, of course; that is impossible! Let me get up—I mustn't talk any more—let me go!"

But Elsie's hand still rested upon his shoulder,—she did not stir.

"You could not love me," repeated Tom; "never, never: you have told me so ever so many times."

"I was silly and wicked," she whispered; "I am wiser now."

Her words lifted Tom into the seventh heaven. He cried out:

"Don't trifle with me, Elsie—not just now—I couldn't stand it!"

"I am not trifling with you, Tom."

"You don't mean that you care for me?"

His voice was broken and low. He waited for her to push him away, to break the spell rudely, but her hand never moved from his shoulder. It seemed to rest there with a caressing pressure, as a bird settles on a fondling hand, and still the fair curls swept his cheek.

"Elsie! Elsie!" he cried, half-wild with struggling emotions.

"Dear Tom," she murmured again.

"Oh, are you in earnest?" he almost sobbed. "Could you take me, Elsie? Let me be your slave—ready to tend you—to care for you—only living for your happiness!"

Elsie shook her head archly:

"You would grow tired of petting me."

"Never, never! You know it!"

"I should be a dreadful little tyrant—it is in my nature; you would never have a will of your own."

"I wouldn't want it; I wouldn't ask it!"

"I should flirt and drive you wild."

"I would never try to stop you."

"I should tease you incessantly."

"You'd only make me the happier."

"I should tell you all sorts of fibs."

"There would be no necessity, for I would not dispute your wishes."

"You would grow tired of that."

"Only try me."

"You couldn't love me always, and pet me, and never get out of patience, and think I was perfect."

"I could—I should—I always shall! Oh, Elsie, Elsie, I love you so—I love you so!"

"Get up, Tom; you are a foolish old goosey!"

Tom started to his feet; those playful words were a cruel waking. He stood before her painfully white, and there was a suppressed sob in his voice as he cried, in passionate reproach:

"Oh, Elsie! Elsie!"

She gave a wicked laugh at his distress.

"So you really were in earnest?" she demanded.

"You know that I was," he said. "You are cruel—cruel!"

"Ah, now you are angry—now you begin to hate me!"

"Never, Elsie! If you tore my heart and stamped on it, I could not hate you."

"But you are angry; and you said you could be patient."

"I could, if you cared for me only the least bit!"

"Oh, you selfish monster! There, Tom, kneel down again; you have shaken my flower out of your coat."

"No," said Tom, passionately; "I can't play now! This is dreadful earnest to me, Elsie, however great sport it may be to you."

"Then you refuse my gift?"

"I can't trifle now—don't ask it."

"And you mean to rush off and leave me?"

"I had better."

"Very well. If you refuse me my one little wish!"

"I'll stay if you want me to," cried Tom. "I'll do anything you bid me. But do be serious for a minute, Elsie. Just answer me one question."

"Only one? Will that satisfy you?"

"To set the matter at rest," pursued he. "I'll never trouble you again. I won't open my lips——"

"Then how shall I know what you want to ask?" she interrupted.

Tom fairly groaned.

"I do believe you are a witch, Elsie; one of those snow women in the old German stories."

"Lurlei—Lurlei!" she sang, flourishing the blossoms about his head.

Tom dashed off the flowers in a blind despair. The scene was growing too much for him to bear.

"Yes," he said, drearily, "I'll go—I'll go! I shan't trouble you again. I hope the day may never come when you will be sorry, Elsie."

He was so pale and trembled so violently, that she was absolutely terrified.

"Tom, don't look so!" she exclaimed. "I only wanted to tease you. I wouldn't have you leave me for the world; I should be wretched!"

"Now you are kind again! I will stay. I won't tire you with telling you of my love——"

"But I want to hear," interrupted Elsie.

"Oh, little child, it could do you no good! I suffer, Elsie, I suffer!"

"Tom, you're a goose—what you call a goney!"

"I know it, dear!"

"And you are just as blind as a bat."

"I suppose I am," he replied, dejectedly.

"And you're too stupid to live," cried Elsie, going into a great excitement. "Don't you know a woman can say one thing and mean another?"

"Yes," said Tom, with more energy, "I do know that. I know it too well."

"Great Mr. Wisdom!" said she mockingly. "Then can't you understand—don't you see?"

He looked at her in bewildered surprise. She was smiling tenderly in his face.

"Elsie!" he cried.

She let her hands fall in his.

"I don't want you to go," she whispered, "never—never!"

"You love me—you will marry me?"

She did not speak, but she made no resistance when Tom caught her to his heart and rained kisses on her face, utterly bewildered and unable to comprehend anything except that happiness had descended upon his long night at length.

But Elsie raised herself, pushed him off and said, with a dash of her old wickedness:

"I'll tease you to death, Tom!"

"I can't believe it!" he exclaimed. "Oh, say it once—say 'I love you!'"

"I do love you, Tom—there!"

In an instant she flashed up again, while he was covering her hands with kisses, crying:

"My little Elsie! My own at last!"

"No more sentiment," said she. "Let's be reasonable, Tom; the catastrophe has reached a climax."

But it was a long time before Tom Fuller could regain composure enough to talk at all coherently, or in what Elsie termed a sensible manner.

"It's so sudden," he said. "And to have so much happiness just when I thought the last rope was going out of my hand! Why, I feel like the fellow who clung all night to the side of a precipice, expecting every moment to be dashed down a thousand feet, and when daylight came found he had hung within a foot of the ground all the while!"

"The comparison is apt and delicious," said Elsie, laughing.

"And you love me! Only say it again, Elsie—just once!"

"I won't!" said she. "But I'll box your ears if you don't stop behaving like a crazy man."

Tom caught Elsie up in his arms and ran twice with her across the floor, paying no more attention to her cries and struggles than if she had been a baby.

"That's for punishment!" said Tom.

"Let me down! Please let me down!" pleaded Elsie. "I know you'll drop me! Oh, you hurt me, Tom!"

Tom placed her on the sofa and seated himself by her side. But she started away and ran upstairs, sending back a laugh of defiance.

CHAPTER XL.

TWO FACES IN THE GLASS.

When Elsie entered her boudoir, flushed with laughter and breathless with running, she threw herself on the azure couch, and gathering her ringlets in a mass between her hand and the warm cheek under which it was thrust, fell into a deeper train of thought than was usual to her.

"It's done, and I don't care. He loves me, and I must be loved. He's rich, generous, devoted, worships me and always will, that's one comfort. There'll be no one to halve his devotion or his money with me, no one to look glum if I want to be a little bit extravagant. Grant never refused me anything in his life, but I'm always afraid to ask half that I want. But with Tom everything will be my own. He won't ask a question. Such laces as I will have! As for cashmere shawls and silks, he shall get them for me by the dozens. Elizabeth won't say that such things are out of place then. I shall be a married woman, free of her and this old house too, free of everything, but—but —"

Elsie started up, breaking this selfish train of thought with the action.

"I wish she'd stop talking to me; I don't want to hear about it. Why won't she bear her trouble alone, if she will make trouble about what isn't to be helped? I'll have no more confidences with her, that's certain. It is like breaking one's heart up in little pieces. I don't want to keep secrets, but forget them; and I will, too, in spite of her. She shan't make me eternally miserable with her pining and remorse."

Elsie paused before a mirror as these thoughts rose in her mind and half broke from her lips. She was threading out her curls and trying the effect as they floated, like golden thistledown, over the roses of her cheek. All at once she started, and a look of pale horror stole to her face; the hand which had been wandering among her hair dropped to her side, turning cold and white as marble; the lips which had been just parted with an admiring smile of her own beauty, lost every trace of color. She still gazed intently into the glass, but not at herself. Beyond her pretty image, reflected from the distance, sat a man with a pen in his hand, as if just arrested in the act of

writing. Rich shadows of crimson drapery lay around him, and a gleam of pure light from a half-closed upper blind fell across his head, lighting it up grandly.

It was a magnificent picture that Elsie gazed upon, far beyond her own image in the glass. But she only saw the man, without regard to his surroundings, and the very heart in her bosom turned sick with loathing or with fear.

It was North, looking at her through the open door, with a sneering smile on his lip—North in the very chamber of her brother's wife, quietly seated there as if he had been master of the house. For a full minute Elsie stood, forming a double picture in the glass with that bold, bad man, then her color came hotly back, and she turned upon him, brave with indignation.

"You here!" she said, advancing into the room till its crimson haze overwhelmed her. "You here, and in this chamber! Get up at once and begone. If my brother finds you under his roof he will shoot you on the spot."

"Never fear, pretty one," said North, with an evil gleam on his face. "Two can play at a game of that sort. If he made the first assault nothing would give me more pleasure. Self-defence is justifiable in law, and his will is made."

Elsie was trembling from head to foot, but she leaned one hand heavily on the table that he might not see her agitation.

"Man, man, you would not—you dare not meet my brother. You that have wronged him so!"

"Excuse me," said North, biting the feather of his pen and looking down on a sheet of note-paper on which he had been about to write; "I do not see this wrong so clearly. If a woman's heart will wander off in any forbidden direction, am I to blame because it flutters into my bosom? And if other hearts follow after——"

"Stop!" cried Elsie, stamping her little foot passionately on the carpet. "How dare you speak of a fraud so black, of treason so detestable! I am his sister, sir, and have something of his courage, frivolous as people think me. Persecute her or provoke me too far and I will tell him all."

"Indeed you would not," answered North, quietly.

"What should prevent me?"

"She will. You dare not break a solemn promise to her."

"I dare!" she almost shrieked, clenching her little hand in a paroxysm of rage. "I will, if ever you come here again."

"No; I think not. Women are weak creatures, but they generally find strength to keep secrets that bring ruin in the telling. You cannot be over anxious to see this proud brother of yours commit murder on——"

"On a villain—a household traitor—a—a——"

Elsie stopped for want of breath.

"Be quiet," said North, rising sternly and towering over her. "I have no dealings with you. One might as well reason with a handful of silkweed thrown upon the wind."

"But I will have something to say—everything to say. You have pursued her, plundered her, tortured her long enough. More than once she has been on the brink of discovery by your persistence in prowling over the grounds and from her attempts to conceal your rapacious extortions. All this must end."

"With all my heart; let the lady accede to my terms and I disappear."

"What are those terms?"

"I will write them, and your own fair hands shall give her the note."

Elsie did not answer, but her white lips closed firmly, and her blue eyes glittered like steel in the glow of a hot fire, as he dipped his pen deliberately in the bronze inkstand and began to write.

"There," he said, folding the note and presenting it to her with a princely air, as if her courage had impressed him with respect; "place this in her hands and she will know how to carry it out."

Elsie took the note and hid it away in the folds of her dress.

"Do not fail," he said, before taking his hat from the table.

"I will not," answered Elsie. "But these cruel visits must cease now and for ever. I will give the note only on this condition."

"Her answer will decide that. Now, good-bye."

He reached forth his hand, smiling pleasantly upon her; but she clenched hers, as if tempted to strike him for the insolent offer, and turned away biting her pale lips.

The hand, rejected with such disdain, fell towards the hat which North placed lightly on his head, casting one glance in the opposite mirror as he did so. Then, with the elastic step of a man

retiring from a festival, he left the chamber, while Elsie looked after him with wondering eyes and parted lips, astonished by an audacity which was absolutely sublime.

The young creature stood with bated breath till his light footsteps died away in the nearest passage. She listened anxiously, but heard no door close or further movement of any kind. His exit was noiseless as his entrance had been.

When Elsie was left alone she sat down in the dim light of Elizabeth's room, pushed the hair back from her forehead and pressed both palms on her temples, where pain was throbbing like a pulse. She moaned and cried out under the sudden anguish, for resistance to suffering of any kind was killing to this young creature, and the reaction which followed that passionate outburst of feeling left her helpless as a child.

CHAPTER XLI.

SECRECY IMPOSED ON TOM FULLER.

During fifteen or twenty minutes Elsie sat pressing both hands to her head, while her eyes filled with tears, and her lips quivered like those of an infant grieved by some hurt it cannot understand. A voice from the outer passage aroused her. It was that of Tom Fuller, who had worked himself into a state of intense excitement from fear that his rough tenderness had mortally offended its object.

"Miss Mellen—Elsie, do come down and speak to a fellow. I'm sorry as can be that I made such a donkey of myself and frightened you away. Just give one peep out of the door, darling, to say that you will forgive me by-and-bye, and I never will kiss you again so long—that is if it's very disagreeable."

The door of Elsie's chamber opened and a face all flushed with tears, through which a smile was breaking, looked out on the repentant Tom.

"Oh, Elsie, darling, I didn't mean it, and you've been crying all this time. If somebody would take me out and lynch me I'd be obliged to 'em—upon my soul, I would."

"Never mind, Tom. I'm not angry—only such a fright, with crying," said Elsie, reaching her hand through the opening, which he forthwith covered with penitent kisses. "It's only a headache."

"A headache! dear me, what a brute I am. But wait a minute. I'll send right to the city for a dozen bottles of bay rum, or schnapps, or something of that sort."

"No, no," answered Elsie, laughing herself into semi-hysterics, "I shall be better in a minute."

"And come downstairs—will you come downstairs?"

"Yes, yes; wait a minute while I get the tangle out of my hair."

Tom retreated to the staircase and waited with his eyes fastened on Elsie's door like those of a good-natured watchdog. As for the girl herself, she bathed her face in cold water, chilling the pain away, straightened out her curls, twisted all her hair in a great knot back of the head, and came out softly, like a dear little forgiving nun, filled with compassion for other people's sins.

Tom followed her into the little morning-room where his confession had been made, and sat down on the sofa to which she retreated with great caution, as if she were afraid.

"Won't Bessie and Mellen be astonished," he insinuated; "I do wonder how they will look, when we tell 'em how it is."

"You won't have an opportunity of judging just at present," replied Elsie.

"Why won't I?"

"Because I don't choose you to say one word about the matter to any human being until I give you permission."

"Now, what is that for?" asked Tom, somewhat discomfited.

"Just because I prefer it," answered the young lady.

"But I want the whole world to know how happy I am," said he.

"Tom Fuller," cried Elsie, menacingly; "are you going to begin already to dispute and annoy me, after what I've just suffered, too?"

"Lord bless you, no! I am as sorry as can be."

"Then do exactly as I tell you," continued she, "and promise me not to mention what has happened till I give you leave."

"It's a little hard," said Tom, "not to be able to show how happy a fellow—why, I shall tell in spite of myself."

"If you don't promise, I'll take back every word I've said—"

"I will! I will!" he interrupted, terrified at the bare threat. "Don't be angry, pet; I'll do just as you say."

"That's a nice old Tom; now you are good and I love you."

"But you, won't keep it long, Elsie?"

"No, no; but just at present I choose; I told you what a terrible tyrant I should be."

"I like it," said Tom, with the thorough enjoyment of her mastery, which only an immense creature like him can feel in a pretty woman's graceful tyranny.

"So much the better for you," said Elsie.

"Oh, little girl, we will be as happy as the day is long!" cried he.

"And you'll never contradict me?"

"Never!"

"And I shall have my own way more and more every day?"

"Well," said Tom, thoughtfully; "I don't see how you could easily; but you may try."

Elsie laughed; his oddity amused her.

"You are a perfect ogre of a lover," cried she. "What a head of hair!"

"It never will keep in order," said Tom, pressing down the shaggy locks with both hands.

"Let them alone," said Elsie; "you look more like a lion that way; I like it."

She was gracious and playful as a kitten, but Tom's happiness was disturbed all too quickly by the entrance of Victoria, crying:

"Missis horse runned off wid her; but she y'arnt hurt; she's a comin' in de carriage."

Out of the room Tom and Elsie went, anxious to learn the full meaning of her words.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE RIDE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES.

The husband and wife galloped joyously on for miles and miles in the soft light of that delicious afternoon; with every step the gloom and the shadows seemed to lift themselves from each heart, till they were cordial and gay almost as Elsie herself.

These few happy hours, soon to be dimly overclouded, were so bright and sweet, that even in the midst of after trouble, their memory would come up like fragments of exquisite melody, haunting those two people.

Whatever the secret was which oppressed Elizabeth, its recollection was put aside for the time, and Mellen gave himself up to the pleasure of the hour with all the intensity of a nature which enjoys and suffers so sharply, that even trifles can make for it a keener excitement than great happiness or acute suffering bring to more placid characters.

"You are not tired, Bessie?"

"Tired, no! I could ride on forever!"

"See how the waters shine in the sun; they seem so full of joyous, buoyant life, that it gives one strength to watch them."

Elizabeth could fully share in his enthusiasm, and she allowed her poetical fancy full play, indulging in beautiful comparisons and earnest talk, which unveiled a phase of her nature seldom revealed except to those who knew her well.

"I never heard a woman talk as you can," said Mellen, admiringly; "we shall have you writing books, or coming out as a genius yet."

Elizabeth laughed gaily.

"You need not be afraid; I know you would not like it."

"Indeed I should not; it springs from my selfishness I know, but I like to keep your real self entirely for my own life."

The afternoon was wearing away when they turned homewards, but still retained its brightness and beauty, as their hearts kept the new glow which warmed them.

They galloped down the long hills and through the level groves till they were nearly home.

The sunlight faded—a strong breeze swept up from the ocean, and a sudden cloud obscured the sun; one of those abrupt changes so common in autumn fell upon the sea, robbing the day of its loveliness, and making it so cold and leaden that it was more than dreary from contrast with the glorious morning.

They were near the gates which led into their own domain, when a man came running swiftly towards them, and as he passed looked up in Elizabeth's face.

Whether her horse was frightened by the stranger rushing so abruptly past him, or whether she gave some nervous jerk to the reins, was not apparent; but a sharp cry rang from her lips, the horse made a simultaneous spring, and though a good rider, Elizabeth was unseated and thrown from her saddle. Mellen sprang from his horse and bent over his wife.

"I am not hurt," she said faintly, "not hurt."

The old woman who lived in a little house at the entrance of the grounds which they had transformed into a lodge, came out at that moment, and being a Yankee woman of energy and resources, caught Elizabeth's horse, and was ready to lend a helping hand wherever it might be required.

While this woman led the two horses within the gates and fastened them, Mellen raised his wife and carried her into the lodge. She was deathly pale and trembling violently, though in reply to his anxious inquiries, she repeated the same answer:

"I am not hurt—not at all hurt."

She drank a glass of water, lay down for a few moments on a cane-bottomed settee, which the room boasted as its principal elegance, then insisted upon rising.

Mellen sent the woman on to the house, with orders for the people to send down the carriage, as he would not have permitted Elizabeth to walk, even if her strength had seemed more equal to the exertion than it really was.

"Did that man frighten the horse?" he asked, when she appeared composed enough to speak. "The whole thing was over before I knew it—even before I saw him clearly he was gone—you cried out—the horse started—"

"No!" she answered with feverish earnestness, "the horse started first—I should not have shrieked but for that—why should I?"

"The scoundrel must have frightened the horse; did you recognise him?"

"He was running fast, you know, and darted into the woods so suddenly."

"I should like to have lain hands on him!"

"He meant no harm. Gipsy has grown shy of late. Don't think about the matter—there is no mischief done."

"But there might have been great danger; I cannot bear even now to think of it."

Elizabeth closed her eyes wearily; her recent elation of spirits was quite gone. She looked so pale and ill that Mellen could not feel satisfied that she had suffered no injury.

"You are sure that the fall has not hurt you, Bessie?"

"Quite sure," she answered, in the same changed voice; "don't trouble yourself about me. I was only frightened."

Mellen could not understand her manner, but he said nothing more. She lay back on the settee, and closed her eyes while he stood there regarding and wondering whether she lay thus from weakness or to escape further conversation.

At last the woman returned and announced that the carriage would be down immediately.

"That are man frightened the horse," she said; "I was a looking out of the window—it's my belief he's a hanging about the place for no good."

"Have you ever seen him before?" asked Mellen.

"Why, I think it's the chap you was a talking with one day, Mrs. Mellen," said the woman.

"I thought you did not know him?" observed Mellen, turning quickly towards his wife.

She sat upright, gave him one of her quick, indignant glances, and answered coldly:

"I simply said he ran by me so fast I could not tell whether I knew him or not."

"Wal, it was the same fellow," pursued Mrs. Green; "I'm sure of that."

"Do you remember?" questioned Mellen.

"I do not," replied Elizabeth haughtily.

Mellen colored and bit his lip, but he saw the woman looking curiously at them and said no more.

"I wish, Mrs. Green," he said, "you would take great care to close the gates at night; we are near enough the city for dangerous characters to stray down here."

"Law, sar, we're just as careful as can be. There ain't a night we don't shut and lock the gates. I hope we ain't a coming to no blame; I'm a lone woman and Jem's a cripple. It would be hard on us."

Mellen tried to stop her flood of protestations and appeals, but she insisted upon telling the whole story of every misery she had endured during her life, before she would pause in her plea of sorrow for an instant. By that time the carriage fortunately arrived and they were able to escape the sound of her tongue.

The husband and wife drove somewhat silently home. Mellen was very anxious about Elizabeth, who had recovered her usual serenity of temper, and could do her best to reassure him, though the color would not come back to her face, nor the startled look die out of her eyes.

When they reached the house, Elsie was standing on the steps, and ran down to the carriage full of alarm, having just learned that Elizabeth had met with some accident, while Tom came forward more anxious still.

"Are you hurt? are you hurt?" demanded Elsie.

Elizabeth assured her that she was not in the least injured, tried to laugh at Mellen's solicitude, but looked very nervous still.

"You are sure you are not hurt?" urged Tom.

"Perfectly sure."

"Maybe I'd better run after a doctor though?"

"Nonsense, Tom," she said, a little impatiently, "when I tell you I am not hurt in the least."

Tom and Elsie cried out together to know how the accident had happened, but Mellen gave a very brief explanation, while Elizabeth entered the hall and sat down in a chair to rest.

Tom ran to bring her a glass of wine which she did not want, and they all worried her with their solicitude, till it required great patience to restrain herself from breaking away from them rudely and rushing into the solitude she so much needed.

"If I had hold of the creature that scared the horse, I'd mill him," cried Tom, irately.

"I don't suppose he was to blame," said Elsie.

"Of course not," added Elizabeth; "of course not."

Mellen made no remark; he was watching Elizabeth, who still looked pale and oppressed.

"Do you feel better?" he asked.

"Much, I assure you; don't be frightened about me."

"Bessie is such a heroine!" cried Elsie.

Elizabeth gave one of the irritated looks with which she had sometimes regarded Elsie of late, but made no remark.

"She's a trump!" said Tom; "that's all there is about it."

Elsie laughed.

"I shall go up to my room and lie down," Elizabeth said; "an hour's rest will restore me completely."

Mellen assisted her upstairs and Elsie accompanied them, quite ready to accept Elizabeth's assurance that she was not injured, and doing her best to make them both laugh.

"Accidents seem the order of the day," she said; "it's lucky for us, Bessie, that we always have some one near to help us."

"Yes," was the weary reply.

"Do you think you could go to sleep now?" Mellen asked.

"Perhaps so," she said; "I will try, at all events."

"The best thing for you," said Elsie. "I'll sit with you a little while, and be still as a mouse."

Elsie was never sorry to escape from sickness or unpleasant occurrences of any kind, and could be of no more use in trouble than a canary-bird or a hot-house blossom. But just now she had an object in remaining.

The moment Mellen had withdrawn, she took North's letter from its hiding-place, and thrust it into Elizabeth's hand.

"Thank heaven I've got rid of it at last," she exclaimed, shaking the flounces of her dress as if the note had left some contamination behind.

"How did you get it?" faltered Elizabeth, looking at the folded paper with strained eyes, as if it had been an asp which she held by the neck.

"Oh, Elizabeth, he was in this very room."

"Here! here! Great heavens! why will no one shoot this man?" exclaimed the tortured woman.

"I thought of it, upon my word I did," said Elsie. "But, then, I don't know how to fire off a pistol!"

"How madly we are talking!" said Elizabeth, pressing one hand to her throbbing forehead.

Elsie pressed her own soft palm upon the strained hand, striving to soothe the evident pain. But Elizabeth shrunk away from the half caress, and said, in a low, husky voice:

"Leave me, Elsie, leave me; I will deal with this alone."

The young girl went away with a sense of relief. Then Elizabeth started up in bed, tore open the hateful note, and read it through.

CHAPTER XLIII.

KINDLY ANXIETIES.

Elsie went in search of Tom; who was walking up and down the veranda, looking anxious still, but his face cleared when he saw Elsie, like a granite rock lighted up by a sudden flood of sunshine.

"How is she?" he asked.

"Oh, a great deal better; she is going to sleep; that is, if Grant will be sensible enough to leave her alone; you men are dreadfully stupid creatures."

"Yes, dear," replied Tom, meekly.

"Well!" said Elsie; "you might show a little spirit at least."

"I thought I was to agree with you!"

"There is nothing I hate so much; if you don't contradict me, I shall die certainly."

"Then, since you want the truth, I must say I think you are a little hard on men in general."

"And you in particular, perhaps?"

"Sometimes you are."

"Indeed!" said she, tossing her curls. "Very well, Mr. Fuller, if you have such dreadful opinions as that, you had better have nothing more to do with me; I'll go away."

"Oh, don't; I didn't mean it," cried Tom, in a fright.

Elsie laughed at his penitence and teased him more unmercifully than ever, but Tom could bear it now with undisturbed equanimity. She had given him happiness, lifted his soul into such a flood of light as he had never thought to reach in this world, and his state of rapturous content utterly defied description.

They walked up and down the long colonnade, jesting and merry, Tom unable to think or talk of anything long except his new bliss, saying all sorts of absurd things in spite of Elsie's expostulations.

"I shall go in at once, if you don't behave more sensibly," she said, snatching her hand from him, as he tried to kiss it. "What would Grant think if he happened to come down."

"Oh, dear," sighed Tom; "how long before you will let me tell him; this having to steal one's happiness is dreadful."

"Oh, you selfish, insatiable monster! not an hour ago you promised to be perfectly content if I would only say I might care for you sometimes, and there now you go!"

"I am a selfish wretch," said Tom, struck with remorse.

"And selfishness is such a dreadful failing," rejoined Elsie.

"It is, I know it."

"In a man."

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom, a little astonished at the close of her sentence.

"Yes," continued Elsie; "It's a woman's privilege."

"It seems to me," said Tom, eagerly, "that women claim a great many privileges, and very odd ones, sometimes."

"Isn't it our privilege!" demanded Elsie, belligerently. "Do you mean to deny that we haven't a right to be just as selfish and whimsical as we please, and that it's your duty to submit?"

"If you'll let me kiss your hand I'll acknowledge anything you desire," said artful Tom.

"Then I won't, and if you value your peace in the slightest degree, I should advise you to behave more decorously."

Elsie drew herself up, and looked as prim as a little Quakeress, who had never indulged a worldly thought in all her days.

"I wish you would come into the music-room and sing to me," said Tom, struck with a bright idea.

"Nonsense, you don't care about music?"

"Indeed I do; your voice is like an angel's."

"You couldn't tell whether I was singing something from *Trovatore* or *Yankee Doodle*?" replied Elsie.

Tom rubbed his forehead again, fairly bewildered; but whether he knew anything about music as a science or not, he listened to Elsie's singing with his heart, and very sweet music it was.

"You shall teach me," he said.

"A hopeless task, Tom! And you really have some voice if you only had any ear."

"Oh," said Tom, putting up his hands, as if taking her words literally.

"Oh," said Elsie, with a shriek, "they prove your race beyond a doubt; don't fear."

Tom laughed, good-natured as ever.

"But come in," he urged; "you will get cold, with nothing on your head."

"You are not to become a Molly," said Elsie.

"I won't," replied Tom, "nor a Betty, nor any other atrocity; only just come in, like a duck."

Elsie allowed herself to be persuaded for once, and they went into the house, seating themselves at the piano in the solitary music-room, enjoying the hour after their own fashion, with no apparent perception of the shadows which lay upon the hearts of the husband and wife in that darkened home.

Some time after Elsie had gone, Mellen returned to his wife's chamber. She lay with one hand partially over her face, but was watching him all the while; there was an eager expression in her eyes, as if she longed to have him go away, but was afraid to express the wish.

"Do you feel sleepy, Bessie?" he asked.

"I think so," she replied; "don't let me keep you shut up here any longer—go down and play chess with Elsie."

"You will come down after you are rested?"

"Oh, certainly; I will be down to tea."

He kissed her and turned to leave the room.

"What are you going to do?" she asked, huskily.

"I have some letters to write; I shall go to the library in order to do it in peace—Elsie is certain not to come there."

"Good-bye," said Elizabeth, speaking with hysterical sharpness, which jarred a little on Mellen's quick ear.

CHAPTER XLIV.

ALMOST DEFIANCE.

He was gone and the door closed; Elizabeth raised herself on her elbow and remained listening till the sound of his steps died upon the stairs, then she threw aside the shawls he had flung over her, and sprang to her feet.

"Not a day's rest," she exclaimed, "not an hour's—not one! I must go out and answer the demands of this villain. If Grantley should meet me—I don't care—I must have it out! I shall go mad in the end—I shall go mad!"

She wrung her hands in a sort of fury, and paced up and down the room with quick, impatient steps.

"I might go now," she said at length; "he is in the library—it is growing dark, too."

She stopped before one of the windows and looked out; the afternoon was darkening under the mustering clouds and a heavy mist that had swept up from the ocean.

"Coming nearer and nearer," muttered Elizabeth, pointing to the waving columns of fog as if she were addressing some unseen person; "just so the danger and the darkness gather closer and closer about my life!"

She turned away, urged forward by the courage with which a brave person is impelled to meet a difficulty at once, threw a shawl about her and left the room.

She ran through the hall to a back staircase seldom used, and which led into a passage from whence she could pass at once into the thickest part of the shrubbery.

At the foot of the stairs she paused an instant, listened then with a quick, choking sigh, opened the door and hurried away.

Seated in his library, Mellen found it impossible to fulfil his task of letter writing. He could not account for the feelings which crept over him. The quiet content of the afternoon was all gone; and in its place came, not only anxiety about his wife, but a host of wild suspicions so vague and absurd, that he was angry with the folly which forced him to insult his reason by dwelling upon them.

The confinement of the house became absolutely hateful to him. He opened one of the French windows, stepped out upon the veranda and walked up and down in the gathering gloom, looking across the waters where the fog shifted to and fro, like ghostly shadows sent up to veil the ever restless ocean.

At last Mellen passed down the steps and entered the grounds; he was some distance from the house when he heard a sound like a person moaning aloud in distress.

He looked about—the mist and the coming night made it impossible to distinguish objects with any distinctness—but he saw the garments of a woman fluttering among the trees.

He darted forward; with what impulse he could hardly have told; but the woman had disappeared, whether warned by his hasty movement or urged forward by some other motive, he could not tell.

The thought in his mind was—

"That is my wife, Elizabeth."

Then the folly of this suspicion struck him; not an hour before he had left his wife almost asleep in her room, how was it possible that she could be there, wandering about like a demented creature in the misty twilight?

"I will go up to her room," he thought; "I will cure myself of these absurd fancies."

He entered the house and ran upstairs quickly, opened the door of his wife's room and looked in. She was standing before the fire—at the noise of the opening door she thrust something into her bosom—a paper it looked like to Mellen—then she turned and stood silently regarding him.

"You are up," he said.

"Yes," she replied, a little coldly. "Did you want anything?"

"Only to see if you slept—if you were coming down soon."

"I shall be down directly."

He hesitated an instant, then he said:

"Were you not in the grounds just now?"

Elizabeth did not answer; she had let her hair down and was beginning to arrange it, shading her pale face with the floating tresses.

"Were you?" he inquired again.

"What did you ask?" she demanded.

He repeated the question.

"It does not seem quite probable," she said, walking away towards the mirror.

"I thought that I saw you there only a few minutes since," he said.

Elizabeth was busy lighting a candle; after she had succeeded, she replied:

"If you had seen me in the grounds would it have been so very singular."

"No; only as I left you lying down——"

She interrupted him with an impatient gesture.

"I am tired of this," she said passionately. "What is it you wish to know—what do you suspect?"

"Nothing, Elizabeth; I only thought it was foolish if not dangerous to go out on such a night."

He was ashamed of himself now, but she did not offer to help him in his dilemma. She stood silent and still, as if waiting for him to leave the room.

"We will wait tea for you," he said.

"Very well."

As he passed near the sofa his foot got entangled in a shawl which lay on the floor; he picked it up—it was heavy with damp.

"I was given to understand that you had not been out," he exclaimed, holding it towards her.

For an instant Elizabeth looked confused, then she snatched the shawl from his hand, crying angrily:

"Well, sir, I was out—now are you satisfied?"

"Always deception," he said, "even in trifles."

"Of course," she exclaimed, in the same passionate tone, "you make it necessary. I went out because these nervous attacks make me feel as if I were choking—you are so suspicious, you see something to suspect in the most trivial action."

"So you——"

"Told you a lie," she added, when he hesitated; "well, let it go at that. Are you through with this examination—have you any more questions to ask?"

"That tone—that look, Elizabeth; you are not like yourself!"

"No wonder—blame yourself for it. I cannot and will not endure this system of *espionage*—I will have my liberty—that you may understand!"

Mellen's passionate temper flamed up in his face, but he controlled it resolutely and did not speak.

"Be good enough to say all you wish and have done with the subject," she continued in the same irritating tone, utterly unlike her old method of parleying or enduring his evil words.

"I have nothing to ask," he said; "you are nervous and excited—we won't quarrel to-night."

He went out of the room, Elizabeth fell upon her knees by the couch, and groaned aloud.

"Oh! I am no longer myself! What wonder! what wonder!"

She drew a letter from her bosom and began to read it, moaning and crying as she read; then she threw it in the fire, stood watching till the last fragments were consumed, then sinking into a chair, buried her face in her hands. She remained a long time in that despondent attitude, her whole frame shaking at intervals with nervous tremors, and her breath struggling upwards in shuddering gasps.

There was a knock at the door at length.

"Who is there?" she called sharply; "what do you want?"

"Miss Elsie wished to know if you were coming to tea," said a servant. "There is a gentleman come to see Mr. Mellen from the city, ma'am."

Elizabeth started up and went on dressing; as was usual with her after one of those strange excitements, a sudden fever crimsoned her cheeks and brightened her eyes.

She went downstairs and received her guest with affable grace, which contrasted painfully with her late excitement, and before the evening was over, seemed to have forgotten the hasty words she had spoken to Mellen, and was like her old self again.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE TIGER IN HIS DEN.

IT was a small room, in one of those mysterious hotels in the narrow streets near the Battery, which appear to be usually appropriated to foreigners, and about which dark-whiskered, sallow-faced individuals may be seen lingering at all hours of the day, their very faded, seedy appearance calling up images of duns, scant dinners, and a whole train of petty evils.

The chamber was small, but not uncomfortably furnished, though the articles had originally been

of the tawdry fashion which such places affect, and had probably not been new by several stages when first established there.

The remains of a fire smouldered in the little grate, but the ashes were strewn over the hearth. The torn and frayed carpet was littered with loose cards, and the whole apartment was in hopeless confusion which added greatly to its original discomfort.

In the centre of the room was a small table covered with empty champagne bottles and glasses, standing in half dried puddles of wine, with a bronze receiver overflowing with cigar ashes all huddled untidily together, and giving repulsive evidence of a long night of dissipation.

The low bedstead had its moth-eaten, miserable attempt at a canopy swept back and heaped carelessly on the dirty counterpane by a man in a restless slumber, just as he had thrown himself down, ready dressed, long after daylight peered in through the broken shutters.

His appearance was in keeping with the room; a soiled dressing-gown, that had once been very elegant, was wrapt carelessly about him; his black hair streamed over the pillow, and gave an almost ghastly effect to his face, as he lay in that troubled dream, already pale and worn from many sleepless nights.

It was a handsome face, but one from which a physiognomist would have shrunk, had he seen it in its hard truthfulness, without a gleam of the fascination which it was capable of expressing in guarded moments and under more fortunate circumstances.

The sleeper was on the sunny side of mid-age, but his countenance was one of those which carries no idea of youth with it, even in early boyhood it was so marked by craft and recklessness that nothing of the *abandon* of fresh feeling ever left an imprint there.

It was nearly noon, but he had not stirred or opened his eyes; once or twice the dilapidated chambermaid, who performed a slatternly duty in that part of the building, opened the door and peeped in, but her entrance had not served to arouse him, and she knew better than to venture upon any further attempt.

Suddenly he woke from a troubled dream and looked about him.

"I dreamed they were railing me up in a coffin," he muttered; "pah, how plainly I heard them driving in the nails!"

He turned upon his pillow with a shuddering oath, but that instant there came a knock at the door, this time quick and impatient—it was the first summons which had caused him that unquiet vision.

"Come in," he called out; "the door isn't locked."

The man raised himself indolently on the bed and looked towards the door—it opened slowly and a woman entered the room.

Her face was concealed under a heavy veil, but the man seemed to recognize her at once, for he started up and gave a muttered execration as he caught sight of his untidy appearance in the little mirror.

Then he hurried towards his visitor, who had closed the door and stood leaning against it.

"You have come," he exclaimed; "so kind of you—excuse the disorder here—I did not know it was so late."

He held out his hand with a smile, but she turned away with a gesture of abhorrence which had no effect upon him save that it deepened the smile to an ugly sneer.

She threw back the long veil and displayed her face—the visitor was Elizabeth Mellen.

"Pray be seated," he went on, placing a chair near the hearth; "this room looks dreadful, but I was up late and overslept myself—had I dreamed you would favor me with so early a visit, I should have been prepared."

She glanced at the table, which bore evidence of the manner in which the night had been passed, and said abruptly, pointing towards the cards scattered on the carpet:

"Did those things keep you wakeful?"

He smiled complacently.

"Nothing ever escapes your eye, dear lady. Well, I won't deny the fact—we were playing cards a little. I was not absolutely fortunate," he answered, with another disagreeable smile; "but you know the old proverb—'Lucky in love, unlucky at cards,' so I never expect much from the mischievous paste-boards."

Her face flushed painfully to the very waves of her hair, then grew whiter than before; she sank to a seat from positive inability to stand.

"I have brought you no money," she said, abruptly, looking in his face with sudden defiance.

His brows contracted in an ugly frown, though his lips still retained its smile—he looked dangerous.

"That is bad, very," he said; "I wonder you should have come all the way here to bring these unpleasant tidings!"

Elizabeth did not answer; she had drawn towards the hearth and was pushing the ashes back with the point of her shoe, gazing drearily into the dying embers.

"You received my letter?" he asked.

"Yes—don't send in that way again, or let yourself be seen. You frightened me so that I fell from my horse."

"How sad! I should never have forgiven myself had any harm resulted from it," he said, so gravely, that one could not tell whether he was in earnest or mocking her. "You were not hurt—nothing unpleasant occurred! I despaired of seeing you in the grounds after that, and so went away."

She started up in sudden passion, goaded by his attempt at sympathy beyond the power of prudence or self-control.

"I wish I had been hurt," she exclaimed. "I could have borne being maimed for life had I seen the brute's hoofs trampling you down as I fell."

He seated himself opposite her and looked earnestly in her face. These bitter words did not seem to excite his anger—he was smiling still, and his face wore a look of admiration which appeared to excite her still more desperately.

"You are so beautiful in one of these moods," he said; "don't restrain yourself. What a Medea you would make!"

She looked at him with a glance which had the menace of a hunted animal brought suddenly to bay, and ready from very despair to defend itself—in moments like that many a desperate woman has stained her soul with crime—but her companion betrayed no uneasiness.

"You don't like me to say complimentary things to you," he said; "it is unkind to deprive me even of that pleasure."

"I have no time to waste," she said, controlling herself by a strong effort, and speaking in a cold, measured tone. "I came to tell you that you must wait—I can't give you the money to-day—if you were successful with those cards you can afford to be patient."

"My dear friend," returned he, "you know how anxious I am—how I desire to put the ocean between me and this accursed country."

"You will not go when you get the money," she said; "you will drink, gamble—leave yourself without a penny."

"So harsh always in your judgments," he returned, deprecatingly.

"I have no hope of escaping you," she went on; "but I have one consolation—you are ruining me, and that will be your own destruction! My husband suspects me—watches me—the day he discovers a shadow of the truth, there is an end to these extortions."

"Don't speak so angrily—my dear lady! I hardly think your husband would refuse to listen to reason—your proud men will do a great deal to procure silence where a lady is concerned."

"You know that he would not be silent! With his home once broken up, his peace destroyed, he would be utterly careless of the world's knowledge—his wrongs and his revenge would lead him to desperate measures."

"Is it possible? What an unpleasant character! Well, well, we must take pains that he is not enlightened—that is the way—you see how very simple it is."

"I warn you, this is the last money I shall give you for years," she said; "it is only from having these stocks in my hands that I am able to do it now."

"My dear friend, you forget; your husband may give you more stocks," he returned, with a laugh which made her shrink with abhorrence.

"Mr. Forbes has promised me the money this week—that will be in time for the steamer."

"How coldly you betray anxiety to have me gone!" he said; "it is really cruel."

"I have no idea that you will go," she returned; "you will spend the money—you will demand more—my husband will discover it. But at least I shall have the satisfaction of knowing that there is no place secret enough, no land distant enough to guard your life safely after that."

He only received her passionate words with a shrug of the shoulders and a deprecating wave of the hand.

"But it is so sad to go into exile alone," he said; "if I could take with me——"

"Oh! you are such a base, miserable coward!" she broke in. "Such a pitiful, dastardly wretch! Don't frown at me—I have never been afraid of you—I am not now! I tell you the hour of retribution will come!"

His face never changed, he made her a gracious bow and said pleasantly:

"You are inclined to do the prophetess this morning—but don't be such a fearful Cassandra, I beg."

She rose from her chair and folded her shawl about her.

"I need stay here no longer," she said, "I have told you what I came to say."

"Don't be so cruel as to run away so soon," he pleaded; "give my poor room the glory of your presence a little longer. You see to what I was driven before I could force myself to trouble you again. These are not proper apartments for a gentleman; you will admit I had an excuse. The whole thing is miserably humiliating."

"I shall be here on Monday," said Elizabeth, ignoring his excuses. "I shall have the money ready for you, but I will not bring it—those letters must be first placed in my hands."

"Ah! you are going to drive a hard bargain, I see."

"You have evaded so often, cheated me so often; I have given you thousands of dollars—this is the last—take it—enough to make you comfortable for years if you are careful; but the letters come into my possession first, and that paper too."

"You really mean to have your freedom, do you?" he asked, jestingly; "to sweep me out of your life for ever; that is hard."

"Don't think to cheat me; neither your forged writing or any pretence will answer here. I tell you I am desperate now—you can't force me down a step farther."

"You are a magnificent woman!" he exclaimed; "a wonderful woman! I don't believe the country could boast another such."

She turned away.

"Now you are angry. But let it pass."

"Remember what I have said," retorted Elizabeth. "I tell you I am desperate now! At least I shall have placed it out of your power to injure any one but myself. I have reached that point when I will have freedom from your persecutions or drag the ruin down on my own head while crushing you."

She was in terrible earnest—he was a sufficient judge of character to see that. It was in her nature to grow so utterly desperate that, whatever her secret might prove, she would find the courage to give it up to her husband and madly urge on the crisis of her fate in all its blackness and horror, rather than endure the slavery and suspense in which she had lived.

"There will be no need of all this," he said. "Place in my hands the sum you have promised, and I will at once put it out of my own power to harm you or yours. After all," he continued, with another sneering laugh, "I am selling my claim much too cheaply; twenty-five thousand dollars is a pitiful little sum, considering what I give up."

"You can get no more—you cannot frighten me! If you betrayed everything you would ruin your hopes of a single penny. I tell you my husband would perish rather than buy your silence. I know him—he might shoot you down like a dog, but would never pay gold to bind your vicious tongue."

"Dear friend, I infinitely prefer transacting this little business with you," he said, laughing again. "We shall not quarrel; for your sake I will content myself with the twenty-five thousand dollars, but I warn you I cannot wait after Monday."

"I tell you it will be ready on that day."

"The letters and that troublesome little document shall be placed in your hands—I promise on ___"

She interrupted him contemptuously: "There is nothing you could swear by that would make the oath worth hearing."

The man bowed, as if she had paid him a compliment. He was so utterly hardened that even her burning scorn could not affect him.

"Don't write to me, don't send to me," she said; "it will only be dangerous—more so for you than for me—remember that."

"I can trust you; I have the utmost faith in your word."

She gathered her shawl about her and moved towards the door.

"Are you going already?"

"That bracelet!" she said, with a sudden thought. "You parted with it of course—could you get it back?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I received your note concerning it; we will see—very doubtful I fear. But when I am once gone—"

even if your husband does discover it—there will be no trouble."

She turned her back on him. He started forward to open the door for her, his hand touched hers on the knob, she started as if a scorpion had stung her, but he only cast a smile in her face and allowed her to pass out.

"A wonderful woman!" he said to himself, after she had disappeared. "What a pity she hates me so; the only woman in the world worth having at your feet."

He went to the table, searched among the bottles till he found one that still contained brandy, poured the contents into a glass and drank with feverish eagerness.

"That'll put a little life in me," he muttered. "Well, there is nothing for it but to wait. I must keep myself very quiet. I think I'll have some breakfast—at any rate I can afford to leave this den."

He pulled out a pocket-book with a laugh, glanced at the contents and put it away.

"Luck enough for a parlor and bed-room in the best uptown hotel for a week or so," he muttered; "pah! how I loathe this hole!"

North threw off his dressing-gown, bathed his face in cold water, arranged his dress a little, and went down stairs in search of his morning meal.

Elizabeth Mellen hurried through the narrow street in which the hotel stood, as if trying to walk herself into calmness. Once she murmured:

"Five days more—five! If I can live through them and keep the tempest back I may be safe. If I can! Such a dread at my heart—worse as the time shortens—oh heavens, if discovery should come now when the haven is so near!"

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE PAWNBROKER'S SHOP.

Weeks had glided along. It was now late autumn; the gorgeous leaves lay strewn along the ground, and the wind sighed up from the ocean chill and bleak, scattering thoughts of decay with each gust. With that gathering desolation, the coldness and the shadows had crept deeper and deeper into Grantley Mellen's life.

He had accompanied Elizabeth to the city, one of these chilly autumn days, and put her in a carriage at the ferry, that she might attend to the purchases and calls which was her ostensible errand to town, while he went about the business on hand, with an arrangement that they were to meet in time for the afternoon boat.

Elsie had chosen to pass the day at home; indeed, the light-hearted girl and Elizabeth were never together now when it could possibly be avoided. Elsie seemed determined to keep aloof from the mystery of the unhappy woman's life, lest its gloominess should cast some shadow over the brightness of her own path.

While Elizabeth was absent on her mysterious visit, Mellen occupied himself with a matter which would have added another trouble to the anxiety of that bitter day, had she dreamed of it. From the first he had determined that the disappearance of that gauntlet bracelet should be in some way explained, if it lay in human power to discover the mystery. What his precise motive was he could hardly have told. The trinket might have been picked up by some vagabond who had wandered into the grounds; if so there was little hope of ever gaining any tidings concerning it, but Mellen could not satisfy himself that such was the case; he believed the jewel would yet be found.

There was some mystery in Elizabeth's life—of that irksome suspicion he could not divest himself. Twenty times each day he went over in his mind every event that had occurred since his return, from the moment when he came upon her wandering so wildly about on that stormy night.

Twenty times each day he convinced himself that there was nothing in the whole catalogue to awaken the slightest doubt in any mind not given up to self-torture and jealousy like his; yet, argue as he would, bring conviction as closely home to his soul as he might, doubts rose up again and haunted him like ghosts that had no power to speak, but pointed always towards trouble and blackness which lay in the past.

If the bracelet had been given to a needy person for any reason, it would undoubtedly find its way to the hands of some pawnbroker—that was his thought. He reproached himself for indulging it—he called himself unworthy the love of any woman while he could harbor such suspicions, but they would not pass out of his mind—the treachery which had wrecked his youth had sown the seeds of suspicion too deeply in his soul to be easily eradicated.

Then he compounded with his conscience, and decided that he was right in taking every step possible to solve these doubts, if only to prove the innocence of his wife. He kept repeating to himself that this was the reason which urged him on.

"I want to be convinced," he thought again and again, "of my own injustice—it is right that I should endure this self-abasement as a punishment for doubting a woman who is beyond suspicion."

Solacing his self-reproaches a little by such arguments and reflections, he had gone to work in earnest to make such discoveries as would drive these harassing doubts away forever.

Among other efforts, he had confided to a leading pawnbroker the details of the affair, and it was in him that his hopes principally lay. If the bracelet was not brought to this man's establishment he had means of discovering if it was carried elsewhere.

That day Mr. Hollywell had news for him; a bracelet similar to the one he had described, was in the possession of an old Chatham street Jew, and they went together in search of this man.

The old Israelite was dreadfully afraid of getting himself into difficulty, but Mr. Hollywell satisfied his fears in regard to that, and assured him that the gentleman would reward him liberally for any disclosures that he might make regarding this particular bracelet.

Then it came out that the bracelet had been disposed of for a considerable sum—it was a sale rather than a deposit. The man who brought it there had more than once come to the shop on similar errands; and always pledged valuable ornaments or sold them recklessly for whatever would satisfy the needs of the moment.

Mr. Mellen grew more interested when he described the man's appearance; the keen eyes of the money-lender and the sharp sight of the old Jew, accustomed to reading countenances, saw a singular expression of uncertainty rested upon his face, which took a slow, deadly paleness as the identity of this man seemed to strike him.

He walked several times up and down the little den where the aged Israelite kept watch, like a bloated spider ready to pounce upon any unwary fly that might venture into his mesh, and at last returned to the place where the two men were standing.

"Have you any of that man's writing?" he asked. "Just a scrap—I don't ask to see his name—only a few words in his writing."

The old Jew looked doubtful.

"Sometimes he has write me, my good sare, but not often, he ish very careful—very careful."

"And have you nothing by you?"

The old Jew turned to a great desk that filled up one end of the dark room, unlocked a variety of doors and drawers, turned over piles of dirty notes, and at last selected a scrap of paper from among them.

"This is his writin'," he said, in a guttural whisper. "I'm taking great trouble, great trouble," he whined; "de good gentleman ought to remember that."

"You shall be well rewarded," said Mr. Mellen impatiently, snatching the paper from his hand.

He glanced at the writing—the paleness of his face grew death-like—he stood like a statue, with his eyes rivetted upon the page, while the two men regarded him in silence.

The writing was peculiar. It had an individuality so marked and so increased by practice, that any person who had seen a page of the delicate characters, could have sworn to the writing among whole volumes.

Mr. Mellen looked up—the astonishment in his companions' faces brought him to himself.

"That is what I wanted," he said.

"I hopes it ish all right," urged the Jew. "The good gentleman is satisfied!"

"Perfectly, perfectly! Now I want the bracelet! How much did you receive on it?"

The old Jew's face changed at once.

"And I won't get my reward?" he faltered. "You will sheat a poor man's out of his earnings."

"Who talks of cheating you," said Mr. Hollywell.

"I am ready to pay you," pursued Mr. Mellen; "I would rather give double the price of the bracelet than not get it."

Mr. Hollywell made a sign of caution; such words would increase the old rascal's cupidity to a height money could hardly satisfy, but they were interrupted by a groan from the Jew.

"And it ish gone!" cried he; "and so leetle paid—so leetle paid. The good gentleman would have given more."

"Gone!" repeated Mr. Mellen.

"Why didn't you say so?" asked Mr. Hollywell angrily. "It was only yesterday you told me it was safe in your possession."

"Yes, yes, I knows, and so I had."

"Where is it, then?"

"The man came for it—he has brought his ticket, paid his money and took the bracelet; I was out—my boy let him have it! Oh, my reward—my reward!"

"Shut your foolish old mouth!" exclaimed Mr. Hollywell.

The old Jew sank into a chair, still groaning and lamenting, while the money-lender turned to Mr. Mellen.

"What will you do now, sir?" he asked.

"Nothing."

He looked despondent now, though the fierce anger that had blazed in his face at the first sight of the writing lighted it up still.

"I am perfectly satisfied," he continued. "I am much obliged to you for your trouble."

"I am very sorry," Mr. Hollywell began, but Mellen checked him.

"It is just as well—don't be troubled."

He took out his pocket-book, laid down a bank note whose value made the old Jew's eyes sparkle with avidity, and hurried out of the dark little shop.

CHAPTER XLVII.

TEASING CONTINUALLY.

All the next day the house at Piney Cove was in confusion with guests coming and going. This husband and wife were not once left alone.

Mrs. Harrington had come up to spend the day, and go out with them in the evening, and Tom Fuller was at his post as usual, though he appeared with a very blank face indeed.

"You look more like Don Quixote than ever," was Elsie's salutation, as he entered the room, where she sat with Elizabeth and their guests.

"How do you do, Mr. Fuller?" cried the widow. "I wonder you have any patience at all with that little witch; she teases you constantly; I am sure you must be amiability itself."

"She won't have the chance for some time to come, more's the pity," returned Tom, disconsolately.

"And why not, pray?" demanded Elsie.

"Because I've got to go to Pittsburg, and flounder about in coal mines, and the Lord knows what."

"Have you business there?" asked Elizabeth.

"Yes, to be sure! Bless me, I was better off when I had no property. I could do as I pleased then, and didn't have to go about breaking my neck in pits, and bothering over all sorts of business that I understand no more than the man in the moon—taking care of my interests as they call it."

"Poor, unfortunate victim!" mocked Elsie.

"The penalty of riches," sighed Mrs. Harrington. "But think of the good they bring to yourself and all about you, Mr. Fuller."

"Yes, I know," returned he; "I'm an ungrateful wretch; it's in my nature; I need to have my head punched twenty times a day, there's no doubt of that."

They all laughed at his energy; even Elizabeth tried to come out of her anxious thoughts, and confine her wandering fancies to the conversation.

"When are you going, Tom?" she asked.

"Oh, to-morrow."

"He speaks as if it were the Day of Judgment," said Elsie.

"And I may be gone a whole week or more," pursued he.

"A small eternity," cried Elsie. "Dear me, dear me, how we all pity you."

"I don't believe you care a straw," said Tom, dismally; "you won't miss me."

"He wants to be flattered," cried Elsie.

"I am sure you will be missed, dear Mr. Fuller," said the widow; "you wrong your friends by a

suspicion so cruel."

"I hope so, I'm sure," returned Tom, glancing at Elsie; but she was in one of her mischievous moods, and would not give him a gleam of consolation.

"Don't spoil him, Mary Harrington," said she; "the creature's vanity is becoming inordinate; isn't it, Bessie?"

"You can ill-treat him sufficiently without my assistance," said Mrs. Mellen, smiling; "I shall not help you, certainly."

"That is right, Bess," cried Tom; "stand by a fellow a little; she hasn't a spark of pity."

"Take care, sir!" said Elsie, lifting her embroidery scissors. "Don't try to win my natural allies over to your side by underhand persuasions."

"I am sure you don't need allies or assistance of any sort to be more than a match for a dozen men," said Tom.

"Another of my womanly prerogatives," replied Elsie.

"Well," said Tom, "there seems to be no end to them."

Everybody laughed at his tone, and Tom sat down near Elsie, tumbling her work, and making signs to her to go out of the room, that he might secure a few moments alone with her, but the little witch pretended not to understand his signals in the least, and went on demurely with her work.

"You ruin my work!" cried she, snatching her embroidery from his touch. "What on earth are you making such faces for?"

Tom laughed in a distressed way, red with confusion.

"Dazzled by your presence, Elsie," cried the widow, seeing that Tom had not presence of mind enough for the compliment.

Elizabeth began to get restless again; it was perfectly impossible for her to keep quiet any length of time that day, and she made some excuse for leaving them.

"Let me go with you," said Mrs. Harrington; "I know you are going to order luncheon, and I should so like to get a peep at your kitchen; it is a perfect Flemish picture."

"Particularly the crowd of dusky faces," said Elsie. "Mary Harrington, you're a humbug."

"I am sure she is quite right," said Tom, anxious to insure her departure; "I was in the kitchen one day and it looked as picturesque as Niagara."

Elsie perfectly understood the motive which led him to speak, and hastened to rejoin:

"If you think it so stupendous you had better accompany them, and get another peep."

"No," said Tom; "I might disturb the colored persons; I'll stay where I am."

"Bless me," cried Elsie; "what consideration! You will be bursting into unpremeditated poetry about the dark future, before we know it."

"Oh, Elsie," said Mrs. Harrington, "what a provoking creature you are."

She followed Elizabeth out of the room, and Tom was alone at last with his idol.

"Are you sorry I am going?" he asked.

"Do I look so?" she asked.

"No, you don't."

"Well, looks can't tell fibs," said she, provokingly.

"Oh, Elsie, be good to me now; just think; I shall be gone a whole week!"

"It's a calamity I dare not contemplate," replied she. "Now, whatever you do, don't break your neck in those horrid coal mines, or come back smelling of brimstone like a theatrical fiend."

"I believe you would jest during an earthquake."

"If it would stop the thing shaking I might," she answered. "There, there, don't be cross, Tom."

Elsie threw down her work, and with one of her quick changes of manner brought her lover back to serenity.

"If you would only let me do one thing before I go," he said, getting courage enough from her kindness to propose an idea that had been in his mind ever since he arrived.

"What is it, *Monsieur Exigeant*?"

"Just let me tell Grant of our—our—"

"Our what, stammerer?"

"Of the happiness you have promised me," said Tom, changing the original word from fear of vexing her.

"You were going to say engagement; don't deny it."

"And aren't we engaged?" he pleaded.

"Not a bit of it, Mr. Tom Fuller; I am just as free as air; please to remember that."

"Oh, Elsie!"

"And Elsie oh!" cried she. "But it's true! You said all sorts of foolish things about love, and I let you talk, but what right have you to say we are engaged?"

Tom instantly became so nervous that he could not sit still.

"Oh, Elsie, Elsie, how can you?" he pleaded.

"Now, aren't you deliciously miserable," said Elsie; "that is the way I like to see you; it's your duty, sir."

"I wouldn't think you so cruel at such a time."

"Oh, wouldn't you? And pray what right have you to think at all; no man has a right; that's another female privilege."

"You are worse than the Women's Rights people," said he.

"Now you are calling me names," cried Elsie, indignantly. "I won't stay with you another moment."

She half rose, but Tom caught her dress.

"Oh, don't go, don't!"

"Go on your knees then, and beg my pardon," said Elsie.

"No," said Tom, "I'll do no such thing."

"Ah, do now, just to please, you know."

Down went Tom in dumb obedience. After enjoying his distress and penitence for a few moments, Elsie suddenly threw both her arms about his neck, and whispered:

"I am very sorry you are going. I do love you dearly, Tom!"

He strained her to his heart with a burst of grateful delight.

"And may I tell Grant?" he pleaded.

"Not yet," she said; "wait till you come back; not a word till then."

"But as soon as I come?"

"Yes; if you are good. But not a look till I say the word."

She tried to escape from him, but he would not let her go until he had extorted one other pledge.

"You must write to me," he said.

"Now, Tom, I hate to write letters! I never write even to Grant, when I can possibly help it."

"But just a few words—"

"If you will behave yourself properly, perhaps yes."

"Every day?"

"Oh, worse and worse! Tom, get up. I hear Mary Harrington's voice; she's the most inveterate gossip."

"Promise then!"

"Yes—yes—anything; oh, get away!"

She struggled from him, and Tom had just time to resume his seat and look as decorously grave as perfect happiness could permit, when the door opened, and Mrs. Harrington entered, with her usual flutter.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

THE PET MESSENGER.

"Elsie, Elsie!" the widow cried out, "Mr. Rhodes and the fascinating Jemima are driving up the avenue; the old maid is rushing on destruction again without the slightest warning."

"It's delightful!" said Elsie. "I shall tell her how rich Tom Fuller is, and that he wants a wife."

"Don't set the old dragon at me," said Tom.

"Yes, I will! Mary, you must flirt desperately with the dear old man; between her desire to watch you and be agreeable to Tom, the spinster will be driven to the verge of distraction."

"I'll go and find Elizabeth," said the widow, "and appear after the old maid gets nicely settled."

Mrs. Harrington darted away, and just made her escape as Dolf opened the hall-door to admit the guests.

The father and daughter were ushered into the room where Elsie and Tom sat, looking demure and harmless as two kittens.

"Here we are again, you see," said the stout man; "no one can resist your fascinations, Miss Elsie."

"Pa would stop," said Miss Jemima, "though I told him it was a shame to come so often."

The truth was, the spinster's appetite had warned her that it was quite luncheon time, and recollecting the bounteous repasts always spread at Piney Cove, she had graciously assented to her parent's proposal that they should call.

"I am delighted to see you," said Elsie, shaking hands as if they were her dearest friends; "my brother and sister will be down in a moment; you must stay to luncheon, of course."

"No, oh, no," said Miss Jemima, glancing at Tom through her scant eyelashes. "We couldn't think of it!"

"But you must, you shall!" said Elsie. "Let me present Mr. Fuller."

The spinster curtseyed and looked grimly propitious. Tom was nearly out of his wits; while Mr. Rhodes talked to him he saw Elsie whisper to Miss Jemima, and felt perfectly certain that she had given the threatened information about his being a rich bachelor in search of a wife.

"And when did you see your charming friend, Mrs. Harrington, last?" asked Mr. Rhodes.

"The oddest thing!" said Elsie. "Why, she is here now; hadn't you a suspicion of it, Mr. Rhodes?"

Miss Jemima's face changed so suddenly, that Tom made a great effort to keep from laughing outright.

"Oh, Mr. Rhodes," continued Elsie; "I am afraid the attractions of this house are only borrowed ones."

The good man was thrown into a state of blushing and pleasant confusion, but the spinster brought him through it without mercy.

"If there's company we won't stay, pa," said she.

But Elsie would not permit her to go; she whispered again about Tom, and between her desire to stop long enough to fascinate him and her fear of exposing her father to the wiles of the artful widow, Jemima was in terrible perplexity.

In the midst of it Elizabeth entered, and welcomed her neighbors; Mellen followed; and after a few moments the widow swooped down on the unfortunate Mr. Rhodes in spite of the dragon, as a well-practised hawk pounces on a plump chicken.

"Ah, Mr. Rhodes, this is such a surprise," she cried, fluttering up to him with a simper on her face, which of late years had done the duty of a blush.

"I dare say a great surprise," snapped in Jemima, siding up to her father.

This was exquisite sport for Elsie and Mrs. Harrington; Tom would have enjoyed it more if the spinster had not beset him as much as her divided attention would permit, and Elizabeth and Mellen bore the infliction as people must endure all things that come to an issue in their own house, smiling and polite, however much they may wish for a release.

While they were at luncheon, Elizabeth's dog ran into the room with a paper in its mouth. It was the most intelligent little creature in the world, educated to fetch and carry in a surprising manner.

This pretty creature, which seemed almost human in her intelligence, ran towards her mistress, but another, a new pet of Elsie's, a frolicsome, wicked animal that had quite worried poor Fanny's life out ever since her intrusion in the house, followed it.

Piccolomini sprang at the paper in Fan's mouth, and a contention ensued between them which attracted general attention.

"Fanny's got a paper," cried Elsie, pointing towards her pets.

"It may be a letter," said Mellen; "Dolf often sends them in by her; call off Pick, Elsie; she'll tear it."

But Pick would not be called off, and Fanny refused to relinquish her hold; between them the paper was rapidly destroyed, Fanny howling dismally all the time, and making sagacious efforts to fulfil her errand in her usual trusty manner.

Mellen went towards them; as he did so Fanny sprang towards Elizabeth; she stooped, caught sight of the paper, and grew pale. Fairly pushing Mellen aside, she snatched the paper from the animal's mouth.

"It's only an old bill, I must have dropped it," she said, thrusting it hurriedly in her pocket.

Mellen saw how pale his wife had become; he noticed her alarm; he remembered, too, seeing Fanny running about the shrubbery just before he came in.

It was another phase of the mystery, he was certain of that; the little creature was carrying a note to his wife. He seated himself at the table again, and appeared to forget the circumstance, but Elizabeth hardly looked like herself during the entire meal.

It was late before the visitors departed; after that Tom Fuller was compelled to take his leave,—a heartrending performance as far as he was concerned; so the day drew to a close, leaving both the husband and wife more preoccupied and anxious than the dreary morning had found them.

CHAPTER XLIX.

ELSIE FINDS THE BRACELET.

There was a dinner engagement the next day. When Elizabeth came down to the library in full dress, her husband sat moodily over the fire. He looked up as she entered, and gazed upon her with mournful admiration, for her beauty that day was something wonderful; unabated excitement had fired her eyes with a strange lustre, and lent a rich scarlet to cheeks, from which protracted suspense had of late drained all the color. Her dress, of rose colored silk, was misty with delicate lace that shaded her neck and arms like gossamer on white lilies. Star-like jewels flashed in the rich blackness of her hair and shone through the soft lace. The calm loveliness of former days was nothing to the splendor of her beauty now a feverish restlessness was upon her,—a glow of pain conquered by courage.

Mellen arose from his seat as his wife came in with the graceful rush of a cloud across the sky. He watched her approach gloomily. It seemed to him that her first impulse was to flee when she saw him sitting there, but if so the desire was quickly controlled, and she came up to the hearth, standing so near him that the folds of her dress brushed his arm.

"You are ready too," she said. "But it is impossible to say how long we shall have to wait for Elsie and Mrs. Harrington!"

He made no answer; she began clasping and unclasping her bracelets, but was watching him all the while from under her downcast lashes.

"Are you ill, Grantley?" she asked at length.

"Oh! no; quite well."

"You are so silent, and you sat there in such a dreary way, I feared something was the matter."

He made an effort to rouse himself and shake off the oppression—the heavy, heavy weight which had lain on his soul all day.

"I am only stupid," he replied, with an attempt at playfulness. "I have been forced to talk so incessantly to those people, that I have no ideas left."

"I am sure conversation with people in general doesn't consume one's ideas," she said, with a lightness which appeared forced like his own.

"How long does Mrs. Harrington stay?" he asked.

"Only till to-morrow. You don't like her, I fancy?"

"There is too much of her in every way," he said, peevishly; "she dresses too much, talks too much—she tires one."

"That is very cruel and ungrateful; the lady confided to me only a little while ago that she had a profound admiration for you, and was dying to get up a flirtation, if I did not mind."

"Don't repeat such nonsense," he said, almost rudely, "you know how I hate it. I think either the married man or woman who flirts, deserves to be as severely punished as if he or she had committed an actual crime."

"I am afraid you would condemn the greater part of our acquaintance," she said. "After all, with

most women it arises only from thoughtlessness."

"Thoughtlessness!" he repeated satirically. "I can only say that the woman who endangers her husband's peace from want of thought, is more culpable than a person who does wrong knowingly, urged on by recklessness or passion."

"I have never thought about it," said Elizabeth vaguely; "it may be so."

She was playing with her bracelets again; the action reminded him of the lost trinket. He did not speak, but a restrained burst of passion broke over his face, which might have changed a plan she was revolving in her mind, had she seen or understood it.

It was too late!

That moment Elsie came dancing into the room, her thin evening dress floating around her like a summer cloud, her fair hair wreathed with flowers, and everything about her so pure and ethereal, that it seemed almost as if she must breathe some more joyous air than the pain-freighted atmosphere which weighed so heavily on others. She was holding her hands behind her, and ran towards them in her childish way, exclaiming:

"I have found something! Who'll give a reward? Won't you both be glad—guess what it is!"

Mellen's face had brightened a little at her entrance, but as she spoke a sudden thought shook his soul like a tempest.

"What is it?" Elizabeth asked.

"Oh, guess, guess!"

"But I never can guess," she replied, seeming to enter into the spirit of the thing.

"You try, Grant. Come, do credit to your Yankee descent!"

He rose suddenly and stood looking full in his wife's face, fixing her glance with a quick thrill of terror, which the least thing unusual in his manner caused her now.

Elsie began to dance up and down before the hearth, exclaiming:

"Oh! you provoking things—you stupid owls! Now do guess—oh! Grant, just try. Tell me what I have found."

Mellen's eyes had not moved from his wife's face.

"Have you found Elizabeth's bracelet?" he asked in a tone which made the unhappy woman shiver from head to foot, and startled Elsie out of her playfulness.

"Why, how did you think of that?" demanded Elsie; "did she tell you? Have you——"

She stopped short, the words frozen on her lips by the look which Grantley Mellen still fixed upon his wife. Without changing that steady gaze, he extended his hand towards Elsie.

"Give me the bracelet!" he said, in the cold, hard tone which, with him, was the sure forerunner of a tempest of passion.

Elsie hesitated; she had grown nearly as pale as Elizabeth herself, but she looked like a frightened child. Elizabeth did not speak or move, but though her face was absolutely death-like, her eyes met her husband's with unflinching firmness.

"Give me the bracelet!" repeated Mellen.

"Here it is!" exclaimed Elsie, nervously, putting the bracelet in his hand. "What is the matter with you, Grant? I am sure there is nothing to make a fuss about. I found the bracelet among a lot of rubbish in one of Bessie's drawers—I suppose she forgot it was there."

Grantley Mellen turned furiously towards her.

"Are you learning to cheat and lie also?" he said.

Elsie burst into a passionate flood of tears.

"You are just as cruel and bad as you can be!" she moaned. "You ought to be ashamed to talk so to me! I haven't done anything; I thought you would be so pleased at my having found the bracelet, and here you behave in this way. You needn't blame me, Grant—I don't know what it all means! I am sure your dear mamma never thought you would speak to me like that! I wish I was dead and buried by her—then you'd be sorry——"

"I am not angry with you, child," interrupted Mellen, softened at once by this childish appeal. "Go away and find Mrs. Harrington, Elsie. The falsehood and the treachery are not yours—thank God! at least my own blood has not turned traitor to me!"

Elizabeth sank slowly in a chair; Elsie stole one frightened look towards her, then the woman in her confusion and dizziness saw her float out of the room, and she was alone with her husband. He held the bracelet up before her eyes, his hand shaking so that the jewels flashed balefully in the light.

"Your plan was carried out too late; you should have had it found before!" he said, and his last effort at self-control was swept away.

She must speak—must try to stem the tide, and keep back a little longer the exposure and ruin which for days back some mysterious warning had told her was surely approaching.

"I don't know what you mean," she faltered.

"I mean that the bracelet was found where you put it!" interrupted Mellen.

"Why should I have hidden it? What reason—"

"Stop!" he broke in. "Not another word—not a single falsehood more! You brought this bracelet back with you from the city—don't speak—I went to the pawnbroker's—it had just been taken away."

In the whirl of that unhappy woman's senses the words seemed to come from afar off; the lights were dancing before her eyes; the flashing gems blinded her with their rays, but she still controlled herself. She must make one last effort—she must discover how much of the truth he knew—there might be some loophole for escape—some effort by which she could avert a little longer the coming earthquake.

"Why don't you speak?" he cried. "Say anything—another lie if you will—anything rather than this black truth! That man; you know him! Speak, I say!"

"What man?" she faltered.

"That traitor—that wretch! He had the bracelet; he got it from you! Explain, I say—woman, I will have an explanation."

"I never gave the bracelet away," she said, desperately. "I have no explanation to make. I will not open my lips while you stand over me in that threatening way."

"Will you defy me to the last?" he exclaimed.

"You can only kill me," she moaned; "do it and let me have peace!"

He flung the bracelet down upon the table.

"I have loved you, and I know that you are false!"

"What do you suspect?" she demanded. "What do you know?"

The momentary weakness of passion passed; the husband stood up again cold and stern.

"I know," he said, "that this bracelet was in the hands of a bad, wicked man; only yesterday he took it from the pawnbroker's, and now I find it in your possession."

There was a hope; only in another deception; but she must save herself; while there was a thread to grasp at, she could not allow herself to be swept down the gathering storm.

"And is there no possibility that I may be innocent in all this?" she exclaimed. "If I receive an anonymous letter, telling me I can find my bracelet by paying a certain reward, is it not natural that I should go? Knowing your strange disposition, is it not equally natural that I should keep the whole thing a secret, and strive to make every one believe that the bracelet had been mislaid?"

"Is this true?" he cried. "Can you prove to me that you speak the truth?"

She was not looking at him; the apathy of despair which came over her seemed like sullen obstinacy.

"I can prove nothing," she said; "if it were possible I would not make the effort. Do what you like; believe what you please; I will defend myself no more."

CHAPTER I.

IN THE TEMPEST.

Mellen turned away, and walked up and down the room in silence. There was a fearful struggle in his mind; the love he still felt for his wife was contending against horrible doubts, and almost threatening his reason.

He could not decide what to think or how to act! For the moment at least he was glad to grasp at any pretext which might prove a settlement to the question, whatever his thoughts and belief might be on after reflection.

He looked again at Elizabeth; her stony calmness irritated him almost to a frenzy. He was too much excited to perceive that her very quiet was the apathy of despair; it seemed to him that she was only testing her power over him to its full extent. If her story was true, she would die rather than humble her pride by protestations or proof; if it was false! There was deceit somewhere, he

felt that; but even in his madness he could not believe that Elizabeth had been guilty of anything that affected his honor; that was a black thought which had not reached him yet.

"Are you determined to drive me mad?" he exclaimed.

She lifted both hands with a strange gesture of misery and humiliation, which he could not have understood.

"What have I done?" she cried. "What have I said?"

"Nothing! There you sit like a stone, and will not speak."

"It is useless to say anything," she returned; "quite useless."

"And you expect me to leave this matter here; to endure this mystery patiently?"

"I expect nothing—nothing!"

The same dreary, desperate wail pervaded her voice, but it was not strange that he mistook her coldness for obstinacy or indifference; the very intensity of agony she was enduring made her appear heartless.

"You won't explain—you won't—"

She drooped her head wearily.

"I have no explanation to make; there is the bracelet."

He caught up the bracelet, snatched her arm so rudely, and fastened the bracelet on it with such reckless haste, that she uttered a cry of pain.

"You hurt me," she exclaimed; "this is cruel, unmanly."

"Wear it," he cried; "wear it, and when you look at it remember that you have dug a gulf between my heart and yours! Wear it, and remember how you have perjured yourself; how your whole conduct since my return has been a lie, and if you have any shame or power of repentance left, the gems will burn into your very soul when you look at them."

Elizabeth fell back in her chair cold and white. He rushed out of the room. She was not conscious of any thought; her brain was too dizzy; but sat there clasping her forehead between her hands, and seeming to feel the whole world reel into darkness before her gaze.

"Has he gone; where is he?"

It was Elsie's voice; she had stolen into the room to learn how the matter had ended.

"Can't you speak, Bessie; what did he say?"

Elizabeth dropped the hands from her face, and rose from her seat.

"No matter what he said; the end is coming. I told you it would; the end is coming!"

"Don't look so!" cried Elsie, "you frighten me."

"Frighten!" she repeated with intense bitterness. "You haven't soul enough in your bosom to be frightened."

"Oh, you cruel, wicked creature!" sobbed Elsie. "Oh, oh! I'll kill myself if you talk so to me; I'll go to Grant; I'll—"

"Hush!" interrupted Elizabeth. "There—I will say no more! I don't blame you—remember that! Whatever comes, I won't blame you for this new danger."

"Oh, you good, unselfish darling!" cried Elsie, drying her tears at once.

She made a step forward as if to throw her arms about her sister, but Elizabeth retreated.

"Don't touch me," she said, faintly; "don't touch me!"

"Should I poison you?" cried Elsie, angrily. "One would think I was some dreadful reptile."

"No, no; don't be angry! I need all my strength! Let me alone, Elsie; don't speak to me."

"The carriage is at the door," said Elsie, "and Mrs. Harrington is waiting; for mercy's sake don't let her think anything is wrong. I am going to find Grant; wait here."

She ran out of the room, and Elizabeth stood thinking over her words.

Very soon perhaps the whole world would know that she was a lost, ruined woman, without a home, a friend, or even a name.

Could she bear up; could she find strength to go on to the end and not die till then?

The hardness and desperation died out of her face; she fell to her knees, and a prayer for help rose to her lips; low and faint, but intense with agony.

She heard steps in the hall; they were coming for her. She sprang to her feet, moved towards the

door and opened it; her husband, Elsie and their guest were there. She answered Mrs. Harrington's careless words; passed on with them through the hall, and took her misery out into the world as we all do so often, hidden carefully in the depths of a tortured soul.

At dinner that day Elizabeth met two or three superior people from the city, men and women of note, whose presence at the board was like meteor flashes—kindling everything with brilliancy; but among the most cheerful and most witty this wretched woman shone forth preëminent. Every word she spoke carried electric fire with it. Her cheeks were scarlet; her eyes radiant. The lips that had been so pale in her husband's presence a few hours before, glowed like ripe cherries with the sunshine upon them. In her desperation she was inspired, and kindled every mind around her with enthusiasm.

CHAPTER LI.

THE OLD CEDAR TREE.

Immediately after breakfast the next morning, Mrs. Harrington returned to the city, perhaps glad to escape from the unnatural mental atmosphere of the house, certainly much to the relief of all the inmates of the dwelling.

Grantley Mellen drove his guest down to the railway train. The moment they departed Elizabeth and Elsie, as if by a common impulse, started in a different direction, apparently anxious not to be left alone with each other.

Elsie was passing through the hall when her brother drove up to the door. She stopped him after he got out of the carriage for a few moments' trifling conversation, then allowed him to pass on towards the library.

As the girl fluttered back towards the veranda, she saw old Jarvis Benson approaching the house, and hurried out.

"Oh, Jarvis, I wanted to see you."

Jarvis took the pipe out of his mouth, regarded her complacently, and answered:

"Then thar's a pair on you, Miss Mellen."

"I want to have a pair of very light oars made to the little boat, so that I can learn to row it," pursued Elsie.

"That's easy done," said Jarvis. "I guess I've got a pair that'll answer. Only don't dround yourself."

"I'll take care of that," she replied, laughing. "But who else wants you, Jarvis?"

"Your brother told me to come up, and—oh, there he is."

Mr. Mellen had heard voices, and came through the hall out on the veranda.

"Good morning, Jarvis!" he said, in his quiet way.

"Good morning, sir! You don't look very well, I think," observed the keen-sighted old man.

Elsie glanced at her brother; he was very pale, and his heavy eyes told of a long, sleepless night.

Mr. Mellen frowned slightly; it displeased him to have his personal appearance commented upon, and wounded his pride to know that he had not sufficient strength to keep back every outward sign of the anxiety and trouble he was enduring.

"Be you well, now?" continued the pertinacious old man, who had a habit of asking questions and expressing his opinions with the utmost freedom to people of every degree.

"Perfectly well," replied Mr. Mellen. "You have come up about that tree, have you?"

"Wal, yes," said Jarvis. "I hadn't much to do this morning, so I thought I'd just come round and find out what's the matter. You hain't found no gardener yet?"

"No; I have sent to town for one. You have sufficient knowledge to keep the greenhouse in order until one is found."

"Just as you say, sir; I'll do my best."

The gardener at Piney Cove had seen fit to leave the place a few days before without the slightest warning, with the true, reckless independence of the Hibernian race. When a dilemma of this kind arose, the people of the neighborhood were in the habit of sending for old Benson, who seemed, in some mysterious way, to have acquired a smattering of knowledge about everything that could make him generally useful.

Elsie did not feel particularly interested in the subject of conversation, and was moving off in search of other amusement, when she heard old Jarvis say:

"It's the big cypress yonder, in the thicket, ain't it?"

She stopped short in the hall, and stood leaning against the door with her back towards them.

"Yes," Mr. Mellen answered. "I am afraid it is dying. I want you to dig about the roots and see if you can find out where the trouble lies."

"Loosening the earth a bit'll maybe do a world of good," said Jarvis; "I've seen it 'liven a tree right up."

"We will try, at all events," observed Mr. Mellen. "First you may take those plants under the library window into the greenhouse; it is too late for them to be left out."

He walked to the side of the house to point out the flowers he wished to have removed. Elsie darted through the hall and up the stairs in breathless haste.

She paused at the door of her sister's room and tried the knob, but the bolt was drawn.

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth!" she called out in a frightened whisper, utterly incapable of speaking aloud. "Open the door—for heaven's sake, open the door!"

There was terror in her voice which communicated itself to the woman sitting so apathetically in her chamber. She rose and opened the door, whispering, in a voice full of alarm:

"What is it? What is it?"

Elsie pushed her back into the room, shut and locked the door, and staggered to a couch.

"The cypress tree!" she gasped. "They are going there."

"Who?" cried Elizabeth. "What do you mean?"

"I can't speak—oh, I am choking!" gasped Elsie.

Elizabeth seized her arm, and fairly shook her with frenzied impatience.

"Speak!" she exclaimed. "Speak, I say!"

"Grant has sent old Jarvis to dig about the roots," returned Elsie, in a shrill whisper.

Elizabeth Mellen sank slowly upon her knees, her limbs giving way suddenly, as if she had been struck with paralysis. She caught at Elsie's dress, the girl raised herself, and there they remained for several moments, staring in each others' faces, with a white, sickening terror, which could find no relief in words.

After a time Elizabeth shook herself free from Elsie's grasp and rose; the power to think and act was coming back to her.

"You heard them say this?" she asked.

"Yes, yes!" cried Elsie. "Grant sent for old Jarvis to come up and dig round the tree; he thinks it is dying."

Elizabeth threw up her arms in silence, more expressive of agony than a shriek.

"It has come at last!" broke from her white lips. "It has come at last!"

Elsie cowered down upon the sofa and buried her head in the cushions, shaking with hysterical tremors from head to foot, and uttering repressed sobs.

"Exposure—ruin—disgrace!" moaned Elizabeth, as if repeating words that some secret voice whispered in her ear. "It has come at last! It has come at last!"

"I shall die!" shrieked Elsie. "I shall go mad!"

She beat the couch wildly with her clenched hands and gave way to a violent nervous spasm, but this time Elizabeth made no effort to soothe her; she stood there, cold and white, repeating at intervals, in that dismal whisper:

"It has come at last! It has come at last!"

"Do something," sobbed Elsie. "Don't stand there as if you were turning to stone. Think of some way to stop them."

"What can I do?" returned Elizabeth. "I tell you it has come! I knew it, I have been expecting it!"

Elsie gave another shriek, sprang off the sofa, threw herself at her sister's feet, clutching her dress with both hands, and cried out:

"Do something—anything! I shall go crazy—my brain is burning! I won't live—I tell you I won't live if you don't stop this."

Elizabeth shook off her grasp, not angrily, not impatiently even, but with a sudden change of expression, as if Elsie's despair had brought back some half-forgotten resolution, and given her wild strength once more.

"You will not suffer," she said, drearily. "You are safe."

"But you—what will become of you?" groaned the girl.

"Let go my dress—get up, Elsie! See, I am calm. I tell you, no harm will come to you—get up."

Elsie staggered to her feet, and sat down on the sofa with a burst of tears.

"I'd rather kill myself than see you tormented so!" she cried. "I have the poison yet—I've always kept it. If they don't stop, Elizabeth, they shall find us dead and cold——"

"Stop!" said Elizabeth. "I won't hear such wicked words! The danger is mine, the ruin and disgrace are mine—all mine; but I do not talk of killing myself."

"You are so brave," moaned Elsie, "and I am such a poor, weak thing. Oh, oh! This will kill me either way, I know it will!"

"I know what will happen to me," said Elizabeth, in a voice of unnatural calmness. "Do you know what this day will bring? Before two hours are gone I shall be driven out of this house, a lost, ruined woman."

"No, no! Grant will forgive you—he loves you so!"

"Does a man ever forgive a wrong like that?"

"But you will say you don't know—I will."

"Are you a baby? Don't you know there will be an exposure—we shall all be questioned—forced to give evidence."

"We will say anything—anything!" cried Elsie.

"We cannot satisfy Grantley Mellen. I tell you, Elsie, this is the last interview we shall ever hold under this roof."

Elsie threw herself down in renewed anguish, shrieking and sobbing so violently that nothing could be done or thought of till she had been restored to composure by the strong remedies Elizabeth administered.

"Promise not to tell that I ever knew of it," she pleaded. "Swear! I'll kill myself if you don't!"

"I have promised," returned Elizabeth, in a hollow voice. "I will bear whatever comes—ruin, death—and bear it alone, you shall not be dragged in."

These words, so solemnly spoken, appeared to give the girl new life and energy.

"Go downstairs," she said; "stop them. You can stop them yet."

"How—what can I say?"

"Tell Grant that the gardener said the tree must be left till spring—bribe old Jarvis to say so—oh, anything, anything; only try, Elizabeth. Save yourself if possible."

The woman walked to the window and looked out.

"They are going," she said.

"Go down!" shrieked Elsie. "Go down, I say!"

Elizabeth took a few steps towards the door—caught sight of her face in the mirror, and stopped appalled at the haggard image reflected there.

"Look at me," she said; "my face tells the whole story."

"There is some rouge in that drawer," said Elsie. "Mrs. Harrington left it. I'll put it on your cheeks."

Elsie could think, now that Elizabeth showed herself ready to bear her danger alone. She got out the rouge, rubbed it on her sister's cheeks, and smoothed her hair.

"Now you look like yourself—nobody would notice. Go quick—stop them—stop them!"

CHAPTER LII.

WOODMAN, SPARE THAT TREE.

Elizabeth dared not pause an instant for reflection; she opened the door, walked downstairs, through the library, and joined her husband on the lawn.

He turned at her approach. She felt a mad sort of courage nerve her—she could speak now.

"What, planning against the great cypress?" she asked, and even in that moment of supreme agony and fear she was conscious of vague wonder at the composure of her voice.

"It seems to be dying," replied Mellen; "I am going to have the earth dug away from about the roots."

"I am afraid you will only kill it," returned Elizabeth; "it is so late in the season."

"I did not know that you were a gardener," he said, coldly.

He looked at her standing there with that unnatural brightness on her cheeks, that wild glitter in her eyes, and it seemed to him that she had only come out in her beauty and unconcern, to mock him after the long night of wild trouble which he had spent.

"I know that is what Jones said," she went on. "He thought in the spring something could be done, but not now."

He was turning away—that action deprived her of all self-control—she caught his arm, crying:

"Don't touch that tree—don't go near it."

He stopped and looked at her in blank amazement; she saw the danger in which her impetuosity had placed her—dropped his arm and tried to appear composed again.

"What is the matter with you?" he asked. "The tree is not a human being that I am going to assassinate."

She forced herself to laugh; even then the woman's self-mastery was something astounding.

"I was a little theatrical," she said; "but I can't bear to have the old tree touched."

"Why, marm, it'll die if it ain't," put in Jarvis, who considered that he had been silent quite long enough.

"You don't know anything about the matter!" cried Elizabeth, sharply.

The old man drew himself up, and looked so indignant that she felt sure he would oppose her now with might and main.

"I mean," she added, "you don't know how I feel about it, I want the poor thing left alone."

The old man relinquished his erect attitude and looked somewhat mollified.

"If it's yer whim, marm, that's another thing, but I thought I'd lived too long in this neighborhood for anybody to accuse me of not knowing a thing when I pretended to, especially about trees."

"Oh, no, no," interrupted she; "I always knew that you were a universal genius, a better gardener than half the professed ones."

"Wal, I don't know about that," said Jarvis, his face beaming all over with satisfaction, for the old man was peculiarly susceptible to flattery.

"Then you won't touch the tree?" cried Elizabeth, turning again towards her husband.

Mr. Mellen had been watching her while she talked; he was growing more and more angry now, thinking that she only wished to interfere unwarrantably with his plans.

"You will leave the tree till spring?" she continued.

"I shall have the earth loosened," he answered, "I don't choose to sacrifice the tree to a mere caprice."

"It is not a caprice," she exclaimed, forgetting herself once more. "I ask you not to touch it—I beg you not to touch it!"

"Might I ask the reason of your extraordinary conduct?" he began; then remembering old Benson's presence, checked himself quickly.

"I think it the best thing for the tree," he added.

"But Jones did not think so, and he ought to know."

"I fancy he said that to avoid the work."

"No, no! In the spring you can do it—not now—not now."

"By spring it will be too late; the earth must be dug away now."

She clasped her hands under her shawl, resolved to make one effort more—a respite must be found—for a day, at least.

She looked out toward the tree—the lower part of it was hidden, where they stood, by a thicket of shrubs and bushes, but the stately top towered up dark and solemn, waving in the morning breeze and seeming to whisper an omen of dread to her half maddened senses.

"Not to-day," she exclaimed; "at least do not touch it to-day."

His suspicious mind, so wildly on the alert since the strange events of the past week, was now fully aroused by the singular earnestness and trouble of her manner.

There was another secret! It was no desire to contradict him which actuated her—there was something at the bottom which he could not understand—a new phase of the mystery with which he had felt himself surrounded from the first moment of his arrival, and which had gathered and darkened so rapidly during the past week.

"Leave the tree at least to-day," pleaded Elizabeth.

"I can't send for Jarvis and put him off without a reason," he said; "he has plenty of work on his hands."

"It can't make no difference, Miss Mellen," the old man joined in; "'tain't no use to put it off—anyhow I couldn't come again till the last of the week."

"Let it go till then," she said, eagerly; and new life stole over her face at the bare hope of obtaining that delay.

"This is sheer folly," said her husband. "Go in—go in. You will catch cold—the grass is damp. Come, Jarvis, get your spade."

"It won't hurt the tree a spec, Miss Mellen," said he; "don't feel oneasy about it—I'll be as tender of it as if it was a baby."

He moved away as he spoke, and left the husband and wife together. Elizabeth was pale even through her artificial bloom—no matter what he thought, she must obtain some delay.

"Grantley," she cried, "don't touch the tree—I ask it as a favor—you will not refuse—let it stand as it is."

He gave one look at her face and turned his head away to hide the expression of anger and doubt which crept over his own.

"Can you give any reason?"

"No, no! It is one of my fancies—only gratify it—let the tree alone for a day or two at least."

Fierce passion shook Mellen like a sudden tempest. His first impulse was to drag her into the house and force from her lips the secret and the mystery which surrounded her, but he controlled the impulse and answered:

"As you please. I will leave it for the present."

With this curt concession Mellen walked away, and Elizabeth went back into the house. She paused to rest a few moments in the library; her limbs were shaking so violently that they refused to support her. She was roused by the sound of her husband's voice in conversation with old Benson—he might come in and find her there.

She started up like a wounded animal that concentrates its dying strength in one wild effort for escape—hurried from the room and up the stairs into her own chamber.

Elsie was still lying on the sofa; she sprang up as Elizabeth entered.

"Will he leave it?" she cried. "Will he leave it?"

"Yes, he has promised."

Elizabeth sank in a chair, so broken down by agony that it might have softened the heart of her deadliest enemy could he have seen her then.

"Saved again!" cried Elsie. "Don't despair, Bessie—it will all end right."

"Saved!" repeated Elizabeth. "Have you thought what must be done before I can breathe again?"

Elsie gave a cry and hid her face.

"Be still!" said Elizabeth. "I will do it—be still!"

"Don't let me know—don't tell me—I should die of fright!"

"Think of me, then," she returned. "In the night—alone with that—what can I do?"

Elsie interrupted her with another cry and her old appealing wail.

"You are killing me! You are killing me!"

"Be still," repeated Elizabeth, in the same awful voice. "Be still!"

CHAPTER LIII.

CLORINDA'S GHOST STORY.

Mellen set old Benson about some other duties and went into the library. While he stood at one of the windows, looking gloomily out on the autumn landscape, he heard the voices of 'Dolf and his

spinster inamorata in the area below.

"What's marster gwine to have done to de tree?" Clo asked.

"He's afeared it's deceasin'," replied Dolf, pompously, "and he wishes to perwent."

"Don't come none o' yer furrin lingo over me," said Clorinda, angrily. "Can't yer say what he's gwine to do, widout any of dem dern outlandish Spanish 'spressions."

"'Twarn't Spanish, lubly one," said 'Dolf, greatly delighted at the effect his grandiloquent language had produced. "Sometimes I do 'dulge in far away tongues jist from habit; its' trabeling so much, you know."

"Don't know nothin' about it, and don't want to," interrupted Clorinda. "Ef yer can't answer a civil question as it outer be, yer needn't stay round dis part of de house."

"Don't be ravagerous," returned Dolf. "Any question ob yours it is my delight to answer, only propose it."

"I does, plainly enough. What's marster gwine to have done to dat ar ole tree?"

"Hab de airth dug up," said Dolf, deeming it wiser to use a more simple phraseology; "he's 'feared it's dying."

Mellen was about to order them away from that part of the house—the veriest trifle irritated him now—when Clorinda's next words made him pause.

"I wish he'd hev it dug up by the roots," she said; "I do 'lieve dat ar tree is haunted."

"Haunted!" screamed Dolf, who possessed a large share of the superstition of his race. "Now what does yer mean, Miss Clorindy?"

"Jes' what I ses," replied she sharply; "I ain't one ob de kind dat tittervates up my words till dey haint got no sense left."

"But I never heerd of a haunted tree," said Dolf, gaining new courage as he remembered that it was broad daylight. "Haunted houses I've heerd on in plenty; but a tree——"

"Oh, mebby yer don't know eberything yet!" said Clo, viciously.

Clo had been rather short with her lover of late, having interrupted several private flirtations of Victoria, with the faithless one.

"Do tell me what yer mean, Clorindy," pleaded Dolf, his eyes fairly started out of his head with curiosity.

"Oh, mebby you'd better go to Vic," she retorted, "she's a heap cuter dan what I be. I ain't coffee-colored, I'se only a nigger."

"Now, Miss Clorindy!" cried Dolf, understanding that this was an occasion when flattery and soft words were absolutely necessary. "You know I'se ales in for de genuine article."

"Don't know nothin' ob de sort," said Clo. "I kint flirty and flighty about like some folks; but, anyhow, I ain't fool enough to put all my wages on my back. I guess marster cud tell what I've got in de bank."

That allusion to her golden charms drove the youthful graces of Victoria quite out of Dolf's head. He grew more tender and submissive at once.

"Yer's de pearl ob de creation!" he cried enthusiastically.

Mellen stamped his foot passionately, furious with their nonsense, upbraiding himself that he could listen to the conversation of his own servants, yet unable to move away without hearing the revelation which Clorinda evidently had to make.

After a little more persuasive eloquence which began to restore Clorinda's good-humor, Dolf said:

"But do tell me what yer means 'bout de tree?"

"No," said Clorinda, mysteriously; "it's one ob dem tings as is best not talked 'bout. I don't run and tell all I sees and hears."

"Jis' confide in my buzzom," said Dolf, tenderly.

"Men is so duberous, 'specially dem as brags 'bout der mean white blood, which comes out coppery any how," said Clorinda.

"Yer knows I'se de most faithful and constance ob my sect," cried Dolf. "Yer may speak freely to me."

"I 'spose yer'd say de same to Vic."

"Neber, Miss Clorindy! What, dat silly, giggling girl—don't tink it!"

His persuasions met with their reward at last; he pleaded again:

"Jis' tell me what yer means 'bout de tree bein' haunted?"

She yielded to his flattery and her feminine desire to tell all that she had seen or imagined about the old cedar.

"Mebby 'twas two months 'fore you came back," she said, in the tone of a person trying to be exact in her recollection of events.

"What was?" cried Dolf, impatiently, "de hauntin'?"

"Ef I'm gwine to tell you my story I'll do it in my own way," said Clorinda, majestically.

"In course, in course," returned Dolf. "I begs pardon for de 'ruption. Jis' go on, sweetest Miss Clo'."

"I tells yer dar's been somethin' agoing on in dis house," pursued Clorinda. "Dat ar bracelet losing was all of a piece wid what went afore. Missus was awful mad at me for saying so, but I don't care. She's queer—stuck up like. There's Miss Elsie, sweet allers as a young kitten!"

"Yes, yes," Dolf said, ready to agree with anything in order to get at the heart of Clorinda's mystery.

"Afore ever dat ring was lost I seed a man in de house in de dead ob de night—a man and a woman!"

"Good gracious!" cried Dolf.

"I'd had de toothache, and ben down to de kitchen fire a smokin' pennyryal, and awful sick it made me. I was gwine up de back stairs, when I heard steps in de hall. I looked in and I seed a man and woman plain. I had de candle in my hand. I screeched right out, and shut my eyes, and let de candle fall. When I opened 'em again missus had come out of her room, wid a shawl over her and a lamp in her hand.

"What yer doin' dar?' says she.

"I up and telled her 'bout de man and woman, and she larfed in my face.

"Whar be dey?' says she. 'Dar's nobody here but us.'

"Twarn't no use to say nothin', she flew off into one o' her tantrums, and scolded me like all possessed. I don't like her, anyhow, and dat's all 'bout it!"

"But is dat all?" questioned Dolf, in a disappointed tone.

"No, it ain't all; jis' wait and don't go off de handle afore you knows which end you've got hold on."

"But de tree, Clorindy," said Dolf; "tell me 'bout de tree."

"I'se comin' to dat," replied Clo, growing eager again. "I'd ben down to see Dinah Jameson, at de cross roads; it was real late; we'd had a prayer meetin' and I kinder forgot myself in de refreshin' season——"

"Yes," said Dolf, fearing she would go off in a long digression and lose sight of the all-important topic, "dey is refreshin'; as preserves is to de taste so is meetin's to de spirit—soothin', yer know."

"Jis' so," said Clorinda.

"Wal, yer was comin' home," suggested Dolf.

"Yes; two or tree on 'em came with me to de gate and dar dey left me. I heeled it up de avenue jis' as hard as I could, but when I got near de house I thort, suppose missus should see me, she's a pokin up at all hours, she'd scold me like smoke. I jis' cut out ob de road to take de path trough de thicket, and came in sight ob de ole cypress tree."

Clorinda broke off abruptly to recover her breath and to allow her narrative to have its full effect upon her listener.

"Go on; oh, do go on!" cried Dolf.

Could the pair have seen the face leaning over the balcony, straining to catch every word, they might almost have thought that one of the ghosts they so dreaded had started up before them.

"I came in sight ob de cypress tree," recommenced Clo, working up her story to a climax with great art.

"Yes, yes," said Dolf again. "In sight ob de tree——"

"I seed somethin' all in white a couchin' down dar, a throwin' up its arms and moaning like. I jis' give one yell and danced away. When I got to de house, what do you tink? dar was missus. Whar she come from I don't know, and she give me goose again for screaming; but la! she was white as a dead woman all de while."

"What could it all a ben?"

"I don't know more'n you. The next morning she sent for me, and she telled me she'd hev to send

me away ef I didn't quit dat habit of bein' up so late and skeerin' de gals wid stories 'bout ghosts; so I jis' held my tongue."

"And had you ebber seed anytink more?"

"Laws, I wouldn't go near dat tree after dark for all de money on Long Island! I tells you dar's sometin' queer somewhar."

"So dar is," assented Dolf, in a perplexed manner, "dar is, sure."

"Don't yer say nothin', 'cause I'd get my walkin' papers ef yer did. But ef you're so mighty wise, jis' tell me what yer makes ob all dis mysteriousness?"

"Clorindy," said Dolf, in a solemn voice, "ghostesses is a subject 'taint proper to talk on, and the queernesses ob our marsters and misseses is not tropics for us."

"A body must wonder, I s'pose, black or white," said Clo, angrily.

"But dat's all you've seen?"

"Dat's all, and it's 'nuff and more too."

Grantley Mellen stepped back into the library and closed the window. He had need to be alone. Every day, every hour, the mystery which had intruded into his home deepened and took more appalling shapes.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE SABLE FORTUNE HUNTER.

The pair of sable retainers went on with their conversation, totally unconscious of a listener, and when the interest connected with that subject had culminated, diverged to themes more intimately connected with their own affairs.

One of the chief desires of Dolf's soul was to find out exactly how much money Clorinda had in the bank, but he had never been able, with all his arts, to bring her to that degree of confidence necessary to make him a partner in that dearest secret of her life.

The other servants and her friends in the neighborhood gave very contradictory accounts concerning the amount, and Victoria openly avowed her belief that—

"De whole ting was just gammon—didn't b'lieve she had no money no whar—she know'd she was so old dat it was her only chance of ketchin' a beau, so she tried it on; dat was 'bout all it 'mounted to."

But Dolf was too wise to be influenced by Victoria's sneers, and had lately convinced himself that the sum was larger than he at first supposed. In that case Dolf felt the extreme folly of allowing a fancy for Victoria to stand in the way of his interest. Already he had incurred Clorinda's serious displeasure; it had required a vast amount of eloquence to reconcile matters after his indiscretion with the strange young woman at old Mother Hopkin's, besides, his flirtations with Victoria were a constant bone of contention between them.

Dolf felt certain that if he only came directly to the point and made Clorinda a bona fide offer of his hand with his heart in it, she would forgive him; but it required a good deal of resolution to make up his mind to that step.

Clorinda was not prepossessing in her appearance,—that her most partial friends would have been forced to admit; probably in her youth she might have had her attractions, but now that years, avarice, and a not very patient temper had worn their furrows in her face, it really required all the glitter of her reported wealth to make her endurable in Dolf's mercenary eyes.

Then her color and her frizzed locks, at which Victoria sneered so openly—that was a tender point with Dolf; he had the general contempt for the jetty hue which one is certain to find among those of the bronze complexion.

Dolf stood there looking at Clorinda and revolving all those things in his mind, while she washed her vegetables and made herself busy as possible at the kitchen dressers.

"Dis life is full of mysteriousness, Miss Clorindy," he said in a meditative tone.

Clorinda snipped off the tops from the carrots she was preparing for her soup, and assented.

"Dar ain't much wuth livin' for," she said gloomily.

Dolf was frightened at once; when Clo got into one of her desponding humors she became very religious without delay; and he trembled with fear that she would condemn him to Methodist hymns and a prayer-meeting that very night.

"Don't say dat, Miss Clorindy, now don't!" he exclaimed pathetically. "You's de light ob too many

eyes for sich renumerations—you lights der hearts as de sun does de sky at noonday."

Clorinda relented; with all her firmness and numerous other grim virtues, she was a thorough woman at heart, and never could withstand flattery adroitly administered.

"Go 'long wid yer poety nonsense," said she, giving a coquettish toss to her head that made her gorgeous bandanna flutter as if suddenly electrified. "Go 'way wid sich, I say."

"Don't call it nonsense, sweet Miss Clorindy," urged Dolf; "when a gemman disposes de tenderest feelins' ob his bussom at yer feet, don't jist at 'em."

To be called by such endearing epithets in two consecutive sentences, softened Clorinda greatly; this time something uncommon must be coming—Dolf certainly was in earnest.

"I don't see nothin' at my feet," said she, with a little giggle.

"Yes, yer does, Miss Clorindy," pleaded Dolf; "yes, yer does—now don't deny it."

"La!" said Clorinda, in a delightful flurry, "you men is so confusin'."

"I don't mean ter be confusin', Miss Clorindy," said Dolf; "it's far from my wishes—leastways wid you."

There was a tender emphasis on the concluding pronoun which quite upset Clorinda. She allowed the carrots to fall back in the pan of water, and seated herself on a stool near by—if anything serious was coming she would receive it with dignity befitting the occasion.

Artful Dolf, profound in his knowledge of the sex, read her thoughts without the slightest difficulty, and chuckled inwardly at the idea that any female heart could resist his fascinations. Still he was in a condition of great perplexity; he had no intention of committing himself until he had learned the exact price Clorinda could pay for the sacrifice he was prepared to make of his youth and good looks. On the other hand, he was sorely puzzled how to obtain the desired information without laying his heart at her feet. All his craft in that direction had signally failed; in that respect Clorinda was astute enough to be fully his match.

But he must say something; Dolf could not afford to lose time in misunderstandings, particularly as he had lately discovered that the sable parson whose meetings she attended, was becoming seriously devoted in his attentions.

"Ah! Miss Clorindy," he said, "de sect is all resemblous in one particular."

"What do yer mean?" inquired Clo, and her voice softened in response to the tenderness in his.

"In yer cruelty," said Dolf, "yer cruelty, Miss Clorindy."

"Laws, nobody ebber sed I was cruel," returned the matter-of-fact Clo. "I wrings de necks ob de chickens and skin de eels alive, 'cause it's a cook's lookout, but I hasn't got a speck ob cruelty in me."

Dolf shook his head, then dropped it on one side with an air which he had found very effective in former flirtations.

"In course yer'll deny it—it's de way ob de sect, but de fact is dar."

"I don't know what yer mean," said Clorinda, beginning to resume a little of her usual rigidity; "if yer ain't a talkin' Spanish now, it's jist as bad."

"I alludes to de coquettations in which yer all indulge."

"I don't," said Clo; "I leaves all sich foolishnesses to silly things like dat Vic—I hasn't no patience wid 'em."

"Oh! Miss Clorindy, Miss Clorindy!"

"Dat's my name, fast 'nuff; yer needn't go shouting it out dat ways."

"When I'se seed wid my own eyes," said Dolf.

"What has yer seen? Jis' 'ticlarise—I hate beatin' round de bush."

Clo really believed that Dolf was getting jealous; the bare idea filled her with a delicious thrill—triumphs of that sort were sufficiently rare in her experience to be exceedingly precious.

"But I don't know what yer mean," she went on, "no more'n de man in de moon."

"Dar it is!" said Dolf. "Why, I b'lieves dat ar's de only reason de sect looks at de moon, cause dar's a man in it."

"Oh, he's too far off," returned Clo, with a prolonged chuckle at her own wit; "too high up for much use."

"Bery good," said Dolf, "bery good indeed! Yer's in fine spirits to-day, Miss Clorindy."

Here Dolf sighed dolefully.

He certainly was in earnest this time—Clo felt assured of that. She forgot the half-washed

vegetables, the unseasoned soup, and tried to pose herself with becoming dignity.

"I don't see why," she said, in sweet confusion. "But any how yer didn't prove nothin' 'bout my bein' coquettious."

"Dar it is!" cried Dolf. "It all goes togeder."

"Oh, laws," cried Clo, "as ef dat ar would set you a sighin'; I knows a heap better'n dat, Mister Dolf."

"Yer don't do me justice, Clorindy," said Dolf, seriously, putting on an injured look; "yer neber has done me justice."

"Why, what have I done now?" demanded Clo, beginning to play with her apron string.

"Clo! I say, ole Clo!"

Victoria, who was getting impatient with her confined position behind the laundry door, where she had done jealous duty as a listener, now dashed in upon the lovers, and broke up the conversation just as it reached a most interesting point.

"I say, ole Clo, them perserves are a bilen over; you can smell 'em here."

CHAPTER LV.

IN THE NET.

The day was wearing slowly on; a day more terrible in its moral darkness and suspense than perhaps had ever before descended upon that old house.

Mr. Mellen was engaged with a succession of visitors on business, with whom he remained shut up in the library; Elsie took refuge at first in her own chamber, but either nervousness or a desire to talk drove her again to Elizabeth's room. Their dressing-rooms were separated by Elizabeth's chamber, so Elsie flung the door open and ran into her sister's room, exclaiming:

"You must let me stay; I can't be alone."

Elizabeth only replied by a gesture; she was walking slowly up and down the floor as she had been during all the morning; it was entirely out of her power to accept one instant of physical rest. She left the door open and extended her promenade through the second chamber into Elsie's, and then back, pacing to and fro till she looked absolutely exhausted, but never once pausing for repose.

They were undisturbed, except when one of the servants knocked at the door for orders, and at each request for admittance Elsie would give a nervous little cry.

"Tell them not to come any more," said she, lifting both hands in nervous appeal.

"They must have their orders," Elizabeth replied; "come what may, everything must go on as usual to the last moment."

Elsie shivered down among her cushions and was silent. She had pulled the sofa close to the hearth, gathered a pile of French novels about her, and sat there trying her best to be comfortable in her feeble way.

"If you would only sit down," she exclaimed, at length.

"I cannot," replied Elizabeth; and resumed her dreary walk.

Then there came more interruptions; Victoria wished to know if they would have luncheon.

"Marster's got in de library wid dem men—'spect missus don't want to go down."

"What is she talking about?" questioned Elsie from her sofa.

"Luncheon," said Elizabeth; "will you have it up here?"

"As if one could eat—"

A warning gesture from Elizabeth checked her.

"You may bring the luncheon up here," Elizabeth said to the girl.

Victoria went out and closed the door.

"I believe they would come if we were dying, to know if we would take time to eat," cried Elsie.

"Everything must go on as usual," was Elizabeth's answer.

"How can you stand there and talk so calmly to them!" cried Elsie. "It's enough to drive one frantic."

"It is too late now to be anything but quiet—entirely too late."

Elsie began some shuddering complaints, but Elizabeth did not wait to hear them; she had resumed her promenade, walking with the same restless, eager haste, her eyes seeming to look afar off and unable to fix themselves upon any object in the rooms.

"There is another knock," cried Elsie. "Oh, they'll drive me frantic!"

"Come in," Elizabeth said, sharply.

It was Victoria with the luncheon tray, and it seemed as if she never would have done arranging it to her satisfaction.

"I brung yer some apricot jelly, Miss Elsie," she said; "I knowed you had one of yer headaches."

But Elsie only moaned and turned upon her cushions.

"Dar's only cold chicken and dat patter," said Vic; "I took de ducks in fur marster."

"There is quite enough," said Elizabeth; "you needn't wait."

"Yes, miss," returned Vic. "I hain't had no time yet to sweep de room Miss Harrington had—Clo, she's ugly as Cain, ter day."

"It makes no difference," said Elizabeth, while Elsie threw down her book in feverish impatience.

"Yes, miss, but tain't pleasant," returned Vic, with her most elegant curtsey. "I likes to do my work reg'lar and in time, missus knows dat; but when Clo gets into one o' her tantrums she sets ebyting topsy-turvey, 'specially when dat yaller nig', Dolf, come down feering wid de work."

"Then keep out of the kitchen," cried Elsie; "don't quarrel."

"Laws, Miss Elsie," said Victoria, with all the injured resignation of suffering innocence; "I neber quarr'ls wid nobody, but I defy an angel to git along wid Clo! She's jest de most aggravatin' piece dat eber wore shoe leather! She's so mad 'cause she's gettin' ole dat she hates a young girl wuss nor pison, she does."

Vic was now fairly started on the subject of her wrongs, and hurried on before Elsie could stop her, with all the energy of a belated steam engine. Elizabeth had walked into the other room, and Victoria took that opportunity to pour out her sorrows with the utmost freedom to Elsie.

"Miss Elsie, sometimes I tinks I can't stand it. I wouldn't nohow, if twarn't fur my affection fur you—you and miss," Victoria hastened to add diplomatically, fearful that her mistress might be within hearing and that the omission would be turned to her disadvantage. "Clo, she gits agravatiner ebery day, and sence Dolf come back she's wurs'n a bear wid a sore head."

"Oh, you make mine ache," cried Elsie.

"Laws, miss, I wouldn't for the worl'."

"Then go along, and let me sleep, if I can."

"Sartin, miss; but let me do somethin' for yer head," said Victoria, out of the goodness of her heart.

"No, no; I only want to be let alone."

"If yer'd only let me bathe it wid cologne," persisted Vic.

"I don't want it bathed," fretted Elsie.

"Laws, miss, it does a heap o' good! Pennyryal tea's good—"

"Oh, do go away!" groaned Elsie.

"In course I will, miss; but I'd like to do something fur ye—yer looks right sick."

"Then just go away, and don't come up again for the next two hours."

"Yes, miss, I'll jest—"

"Go out!" shrieked Elsie.

"I'se only fixin' yer cushins," said Vic. "Dear me, Miss Elsie, yer allers says I'm right smart handy when yer has dem headaches."

"Oh, I can't bear anybody to-day."

"Dear me, ain't it a pity! Now, miss, I knows what 'ud be good for yer—"

"Elizabeth," groaned Elsie, "do come and send this dreadful creature away!"

This time Victoria deemed it prudent to make a hasty retreat, for she stood in a good deal of awe of her mistress. She went out, reiterating her desire to be useful, and really very full of sympathy, for she was a kindhearted creature enough, except where her enemy, Clorinda, was in the question.

"They'll kill me, I know they will!" moaned Elsie.

Elizabeth did not pay the slightest attention to her complaints, and she relapsed into silence. Finally, her eye was caught by the luncheon temptingly laid out. There lay a mould of delicious apricot jelly in a dish of cut crystal, shining like a great oval-shaped wedge of amber; the cold chicken was arranged in the daintiest of slices, and there was custard-cake, Elsie's special favorite.

She made an effort to fancy herself disgusted at the bare sight of food, and turned away her head, but it was only to encounter the fragrant odor from the little silver teapot, which Victoria had set upon the hearth.

"Could you eat anything, Elizabeth?" she said, dejectedly.

"No, no; I am not hungry."

"But you never touched a morsel of breakfast, and you ate nothing all yesterday."

"I can't eat now—indeed I can't," was Elizabeth's reply.

"Oh, nor I!" moaned Elsie. "I feel as if a single mouthful would choke me."

She glanced again at the tray, and began to moan and weep.

"Oh, dear me! This day never will be over! Oh, I wish I were dead, I do truly! Do say something, Bessie; don't act so."

But Elizabeth only continued her incessant march up and down the floor, and Elsie was forced to quiet herself.

She rose from the sofa at last, stood by the window a few moments, but some magnetism drew her near the luncheon-tray again. She took up a spoon and tasted the apricot jelly.

"I want things to look as if we had eaten something," she said, giving Elizabeth a wistful glance from under her wet eyelashes.

"You had better try and eat," said her sister.

"One ought, I suppose," observed Elsie. "I think I will drink a cup of tea—won't you have some?"

Elizabeth shook her head, and with renewed sighs Elsie poured herself out a cup of tea and sat down at the table.

"Oh, this wretched day! I'd rather be dead and buried! Oh, oh!"

In an absurd, stealthy way, she thrust her spoon into the apricot jelly again, and stifled her moans for a second with the translucent compound.

"I wish I could eat; but I can't!"

She put a fragment of chicken on her plate, made a strong effort and actually succeeded in eating it, while Elizabeth was walking through the other rooms.

"I've tried," she said, when her sister appeared in the doorway again, "but I can't, it chokes me."

She drank her tea greedily.

"I am so thirsty; I believe I've got a fever."

But Elizabeth was gone again, and Elsie stood staring at the paté—a magnificent affair, she knew it was—one of Maillard's best, full of truffles and all sorts of delicious things. She felt something in her throat, which might have been hunger or it might have been weakness; she chose to think it the latter.

"I feel so weak," she said, when Elizabeth returned on her round; "such a sinking here," and she put her hand in the region where her heart might be supposed to beat.

"You had better lie down," her sister said, absently.

That was not the advice Elsie wanted or expected, and she cried out, spasmodically:

"How can I keep still! Oh, I wish I had some drops, or something to take!"

She moaned so loudly that it disturbed Elizabeth, who became impatient.

"Drink your tea," she said, "and eat something; you cannot go without food."

"Well, I'll try," said Elsie, resignedly. "I wish you'd sit down and have a cup; perhaps I could eat then."

"Not now," replied Elizabeth.

The very sight of food was loathsome to her. She had hardly touched a morsel for two days.

After a good deal more hesitation, Elsie attacked the paté, and the jelly, and the pickles, and the custard-cake, and some crisp little wafers, and, finally, made an excellent meal; all the while declaring that she could not eat, that every mouthful choked her, that she believed she was

dying. To all these complaints Elizabeth paid no more attention than she did to the meal that sensitive young creature was making.

Elsie went back to her sofa, feeling somewhat comforted, and prepared to take a brighter view of things. It appeared possible now for her to live an hour or two longer—a little while before she had declared that her death might be expected any moment.

"Do come and sit down, Bessie," she said, as Elizabeth entered, for about the hundredth time. "I'll give you the sofa; you must be tired out."

"No; I am not tired."

"But I am sure you have been for three hours march—march—march! Do sit down."

Elizabeth only turned away in silence, but Elsie felt so much relieved after her creature comforts, that she could not forbear attempting to inspire her sister with a little of the hope which had begun to spring up in her own narrow heart.

"Oh, Bessie," she cried, "I feel as if this would get over somehow, I do indeed."

"But how? may I ask how?"

"Oh, I can't tell; but there'll be some way, there always is; nothing ever does happen, you know."

Elizabeth did not reply. She was thinking of the books she had read, in which women's ruin and disgrace were depicted with such thrilling force, of the accounts in almost every daily journal of families broken up, their holiest secrets made a public jest; of terrible discoveries shaking a whole community with the commotion, and dragging all concerned before the eyes of the whole world in scorn and humiliation. Yet Elsie could say:

"Nothing ever does happen!"

She was thinking that perhaps in a few hours her beautiful home might be agitated by a discovery, mysterious and full of shame as any of the occurrences in the novels she was recalling; only a few hours and she might be driven forth to a fate terrible as that of the unhappy women whose names she had shuddered even to hear mentioned.

Not for one instant did she delude herself. She knew that the crisis was at hand, the fearful crisis which she had seen approaching for weeks. This time there would be no loophole of escape—this last respite was all that would be granted her; and even now that she had gained that much, there seemed every hour less probability of her being able to turn it to advantage.

Then the task before her, the thing she had to do, a work at which the stoutest man's heart might have quailed, alone in the dead of night, with the fear of discovery constantly upon her, and the horror of an awful task frenzied her mind!

She clenched her hands frantically as the scene presented itself, in all its danger, to her excited fancy. She saw the night still and dark, herself stealing like a criminal from the house; she saw the old cypress rising up weird and solemn, she heard the low shiver of its branches as they swayed to and fro; she saw the earth laid bare, saw—

The picture became too terrible, she could endure no longer, and with a shuddering moan sank upon her knees in the centre of the room:

"God help me! God help me!"

Elsie sprang off the couch and ran towards her with a succession of strangled shrieks.

"What is the matter? What ails you? You frighten me so. Are you sick—did you see something? Is he going that way?"

But the woman neither saw nor heard; her eyes were fixed upon vacancy, an appalling look lay on her haggard face, which might well have startled stronger nerves than those of the girl by her side.

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth!" shrieked Elsie, in genuine terror which there was no mistaking.

"I must do it," muttered the woman; "I must do it!"

"Oh, Bessie, dear Bessie! Get up! Don't look so! Oh, for heaven's sake! Bessie, Bessie!"

Elsie threw herself upon the floor beside her sister, crying and shrieking, clinging to her, and hiding her face in her dress. Her agitation and wild terror recalled Elizabeth to her senses. She disengaged herself from Elsie's arms and staggered to her feet.

"It's over now," she said, feebly, with the weariness of a person exhausted by some violent exertion; "I am better—better now."

"Oh, you frightened me so."

"I will not frighten you again. Don't cry; I am strong now."

"What was the matter? Did you see anything?"

"No, no. I was only thinking; it all came up so real before me—so horrible."

"But it may be made safe yet," urged Elsie. "If you can escape this time—only this once."

She did not connect herself with the trouble which might befall her sister. Even in that moment of anguish, her craft and her selfishness made her remember to keep present in Elizabeth's mind the promise she had made.

"Only this once," she repeated.

"It is too late," returned Elizabeth. "I knew the day would come—it is here!"

"But he can't discover anything, Bessie, when everybody is abed."

"Have you thought what I must do?" she broke in. "The horror of appealing to that man is almost worse to bear than exposure and ruin."

Elsie wrung her hands.

"Don't give way now. You have borne up so long; don't give way when a little courage may save everything."

"I shall not give way; I shall go through with it. But, Elsie, it will all be useless; the end has come, deception cannot prosper forever."

"No, it hasn't! I'm sure it hasn't! Think how many secrets are kept for ever. It needs so little now to make all secure; only don't give way, Bessie—don't give way."

"Be quiet, child; I shall not fail!"

Elizabeth walked away and left the girl crouching upon the floor, went to the glass and looked at herself. The rouge Elsie had rubbed on her cheeks burned there yet, making the deathly pallor of her face still more ghastly; her eyes gleamed out of the black shadows that circled them so full of agony and fear that she turned away with a shudder. Her hair had fallen loose, and streamed wildly about her shoulders. She bound it up again, arranged her dress and recommenced her restless walk.

"Get up, Elsie," she said; "some one may come in."

Elsie took refuge on her sofa, and sobbed herself into a sound slumber, while Elizabeth, in her haggard anxiety, moved up and down, wounded by cruel reflections which wrung her soul and left it dumb, with a passive submission, born rather of desperation than endurance.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE SECRET TELEGRAM.

Elizabeth at last paused, and in her bitter anguish stood for minutes regarding Elsie as she lay asleep upon the sofa. She approached and bent over her. The girl had brushed her long fair curls back from her face, and they fell over the cushions in rich luxuriance, a feverish color was on her cheeks, lighting up her loveliness, and her whole appearance was so pretty, so singularly childlike, as she lay there, that it seemed impossible, even then, that she could have anything in common with the trouble that oppressed Elizabeth.

Elizabeth stood for a long time regarding her, and many changes passed over her face as she did so, but they all settled into a look of determination, and she turned away. Whatever was to be borne she would endure alone; she would keep her promise to the very letter. If ruin and disgrace came they should fall on her alone. Why attempt to involve that fair young creature in it?

She went to a cabinet in the corner of the room, opened a little drawer and took out a package of letters. They were those her husband had written to her during his long absence.

She drew an easy-chair near to the sofa and sat down, with her face turned towards Elsie, opened one or two of the epistles and read passages from them. One of the pages ran thus:

"Whatever may happen, no matter how long my absence may be protracted, I know that you will take care of Elsie. If the worst should happen—if death should surprise me in this far-off land, I know that you will fulfil for me the promise I made my dying mother, and be a parent to that desolate girl.

"Forgive me if I pain you by writing so sadly. I do not believe that any misfortune will happen to me; something tells me that I shall reach home in safety, and find love and happiness once more awaiting me there.

"But the charge I have in Elsie's future is always present to my mind. I never can forget the words that my dying mother spoke; they are with me night and day, and have been since the hour when they died on her pallid lips.

"It rejoices my heart to think how different from most girls our little Elsie is. If any harm were to reach her I think I should go mad; disgrace to one whose blood was kindred to that in my veins

would kill me. You may think this pride a weakness, but it is too deeply rooted in my nature ever to be eradicated. When I look about the world and see girls disgracing themselves by improper marriages, elopements, often social crimes, which must blight their lives and those of all connected with them, I think what I should do under such circumstances.

"Elizabeth, I could not endure it. You are my wife; I love you more deeply than you know of; but I tell you that I could better bear sorrow which came to me through my wife, than the weakness or dishonor of one who claimed my name by right of birth. It is an inherited pride, which has, I know, come down from father to son, and will go with me through life.

"But Elsie is safe—in your hands quite safe. I rest upon that thought. I remember her loveliness, her innocence, her sweet childish ways, and I am at peace again, knowing that you will care for her."

This was the letter Grantley Mellen had written during his long exile, and his wife sat reading it in the presence of that sleeping girl.

After a time Elizabeth folded up the letters, kissed them passionately, and laid them away.

"Perhaps it is the last time," she murmured. "The last time! I must not think of it. Oh, my God, how will this day pass?"

She began walking up and down the rooms again, treading softly that she might not disturb Elsie's slumber. This time her movements had some purpose. She went into her dressing-room, took her riding dress from a wardrobe and hastened to put it on. She grew cold, and her poor hands shivered as she drew on her gauntlet gloves, and tied the veil over her hat. In passing through the next room, the unhappy woman lingered a moment to look on that sleeping girl, and her soul filled itself with the cruel desolation of this thought.

"He will not feel it so very much when it is only me on whom disgrace falls," she thought, with mournful satisfaction. "For her at least I shall have done my best. I have struggled so hard to keep the fair creature he loves from harm. When I am swept from his path, like a black cloud that had no silver lining for him, he will be happy with her. I ought to be comforted by this. Yet, oh, my God! my God! this thought alone makes the worst of my misery. They will be so happy, and without me!"

In passing down stairs Elizabeth met Dolf, moving dejectedly up from the basement story where Vic had so maliciously disturbed his love making. He stood aside to make room for his mistress, who addressed him in her usual calm fashion.

"Go to the stables," she said, "and order my groom to bring Gipsy round; he need not trouble himself to attend me. I shall ride alone."

Dolf hurried down the hall, and his mistress went into her little sitting-room, opened her desk and wrote some words on a slip of paper which she folded and thrust under the gauntlet of her glove. Then she stood by the window watching till her horse was brought round.

He came at last, a light graceful animal, so full of life, that he fairly danced upon the gravel, and flung the sunshine from his arched neck with the grace of a wild gazelle. He whinnied a little, and put out his head for a tribute of sugar, which Bessie always gave him before she mounted the saddle. But she had nothing of the kind for him now; scarcely touching the groom's hand with her foot, she sprang upon his back and rode slowly away, turning him upon the turf which was like velvet, and gave back no sound. Thus, with an appearance of indolent leisure, she passed out of sight.

There was nothing remarkable in this. Elizabeth had been in the habit of riding around the estate, without escort, during the two years in which her husband had been absent, so the groom went back to his work and thought no more of the matter.

Elizabeth rode forward, without any appearance of excitement, until a grove of trees concealed her from the house; then she put her horse upon the road, and ran him at the top of his speed to the edge of the village.

Once among houses she rode on leisurely again, and stopped at the post office to enquire for letters,—getting down from her horse, an unusual thing with her. There was a telegraph station connected with the post office, and while the man was searching his mail, she took the slip of paper from her glove, and laid it with some money before the operator.

The telegram was directed to that hotel near the Battery, which has already been described.

CHAPTER LVII.

KITCHEN GOSSIP.

The day was passing—that long, terrible day—in which the moments seemed to lengthen themselves into hours, while with every one the gloom about the old house deepened and pressed more heavily down.

Grantley Mellen was in his library still, it had been a busy day with him; it appeared as if every creature within reach who could invent a plea of business had chosen that time to trouble him with it.

He was alone at last, and that was well; he was literally incapable of enduring any farther self-restraint.

He rang the bell and gave strict orders to Dolf:

"Let no one else in to-day; I have letters to write; I will not see another human being."

Dolf bowed himself out, and took his way to the lower regions, to communicate to Clo and Victoria the commands his master had given. Those three servants kept themselves aloof from the few others employed for tasks which they considered too menial for the dignity of their position, and these gaping youths and girls were strictly forbidden to enter the apartment in which Clo had installed herself.

They were perfectly well aware, those three sable dignitaries, that something was wrong in the house; servants always do know when anything out of the common routine happens, and no pretence can blind their watchful eyes.

"Marster says he won't see nobody more," said Dolf, as he entered the room where Clo was rolling out her pie-crust, and Victoria busily occupied in watching her.

"I wonder what's come over 'em all," said Vic. "Der's missus was a walkin' up an' down like a crazy woman—"

"She didn't eat no breakfast," interrupted Dolf, "an' she never teched a thing yesterday; now she's just done gone out a riden' all alone."

"An' Miss Elsie stretched out on de sofa, lookin' as if she'd cried her pretty eyes out," went on Victoria. "Says she's got a headache—go 'long; tell dat to blind folks! It's my 'pinion der's more heart-ache under dem looks dan anythin' else."

"Dat's jis' what I tink," assented Dolf.

Clorinda, from her station at the pastryboard, gave a sniff of doubtful meaning, tossed her head till her frizzed locks shook, brought her rolling-pin down on the board with great energy, and remained silent for the express purpose of being questioned.

"What does yer tink 'bout it, Miss Clorindy?" asked Dolf.

Vic looked a little spiteful at hearing this appeal to Clo, but she was so anxious for anybody's opinion, that for once she forgot to quarrel.

"I tink what I tink," said Clo, with another toss of her head and an extra flourish of the rolling-pin.

"Oh!" said Dolf, quite discomfited.

"Jis' so," said Clorinda.

"Any pusson could have guessed dat ar," put in Victoria, in an irritated way; "yer needn't make sich a mysteriousness."

"I shall make a mysteriousness or shall luff it alone, jis' as I tink best," retorted Clo, "so yer needn't go a meddlin' wid my dumplin', Miss Vic, 'cause yer'll git yer fingers burnt if yer does."

"Don't wanter meddle wid nothin' that recerns you," cried Vic, jumping at the prospect of a quarrel, since there was nothing to be gained by amicable words.

"Jis' give me any of yer sarse," said Clo, "and I'll mark yer face smash wid dis ere dough, now I tells ye?"

"Don't lay a finger on me, cause I won't stand it," shrieked Vic; "yer a cross ole, ole—dat's what's de matter."

"Go 'long 'bout yer business," shouted Clo, shaking her rolling-pin in a threatening rage. "Dis ere's de housekeeper's room, an' yer hain't no business here."

"Much business as you has, I guess; yer ain't housekeeper as I knows on; yer only potwasher anyhow."

"Missus telled me to use dis room for makin' pies and cakes in till she got anoder housekeeper, an' I'se gwine ter."

"I don't keer if she did, dat don't make yer housekeeper any more'n stolen feathers makes a jackdaw an eagle."

"Now, ladies, ladies!" pleaded Dolf, fearful of the extent to which the tempest might reach if not checked in time. "Don't let us conflusticate dese little seasons of union by savagerousnesses;

don't, I beg."

"Den her leave me alone," sniffled Vic.

"Larn dat gal ter keep a civil tongue in her yaller head if yer want peace an' composition," said Clo.

"Dat ar's religion wid a vengeance," cried Vic; "a callin' names is pretty piety, ain't it! I'll jis' see what Elder Brown says ter dat ar de bery next time I sees him."

"Oh, yes!" said Clo, contemptuous; "yer allers glad ob a 'casion ter gabble! How's a pusson gwine ter hab religion when dey's persecuted by sich a born debil; wurs 'en dem in de scripture as was worrying de swine."

"Laws!" said Vic, with a vicious sneer, "was yer roun wid dat drove 'bout dat time."

"I'll drove yer," cried Clo.

But Dolf interposed again, and luckily Clo's nostrils detected the odor of burning pie-crust, and she rushed into the kitchen to see if the girl had allowed her pastry to burn.

Dolf took that opportunity to soothe the angry Victoria, and succeeded admirably.

"Now, Miss Clorindy," said Dolf, when she had relieved her feelings by abusing Sally for her carelessness about the pies, and was once more tranquilly occupied with her work; "now, Miss Clorindy, jis' glorify us wid yer 'pinion 'bout de 'fairs ob dis dwellin' which we has all noticed is more mysteriuser dan is pleasant."

"I ain't gwine ter talk, jis' ter be snapped up like a beetle by a Shanghai," said Clo; "shan't do it, nohow."

Dolf winked at Victoria, and the artful maiden condescended to mollify her fellow servant.

"Now don't be cross, Clo," said she, "it's bad enough ter hab conflictions above stairs widout us a mussin'."

"Dem's my sentiments," cried Dolf, "and I knows fair Miss Clorinda 'grees wid dem—she coincidates, if yer'll 'scuse the leetle bit ob dictionary."

Victoria made a grimace behind Clo's back, but said, graciously:

"I'se gwine ter gib yer dat ar blue handkercher Miss Elsie gub me, Clo," she said, "so now let's make up and be comfoble."

"I don't want ter fight," replied Clo, "'taint my way—only I knows my persition and I 'spects ter be treated 'cording."

The handkerchief was something Clo had coveted for a long time, and the gift quite restored her good-humor.

"Dat's as it orter be," said 'Dolf. "Peace and harmony once more prewails, and we's here like—like—de Happy Family as used ter be at Barnum's Museum," he added, finding a comparison at length, and quite unconscious of its singular appropriateness.

"I'se gwine to mend dis tablecloth," said Vic, "and I'll set here to do it—when I go upstairs I'll git yer the hankercher, Clo."

"Oh! laws," said Clo, "yer want it yerself—don't be a givin' away yer truck."

"I'd ruther yer had it," observed Vic, "blue's allers becoming to yer, ain't it, Mr. Dolf?"

She made another grimace, unseen by Clorinda, which nearly sent Dolf into fits, but he restrained his merriment, and answered with the gravity of a judge:

"Miss Clorindy overcomes whatever she puts on, but since yer wishes my honest 'pinion, I must say I tink blue's about de proper touch fur her."

Clo grew radiant with delight, but she worked away resolutely, only observing:

"Victy, dar's a leetle cranberry tart I jis' tuk out ob de oben—it's on de kitchen table—I 'spect we might as well eat it, cause 'taint big enough to go on de table."

"I'll fotch it," cried Dolf; "to sarve de fair is my priv'lege."

He darted into the kitchen, bore off the tart from before Sally's envious eyes, and closed the door so that she could not be regaled even with a scent of the delicacy.

"I've jis' done gone now," said Clo, "so I'll rest a leetle afore I 'gins dinner. I'll jis' taste de tart to see ef it's good—it kinder eases my mind like."

"In course it does," said Dolf, and he cut the tart into four pieces, having an idea that the last slice would revert to him in the end.

They ate the pie and talked amicably over it, while in the end Dolf received the extra piece by earnestly pressing it on his companions, who in turn insisted upon his eating it himself.

"Mebby Sally'd like a taste," he said, virtuously.

"Sally, 'deed no!" cried Clo. "It's nuff fur her ter see such tings widout eatin' 'em—a lazy, good-fur-notin' piece."

"Den ter 'blige yer I'll dispose of it," said Dolf, and he did so in just three mouthfuls.

"If yer wants my 'pinion 'bout what's gwine on," said Clo, suddenly, as she rose to pile up the dishes she had been using preparatory to making poor Sally wash them in the kitchen; "it's jis' dis yer! Dis trouble's all missus!"

"Missus!" repeated Vic.

"Now what does yer mean?" cried Dolf.

Clo nodded her head several times with gravity and precision.

"Yes, missis," she repeated, with the firmness of a person who meant what she said, and was fully prepared to defend her opinion.

"What's come over her?" asked Vic.

"Dat's jis' it," returned Clo; "now you've hit it prezact—yer might talk a week, Vicky, and not come inter de pint agin."

Victoria looked at Dolf, and he looked at her, but, however convincing her own words might have seemed to Clorinda, there was nothing to throw any light upon their minds.

"Yer's repeatin' wid yer usual knowledge," said Dolf, softly, "but can't yer sperficate a leetle more clear."

"Mr. Dolf," said Clorinda, rolling up her eyes 'till only the whites were visible, "when I lives in a house de secrets ob dat house is locked in my bussom—"

"But ter feller domestics," put in artful Dolf.

"Jis' 'mong us," said Vic.

"I know, I feels dat, and so I speak," replied Clo. "I ain't gwine ter say Miss Mellen is a favoright ob mine, 'cause she ain't—but she's my missus. Her ways isn't my ways, dat's all I says, and I hain't recustomed to bein' brung up so sharp roun' de corners as is her way ter do."

"Tain't ter be 'spected," said Dolf.

"Mebby 'tis and mebbly 'tisn't," returned Clorinda; "I only says I ain't recustomed to it, dat's all."

"But what do yer tinks happened ter her ter put 'em all in sich a to-do?" questioned Victoria.

"I ain't prepared ter say ezzactly," replied Clo, "but I tink she's gwine crossways wid marster and dat lubly angel, Miss Elsie. Dar's a syrup fur ye! She nebber gubs a pusson orders widout eben lookin' at 'em—she ain't so high and mighty dat de ground ain't good 'nuff for her ter walk on! Not but what missus a mighty fine woman—she steps off like a queen, and I tell yer when she's dressed der ain't many kin hold a candle ter her, and as fur takin' de shine off, wal, I'd jis' like ter see anybody do dat."

"It's all true," said Dolf, "as true as preachin'!"

"Mr. Dolf," said Clo, gravely, "don't take dem seriousnesses so lightsome on yer lips."

"I won't," said Dolf, humbly, "I begs ter 'pologise—yer see in gazing 'bout de world a gemman 'quires some parts ob speech as seems keerless, but dey don't come from de heart."

"I'se glad dey don't," observed Clorinda, "bery glad, Mr. Dolf."

"But what do yer tink missus has done?" demanded Victoria.

Such a straightforward question was rather a puzzler to Clorinda, so she answered with a stately air:

"Der's questions I couldn't answer eben ter my most intemancies—don't press it, Vicky."

Victoria's big eyes began to roll wildly in their sockets; she was astonished to find that Clo had for some time seen that things were going wrong, when the fact had escaped her own observation, and, for the first time in the course of their acquaintance, she felt a sort of respect for her usual foe but temporary ally.

"Does yer tink dey's quarr'ling?" she asked.

"When I hears thunder," said Clo, sententiously, "I allers takes it there's a storm brewin'."

Vic looked more puzzled than ever, and Dolf was not much better off, though he tried to appear full to the brim with wisdom and sagacity.

"Yer 'members the night missus lost her bracelet, Mr. Dolf?" asked Clo.

"I does bery well."

"When missus bemeaned herself to shout out at me as if I'd been a sarpint," cried Clo, viciously.

"Wal, if ever I see thunder I seed it in marster's face dat ar night!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Victoria, bundling up her work, "if you and Mr. Dolf has got secrets to talk ober, I'd better go 'way."

"Who's a destryin' the harmony now?" shouted Clo. "It's raal sinful, Victory, to give way to temper like you does."

"Oh, dat's all fine 'nuff. But I don't wish to stand in nobody's way. I'd better take my work upstairs."

"Set still, set still, Miss Victory," urged Dolf. "Der's no secret. We shall have de uttermost pleasure in making you 'quainted wid de pint in question."

Clorinda did not look altogether pleased with his eagerness to explain; she rather liked Victoria to suppose there was a secret between Dolf and herself; it seemed like paying off old scores, and though in a friendly mood, Clorinda was a woman still.

"'Splain or not, jis' as yer please," said Vic, tossing her head, viciously, "it's quite 'material to me."

But Dolf gave a voluble account of what his master and mistress had said and done the night the bracelet was lost, and ornamented the conversation beautifully, calling on Clorinda to set him right if he erred, and the points where Clo most loudly expressed her approval as being the exact words spoken, were those Dolf embroidered most highly.

"Why, dar goes marster now," exclaimed Victoria, suddenly. "He's gwine out to walk."

They all rushed to the window to look, as if there had been something wonderful in the sight, and just then Sally rushed in with a cry:

"The soup's bilin' over, Clo; come—quick!"

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE INTERCEPTED TELEGRAM.

That afternoon confinement in the house became so irksome to Grantley Mellen that he could support it no longer, so he put on his hat and hurried out into the grounds.

Upon one point his mind was fully made up. The clue to the mystery appeared to be in his hands; he would follow it out to the end now—he would know the worst. If this woman had wronged him he resolved to sweep her out of his life, even as he had done that false one in years gone by.

That thought drove him nearly mad, it recalled that writing. Should it prove the same! If this man had a second time thrust himself into his life to blacken it with his treachery and hate! Terrible words died, half uttered, on Mellen's lips, his face was fairly livid with passion, a loathing and a hatred which only blood could wipe out.

Below the house the lawn and gardens led away into a grove, and towards its gloom Mellen mechanically directed his steps under the cold, gray sky. A chill wind was blowing up from the water, but he did not observe it; in the fever which consumed him the air seemed absolutely stifling, and he hurried on, increasing its excess by rapid movements.

He was in the grove, walking up and down, with no settled purpose, striving only to escape those maddening thoughts which still clung to him.

The wind was shaking the few remaining leaves from the trees and blowing them about in rustling dreariness, the frosts had already touched the grass and ferns, and though the place on a bright day would still have been lovely, it looked bare and melancholy enough under that frowning sky.

"It is like my life," muttered Mellen; "like my life, with an added blackness coming up beyond."

Then his mood changed; again that fierce passion swept over his face, leaving it dangerous and terrible.

"If that woman has deceived me," he cried aloud, "this time I will have no mercy! She shall taste her degradation to the very dregs; there is no depth of shame through which I will not drag her, though I ruin my own soul in doing it! But it can't be! it can't be! It were death to believe it! Oh, Elizabeth, Elizabeth!"

Every tender feeling of his nature went out in that last agonizing cry. For the first time he realised all that this woman had been to him, how completely she had woven herself with his life, and what a terrible blank it would become if he were forced to tear her from it.

He made an effort to check those black thoughts, to invent excuses; he was almost inclined to rush into the house, beg for the truth and promise pardon in advance. Then he called himself a weak fool for the idea that any excuse was possible.

"I will wait—I have the clue—it will all be made clear soon. I will wait."

He clenched his hands with a groan that was half anguish, half rage, and hurried more swiftly into the depths of the woods.

He came out upon a little eminence, from whence he could look down on the paths and avenues leading towards the house, though the dwelling itself was hidden by the thick growth of trees.

Along the high road he saw his wife riding at full speed toward the woods, through which she passed with weary slowness, walking her horse homeward, and looking anxiously down upon his reeking sides, and smoothing his neck with her hand, as if troubled by those signs of hard riding.

Where had the woman been? What deception was she practising now?

Mellen could see his wife's face plainly—for she passed near him quite unconsciously. It was pale and wild with the fear of a hunted animal.

"Traitoress!" he muttered between his teeth, "she thinks to evade me."

He watched the slow progress of Gipsy as she walked toward the house, taking the lawn, evidently because her rider feared to give warning of her expedition by the sound of hoofs on the beaten track. He saw Elizabeth dismount unaided, and go wearily into the house.

Where had she been?

Over and over Mellen asked himself this question, as he sat minute after minute, pondering over the most bitter thoughts that ever haunted a man's brain.

It might have been an hour after, when he saw a man coming up from the direction of the village, walking forward with great rapid strides. Instantly his suspicions fell upon this new object. He was always keen-sighted enough, but just then the thought in his mind made his vision still quicker and more clear.

Without pausing for an instant's reflection he darted down the hill—as he approached the figure it disappeared. On into the woods Mellen followed the intruder, and before he could look around grasped his arm with a clutch so firm that there was no shaking it off.

"Rascal!" he cried, "what are you doing here? Answer me, or I'll shake you to pieces!"

The man struggled violently, but Mellen was like a giant in his passion, and swung him to and fro as if he had been a child.

"Let me alone!" cried the man. "I ain't a doing no harm!"

"What are you prowling about my house for, then? Do you know that I am master here? I shall take you indoors, and keep you till I can send for a constable. Take care, no resistance; what is your business here?"

"I wasn't prowling round," pleaded the man, gasping for breath in Mellen's hard grasp; "I thought these woods was public property."

"Then you shall be taught. You had some errand here—speak out, or by the Lord I'll kill you!"

"Don't—don't! You're choking me!" groaned the wretch.

"Then speak! What are you doing here—whom do you want to see?"

"Just let me go and I'll tell you," pleaded his prisoner. "I can't speak while you're throttling me."

Mellen loosened his grasp on the man's throat, but still held him fast. His hold had been a fearful one—the man was actually breathless.

"Will you speak now?" he demanded, with terrible menace in his voice.

The man began to breathe more freely; but, though shaking with fear, he answered sullenly:

"I hain't got nothin' to tell; I was going to the house yonder, and took a short cut through here."

"What business have you at the house? Tell me the truth, for I will know."

The man could both see and feel that he was in horrible earnest; he might easily have supposed himself in the power of an insane man—and for the moment Mellen was little better.

"How do I know that you have a right to ask?" questioned the man.

"I am the master of that house. Now will you speak?"

"Yes," faltered the man, "I'll tell you. It's a telegram that I was carrying to the lady; nothing wrong in that I hope."

"No harm, certainly; give the telegram to me. I will deliver it."

The man gave up the telegram. The envelope which contained it was sealed, but Mellen tore it open without a moment's hesitation. Even as he unfolded the paper, his hand faltered—in the very height of his rage he could not think of the woe its contents might bring, without a sharp pang.

He read it slowly, standing there motionless, unable, at first, to take in the full extent of his crushing anguish. "*Have no fear. I will be at the old spot, prompt to help you. All shall be prepared.*"

This was the telegram. There was no signature—it needed none. Mellen knew only too well who the writer was, knew it as thoroughly as he did the woman for whom it was intended.

For a full half hour Grantley Mellen was a madman. The fever and the insanity passed at length; he lay upon the ground, staring up at the cold sky, the telegram still clutched in one hand, the other dug deeply into the earth, in a wild conflict of passion that shook him to the soul. He raised himself and looked about; it seemed as if he had been suffering in a fearful dream—he glanced down at the paper—that brought conviction back.

He sat there for a long time revolving vague plans in his mind, and deciding upon the course he would pursue.

"Meet craft with craft," he muttered; "their own evil weapons."

He rose from the ground, arranged his dress, and walked towards the house.

"Not a sign, not a word which can betray," he said aloud. "I will meet her with a duplicity equal to her own,—wait—a little longer—only a little longer."

He walked towards the house, and again Victoria called out to her companions:

"Here comes marster as fast as fast can be."

But Clorinda's thoughts were now centred upon her dinner, and she had no time even for gossip.

"Get away from dat window and go 'bout your work," cried the dark spinster, austere; "what hev yer got to do wid de marster's outgoins or incomins? Beat dese eggs into a foam rite off, for I'se in a hurry. Mr. Dolf puts one back so."

Victoria cast one more glance through the window, for the wild agony on her master's face rather alarmed her. But Clorinda called out in a voice so shrill that it was not to be disregarded, and she was constrained to undertake the task assigned her without more delay.

CHAPTER LIX.

FORCED HOSPITALITY.

While Mellen stood on the veranda in front of the house, Mr. Rhodes came up the avenue. There was no hope of escape for him; he had not perceived the visitor until it was too late to retreat, and a voice called out:

"Oh, there you are, old fellow; I'm in luck after all. You see I walked over to my farm on the back road," he explained, "intending to take the half-past three train to New York, but I missed it. So I said to myself, 'I'll cut across the fields, down the hill, and stop at Mellen's, beg a dinner, and get him to send me over in time for the five o'clock train'—wasn't a bad idea, eh?"

"A very good idea on the contrary," Mellen answered, with a desperate attempt at hospitality, while the visitor wrung his hand again and burst into shouts of laughter, as if some wonderfully good joke lay in the affair. "And how is your good lady?" he asked. "And the pretty little sister—quite well, eh?"

"Tolerably so," Mellen answered; "complains of headache and that sort of thing."

He conducted his guest into the library, and meeting Dolf in the hall, directed him to inform his mistress of the arrival.

Mellen made an effort to be civil though the man was tiresome in the extreme; perhaps it was better to endure his society than to meet his wife that day without the restraint of a stranger's presence.

Indeed, without some of those social restraints to which all men are more or less slaves, it is doubtful if Mellen could have appeared so perfectly calm. As it was, the fire that consumed him raged unseen. Dolf carried his message upstairs, where it was received with a little shriek from Elsie, and blank dismay on the part of Elizabeth.

"I can't go down," she said; "Elsie, you must take my place at the table. Say that I am ill, fainting, anything."

"Indeed, I'll do nothing of the sort," returned Elsie; "if you don't go down I shall stay with you. I am nervous as I can be, and if you are not at the table I shall break down completely."

The girl was full of selfishness to the very last—not willing to yield her comfort in the slightest particular, but Elizabeth only sighed as she observed it, and said, quietly:

"After all, it is just as well—change your dress, Elsie."

These two women commenced the duties of a dinner toilet with heavy hearts, scarcely heeding what they put on.

But when the dinner hour approached, they entered the drawing-room together and almost smiling, Elsie looking exquisitely pretty in her dark blue silk, with those bright ringlets floating about her shoulders; her volatile spirits were already rising at the idea of an escape from that shadowy chamber where she had dragged through the day.

Elizabeth was calm and self-possessed as ever. To a casual observer she looked pale, but her heavy black dress might account for that, and the delicate contrast it gave to her complexion made amends for any lack of bloom.

Mellen sat watching her while she greeted Mr. Rhodes, and listened patiently to his labored compliments.

"Is she stone—ice?" he thought. "Is there no touch of nature about her that she can be so calm?"

If the man could have read her mind, he might have pitied her even in the midst of his anger and fearful doubts. What she suffered in putting that terrible restraint upon herself was almost beyond the power of belief; but woman-like, having formed her resolution, not all the tortures of the rack could have driven her from it.

Elsie had seated herself on a low stool at her brother's feet; he sat absently playing with her curls, and looking moodily into the fire, but he had no words even for her, though she tempted him with rather mournful smiles. But he had been so silent and sullen by times during the past week, that there was not change enough in his manner to be at all perceptible.

Sometimes Elizabeth glanced over at the pair, and then some sharp pain contracted her brows, but there was no other appearance of emotion; she would control even that instantly, and bending her head once more, listen patiently to her persecutor's verbiage.

Dolf announced dinner, and the party passed into the dining-room, Mr. Rhodes honoring the hostess with his arm. As Mellen and his sister followed, Elizabeth heard Elsie whisper in a low voice:

"Grant, dear, you are not cross with me?"

In the midst of Mr. Rhodes's uproarious laugh at one of his own jokes, she caught Mellen's answer:

"Never, darling, never! You are my one comfort—my only blessing."

With her head more proudly erect, a faint crimson beginning to burn on her cheeks, Elizabeth Mellen walked on and took her seat at the table, appearing so completely engrossed in Mr. Rhodes's conversation that she did not once meet her husband's eye.

To all but the guest, that dinner seemed interminable, but Mr. Rhodes was so busy with the delicacies Clorinda's skillful hands had prepared, and so full of himself, that he was in a perfect glow of content.

The lights danced before Elizabeth's eyes, every morsel she ate was swallowed with a pang, the wine was like a bitter drug on her lips, yet there she sat in patient endurance.

Occasionally Mellen glanced towards her, and her composure sent such a thrill of rage through his soul, that it was with difficulty he could keep from springing up and overwhelming her with the discovery he had made, on the spot.

The dinner was over at last, but tedious as it had seemed to Elizabeth, she would gladly have prolonged it: anything to lengthen the hours; to keep afar off the stillness of the night, when she must undertake that to which she had doomed herself.

But she would not think of that; she dared not; madness lay so near the dismal reflection that it must be swept from her mind.

They dragged through the evening; Elizabeth played cribbage with Mr. Rhodes, and Elsie gave snatches of desultory music at the piano; every time her fresh young voice rang out in joyous song Elizabeth started, as if an unseen dagger had struck her to the heart.

"You will all come and pass a day with us before long, I hope," Mr. Rhodes said, with exuberant hospitality, when the time came at last to order the carriage for his departure.

Elizabeth only answered with a wan smile. She could hardly stand. Mellen accompanied his visitor through the hall, and the instant they disappeared Elizabeth started for the door.

"Where are you going?" asked Elsie.

"To my room; I can't bear this."

"I'll go—"

"No, no, not yet; stay awhile, for heaven's sake let me rest alone one moment." She staggered through the dining-room and was gone; when Mellen entered the library again, Elsie sat alone by the fire, teasing the cat, looking cheerfully pretty and childlike.

CHAPTER LX.

WAITING FOR THE HOUR.

The clock in Elizabeth's dressing-room had struck eleven, but there she sat desolately looking into the fire, just as she had sunk into her chair on first entering the chamber.

She heard her husband and Elsie ascend the stairs a full hour before, but Mr. Mellen went straight on towards his own apartments. He had not entered hers since the day the bracelet was found; she knew well that he would not intrude upon her then.

For two long hours she had been alone with her dismal thoughts, no sound broke the stillness, save the monotonous ticking of the clock or an occasional sob and moan from the half spent wind without.

There was too much anxiety and agony in her mind for any of the nervous terrors which had haunted her during the day. Then, as she thought what the coming of the night would bring her, the heart in her bosom shuddered. Now it stood still and seemed hardening into iron. If some spirit had appeared with an articulate warning, she could not have been more convinced that exposure and ruin were approaching her with rapid strides. She would do her best, but that, she knew in her innermost soul, would lead to destruction. She looked back on the past weeks, and tried to remember if her plans had failed through her own weakness.

Before Mellen's return it had seemed possible to carry them out, to bury the past utterly, and build a new palace of hope on its grave, but they had all failed. It was not her fault, she had borne up as bravely as any woman could have done under the circumstances, had been as circumspect and guarded as it was possible to be, but from the moment of his inopportune arrival, some untoward event had occurred to thwart every project she had endeavored to carry out for her own salvation.

"It is fate," she muttered, in a cold whisper; "it is fate! Oh, my God, help me, help me, for I have yet a right to pray!"

No, even the consolations of prayer were denied this most wretched woman; the words seemed to freeze upon her lips; she could only moan in that broken whisper:

"My God, help me, help me!"

As she sat there, the door opened and Elsie softly entered the apartment. She had taken off her evening-dress, and put on a loose white wrapper, and over that had thrown a crimson shawl, which made the pallor that had come over her face still more apparent.

There was no light in the chamber except that given by the fire.

Elizabeth had extinguished the lamps; the gloom and the shadows befitted her mournful thoughts.

"Bessie, Bessie?" called Elsie, unable at first to distinguish any object in the half light. "Are you there?"

"Here I am," was the hoarse answer; "come in."

"I was so afraid to be alone with Grant," continued Elsie; "I felt as if I should scream every moment."

"What did he say to you; what did my husband talk about?"

"Oh, nothing in particular; he said very little; he did not even ask where you were. I told him you had gone to bed with a headache, but he did not seem to hear. He sat and looked in the fire, as if he were reading something in the red hot coals; after a long time he asked me if I loved him, and kissed my forehead. That was all."

Elizabeth struck her hands hard together, choked back the groan which rose to her lips, and sat gazing into the fire, as if she too read something terrible in the scarlet caverns which were breaking up and forming in its midst.

"I'm so cold," shivered Elsie; "there isn't half enough coal in the grate."

Cold! The chill had crept into Elizabeth's very soul which no power of hers could warm, and close to her that weak creature crouched, moaning out her petty complaints!

Even then, up to the last, while the glittering hands of the clock were seen in the firelight, creeping swiftly over the dial, and its solemn tick measured off the awful minute on which Elizabeth had agreed with her own soul to go forth on her terrible errand, the wretched woman was compelled to pause in that dim chamber, worse than dead herself, to comfort and soothe the creature who lay like a wounded fawn on the hearth.

"What time is it, Bessie?"

She raised herself and looked at the clock.

"Half-past eleven," answered Elizabeth, solemnly. "My hour has come!"

"I thought it was later," groaned Elsie. "Will it never be morning?"

"Soon enough," whispered Elizabeth, "soon enough."

"I wonder if Grant has gone to bed; I asked him if he was sleepy, and he—"

"Well?"

"Oh, he only gave a queer sort of laugh, and said, 'Sensible people always are sleepy when it comes bedtime.'"

Elizabeth had said truly her hour had come, but she could not go yet; she must wait until all danger of discovery was over—stand there breathless while her husband forgot her and her agony in peaceful sleep. They were both silent for a time, then Elsie began to shiver again, like some young bird lost from its nest in a storm.

"Oh, if it would only come morning!"

"Soon enough, soon enough," repeated Elizabeth, as before.

"Do talk to me; I shall die if you don't!"

"What can I say, child? I can only wait—wait."

"Wait! What do you mean? Oh, I know—I know!"

The girl broke off with a more violent shudder and buried her face in her hands.

"What made you remind me?" she cried. "I shall go crazy now. Bessie! Bessie!"

But this time, when the girl clung to her, Elizabeth removed her hands, not impatiently, but with quiet firmness.

"You must control yourself," she said. "I have upon me all that I can bear now. Be still, Elsie!"

"I will! I will!" she sobbed. "Oh, wouldn't it be better to be dead?"

"Better! Yes, a thousand times; but it is not easy to die."

Elsie checked her sobs again, and caught at the hope with which she had sustained herself all day.

"This is the last of it," she said; "this night once safely over, and there is an end."

"One way or the other," muttered Elizabeth.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing—nothing."

It was worse than useless, to agitate the girl's weakness afresh with fears that lay so deep in her own mind. Whichever way the end came, Elsie was safe. Was the creature thinking that as she shut her eyes and leaned more closely against her sister?

"Yes, it will be all safe then," she went on. "The money is paid; we shall have the papers; there is nothing more to fear."

Elizabeth did not answer; she allowed her to think that the danger from that quarter was removed. It could do no good to fill her mind with added fears.

"There is the wind again!" cried Elsie. "Oh, if it would only stop!"

The sound recalled all that lay in the coming hours, and she was unnerved again.

"You are not frightened, are you, Bessie?" she asked.

"I suppose not; there is nothing to fear."

"To be alone with him and—and—Oh, I ought to go with you; I'll try—I'll try."

At that late hour some remorse woke in her mind for her unsisterly selfishness, but Elizabeth said very kindly:

"You will stay here; you could do no good."

"But I shall go mad while you are gone."

"You must get into bed again."

"How long shall you be away?"

"I can't tell. Stop—don't talk about it. I shall go through with it all; let me alone till then."

Elsie writhed to and fro in hysterical weakness.

"You must be quiet," Elizabeth said. "Suppose he should hear you?"

"Grant? Oh, I'll be still—I'll be still as death."

"What time is it?" Elsie asked again.

"Almost twelve; the clock will strike in a moment."

"How much longer shall you wait?" asked the girl in a whisper. "Did he answer your telegram?"

"I did not expect that he would, there was too much danger in it. But hush, I must discover if he is asleep."

"Grantley?"

"Yes."

"What was that noise?" Elizabeth exclaimed suddenly.

"I heard nothing," Elsie answered, lifting her head and allowing it to fall again on her sister's knee.

"It sounded like a step in the hall," said Elizabeth.

"It was only your fancy," returned Elsie. "This house is as still as the grave."

Elizabeth rose from her chair and walked to the window.

"You are not going?" cried Elsie.

"No; I only want to look. Be still!"

Elsie cowered down on the rug and muffled herself more closely in her shawl, lying quite still, with a sort of comfort in the feeling of warmth which began to creep over her.

Elizabeth pushed back the heavy curtains and looked out into the night. A stream of dim, silvery radiance shot into the room, and played like rippling water over the floor.

Elsie half started to her feet with a cry.

"What is that? What is that?"

"The moon is up," said Elizabeth, simply.

Elsie laid her head down again, Elizabeth stood leaning her hands on the window-sill, looking straight before her.

The moonlight was peculiarly clear, and millions of stars shone forth with the diamond radiance seen only in a frosty night. Every object was visible. Hoar frost shone up whitely from the crisp grass of the lawn, and long black shadows were cast downward by the trees, shaken like drapery when the wind tossed the branches up and down.

From where Elizabeth stood she could look out over the withered flower-beds and into the thicket beyond.

Suddenly her eye caught sight of a man standing under the cypress tree, which rose up gloomy and dark, its branches waving slowly to and fro, looking, to her excited fancy like spectral hands that beckoned her forth to her doom.

She uttered a faint sound and strained her eyes towards it with a chill feeling of horror. Elsie was roused again by the noise, and asked, quickly:

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"What made you groan, then?"

"I am looking out," returned Elizabeth, in a low voice, leaning more heavily against the window for support, "he is there!"

"Come away, come away!" cried Elsie, muffling her face more closely in her shawl, as if to shut out some dreadful object. "Come back to the fire, Elizabeth, do!"

"Surely, if I can go out there to meet him," she said, "I have courage enough to look at the old tree."

Elsie only groaned anew. She sat upright and rested herself against the chair her sister had left.

"How does the night look, Bessie?" she asked, in a low, scared tone.

"The moonlight is so ghostly," returned Elizabeth; "it looks frightened. No wonder—no wonder!"

Elsie trembled more violently, but it seemed as if some power stronger than her own will forced her to continue these harassing questions.

"And the cypress, Bessie, how does it look?"

"Stern and dark—no wonder, sheltering him," cried Elizabeth. "It beckons to me; the branches

look like giant arms tempting me to ruin. I must go—I must go!"

Her voice was little more than a whisper, but it sounded painfully sharp and distinct. Elsie buried her face in both hands, once more to shut out the images it conjured up.

"Come back!" she moaned; "Elizabeth, come back!"

"I must go. It is time."

"Wait—wait—just a moment! Don't go yet—don't leave me—I shall die here alone."

Elsie dragged herself along the floor to where Elizabeth stood, and caught her dress in a convulsive grasp.

"Wait a little—just a little?"

The very weakness of this girl seemed to give Elizabeth a sort of insane composure.

"Let go my dress," she said; "I must be gone."

"I can't stay here—I can't!"

"Be still—you must, and shall!"

She wrenched her garments from Elsie's hands, and the girl fell helplessly on the floor.

"Let me creep into bed first," she moaned; "I shall run mad if you leave me here. Oh, I'll go—I ought to go! What an unnatural creature I am! I'll go!"

"Don't talk—don't think—it is too late," whispered Elizabeth. "If you can pray, do it."

"I can't—I daren't! Help me up, Elizabeth—help me up."

But there was no response. Elizabeth was bending towards the window again, looking straight at the cypress tree; but the dread which had been in her face before was weak compared to the horror that convulsed it now.

"He is going there!" she cried, in an awful voice.

Elsie caught hold of her and raised herself so as to look out of the window.

"Who—who? What do you mean?"

"See—see!" continued Elizabeth. "Some one is creeping towards the cypress. He has a spade in his hand. Merciful God, it is too late!"

"Is it Grantley?" shrieked Elsie. "Is it Grantley?"

"There he goes! I told you I heard steps! My God! my God!"

She fell on her knees by the window, still staring out into the spectral light. Elsie gave one glance, saw her brother walking towards the cypress, and then sank back, unable to venture another look.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE MIDNIGHT SEARCH.

Alone in his room, Grantley Mellen had sat for hours with only stern thoughts for his companions, and they grew so black and fierce that the most terrible crisis would have been less hard to endure than that suspense.

He waited silent, immovable, till the last sound in the house died away; waited still for slumber to overtake every inmate of the dwelling, that he might carry out the plan he had formed.

He was going out to the cypress tree; he would discover if his wife's agitation, when he proposed digging about it, was in any way connected with the mystery which surrounded her. He believed that it was so, though in what manner it was impossible to divine. Perhaps there were letters hidden there—some condemning evidence against her which she had found no opportunity since his return to destroy. Whatever it was, he would discover it, drag it out, and with this fresh proof of her treachery in his hands, overwhelm her with a knowledge of her guilt.

He, too, sat watching the clock, counting the strokes as the hours sounded, but to him the time appointed did not arrive quickly. It seemed as if the hands scarcely moved; in his mad impatience he thought the appointed instant never would approach.

It was a terrible vigil that he kept; the strongest man could not for many hours have endured that strain of suspense, while tortured by such fiendish whispers as moaned in his ear.

The time came at last; the moonlight streamed pale and uncertain through the casement; no sound broke the stillness, even the wind had ceased its moaning. He could go forth now without

fear of discovery.

He could go forth, but to what?

His very inability to form an idea of the discoveries he might make, increased the fever of his impatience. He could wait no longer—not a moment—not a second.

He opened the door and crept cautiously through the gallery, down stairs into the lower hall, undid the fastenings of the outer door and passed on to the veranda.

The garden tools were some of them in a closet in the area; he went down the steps, opened the door, took out a spade and hurried towards the cypress tree.

There he was, standing under the moaning branches, his head bare, digging wildly and aimlessly about the roots, peering at every lump of earth with his insane gaze, ready to believe that he had at last come upon that nameless thing for which he sought.

And while he dug furiously into the earth, Elizabeth Mellen knelt by the window-seat watching him; and Elsie lay upon the floor, so utterly prostrated that she could only cry out to Elizabeth at intervals in her sharp, discordant voice:

"Is he there yet—is he there?"

"Still there," she answered.

"What is he doing?"

"Digging, digging! He is on the wrong side of the tree."

Elsie gave a sigh of relief.

"No, no," continued Elizabeth; "he stops to throw the earth back—he is going farther round."

"Has he found the place—has he?"

"Not yet."

Elsie could not even groan; her breath came in quick gasps; her hands tore madly at the carpet, but Elizabeth leaned motionless against the window-sill, watching always with that strained gaze.

"Where is he now, Bessie?"

"He has not reached it—he is near! No! he is digging again—he has not found the place."

"If we could only stop him," cried Elsie, roused to new courage. "If I opened my window and called out."

"Too late, too late!"

"But he will find it—he will find it!"

"Then God help me, I can do no more!"

Elsie sprang up with another shriek.

"You'll tell—you'll tell! I know you will give way—and Grant will murder you—murder us all."

Elizabeth caught the frantic creature in her arms, and forced her back on the couch.

"Lie still," she said.

"Let me go, I say—let me go! I want to die—I won't live after he finds you out. I'll kill you, Elizabeth, if you don't let me go."

But Elizabeth held her firmly in spite of her insane struggles, crying out:

"It is nothing to you—you have no cause to fear. You are mad, mad! I tell you the trouble is mine; whatever comes falls on my head; be still, Elsie."

"You promise. Swear it—swear not to bring my name in."

"I have sworn and I will keep my oath," returned Elizabeth. "Disgrace, infamy, death—I will bear them all alone. What should I gain by dragging you down with me?"

She fell away from the girl as she spoke, but Elsie did not attempt to rise; she lay still now, exhausted by her recent violence, and reassured by Elizabeth's promise.

Again the woman leaned against the window-sill and looked out towards the tree. Mellen was at work still, more furiously than ever, throwing up great shovelful of earth and dashing them down with frantic haste.

"Is he there yet?" called Elsie.

"Yes, yes! How he works—dig—dig—dig!"

She stopped suddenly: the silence raised wilder horror in Elsie's mind.

"Has he found it?"

"Not yet. He is standing still now, he is throwing the earth back."

"What now—what now?" called Elsie, when Elizabeth paused.

"He is looking about—he is puzzled. There is only that place left—he will miss it. The shadows are blackest there."

Another instant of intent watching, then a low cry.

"He is there—he is there!"

"Stop him!" shrieked Elsie. "Shout to him!"

Elizabeth whispered hoarsely:

"Too late! too late!"

"Is he digging?"

"Yes; wait—wait!"

She clutched the window-sill until her nails bent and broke against the woodwork.

"First on one side, then the other," she whispered. "He doesn't touch the right spot—I know it so well—night and day I have seen it——"

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth!"

She never heeded the mad cry, pressed closer and closer to the window-frame, staring out as if every energy of her nature was centred in that gaze.

"He has not found it! He stops again—he throws down the spade! He is stamping on the ground. Oh! once more!"

Then another pause, and at last Elizabeth cried in the same sharp whisper:

"He is throwing the earth back—he turns away!"

"Saved! saved!" shrieked Elsie.

Elizabeth watched her husband's movements still. He stood for some moments in quiet, then walked about the tree; she could feel the baffled rage that shook him.

He turned away at last and disappeared around the corner of the house. Then Elizabeth sprang to her feet.

"Where are you going?" cried Elsie.

"Lie still—don't speak, on your life!"

She ran to the door and locked it, then threw herself down by the fire.

"He might come in and find us," she whispered.

Elsie crept across the floor again, seeking protection at her side. There they waited, hushing their breaths, listening for the echo of his step on the stairs. It came at last, muffled and cautious, but terribly distinct to their strained senses. He half paused at the room where they were, passed on, the door of his chamber opened and shut.

"He has gone in," said Elizabeth.

"Saved! saved!" broke again from Elsie, but there was no answering echo from the woman by her side.

For a time they sat motionless, whether moments or hours neither of them ever could have told.

CHAPTER LXII.

UNDER THE CEDAR.

At last Elizabeth rose, moved noiselessly across the chamber, while Elsie raised her head to look.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"You know," Elizabeth answered.

"You won't—you can't! Oh, wait—wait!"

"And to-morrow have the whole household look on while the work is more thoroughly done!"

"Is there no other way?"

"None. This is the last hope; I shall try it."

There was no elation in her voice at the danger she had escaped, no hope rising up now that she might go through her task in safety, no dread either of what she had to do, only stern determination, the chill of utter despair, ready to struggle but not to hope. She wrapped a shawl about her without the slightest appearance of haste, and stood still a little longer, more like a marble statue endowed with the power of motion than a breathing, living creature.

"Are you going?" called Elsie.

"Yes; I shall not be long—not long."

But Elsie rushed after her and caught her in her arms.

"Every moment is worth a whole life," cried Elizabeth. "Let me go!"

She forced the girl to release her hold, and with one feeble wail Elsie fell senseless to the floor.

"Better so," muttered Elizabeth, "better so!"

The excitement she was laboring under gave this woman new strength. She raised the insensible girl, carried her through the vacant chamber, and laid her on the bed in her own room. She drew the bedclothes over her inanimate form and turned away.

"Now for the end," she murmured, "the bitter, bitter end."

She went back to her own room, closing the doors after her, then, without further delay, passed down the private staircase which led to the little entry off the library.

Once on the stairs she paused to listen, but there was no sound, and she hurried on noiseless as a spirit. One of the shutters was ajar, admitting a few gleams of light, by which she could see to unbolt the door.

She was out in the air at last; the first step was taken in safety—in her turn she flew towards the cypress tree. She was under its shadow, the branches writhed and moaned like living things, the moon shot in and out of the gathering clouds, and cast a flickering, uncertain light about that was more terrible than the deepest gloom.

As she stood in the depth of the shadows, a man came out from the thick darkness that lay under a neighboring clump of white pines, and drew close to her.

"I have been here some time," he whispered. "Everything is ready out yonder—rather rough work for a gentleman, but take it as a proof how ready I am to help you, even after all the money is paid in. But do you know that Mellen has been here?"

"I saw him—I know it; we have no time!"

"Fortunately, he will know why the earth is broken up, having done it with his own hands," said the man, with a suppressed laugh, that made Elizabeth shudder. "Better still, he has left the spade—threw it down in angry disappointment. That is fortunate, for mine was partly disabled out yonder: now show me the exact spot."

She had no need to search, only too well she knew the place. Night and day for weeks the dread spot had been with her, in every dream she had watched men digging, digging—digging with frantic haste; and, as in her dreams, all strength seemed to fail, and some unseen power to hold her back, so now, in that frightful reality, her arms fell half paralyzed, and she could not lift her hand to point out the spot.

To and fro the branches swayed above her head, beating themselves about, moaning like evil voices. The wind swept up chill and warningly.

Such a terrible face it was that confronted the man—such a pale terrified face, lighted up with those agonized eyes, that seemed to grow large and wild in the moonlight.

The man stood before her, leaning on his spade, waiting.

"It is there just in that line of moonlight," she said at last, pointing downward with her finger.

The man lifted the spade with all his fierce might, and struck it deep into the earth, which the cold nights had frozen, until it gave out a sharp ringing sound.

Elizabeth held her breath; what if that sound had reached the house!

Another firm downward thrust of the spade was scarcely heard. The crust was broken, the earth grew soft and yielding—the wretched woman remembered how carefully it had been packed down over the spot. For nights after, the hollow sound of the spade had rung in her ears, and nothing could dull its echo.

A horrible fear was coming over her, a supernatural, ghostly dread, that made her flesh creep and the hair rise on her temples.

Spadeful after spadeful of earth was thrown out, but still the bottom was not reached. She had not thought it deep—so deep. If it should be empty—if nothing was there!

What if the place had been searched before, if the least possibility of removing that terrible evidence was gone beyond her power!

The idea was too maddening, and she shook off the nightmare-like oppression which had been upon her, as the spade suddenly struck some substance harder than the earth, and rang out with a dull, heavy sound.

For one instant she started back. She was alone in the night, alone with that man, who uttered an exclamation of delight that his task was so near done. Elizabeth drew back. She dared not even peer into the cavity. It was choked up with shadows, and their blackness seemed to warn her off.

The mighty strength that had carried this woman forward till now, left her. The cold pierced her through and through; still she found strength to speak, and implored the man to complete his work. He took up the spade again, dropped it into the impalpable darkness of the hole and pressed it down, leaning his whole weight upon it.

She shivered violently now. A sharp pain ran through her chest, as if she, too, had been putting forth some great physical energy. Shadows from the disturbed cypress boughs were falling all about her, breaking and forming again in a thousand fantastic movements. But one shadow, dark, solid and still, fell across a gleam of moonlight at her feet, freezing her to the heart. She looked slowly up and saw her husband.

CHAPTER LXIII.

FACE TO FACE.

For several seconds the husband and wife remained looking at each other in utter silence; the moaning of the cypress boughs sounded louder and more weird; through the whirl of her senses Elizabeth heard it still.

"Come forward," she heard her husband's voice say at length, in the hard, icy tones of concentrated passion. "Come forward, woman, that I may see your face."

The words seemed to come from a great distance; looking over at him, it seemed as if that shallow trench between them was a bottomless abyss which no power could bridge over,—the gulf between them for ever and ever.

"Come forward, I say."

She staggered slowly into the moonlight; the warning was fulfilled; ruin, disgrace had come; yet there she stood speechless, motionless, unable even to give utterance to a moan.

The man who had been digging, flung down his spade with a smothered oath.

For a little time Mellen stood almost as still and helpless as herself. Suddenly, in a voice that sounded scarcely human, he turned upon this man.

"Take up the spade, and finish your work!"

With something between a laugh and an oath, North snatched the spade, plunged it into the grave, and pressed all his force upon it. Slowly the edge of a box appeared. That evil man seemed to triumph in his gloomy work: placed one foot on the handle of the spade to hold it firmly, bent down and dragged the box into the moonlight.

Pulling the spade up from the crumbling earth, he raised it on high, and was about to dash the box open. Elizabeth lifted her hands in mute appeal.

She hoped nothing from her husband's forbearance. The action was only an instinct of her whirling senses, such as makes a drowning man clutch at straws; but with it her limbs gave way, and she fell upon her knees by the box, still lifting her white face to that stem, determined countenance.

"Do you think to oppose me even now?" he exclaimed. "I wonder I do not kill you. Ask this man, this double dyed villain to dig deeper his pit, which has concealed your infamy, and bury you there alive,—that would be a mercy to us both."

"If you would only kill me," she moaned, "only kill me."

"Stand up," he cried again; "stand up, I say."

But she stretched out her hands over the box; some insane idea of still preserving it from his touch, rushed across her mind.

"Open it," he said, turning fiercely on North; "I will look on this dishonor with my own eyes."

"Don't open it; don't open it! Let us pass away from your sight for ever."

Mellen caught her arm and pulled her roughly away.

"You shall not touch the dead," she cried; "kill me but do not commit sacrilege."

Elizabeth struggled on to her knees, and wound her arms about him in a convulsive grasp: he

shook her off with loathing, as if a poisonous reptile had brushed his garments.

North stood with an evil light in his eyes, looking on Mellen, snatched the spade from his grasp, and while a despairing cry died on Elizabeth's lips, dashed it upon the cover; again and again, till the frail board split, revealing a gleam of white underneath.

Elizabeth was lying on the ground—not insensible; no such blessed relief came to her—but incapable of a movement; watching her husband always with those insane eyes.

His passion had exhausted itself in this sacrilegious violence, and he stood over the shattered box, struck with remorseful awe. But the wind swept over it, lifting some folds of transparent muslin from a little face that Elizabeth had seen night and day in her thoughts and her dreams, since the dreadful night when that grave was dug under the cypress tree.

She saw the face; saw her husband looking down upon it; saw all the shuddering horror in his eyes. Still she could not move.

"This has been a murder!" he hissed through his clenched teeth. "I swear that the guilty ones, even if my own name is dragged down to infamy with them, shall be brought to judgment."

"No, no," she moaned; "not murder; not that."

He caught her arm again and lifted her up.

"Tell the truth," he cried; "I will hear it!"

She could only stare at him with an affrighted gaze.

"I will bring the whole neighborhood to look," he went on; "I will drag this secret guilt out in the face of day if you do not speak! I will give you no time; no chance of escape; speak, or I will rouse the whole house, and let them see you here with this vile man, at your guilty work."

"Wait," she shivered; "wait!"

"Do you know what this is?" he cried. "The murder of a child! Do you know that to-morrow may find you a criminal in the hands of justice—you, my wife! You, in whose care I entrusted not only my honor but the most innocent soul that ever lived. Speak then! Expect no mercy from me; not to save my own honor; not to keep my own soul would I lift one finger to help you! Think of it! Picture it to yourself!—The eager crowd gathering about this spot; the hootings and execrations that will follow you forth to prison! Think of the days and nights in your lonely cell; remember the trial! the sentence! the horrible death! you shall not escape! you shall not escape one of these things."

"Grantley! Grantley!"

"Not content with one crime, you have added murder; striving to hide your guilt with a deeper sin!"

"This child died," she moaned; "it was God's own mercy, not my crime!"

"Speak then, and tell the whole truth. Do it. But have no thought that even confession can save you; never hope for mercy from my weakness! You can have no enemy who will prove so relentless as I will; if there was a hope of your escape I would hunt you both down to utter disgrace—nay, to death itself!"

"It is only to die," she muttered; "only to die."

"Will you speak; will you confess? Tell me how you murdered it?"

"There was no murder."

"But you buried it; you and this fiend who shared your guilt? Speak that man's name; I will have it, and from your lips. But, oh, if you have degraded my sister with this secret; if you have blighted her innocence with a knowledge of your guilt——"

"Stop," she broke in; "stop! do not speak of her."

Even in that moment some recollections came upon her, and her face fell forward, bowed down to her marble bosom.

"Elsie knows nothing," she said; "for her sake spare me."

"If you wish to escape having your shame dragged before the whole world, tell me the truth."

"For her sake, for Elsie's, have mercy! I don't expect it—but, remember, disgrace to me reflects not only on you but her! Think of that—don't blight her whole future in crushing me!"

"I left her in your hands—she has been living in daily intercourse with you—you have stained her lips with your kisses—degraded her by your affection."

"I have not hurt her," she cried; "I tell you she never received harm from me."

There was only one thought in her mind, to preserve Elsie from his anger—the worst had come to her now. Her present agony was too great for dread—the shame of the world—the most loathsome prison—nothing could bring such pangs as this wrenching away of hope and

happiness.

She sat upright on the ground, folding her hands in her lap. Weaker women would have fainted, perhaps gone mad, but when the first dizzy whirl had left her senses, she could see and think clearly.

"With this man you alone buried the child. Will you own it, or shall I charge the servants as your accomplices—will you carry out your guilt to the last, and let others suffer that you may escape?"

"No, no! I do not struggle. See, I do not defend myself. Let it fall on me! But no murder, do not charge me with murder. Oh, I am not so bad as that—I could not harm one of God's creatures."

"Is not your sin worse than murder? Why, the blackest criminal has white hands compared to yours! You whom I loved and trusted—you have dragged a man's soul through the depths of your sin."

"I have not, I have not!" she broke forth.

He pointed to the box—he turned his finger to the man who stood in the shadows, shrouded with blackness, like the fiend he was. What could she say—how could she deny with that evidence at her feet.

"Oh, my God, have mercy!" she groaned.

"Don't take his name on your lips—don't curse yourself more deeply by a prayer!"

She crouched lower on the ground, her wild eyes were raised to heaven, but there was no help—no aid.

"All the facts—I will hear them from your own lips—speak."

She was silent.

"I know—I have been on your track for days. It was not enough that you destroyed my life, trampled on my honor, but you must choose for the partner of your guilt the man who had most cruelly wronged me—the one foe I had on earth."

"No, no! I never saw that man—never!"

"Peace, woman! I tell you that man standing yonder with a grin of Satan on his lips, is William Ford."

She did cry out then—this was a horror of which she had not dreamed.

"I never knew it; I never knew it."

"And you love this wretch? Through him you shall suffer!"

"I hate him, loathe him!" she cried. "Oh, in this one thing believe me—I never knew it was Ford. The name was changed to deceive me."

"I would not believe a word from your lips though you brought an angel to witness it."

Then he looked down at the little coffin, and a fierce gust of insanity swept over him.

"I will send for some officer of justice."

She caught his arm and held him firmly.

"For Elsie's sake—don't overshadow her life with the shame you hurl on me. Let me go away—you shall never hear of me again—I will never cross your path! I do not ask for mercy, but for your sister's sake, for your own honored name, let me go away and die."

CHAPTER LXIV.

BURIED OUT OF SIGHT.

Lost and guilty as this woman was, there existed still one human virtue in her soul—even in his rage Mellen could feel that she spoke the truth—she was not asking mercy for herself—she was pleading for the innocent girl whose future would be destroyed were it known how vile the creature was with whom she had been the associate.

"Where will you go—what will you do?"

"Anything—anything! You shall never hear from me again."

"You are going with this man!"

"There is no life so horrible that I would not prefer it to his presence," she said; "no death so shameful that it would not be heaven compared to seeing his face again."

There was a brief pause then; Mellen grasped her by the arm.

She thought he was about to kill her. She sank on her knees and a broken prayer rose to her lips. She would not have struggled; she would have knelt there and received death patiently from his hands.

"Do you think me lost and vile as yourself?" he cried, reading her thoughts in this gesture. "I do not want your life—do with it what you will! For my innocent sister's sake I will spare you—but go—go where I never can hear your name—let me have no reason to know that you exist! If you cross my path again, nothing shall keep me from exposing you to the whole world."

All at once, North came out from the shadows that had concealed his face, and stood before the man he had so foully wronged.

"Grantley Mellen," he said, "for your own sake, believe me. If this woman will not speak, I am not coward enough to keep silent."

Elizabeth stepped forward, her head raised, her eyes flashing.

"But I charge you—North or Ford, I charge you, make no defence for me. At your hand, neither he or I, will accept it. There has been no murder, there must be none. If this most wronged man grants us the mercy of silence, it is enough."

"But I am not brute enough to——"

"Peace," said Elizabeth; "if you would serve me, obey him."

"Obey him," answered North, with a sneer. "I would do almost anything. Yes, and I will do even that; but you are the only woman on earth for whom I would so bend and creep to this man."

These words stung Mellen like vipers, but he would not allow those two criminals to know how his heart writhed.

"It is well," he said; "there is more to be done. Go and finish your work."

North took up the spade.

"Remember," he said. "It is for her sake."

Elizabeth made an effort to speak.

"Be still," said Mellen, "we need no more words."

North began throwing the earth back into the trench, Elizabeth sat still and watched him.

It seemed to her that she did not suffer—there was nothing in her mind save the blank feeling which one might experience sitting over the ruin an earthquake had made, after burying home, love, everything the soul clings to. North filled the chasm and smoothed the earth down over it carefully. Then, without a pause, he straightened the lid of the coffin—there was no haste, no recoiling—he drove back the nails that had been loosened, into their place—then he raised the box in his arms, saying, only:

"Come!"

Mellen walked forward, Elizabeth followed a little behind—she did not ask a single question, but moved slowly down the avenue towards the outer gates. They passed through, out into the high road, up the little hill, Mellen walking sternly on, and the woman following, North marching forward with long strides, bearing the coffin on his shoulder.

They reached the graveyard; the fence was broken in one place; Mellen wrenched off the picket and forced a passage. He passed through, and Elizabeth mechanically kept in his footsteps. At the lower end of the yard was a single grave, with the earth still fresh around it; not a tuft of grass had sprung on the torn soil, but dead leaves had drifted over it, and the frost crusted it drearily, turning its moisture to ice. Elizabeth might have recognised this grave as one that had been given to a fair woman who had perished in the late shipwreck, had she found any room for thought out of her great misery. But she only saw a dreary-looking grave, at which North paused. He set down the coffin and again raised his spade. Elizabeth stood by, silently turning to stone, as it were. She watched him dig a deep cavity, saw him lower the box down into it, then he began to fill up the gap.

"It is done, your sin is buried; we part, and forever," said Mellen.

"We part here!" echoed Elizabeth.

"I have no more to say," he went on; "if you can live, do so; but, remember, death comes at last—death and the judgment. I think, had your sin been other than it is, I could have promised you forgiveness in your last hour. But the horror of your crime in choosing that man——"

"I never knew it," she broke in. "Oh, believe that—do believe that! I ask nothing more—I have no right even to ask so much—but if you should one day hear that I am dead, believe that I have now told you the truth."

"You have the means of subsistence," he went on; "the stocks I settled upon you will be sufficient for your support. If you ever see this wretch again, it is because you are altogether bad."

"Only say that when I am dead you will pardon me—only say that, Grantley Mellen, for I have

great need of one kind word."

"You will be careful that your name never reaches my ear," he went on, regardless of her appeal. "Hide yourself in some strange land, where no tidings of you may ever come near my home. I warn you, for your own sake."

"Give me your forgiveness in my dying hour; only that, Grantley, for I have loved you so!"

"I will not promise it. This mockery is worse than your sin!" he exclaimed. "If it were to keep your soul from eternal torture, I could not speak a pardoning word."

She fell forward upon the ground.

"Only for my death-bed—your pardon for my death-bed?"

"Never! Never!"

His voice rang out clear and sharp, as steel striking steel. It was like the sound of prison doors shutting out the last gleam of light and hope from a condemned criminal.

"Don't be found here," he said; "nor be heard of again. We are parting now forever. Take the shelter of my roof for the rest of this miserable night. I will not send you forth in darkness—go, but we meet no more!"

He turned and walked away; she watched him threading his path among the graves, and it seemed as if she must die when her eyes lost him.

He had reached the palings, he was passing through. She raised herself, her last expiring energy went out in one agonized appeal:

"Your pardon—for my death-bed—Grantley—husband!"

He never turned, never paused—perhaps he did not hear—but walked steadily and firmly on.

Elizabeth looked up at the cold sky; the moon was partially hidden, the dawn was struggling up gray and chilled in the east, the wind moaned faintly among the graves, and rustled her garments like the stirring of a shroud; there she stood among the graves of her world, as utterly helpless and lost as if eternity swept between her and the past, and there she remained during some minutes that lengthened out like years, with the wind moaning around her and dead leaves crackling under her feet. She could see her old home through the naked trees, with the dull smoke curling in clouds above the chimneys, and the great trees sweeping their naked branches over it. Oh, how her heart yearned towards it, how wistfully her eyes watched all those signs of her forfeited life through the leafless grove and the drifting leaves!

"Can I help you, can I do anything?"

Elizabeth lifted her dreary eyes. It was North. The desolation of that poor woman smote him with remorse, his voice trembled with human pity.

"The money—you shall have part of that."

Elizabeth shook her head; she had no strength for resentment. All pride was crushed within her.

"Go," she said, "leave me here alone; I want nothing."

"But I cannot leave you so—I will not."

Elizabeth arose and stood upright among the graves.

"I am going somewhere—this way, I think. One cannot rest here, you know," she said, with a wan and most pathetic smile. "You and I have been too much in company—the world is wide—oh, misery, misery, how wide—but you can go that way and I the other. No one will ask for me."

Was the woman dropping into piteous insanity?

North thought so, and made another effort to arouse her, but she only entreated him to go away, and at last he went; afraid that the daylight would find him there.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE HUSBAND RELENTS.

Grantley Mellen turned back to the miserable grandeur of his home. The proud heart ached in his bosom. What if, from fear or weakness, Elizabeth did not return to the house? What if she remained there among the cold graves, or wandered off in terror of his wrath?

The graveyard was full half a mile from the spot where this thought struck him. He turned at once and went back, feeling how unmanly it was to leave the miserable creature stricken with such anguish, alone with that man. He remembered how her uncovered head had drooped under his denunciations in the moonlight, that the cold wind had lifted the waves of her hair and

revealed the dead marble of a face in which all hope was quenched. Notwithstanding his wrongs, notwithstanding the ache at his heart, he would go back and take her home for that one night—only for that one night.

He walked rapidly towards the graveyard, more eager now to find Elizabeth than he had been to separate from her only a brief time before. He looked to the right and left in search of her, but the moon was obscured now by thin gray clouds, and a fog drifting up from the ocean was fast obliterating the crowd of golden stars that had been so brilliant when he went forth.

Mellen walked on, growing more and more anxious, till he came in sight of the graveyard, then he paused under a clump of cedars; for he saw his unhappy wife forcing her way, in desperate haste, through the broken pickets of the fence, with her face turned homewards. The gray woollen shawl was floating loosely around her, giving a weird ghostliness to her appearance.

Mellen turned and went back, sheltering himself under the cedar trees. When he saw that she was safe, a revulsion came upon his feelings; a sense of the wrong she had done him returned with bitter force, and when she passed along the outskirts of the cedars, making her way down the hill, he retreated deeper into the shadows, recoiling from contact with her.

"She will go home," he said, gloomily, "no one is more familiar with the paths through the woods. Thank heaven she does not know that I am weak enough to care for her safety! Let her reach the house first, we shall be less likely to meet."

With these thoughts in his mind he lingered in the cedars till Elizabeth was out of sight. The wind was dying away in low sobs now, smothered down by the fog, through which he could hear the moaning of the ocean afar off.

Mellen left the woods, and made the best of his way home, believing that his wife had already found a shelter there.

The house was dark and still as the grave when he entered it again. Instinctively he trod with caution along the halls and crept stealthily upstairs, for in the depths of his heart he was anxious to conceal Elizabeth's movements that night from the servants, and, above all, from Elsie. He paused and listened a moment in the square passage that led to her rooms, hoping to hear some movement by which he could be certain that she had reached home in safety. But there was no sound, and he turned away sighing, for compassion and the tender pity which every generous man feels for a fallen woman whom he has once loved, was turning the bitterness of his rage into intense pain.

Hearing nothing, and with vague uncertainty at his heart, the unhappy man entered his own dark chamber, threw off his clothes and flung himself into bed, wretched beyond any power of my pen to describe.

But he could not sleep, could not even rest, the very effort at repose drove him wild. He got up again, dressed himself and sat down by the open window, looking out into the darkness. All at once he started and leaned far out of the window. Was it fancy, or had some wailing voice pronounced his name? Something gray and weird seemed floating from his sight through the gathering fog. At first it had the form of a human being, then it seemed as if a pair of wings unfurled and swallowed it up. Was it his wife? Could that winglike envelopment be her gray woollen shawl, tossed by the wind? Had her voice been engulfed in the far-off moan of the ocean? In this dreary state the unhappy and most wronged man remained all the rest of that gloomy night.

CHAPTER LXVI.

GONE.

The day began; the sun was up; once more the old house awoke to life and activity.

Sitting in his chamber, Grantley Mellen heard the familiar sounds below; he knew that life must sweep on again, that he must rise once more and go forth among his fellow-men, hiding his misery as best he might, taking his place in the world and bearing the secret burden of his dishonored life. He went to the window, swept back the curtains which he had drawn over it, and looked at himself in the glass. If he had wished to know how his corpse would look after the ravages of time and disease, he could have learned it in that prolonged gaze.

It was absolutely the face of a dead man; even the eyes looked lifeless—there was only a heavy, stony expression, which had neither spirit or humanity in it.

It was late in the morning when Elsie awoke from the heavy slumber which had succeeded her swoon. For a few moments she lay still, believing that the events of the past night had been only a dream. Suddenly she raised herself with a cry of anguish—she had caught sight of the shawl which Elizabeth had wrapped about her—she knew that it was all real.

She sprang out of bed, opened the door, ran through the empty chamber and entered her sister's room:

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth!"

There was no answer. She looked about—the fire had died down in the grate, the room was empty and desolate as a grave.

She hurried through into the sleeping apartment, calling still in a voice which frightened herself:

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth!"

The bed-chamber was empty too—the bed untouched.

"Gone!" cried the wretched girl. "Gone! Where is she? What has become of her? Elizabeth, Elizabeth!"

She shrieked frightfully in her anguish—cried out in such terrible anxiety, that the sound reached the chamber where Grantley Mellen sat.

He went out into the hall and approached the door of the dressing-room. Elsie heard him—her first impulse was to flee but her limbs refused to move.

She heard him try the door—heard him call:

"Elsie! Elsie!"

She must meet him—there was no escape.

Again the summons was repeated, more imperatively now.

"Elsie, open the door—quick, I say!"

She got to the door, she turned the key; her brother entered quickly, and stood in Elizabeth's desolate room.

"Where is Elizabeth?" she cried. "I can't find her—I want Elizabeth."

Mellen felt a shiver of dread pass through his frame. He pushed the chamber-door open and looked in, pale with anxiety. She was not there—the bed was untouched, and gleamed upon him through the crimson light that filled the room, like a crusted snowbank. There was none of that luxurious confusion which usually marks the apartment of a sleeping lady. The rich toilet service was in complete order. There was no jewelry flung down with half sleepy indifference, no garments laying ready for use on the chairs, or across the sofa. The silken window curtains were drawn close. The carpet looked like moss in the deep shadows of an autumnal forest.

"Gone, gone! Oh, my God, what has become of her?" he exclaimed.

"Where—what has happened? Is she dead? Oh, I shall go mad—I shall go mad now," cried Elsie.

She fell into spasms, but still preserved her senses sufficiently not to speak again—she dared not utter a word more, lest she should betray her knowledge of Elizabeth's sorrow.

Mellen carried her to the sofa and laid her down upon it, wrapped shawls and eider down quilts over her, holding her hands, which trembled like frightened birds, striving in every way to soothe her, as Elizabeth had so often done in the time gone by for ever.

Elsie lay back at length, quiet but utterly exhausted.

"Where is Elizabeth?" she moaned. "What has happened?"

"Never take that name on your lips again," he said; "let even her memory be dead between us. That woman is no longer my wife—you will never see her. She shall not suffer; I will deal gently with her; but to you, my dearest sister, she is dead, forever and ever."

"You have killed her!" shrieked Elsie. "Elizabeth! Elizabeth!"

"She leaves this house of her free will, Elsie—the only condition I have made is that she takes her name far out of our lives. Have you known—have you suspected this woman, Elsie?"

"No, no! I don't know anything but what is good of her—I don't believe anything! She is good and kind—send for her! You shan't drive her away—she shall come to me now! My dear Elizabeth—I love her! You shall not do this—you are mad, mad! She is the best woman that ever lived! Let me go to her—I will go!"

She was writhing again in hysterical spasms, but Mellen forced her back when she attempted to rise.

"Be still, Elsie—try to understand me! I can't tell you the whole story—but we are parted. Do not plead for her. Do not mention her name."

"But, Grantley, Grantley!"

"No more, I say—not a word."

"She is innocent," moaned the girl; "she is innocent."

"I know what you suffer—think of all that I endure—let that give you strength."

"I tell you she is an angel—she has done no wrong!"

"I had the confession which separates us from her own lips—I tell you I would not have believed any other testimony. Don't struggle so, Elsie—lie still."

The girl fought with him like an insane creature—she had no self control or reason—it was inability to speak which kept her from shrieking out in Elizabeth's defence. She could only gasp for breath, and when words did come, it was that broken cry:

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth!"

"You must try to understand me, Elsie! You are all I have left in the world—oh, Elsie, Elsie! She has gone forever, and I loved her so—I loved her so. You and I must live on as best we can—it is only for you, child, that I live at all."

"Only bring her back—clear it all up—the truth—the truth at last! Oh, Grantley, I—"

Her words were so indistinct that he could not gather their meaning; she was struggling more fiercely than ever, and it required all his strength to hold her.

"If you love me, Elsie, strive to be calm! Oh, think of my trouble, my anguish—my sister, my sister!"

"Only send for her—call her here!"

"Be quiet and I will search, but she went off last night, I do not know where!"

Elsie gave one frightful cry and sank back in his arms insensible again. Her swoon was so death-like that it seemed as if life had gone out for ever.

Just as Elizabeth had raised her and carried her into her own room, so did Grantley Mellen carry her now, stricken by a fear so horrible that his past agony paled under it. What if she were dead—if she should wake a raving maniac, and all from the evil influence of that woman.

He called no assistance; he watched over Elsie in that lonely chamber, trying every remedy he could find, but for a long time his efforts were unavailing; she lay there, white and cold, as if the snowy counterpane had been her winding sheet.

Just as he was calling her name in a last frenzied burst of grief, Elsie opened her eyes. She was too feeble for speech, but she remembered everything clearly, and made a vain effort to rise.

"You must not talk, Elsie; don't stir—you will hurt yourself!"

He searched on the toilet table, found a bottle of laudanum, and administered as large a dose as he dared; he knew that the effects could not be so dangerous as her present suffering.

He sat down by the bed, folding his arms about her, calling her by every endearing name that his tenderness and fear could suggest, striving to soothe her into slumber.

Elsie would lie quiet for a few moments, then begin to struggle and cry out, till it seemed to Mellen that she would die before the opiate could take effect.

The potion worked at length; she lay back on the pillows white and still—her eyes stared drearily about the chamber once more, and then closed—she had fallen into a heavy sleep.

For a long hour Grantley Mellen remained on his knees by her bedside, where he had fallen.

He rose at length. Victoria was knocking at the door, and warning her young mistress that breakfast was on the table.

Mellen went to the door and opened it, checked the girl's cry of astonishment with a gesture, and said:

"Miss Elsie is very ill—go downstairs at once, and let there be no noise in the house."

Vic crept away in frightened silence; Mellen followed her into the hall, gave orders to one of the men servants to get a horse ready, went into the library and wrote a dispatch to his physician in the city, and came out again.

By the time the man was starting off to the station, Clorinda and several of the servants, to whom Victoria had communicated her tidings, were assembled in the hall.

In consultation they forgot their awe of the master, and asked a thousand eager questions, which he answered with brief sternness.

"Go back to your places, all of you," he said; "Miss Elsie is asleep, and must not be disturbed till the doctor arrives."

"Is missus wid her?" demanded Clo.

He turned upon her with a frown which made her spring back as if she had received an electric shock, and entirely checked any further desire to question him where his wife was concerned.

He turned towards the stairs again, but Dolf interposed with one of his profound bows.

"Scuse me, sar, but de brekfus is on de table."

Self-restraint must be kept up; whatever suspicions might arise when the fact of Elizabeth's disappearance became known in the house, this proud man would not expose himself to the curious eyes of his menials.

He went into the breakfast-room, drank the coffee Dolf poured out with a skillful hand, pretended to eat a few morsels, then pushed his chair back and hurried up to Elsie's chamber—he could not trust himself yet in the presence of his servants.

Below stairs all sorts of stories were rife. Victoria peeped into Elsie's room and came down with the information that "She lay dar like a beautiful corpus!"

Everybody groaned in concert, but she added new astonishment by saying:

"And missus ain't nowhars about. She ain't in Miss Elsie's room, and she ain't in her own, and her bed ain't been touched all night."

Clorinda began to nod her turban with a sapient air.

"What did I tell yer!" cried she. "Now what did I jist tell yer."

"But whar can she be?" wondered Dolf. "What do yer s'pose has happened, Miss Clorinda?"

"'Nuff's happened," returned Clo, "and more'n 'nuff! I told yer de tunderbust would break, an it has."

They urged and entreated her to speak; but it was difficult to speak when she literally knew nothing, so she contented herself with going about her work with unusual energy, while the rest stood around and watched her, deeming this an occasion when idleness was to be taken quite as a matter of course.

Clo nodded her head, muttered to herself, and made dreadful confusion among her pots and pans, exciting her fellow-servants to a fearful pitch by her air of mystery, but not a word would she speak beyond vague and appalling hints.

While the servants below stairs wore away the morning in vague conversation and surmises, growing every instant wilder and more improbable, Grantley Mellen sat in that darkened chamber watching his sleeping sister.

The physician arrived late in the evening; by that time Elsie was awake, and he looked a little grave while giving his medicines and examining into the case.

"Keep her very quiet," he said to Mellen, who followed him into the hall; "it is a severe nervous attack, but she can endure nothing more. Don't let her get up—I'll come back to-morrow. Where is Mrs. Mellen? she is so good a nurse I should like to give her my directions."

"She—she is not here," Mellen answered.

"In town, I suppose? You had better send for her, or give me her address and I will call and tell her how much she is wanted the moment I reach town. To-night I stay in the village."

"Thank you, I won't trouble you," replied Mellen. "You will be here to-morrow morning?"

"Oh, certainly! Don't be at all alarmed—Miss Elsie is subject to these nervous attacks. So I shan't call on your wife?"

"No, sir, no;" Mellen answered, impatiently. "I must return to my sister."

He bowed the doctor downstairs and disappeared, leaving the son of Esculapius to go on with some rather strange ideas in his head.

He had another patient in the village, and so drove over there in the carriage which had brought him from the station. As he was standing on the hotel porch old Jarvis Benson came up, caught him by the button-hole and began a long story, to which the physician listened with such patience as he could find.

CHAPTER LXVII.

UTTER LONELINESS.

When Elizabeth Mellen quitted the graveyard, she was for the moment insane. Mellen had left her alone with the dead and the man she had so hated. He had forsaken her there in that cold, desolate night, regardless that she had once been his wife, scorning to remember her even as a woman. This thought stung her proud soul through all its anguish. She would not return home; not a single hour would she rest under the roof which loomed up so gray and ghostly behind those weird trees. But where could she go? in all the headlands that spread away from the coast there was no shelter for her. Degraded, broken-hearted, abandoned to her fate, like a wild animal, she stood alone among the graves of those who had been happy enough to die.

This terrible blow, long as it had been dreaded, came upon the poor woman suddenly at last. At

the bottom of her heart there had been all the while a desperate hope of escape. But it was over now. The worst had come, and that was almost annihilation. She looked up to the sky. The stars were all out. The soft gray clouds which had floated over them only a little while before were turning leaden and heavy, so heavy that the ocean was one mass of blackness, as if the mighty deep had veiled itself with mourning, while the throes of a coming tempest heaved its inner depths.

The man North had left her at last—she was utterly alone.

Never in this world had a human being been cast forth to such utter desolation. She looked down on the torn earth at her feet, and her poor heart ached to lie down with that other woman who had found her rest so early, and was at peace. She thought of her with strange envy, remembering that the ocean had cast her forth when it moaned and heaved as she could hear it now,—the grand, beneficent ocean, that could give death to a poor soul pining for it as she did. She bent her head and listened to the far-off voice which held her with a sort of fascination.

"I will go," she said, "I will go. It calls me—with ten thousand voices it calls me."

She started from the tombstone against which she had leaned, and swiftly treading a passage through the graves, forced her way out by the broken pickets. That moment Mellen stood in the cedar grove and saw her pass. Had he come forth all might have been well, but fierce pride rushed in and checked the noble impulse that had brought him back so far. She swept swiftly by him and was lost in the fog. Some strong impulse of love broke up through the insane fascination which drove her toward the ocean, and in spite of herself she drifted homewards. Once a break in the clouds sent down wild gleams of light, throwing up black vistas of gloom through every break in the woods, and revealing dense, gray masses of vapor, frowning over the waters. Then came darkness again, and she wandered on.

Without knowing how, Elizabeth found herself on the lawn before her old home. The odor of dead leaves and late autumn blossoms rose up from the soil, and enveloped her with sickening remembrances. All at once the woman recognised the place. That pile with its gables and towers had been her home only a few short hours before. Why had she turned that way? What mocking fiend had driven her back against her will? The thought maddened her, but she could not move. The passionate love in her heart anchored those weary feet. She flung up her arms towards a window through which a light shone dimly—the window of his room, and an agonising cry of farewell broke from her. It was his name that fled from her lips like a burning arrow, and reached her husband in the gloomy stillness of his chamber.

The window opened. She tore her feet from the earth and fled. Her husband, of all others, should not know that she was there, prowling about the home from which he had driven her. That cry of agony coming from her lips frightened back her pride.

She darted away across the flower-beds, through thickets and over the lawn, which lay moist and heavy under the fog. Her wet feet got entangled among clusters of dead heliotrope and chrysanthemums, still blooming in defiance of storm and frost. The shawl blew loose from her hands, which unconsciously huddled it close to her bosom, and was torn by the thorny rosebushes. Fragments of her dress were left behind. She plunged into a swampy hollow where clusters of tall catstail, sweet flag and sedgy rushes grew around a little pond, swarming with trout and gold fish. Her feet sank into the marsh till the water gurgled over her gaiters. She stood a moment, looking out upon the black pool, tempted to throw herself in; but some water-rat or frog, frightened by her approach, made a great leap, and plunged into the black depths, giving out a horrible idea of reptile life.

Not there, not there; no one should find her after she was dead. The ocean, the great heaving ocean had called her; why was she lingering by that miserable pool of black water, full of living things? Again she plunged forward, broke through the tangled sedges, and trampled down the spicy peppermint, till she reached firm land again. Then on—on—on till she stood under the beetling cliff which frowned over the shore tavern.

It was the dark hour now which comes just before daylight. The gleam of a candle shone through one of the tavern windows, and this faint idea of warmth drew her that way. She crept up close to the building, and through the little panes of glass saw Benson with his daughter and her children at breakfast together.

When the days grew short it had always been the old man's habit to eat his breakfast by candlelight. It was a pleasant, homely picture that the wretched woman looked upon. Her haggard eyes grew wild at the sight of so much warmth, while her teeth chattered with cold, and terrible chills shook her from head to foot. A noble wood fire blazed on the hearth, filling the small white-washed room with its golden glow. The soft steam from the tea-kettle curled up the chimney, broiled fish and hot Indian cakes sent a savory odor through the ill-fitted sash.

Elizabeth had eaten nothing for the past two days, and with the sight of this comfortable breakfast, an aching desire for food seized on her. Food and warmth; let her have them and she was ready to die. This animal want drew her close to the window. A child at the table saw that white face with its wild burning eyes, and pointed its finger, uttering frightened shrieks.

Elizabeth darted away, crying out to the storm, "They will not have me; even his menials drive me forth."

The beach was not far off, and from it rose a sound of lashing waves, hoarse with the thunder of mustering storms. Afar off the moan of the deep had sounded like an entreaty, but now it came full and strong, commanding her to approach. She obeyed these ocean voices like a little child; her powers of reasoning were gone; all consciousness of pain or danger benumbed; everything else had rejected her, but the great ocean was strong, boundless. With one heave of its mighty bosom it would sweep her away forever.

She walked steadily on to the beach, forcing her way to the sands; through drifts of seaweed and slippery stones, on, on she walked, slowly, but with horrible firmness, through great feathers of foam that curled upon the sands; on and on through whirlwinds of spray, till a great wave seized her in its black undertow and she was gone.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

PLANS AND LETTERS.

All that day Elsie remained in bed, sleeping a good deal, but so nervous and shaken that she would not permit herself to be left alone for a single instant. Her brother's presence seemed to fill her with fear, and she shrank with a strange sort of timidity from every tender word or soothing caress; still she was wretched if he left her bedside, and there he watched the long day through.

Evening came. Mellen was compelled to go through the pretence of another meal; indeed he forced himself to eat, for he began to grow angry with his own weakness.

He had thought when the first struggle was over to feel only an icy, implacable resentment against the woman who had wronged him; he was ashamed of the tenderness in his own nature when he found that, stronger than his rage, more powerful than the horror with which he regarded her dishonor, was the love he had believed uprooted suddenly from his heart, as a strong tree is torn up by tornados.

Yes, he regretted her! It was not only that his life must be a desolate blank, he pined for her presence. But for his pride he would have rushed out in search of her, and taken her back to his heart, sweeping aside all memory of her sin.

He roused himself from what appeared to him such degrading weakness by one thought—the partner in her guilt was his old enemy; a man too vile for vengeance, even.

That memory brought all the hardness back to his face, all the insane passion to his soul, but it centered on the man now.

That night, in the woman's very presence, he could not take the vengeance that he meditated, but now he was prepared to force her from the villain's grasp—on to repentance.

Alone in his library, Grantley Mellen wrote several letters; it was impossible to tell how that meeting would end, and he must make preparations for the worst. When all was done he rose to go upstairs again; a sudden resolution made him pause. He sat down at his desk once more, and wrote these lines:

"ELIZABETH—I said that even in your dying hour, I would never forgive you: I retract. If my pardon can console your last moments, remember that it is yours. I have made no alteration in my will; if you can accept the benefits which may accrue to you by my death, take them; but so surely as you ever attempt to approach the innocent girl who has been so long endangered by your companionship, my curse shall follow you, even from the grave to which you will have consigned me."

He put the note in an envelope, sealed it carefully, and addressed it—"To Elizabeth."

These were necessary precautions. The man who had twice wronged him possessed the fierce courage of a bravo. If Elizabeth was found with him, death might come to one of them—even if that followed, the woman who had been his wife should never share the degrading future of a man too vile for personal vengeance. In mercy to her he would separate them.

He found Elsie sitting up in bed. She shrank away among the pillows when he entered; he saw the movement, and it shook his heart with a new pang. This artful woman had drawn the spell of her fascinations as closely about that pure girl as she had enthralled him. Elsie shrank from the brother who had deprived her of the love on which she had leaned. Elizabeth had left him nothing but bitterness.

"Are you feeling better?" he asked, sitting down by the bed.

"Oh, I never shall be any better," she murmured; "I shall die, and then, perhaps, you will be sorry."

Mellen could not be angry with her; it wounded and stung him to hear her speak thus, but he answered, patiently:

"When you are able to reflect, Elsie, you will see that I could not have acted differently. Few men would have shown as much leniency as I have done; regardless of the consequences to themselves, they would have made that woman's conduct public, and ruined her utterly."

"She wasn't bad," cried Elsie; "you are crazy to think so. She was the best woman in the world."

"Have you forgotten what I told you this morning—what I was forced to tell you or submit to your hatred? From yon window you could look out on the spot where she had buried——"

"Be still!" interrupted Elsie, with a shriek. "I won't stay in the house if you go on so—be still, I say!"

It required all his efforts to soothe the excited girl. He longed to question her, to know if she had left Elizabeth much alone during his absence, to understand how she could have been so persistently deceived, but she was in no state to endure such inquiries then.

Elsie lay back among her pillows, refusing to be comforted:

"If you want to cure me send for Bessie—my dear, dear Bessie! Search for her—send the people out!"

"Elsie, she has gone with that man; I cannot follow her there."

"No, no; she is wandering about in the cold. Go, search for her!"

"Anything but that, Elsie—ask anything else in the world."

"I don't want anything else."

"As soon as you are better we will go away from here," he continued; "to Europe, if you like."

"But how will she live?" persisted Elsie. "What will become of her? No money—no friends. Oh, Bessie, Bessie!"

"She has plenty to live on," he replied. "There are stocks enough deposited in her name to give her a comfortable income."

"But they are gone," cried Elsie. Then, remembering the danger of that avowal, she stopped suddenly.

"Gone!" he repeated. "How do you know? Oh, Elsie, do you know more than you own—do—"

"Stop, stop!" she screamed. "You have driven Bessie away and now you want to kill me! I don't know about anything—you know I don't. Just the other day Bessie spoke something about the stocks; I thought from what she said that you had taken them back for some purpose."

He was perfectly satisfied with her explanation, but the distress and fright into which she had fallen nearly brought on another nervous crisis. Great drops of perspiration stood on her forehead, and the slender fingers he held worked nervously in his grasp.

"Don't talk any more, dear child," he said. "Try to go to sleep again."

"I can't sleep—I never shall rest again—never! I feel so wicked—I hate myself!"

"Child, what do you mean?"

She must restrain herself, no danger must come near her. Even her sorrow for Elizabeth, her stinging remorse, could not make her unselfish enough to run any personal risk of his displeasure.

"I don't know what I mean—nothing at all! But it drives me wild to think of Bessie. Where can she be—where could she go? Suppose she has killed herself! Oh, she may be drowned in the bay—drowned—drowned!"

She went nearly mad with the ideas which her fancy conjured up, but it was perfectly in keeping with her character that in the very extremity of her suffering, no word for Elizabeth should be spoken that would implicate herself. Mellen must not guess at her knowledge of his wife's fault.

"You will have her searched for," she cried; "promise me that, if you don't want to kill me outright, promise me that."

"It could do no good, Elsie, none whatever. She has chosen her own destiny."

"It might, it might! If she has no money what will become of her?"

"I will inquire to-morrow," he replied. "I will write to my agent. If she has disposed of the stocks I will see that she has means to live upon; I promise you that."

"Really, truly?"

"Did I ever break my word, Elsie?"

"No, no; but you are so hard and stern."

"Never with you, darling—never with you."

Elsie groaned aloud, but hastened to speak:

"I am only in pain—don't mind it."

"My poor little Elsie, my sister, my treasure!"

"Do you love me so much, Grant?"

"Better than ever; you are all I have now! Oh, Elsie, don't shut your heart against me, I can't bear that. Try to believe that I have acted as justly as a man could. To the whole world I can be stern and silent, but let me tell you the truth. I loved that woman so, my heart is breaking under this grief. Bear patiently with me, child."

"Oh, if you suffer, send for her back," cried Elsie. "Let her explain; you gave her no time——"

"Hush, hush! Have I not said all those things to myself?"

This man's pride was so utterly crushed that he was revealing the inmost secrets of his soul to this frail girl, scarcely caring to conceal from her how keenly he suffered.

"But try," pleaded Elsie; "only try."

"It is impossible; later you will see that as plainly as I do. Don't you see what a sin I should commit in taking a false, dishonored woman back to my heart; what a wrong to my sister in exposing her to the society of a creature so lost and fallen?"

"She is good!" cried Elsie. "Bessie was an angel! Oh, I wish I was dead—dead—dead! I can't bear this; it is too much—too much!"

Elsie wrung her hands and sobbed piteously; she had wept until nature exhausted itself, and that choked anguish was more painful to witness than the most violent outburst of tears.

"We loved her so," muttered Mellen; "she was twined round that girl's heart as she enthralled mine; she has broken both."

"What are you saying, Grant?"

"Nothing, dear; I only pitied you and myself for loving her so much."

"I will always love her," cried Elsie; "you never shall change me; nothing shall do that. She is innocent; I believe it; I would say so before the whole world."

CHAPTER LXIX.

ELSIE PROMISES TO BE FAITHLESS.

Mellen was seized with a sudden fear.

"Elsie," he said, "if anything should happen to me; if I should die——"

She caught his hands and began to tremble.

"What do you mean? Die—die!"

"Nothing, dear; don't be frightened. But life is uncertain; what I mean is this—if you should outlive me promise never to seek that woman; never to let her come near you."

"I can't promise that; I can't be so wicked."

"You must, Elsie."

"I can't; I won't! No, no; I'll never be bad enough for that!"

"If you refuse me this, Elsie, you will sink a gulf between us which can never be filled up."

"Don't talk so; remember how sick I am."

"I do; I won't agitate you, but we must have an end of this subject. If I should die——"

"I won't hear you talk about dying," she broke in. "You frighten me; you'll kill me."

But he went on resolutely;

"Promise never to see or hear from her."

"Not that; it is too wicked—too horrible."

"Elsie," he cried, in stern passion, "promise, or I will go out of this room, and though we live together it shall be as strangers."

He rose as if to fulfil his threat; she sprang up in bed; her cowardice, her selfishness mastered every other feeling.

"I promise. Come back, Grant, come back; oh, do!"

He seated himself again, soothed and caressed her.

"We will not talk any more," he said, kindly. "Henceforth let everything connected with this subject be dead between us; that woman's name must never be mentioned here; her very memory must be swept out of the dwelling she has dishonored. You and I will bury the past, Elsie, and place a heavy stone over the tomb; will you remember that, child?"

"Yes, yes; anything! Do what you please; I cannot struggle any longer; it is not my fault."

"Indeed no, darling! You are tender and forgiving as an angel! Oh, Elsie, in all the world yours is the only true heart I have found."

She lay there and allowed him to speak those words; she suffered terribly in her shallow, cowardly way, but she could not force her soul to be courageous even then. In time her volatile nature might turn determinedly from the dark tragedy. She probably would convince herself that she was powerless; that, since it could do no good to grieve over Elizabeth and her mournful fate, it was better that she should dismiss all recollection of it from her mind, drown her regrets, enjoy such pleasures as presented themselves, and build up a new world between her and the past.

But as yet she could not do that; she was completely unnerved and incapable of any resolution. She writhed there in pitiable pain and caught at every straw for comfort.

"You won't forget your promise, Grant?"

"What, dear?"

"To send money—that she may live, you know."

"I will not forget, rest satisfied. I will attend to it this very day; don't think about that any more."

"How can I help thinking? You might as well tell me not to breathe; I must think!"

"The end has come; it can do no good to look back!"

Almost the very words Elizabeth had so many times repeated during those last terrible days; the recollection went like a dagger to Elsie's soul.

It was a long time before she could be restored to anything like composure; then Mellen forbade her to talk, fearing the consequences of continued excitement.

"You can sleep, now, darling; you will be better in the morning."

"And you will take me away from here, Grant?"

"Yes, dear; whenever you like."

"I don't care about the place—the farther the better! I cannot stay in this house—I should die here. But not to Europe—oh, you won't take me to Europe?"

He only thought the sudden terror in her voice rose from a fear of the voyage or some similar weakness.

"You shall choose, Elsie; just where you please. We will go to the West Indies—as you say, the farther the better."

"Yes, Grant, yes."

"Now shut your eyes and go to sleep."

"You won't leave me," she pleaded.

"No; I shall stay near you all night."

"It is so dreadful," she went on, glancing wildly about the room; "I should go mad to wake up and find myself alone."

"You shall not, dear; indeed you shall not."

She grew quiet then; after a little time he heard Victoria in the hall, and went out to speak with her.

"You will lie down on the bed in the room next Miss Elsie's," he said, "and be near her if she wants anything."

He had not forgotten that he must be absent in the night, and was careful to guard the cherished girl against every possible cause of fright or agitation.

He spent the evening in Elsie's sick chamber as he had passed the day. Elsie did not sleep, but she was glad to lie quiet and keep her eyes closed, shutting out the objects around her. Sometimes when her reflections became too painful to bear, she would start up, catch his hands and shriek his name wildly, but his voice always served to calm her.

Towards midnight she fell into a heavy slumber. More than an hour before he heard Victoria enter the next room, and knew that he could leave Elsie in safety.

He bent over the bed, kissed her white forehead, and stole softly out of the room.

He went down into the library and sat there drearily, starting at the least sound, almost with a belief that he should stand face to face once more with his wife who might yet return on some possible pretence. The hours passed, but there was no step from without, no sign of approach anywhere about the house.

He went to the window, pushed back the curtains and looked out—the first thing he saw was the cypress tree waving its branches as they had done the night before when their moans seemed inarticulate efforts to speak.

The moon was up now, streaming down with a broad, full glory, very different from the spectral radiance of the previous night. How vividly recollection of those fearful hours came back as he stood there! He lived over every pang, felt every torture redoubled—started back as if again looking on the dead object which had shut out all happiness from him for ever.

Suddenly he saw the figure of a man, that man, stealing across the lawn; he did not wait to reflect, flung open the window and dashed out in pursuit. He was too late—the intruder disappeared, and though he made a long and diligent search his efforts were futile.

He returned to the house, livid with the new rage which had come over him.

"I will find him," he muttered; "there is no spot so distant, no place so secret, that my vigilance shall not hunt him down!"

So the night passed, and when the dawn again struggled into the sky Grantley Mellen returned to his sister's chamber, and sat down to watch her deep, painful slumber once more.

No sleep approached his eyelids—it seemed to him that he must not hope to lose consciousness again—that never even for an instant would that crushing sorrow and that mad craving for the lost woman leave him at rest.

CHAPTER LXX.

ALMOST A PROPOSAL.

In the basement story of Piney Cove, the absence of Mrs. Mellen was a continued source of curiosity. But for once, that part of the household had little but conjecture to go upon; so after a time, curiosity died out and the selfish element rose uppermost, especially with the mulatto, Dolf, who had not yet found out the sum total of Clorinda's fortune.

The night after Mrs. Mellen's disappearance, there had been an anxious meeting in the neighborhood, at which Elder Spotts had held forth with peculiar eloquence, and Clorinda had been wonderfully loud in her responses, a state of things which filled Dolf with serious perplexity; in fact, it had been a very anxious meeting to him. After their return home, that young gentleman lingered in the basement, looking so miserable that Clorinda asked the cause.

"Yer knows," said Dolf, prolonging the situation as much as possible, in the hope that some bright thought would strike him by which the conversation might be led round to the subject uppermost in his worldly mind; "yer knows very well."

"Why, yer's making me out jis' a witch."

"No, Miss Clorindy, no; don't say dem keerless tings—don't! I ain't a makin' you nothin', only de most charmin' and de most cruel of yer sect."

If Clo did not blush it was only because nature had deprived her of the dangerous privilege, but she fell into a state of sweet confusion that was beautiful to behold.

"Dar ye go agin," said she; "now quit a callin' me witches and sich, or else say why?"

"Didn't I see you dis berry even'?" said Dolf.

"In course ye did; we was to Mrs. Hopkins's when de meeting was ober."

"And wasn't Elder Spotts dar, too?"

"In course he was; yer knows it well enough."

"I knows it too well," said Dolf. "Dar's whar de coquettations comes in; dat's jis' de subjec' I'm 'proachin' yer wid."

"Me!" cried Clo, in delightful innocence. "Laws, I didn't know yer even looked at me; I tought ye was fascinated wid dat Vic."

"I'se neber too busy to reserve you, Miss Clorindy," said Dolf; "wherever I may be, whatever my ockipation, I'se eyes fur you. And I seed you; I seed de elder a bending over ye, a whisperin' in yer ear."

"Oh, git out!" cried Clo. "He didn't do no sich."

"Oh, yes, he did, Miss Clorindy; dese eyes seen it."

"Wal, he was a axin' me if I was gwine to come to meetin' more reg'lar dan I had ob late."

"It took him a great while to ax," said Dolf, in a reproachful voice.

Clo laughed a little chuckling laugh.

"He's a bery pleasant man, de elder," said she; "bery pleasant."

"Dey say he wants a wife," observed Dolf.

"Do dey! Mebby he do; anyway he hain't told me dat."

"But he will, Clorindy, he will!"

"Tain't no ways likely; don' 'spec I shall knows much bout it!"

"Oh, yes, yer will," insisted Dolf.

He was serious, and Clo began to grow dizzy at the thought of so many conquests crowding upon her at once.

"I jis' b'lieve he's a sarpint in disguise," said Dolf, with great energy; "one ob de wust kind of old he ones."

"Laws, Mr. Dolf, don't say sich things; he's a shinin' light in de sanctumary, I'se certain."

"It's a light I'd like to squinch," cried Dolf, "and if he pokes himself into my moonshine I'll do it."

Clo gave a shrill scream, and caught his arm, as if she feared that he was intending to rush forth in search of the elder, and put his menace into instant execution.

"Don't kick up a muss wid him," she pleaded: "why should yer?"

"It 'pends on yer, Miss Clorindy, yer know; de 'couragement yer've ben a givin' him is 'nuff to drive yer admirers out o' der senses."

"Oh, dear me, I neber heerd sich audacious nonsense!" said Clo.

"It's true," answered Dolf, "an' yer knows it. But ye're received in dat man, Miss Clorindy, yer is! He's got both eyes fixed on de glitterin' dross. I've heerd him talk 'bout de fortin yer had, an' how it wud set a pusson up, an' what good he might do wid it 'mong de heathen."

Clo gave another scream, but this time it was a cry of indignation and wrath.

"Spend my money 'mong de heathen!" she cried. "I'd like to see him do it! comes 'bout me I'll pull his old wool fur him, I will."

Dolf smiled at the success of his falsehood, and made ready to clench the nail after driving it in.

"Dat's what he tinkt anyhow. Why, Miss Clorindy, he was a tryin' ter find out jist how much yer was wuth."

"Taint nobody's business but my own," cried Clo, angrily, "folks needn't be a pumpin' me; 'taint no use."

"Jis' what I've allers said," remarked Dolf, with great earnestness; "sich secrets, says I, is Miss Clorindy's own."

"Yes, dey be," said Clo, holding on to the sides of her stool as tightly as if it had been the box which contained her treasures.

"I've said sometimes," continued Dolf, "dat if de day shud eber come when dat parathon ob her sex made up her mind ter gib her loved hand to some true bussom, she'd probably whisper musical in his ear de secret she has kept from all de wuld."

Clo was divided between the tenderness awakened by these words and the vigilance with which she always guarded the outposts leading to her cherished secret.

"Ain't dat sense, Miss Clorindy?" demanded Dolf, getting impatient.

"I hain't said it warn't," she replied.

"Dis wuld is full ob mercenary men," Dolf went on, "searchin' fur de filty lucre; I'se glad I neber was one ob dem. I allers has 'spised de dross; gib me lobe, I says, and peace wid de fair one ob my choice, and I asks no more."

Clo played with her apron string again, and looked modestly down.

But Dolf did not know exactly what to say next without committing himself more deeply than he desired; indeed, he had been led on now considerably farther than he could wish, but that was unavoidable.

"Not but what fortins is desirous," he said, "'cause in dis wuld people must lib."

Clo assented gently to that self-evident proposition.

"Do yer know what I've often tought, Miss Clorindy," said Dolf, starting on a new tack.

"Spect I don't," said Clo.

"I've wished many a time, more lately'n I used ter, dat I could take some fair cretur I lobed ter my heart, and dat 'tween us we had money 'nuff ter start a restauration or sometin' ob dat sort."

Clo sniffed a little.

"In dem places de wurk all comes on de woman," said she.

Dolf was quite aware of that fact; it was the one thing which made him contemplate the idea with favor.

"Oh, not at all," he said, "de cookin's a trifle; tink ob de 'counts; my head's good at figures."

"Dey kind o' puzzles me," Clo confided to him softly.

"Tain't 'spected in the fair sect," said Dolf; "dey nebber ort to trouble 'emselves 'bout sich matters."

Then Dolf sighed.

"Yer wonders what's de matter," he said; "I was jis lamentin' dat I hadn't been able to save as much as I could wish, so dat I could realise sich a dream."

"Laws," cried Clo, so agitated and confused she was about to speak the words he so longed to hear; "how much wud it take? Does yer tink dat if a woman had—"

"I say Clo, where be yer?"

The interruption was a cruel one to both the darkeys, though from different reasons; the voice was Victoria's.

"Clo!" she called again, in considerable wrath, "jis' you answer now."

Clo sprang up in high indignation. Dolf mounted a couple of steps and appeared to be diligently searching for something in a closet.

Victoria opened the kitchen door, looked out and tossed her head angrily when she saw the pair.

"I s'pose I might a split my throat callin', and yer wouldn't a answered," she cried.

"I've 'bout my business," said Clo, grimly, "jis' mind yours."

"I s'pose Mr. Dolf am 'bout his business too," retorted Vic.

Dolf turned around from the closet and asked sweetly, "Did you 'dress me, Miss Vic?"

"No, I didn't, and don't mean ter. But Miss Elsie's woke up, and wants some jelly and a bird; where am dey, Clo?"

"Look whar dey be and ye'll find 'em," replied Clo.

"Ef they hain't gone down dat ol' preacher's throat it's lucky," cried Vic, slamming the door after her, thus defeating poor Dolf in the very moment of success.

CHAPTER LXXI.

FUTILE PLEADINGS.

Elsie was better that morning. When the physician arrived he pronounced her much improved, and confessed to Mellen that he had at first feared an attack upon the brain, but he believed now it was only the result of a severe nervous paroxysm. This time he made no inquiries of Mellen concerning his wife; the manner in which they had been received on the previous day did not invite a renewal of the subject.

Elsie was eager to get up, after her usual habit, the moment she began to feel better; but the doctor ordered her to lie in bed, at least for that day.

"But I want to get up so badly," said she, when her brother returned to the chamber; "I am so tired of lying here."

"Just have patience for to-day; the doctor would not allow the least exertion."

"He's a cross old thing!" pouted Elsie, with a faint return to her old manner, which made Mellen both sigh and smile.

"You will soon be able to put him at defiance. But, indeed, you are so weak now you could not attempt too much."

"Oh, that's nonsense! I don't believe anything about it. You shall stay here with me; if I have to be kept prisoner I will hold you fast, too."

"There is no fear of my attempting to leave the room," he replied.

Elsie felt much improved. She sat up in bed, made her brother play at various games of cards with her, talked and looked herself again.

But into the conversation, in which Mellen did his best to hold a share, there crept some chance mention of that name which those walls must no longer hear. It fell from Elsie's lips thoughtlessly, and at once dispelled her faint attempt at cheerfulness, throwing her into the gloom which she had succeeded in shutting out for a little time.

"Did you write that letter, Grant?" she asked, quickly.

"Yes; I sent it down to the village, to go by the morning's mail."

"Thank you, Grant, thank you!"

She attempted to console herself with thinking she had done something in Elizabeth's behalf, but when her conscience compared it with all that she ought to have done, her coward heart shrank back at the contrast.

"I am tired of cards," she said, sweeping the bits of pasteboard off the bed with one of her abrupt movements, which would have been rude in another, but seemed graceful and childish in her. "Cards are stupid things at the best!"

Mellen patiently collected the scattered pack and laid it away, trying to think of some other means of relieving her *ennui*.

"Shall I read to you?" he asked.

"I don't believe I could listen," she said, tossing her head wearily about. "I don't know—just try."

There was a pile of new novels and magazines on the table in the centre of the room, for Elsie always kept herself liberally supplied with these sources of distraction, though it must be confessed that she generally carried the recreation to an extreme, reading her romance to the exclusion of more solid studies, just as she preferred nibbling bon-bons, to eating substantial food.

"There certainly is opportunity for a choice," Mellen said, glancing at the pile. "What book will you choose?"

"Oh, bring a magazine; read me some short story."

Mellen seated himself, opened the periodical and commenced reading the first tale he lighted upon. It was a story by a popular author, beginning in a light, pleasant way, and promising the amusement his listener needed. But as the little romance went on it deepened into a pathetic tragedy. It was an account of a noble-born Sicilian woman who, during the Revolution, endured, silently, every species of suffering, at last death itself, rather than betray her husband to his enemies, yet the husband had bitterly wronged her and half-broken her heart during their married life.

Elsie did not listen at first, but as the story went on her thoughts became so painful that she tried to fasten her attention upon the reading. When she began to take notice Mellen was just in the midst of the account of this Sicilian woman's martyrdom in prison, bearing up with such serene patience, faithful to her vow, firm in her determination to save the man who had injured her.

Elsie fairly snatched the volume from his hand.

"Don't read it!" she exclaimed. "What made you choose such a doleful thing; it makes my flesh creep."

He saw the change which had come over her face, and reproached himself for his carelessness in having chosen so sad a tale; but the truth was, in his absorption, he had not the slightest idea of what he was reading, his voice sounded in his own ears mechanical, and as if it belonged to some other person.

He went to the table to make a more fortunate selection.

"Here is a volume of parodies," he said, "shall I try those?"

"Anything; I don't care."

He commenced a mischievous travestie of a poem, but though it was wittily done, its lightness jarred so terribly on both reader and listener that it was speedily thrown aside. For some time they remained in gloomy silence, then Elsie began to moan and move restlessly about, then Mellen tried to rouse himself and be cheerful again.

The afternoon passed very much in the same way. At last Elsie declared that she would sleep awhile.

"Anything to wear away the time!" she said.

Mellen wondered if he should ever find anything that would shorten the hours to him, but he held his peace.

"I have such an odd, horrible feeling," said Elsie; "just as if I were waiting anxiously for something—every instant expecting it."

"That is because you are nervous."

"Perhaps so," she said, fretfully.

He was waiting. Henceforth life would be but one long waiting just for revenge, then to be free from the dull pressure of this existence.

"How white you are!" Elsie said suddenly. "I don't believe you have slept at all."

It was true. For nights Mellen had not closed his eyes, but he felt no approach towards drowsiness even now.

"You will fall sick!" cried Elsie. "What shall I do then?"

"Don't be afraid; I am well and strong."

He said the words with a loathing bitterness of his own ability to endure.

The more powerful his physical organization, the more years of loneliness and pain would be left for him to bear. His mind flew on to the future; he pictured the long, long course towards old age; the dreary lapse of time which would bring only a cold exterior over his sufferings, like a crust of lava hardening above the volcanic fires beneath.

"Don't sit so, looking at nothing," cried Elsie.

"Yes, dear. There, do you think you can go to sleep?"

"I won't try, unless you go to sleep too. Draw the sofa up by the bed and lie down."

He obeyed her command, willing to gratify her least caprice. She gave him one of her pillows, threw a part of the counterpane over him, and made him lie there, holding fast to his hand, afraid to be alone, even in her dreams.

"Do you feel sleepy, Grant?" she asked, after a pause.

"Perhaps so; I am resting, at all events."

"Don't you remember when I was sick once, years ago, I never would sleep unless I held your hand?"

"Yes, dear."

How far back the time looked—he had been a mere youth then—what a fearful waste lay between that season and the present!

Suddenly Elsie started up again.

"You sent the letter, Grant?"

"Yes, yes; be content."

She was so much afraid even to sleep, that it relieved her to turn her last waking thoughts upon some little good she was doing Elizabeth.

"Good-night, now," she said; "I can go to sleep. Kiss my hand, Grant. You love me, don't you?"

"Always, darling, always; nothing can part you and me."

She fell away into a tranquil slumber, and Mellen lay for a long time watching her repose; it was a brief season of peace to her, for burning thoughts had not followed her into her dreams.

The extreme quiet, the sight of her placid face soothed him imperceptibly. A dreary weakness began to make itself felt after that long continued excitement. At length the lids drooped over his eyes, and he slept almost as profoundly as Elsie herself. For a long time there was no sound in the chamber; the brother and sister lay slumbering while the day wore on and the twilight crept slowly around.

When Elsie awoke it was to rouse him with the cry which had been so often on her lips during the previous day—

"Bessie, Bessie!"

He started up, spoke to her, and his voice brought her back to the reality.

"I was so happy," she moaned; "I dreamed that Bessie and I were gathering pond lilies—she was wreathing them about my head—then just as I woke I saw a snake sting her—before that it was all bright. Oh, dear, if I could only sleep forever!"

CHAPTER LXXII.

TOM FULLER RETURNS.

The next day Elsie was still stronger and better. She consented to lie in bed all the morning, making it a condition that she might get up and be carried downstairs to pass the evening.

"That is the dreariest time," she said; "it drags on so heavily."

Mellen promised her, and she was childishly happy.

"You shall have an early dinner, Grant, and then we'll take tea in the evening, and eat toast and jam just as we did when I was a child."

"Yes, that will be very comfortable."

He had tried to say pleasant, but he could not speak the word. The day was so warm and bright that a little after noon he took her out for a short drive, then she lay down to rest again, resolved to be strong and pass the evening below. The change was pleasant to her—she felt quite elated, as she always was in health, at the idea of amusement.

They got through the day rather quietly, and Elsie did not have a single relapse of her nervous tremors.

When she awoke from her afternoon nap it was growing dark. She cried out quite joyfully when she saw Grantley sitting by the bed:

"It is almost evening at last!"

At that moment Victoria appeared at the door.

"Come in," Mellen said; "what do you want?"

Victoria entered on tip-toe, though she knew plainly enough that her young mistress was awake, and whispered in the doleful semitone she reserved for sick rooms:

"If you please, Mister Fuller's just arrived, and he's asking after all of you in a breath."

Elsie started up on her pillows, and the brother and sister looked at each other in blank dismay when they thought of the blow that must be inflicted upon the warm, honest heart of Elizabeth's cousin.

"Go and say that we will be down," said Elsie, recovering her presence of mind.

Victoria departed, and Grantley cried out passionately:

"How can I tell him? Poor Tom, he will nearly die."

"You must not tell him yet," said Elsie, "not one word—just say Bessie is absent."

"Such prevarication is useless, Elsie, he must know the truth."

Elsie began to cry.

"There, you are contradicting me already. I won't go down—I shall be sick again—my head swims now."

"Don't distress yourself, dear, don't."

"Then let me have my own way," she pleaded.

"What do you wish? Anything to content you."

"That's a good brother," said Elsie. "Go down and merely tell Tom I have been very sick, and that Bessie has gone to New York—anywhere—not a word more."

"But he will wonder at her absence during your illness."

"No, he never wonders; it doesn't make any difference."

"I detest these white lies, Elsie."

"Oh, well, if you want to kill me with a scene, go and tell Tom," she exclaimed, throwing herself back on her pillows; "I shall be worried to death at last."

Mellen was anxious to soothe her, and against his judgment submitted.

"I'll go, darling; I'll go."

"Good Grant; kind brother! Send Victoria to me; I will be all dressed when you come back."

Mellen went out and called the servant, then he passed downstairs, and in the hall met Tom, who rushed towards him, exclaiming:

"The woman says Elsie is very sick; is she better; what is it?"

"She is much better; don't be frightened; she will be downstairs in a few minutes."

"Thank God," muttered Tom, his face still white with fears that Victoria had aroused.

Mellen was too much preoccupied to notice his extreme agitation, or speculate upon its cause if he had observed it.

"I only got back this afternoon," said Tom, "and I hurried over here at once. How is Bessie?"

"She—she is not at home," faltered Mellen.

"Not at home and Elsie sick?"

"She was gone," said Mellen, "and I did not send for her."

Tom was too much troubled about Elsie to reflect long upon anything else, and directly Mellen broke from his eager questions, saying:

"Go into the library, Tom; I'll bring Elsie down."

He went upstairs, and knocked at his sister's door.

"You may come in," Elsie called out; "I am ready."

When he entered she was sitting up in an easy chair, wrapped in a pretty dressing-gown of pink merino, braided and trimmed after her own fanciful ideas, a white shawl thrown over her shoulders, the flossy hair shading her face, and looking altogether quite another creature.

For the first time since Elizabeth's departure, a feeling of relief loosened the oppression on Mellen's heart.

"You look so well again; God bless you, darling!"

"Of course I'm pretty!" she cried childishly, pointing to herself in the glass. "I shall make a nice little visitor."

"You will always be one, my sunbeam," he said.

She shivered a little at his words, but she would not permit herself to think, determined to have her old carelessness, her old peace back, if she could grasp it.

"How is Tom?" she asked.

"Dreadfully anxious about you, poor fellow."

"Did he ask for Bessie?"

"Yes—yes."

"But you said nothing?"

"No, Elsie; he knows nothing."

"That is right," she said; "I can tell him better than you. Be kind to him, Grant."

"Yes, dear; he saved your life; Tom is very dear to me; poor fellow."

"I am to be a visitor, remember," she said childishly; "You must not forget that."

"I will forget nothing that can give you pleasure, be certain of that," he answered, kindly.

"Now you shall lead me downstairs," she said.

"You must not walk; I will carry you."

"No, no; I am so heavy."

But he took her in his arms and carried her downstairs, as he had so often done in her childhood, while Victoria followed with cushions and shawls to make her perfectly comfortable.

"I am your baby again, Grant! Don't you remember how you used to carry me about?"

"Indeed I do; you are not much larger now."

"You saucy thing! I would pull your hair only I am afraid you would let me fall."

He carried her into the library and laid her on the sofa. Tom sprang forward with a cry of terror at the change his absence had made in her appearance, but a gesture from Mellen warned him that he must control his feelings lest his anxiety should agitate her.

"I am so glad to see you, Tom, so very glad," she said, clasping her delicate fingers about his hands, and so filling him with delight by her look and words that he could not even remember to be anxious.

"It has seemed an age to me since I went away," said Tom. "And you have been sick, little princess, and Bessie gone! that is strange."

"There, there," cried Elsie; "you must not talk about my appearance or sickness or anything else!"

Just tell me how pretty I look, and do nothing but amuse me."

"You seem like an angel of light," cried Tom, looking wistfully at her little hand, as if he longed to hide it away in his broad palm.

The fire burned cheerfully in the grate, the chandeliers were lighted, the tea-table spread, and everything done to make the room pleasant which could suggest itself to Dolf and Victoria, in their anxiety to please the young favorite.

"It is so pleasant," she said, with a sigh of relief; "so pleasant."

Then Victoria brought her a quantity of flowers Dolf had cut in the greenhouse, and she strewed the fragrant blossoms over her dress and wreathed them in her hair, making a beautiful picture of herself in her rich wrappings and delicate loveliness.

"Now we will have tea," she said, "bring all sorts of nice things, Vicky."

"Yes, 'deed. I will, Miss! Clo she's ben a fixin' fur yer! Laws, it jis' makes my heart jump to see you up agin."

As the girl left the room Mellen said:

"How she loves you! Everybody does love you, Elsie."

"They must," she answered; "I should die if I were not petted. Oh, Grant, it's so nice here; don't you like it?"

"Yes, indeed; you make the old room bright again."

Her spirits had risen, she was really quite like her old self, and that without effort or pretence.

Then the tea was brought in, and she insisted on at least tasting everything on the table. Clo was well acquainted with her dainty ways, and the varieties of preserves and jellies she had brought out from her stores was marvellous.

Elsie fed Tom with bits of toast, made him eat everything he did not want, and beg for all that he did, and was so bright and peaceful that Mellen himself grew quiet from her influence.

CHAPTER LXXIII.

A FEAST AND A LOVE FEAST.

While the evening was passing so pleasantly with Elsie, the principal personages below stairs were holding a subdued revel in the housekeeper's room.

Miss Dinah had come up from the village, and her ebony suitor was expected. With that and their delight at Miss Elsie's improvement, the whole staff was in excellent spirits.

"It's one ob dem 'casions," said Dolf, "when we ort ter do somethin' a little out ob de common run—what do yer say, Miss Clorindy?"

Clo smiled affably; certain explanations had passed between her and Dolf on the previous day, which made her inclined to consider any proposal of his with high favor.

She summoned her unfortunate drudge Sally, and ordered her to set the table at once.

"And don't spend yer time a gaupin' at Miss Dinah's new dress," said she, severely; "'taint manners, nohow."

The truth was Sally had not observed the gown, but its bright crimson had struck Clorinda's fancy, and being tempted to stare at it enviously herself, she concluded the girl must be doing the same thing.

"Jis' obsarve what Miss Clorindy tells yer," remarked Dolf, "and yer'll be on the road ter 'provement; Sally, yer couldn't hab a more reficient guide."

Clo bridled and grew radiant; she cast a glance of triumph at Dinah, and only regretted that Victoria had not yet come downstairs to hear these benign words.

"I 'spect Othello won't get here till late," said Dinah, beginning to fear that the good things would all have disappeared before his arrival. "Der's some meeting at de hotel, and he'll be kept dar—de gemmen tinks nobody else can wait on em."

"He desarves deir 'preciation," said Dolf, loftily, with the air of a man so supremely great that he could well afford to allow ordinary people to claim their little virtues unchallenged.

"Wal," said Clo, "arter all it needs trabel and the world to develop a man proper."

"Jis' so, Miss Clorindy; yer's allers rezact."

He gave her a very tender glance, and Clo giggled in delightful confusion.

"But I tell you, Mr. Othello mustn't lose his share of 'freshment," pursued Dolf, anxious to secure as many extra meals as possible. "Miss Clo, will you permit me to make a proposition?"

"I'll feel it an honor," said Clo.

"Yer does me proud," returned Dolf with a profound bow, while Dinah sat quite aghast at their stateliness and high breeding, and Sally began to think Clo must speak Spanish as well as Dolf.

"I moves we has our tea now," said Dolf; "it's a sort of delercate compliment to Miss Elsie to eat when she does, and later in de ebenin' arter Mr. Othello comes we might make a brile ob dat chicken in de closet—marster don't eat nothin', and I'se afeared it'll be wasted."

Clo was complaisance itself, and went to work while Dolf encouraged her with his smiles.

By the time Victoria came downstairs the table was spread sumptuously, and in order to carry out Dolf's extraordinary idea of complimenting Miss Elsie, there were sweetmeats and cakes, hot muffins, cold tongue, and stores of eatables that brought the water into Dolf's crafty mouth.

The meal began in greatest harmony, Miss Dinah was very affable, Vic really was the best-natured creature in the world, and just now she was perfectly happy from seeing her beloved young mistress better; Dolf was so circumspect in his conduct that Clo was kept in the state of high good humor befitting the glory of her new turban, and the first brightness of the change which had come upon her prospects.

The truth was, the day before, while she was peeling onions, Dolf grew desperate, and was led on to that point beyond which there was no turning back. Clo had grown tender and confidential—he learned the amount of her fortune—five hundred hard dollars in the bank. After this the happiness of that sable pair was supreme. For the moment she really looked beautiful in his eyes, and with tears in their depths—the result of affection, not of the onions he assured her—he implored her to make him the happiest of men. He performed his part in the most grandiloquent style, dropping on one knee as he had seen lovers do from the upper loft of the Bowery Theatre, and holding her hands fast, one of which grasped a knife and the other an onion.

Before they were disturbed matters were completely settled, though Dolf pleaded for the engagement being kept secret a little while.

"I jis' want to see what dat ole parson'll say," he averred, though the truth was, Dolf had been so indiscreet in his protestations to Victoria that he was a little fearful of consequences if that high-spirited damsel learned the news without a little preparation.

"Nebber you mind de parson," said Clo; "laws, I wouldn't wipe my ole shoes on him, 'sides it ed be something wuth while jis' to denounce our connubility to de hull company dis ebening."

But Dolf flattered and persuaded until she consented to comply with his wishes.

Victoria had been so much occupied above stairs that she found no opportunity for observation, otherwise Dolf's manner and the mysterious air of importance which Clo assumed, would have warned her that something extraordinary had happened.

Clo made Sally wait on her more than ever, boxed the girl's ears for her own mistakes, tried on new turbans, surveyed herself in the glass, and fluttered from room to room in the highest state of feminine triumph. Dolf tried his best to be happy, but it required a vivid recollection of the money lying in that bank to make him at all comfortable. He kept repeating to himself:

"Five hundred dollars! One—two—three—four—five!"

Then he would remember Victoria's youth and golden beauty, his own delicious freedom, and groan heavily. But he was sure to bring up his spirits again by muttering, vigorously:

"Five hundred dollars! One—two—three—four—five!"

But it was a season of holiday delight to Clorinda. The highest aspiration of her spinster soul was soon to be gratified—she would have a husband! No long engagement for her; she made up her mind to that on the moment. With that yellow bird once in the cage, she was not going to lose time in closing the door—not she!

She fed her intended to repletion with dainties, and it spoke marvels for his digestion that after all the dinner he had eaten he could make such havoc among the cake and preserves, still looking complacently forward to the prospect of broiled chicken. Crisp crullers disappeared like frostwork in his nimble jaws, he laid in a very unnecessary stock of tongue considering his natural advantages that way, made a dismal cavern of an immense fruitcake, and softened the effect with a whole mould of apricot jelly.

Dinah and Vic certainly kept him in countenance, but Clorinda rather trifled with the sweets, drinking so much strong tea in her pleasurable agitation, that to an observer given to ludicrous ideas, her jetty face would have suggested the idea of an old fashioned black teapot, with her pug nose for the chubby spout. Sally witnessed this dashing festival from behind the door, scraped up the jelly left in the glasses, stole bits of toast and muffins on their road to the table, and solaced her appetite on various fragments, till at last, growing bold and getting hungry, she crept to the pantry and purloined half a pumpkin pie. Until it had disappeared, like a train down a tunnel, she never remembered that Clo was sure to miss it in the morning, but reflected, in her fright, that it was possible to shut the cat up in the closet at bedtime, and so escape detection.

After tea Dolf brought out a pack of cards—a pack which had mysteriously disappeared from the library table some time before—and inducted the ladies into the mysteries of sundry little games, winning their pennies easily and cheating them without the slightest compunction.

That was a point beyond Clo, she could not lose her money even to Dolf, and vowed from that time out she would only play for pins.

"Gamblin's wicked," she said, virtuously.

So they played for pins, and Dolf allowed her to be the gainer. When she lost, Clo gave crooked ones in payment, and thus her high spirits were preserved untarnished.

CHAPTER LXXIV.

THAT MONEY IN THE BANK.

At last Othello arrived and made the circle complete. A great, shiny creature, uglier than a mortal easily can be, at whom Miss Dinah cast admiring glances, and did the fascinating in a way which Clo copied on the instant.

Dolf reminded her of the chicken, and proposed making a bowl of flip while she cooked the fowl, an idea which received unanimous approval.

They were gathered about the supper-table, Dolf was carver, and managed to secure an unfair portion of the delicate bits, proposing all sorts of trifles to suit Othello's palate, and then devouring them before the unfortunate creature could get more than a look at the dainties.

Othello was giving an account of his labors during the evening, and from his story it was quite evident that he had been the most important personage in the assembly, and Dinah shone like a bronze Venus with the triumph in his success.

"Oh, laws!" said he, suddenly; "I quite forgot!"

"What, what?" they asked.

"Why, what Mr. Moseby said. 'Spec it don't consarn nobody here; only, as Miss Clorindy's a lady of property, she naterally feels interested in what happens to oder folks wid fortins."

Clo bridled, and Dolf said majestically, feeling that he had already a share in her wealth:

"In course, in course; perceed, Mr. Othello."

"Wal, yer see the gemmen was talkin' 'bout de banks—I didn't hear de beginning, 'cause dat boy, Pete Hopkins, let de punch glasses fall, and I was a fixin' him."

"Did it break 'em?" cried Dinah, feeling an interest in the details not shared by the others.

"Only two. I gave him six cracks for each—the little limb!"

"Wal, 'bout de bank," said Dolf, impatiently.

"Yes, dat's what I'm gwine to tell. Mr. Moseby, he said—you know him—dat tall man—"

"Laws, we know him well 'nuff," said Vic. "Go on if you're gwine to."

Dinah looked reproachfully at her, and Othello continued:

"Mr. Moseby—he said de Trader's Bank had blowed all to smash—clean up."

A scream from Clorinda brought them all to their feet.

"Massy sakes," cried Vic; "what is it?"

"Have yer got fits?" demanded Dinah.

"Bring de peppermint," suggested Othello.

"Miss Clorindy, dear Miss Clorindy, what am it?" cried Dolf, with a sudden sinking at his heart.

Clo would have had hysterics, but not being a fine lady, she gave two or three yells, kicked the table, pulled her frizzed hair, and shouted, amid her tears:

"You Sally, git my bunnit—quick!"

She rose, and they crowded about her.

"Whar be you gwine? What's up?"

"Git my bunnit!" she repeated. "Ise gwine to York, I is."

"To York, this time o' night?" cried Vic.

"Yes, I is—let me go."

Dolf laid a hand on her arm.

"Only 'splain, Clorindy, 'splain!"

"Ise gwine to git at dem rascals. I want my money—I'll have it! Marster shall git it. Oh de villin scampsesses! I want my money."

Dolf dropped speechless in a chair, while the rest poured out floods of questions, which Clorinda was in no state to answer.

"Was yer money in dat bank?"

"Ise gwine to York; get my bunnit!"

They fairly shook her, the general curiosity was so great.

"Why don't yer speak?" said Vic. "Was yer money in de bank?"

"Yis; ebery red cent. Oh! oh! Five hundred dollars—and it's a—all g—gone!" she sobbed. "I'll hev it! I'll hev it! Call marster! Git my bunnit. Oh! oh!"

They made her sit down, they explained to her that nothing could be done until the next day, and finally she subsided into silent tears. All this while Dolf sat without offering one word of consolation; now he said:

"Mebby dar's some mistake, Othello."

"No, dar ain't," persisted Othello. "Mr. Moseby's lost ten thousand dollars; he'd orter know. De bank's gone to smash, clar nuff."

Clo burst into a new paroxysm of distress, and Dolf, after a brief struggle with his own disappointment, turned on her:

"Yer needn't rouse de house wid yer hurlyburly," said he, savagely. "Better 'member Miss Elsie's sick."

Clo stared at him in tearless horror; a new fear struck her; was he going to prove false?

"Don't talk so," she said; "tink of yesterday, Dolf!"

Dolf drew himself up, and looked first at her and then at the company with an air of profound astonishment.

"I tink her brain am turned," said he.

"'Taint!" roared Clo. "Oh, Dolfy, yer said yer loved me; yer knows yer did; dat yer didn't care for money; dat I was a Wenus in yer eyes—oh—oh!"

"Wal, I do declar!" cried Vic.

Dolf flew into a great rage.

"Miss Clorindy, yer sorrow makes yer forget yerself; yer've ben a dreaming."

Clo drew her apron from her eyes and looked at him; lightning was gathering there which he would have done well to heed, but he did not.

"Does yer mean that?" she demanded, sternly.

"Sartin, I does."

"Yer denies kneelin' at my feet an' sayin', 'Wasn't de onions made yer cry;' a pleadin' and a coaxin' till I 'sented to marry yer."

"In course I does," repeated Dolf, doggedly.

"Take care! Jis' tink!"

"Miss Clo, dis ere ain't decorous; I'se 'stonished at yer!"

With a bound like an unchained tigress Clo sprang at him. Dolf dodged, ran behind the startled group, in and out among the chairs, through the kitchen, back again, and Clo at his heels. She had caught up a broom; once or twice she managed to hit him, and her sobs of rage mingled with Dolf's cries of distress.

"Take her off," he shrieked; "ketch a hold of her!"

"I'll kill him," shouted Clo. "I'll break every bone in his 'fernal body! Oh, yer varmint, yer cattle!"

They laid hands on Clorinda at length, though it was a difficult operation; and Dolf took refuge behind a great chair, peeping through the slats at the back, with his eyes rolling and his teeth chattering like some frightened monkey in a cage.

The women were consoling and blaming Clo; Vic divided between conviction and anger, and Othello, like a sensible man, siding neither way.

Suddenly they were roused by a prolonged cry from the floor above, a cry so shrill and unearthly

that it froze the blood in their veins. In an instant there followed a loud knocking at the outer door, and forgetful of their own troubles, they crowded together like a flock of frightened crows driven from a cornfield.

CHAPTER LXXV.

UNEXPECTED DEVELOPMENTS.

The evening had passed very pleasantly to Elsie; Mellen had humored her caprices at whatever cost to himself, and kept her thoughts as much aloof as possible from the events of the past days.

It was growing late, and he had several times reminded her that it was time she went to rest. Tom Fuller had taken the first hint and retired.

"Let me sit up a little longer," she pleaded; "I am not in the least sleepy; it is so nice to get out of that dull chamber."

"But I am afraid you will tire yourself so completely, that to-morrow you cannot come down at all."

"There is not the slightest danger of that; I am stronger than you think. When this little dizziness in my head leaves me I shall be quite well."

They talked a few moments longer, then she began turning over the papers on a stand near her sofa. Suddenly she took up a letter, and glancing at the writing, exclaimed:

"This is from Mr. Hudson! You did not tell me that you had heard."

"It came this afternoon while you were asleep."

"What does he say? Does he know where she is? Will you send him money for her?"

"There is no necessity."

"But she must have it; she can't live."

"My dear, she has her money. He writes me that sometime since he sold out the stocks by her orders. She was doubtless preparing to leave the country with that man."

Elsie fell back on the sofa overwhelmed by the new fear which came over her. The money had been paid; but where was Elizabeth? What to do—how to act! Before the whirl had left her brain there was a sound at the door of the little passage already described.

"What is that?" exclaimed Mellen. "Some one trying that door."

"No, no," she cried. "Come back; it's nothing; I'm afraid; come back!"

He gave no attention to her cry, but hurried towards the door, while she was attempting to rise from the sofa; he had it open, Elsie heard a muttered curse, an answering imprecation from another voice, looked out, saw the outer door ajar and a man just entering the passage with whom Mellen closed instantly in a fearful struggle.

That one glance had been enough; she knew the man; then it was her insane shriek rang through the house.

Mellen forced Ford into the room, flung him against the wall, locked the door, and exclaimed in a terrible voice:

"At last! at last!"

A bell rang at the front entrance, but no one in that room heeded it.

Mellen sprang towards the man again, but he cried out savagely:

"Keep off, if you value your life, keep off."

"One of us dies here!" cried Mellen. "William Ford, one of us dies here!"

After that long shriek Elsie had fallen back helpless; she had not fainted, but a sort of cataleptic rigor locked her limbs; there she lay without voice or power of motion, listening to their words, which seemed to come through blocks of ice.

"I did not expect to meet you here," said Ford, calling up a sudden audacity. "It's an honor I did not wish."

"I know who you expected to see; but the woman is gone; you must seek her elsewhere!"

"Then you have driven her to destruction at last. I tell you, sir, we are a pack of cowards hunting down an angel. You and I and that pretty imp of satan. I came to tell you this: bad as I am, her goodness has touched me with human feelings. If she is here and alive, justice shall be done her, and for once the truth shall be spoken under this roof. That woman has bribed me to shield

another through her. Soul and body she has been made a sacrifice. There is danger to me here. This bit of goodness may bring ruin upon me, but I cannot leave the country forever, and know that she is being ground to dust under your heel; while that other flimsy coward crowds her from hearth and home. For once, Grantley Mellen, you shall be forced to hear the truth and believe it."

"The truth from you!" exclaimed Mellen, with unutterable scorn, "that or anything else from so vile a source I reject—go, sir, we are not alone!"

Ford, or North, glanced towards the sofa; recognised Elsie lying there, and turned again towards Mellen.

"Twice you have broken up my life," cried Mellen, "but this time you shall not escape! Here, in the home you have dishonored, you shall meet your fate. Burglar, villain, how did you get here?"

"By the way I have been in the habit of reaching these rooms. I hoped to see your wife here, and tell her that at last I was resolved to knock my chains from her soul. She never would have spoken; but nothing, even though she had gone on her knees again, should have silenced me! If she is not alive to benefit by the exculpation, I am resolved that her memory, at least, shall be saved all reproach."

"I believe," said Mellen, with cool scorn, "that it is expected that a man should perjure himself in behalf of a woman whom he has dragged into sin, but here, impudent falsehoods of this kind, count for nothing."

"But you shall believe me! If that woman is lost, if she has gone mad, for she was mad, when I left her in the graveyard, if she has wandered off and perished, or worse still——"

"Hold, hold!" cried Mellen, shuddering.

"If she is lost or dead," continued North, without heeding the anguish in this cry, "you have murdered the sweetest and noblest woman that ever drew breath, and only that the worthless thing lying yonder, should continue to be pampered and sit above her."

Mellen started to his feet.

"Silence!" he thundered. "Do not dare to take the name of that innocent child into your lips."

A keen, sarcastic laugh, preceded the answer North gave to this.

"So that strikes home, does it? Your wife has probably died by her own hand, but you do not feel it. When that paltry thing is mentioned, you tear at the bit and begin to rave, as if she were the most worthy creature on earth. Ah, ha! There you are wounded, my friend."

Mellen remembered Elsie's presence.

"Well," he cried, pointing to her, "that woman only had my heart; my blood did not run in her veins; if you had struck me there the blow would have been keener."

The man laughed again; Elsie heard both words and laugh, as she lay in that marble trance. Had she been laid out shrouded for burial she could not have been more helpless.

"So you drove your wife away; out of the house?" cried the man. "I guessed as much."

"She is gone for ever, but you shall not live to join her."

"Before now she is dead! Listen to what you have done. I repeat it, your wife was as innocent as an angel. She is dead, and I tell you so, knowing how it will poison your life. If there was guilt or dishonor in loving me it belonged to that pretty heap of deception on the sofa. Hear that, and let your soul writhe under it, for your blood does run in her veins. I came to tell you this. That great hearted creature forced the truth back in my throat, the other night; but you shall hear it now. There lies the mother of the child we buried, the other night!"

"Liar! Traitor!" cried Mellen.

Again came a violent ringing of the door-bell; steps in the hall; this time the two men listened.

"I am pursued," muttered Ford; "they've cornered me; it is your turn now."

"I will give you up if these are enemies," cried Mellen; "there is no escape."

He took one stride towards the door, but Ford called out:

"You are giving up your sister's husband; remember the whole world shall know it."

There was bitter truth in the tone, but before Mellen could move or speak, the door opened and two officers entered the room.

"We have him safe," said one of the intruders as he passed Mellen. "Caught at last, my fine fellow."

Ford started back—thrust one hand under his vest, and drew it out again—there was a flash—a stunning report—he staggered back against the wall, shot through the chest.

For a few instants there was wild confusion; the servants rushed in, the wounded criminal was lifted up, but during all that time Elsie lay on the sofa quite unnoticed, not insensible yet, but

utterly helpless, so blasted by the shock that mind and body seemed withering under it.

Ford sat on the floor in gloomy silence. In spite of his resistance an effort was made to staunch the blood which was trickling down his shirt bosom, but he said in a low, quiet voice:

"It is useless. I have cheated you at last—the first good act of my life has killed me—I am a dying man. It was my last stake, and I have lost it."

A great change in his face proved the truth of his words; even the officers, inured to scenes of suffering and pain, recoiled before his stony hardihood.

One of them spoke in explanation to Mellen.

"We don't know what he wanted here; we have been on his track for days; he committed a forgery, months ago, and was trying to get off to Europe just as it was found out."

"He's bound on a longer journey, that you cannot stop now," said Ford. "Mellen, I have something to say to you—better send these men away unless you want our little affairs discussed before them."

CHAPTER LXXVI.

THE CONFESSION.

After a few moments the men went out and left Mellen alone with the suicide—in his excitement Mellen forgot Elsie's presence, and the dreadful state she was in.

"I am dying," said Ford; "I may live the night out—it don't matter! You are glad to see my blood run—that's natural enough! Man, man, the torment I go to isn't half as bad as that I shall leave behind for you."

"Say quickly what you wish," exclaimed Mellen, forgetting even his hatred in the dreadful picture his enemy made, his garments red with blood, his face pale with the death agony, distorted with baffled rage and hate. "I believe nothing you say—you cannot move me."

"So be it," said the man. "These fellows have tied my hands—put yours in my coat pocket—you'll find three letters, a paper and a roll of money."

Mellen obeyed, shuddering to feel the blood drops warm on his fingers as he drew forth the package.

"Read them," said Ford, briefly.

Mellen opened one after another of the epistles and read—they were in Elsie's writing—they proved the truth of the villain's assertions. The smaller paper was a marriage certificate. The roll of bills—each note for a thousand dollars—was the price of Elizabeth's bonds.

Mellen staggered back with one heartbroken cry.

"I have touched you," exclaimed the man! "There lies your precious sister in a dead faint—here I am, dying, a criminal, but your brother-in-law none the less—stoop down, I want to whisper something."

Mellen bent his head, for his enemy was dying.

"It is a fair certificate you see, but I was a married man all the time."

As Ford whispered these words a fiendish smile covered the lips on which death was scattering ashes.

Mellen started forward with a wild impulse to choke the ebbing life from his lips, but they whispered hoarsely:

"You can't fight a dying man—you'll only put me out of this cursed pain if you choke me."

Mellen stood transfixed.

"I'll tell you the story," continued Ford; "novels always have dying confessions in them—hear mine. I tell you because it is too late to remedy what you have done—your wife is gone—I'm glad of it. She was ten thousand times too good for any of you. She's dead, I dare say; just the woman to do it, without a word, and all for that little heap of froth."

Mellen could not speak; he felt about blindly for support, and sank into a chair.

"I always hated you," Ford went on, and the hatred of a life burned in his voice and convulsed his face. "When we were boys together, I swore to pay you off for getting that old man's money away from me, his rightful heir. That was bad enough, but your insolent kindness, your infernal, condescending generosity, was ten times worse. Mighty willing, you were, to dole out money that was more mine than yours, and claim gratitude for it. But I had a little revenge at the time, remember. I took away the woman you loved—I cheated you out of money—that was something,

but not enough. I came back to this country just after you sailed from Europe, and even before I ever saw the woman who became your wife, or your sister, I had formed my plan—it succeeded. I met that bunch of flimsy falsehood—I made her love me—made her mad for me—you wince—I'm glad of it. But mind me, I would not have married her after all, but that I thought she had inherited half her old uncle's property. It would not have been worth while to saddle myself with a thing like that. Then came your turn to laugh, if you had but known it. I was taken in—sold. The creature had not a cent, and no hope of one if she offended you.

"It was a hateful position, especially as I did not care for the pretty fool after the speculation failed, and what's better, she soon got over caring for me, just as the other did, and wanted to be off her bargain. I had given her a glimpse or two of my way of life. That did not frighten her, but my poverty did. This little sister of yours has luxurious tastes, and understands the value of wealth uncommonly well. But she had told me just how far you had made your wife independent in means. It was a pretty sum, and I saw a way of getting it.

"Elsie had told me a great deal about your wife, and I made my own observations, though she detested me from the first, some women will take such fancies. I say nothing of certain wires that I had laid in the basement region of your house.

"The little goose yonder really believed that you had married that glorious woman only as a companion for her—that you did not love her in the least. I knew better; she was a woman to adore, worship for ever and ever: and you are no fool in such matters, I know that of old our tastes in that direction have always harmonized beautifully. Your wife adored you; I can say this now that you have killed her, but that little witch convinced her of the story she told me, and it was breaking her heart, for that woman had a heart.

"To save you from trouble and the creature that you worshipped even in her presence from disgrace, I knew that she would give up everything, even her life, which you have taken at last.

"I told Elsie the truth, after I got a little tired of her, which was early in the honeymoon; let her know frankly that I had a wife living in Europe, though it was impossible for any one to prove it against my will. The very day that I told her this I managed to convey some of her letters to me—fond, silly things they were—into your wife's room. Then I sent Elsie home to tell her own story.

"The girl was mad, crazy as a March hare, went into hysterics, made an insane effort to kill herself, took poison and heaven knows what else in the presence of your wife. I knew she would, and set her loose for that purpose. These tragedies were kept up till your wife, thinking your soul bound up in the girl, and herself nothing in comparison, made a solemn promise never to betray Elsie's secret, and to shield her from all harm with her own life if needful. I heard this and knew that my money was safe.

"Your wife came to me, for I was not permitted to enter the house after she found me out. There was a woman! I swear the only creature of the sex that I ever respected. She was firm but grand in her generosity, ready to sacrifice everything so long as it took Elsie out of my power. I gave up more of the letters, reserving these three for use, unknown to her. She raised all the money in her power at the time, but I kept the certificate, resolved not to sell that without demanding the last cent she possessed.

"In telling my grand secret, I had been cautious to keep all possibility of proof to myself. They knew that my first wife, your old lady love, was living, but had no means of proving the fact, or even that I had ever been married at all, otherwise my position might have been dangerous; as it was, those two women were like flies in a spider's web.

"Our child, your nephew, was born, and died, fortunately for us all. They were obliged to trust me a little then. Your wife summoned me to the house, for she was afraid to claim help from any other human being—I went, and with my own hands buried it under a cypress tree in your grounds. That heroic woman stood by and watched. She would not trust me out of her sight, fearing that I might attempt to see Elsie, whom she guarded like a mother bird when hawks are near. Noble soul. It was all useless; I had no wish to see that faithless little imp, and as for her, I dare say she was glad to get rid of me even at the bitter cost she was paying. In fact I know she was, after that other noble creature took up her burden.

"Well, after this I got a little money from your wife now and then, under threats of claiming my wife, which always brought her to terms—remember I had told her she was not my legal wife, but held proofs that she was—I could claim or reject her as I pleased.

"But one day a new idea came into my head; I found out that you were coming home just as the steamer which brought you was on the coast. That your will had been made, leaving all you had to be equally divided between your wife and sister. If you should never reach shore Elsie would be worth claiming in earnest. But with that news came a letter from my wife; against my commands she was following me to this country, just when her presence was certain ruin."

The man broke off in his narration here, evidently convulsed with more than physical pain, specks of foam flew to his lips, great drops of agony stood on his forehead.

"Brandy; give me some brandy!" he cried out huskily. "Some brandy, I say."

Mellen poured some brandy into a glass and held it to his mouth. He drank eagerly, and sank back to the floor again.

"What's the use of talking about that? I would have saved her at the last, and tried hard enough, but the storm was too much for me. After all that, you baffled me and got on shore; the fiends must have guided that pilot boat. I got frightened too. It was not a part of my programme to go down with you."

"Wretch!" said Mellen, struck with a sudden idea, "you were the person who nearly lost me among the breakers."

"Yes," answered Ford. "We both had a narrow chance, but the risk was worth running—that is, if your will really was made—but when you once touched shore all hope for me was over. I must leave America; I sent word to your wife that I must have twenty-five thousand dollars or claim my wife."

"She was trying to get it; she gave me the bracelet as a bribe for delay, one night when I came. Still of one thing I pledge you my soul, it is pretty much all I have left now, your wife never dreamed that I was your enemy, Ford. She knew I was a villain, and held the fate of that pretty fool in my hands. Now you have the whole story. I came here to-night because I had not heard from her; now I believe she's dead. I thought I would see that girl there. Now, then, Grantley Mellen, are you satisfied? You have driven your wife away, you could believe her guilty, and pet that frivolous thing in her place!"

"'When did I first see her?' when she was a flirty little school girl."

"'When did I marry her?' what there was of it, remember—just after you started for California, when the widow Harrington innocently brought me a guest into this house against the wishes of its mistress, who had seen me about the boarding-school, charming the canary birds with serenades. Once or twice she caught me with my guitar playing the fool under her own window. Of course she was not certain whether the homage was intended for her or Elsie, but I think took it to herself and was indignant, giving me in exchange for my music, such looks as a queen might bestow on her slave. I rather liked her for it; that kind of homage was not suited to her. The heap of thistle down yonder liked it. She knew what it meant. The only deep thing about such creatures is their craft. That girl is cunning as a fox. The pure, innocent thing, for whom that splendid creature was sacrificed; if I were not dying, the idea would make me laugh."

"There, now are we even? You deprived me of a fortune I was brought up to expect; I have managed to get some of it back. You loved a woman, and I married her. You married another woman, the most glorious creature I ever saw, and in a fit of jealous rage with me, turned her out upon the world to die."

"Tell me now, if my revenge has been complete?"

Mellen ran to the door and opened it.

"Come in," he cried to the officers. "Carry that man away! Take him to the lodge; he shall not even die here."

"As you will," cried Ford. "I will hold my tongue for that poor woman's sake."

He could not walk, so they carried him down to the lodge, and there, while waiting for a doctor to come, he sat looking death in the face, with the same desperate bravado that had marked his conduct all the night.

CHAPTER LXXVII.

SEARCHING.

Shriek after shriek from Elsie roused Mellen. She was raving in horrible delirium, and when assistance arrived it proved that she had been seized with brain fever, and there was scarcely a hope of her recovery.

Standing there by her bed, this thought must have been a relief to Mellen; but he did not forsake her, his pride was utterly crushed. He longed to cast himself down by her side and die there.

The next morning, when nurses and physicians arrived, Mellen left the house. He was going out on an aimless search for his lost wife—the woman who had given up her last hope for him and his.

He learned at the lodge that the wounded prisoner had been carried to the village by his own command; that he was alive still, but could not last more than another day; that his name was North, and he was well-known among the sporting gentry who came to the shore tavern. All this was told him as news.

Mellen hurried to the city and commenced his task. He sought for Elizabeth in every place where there was a possibility of her having taking refuge, but without avail. He used every means in his power to make some discovery, but they were ineffectual.

When night came he returned home, only to hear Elsie's mad shrieks and laughter echoing

through the desolate house, to pass the night with those sounds ringing in his ears, and feel that terrible remorse tugging at his heart.

The next morning he started again on his errand. He was told in the village that the man was dead. The story had gone abroad that he was a daring burglar, and that the officers had surprised him breaking into Mellen's house. He had found no strength to tell his story, so fear of open disgrace perished with him.

In the madness of his grief, Mellen had forgotten that Tom Fuller was his guest. The young man's chamber was in another wing of the building, and he heard nothing of the wild turmoil that distracted the family. Tom was not a very early riser, and when he came down in the morning, sauntering lazily into the breakfast-room, expecting to see Elsie there in her pretty blue morning-dress and flossy curls, he found the room empty, no table spread, and no human being to greet him.

"Well, this is strange," said Tom; "but when Bessie is away things will go to sixes and sevens, I dare be sworn. And Elsie isn't well, poor darling! Hallo! there goes Mellen, riding like a trooper! What on earth does all this mean? I am getting hungry, and lonesome, and——"

Here Tom gave a jerk at the bell, and cast himself into an easy chair.

Dolf presented his woe-begone face at the door.

"What's the matter, Dolf? Isn't it breakfast-time? Where is your master going—and—and—Well, Dolf, can't you tell me why Miss Elsie isn't down?"

"Miss Elsie, oh, sah, she am sick."

"Sick, Dolf! You don't say that?" cried Tom, starting up, with his face all in a chill of anxiety.

"Yes, I mean just dat, and nothing else."

"No, no; not very sick, Dolf," cried Tom, trembling through all his great frame, "only a little nervous, a headache, or something of that sort."

"She's just ravin'—crazy—ask Vic if you don't believe me. The doctors come in before daylight; I went after 'em myself. Robbers broke into de house last night, sah, and frightened our sweet young lady a'most to death."

"Robbers, Dolf!"

"Yes, sah. A gemman, too, as has been a visitor in dis dential house. Marster caught him in de act ob takin' out de silver, and de gemman—robber, I mean—felt so 'shamed ob himself dat he up and banged a bullet straight frough his own bussom, afore Miss Elsie, too!"

"Poor thing; precious little darling," cried Tom; "Mellen's left her all alone, and Elizabeth away; dear me! Dolf, Dolf, what was that?"

"It's her a screaming."

"What, Elsie, my Elsie?"

"Yes, sah; dat am her."

"Dolf, I say," cried Tom, in breathless anxiety, thrusting a ten dollar gold piece into the negro's hand; "Dolf, would it be very much amiss, you know, if I was to take off my boots and just steal up?"

"Well, I doesn't 'zactly know; de fair sex am so captious 'bout us gemmen; but Vic is up dar, and you can ask her, she knows all 'bout de 'prieties. Smart gal, dat Vic, I tell you; loves Miss Elsie, too, like fifty."

"Does she?" said Tom; "here's another gold piece, give it to her, with my best regards, Dolf."

Dolf pocketed the gold piece, and that was the last time it saw the light for many a day. Tom took off his boots and crept upstairs in his stocking feet, holding his breath as he went. Vic came out of the shaded room, and the young man's grief softened her so much that she allowed him to steal into Elsie's boudoir, where he sat all the morning listening to the poor girl's muttered fancies, after bribing Vic with gold pieces to leave the door open, that he might catch a glimpse now and then of the beloved face, flushed and wild as it was.

Generous, noble-hearted Tom Fuller; he had been really hungry when he came from his own room, but all that was forgotten now, and there he sat fasting till the shadows slanted eastward. Then he saw Mellen riding towards the house at a slow, weary pace, which bespoke great depression.

Tom arose and went downstairs, urged to meet his friend by the kindest heart that ever beat in a human bosom.

"She's better, I am quite sure; she slept two or three minutes; so don't look so downhearted," he cried, seizing Mellen's hand as he dismounted. "But where's Elizabeth? I thought you had gone after her."

"Elizabeth, my wife," answered Mellen, lifting his haggard eyes to Tom's face. "She is gone—lost

—dead. My friend, my friend, I have murdered your cousin, murdered my own wife."

"Murdered her; now I like that," said Fuller; "but where is she? not gone off in a tiff. Bessie wasn't the girl to do that any way; but as for murder, oh nonsense!"

"Fuller, you are her only relative, and have a right to know. Come out into the grounds, the air of the house would stifle me."

They sat down together on a garden chair within sight of the old cypress.

"I have been a proud man, Fuller, sensitive beyond everything to the honor of my family, but never knowingly have I allowed this feeling to stand between my soul and justice. Your cousin has been terribly wronged since she came under my roof. It is now too late for reparation, but to you, her only relative, the truth must be known. I will not even ask you to keep the facts secret. I have no right."

"Look here, old fellow," said Tom, wringing Mellen's slender hand in his; "if this is a lover's quarrel between you and Elizabeth, don't say another word. Lord bless you! I can persuade her into anything, she knows me of old. Besides, I am glad there is something that I can do to make you both good-natured just now, for as like as not, I shall be asking a tremendous favor of you before long, and this will pave the way; tell me where your wife is, I'll take care of the rest."

"Tom, I believe—I fear that she is dead."

The solemnity with which this was spoken, appalled Tom.

"Dead!" he repeated, and the ruddy color faded from his face. "Dead—you can't mean it."

"Listen patiently to me if you can," said Mellen, sadly. "This must be told, but the effort is terrible."

Tom folded his arms and bent his now grave face to listen. Then Mellen told him all; the anguish, the deception, the anxiety which these pages have recorded so imperfectly. There was but little exhibition of excitement, Mellen told these things in a dull, dreary voice that bespoke utter hopelessness. He was so lost in his own misery that the signs of anguish in Tom's face never disturbed his narrative.

When he had done Tom Fuller arose, and stood before him, white as death, but with a noble look in his eyes.

"Mellon, give me your hand, for you and I are just the two most wretched dogs in America at this minute. I loved her, Mellen, O God help me! I love her as you did the other one. Great heavens, what can we do?"

"Nothing," answered Mellen; "I did not think another pang could be added, and my soul recoils from this. Could she prove so base to you also?"

"Base; look here, Mellen, you don't take this in the true light. It was all my fault. I forced myself upon her; I—I—"

The poor fellow broke down, a convulsion of grief swept his face, and he walked away.

Directly he came back, holding out his hand.

"Come, now let us search for Elizabeth," he said.

"It is useless; I have searched."

"But come with me—it was not in town you should have looked; Elizabeth would not go there."

Mellen arose and walked towards the bay. In passing a clump of rosebushes Tom stopped to extricate a fragment of silk from the thorns.

"What dress did she wear that night?" he inquired, examining the shred in his hand.

"I remember well, it was purple," answered Mellen, without lifting his weary eyes from the ground.

"Come this way, for she has been here," said Tom. "This path leads to the fishpond."

They walked on, Tom searching vigilantly all the thickets he passed, and Mellen looking around him in terror lest the dead body of his wife should appear and crush his last hope for ever.

"She has been this way," said Tom, when they reached the pond. "See, that tuft of cat-tails has been broken. No, no, don't be afraid to look; see yonder where the bushes are swept down; she went away towards the shore."

Mellen groaned aloud. This was his most terrible fear. They walked on, taking a path that curved round the bay, and leaving the shore tavern on the right, went down to the beach. It was now sunset, and a golden glow lay upon the waters till they broke along the beach like great waves of pearls and opals drifting over the Sound together, and melting in the sand. Near the two men was a winrow of black seaweed, on which great drops of spray were quivering. Something in the appearance of this dark mass arrested Tom's attention. He went up to the pile of weeds and kicked them apart; a dark sodden substance, compact and heavy, lay underneath. He took it in

his hands, gave the weeds that clung to it a shake, and held it up. Mellen came forward, his white lips parted, his breath rising with pain. He reached forth his hand, but uttered no word.

It was the ample shawl that Elizabeth had worn that night.

CHAPTER LXXVIII.

IN BENSON'S TAVERN.

She was dead! That fiendish man had spoken the truth—Mellen believed it now. Elizabeth was dead, and he had killed her—that noble, grand woman, so resolute in her sacrifice, so determined to save that girl, to preserve him from the hardest shock to his honor and pride, had offered herself up to death, body and soul.

Those few moments of conviction changed him more than many years would have done. The pride and anger which had helped to aid him in his first grief were gone now—he was the wronger—searching for the wife he had driven forth to perish. And she was dead!

No clue—no hope!

He did not touch the shawl, but leaving Tom Fuller, went back and sat down in Elsie's room, with the sick girl's delirious cries smiting his ear, and terrible images rising before his eyes of Elizabeth—dying, dead—drowned and dashed upon some lonely beach, with her cold, open eyes staring blankly in his face.

Tom dropped the shawl in a wet mass at his feet, and walked away without attempting to detain or comfort the stricken husband. He too believed Elizabeth dead, and had no heart to offer consolation. Indeed, the pang of sorrow that this conviction brought took away his own strength.

He walked on, over the wet sands of the beach, ready to cry out with the anguish of this sudden bereavement, when the figure of old Caleb Benson cast its long shadow on the shore.

"Is that you, Mr. Fuller, and alone? I'm mighty pleased to find any one from the Cove—most of all you."

"Do you want me for anything particular?" asked Tom in a husky voice; "if not I—I'm engaged just now."

"Well, yes; I must tell you," said the old man. "I've bin to your house twice—once in the night—I thought mebbly I'd see the young gal."

"What is it?" asked Tom, in the impotence of his grief.

"She made me promise not to tell—but whatever's wrong, you're her cousin, and can't be hard on her—she's dreadful sick."

Tom caught his arm.

"My cousin—are you talking of my cousin, Mrs. Mellen?"

"Why yes, sure enough, though she never will forgive me for telling you."

"But where is she? Where is she?" shouted Tom. "How did you find her? Who got her out of the water? Great heavens, old man, can't you speak?"

"Well, this is the way it was," answered the old man. "T'other night, or morning, for it was nigh on to daylight, I was eating breakfast with the young uns, when one on 'em got scared by a face at the winder looking in on us as we eat. I jist got one sight of the face, and kinder seemed to know it. So up I jumps, and on with my great coat, and out into the fog. Something gray went on afore me, and I follered, for sometimes it looked like a woman, and sometimes not. Down it went, making a bee-line for the beach, and I arter it full split, for it travelled fast, I can tell you. The night had been kinder rough, and the waves dashed up high, considering that the storm wasn't nothing much to speak on. But the woman, for I could see that it was a woman now, went right straight on, as if she'd made up her mind to pitch head forred into the sea and drown herself the first thing.

"This riled me up, and I went on arter her like a tornado, now I tell you. But jist as I was reaching out both hands to drag her back from a wave that came roaring along, it broke, and the undertow sucked her in right afore my face.

"Now some folks might a pitched in arter her, but I knew better'n that. We should both on us have gone to kingdom come and no mistake if I had. Not a bit of it; I planted myself firm and waited. Sure enough the second wave arter that came tearing along, tossing the poor cretur up and down like a wisp of seaweed, and pitched her ashore right in my tracks.

"In course the next wave would have dragged her out to sea agin, but I got hold of her shawl and tried to haul her back, but the tarnal thing gave way, and I had just time to drop it and make a grab at her clothes, when it came crashing over us agin. But I held on, and planted myself firm,

so it only dragged us both a foot or two and went roaring off. Then I got a fair hold of the lady and dragged her up the beach out of harm's way. But I really thought that she was dead; the daylight broke while she lay on the sand, and then I saw who it was, and the sight of her cold face drove me wild. I took her up in my arms and carried her home. There was a good fire burning, and my darter is used to taking care of such cases. So she wrapped her in hot blankets, and worked over her till the life came back."

"And she's alive—doing well," cried Tom, "at your house; old Benson, you're—a—a—trump. If I hadn't given away every gold piece I had in my pocket, you should have a double handful—by Jove, you should! But never mind, just come along, I must have one splendid hug, and then for the Cove. No, no, that won't be fair after all," thought the generous fellow, "Grant must have the first kiss, he must tell her——"

The thought of what must be told her went through the poor fellow's brain like an arrow of fire. But he dashed into the path which led to Piney Cove, calling back to Benson, "Don't tell her anything!" and strode away.

Breathless, eager, forgetful of his own great sorrow, Tom cleared the distance between the shore and Piney Cove with enormous strides. He crossed the lawn almost at a run, leaped up the steps two at a time, and found Mellen lying upon a sofa in the balcony, with his face to the wall.

"Get up, old fellow, get up and shake yourself," he cried, seizing upon Mellen and turning him over as if he had been a Newfoundland dog in the wrong place; "I've found her—by Jove, I have!—she's at old Benson's. Isn't he a brick? She's well—no, she isn't quite that according to the latest accounts, but by all that's sacred, your wife is alive!"

Mellen started to his feet, bewildered, wild.

"Tom Fuller, is this true?"

"Do I look like a man who tells lies for fun?" said Tom, drawing himself up.

"Have you seen her—is my wife truly alive?"

"Yes—no—no—I haven't seen her—was in too great a hurry for that. But she's there at Benson's tavern, just as sure—as sure—as a gun."

Mellen brushed past the kind fellow while he was hesitating for a comparison. His saddle horse stood at the door—for he had been too excited for any orders regarding it. He sprang upon its back and dashed across the lawn, through the grove and out of sight, quickly as a fast horse could clear the ground. He drew up in front of old Benson's house, leaped off and rushed in.

"Where is she?" he cried, to the frightened woman who met him. "My wife—where is she?"

A cry from the upper room answered his words; he dashed into the apartment. There, on the humble bed, lay Elizabeth, pale and changed, but alive!

She was cowering back in deadly terror—putting out her hands in wild appeal.

"I'm going away," she moaned; "don't kill me! I can start now—I'll go—I'll go!"

He fell on his knees by the bed, he was telling the truth in wild, broken words.

"Only forgive me, Elizabeth; only forgive me; my wife, my darling, can you forgive me? You would if my heart lay in your hands. Oh, Elizabeth, speak to me!"

She could not comprehend what he was saying at the moment; when she did understand, her first thought was of the girl—his sister.

"Elsie! Elsie!"

"She is ill—dying perhaps. Oh, my wife! my wife! Try to speak—say that you forgive me."

She was too greatly agitated for words then, but she put out her hands with a gesture he understood. He lifted her in his arms and folded her close to his heart. She lay in their passionate clasp with a long sigh of content.

"God is very good," she whispered; "oh, my beloved, let us thank Him."

There, in that lowly room, Grantley Mellen held his wife to his bosom and the last fire of his old wrong impetuous nature, went out forever in thankfulness and tears.

CHAPTER LXXIX.

RECONCILIATIONS.

Elizabeth Mellen was home again—home under her husband's roof, for ever at home in his heart. She sat in her dressing-room. The autumnal sunshine came through its windows, with a rich, golden warmth. A hickory wood fire filled the room with additional cheerfulness, which was

scarcely needed, for that awful chill had left her heart for ever. A few days of supreme happiness had given back the peach-like bloom to her cheek and the splendor to her eyes. Full of contentment, all the generous impulses of her character rose and swelled in her bosom, till she longed to share her heaven with anything that was cast down or unhappy.

The door between her room and Elsie's boudoir was open, and through it she could hear a soft, pleading voice amid a struggle of sobs and tears. Prompted by tender sympathy, Elizabeth half-rose from her easy-chair, but fell back again, murmuring:

"No, no, she will best find her way to his heart alone. God help her to be frank and truthful."

Still she listened, and her beautiful face grew anxious, for the sternness of her husband's voice, in answer to those feeble complaints, gave little hopes of conciliation. Directly Mellen came through the boudoir and sat down on a couch near his wife, shading his face with one hand, not wishing her to see how much he was disturbed. Elizabeth arose, bent over him, and softly removed the hand from his eyes.

"For my sake, Grantley," she said, "for my sake."

Generous tears filled her eyes, pleading tenderness spoke in her voice. Her lips, tremulous with feeling, touched his forehead.

"For my sake, Grantley."

Mellen lifted his eyes to hers—a mist, such as springs from the unshed tears of a strong man, softened them. She fell upon her knees by his side, laid her head upon his bosom with soft murmurs of entreaty which no living man could have resisted.

Mellen folded her close, and touched his lips to her forehead with tender reverence.

"For your sake, my beloved; what is there that I would not do for your sake?"

"And this forgiveness is perfect," she questioned.

"Her fault from this hour is forgotten, sweet wife."

"It was terrible—more terrible than you dream of. When I tell you that she had engaged herself secretly to Thomas Fuller, even your mercy may be qualified."

Elizabeth withdrew from her husband's arms and bowed her lovely face for a moment in sad thoughtfulness. Then she looked up, smiling faintly.

"Elsie is so thoughtless—she does not mean the wrong she does poor Tom—still we must not be unmerciful, so once more let us forgive her wholly—without reservation."

A knock at the door disturbed them. It was Victoria, who came to announce Mr. Fuller, who was close behind her.

"Elizabeth, I've come back. It was no use trying to stay in that confounded city. To save my life I couldn't do it," he said, pushing by the pretty mulatto and closing the door upon her. "Can I see her now—only for once, you know?"

Elizabeth blushed crimson.

"Oh, Tom, you don't know your—"

"Yes, I do know."

"And still wish to see her?"

"Why not? of course I do; because one—infernal villain—excuse me, I won't talk. Where is she?"

Elizabeth, a little shocked and quite taken by surprise, glanced towards the blue boudoir. In Tom strode and shut the door resolutely after him.

CHAPTER LXXX.

TOM ACCEPTS THE SITUATION.

Lying upon a couch, over which that pale marble statue was bending with its cold lilies in mocking purity, lay a pale little creature, covered with a pink eider-down quilt, which but half concealed a morning dress of faint azure; quantities of delicate Valenciennes lace fluttered, like snowflakes, around her wrists and bosom, and formed the principal material of a dainty little cap, under which her golden tresses were gathered. She looked like a girl of twelve pretending womanhood.

When Tom came in she uttered a sudden cry, flung up her hands and dropped them in a loose clasp over her face, which flushed under them like a rose.

Tom walked straight to the couch, drew one of the fragile gilded chairs close to it, and sat down.

"Don't—don't—go away. It's cruel. I shall faint with shame," she cried, trembling all over.

"Not till you have answered me a few questions," said Tom, firmly. "Questions that I have a right to ask and you must answer."

Elsie drew the little hands slowly from her face and looked at him. The blue eyes—grown larger from illness—opened wide, her lips parted. That was not the lover she had trifled with and domineered over. She was afraid of him and shrunk away close to the wall.

"Elsie, one word," said Tom, pressing a hand firmly on each knee and bending towards her.

Her lips parted wider, and she watched him with the glance of a frightened bird when a cat looks in at the door of its cage.

"You have come to torment me," she faltered.

"Torment you! I! It isn't in me to do that. Torment! I do not know what it is."

"Well, what do you want of me then?"

"What do I want, Elsie, dear? What do I want? Nothing but God's truth, and that I will have!"

Elsie's eyes grew larger, and the flush of shame left her face.

"I can't—I can't tell you the truth, Tom Fuller, now. Elizabeth can say enough to make you ready to kill me, but I would rather die than talk of it."

"I know all that Elizabeth can tell me," said Tom, resolutely.

"What did you come for, then?"

"To ask this one question: Did you love that man?"

A shiver of disgust ran through her and broke out in her voice:

"Love him! No! At first it seemed as if I did; but after I saw what he was and how he lived, it was dreadful, I hated him so."

"But how came you married to him?"

"I don't know; I never could tell. It was when we went on that picnic. He asked me to walk with him. It was good fun to set you all wondering, and I went. He took me down the hill and towards the beach, close by the tavern. We had been flirting for weeks then in New York and here, for he always met me when I went out to walk or ride, or anything; but I never thought of marrying him in earnest, upon my sacred word. Well, that day, just as we came to the tavern, he said, 'Let us stop a moment and get married; there is a clergyman in here.'

"I didn't believe him, and said so. 'Come in and see for yourself,' was his answer. I went in laughing. A gentleman sat in one of the rooms, and Mr. North's mulatto servant, who was sauntering about the door when we came up, followed us in. I don't know what possessed me. Perhaps for the minute I loved him; it seemed to me that I must stand up when the strange man rose. He only said a few words, and before I really believed it was a true ceremony the man said I was Mr. North's wife, and wrote out a paper, which I dropped, thinking that I should be really married if I took it, but which Mr. North picked up, saying I did not know its value."

"The scoundrel! The infamous, double-dyed scoundrel!" cried Tom. "But you didn't love him—you didn't love him?"

"No," said Elsie, shaking her head. "I tried my best to get away from it all, but it was of no use. Then he petted me so, and told me how beautifully we would live somewhere in Europe, and I thought him so rich. But it was my money he meant to use. He thought that half of uncle's property was mine, and when I told him how it was, oh, I won't tell you how rude he became. Just after he told me about that other person."

Elsie broke off here, and covered her face with both hands again. Tom saw the scarlet glow where it shot up to her temples and bathed her white throat, and gave his hands one hard grip in a wild desire to strike something.

"There comes a question," he said, hoarsely; "did you leave him?"

"Yes, yes; that very hour."

"And never saw him again?"

"Never but once; and then I ordered him out of the house."

"Because you hated him so?"

Tom seized both her hands as he asked this question, and wrung them till she could scarcely keep from crying out with pain.

"Oh, how I did hate him!" she exclaimed, shuddering.

"Elsie," said Tom, "look into my face, straight into my eyes."

She obeyed him, with a look of piteous appeal.

"Did you ever love me?"

Her hands were locked together, she lifted them up with more of energy than he had ever witnessed in her before.

"Did you?" repeated Tom, and a glow came into his face.

"Yes."

The word had scarcely left her lips when Tom flung the gilded chair back and fell on his knees, gathering her up in his arms with a wild outburst of feeling.

"Then I'll be d— hung and choked to death if anything on God's beautiful earth keeps me from marrying you!"

She clung to him, she lifted her quivering lips to his.

"Say it again, just once, darling?" cried Tom, shaking back his tawny locks with energy. "Is this love downright, honest, whole-hearted love?"

"Yes, yes!"

"God bless you, darling! And when was it? about what time did it begin?"

She answered him honestly, but with a faltering voice:

"Oh, Tom, I'm afraid it wasn't till after you got so rich. Don't think hard of it; I do love beautiful things so much—but indeed, indeed I love you more."

"Then I'm glad the old covey left me all his money. I don't care a d— red cent why you love me, only I must be sure that it's a fixed fact. Now I'll go straight out and tell Bessie."

Elsie turned cold.

"Oh, Tom, she'll never consent to it."

"Won't she! I'd just like to know why?"

"And my brother, he is so cold, so unforgiving."

"Is he? then I'll take you away to a warmer climate. But don't believe it; he's proud as a race-horse, but you'll find him a trump in the end."

"Don't go yet, Tom, I am afraid they will—"

"No, they wont," cried Tom, and away he went into Elizabeth's sitting-room, with tears sparkling in his eyes and a generous flush on his face.

"Mellen," he said, wringing Grantley's hand, "I want to be married to-morrow, and carry her away."

"Fuller, what is the meaning of this?" demanded Mellen, pained and surprised, while Elizabeth stood up aghast at this sudden outburst.

"It means just this, Mellen, I don't care a tin whistle for what has gone before, and I feel strong enough to take care of anything that may come after. Your sister loves me, and I love her, that's enough. I am satisfied, and—there—that's enough. The whole thing is a family secret, and who is going to be the wiser. I only hope they have dug the fellow's grave deep enough, that's all."

"But, Fuller, have you reflected?"

"Reflected! I've done nothing else for a week, and this is just what it has brought me to. So give us your hand."

Elizabeth came up to Tom, put her arms around his neck, and burst into tears.

"That's the time o' day," shouted Tom. "Silence gives consent; now just give us a good brotherly grip of the hand, Mellen, and it's all right."

Tom folded one arm around his cousin, and held out the other a second time. Mellen took it in his, wrung it warmly, and left the room.

"Just go in and comfort her a little, Bessie, poor darling, she's afraid you won't consent."

"Generous, noble fellow," said Elizabeth, kissing him with warmth; "but where will you go? what will you do? It is all so very sudden."

"Do! what on earth can I do but love her like distraction? Go! any place where she can find life and fun, plenty of shopping. Paris, isn't that a nice sort of place for pretty things? I think we'll go to Paris first. But, I forgot, Rhodes's daughter, the old maid, is waiting for you downstairs. Victoria would have told you if I hadn't shut her out."

Elizabeth went down, leaving Tom in the only spot he cared to occupy on earth. She found Miss Jemima in a state of wild commotion, with her riding-dress buttoned awry, and one of her gauntlets torn half off with hard pulling.

"Did you know it? had you any suspicion?" she demanded, confronting Elizabeth like a grenadier; "I could think it of your sister, but you—you—"

"What is it? I know nothing," answered Elizabeth.

"They are married, absolutely married; my par and that painted lay figure you introduced to him, that Mrs. Harrington."

"What, your father married to her!" cried Elizabeth; "you surprise me."

"It's a solemn truth, though a disgraceful truth, but she shall never come into the house that shelters me. I'll burn it down first. Where's your sister?"

"She is ill in her room."

"Yes, I dare say. But she's had a hand in this, and I'll pay her for it, or my name isn't Jemima Rhodes. Tell her so, with my compliments. Good morning!"

With this abrupt adieu the spinster took herself off, tugging away at her gauntlet, or what was left of it, and diversifying the movement with a vicious crack of her whip now and then.

Elizabeth smiled and went upstairs again. Thus the great events of the day ended.

In less than a week Tom Fuller was quietly married, and took his wife at once on board a steamer bound for Europe. She had come forth from her sick room greatly subdued and changed in many respects, but able, from her peculiar character, to put a veil between her and the past, which would have been impossible to a woman like Elizabeth.

I am happy to state that Dolf's treachery met with its proper reward. Clorinda succeeded in saving her money, and she married the parson, leaving Dolf to his shame and remorse. Victoria gave him the cold shoulder, and made herself so intimate with a new male Adonis, who came to the house as domestic, that Dolf's days were full of misery and his nights made restless with legions of nightmares.

The house by the sea shore stands up in its old picturesque stateliness, and within the sunshine never fails, and the summer of content is never disturbed.

Old Benson, a very short time after these events, became possessed of a fine tract of land running back from the point where his house stood; how he paid for it, and got a clear deed, no one could tell except himself and Mr. Mellen. It is certain that both of these men knew how to keep a secret, for to this day it is utterly unknown in the neighborhood, that Elizabeth ever lay ill and suffering in that good man's house. The servants speak of her visit to New York about that time, and so this great family mystery ended.

THE END.

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PALACES AND PRISONS.

MARRIED IN HASTE.

RUBY GRAY'S STRATEGY.

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WIVES AND WIDOWS; OR, THE BROKEN LIFE.

THE REJECTED WIFE.

THE GOLD BRICK.

THE HEIRESS.

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