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Title: It May Be True, Vol. 2 (of 3)

Author: Mrs. Henry Wood

Release date: March 18, 2012 [EBook #39192]

Language: English

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A NOVEL.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

MRS. WOOD.

VOL. II

London:

T. CAUTLEY NEWBY, PUBLISHER,
30, WELBECK STREET, CAVENDISH SQUARE,

1865.

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IT MAY BE TRUE.

CHAPTER I.

NEWS FROM HOME

"The smith, a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands;
And the muscles of his brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands.
His hair is crisp, and black, and long;
His face is like the tan;
His brow is wet with honest sweat;
He earns whate'er he can;
And looks the whole world in the face,
For he owes not any man."

LONGFELLOW.

It was just sunset as Matthew the pikeman went out to receive toll from some one passing, or rather coming quickly up to the gate.

It was market day at Brampton, so Matthew had to keep his ears open, and his wits about him, for generally he had a lazy post, with scarcely half a dozen calls during the day.

A spare thin man was the occupier of the light cart now coming fast along the road; who as he drew near the gate threw the pence—without slackening his horse's pace—at least a foot from where the other was standing. [1]

"There's manners for you!" said Matthew, stooping to look for the money, "chucks the ha'pence to me as though I was a thief. Hates parting with 'em, I 'spose."

"Or hates touching you with the ends of his fingers," said a voice at his side.

"Good evening to yer, Mrs. Grey," said he, civilly rising and looking up, "Well, I'm blessed if I can find that last penny," and he counted over again those he held in his hand, "I'll make him give me another, next time I sets eyes on him, I know."

"What's this?" said Goody Grey, turning something over with her stick.

"That's it, and no mistake. Why I'd back yer to see through a brick wall, Ma'am."

"There!" said she, not heeding his last remark, and pointing out the cart going slowly up a neighbouring hill, "he's too proud to shake hands with his betters, now. Pride, all pride, upstart pride, like the rest of the fools in this world. And he used to go gleaning in the very fields he now rides over so pompously." [2]

"Can yer call that to mind, Mrs. Grey?" asked Matthew, eyeing her keenly and searchingly.

"Call it to mind! What's that to you? I never said I could, but I know it for a truth."

"Folks say there's few things yer don't know," replied Matthew, somewhat scared at her fierce tone.

"Folks are fools!"

"Some of 'em; not all. Most say yer knows everything, and can give philters and charms for sickness and heart-ache and the like."

"Folks are fools!" repeated she again.

"Well I know nothing, nor don't want to; but," said he, dropping his voice to a whisper, "if yer could only give me a charm to keep *her* tongue quiet," and he pointed with his thumb meaningly over his shoulder in the direction of the cottage, "I'd bless yer from the bottom of my heart as long as I live." [3]

"What blessing will you give me?"

Matthew considered a moment, as the question somewhat puzzled him. Here was a woman who had apparently neither kith nor kin belonging to her, one who stood, as far as he could see, alone in the world. How was he to give her a blessing? She had neither children, nor husband to be kind or unkind to her; she might be a prosperous woman for aught he or the neighbours knew, or she might be the very reverse. She never seemed to crave for sympathy from anyone, but rather to shun it, and never allowed a question of herself on former days to be asked, without growing angry, and if it was repeated, or persisted in, violent.

Presently Matthew hit upon what he thought a safe expedient. "What blessing do yer most want?" he asked cunningly.

"None! I want none."

"I'll give yer one Ma'am all the same. Most of us wish for something, and I'll pray that the one wish of yer heart, whatever it is, yer may get." [4]

"How dare you wish me that?" she said in a fierce tone, "how dare you know I've any wish at all?"

"'Cos I do. That's all," replied Matthew sullenly.

"Who told you? Speak! Answer!"

"Good Lord! Mrs. Grey, ma'am; how you scare a man. Who should tell me? I don't know nothing at all about yer; how should I? All I know is that most folks has wishes of some kind or another; nobody's satisfied in this world, and in course you ain't, and so I just wished yer might be, that's all; there's no great harm in that, is there?"

"I told you folks were fools; but I think you are the biggest fool of the lot."

"Come, come, don't let's have words. I didn't mean to vex yer, you're a lone woman with not a soul to stand by yer, and the Lord knows what you've got on yer mind."

Then seeing her eyes flashed again he hastened to change the subject. [5]

"It's a fine evening, anyhow," said he.

"We shall have rain."

"Rain!" and Matthew looked up overhead, but not a vestige of a cloud or sign of a storm could he see.

"Yes, rain, heavy rain, like the weeping of a stricken, woeful heart."

And she was passing on; but Matthew could not let her go so; he must have the charm, even at the risk of offending her again. He had thought of it for days past, it was the one wish of his heart; he had longed and sought for this opportunity and it must not slip through his fingers thus, so he said meekly, but still rather doubtfully,

"Well it may be going to rain; yer know a deal better than I do, and I won't gainsay yer? we shall know fast enough afore night closes in. And now Mrs. Grey will yer give me the charm?"

"You don't need any charm."

"Can't be done without," said he decidedly. "I've tried everything else I know of, and it ain't no use," said he despairingly. [6]

"Well," said Goody Grey, after a moment's consideration, "do you see this box?" and she took a small box out of her pocket and filled it with some of the fine gravel from his garden, whilst Matthew looked eagerly on as if his life depended on it. "When next you are on your road to the Brampton Arms, and are close to the yew tree which grows within a stone's throw of the door, *turn back*, and when you reach home again take the box out of your pocket and throw away one of the stones, and don't stir forth again, save to answer the 'pike, for the rest of the evening."

"And then?" questioned Matthew.

"Then there's nothing more to be done, except to sit quiet and silent and watch your wife's face."

"Where I shall see ten thousand furies, if I don't answer her."

"You are a man, what need you care? Do as I bid you every time you are tempted to go to the Public-house; never miss once until the box is empty. Then bring it back to me." [7]

"And suppose I miss. What then?"

"How do you mean?"

"Why; what if when I finds myself so near the door of the Public—you see, ma'am, it's a great temptation—I turns in and gets a drop afore I comes home?"

"Then you must add another stone instead of taking one away, and don't attempt to deceive me, or the charm will work harm instead of good."

Deceive her; no. Matthew had far too much faith in the charm to do that; there was no occasion for her fears.

"And is this the only charm you know of?" he asked.

"The only one. When the box is empty the cure is certain; but remember the conditions, a silent tongue and not a drop of drink; the breaking of either one of these at the time when the charm is working, and a stone must be added."

"The box'll never be empty in this world," said he, with a deep sigh; "but I'll try. My thanks to yer all the same, ma'am." [8]

"You can thank me when you bring back the box. How is Mrs. Marks?"

"Pretty tidy, thank yer," but he looked crestfallen, notwithstanding his assertion. "I never know'd

her ill; she's like a horse, always ready for any amount of work, nothing knocks her up."

"Sometimes the trees we think the strongest, wither the soonest," said Goody Grey passing on, while Matthew leant against the gate and counted the stones in the box.

"There's eight of them," said he. "I wish it had been an uneven number, it's more lucky. Eight times! More than a week. It'll never be empty—never!" then he looked up and watched Goody Grey almost out of sight, and as he did so her last words came across him again.

What did she mean by them? Did she mean that his old woman was going to die? Then he considered if he should tell her, and whether if he did she would believe it, and take to her bed at once, and leave him in quiet possession of the cottage and his own will; somehow his heart leaped at the thought of the latter, although he shook his head sadly while the former flashed through him. [9]

"There's mischief abroad somewhere, Mrs. Marks," said he, entering the cottage.

"Was when you was out," retorted she; "but it's at home now, and likely to remain so for to-night."

"Who was talking of going out? I'm sure I wasn't. I never thought onc't of it, even."

"Best not, for you won't as long as I know it. You were drunk enough when the young master passed through the 'pike to last for a precious sight to come; you're not going to make a beast of yourself to-night if I can help it."

Mrs. Marks was scrubbing the table down. She was one of those women who, if they have no work to do, make it. She was never idle. Her house, or rather cottage—there were only four rooms in it—was as clean as a new pin; not a speck of dirt to be seen, and as to dust, that was a thing unknown; but then she was always dusting, scrubbing, or sweeping. Matthew hated the very sight of a brush or pail, and would have grumbled if he dared; but he dared not; he was thoroughly henpecked. Had he been a sober man this would not have been the case; but he was not, and he knew it, and she knew it too; and knowing his weak points she had him at her mercy, and little enough she showed him. He answered her fast enough sometimes, but he dared not go in opposition to her will, even when he came reeling home from the Public-house. Appearances were too against him: he being small and thin, she a tall, stout, strong-looking woman. Certainly the scrubbing agreed wonderfully with her, and there seemed little prospect of Goody Grey's prophecy being verified. [10]

"Who was it passed through the 'pike, just now?" asked she.

"White; as owns the Easdale Farm down yonder, with no more manners than old Jenny out there—the donkey,—she lets her heels fly, but I'm blessed if this chap don't let fly heels and hands both." [11]

"Chap!" reiterated Mrs. Marks, "where's your manners? He's a deal above you in the world."

"May be. But Goody Grey don't say so. She says he was no better nor a gleaner time gone by."

"She!" replied Mrs. Marks, contemptuously. "What does she know about it? She's crazed!"

"Crazed! no more nor you and I. She's a wise woman, and knows a deal more than you think."

"I am glad of it," said Mrs. Marks sneeringly, "for it's a precious little I think of either her or her sayings."

"She went through the 'pike same time as 'other did, and told me all about him."

"Why don't you be minding your own business, instead of talking and gossiping with every tom-fool you meet."

"She's no woman to gossip with, or fool either; she made me tremble and shake again, even the fire don't warm me," said he, lighting his pipe and settling himself in the chimney corner. [12]

"I'll take your word for her having scared you. There's few as couldn't do that easy enough."

Matthew's hand went instinctively into his pocket; he could scarcely refrain from trying the effect of the charm, but it was growing dusk, and he was afraid that for that night at least it was too late.

"Wait a bit," said he in a low voice, "Wait a bit;" but his wife heard him.

"Was that what she said?" asked she.

"No, she said—" and Matthew took the pipe out of his mouth so that he might be heard the plainer, "she said; 'all trees wither the first as looks fat and strong.' That's what she said."

"Trees fat and strong! Are you muddled again?"

"No, I'm not," replied he doggedly, "that's what she said, and no mistake; the very words, I'll take my oath of it; and if you don't see the drift of 'em I do." [13]

"Let's hear it."

"Well," said Matthew solemnly, "she meant one or t'other of us was going to die," and he looked

her full in the face to see how she would take it, expecting it would alarm her as it had done him.

Mrs. Marks put down the scrubbing brush, and resting her arms on the table returned his gaze.

"Oh! you poor frightened hare," she said, "So you think you are going to die, do you? Well I'd have more spirit in me than to list to the words of a mad woman."

His astonishment may be better guessed at than described. He had so entirely made up his mind that his wife was the one Goody Grey had so vaguely hinted at, that he never deemed it possible any one could think otherwise; least of all Mrs. Marks herself: he glanced downwards at his thin legs, then stretched out his arms one after the other and felt them, as if to satisfy himself that he had made no mistake, and that he really was the spare man he imagined. [14]

"No, you're deceiving yourself," said he, "I'll declare it wasn't me she meant. She said fat, I call it to mind well; and I'm as thin as the sign post out yonder and no mistake."

Then he glanced at the stout, strong arms of his wife, now fully developed with her determined scrubbing. "If she meant anyone," said he decidedly, "she just meant you!"

"Me!" screamed Mrs. Marks, "Is it me you are worriting yourself about, you simpleton? There, rest easy; I'm not afraid of her evil tongue; not that I suppose I've longer to live than other folks: I'm ready to go when my time comes and the Lord pleases; but I'm not to be frightened into my bed by Mrs. Grey or any woman in the parish. No, she's come to the wrong box for that. I'll hold my own as long as I have the strength for it, and am not to be ousted by any one; not I!" and Mrs. Marks nearly upset the pail in her violence, as she swept the scrubbing brush off the table into it. [15]

"Hulloa!" cried a voice, as the latch of the door was lifted, and a stout strong-looking man entered with a good-humoured, cheerful face. "Anybody at home? How are you Mrs. Marks? I'm glad to see you again, and you too," he said, grasping and shaking Matthew's hand heartily.

"It's William Hodge of Deane!" said she in surprise, "Who'd have thought of seeing you down here, and what brings you to these parts?"

"Business," replied the other laconically.

"Something to do with the Smithy, eh?" questioned Matthew.

"Just so."

"You still keep it on, of course."

"Of course."

"There don't stand there cross-examining in that way," called Mrs. Marks, as she opened a cupboard at the further end of the room, "but attend to your own business, and just go and draw some ale, while I get a bit of bread and cheese ready. Supper won't be served up yet," said she apologetically, returning and spreading a clean snow white cloth on the table; "but you must want a mouthful of something after your long journey." [16]

"I can't wait supper, I'm in too great a hurry; thank yer all the same."

"Are you going further on?" asked Matthew, coming in with the ale.

"No. I'm to put up at the Brampton Arms for the night, or may be two—or perhaps three," he replied.

"I'm sorry for that," said Mrs. Marks. "I hate the very name of the place. They're a bad set, the whole lot of 'em."

"That don't signify a rap to me. I shan't have nothing to do with any of 'em so long as they let's me alone, that's all I care about. I shan't trouble 'em much 'cept for my bed."

"And now for a bit of news about home," said Mrs. Marks, as her visitor began his supper, or rather the bread and cheese she had set before him. "How are they all down at Deane? And how's mother?" [17]

"I'm sorry to say I've no good news of her; she've been ailing some time, and the doctor's stuff don't do her no good; he says she'll go off like the snuff of a candle. But there, she's precious old now, and well nigh worn out. I've a letter from your sister Martha—Mrs. Brooks—telling yer all about it;" and he searched and dived into his deep pockets for it, and then handed it to her.

"Is Jane as queer as ever?" asked Matthew, in a low voice, as his wife was perusing the letter.

"Yes, worse nor ever, I think; scarce ever opens her lips, and stares at yer awful, as though she had the evil eye."

"I always thought she had; she wor as strange a woman as ever I set eyes on."

"Well!" said Mrs. Marks, looking up from her letter, "I suppose I must say yes. Perhaps you'll just look in, Mr. Hodge, when the time comes for you to go back to Deane, and I'll give you the answer." [18]

"I won't fail," replied he.

"What are yer going to say yes to?" asked Matthew.

"Martha says mother's dying, and she wants to know what's to become of Jane, and if she can't come here."

"Here!" exclaimed Matthew. "The Lord save us."

"Save you from what?" asked Mrs. Marks angrily.

"From having a crazed creature in the house. Who knows but what she might burn the house down about us; Mr. Hodge says she ain't no better in the head than she used to be."

"If she was ten times as bad as she is, she should come. It's a sin and a shame to hear you talk so of your own wife's sister and she nowhere to go to, and the cottage big enough to hold her."

"Why can't your sister Martha take her?"

"Just hear him talk," said she, derisively, "and Martha with more children than she knows what to do with; and a husband as is always ailing. Why you've no more charity in you than a miser; there, go and draw some more ale, and have done with your folly. Least said is soonest mended." [19]

Mrs. Marks had two sisters and a mother living at Deane, some forty, or it might be more miles, from Brampton. Martha, the youngest, was married, and blessed—as is too often the case with the poor, or those least able to afford it—with nine children, and a sick husband; the latter worked hard enough when his health permitted, but then there was no certainty about his being able to earn wages. A cold caught and neglected had given him a fever and ague, and the least chill brought on a return of it. His wife, almost as energetic a woman as her sister, Mrs. Marks, but with a more mild and even temper, earned a living by washing, and did the best she could to keep them all; and her management certainly did her credit, her house being as clean as Mrs. Marks', although not so constantly scrubbed or washed. [20]

The other sister, Jane, lived with her mother, an old woman of seventy-five, who, until now, had borne her age well, and looked certainly some ten years younger, but then she had always enjoyed the best of health; was up betimes in the morning, summer and winter, and about her small farm and dairy, which she managed better than most did with half-a-dozen hands to help them.

Ever busy, and uncommonly active, her illness was totally unlooked for, and least expected by Mrs. Marks, who read and re-read her sister's letter several times, to assure herself there was no mistake; that she really was struck with paralysis and not expected to survive many days, and then what was to become of Jane? Jane, who was so totally dependent on others, who lived as it were on sufferance, rarely doing work, or helping her mother in any way, or interesting herself in any one single thing. If she willed it she worked, if not, she remained idle; her mother never grumbling or finding fault, while the girl who helped her was severely rated as an idle good-for-nothing if any one portion of her daily work was neglected. [21]

There were days when Jane would milk the cows, churn the butter, even scour out the dairy itself, and work willingly and well—she had been out to service in her youth—but these days were few and far between; she usually roamed about at her will, sometimes half over the parish, or else sat at home perfectly quiet and silent knitting, she never did any other kind of needlework; or if unemployed she would clasp her hands together over her knees, her eyes either fixed on vacancy, or restlessly wandering to and fro, to all appearance, as the neighbours said, not exactly a daft woman, but one whose mind was afflicted, or had been visited with some heavy calamity, the weight of which bore her to the ground, and was at times more than she had strength to bear or battle against.

Such was the sister Mrs. Marks had determined on befriending, there being little doubt she would carry out her intention, notwithstanding Matthew's decided aversion to it; and that Jane would ere long be in quiet possession of the one spare room in the cottage. [22]

William Hodge, her present visitor, also came from Deane, and kept the small blacksmith's shop, or parish smithy. He had two sons, one a good-for-nothing, ne'er-do-weel. Also, well probably a sorrow and constant anxiety to his parents, who had been absent from home now for several months, and at his wife's earnest solicitations Hodge had come down to Brampton to seek him, they having heard accidentally of his being there or somewhere in the neighbourhood.

"How's Mrs. Hodge, and your sons?" asked Mrs. Marks, as Matthew went off once more for the ale.

"Sons!" he repeated. "Ah! there's the rub, you've hit the right nail on the head now. Richard, as works the smithy is as good a lad as ever breathed; but Tom's turned out bad, and between you and I, 'tis he I've come all this way to look after. I'd turn my back upon him and have nothing more to do with him; but there, one can't always do as one wishes." [23]

"Is Tom down here?"

"I've heerd so."

"What's he doing?"

"No good, that you may be sure," replied he, "since he's here on the sly. I'm afeard he's got into bad company, and gone along with a terrible bad lot. The old woman thinks he's turned poacher, and most worrits and frets herself to death about it; so I've come to try and find him, and get him

back home again, that is if I can. It'll most break his mother's heart if I don't."

"God grant he isn't with them as murdered poor Susan's husband?"

"Amen," replied he solemnly.

"One of 'em got hanged for that, God rest his soul, though he deserved it; but there's lots of 'em about; they say the gang is more desperate like since then, and have vowed to have their vengeance on Mr. Grant, the Squire's head keeper, but there, it don't do to tell yer all this; bad news comes fast enough of itself; we'll trust and hope Tom isn't with none of these." [24]

"Well, we've all got our troubles," said Mrs. Marks again, seeing he made no reply. "I begin to think those as has no children is better off than those as has 'em."

"Ye've less trouble, no doubt of it."

"Less trouble! oh, I've mine to bear as well as the rest of yer; why there's Matthew, with no more spirit in him than a flea, and all through drink. He'll go off to the public, though 'tis half a mile and more away, whenever my eyes isn't on him."

"That's bad."

"Bad! It's worse than bad. Here's mother dying, Jane not to be trusted to come here alone, and Matthew not able to take care of himself no more than a baby! How I'm to manage to get to Deane I don't know, nor can't see neither how it's to be done." [25]

"If I was you, I'd go somehow. They'll think badly of you if you don't, and as for Marks, leave him to get drunk as oft as he likes, for a treat; I'll wager my life on it, he'll be sober when he sees your face again, my word on it."

This, to Hodge's mind, was satisfactory reasoning enough; but not so to Mrs. Marks. She would like to know who was to take care of the 'pike, during her absence, if Matthew was unable to do so? This was a question Hodge had not foreseen, and when asked, could not reply to. However, after a little more talking, they came to the friendly arrangement that Mrs. Marks should start on the morrow for Deane; Hodge, in the meanwhile, keeping house with Marks, while she was absent; her stay, not under any circumstances whatever, to extend beyond a week.

It was an arrangement that satisfied both parties, as on considering the matter over, Hodge thought it was just as well he did not put up at the inn for any length of time, his being there might be noised abroad, and, although he intended passing under a feigned name, still Tom might easily recognise a description of him, be on the alert, and keep aloof until all was quiet again. [26]

Mrs. Marks gave him sundry pieces of advice as to how he was to manage while she was at Deane, and among other things, cautioned him to beware of trusting Marks too much about Tom.

"If you take my advice," said she, "you won't tell him a word about him, that's if you want it kept quiet, I never trust him with a secret. He's the man for you if you want a bit of news spread, why it would be all over the parish in—well, I'd give him an hour's start, then I'd walk after him, and hear it all over again from everybody's mouth I met. It's ten times worse when he's got a drop of drink in him, then he'll talk for ever, and you'll may-be hear more than you care to, so mind, I caution you to be wary."

"I shan't wag my tongue, if you don't," replied Hodge. [27]

"I!" exclaimed Mrs. Marks, indignantly. "I mind my own business, which I've plenty of, I can tell you, and don't trouble my head about other people's; let everybody take care of their own, which it's my belief they don't, or there wouldn't be so many squabbles going on in the village at times."

"You're a wise woman, Mrs. Marks."

"True for you," said Matthew, returning, "I'll back her agin a dozen women, twice her size."

"Hold your tongue, you simpleton," said his wife, "and give me the ale here; you've been a precious time drawing it. What have you been about?" added she, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Been about? Why just tilting the barrel, there ain't enough left to drown a rat in."

"Why don't you say a mouse, or som'ut smaller still. If I'd had my senses about me, I'd never have trusted you within a mile of it," said she, handing the mug to Hodge.

"I'll swear I arn't tasted a drop. I'd scorn to drink on the sly," replied Marks, attempting to look indignant, and glancing at his visitor. [28]

"There, don't straiten your body that way, and try to look big, you meek saint, you! as scorns to drink on the sly, but don't mind telling a lie straight out; there ain't anybody here as believes you, leastways I don't. Why Mr. Hodge," said she, taking the empty mug from his hand, "you'd think I was blessed with the best husband as ever breathed, instead of the greatest rogue. Why you'd be a villain, Marks, if it warn't for knowing your wife's eye's always on you. You're afeard of it, you know you are."

"I'm a devilish deal more afeard of som'ut else; a 'ooman's eye only strikes skin deep, but her tongue do rattle a man's bones and make his flesh creep," muttered Matthew, turning away.

"There don't settle yourself in the chimney corner again, but come and help Mr. Hodge on with his great-coat. Hear to the wind how it's rising; 'tis a raw cold night outside, I take it."

"It's drenching with rain," said Hodge, as he stepped over the threshold and pulled up the collar of his coat preparatory to facing the rain, which was coming down in torrents. [29]

"Rain!" exclaimed Matthew, as his wife closed the door on her visitor. "Who'd have thought it? But there, *she* said it would rain. Oh! she's a true prophet, is Goody Grey, and no mistake. I said she was a fearful 'ooman, and know'd most everything. The Lord save and deliver us, and have mercy upon us! for we none of us know," and he glanced at Mrs. Marks, "what's going to happen. Good Lord deliver us from harm."

"There go and put the pot on to boil for supper," said Mrs. Marks, turning on him sharply, "and don't stand there a chaunting of the psalms'es."

And with deep sighs and many inward groans, Matthew went and did his wife's bidding, but the psalms seemed uppermost in his mind that night; he seemed to have them at his fingers' ends.

CHAPTER II. [30]

A FRIENDLY INTERFERENCE.

"No tears, Celia, now shall win
My resolv'd heart to return;
I have searched thy soul within,
And find nought but pride and scorn;
I have learn'd thy arts, and now
Can disdain as much as thou."

CAREW.

Men fall in love every day, yet few of them like to be caught talking or acting sentimentally towards the object of their affections.

Charles was inwardly vexed at Frances' sudden appearance, and still more so at the sarcastic way in which she had spoken and acted. What business was it of hers to take either himself or Miss Neville to task? Was it not partly his fault the wrist was sprained, and would he not have been wanting in common politeness had he, when he accidentally discovered it, not tried in some measure to remedy it? [31]

It was a bad sprain, there was no doubt about that, although she made light of it.

It ought to be looked to; but how to procure proper surgical attention puzzled him. Somehow he did not quite like being the bearer of the tidings to his brother's wife; he could fancy how proudly and contemptuously she would raise her head, and look him through with her dark flashing eyes; and how quietly—very differently from Frances—hint her displeasure at his interference, and turn his fears and sympathy into ridicule. He could not stand that; no, he was ready to face any open danger, but the covert, sarcastic glance and mocking smile of his sister-in-law was a little beyond even his courage. Yet it was necessary she should be informed of it if Amy was to be helped, which he had made up his mind she must be. How then was it to be managed?

Ideas and plans crowded into his brain one after another, but all more or less impracticable; as he stood at the window, where Amy had left him, hopelessly entangled in a web of perplexing thoughts. [32]

There was, as I said, no restraining Anne's curiosity, she always gratified it, or tried to do so, whatever the risk. Certainly, if curiosity is, as we are told, a woman's failing, and men take every opportunity of reminding them of the fact, or rather laying it at their door, whether they will or not, Anne claimed a large portion of it. Why women should be thought to have a larger share of curiosity than men remains to be proved; surely if it be a sin, it is a very small one in comparison to the long list of sins of greater magnitude not laid to their charge, and if not to woman; then to whom do they belong?

Anne had heard voices in the gallery, and had opened her door just sufficiently wide to allow of her obtaining a sight of those who were talking, and notwithstanding sundry hints from Julia as to the disgraceful way in which she was acting, she determined to see the end, let the cost be what it might. She could not hear what was said, but there could be no harm in just peeping and seeing what was going on. [33]

It was with no little astonishment that she watched Charles and Amy apparently on such intimate terms of acquaintance, when the latter had only assured her the night before that she scarcely knew her cousin to speak to. Subsequently, Frances' arrival on the scene, and evident anger and scorn, astonished her still more.

That Miss Neville was a flirt had crossed her mind ever since the day she had caught her coming home with Mr. Vavasour; but here she was apparently hand and glove with Charles. She did not see cause for any such display of temper as Frances had made; still, she thought it a shame Miss Neville should take all the men to herself, when there were lots of other girls in the house ready to be made love to, now, of necessity, left to their own devices, and dull enough in consequence. [34]

Anne began to think Miss Neville was not acting fairly, and certainly not openly. Why should she have two strings to her bow, while Anne could not conjure up one, for she counted Mr. Hall as nobody, and disdainfully thrust the thought of him aside, as his image presented itself in full force; even as she had gazed at him but last night, over the balusters drenched to the skin, looking the true personification of a country parson, but totally dissimilar to the beau ideal of Anne's imagination, which she had snugly enshrined somewhere in a small corner of her heart. It seemed ridiculous to imagine him falling in love, and least of all with her, who had determined on marrying a man with fierce moustaches and whiskers, and these Mr. Hall could never have. No, he should not fall in love with her; she would not have it.

Why should such an uncouth being be always dangling after her, while Miss Neville, with no trouble at all, came in for all the loaves and fishes, and she obliged to content herself with the fragments? If all the beaux in the house were to be monopolised in this style, it was time Mrs. Linchmore invited others who would be able to look at Miss Neville without immediately falling down and worshipping her, as though she were an angel. She had no intention of losing her temper, as Frances had done, but she did not see why she should not let Charles know she had seen him, so out of her room she marched at once, and went up straight to where he still stood by the window. [35]

"What on earth have you done to offend Frances?" asked she, beating about the bush, "she looks as surly as a bear."

"I might ask *you* that question, seeing she had evidently been put out before I saw her."

"I was peeping through a crack in the door, and could not help laughing to see the rage she was in."

"She may remain in it, and welcome, for aught I care," replied Charles, trying to appear [36] indifferent, but at the same time showing some slight symptom of temper.

"So may somebody else," said Anne; "but you know very well she was mortified at seeing you hold Miss Neville's hand, and—and—I don't think it was right of you, Charles."

He looked up as if he could have annihilated her. "I am the best judge of my own affairs," said he, slowly, "and as for Miss Neville, it is impossible she could do wrong."

"I do not accuse Miss Neville of doing wrong; but I think my cousin, Mr. Charles Linchmore, is playing a double game."

Charles bit his lip, but made no reply.

"You may take refuge in a sneer," continued Anne, somewhat hotly, "and play with Frances' feelings as much as you like, and as much as you have done, and few will trouble their heads about it; but it's a shame to carry on the same game with a governess, who cannot help herself, and is obliged, nay expected, to put up with slights from everybody." [37]

"Not from me, Anne."

"Yes, from you, who are making love to two girls at the same time."

"How dare you accuse me of so dishonourable an action?" exclaimed Charles.

"Dare? Oh, I dare a great deal more than that," replied Anne, tossing her head.

"Any way, you could not accuse one of much worse."

"It is the truth, nevertheless, and I cannot see that there is anything daring about it. The daring is not in my speaking, but in your own act."

"I never made love to Frances, or if I did, her own cold pride annihilated any partiality I might have had for her."

"Partiality!" uttered Anne, sarcastically, "Defend me from such partiality from any man. I wonder you did not say flirtation; but even your assurance could not summon courage to tell such a fib as that."

"A truce to this folly, Anne, or I shall get angry, and you can't convince me I ever—" he hesitated a moment—"loved Frances. Allowing that I did show her a little attention, I don't see she is any the worse for it." [38]

"You have succeeded in making her miserable, although you have not broken her heart, and now want to play Miss Neville the same trick; but I won't stand by and see it, I declare I won't; my woman's heart won't let me; so, if you begin that game, we wage war to the knife. I cannot help pitying Frances, whom I dislike, and will not, if I can help it, have to pity Miss Neville also."

"There is no reason why you should. Miss Neville is superior to a dozen like Frances." Anne opened her eyes at this, but wisely held her tongue. He went on,

"I swear, Anne, I'll never give you reason to pity Miss Neville; but she has sprained her wrist, I think very severely. That confounded brute was the cause of it."

"Man or beast?" she asked. "'Tis difficult to know which you mean." [39]

"My horse," replied he, determined not to be laughed into a good temper. "She would hold him at the lake when I asked her not to; but women are so obstinate, they will have their own way; there is no reasoning with them. I would not have allowed her if I could have foreseen what was going to happen, but how could I? and now the mischief is done, and she is pretty considerably hurt."

"All her own fault, according to your account, so why should you vex yourself about it? Men generally send us to 'Old Harry' under such circumstances."

"But I consider it to have been partly my fault; I was a fool to allow her to hold the horse, and a still greater one, inasmuch as now the mischief is done, I am unable to help her."

"In what?"

Charles made no reply; he was thinking could Anne help him in his difficulty? She might if she liked, but would she? Could he trust her? as in evincing so much sympathy for Miss Neville would she not partly guess at his secret liking for her—if she had not guessed it already? [40]

Anne was good-natured and truthful enough; had she not just plainly told him he had done wrong? but that he would not allow of for a moment. It was the natural thing to do, and would have been done by any one under similar circumstances. How could he help being sorry? how could he help feeling for her? Dr. Bernard must be sent for, the sprain might get worse. Charles, like most men when their minds are set on attaining any one object, determined on carrying his point. The more difficult the accomplishment the more resolute was he in attaining it, and clearing all obstacles that stood in his way.

"I'm going to Standale," said he, suddenly looking up.

"To Standale! You have just three hours to do it in; we do not dine before eight, so I dare say you will manage it."

"Yes. Have you any commissions?" [41]

"None, thank you. It will be too dark for you to match some wool for my sister. I know she wants some. Men invariably choose such unseasonable hours for their jaunts, when they know it is impossible for women to load them with commissions."

"Do you not think it would be as well to mention to my brother's wife that I am going to Standale? She might like Dr. Bernard to call to-morrow and see Miss Neville, and prescribe for that injured wrist."

"Nonsense, Charles! It cannot be so bad as that; and besides, you said it was caused entirely through her own obstinacy, so let her bear it as best she may, as a just punishment for her sins."

Then seeing he looked serious and a little annoyed, she added, "Of course you can do as you like about it."

"I shall be ready to start in less than ten minutes," replied he. "You can meet me in the hall, and let me know the result of your communication with Mrs. Linchmore." [42]

"That is what I call cool," said Anne, as Charles vanished; "he does not like to tell Isabella herself, so makes me the bearer of the unpleasant news, and I dare say thinks I am blind and do not see through it. Well, the cunning of some men beats everything. I believe the wretch is fast falling in love with Miss Neville, if he is not so already. At all events, it strikes me, cousin Frances stands a very good chance of being cut out; so she had better control her temper instead of allowing it to get the better of her as it did to-day."

Then, as if a sudden thought struck her, she turned and darted away after Charles.

"I tell you what it is," said she, breathlessly, coming up with him, "I do not mind doing this little act of mercy for you; but at the same time I must first go and see Miss Neville. It would never do to have Isabella asking me how she looked? What was the matter with her? and lots of other questions, that I could not answer; so you must have patience and give me half-an-hour's start." [43]

"Half-an hour!" cried he, looking at his watch. "Why it is nearly five o'clock now."

"I must have half-an-hour, I ought to have said an hour. Why, if it is so late, not put off your journey to Standale until to-morrow. Is your business there so very pressing?" asked she, slyly.

"Yes. I must go this evening," replied he, evading her look.

"Men are so obstinate, there is no reasoning with them. Is not that what you said of Miss Neville?"

"This is quite a different thing."

"Oh! of course, quite different, when it suits your convenience; but I am not convinced."

"Women never are," muttered Charles, turning on his heel.

In the meanwhile Fanny had carried the flower in safety to her governess, her little mind full of wonderment as to what her cousin Frances could have meant; why she had looked so strangely and spoken still more so? [44]

Children are great observers, and often think and see more clearly than their elders give them

credit for. So it was in the present instance. Fanny felt certain her cousin did not like Miss Neville should have the flower, that she was jealous of her, and disliked her; and the child settled very much to her own satisfaction that it was all because her governess was so pretty, and had such lovely hair; even more golden than Edith's, while Frances' was as nearly approaching black as it well could be.

Amy was a little indignant on seeing the flower, and hearing from Fanny that "*he* had sent it to her." She recognised the Camellia at a glance. It was the one Robert Vavasour had gathered for her in the greenhouse; she knew it again, because in arranging the bouquet for Mrs. Linchmore its stem had been too short, and she had added a longer one, and secured it by winding a piece of thread round; it was there still, while some of the pure white leaves of the flower were becoming tinged with brown; evidences of the length of time it had been gathered.

[45]

"He said it was not quite fresh," said Fanny watching her governess, as she thought noticing its faded beauty, "but I thought you would like it just as well, because you are so fond of flowers."

"Who desired you to give it me?"

"That tall dark gentleman who walked home with us one day, the day you lost your embroidery." Fanny could not get the latter out of her mind, it was uppermost there.

It was Mr. Vavasour, then who sent it; and why?

Amy remembered his having asked for the flower she had gathered for Mrs. Linchmore, and her refusal to give it. Had he now sent it to show her that another, even Mrs. Linchmore, had been more willing to oblige him than she had; as also how little value he placed on the gift? Or probably their meeting in the greenhouse had escaped his memory, and perhaps he merely wished to please her, seeing how fond she was of flowers, and thought any flower, however faded, was good enough for a governess.

[46]

As she stood by the fire her hand unconsciously wandered towards the bars; in another moment the poor flower would have been withered, the heat would have scorched it.

"Oh! don't burn it, Miss Neville, please don't," exclaimed Fanny. "It isn't half dead yet; and I have had such trouble in bringing it you safely, because cousin Frances wanted it."

"Miss Strickland?"

"Yes. She got in such a rage, you never saw anything like it; but I would not let her have it. I was determined she should not. She knew it was for you too, and it was that made her so angry. She told a fib as well, for she said she saw Uncle Charles give it me, and you know it was Mr. Vavasour."

"Did you tell her so?"

"No" replied Fanny, triumphantly, little thinking how every word was grieving her governess. "No, I didn't; she tried very hard to make me say, but I wouldn't; see," said she, baring her arm, "I'll show you what she did. There! see that; only look, Miss Neville," and she pointed to some deep blue marks, plainly the impression of four lines like fingers, "wasn't it spiteful and naughty of her?"

[47]

Amy looked up in surprise and compassion. Was it possible Miss Strickland, usually so calm could have so far lost her temper, as to hurt her so severely. Spiteful? yes it was worse than spiteful, it was wicked. If she had shown so little mercy to a child who could not have intentionally harmed her what would be the result of the appeal she meditated making to her womanly feelings? would she feel for her and help? she who had shown none for a helpless child? Amy's heart sank within her, and she began to fear she was in a sea of troubles, that would take a wiser head than hers, and a stronger hand and heart to extricate her from.

[48]

And all this time the little girl stood with bared arm before her governess, waiting for and claiming her pity, while the four blue marks seemed more plainly visible each time Amy looked at them.

Would Miss Strickland ever wound her as deeply? Words she did not care for, they were often lightly spoken, and soon perhaps regretted or forgotten; but acts were different things, they caused injuries, and heart-aches to last a life-time. They might like words be regretted, but could never be recalled, causing irreparable mischief.

Fanny's arm gave Amy a disagreeable insight into Frances' character, one that was altogether new and unexpected. Julia Bennet had often spoken of her, and always from the first as a proud, cold girl, wrapped up in self, with no interest in the every day cares of life, or affection for home ties or duties; but fond of society, and caring for little beyond it, living in the world and only for its approval and worship; a being neither exacting nor demanding homage, but taking it to herself as a matter-of-course and right, yet it was evident to Amy, that though she assumed the appearance of a goddess, she, like many a Homeric deity, was affected with a mortal's worse passion—revenge, and Amy shivered slightly as she thought of the coming interview, fearing an explanation might be more difficult than she had imagined, and that instead of a few quiet words, it might be a stormy warfare.

[49]

"You must have your arm bathed, Fanny," she said, putting the sleeve down in its place again, and hiding from sight the ugly marks. "I am sadly afraid you must have been very naughty for

Miss Strickland to have punished you so severely. Why was she angry with you? What did you do to annoy her?"

"Nothing, Miss Neville. She tried to make me tell her who sent you the flower; and because I would not she got angry, and wanted to snatch it from me. It was cousin Frances began it all; she caught hold of me as I was coming along quite quietly, and never thinking of her at all." [50]

"But you must have vexed her, Fanny. It is impossible she could have injured you so severely without."

"Well, perhaps I did, a little—only just a little. I found out," said Fanny, looking down, "something she thought was a secret, and only known to herself, and she could not bear to think I knew it."

"You found out a secret?"

"Yes," replied Fanny, hesitatingly; "but I must not tell you what it is, Miss Neville. Please don't ask me."

"I will not, Fanny; but at the same time I hope it is nothing wrong that will not bear the telling. I am sadly afraid that appearances are against you. I fear now more than ever that you must have seriously offended or wounded Miss Strickland. Are you sure, quite sure, Fanny, that you cannot trust me with the secret?"

"Oh, I must not tell you, indeed I mustn't. You are wrong, too, in what you think. I have done nothing bad, Miss Neville; do believe me, and please don't think badly of me." [51]

"I will try not to, Fanny."

"Oh, how I wish I had come in with Edith when she asked me, and never waited for anyone, then I should never have seen cousin Frances," and fairly overcome with all her little heart had been suffering during the past hour, Fanny burst into tears.

"I have made my appearance at a most unfortunate moment," said Anne, opening the door. "Good gracious, child! don't cry like that; you are roaring like a mad bull, and will make a perfect fright of yourself into the bargain. There, do stop. I promise you, you shall be forgiven whatever your sin, and receive the kiss of forgiveness on the spot, if you will only have done and be quiet."

"Go, Fanny," said Amy, "we will talk over this quietly by-and-by, go and desire Mary to see to your arm."

"Thank goodness she is gone," said Anne, "now I can begin to breathe again. If there is anything in this world I hate, it is the cry of children and cats; I class them both together, as I don't know which is the worst of the two, all I do know is, that when children once begin, they never know when to leave off." [52]

Then suddenly she caught sight of the Camellia, and took it up, while Amy most sincerely wished she had burnt it.

"Where did you get this Camellia?" asked she.

"Fanny brought it me a few minutes ago," replied Amy, blushing slightly, feeling she was in a manner evading the question.

But Anne was far too point blank to be put off, and had Amy but considered for a moment, she would have remembered how hopeless it was to check or elude Anne's curiosity. She returned to the charge at once, without one moment's thought or hesitation.

"Who gave it her?" she asked shortly.

"I believe Mr. Vavasour did."

"Of course I expected as much. Here are you like some saintly nun, shut up in a cloister, no one supposed to get even a glimpse of you, and yet for all that, you receive more attention than all us poor girls put together, who are dressing and walking, laughing and talking, and doing I do not know what else besides to please the men. You may smile, but I can tell you I think it no laughing matter. Upon my word, it is a great deal too bad." [53]

"The flower is not worth having," replied Amy, constrained to say something. "It is faded."

"Not worth having! now I do call that ungrateful, when I dare say the poor man has done his best to please you. I know I should be thankful enough at having such a graceful compliment paid me; but there, I never have the chance of showing my gratitude to anybody, seeing no one ever pays me the compliment of even sending me a dead flower!"

"I am sure Mr. Hall would."

"Oh! the monster, don't name him, pray. Thank goodness he has not found out my penchant for flowers, or I believe I should find him waiting every morning at the bottom of the staircase, with a bouquet as big as his head, composed of ivy berries and Christmas holly; he decorates his church with them, and I have no doubt thinks them preferable to the most lovely hot-house flowers; here, take your Camellia," and she held it out at arm's length. [54]

This was a ruse on Anne's part to induce Amy to hold out her arm, so that she might, as it were

by accident, discover the sprain, having determined in her own mind, after leaving Charles, not to let Miss Neville know a word about his solicitude; he had appealed to Anne's good nature, and she was willing enough to help him to get a dozen doctors—if he wished it—to see her, but then Miss Neville must not know anything about it; there was no reason why she should, but every reason why she should not.

Anne would not, by the slightest word or hint, soften Miss Neville's heart towards her cousin; people must manage their own love affairs themselves, and if they got into scrapes, not get others into a mess as well; besides, Anne knew well enough, or rather guessed it, that neither Mr. or Mrs. Linchmore would exactly approve of it, while as for Charles, she hoped Miss Neville would pay him out in the same coin as he had paid Frances. If her cousin was foolish enough to fall in love with the governess, it was his fault, Anne was not going to take the blame, or have anything to do with it. [55]

Then it was evident to Anne's quick sight that Mr. Vavasour was getting up a flirtation too, and if Miss Neville was wise she would improve upon that, there being no one in the world to say a word against his falling desperately in love with her, if he liked; he was a rich man, and his own master entirely, and ought to have a wife to help him spend his money, whereas Charles's fortune was all built upon expectations; it was true he had some four or five hundred a year, but that might, in the end, starve a wife, or turn her into a household drudge. [56]

There was not a shadow of doubt in Anne's mind which of the two ought to be the object of Miss Neville's choice; but true love never did run smooth, and she supposed she would choose Charles, simply on account of the difficulties that stood in her way. She only wished, with a sigh, she was the chosen one, instead of Miss Neville—and then—what a dance she would lead the two!

"What is the matter with your wrist?" asked she, as Amy of necessity stretched out the left hand for the flower.

"I have sprained it."

Anne never asked the why or wherefore,—which might have surprised Amy had she thought at all about it; knowing, as she did, her inquisitiveness,—but examined it at once.

"Yes, it is a bad sprain, and how swollen the fingers are! and how funny it looks," said she laughing. "Why you might as well be afflicted with gout. How it burns! I should be quite frightened if it was mine." [57]

"I am not in the least so," replied Amy. "I am going to bathe it in cold water presently. I think that will do it good."

"How can you possibly know what will do it good; you ought to have old Dr. Bernard to see it."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Amy hastily, "there is not the slightest necessity for any such thing. I cannot bear the idea of it; pray do not think of it for one moment, I would rather not see him."

"Well, it is horrid, the idea of having a medical man, and knowing that for the time being, you are bound to follow wherever he leads; I hate it too. But old Dr. Bernard is so mild and meek, so fatherly-looking, with his grey hair or hairs—he has only got about twenty round his shining bald pate—so different to our young doctor at home, who comes blustering in, cracking his okes; and then sends medicine enough to kill the whole household. Of course Isabella knows about your arm?" [58]

"No, not a word, and I hope she will not."

"Hope no such thing, please, as I shall tell her of it the very first opportunity I have."

"Pray do not, Miss Bennet. It will be quite well to-morrow."

"It will not be well for days; and as for not telling Mrs. Linchmore, I always do what I say, and if you were to talk until Doomsday you would not reason me out of it. Only think if it were to bring on fever; you might get seriously ill and die, imagine what a mischance, obliged to have a funeral and all kinds of horrors; and then, how do you suppose us poor visitors would feel. I am sure we are dull enough as it is; at least, I am; so in compassion to our poor nerves, you *must* see that dear old Dr. Bernard. It is no use whatever fighting against your destiny," and without waiting for a reply Anne went away, thinking she had managed admirably well, seeing she had carried her point, without in the least compromising Charles. [59]

She looked into the morning-room on her way down: there was no one there but Alfred Strickland having a quiet nap to while away the time before dinner, and Mr. Hall; the latter with his legs as usual, tucked away out of sight, a book in his hand; but fortunately for Anne his face turned away from its pages, towards the fire; so she crept softly away without disturbing either.

In the hall, to her astonishment, she met Charles, impatiently awaiting her, cloaked and booted for his cold ride.

"Well, what success?" asked he.

"How ridiculous!" exclaimed Anne angrily. "There is such a thing as being too punctual. If I am to do as you wish, I will not be hurried; I am a woman as well as Miss Neville, and look for as much consideration. Besides, I said half an hour, and half an hour I will have;" and without waiting for a reply she passed on into the drawing-room, while Charles, throwing off his great coat, followed. [60]

But he was doomed to be terribly tried, for there sat Mrs. Linchmore, the object of Anne's search, deep in the mysteries of a game of chess with Mr. Vavasour.

Anne sat down and took up a book. "It will never do for me to disturb them," said she, quietly, rather enjoying the joke of Charles' discomfiture, now visibly expressed on his face.

A muttered exclamation of impatience, which sounded very much like an oath, passed his lips.

Anne slightly winced at this. She thought the case getting desperate.

Why should Charles be in such a tremendous hurry?

It was not a case of life and death. She really thought, considering she was doing him a favour, he might have a chat, and make the time pass pleasantly and agreeably, instead of letting her see how entirely his heart was wrapped up in another girl. Only that her word was passed, from which Anne never deviated, she would have thrown up the office she had undertaken, and have nothing more to do with it. [61]

Time passed on, not as it generally does, with swift fleet wings; but even to Anne, who did not care how it went, heavily and slowly, very much in the same way as the game of chess was progressing. Charles evinced his impatience by crossing his legs, uncrossing them, taking up a book and tossing over the pages; for not one word did he read or desire to; and finally, as the small French clock on the mantel-piece chimed six, he threw down the book and exclaimed impatiently—

"When the devil will that game be over?" Then catching Anne's astonished look, he laughed aloud, and said, "You do not often see me out of temper, cousin?"

"True, but then I never recollect having seen it tried."

"Or tried so severely as it is now."

"Men have no patience, see how quietly I take it." [62]

"You! you have no interest in the matter."

"Have I not? And pray may I ask do you suppose it is very pleasant for me to be sitting here doing nothing. There are Alfred and Mr. Hall, both in the morning room, alone, waiting to be talked to, and I might have them all to myself, for the next half hour, and certainly all the time I have been wasting on you and your affairs. Have a little more gratitude Sir, or you may get some one else to manage for you."

"You are a good girl, Anne, but a shocking flirt."

"Oh yes! abuse me as much as you like, it will do you good, and perhaps make you in a better temper; as I said before, men have no patience. As long as things go smoothly and quietly they are all right; but when things happen contrary or not exactly as they wish, they get into a rage, and do not know how to bear it like us poor women, who are taught it every hour of our lives." [63]

"I never remember to have heard such a piece of moral wisdom from your lips before Anne."

They were here, much to the intense delight of Charles, interrupted by the voices of the chess players.

"That was a very pretty checkmate," said Robert Vavasour, "so totally unexpected and unperceived."

"Who has beaten?" asked Anne, going towards them, as Charles went out of the room, leaving her to do as best she could for him.

"Mr. Vavasour," replied Mrs. Linchmore, "he always does."

"Not always; you won two games of me last evening."

"Or rather you allowed me to; but I do not mind being beaten sometimes, it is tiresome never to win."

While the chess-men were being put away, Anne considered how she should begin her story, which, now it had come to the point, seemed more difficult than she had imagined. At length a bright idea struck her. [64]

"I hate chess," she said, "and cannot think what pleasure there can be in poring over such a dull game. I would a thousand times rather play the children's Race game; there is something exciting in that, but poor Miss Neville is too ill to play now."

"Ill!" exclaimed Mrs. Linchmore. "Miss Neville ill?" while one of the chess-men slipped from Robert Vavasour's fingers, and rolled over on to the soft hearth rug, instead of into the box as he had intended.

"Yes, she has sprained her wrist," continued Anne, giving the chess-man a gentle kick with her foot as it lay close beside her.

"Is that all? I thought at least it was the small pox, or scarlet fever," said Mrs. Linchmore.

"Although it is neither one nor the other," said Anne, "still it is very bad, and ought to be seen to." [65]

"Do you speak from your own personal observation?"

"Yes. I have been sitting with her for some time, and certainly think she looks ill and feverish; her hand is swollen an awful size. I should be quite frightened if it were mine, and told her so. I dare say old Dr. Bernard though would soon put it all right."

"He shall be sent for to-morrow," replied Mrs. Linchmore, "should she be no better, but perhaps a night's rest, and a little of Mrs. Hopkin's doctoring, may make her quite well again. Do you know how she sprained it?"

"I never asked her," replied Anne, evading a direct reply, "all I know is, it is very bad."

"If no better to-morrow, I will send for Dr. Bernard in the afternoon," said Mrs. Linchmore, quietly.

"To-morrow afternoon," repeated Mr. Vavasour quite as quietly, and before Anne had time to shape any answer in reply, "But perhaps Miss Neville is in a great deal of pain; a sprain is an ugly thing sometimes, and at all times painful." [66]

"It is quite impossible to send to-night," replied Mrs. Linchmore, decidedly. "Mr. Linchmore will not return from Standale himself much before ten, and I never send any of the servants so far without his sanction. It strikes me there is a little unnecessary haste and compassion displayed for my governess."

Robert Vavasour was silenced; but not so Anne, she came to the rescue at once, rather nettled.

"I am sure, Isabella, I don't care a bit about it; only I thought as Charles was going into Standale, —I suppose to ride home with your husband at night,—he might as well call on Dr. Bernard as not; or leave a message to say he was wanted."

As there was no good reason why he should not, Mrs. Linchmore was obliged to acquiesce, though apparently,—and she did not care to conceal it—with a very bad grace, and without the slightest solicitude expressed for her governess. [67]

"I have managed it for you," said Anne, going out into the hall, where she found Charles striding up and down, impatiently; "such a fight as I have had."

"Never mind about the fight, Anne. Am I to call on Dr. Bernard?"

"Yes."

The word was scarcely spoken, ere to Anne's astonishment, he had caught her in his arms, and kissed her.

"You're a dear good girl, Anne," he said, "I swear there's nothing I wouldn't do for you!"

"How rough you are, cousin!" exclaimed Anne, struggling from his hasty embrace. "I'll do nothing for you, if this is the style I am to be rewarded with. It may be all very well for you, but I don't like it."

"Here's another then," laughed Charles, "and now for Dr. Bernard, I suppose he's the best medical man in the place?"

"Oh! for goodness sake," said Anne, aghast at the bare idea of facing Mrs. Linchmore, if any other were called in. "Do not go to any one but old Dr. Bernard, whatever you do; Isabella will never forgive me; she is in a tremendous gale as it is. Do you hear, Charley?" said she, catching his arm as he was going off. [68]

"All right," said he, laughing at her fright, and leaving her only half convinced as to what he intended doing. "I'll tell him to call the first thing in the morning."

Anne held back the hall door as he passed out.

It was pouring with rain, but he was on his horse and away in a second.

"Why he must be desperately in love with that Miss Neville," said Anne, "to go off in such torrents of rain; he'll be drenched to the skin before he gets to the park gates. Well, I wish I could be ill, and somebody—not that Hall—go mad for me in the same way."

And Anne sighed, and smoothed the hair Charles had slightly disarranged.

CHAPTER III.

THE LETTER.

"They sin who tell us love can die!
With life all other passions fly—
All others are but vanity.
In heaven ambition cannot dwell,
Nor avarice in the vaults of hell.

Earthly these passions, as of earth—
They perish where they draw their birth.
But love is indestructible!
Its holy flame for ever burneth—
From heaven it came, to heaven returneth."

SOUTHEY.

Against the mantle-piece in the morning-room leant Mrs. Linchmore; one hand supported her head, the other hung listlessly by her side, while in the long taper fingers she clasped an open letter. A tiny foot peeped from under the folds of her dress, and rested on the edge of the fender; the fire burnt clear and bright, and lent a slight glow to her cheeks, which were generally pale.

She looked very beautiful as she stood there; her graceful figure showed itself to the best advantage, and her long dark lashes swept her cheek, as she looked thoughtfully on the ground. [70]

Mrs. Linchmore was not a happy woman; she had, as I have said, married for money, and when too late, found out her mistake, and that money without love is nothing worth.

When scarcely seventeen, she had loved with all the fervour and truth of a young heart's first love; her love was returned, but her lover was poor, they must wait for better times; so he went abroad to India, full of hope, and firm in the faith of her to whom he was betrothed; to win honour, fame, glory, and promotion; and with the latter, money wherewith to win as his wife her whom he so dearly loved.

Scarcely three years had passed slowly away, when Mr. Linchmore wooed the beautiful Isabella for his bride; he was young and handsome, and unlike her former lover, rich. Did she forget him to whom her young love was pledged? No, she still thought of him, love for him still filled her heart, yet she smothered it, and became the wife of the wealthy Mr. Linchmore, with scarcely a thought as to the suffering she was causing another, or remorse at her broken faith and perjured vows. [71]

Shortly after her marriage, she heard of her young lover's hasty return, and what a return! Not the return he had so often pictured to her in the days gone by, never to be lived over again; but he came as a sorrowful, broken-hearted man, mourning the loss of one who was no longer worthy of his love, one for whom he had been willing to sacrifice so much, even the wishes of those nearest and dearest to him—his father and mother, whose only child he was.

His death soon after nearly broke his mother's heart; some said it was occasioned from the effects of a fever, caught in an unhealthy climate, but Mrs. Linchmore, his early love, dared not question her own heart when she heard of it, but gazed around, and shuddered at the magnificence of the home for which he had been sacrificed. Then remorse and anguish, bitter anguish, must have been busy within her, but she showed it not; outwardly, she was the same, or it might be a little prouder, or more stately in her walk, more over-bearing to her servants, with all of the proud woman, and none of the girl about her. [72]

The envy of many. Ah! could they but have seen the wretchedness of her heart, the hollowness of her smiles, would they have envied her? Would they not rather have been thankful and contented with their lot, and changed their envy into pity?

This was what she dreaded. Their pity! No, anything but that. To be hated, feared, disliked, dreaded, all—all anything but pitied. To none would she be other than the rich, the happy Mrs. Linchmore; and so she appeared to some, nay, to all. Henceforth her heart was dead and cold, no love must,—could enter there again.

She became a flirt, and a selfish woman, without one particle of sympathy, and scarcely any love for her husband. How dissimilar they were—in ideas, thoughts, feelings, tastes—in everything. She took no trouble to conceal from him how little she cared for him; he who loved her so intensely—so truthfully. [73]

In the first early days of their married life he strove to win her affection by every little act of kindness, or devotion that his love prompted; but all in vain;—he failed. All his deeds of kindness all his love elicited no answering token of regard, no look of love from her; she was ever the same—cold, silent, distant; no sweet smile on her face to welcome him home, no brightening of the eye at his approach, no fond pressure of the hand: truly she loved him not, yet no word of unkindness or reproach ever crossed his lips, even when she turned away from his encircling arm as he stooped to kiss his first-born, no word escaped him—but his look,—she remembered that long after; it haunted her dreams for many a long night.

How she had betrayed and deceived, him who fondly thought before their marriage that she loved with all a girl's first love; yet he forgave her for the sake of his children, and blamed himself for the change; he had perhaps been too harsh, too stern to her. Kind, unselfish man! poor short-seeing mortal! It was not you, it was her unfeeling, cruel heart. [74]

Lately, instead of flirting and laughing with all and every one as she had formerly done, she singled out one to whom for the time being all her smiles were directed. At balls, at parties, riding, or walking, it mattered not, the favoured one was ever at her side; she danced with only him, rode with him, talked alone to him, or leant on his arm when tired.

Human nature could not stand this; she had gone too far. At length Mr. Linchmore's spirit was roused, at length her conduct had maddened him; he had borne uncomplainingly her coldness,

but his honour she might not touch; none should lift a finger against the wife of his bosom, the mother of his little ones. She might receive homage from *all*; but his spirit roused, his pride rebelled at the marked attentions of *one*. High words ensued between husband and wife, which might almost be said to be their first quarrel, so silently had he endured her want of love; but now he stood firm, and she was defeated. [75]

This event caused a considerable alteration in both parties. Mrs. Linchmore saw that however quietly her husband might brook the knowledge of her coldness, or the wrong she had done in marrying him without love; yet there was a boundary beyond which even she dared not step. He might appear easy and weak, but deep in his heart lay a strong firm will she could not thwart, a barrier not to be broken through, nor even touched with ever so gentle a hand. She might be heartless, might be a flirt; but beyond that she might not go. She felt also that her husband no longer trusted her, even searched her conduct, so she took refuge in pride, and open cruel indifference to his words or wishes, more galling than her former thinly veiled coldness. He had found out she loved him not; what need for further deceit? [76]

And Mr. Linchmore? Had his wife judged him rightly? Yes, even so. The sad truth that she loved him not had crept slowly yet surely into his heart, vainly as he had striven to crush it; her indifference he had borne without resentment, hoping that in time she might be brought to love him; for he still loved her passionately, as also sternly, almost harshly, if I might so say. His was not a nature to change, and then his love for her had been the one deep, intense feeling of his manhood, a love that nothing short of death could change; but with his knowledge of her deceit had gone his trust; and latterly almost his respect. He now lived hoping that time might change her heart, or draw it towards him—a hopeless wish, since the very presence of him she had wronged, and who had innocently wrought his and her own life-long misery, was a reproach and bitterness to her. No wonder he was severe and stern! Yet there were times when his old impetuous nature would have sway, and shut up in his room alone with nothing but despairing thoughts, he would pace it in utter anguish of spirit, hoping, looking for what never could be, namely, the love of his wife. And so they lived on. She fearing his love. He mourning hers. [77]

What did she care for the dark Frenchman of whom her husband had grown jealous? and who had singled her out from among a multitude it might be for her haughty beauty, or it might be for the *éclat* of being thought the favoured one of her who was the centre of admiration around which so many flocked at Paris the winter before Amy's arrival at Brampton? He had no intention, that man of the world, of falling in love with her; it was a flirtation, nothing more, and cost neither a pang. That she encouraged his attentions was without a doubt; that she despised him was without a doubt, too, seeing his absence—for Mr. Linchmore had positively forbidden him the house—did not cost her a sigh, not even a thought. What mattered it if he went? there were others to pay her the self-same attentions, others as gay and fascinating. So she went on her way in no degree wiser or better for the obstacle she had stumbled upon in her path, the provocation of her husband's wrath. [78]

Flirt she must. How otherwise divert her thoughts? those thoughts that crowded so relentlessly into her brain, threatening to overwhelm her with the memory of the one loved and lost; him whom she had thought to forget, or of whom she had hoped to crush out the remembrance.

Ah! her heart was not all coldness. Did she not love her children passionately; and were not her very faults, bad as they were, caused by the one false step—the forsaking her early love?

The storm between husband and wife blew over; it was not *outwardly* of long duration, and again Mrs. Linchmore singled out another—it mattered not to her whom she flirted with. "*La belle Anglaise*"—as she was called—cared not; life to her was a blank—a dreary waste.

Alas! how much misery it is in woman's power to make, how much to avert or remove. Man's comforter, sharer of his joys, partaker of his sorrows, ever ready to pour into his ear the kind word of comfort, consolation, and hope; whose soft, gentle hand smooths his pillow in the hour of sickness; and whose low, sweet voice assuages his pain, and bears without complaint his sometimes irritable temper. What would he do without her? How much good can she do, and alas! how much evil. Few, very few women there are without some one redeeming quality. Few, very few, we hope, like Mrs. Linchmore. [79]

But to return to our story.

Ere long, with a deep drawn sigh, Mrs. Linchmore raised her eyes, and recalled the thoughts—which had been wandering away into the past,—to the present time, and to the letter she held in her hand, and began to peruse its contents, a troubled unquiet look resting on her face, as she did so.

It was the answer to the letter she had written at her husband's earnest solicitations, to Mrs. Elrington. [80]

"ISABELLA MARY—(so it began)—

"Your heart deceived you not when it warned you I should not accept Mr. Linchmore's invitation. God forbid I should ever see your face again; it would be pain and grief to me, and recall to life recollections, now long *hidden and buried* in my heart. I never wish to look on you again, though God knows I have long since forgiven you, and that my ever constant prayer is, that I may think of you without bitterness, and ever with charity.

"It was an evil dark day when first I saw you, and will be a still darker one for me if ever I see you again. I could not trust myself even now—though long years have passed away since we met last—to meet you face to face. It would bring the image of *one* too forcibly and vividly to my mind; even now my hand shakes and trembles with emotion; and my eyes swim with tears, bitter, blinding tears, as I write.

[81]

"Do not mistake me, do not think I write this letter to reproach you, I do not. I have never reproached you; or, at least, I have striven to stifle all ill-feeling. I promised *him*, on his death-bed, to forgive you and learn to think of you with, if possible, kindly feeling and pity; and I trust I have been enabled to fulfil that promise. No, I do not reproach you, but I leave your own heart to do so; long, long ago, if I mistake not, it must.

"Miss Neville has told me you are cold, stern, and seldom smiled; you are changed indeed. Changed more than I, if I were your bitterest enemy, could have wished. Alas! that one wrong, wilful, wicked act could have entailed so much misery and sorrow.

"I will not lay down my pen without thanking you for your kindness to my young friend, Amy; she says you are very kind. And here again I would repeat what I said in a former letter to Mrs. Murchison, that she has been tenderly nurtured, and I would not that her young spirit should be broken. Forget not your promise to treat her more as a companion and friend, than as a governess, or as the latter class are sometimes treated. I am inclined to doubt any promise of yours being kept, but I have Mr. Linchmore's word, and I am content.

[82]

"And now farewell. May God forgive you, as I do. When your hour of death draws near—for in this changing and transitory life, we know not what a day may bring forth, or how soon we may be summoned away, and perhaps I shall never write to you again—may it smooth your dying hour, and give peace to your then troubled, remorseful heart, to know, that she whom you so deeply injured and so cruelly deceived and whose life you helped to render desolate, has forgiven you.

"ELLEN ELRINGTON."

There was an expression of pain on Mrs. Linchmore's face as she read, but not a sigh not a tear escaped her; perhaps those had all been shed long ago, or surely those sad, earnest words, from a sorrowful heart would have moved her; but ere she closed the letter and looked up, the painful look passed away, and a sarcastic curl had settled on her lip, and shone brightly in her full dark eye. She crushed the letter in her hand as she would perhaps have crushed the writer, if she could, and laughed aloud; a laugh so hollow, so forced, its very echo would have made one's blood run cold; but there was no fear of its being heard, she was still alone, as she felt with satisfaction as she glanced hurriedly around.

[83]

Again she laughed. But this time the tones were more subdued, the echo was scarcely heard.

She crushed the letter more tightly in her hand, until the clear blue veins were almost swelled to bursting, while she murmured, "so much for Mrs. Elrington's letter. Did she think to frighten and make a coward of me. Pshaw! she was mistaken; *I am altered and changed*, for it amused me."

[84]

But though she gave vent to these words, such were not her feelings. She was in reality deeply moved; past scenes had risen up vividly before her, with all the hopes and fears, joys and sorrows, of her girlish days. As she read word after word, line after line, of the letter, those days became more vivid still; and the old loving, gentle feelings crowded together at her heart; she was again the loving and beloved of him of her early choice; again, in fancy, sitting by his side, weeping bitter, passionate, despairing tears, as on the morning they had parted, then with the hope of meeting again; but it had been for the last time—for *ever*—and as the last word, with all its dreadful import came steadily into her heart, she could in very desolation have thrown herself into the large arm chair and wept more despairingly, more passionately still; but no, she was Mrs. Linchmore, cold and stern; Miss Neville had said so,—she must be herself again. So she crushed the old regretful feelings, and stifled their dying moan with that bitter, ghastly laugh.

[85]

On the table was a beautiful small bouquet of hot-house flowers; she drew out a bright scarlet one, and arranged it in her hair at the glass over the chimney piece.

"I may be cold and stern—I may be changed—but—I am still beautiful." Such were her thoughts as she stood gazing at herself long after the flower had been arranged to her satisfaction.

But now a step sounded on the stairs; it echoed in the lofty hall; it approached the door. Suddenly she remembered the letter, and hastily snatching it from the ground where it had lain forgotten, she hurriedly threw it into the fire.

There was a bright light for a moment, then it was gone, and a thin black substance floated lightly on the coals, showing where the letter had been; this she buried at once, deep—deep beneath the burning coals, until not a vestige remained, and turned to greet her visitor.

It was her husband.

[86]

He entered, drew a chair near the fire, and sat down, while his wife, with no visible trace of the emotion she had but lately felt, busied herself with some fancy work, so that her eyes might not meet his, or they must have revealed a little of the passions that had been struggling within; at all events she dared not raise them, but kept them obstinately fixed on the canvas in her lap, and

worked on in silence, expecting her husband to be the first to speak: but he did not, he took up his newspaper and read it as perseveringly as she worked.

Ere long the silence grew oppressive; the crumpling of the paper as Mr. Linchmore turned it in his hand annoyed and irritated her; her thoughts were still half struggling with the past; she *must* bury that, and bring them forcibly back to the present time, so she spoke; but try as she would she could not do so without showing a little irritation of manner.

"The paper appears to engross your attention entirely, Mr Linchmore. Have you found anything so very interesting in it?" [87]

He looked up in surprise, then quietly laid it on the table, as he replied, "Perhaps I did not speak, as I have rather unfortunate news for you, 'Lady Emily'—Mrs. Linchmore's riding horse—has gone dead lame."

"Lame!" exclaimed Mrs. Linchmore in a vexatious tone of voice. "It must be something very sudden then; she was perfectly well the last time I rode her, there was not the slightest symptom of lameness about her then."

"That was some time ago," rejoined her husband.

"Only a few days, or a week at the utmost. What is the matter with her? or what has caused the lameness?"

"A nail has been accidentally run into her foot in shoeing. There has been great carelessness no doubt."

"It is always the case that whenever I wish to ride or drive something happens to prevent me, for the last two or three months I have noticed it. What is the use of having servants if one cannot trust them, or horses either, when they are never fit to be ridden?" [88]

"There are other horses in the stable, Isabella, would carry you just as well as Lady Emily, but you never will ride them."

Mrs. Linchmore was not exactly a timid horsewoman, but she was not courageous enough to ride a strange horse, whose temper and habits she was unacquainted with. She had ridden the mare constantly for the last five years, and knew her temper well, and after the first canter was over all nervousness was gone, and she could talk and laugh and ride without fear, or the slight timidity she might have felt at first starting.

"I promised to ride into Standale with Mr. Vavasour," said she.

"Shall I order the bay to be brought round for you, Isabella? You will find him even quieter than Lady Emily."

"You know I hate strange horses, Mr. Linchmore. I wonder at your proposing such a thing. After being accustomed to one horse for so long, I should be nervous." [89]

"I will ride with you with pleasure," was the reply, "and give you confidence if I can, and see no accident happens."

But no, her husband's escort was very different to the promised pleasure she had looked forward to with Mr. Vavasour.

"Thank you," replied she coldly, "but I shall stay at home, and give up all idea of riding until my horse gets well."

"Very well, Vavasour can ride into Standale with me if he chooses, I am starting for it in half an hour. By-the-by, what report did Bernard give of Miss Neville this morning?"

"Nothing very much the matter, I believe," said she carelessly, "simply a sprain caused by some folly or another."

"I am glad it is nothing more serious; she looks a delicate girl."

"Some people always look so. I believe she is strong enough; we were always from the first led to expect a rather fragile person." [90]

This was an unwise speech of Mrs. Linchmore's, as it recalled Mrs. Elrington at once to her husband's mind, and he asked—

"Have you received any reply to the letter you wrote to Mrs. Elrington, Isabella?"

"Yes. Miss Neville gave me a message to the effect that she did not intend," said she sarcastically, "honouring our poor house with a visit."

"Did she write to Miss Neville?"

"I fancy not. I think it was mentioned by Mrs. Neville, in a letter she wrote from Ashleigh."

"And Mrs. Elrington has never answered your letter?"

"No. I suppose she thought the message good enough for us."

There was no quivering of the lip, no tell-tale blood in her cheeks, nothing to betray the falsehood

she was telling, save her eyes, and those she still bent down. She could not have met her husband's gaze. [91]

"Strange," murmured he, "that she should so long keep aloof from us. I should have thought she would have wished to heal up old quarrels."

"You know her not," was the reply. "I told you she would not come, and implored you, almost, not to ask me to write to her."

"It was my fault you wrote, and I cannot help feeling sorry at her discourtesy; it is so different from what I should have thought she would have done. I liked the little I saw of Mrs. Elrington, she was a true Englishwoman. I wonder what she disliked me for. I suppose she did dislike me?" asked he.

"Yes, thoroughly. You supplanted her son."

"But you never cared for him, Isabella?" and this time he waited for the eyes to be raised to his.

But they were not. Mrs. Linchmore bent lower still over her work, so that not only the eyes, but the face was almost hidden. She seemed to have made some mistake, for, with a slight hasty exclamation, she took the scissors and cut out, hurriedly, what a few moments before she had been so busy with. [92]

Again he repeated the question, but not sternly, only sorrowfully and slowly, as if he almost feared the answer, or guessed what it would be.

"You never cared for him, Isabella?"

But the emotion or embarrassment had passed away, and although Mrs. Linchmore did not look up to meet his gaze, now so searchingly bent on her, she laid down her work and patted the head of the lap-dog lying at her feet.

"I liked him as I do Fido," replied she, perhaps a little mockingly. "He was a pretty plaything."

But the answer did not satisfy Mr. Linchmore. He withdrew his eyes from her face and sighed. Did he doubt her? Alas! a strange, sad thought had long filled his mind, and would not be chased away.

"I am glad you did not *love* him, Isabella," was all he said. [93]

And then he sat silent for some time. At length he spoke again, somewhat suddenly. "To revert to Miss Neville," he said. "I feared her illness might be caused from dulness or ennui. She is so much alone—too much for one so young. Miss Tremlow, even, hinted at it to me the very first day she came downstairs; but I do not see what else is to be done, with these young men in the house."

"I invited her down the other day, but she would not come."

"I am glad she did not. Why did you ask her?"

"You told me to yourself, Mr. Linchmore. You surely cannot have forgotten it; and besides, we promised to treat her more as a young friend than as a governess."

"True," he replied. "I now regret we ever gave such a promise. It would be far better for Miss Neville, for although we treat her as a friend, who amongst our numerous acquaintances will? They do not know her as we do, and will simply treat her as a governess, nothing more. I neither like Miss Strickland's apparent haughtiness, which amounts to rudeness, or Vavasour's attentions, which almost amount to a flirtation with her." [94]

"The first is unaccountable to me; but the latter—what harm can there be in that?" replied Mrs. Linchmore.

"To Miss Neville there might be harm. She might lose her heart to him, for she is no flirt; *he is*," said he, decidedly, and his wife could not attempt to contradict him, "and would as soon break her heart as not; perhaps be a little proud of it, and certainly think less about it than he would at breaking his horse's neck in leaping a fence."

"You are very uncharitable."

"Not at all. My opinion is, Vavasour intends getting up a flirtation with Miss Neville, just to pass the time away; perhaps you had better see to it, Isabella, and try and give her a hint. You could easily do it, without appearing to have noticed his attentions to her." [95]

"The very way to make her fall desperately in love with him; women always do with those they hear abused—our hearts are so pitiful. Much better let her do as she likes, she has plenty of sense."

"As you will, Isabella; but I must not see her feelings trifled with; there is nothing half so sad as to love without return—hopelessly."

And again he turned his face, and looked sorrowfully at his wife, as if expecting or longing for some slight mark of affection; but she gave none, and rising slowly, he went out.

Mrs. Linchmore was once more alone.

The preceding conversation, at least the latter part of it, had been entirely to her satisfaction. It must not be supposed she had been a blind spectator to Vavasour's attentions to Amy. She had heard of the first walk from Frances, she had seen the second, and imagined that, perhaps, having remarked the looks with which, once or twice, Mr. Linchmore had watched his attentions to herself, he had had recourse to a ruse-de-guerre, and now flirted with the governess, as the most harmless girl he could pick out, whilst all his looks, all his *petits soins*, were directed and given to *her*. [96]

She laughed at the idea of outwitting her husband; not that she cared for Vavasour, but the flirting spirit was strong and powerful within. Old memories and associations, instead of softening had only hardened her present life, and made her look back more regretfully to the past, more hopelessly and bitterly to the future.

"Miss Neville is certainly very beautiful," mused she, "but so quiet, so meek; no animation about her, nothing to charm such a man as Mr. Vavasour with." Then she wondered if she herself possessed that power.

She rose up, and again stood before the glass, which reflected back her proud, beautiful face, with the conscious haughty look, that if beauty had the power to charm it was hers, she need fear no rival. [97]

Then she re-arranged the flower which she had previously pinned in her hair, and a smile, sparkling with pleasure, showed that she was satisfied.

Mr. Linchmore judged Robert Vavasour's character more justly than his wife, although neither quite understood it. The mystery of his birth was the shadow continually haunting Vavasour's path, and making him thoughtless and trifling towards women. If his mother, as he believed, still lived, where was her gentle, tender love? Why had he never felt it? Why had she so cruelly deserted him, and left him to fight his own way in the world, with no name but a false one? His heart hardened against womankind. If a mother could be false to her child, what woman could be true? What woman worth living or caring for? They were triflers all, and to be trifled with; so he held no reverence in his heart for them, but flirted with his hostess thoughtlessly, and admired her as he would have admired any other beautiful woman; as he admired Amy, and would have flirted with her also if she would have let him. [98]

Would his heart ever be touched by love? ever see reason to regret or recall the rash vow he had made that no woman should ever hold a place in his heart, seeing that in loving her he would have to plead, not only his love, but his nameless birth.

CHAPTER IV. [99]

THE INTERVIEW.

—"Earthly things
Are but the transient pageants of an hour;
And earthly pride is like the passing flower,
That springs to fall, and blossoms but to die."
HENRY KIRKE WHITE.

"Whoever looks on life will see
How strangely mortals disagree."
CAWTHORNE.

It was almost dusk as Frances Strickland, who had been sitting for the last hour before the glass trying the effect of a wreath of fuschias she intended wearing at some forthcoming party, laid the flowers on the dressing table with a dissatisfied sigh as her maid entered the room with candles.

"At last!" exclaimed she, impatiently, "what have you been about, Jane? I thought you would never come; make haste and dress me for dinner, as I wish to try the effect of these flowers in my hair." [100]

Proud and haughty as Frances was to her equals, she seldom or ever showed much pride to her maid, or if it did occasionally peep out, it was instantly checked and controlled.

Jane was useful to her young mistress in more ways than the mere dressing her, and brushing her hair. She was an incessant talker, and found a willing listener in Frances, who silently encouraged her in repeating all the gossip and tittle-tattle of the servants' hall: as in this way Frances flattered herself she found out with little trouble the character as well as the sayings and doings of those around her.

Jane was perfectly well aware of Frances' failing, consequently indulged her propensity of talking to the utmost, and when she had nothing to relate, drew somehow from her own fertile brain and lively imagination, or added many wonderful improvements to the story already at her fingers' ends. Sometimes Jane was cross, or as she expressed it—"had a bad head-ache," and then it required all Frances' tact and ingenuity to get her to utter a syllable; and cunningly as she thought she cross-questioned her on these occasions, Jane's cunning equalled if not surpassed her mistress's, as she generally contrived to guess at what she was aiming, and either added fuel [101]

to the fire already kindled there, or quenched it altogether.

On the present occasion, Jane was especially communicative, and as she smoothed the raven tresses of her hair, talked away to her heart's content, now of this thing, now of that, until at length she approached the subject nearest her own heart and that of her mistress', namely, Miss Neville.

The loss of the piece of embroidery, and the search that had been made for it, had annoyed and irritated many of the servants, and especially Mason, who had long had a dislike of the governess, though she had not openly expressed it; then, Mr. Linchmore's apparent partiality for her? Why should Miss Neville come into the room just as she pleased when Madam was dressing, and give her opinion as to how she looked, and what she wore, even sometimes to the very ornaments themselves, throwing the lady's maid completely into the shade, where before she had reigned paramount, with no one's opinion or taste asked but her own. So Mason grew jealous, and took in the end a dislike to her, as servants often foolishly do to governesses; and only waited her time to manifest it. [102]

Mrs. Hopkins' decided tone and speech in Miss Neville's favour, and the 'setdown' she gave Mason, only rooted her dislike the more firmly; if it had not been for the governess she would not have had that; and as birds of a feather flock together, so she had impressed upon Jane, during their many friendly chats, her opinion of Miss Neville: that she was a nobody, who gave herself airs, and interfered where she had no business to, and as to the lost piece of work, there was no doubt whatever that she suspected some of the servants, and most likely meanly accused them of taking it; otherwise, why was such a fuss made, and why had they been questioned as to whether they had seen it? [103]

Jane readily believed all that was told her, and determined on shewing Miss Neville on the very first opportunity she had, that she thought her in no way better than herself, so meeting her one day accidentally in the corridor coming upstairs, she tossed her head and pushed rudely past her, allowing the baize door to slam to, without so much as offering to hold it open for her to pass through.

Amy gently and indignantly remonstrated with her on her rudeness, which she saw at once was intended, and silenced the second impertinent action, namely the answer hovering on Jane's lips; but though silenced, Jane went away more firmly impressed and convinced that Mason was right, and that Miss Neville was an upstart and a nobody.

"The idea," said she, as she recounted the adventure to Mason. "The idea of Miss Neville's teaching *me* manners, and ordering *me* to bridle my tongue; I'd like to see her as could make me do it, that's all; I'll teach my lady to bridle *her* tongue, and keep *her* sauce to herself." [104]

Mason's temper was not a passionate one; Jane's was, and vindictive too; she felt convinced, judging from what she should do were she in Miss Neville's place, that the latter would immediately repeat all that had taken place to her young mistress, so she determined to be beforehand with her, and have, as she called it, the first say; whereas Amy had almost forgotten the circumstance, and certainly had no wish to recall it.

"Did you give my message to Mrs. Linchmore?" asked Frances, "I almost hope you did not, as I am so much better. I intend after all going down to dinner."

There had been a long silence, uninterrupted save by the noise the brush made as it passed through the soft dark hair.

"Yes Miss, I did, and they all said they were sorry to hear you had such a bad head-ache." [105]

"All!" exclaimed Frances, "I desired you to give the message to Mrs. Linchmore. Why did you disobey me?"

"Well, Miss, I'm sure it was no fault of mine that Miss Neville happened to be in the room."

"Miss Neville!" exclaimed Frances.

"Yes, Miss Frances, I thought it would surprise you, but I know it was her, because I saw her through a chink of the door as Mason held it open; besides Mason says she is always there, trying to butter her bread, as the saying is; and after I'd given the message, which I should not have given if I'd known she had been there, I heard her and Mrs. Linchmore say they thought you was a very perverse and disagreeable girl; of course they didn't know I was so near, or they wouldn't have spoke so loud."

"And how dare Miss Neville have a word to say in the matter concerning any affairs of mine!" said Frances, thrown off her guard by the suddenness of Jane's announcement, and drawing her head up proudly, so as to almost drag her hair through Jane's fingers, and totally disarrange the long silken plait she had just completed. [106]

"Law! Miss! I'm sure I can't say," replied Jane somewhat surprised in her turn at the extraordinary emotion she witnessed, and delighted that so far she had succeeded beyond her hopes.

"Then you ought to know; I don't believe one word of it."

"It's true all the same, Miss, whether you believe it or no, and I'm sure there's some people as is

always picking other people to pieces, and more especially those as is much above them in station; and if I don't mistake Miss Neville thinks herself a mighty fine lady, and as Mason says tries—though she doesn't say she manages it—to turn Mrs. Linchmore round her thumb."

A gentle tap at the door here interrupted Jane, and she hastened to open it, but before she could do so the imperious "come in," of Frances was answered by the door softly opening and shutting; a light footstep crossed the room, and Amy Neville herself stood by the table. [107]

Frances looked surprised.

"This is a most extraordinary intrusion, Miss Neville," said she rising. Then added sarcastically, "to what fortunate circumstance am I to ascribe the pleasure of your company?"

"No fortunate circumstance," replied Amy, almost as proudly, "has induced me to come here."

"Perhaps unfortunate, then," suggested Frances, in the same tone, still standing, and never asking her visitor to sit down.

"You are right," said Amy, quietly.

But this quietness enraged Frances, predisposed as she was to quarrel with her, and inwardly hating her, as she did; so she answered, angrily—

"And do you suppose I have nothing better to do than to listen to unfortunate circumstances, related by unfortunate people; for I suppose you are come with some absurd story. I care nothing for you or yours, and have no wish to listen to anything you have to say," and turning away, as rudely as she had spoken, Frances once more seated herself at the table, and desired Jane, who had been looking on in astonishment, to go on with her hair. [108]

"But you *must* listen," replied Amy firmly, her eyes flashing at Frances' insulting tones and speech. "I have something to tell you,—an explanation to give,—a circumstance to explain; indeed you must listen."

Frances mused.

"Must listen," she repeated presently. "If that is all, pray talk on; as to whether I answer or no remains to be seen. No one ever yet compelled me to do aught against my will; therefore I advise Miss Neville,—determined as she seems,—to think twice before she puts me to the test. I must also state I am rather hurried, the dressing bell having rung long since."

And Frances carelessly wound the two long plaits Jane had plaited round her head.

"I have little to say; I shall not detain you long." [109]

"Pray begin," said Frances. "Jane be more careful, that hair-pin hurts me. Well, Miss Neville?"

But Amy answered—

"What I have to say is for your ear alone; Jane cannot be present."

"I have no secrets from Jane; you need have no fear of her repeating anything she hears."

"Still, what I have to say, Miss Strickland, cannot be said before her."

"Really, Miss Neville, your conduct is most extraordinary, not to say presuming and impertinent. Jane is necessary to me, I cannot dress without her assistance. I am late as it is, and cannot send her away."

"If you will allow me, I will assist you."

"Well, I'm sure!" exclaimed Jane, who had been listening in secret wonderment to the fore-going conversation, and anticipating the dismissal she was now about to receive. "Well, I'm sure! I'm the last woman in the world to wish to pry into other people's secrets. Thank God, I've none of my own to trouble me, and don't care who hears what *I* say; and thank you, Miss Neville, for your good opinion of me," said she, with a slight bend, and, throwing the dress she held in her hand across the back of a chair, she marched indignantly from the room, taking care not to close the door behind her. [110]

But Amy followed, and shut it, a proceeding that still more incensed her, as she had fully intended hearing something, if not all, of what passed, and learning, if possible, what secret enmity there was, or ill feeling between the two; as, with all her cunning and quickness, for once Jane was at fault. "Never mind," thought she, as she proceeded in search of Mason, to whom to unburden her ill-treatment. "I've been beforehand with you, with all your caution, Miss Neville, and I'm much mistaken if Miss Frances likes you one whit better than I do, and that's a precious deal, I can tell you," and Jane laughed; "though I'm puzzled to know why she got on her proud horse so soon. Yes, I'm fairly puzzled; but I'll find out yet. All those airs and graces didn't come from what I told her. No, no; I must be awake, and keep my eyes open. I'm not so easily deceived. Shut the door as tight and close as you will—say your say, whisper your secret, yet, for all that, Jane will be up to it, and fathom it out." [111]

Amy and Frances were alone.

How different were the thoughts and feelings of both!

Declining her companion's assistance in dressing, Frances seated herself in an easy chair by the fire, her feet in their rich worked slippers resting on a footstool; her small jewelled fingers playing impatiently with a small gold heart attached to a bracelet she wore round her smooth white arm, her eyes emitting from under their dark lashes looks of defiance and scorn—for Frances, as I have said, cared not to hide her feelings, or had not yet learnt the habit of doing so;—a determined expression about the corners of her mouth, as if she had fully made up her mind what course to pursue, and that neither argument nor persuasion should induce her to abandon it. [112]

She sat looking like some empress, awaiting the victim about to be sacrificed or made to bend to her haughty will.

A faint idea as to what Amy's explanation would be arose in her mind, how should she take it? should she remain silent, or answer it, and so lead her on until her whole heart should be probed,—laid bare before her? yes, she would do the latter, would penetrate into the very secret recesses of her heart; find out what her thoughts were, and how much she cared or did not care for her cousin, and then gradually retreat when she had her at her mercy. "We," so she reasoned, "cannot both triumph—one must be defeated—one must fall—and that one must be Miss Neville."

Amy stood a little apart.

She, too, had a determined expression playing round the corners of her mouth, and her tall, graceful figure was drawn up proudly to its full height; yet there was softness, gentleness in the very way she stood, one small fair hand tightly clasped round the injured wrist, as it rested delicately on the back of the chair, as if to keep down some strong inward emotion with its tight grasp; there was pride—there might be a touch of haughtiness, too—for she was but a poor weak mortal, but there was no anger, no defiance, no doggedness about Amy's looks. Her clear dark grey eye quailed not beneath her companion's hard cold gaze, it flashed as brightly, but there was neither malice, nor hatred, nor revenge in it; all was soft and womanly, though had opportunity offered or occasion required it, it might have returned scorn for scorn. [113]

The two young girls were alone.

Yet both remained silent; perhaps both feared to be the first to speak, or wished her companion might break the silence becoming every moment more painful and embarrassing.

Twice Frances turned her head impatiently, but meeting Amy's steady gaze, her eyelids dropped and again she leant back in the soft cushioned chair, and played with the locket as though she could not rest quiet: if her lips were silent her hands must be employed—she must appear careless and unconcerned, and uninterested in what was to follow. [114]

Amy never attempted to move or speak. There she stood gazing at Frances, but seemingly engrossed by other thoughts, for a close observer might have detected a slight, almost imperceptible trembling of the under lip, and a nervous twitching of the fair fingers of the left hand as it rested softly on the other.

At length, stooping as though to brush something off her wrapper, Frances spoke.

"Well, Miss Neville, how long is this farce to last, this silence continue? I have already intimated my wish to be alone, and that I do not care to be troubled with anything you may have to say; yet, hurried as I am, you seem to take little heed as to the length of time you detain me. Have the kindness to begin and end quickly." [115]

Amy started. Her thoughts had been far away. Once again she had gone over in thought all those pleasant, joyous days, when the world seemed all so fair and bright, and the days had flown too quickly by; and at night, she had slept the sleep of happiness and peace, without a thought for the morrow, save to find or try and make it as happy as the one that had gone before.

Ah! how many days had fled since then; how many sorrows and trials had she seen and experienced. Each day now was but a sad counterpart of the yesterday that had been, no bright looking forward, no trembling certainty of happiness; all seemed drear, and the future a blank to her troubled mind.

Again Frances spoke.

This time her voice was firm, though she still steadily avoided meeting Amy's gaze.

"When is this wonderful explanation to take place, Miss Neville? If you have changed your mind about it, pray say so at once, that I may call Jane, and continue my dressing." [116]

"Miss Strickland," began Amy, falteringly, for Frances' cruel manner had made her even more nervous than when she entered the room; "you must have guessed, you must be aware that—that —"

But instead of helping her, Frances laughed, and *that* gave Amy the courage she lacked, for her cheek glowed, and her eye flashed, and calmly and without hesitation, she went on at once.

"Have patience, Miss Strickland. I will go on quickly. You saw me yesterday talking to your cousin in the corridor, and I was led to infer from your manner, that you imagined I had done wrong in staying to speak with him, and I thought if I could only explain to you how accidentally it all occurred, you would exonerate both him and me from blame and unkind suspicion."

Frances raised her head haughtily. "I have so many cousins, that I must trouble Miss Neville to explain herself more fully, as I am unable either to recall the circumstance, or to remember which cousin was honoured by Miss Neville on the occasion referred to." [117]

"Which cousin? I know but one—Mr. Charles Linchmore."

"I understood Miss Neville to be a lover of truth. If you know that Charles Linchmore is my cousin, may I ask what relation his brother can be?"

Amy was silent. Neither shame, fear, nor anger kept her so, for presently, a torrent of words burst from her lips, and she hurried on as if nothing could stop her; no, not even Frances' mocking gaze, or the seemingly indifferent manner with which she listened.

"Miss Strickland, why torture me thus? Think you that the change in my position has changed my feelings, my heart, my very nature? Think you I am a stone, or my heart dead within me, that I can stand calmly by, and hear such cutting cruel words from you, and not feel them bitterly? How could I look into your face the other day, or listen to your words, and not feel that you were judging me harshly; it was not possible, neither is it possible I can go on in my daily path of duty, until at least I have attempted to clear myself of the wrong I see you think me capable of. I have lived to see my fairest dreams vanish, and have bowed with submission to the will of One who is wiser than I,—have neither murmured nor fought against the burden God has seen fit to cast upon me, though it has been, nay, is, heavy and severe; and though my spirit has been sad and weary, cast down almost to the dust, yet I have had strength given me to fight against all repining, unthankful thoughts, and although not perhaps exactly satisfied with my lot in life, still I know it might be much worse; that many others suffer more than I do." And Amy's voice sank almost to a whisper, still and low. [118]

But Frances was in no way moved by it, and replied as hardly and tauntingly as before—

"Go on, pray, Miss Neville, or is this all you have to say?"

"All? Ah, no! I could talk for ever. My feelings have been pent up—kept back for days, weeks, months past. You have loosened them, and they must have sway. I cannot restrain them now. Oh, if you had ever felt as I have felt, you could never sit there so indifferently, and not feel some pity for me; have I not been as tenderly and delicately nurtured? as much love lavished on me? and yet it is all past and gone, and I am alone in the world. There is comfort in once again being able to talk—to tell of all that is binding my heart so tightly—burning my brain. I have shed tears, but they have brought no relief. I have pictured to myself happier days, such days of love and peace, but they have vanished from before me. I have dreamt pleasant dreams, but with the morning sun they too have disappeared, and all is cold, stern reality. Oh, I could talk for ever if I thought it would move you to think better of me." [119]

"You have my free permission to do so if this is what you come to ask; only you must excuse my being a careless or inattentive listener, as really your conversation interests me so little." [120]

"And are you so strangely devoid of pity, then, or is it because you do not think me worth any? Alas! alas! when rich I was courted, flattered, and even loved; now, as the poor governess, I am despised and deserted," and again Amy's voice was low and plaintive.

"I never had the pleasure of knowing you in those palmy days you speak of; as a governess of course you must not expect to find much pity; it would be just as well to leave the history of your reverses—I hate everything sorrowful—and return to the starting point of your conversation, my cousin."

"I will," replied Amy. "I met Mr. Charles Linchmore yesterday accidentally in the corridor, as I was returning from a fruitless search for Fanny; he saw that I had injured my hand, and simply asked to look at it, that was all; you came by just then; your manner—your words, Miss Strickland, gave me the impression that you had misjudged me, and I shrank from the feeling, and could not rest until I had explained how it all happened, thinking,—but it seems I was wrong,—that your kind, womanly feeling and pity would at once feel for me, seeing the delicate position I occupy in this house." [121]

But Amy's words only kindled the fire already smouldering in Frances' heart. Did they not recall to her remembrance the flower Charles had sent her? The embroidery he had taken? The hurt she had received from his horse? The interest he had afterwards taken in her welfare?

"I know you misjudged me, Miss Strickland; do not be afraid to say so."

"Afraid!" repeated Frances, scornfully, "No, you are mistaken; do you suppose I should consult your feelings?"

"No," replied Amy, sorrowfully, "I am sure you would not; I might have thought otherwise a few minutes ago, but now—"

"Now, I hope you are convinced that whatever I thought on the occasion referred to, I think still." [122]

"I am sorry," replied Amy, much in the same tone she had said it to Charles the day before, "because you are wrong."

"I am not. Do you suppose I am blind, and do not see the interest *he* takes in your welfare?"

"Scarcely more so than he would show to a stranger whose wrist had been injured partly from his

own fault in saying his horse was a quiet one, when the accident proved it to have been otherwise. Your manner, Miss Strickland, placed me in a very awkward position. Mr. Charles Linchmore noticed it as well as myself, and I think it irritated and annoyed him, but I, of course, had no right to feel hurt; I will try and act differently for the future."

But Frances answered not. Slowly her brow contracted—slowly her passion seemed to rise.

Suddenly she stood up and confronted her fancied rival, hatred, revenge, anger, by turns burning in her eyes, while at each sentence she uttered she stamped her foot impatiently, as if to give emphasis to what she said. [123]

"How dare you tell me what *he* thought of me? I don't believe a word of it! Do you suppose I am a simpleton? a fool? and cannot see that you care for him, perhaps love him; and would prejudice me against him, cause disunion if you could, but it is useless—utterly useless—for I love him, Miss Neville;—loved him long before you knew him—long before you ever saw him,—yes, you may stare; I am not ashamed to repeat it—loved him—worshipped him if you will. What is your love, compared to mine, but a paltry, insignificant, nameless thing? What is your love that it should be preferred before mine? You whom he has known only so short a time. There is nothing in the world I would not give up for him; home, everything: for what are they all in comparison to his love? There is nothing I would not do to win him; nothing too great a sacrifice,—his love would compensate for all, and more than all."

Amy stood as if thunderstruck, while Frances, who had paused for a moment, went madly on. The ice was broken,—Amy knew of her love, she was glad of it, and cared not what she said. [124]

"You talk of pity for your feelings: what are they in comparison to mine? You have never seen him you love, deserting, forsaking you for another. You have never seen his love grow colder and colder, his eye less bright when it met yours, and his smile less kind; you have never felt the cold touch of the hand that once warmly pressed yours, or found that your words have been spoken to careless ears, your conversation listened to heedlessly—indifferently; when before, every word that fell from your lips was waited for with impatient eagerness; you have never known the bitterness of estranged love; you have never known what it is to feel that all your deep strong love is unsought, unvalued, uncared for, that nothing, not even all your tenderness can recall the heart that once loved, once beat for you alone. You talk of sorrows. What are your sorrows compared to mine? You talk of trials; have you ever been tried like this?" [125]

Frances stopped, overcome by her emotion, and wept violently and passionately; but her tears were caused more by the angry vehemence of her manner than from sorrow.

Who could have believed that the pale proud girl that nothing seemed to animate, nothing seemed to rouse, had such deep strong feelings within her? that beneath that cold, proud demeanour, fiery, unruly passions lay sleeping, requiring but a touch to call them forth with angry violence.

"Miss Strickland," said Amy, gently and pityingly placing her hand on her arm, "believe me, I never suspected, never guessed all this, or I should have made some excuse, some allowance for the manner in which you spoke to us on that day."

"To *us*," exclaimed Francis, as she dashed away the soft hand, "already you talk of him so; perhaps he has already told you he loves you, and when next you meet it will be to triumph over me, and talk with pity of her you have supplanted." [126]

"No, never! Miss Strickland," replied Amy quickly; "you wrong me, I never could do so; pity you I certainly should; but triumph in your sorrow! Never! your suspicion is unjust, you wrong me, you do indeed!"

"And what if I do wrong you? there is no great harm in that. But I do not judge you harshly; I know you well enough; I know you will glory in being able to say you have supplanted proud Frances Strickland."

"Again let me assure you such will never be the case; from my heart I pity, will keep with you, if you will let me, and if he cares not for you, strive to lead your thoughts from him, and help you to conquer your love and learn if possible that there are other things to strive for besides his love, things that ought never to be lost sight of."

"And pray what may these wonderful things be?" asked she sarcastically.

"Your own self-respect, and the esteem of those around you." [127]

"Self-respect! Esteem! Am I a child that you pretend to teach me? Did I think myself deficient in morals I should not come to Miss Neville to learn them."

"I do not pretend to teach you, Miss Strickland, neither do I wish to intrude my advice where I see it is not wanted."

"You do well. I want neither advice nor assistance from any one. My mind is fully made up how to act, I will enter heart and soul into it, and it will be strange if I do not succeed; so you had best, of all my *friends*," and Frances dwelt contemptuously on the last word, "wish me success."

"I am in total ignorance as to what your plans are; and therefore am not able to give any opinion on the subject."

"I shall be delighted to unravel them: it is but fair we should start together in the race we are to run."

"You are mistaken, Miss Strickland. There is no race to run. I shall never strive to win the love of one who cares not for me; besides I want it not. Mr. Charles Linchmore is,—can never be, anything to me; we are friends; nothing more; you have deceived yourself in imagining otherwise. I will never wilfully or deliberately deviate from the path of duty my conscience points out as the right and safe one to follow." [128]

"Neither do I intend to; my conscience tells me Charles once cared for me; he cannot have forgotten me, have ceased to love me altogether; his love is only estranged for a time, not alienated for ever."

"I trust it may be so, and that if he ever cared for you—"

"Ever cared for me?" exclaimed Frances, "I tell you he loved me. Yes," added she passionately, "and his love shall return. Oh! I will enter heart and soul into it, he must—nay shall love me again. That you, meek and passionless as you are, love him, I wonder not; but that he should return your love? it must not! shall not! cannot be! I will move heaven and earth to aid me; I will humble my pride, sacrifice my ambition, all! all! I will suffer degradation, poverty, such as you complain of, all for him; and when at last he finds out, as he must, how I have loved him, knows all my heart's devotion, all its deep tenderness; I feel and know he will love me again as of old, as I know he once did. It cannot be that I should be doomed to a life of misery, without one bright ray to cheer the darkness of my lot, one bright spot to lighten my days." [129]

"It is a sad life," replied Amy, "the one you have pictured, and the only one I have to look forward to."

"You!" cried Frances in the same passionate tone, "you! what matters it? Your love is but a child's love, your love is but a name. Oh, would," and she clasped her hands eagerly together, "would I could tell him—would he could know the value of the heart he rejects—what deep earnest love burns there for him. And he will know it, he shall know that the heart of proud Frances Strickland is all his own; then he will, he must, despise the love of such a weak, simple girl." [130]

"I love him not," replied Amy, while her face and even neck crimsoned with the words.

"Talk not to me!" replied Frances, wildly. "I tell you it shall be so; the day shall come when he shall spurn you from him, cast away your love—scorn it—trample upon it. I tell you his love shall be mine, wholly, entirely mine, and none other's. You shall never be his. You think, perhaps, that the means to attain this end will be difficult and impossible. I tell you if there be means on earth to accomplish it—it shall be done. I will thwart all your fine plans; when you think yourself most secure, I will step in like a dark cloud, and hang about your path, hurling all your fond schemes to the ground. If he is not mine, he shall be no other's. Go! leave me."

"No, Frances Strickland, I will not, cannot leave you with such hot, revengeful feelings warring in your heart. I would have you think otherwise than what you do before I go. You are speaking in haste and passion and are scarcely aware of what you are saying. When the present feelings which now agitate you pass away, cooler moments will succeed; you will then be sorry I am gone, and that you cannot recall what you have said." [131]

"Never! never!" cried Frances angrily and vehemently. "I will do as I have said, I will enter heart and soul into it, and since you have dared to love him, so I will ruin you if I can in his eyes."

"Shame on you, Miss Strickland, for so far forgetting your womanly feelings as to seek to injure one who has never intentionally done you harm. Shame on you for encouraging such revengeful feelings and badness of heart; for striving to render another as unhappy as you are yourself. All womankind, if they knew it, would think ill of you, and hold you in utter contempt. As for me, I scorn your words—your acts—and care little for the premeditated evil you threaten me with. Yes, I the poor dependant, separated from home,—mother,—friends, with none to help and befriend me, save One who has said He will be a father to the fatherless. Strong in his strength, and confident in my own purity of heart, I reject your words—your threats—with scorn, and pity you!" [132]

How beautiful Amy looked, as for a moment she stood confronting Frances with all the strong emotions she felt flashing in her soft eyes, and chasing one another by turns over her face.

If a look could have turned Frances Strickland from her purpose, surely she would there and then have repented; but there was no sign of wavering, no pitying expression in her eyes, and turning away without another word, Amy left the room.

As the door closed upon her, the revengeful, un pitying expression died away from Frances' face, and burying her face in the soft crimson cushions of the chair, she wept, as only women can weep, passionately—convulsively. [133]

After a while, she slowly raised herself and while sobs shook her frame, murmured with difficulty.

"Is it possible that I can have lost his love? Has he indeed taken it from me and given it to that girl? My God! that I should have lived to see it. Was ever anguish equal to mine? A drowning man catching at a straw is an enviable fate compared to mine; for I have not a straw even to lay hold of. To think that I should live to see myself deserted—cast aside without a thought. Oh! if I could only cast him off as easily, and revenge myself by weaning her love—for I know she must love

him—poor and pitiful as it is, from him; so that he might feel some of the woe I suffer. If I could only do that. But no, I cannot—I cannot; I must love him."

Again she wept bitter, passionate tears, then went on despairingly.

"I cannot have been deceived; surely he did love me? I cannot have fancied it; oh! no, no; I am sure he loved me until he saw her. Oh! why did he ever see her? Why did they ever meet? And why was I so angry and proud with him when I found them talking together?" [134]

She stopped again. Then went on bitterly and gloomily, while she clasped her hands tightly together over her bosom as if to check the tumult within, and stifle the sobs that shook her.

"I was proud—too proud. Yes it must be so,—he often said I was proud, but he shall say so no longer; to him at least, I will be a different being. Even if he never loved me, I will make him love me now—I will be all softness, gentleness, without a sign of the burning passions I feel. But should he speak of her?" and Frances tossed back her hair from her forehead impatiently, "yes, even then I will smother all pride, all angry feeling. I will win him yet, if he is to be won; no obstacle shall stop me. He shall learn to think me warm-hearted and generous, though to others I still seem cold and proud. Yes, I will rouse myself; I will no longer despond. I will cast aside all doubts and dismal forebodings. I will triumph over her yet, and trample her under foot; I wonder I could be so foolish as to weep," and, hurriedly rising, she bathed her eyes, so as to efface all trace of the emotion she had undergone, and then once more summoned Jane to her presence. [135]

And Amy?

She went at once to her own room, sad and heavy at heart, and pondered long and deeply on all that Frances had said, and dreaded to think what might be the end of her plots and machinations. She foresaw she would leave no stone unturned to gain her end; and what might she not urge, what stories invent? Her hope,—all hope of softening Frances' heart and exonerating herself from blame, had failed utterly. The interview from which she had hoped so much had done harm, and evidently roused angry, jealous feelings, which Amy would believe and persuade herself there was no foundation for. She would not allow, for a moment, that Charles Linchmore had a thought for her, and as to loving her, that could not be. Amy even felt vexed and angry, and indignant with Frances, for so insisting upon it. She wondered what Frances would tell him, when next they met; and could not help feeling an undefinable dread—a sensation of coming evil. Suppose she should tell him that, though unsought, Amy's love was his, the bare supposition of what he would think brought tears into her eyes, but she hastily brushed them away, for Amy was not one to give way to needless sorrow, and tried to smile and think how foolish it was to weep, when there was yet no cause for it. [136]

Yet, as she arrived at this conclusion, Frances' evident dislike to her, combined with her passionate, revengeful temper rose up before her; and what might they not lead her to do; "and he," murmured Amy mournfully, "does not know half she is capable of, and will believe anything she says of me. How I wish we had never met! How I wish she had never loved him!" [137]

Poor Amy! she scarce knew what she wished, or what to think. One moment she was confident, at another she doubted, and trembled she scarce knew why.

CHAPTER V. [138]

DOUBTS AND FEARS.

"Why so pale and wan, fond lover?
Prithee, why so pale?
Will, when looking well can't move her,
Looking ill prevail?
Prithee, why so pale?"

Why so dull and mute, young sinner?
Prithee, why so mute?
Will, when speaking well can't win her,
Saying nothing do 't?
Prithee, why so mute?"

SUCKLING.

"The wrist is better," was Dr. Bernard's next report of Amy; "but Miss Neville is ill and feverish, and must be kept perfectly quiet."

So there were no more lessons for some days; while Julia installed herself by Amy's bedside as head nurse, aided by Mary; and sometimes Mrs. Hopkins came, bringing a jelly or some nicety she had prepared with her own hands to please the invalid; Amy, therefore, was not dull, with so many friends to cheer and take care of her. [139]

During these days Charles was restless and unhappy; was it not partly his fault she was ill? How he accused himself of being the author of all the mischief that had accrued from the simple fact of having allowed her to have her own way, when he might have so easily prevented it; nor was he in any way consoled when Julia said to him, "Well, you must confess, Miss Neville has nerve

now, and is not afraid of her own shadow; for I have never heard her once complain of pain; she bears it like a martyr."

How he envied Dr. Bernard his privilege of seeing and speaking to Amy, and would have waylaid him at every visit if he had only dared. To ask news of his patient would betray too evident an interest in her welfare; so although Charles saw him come and go every day, yet he was obliged to wait patiently, sometimes for hours, until he could catch sight of Anne. Anne, who kept out of his way as much as she could, who had determined on having nothing to do in the matter, now found herself dragged into his confidence, whether she would or no. How she regretted the curiosity that had induced her to join him that day in the corridor; if it had not been for that she would have been free now, and not troubled with the knowledge of the fact that he had certainly fallen in love irretrievably with his sister-in-law's governess; but then he looked so miserable and unhappy, Anne could not help pitying him, she was too kind-hearted not to do that. So every day she gave him news of Amy, and consoled herself with thinking things had gone too far for any interference of hers to do any good; but, at the same time, she would be the bearer of no kind messages, no books, no flowers; and Charles often flew into a rage, and they parted bad friends in consequence, only to find him awaiting her the next day as anxiously as before. [140]

Anne wondered sometimes how it would all end, and whether Amy loved him or no, and whether Frances guessed how things were going on. Anne did not like Frances, and had often felt sorry at Charles's seeming partiality for her, and thought how unsuited they were to make each other happy; and yet only last year everyone had looked forward to an engagement between them as almost a settled thing. How devoted he had been; but then perhaps he had found out what a temper Frances had, so proud and jealous—so imperious a will. Men did not like that, so she concluded that during the few months that had intervened, he had thought better of it and changed his mind. Besides, they were cousins, so there was an excuse for his paying her more attention than he would have done had there been no relationship between them. [141]

Amy's illness was more of mind than body; she heard old kind Dr. Bernard say so, and knew it well herself, and tried hard and earnestly to rouse and be herself again, but all to no purpose; it would not do. She had worried and fretted, and thought, and allowed her mind to dwell too much on the eventful interview she had had with Frances, to shake off so easily the weight that was pressing on her mind, and sinking her spirits. Julia was kindness itself, and did all she could to comfort and cheer her, but then she knew nothing of Frances' unkind suspicions and unjust opinions, or of the fear Amy felt lest she should tell Charles what she so erroneously and determinately adhered to, namely, that her love was his, although unsought, unasked, and unwished for. [142]

It was this fear kept Amy ill. If she could only have unburthened her mind to Julia and told her that! But she could not, and so she lay quiet, very quiet, and did all they wished her to do, those kind nurses; but still she did not get well, and it was nearly a fortnight before Dr. Bernard pronounced her better, and in a fair way of recovery.

Then, as she grew convalescent, she dreaded the idea of meeting Charles Linchmore again, lest he should have heard and believed Frances. How she wished his leave had expired and he were gone, so that she might never see him again, never hear of him, and she blushed painfully one day when Anne happened to mention his name, to the no small astonishment of the sharp-sighted Anne, who noted it at once, and drew her own conclusions therefrom. [143]

In the meantime Frances had not been idle. Determined on gaining her end, she went cunningly and cautiously to work, and while Amy was ill the field was all her own.

First, she must find out how much of Charles's heart had been given to Amy; so, controlling her feelings by a strong effort of will, which made her appear a little colder than she really was, and was worthy of a better cause, she led him to talk of Amy, and wept afresh at each new proof he gave of how much he thought of and cared for her. Still she did not, would not despair. Like all the Linchmores, Charles was proud. If she could only touch that; only rouse a jealous feeling within him, the battle would be won. [144]

How well she remembered his hasty exit from the school-room and the angry, jealous expression of his face. Was it not that that had first led her to think he cared for another, and that his love was lost to her, or nearly so?

All the fears Amy was suffering and tormenting herself with were groundless. Not for worlds would Frances have allowed Charles to think Amy cared for him, or returned his love. No, that would take him from her for ever, and oh! the anguish that thought cost her. So while Amy was fidgeting and worrying herself, Frances was trying all in her power to lead Charles to think that Amy's heart was Mr. Vavasour's, and as Amy grew better, and able to resume studies again, so Charles became more depressed and irritable, and more unlike his former self than ever.

Amy no longer passed her evenings upstairs alone, but came down into the drawing-room. Mr. Linchmore would have it so. Dr. Bernard had said her illness was principally caused by anxiety of mind, and Miss Tremlow had hinted her fears that the governess was too much alone for one so young, so he mildly but gently insisted upon it, overruling Amy's scruples and his own. [145]

This great change in her life at Brampton was viewed very differently by those most interested in her. Frances hated it, as bringing her and Charles on more intimate terms of friendship, and he himself hated it, as giving Vavasour an opportunity of paying her more attention than before.

Robert Vavasour was the only one pleased with the arrangement. Knowing nothing, suspecting nothing, of what was passing around him, he was glad to see her, and sat down by her and told her so the very first evening she came down, much to Charles's intense disgust, who kept sullenly aloof, in a wretchedly bad temper, which not even his cigar or Bob could dissipate or soothe, although he angrily left the room and had recourse to both; but neither had any good effect, his mind was too thoroughly engrossed with the governess. [146]

Another consequence of Amy's evenings being spent downstairs was that she had little time for writing home. Often instead of the four closely-written crossed sheets of paper, only one found its way into the envelope, and that one sometimes scarcely filled, and hastily written. But Mrs. Neville never complained; she fully believed that as Amy said, so it was; not the will but the time was wanting.

Sometimes there was dancing of an evening, and then Amy was expected to contribute her share to the evening's amusement by playing the piano for the dancers, who never seemed to tire. Sometimes her head ached sadly, and her fingers grew quite stiff, and she stumbled dreadfully over the notes, but no one heeded it, or seemed to mind it, and she played on until relieved by Julia or Anne, who soon learned to guess the true reason of the false notes. [147]

The tight fitting black dress and little plain collar, that had often annoyed Anne, were now laid aside in the evening for a plain white muslin, made high, without ornament or ribbon of any kind, confined at the waist by a broad band. It was simple, but suited her well; and many a proud beauty, conscious of her own loveliness, would have fallen into the shade beside the governess in her plain white muslin.

There was a dignity as well as beauty in Amy: the one attracted, the other commanded the respect of everyone. There was something truly feminine about her—grace in every movement, sweetness in every smile, sad as her smiles were now; and her manner was so devoid of affectation, yet so soft and winning, what wonder that she was loved by some, and hated as a dangerous rival by others.

Amy sat at a small table writing home, her head bent gracefully forward, and her fair fingers guiding the pen rapidly over the paper, as she added a few lines to the hastily-written note begun that morning. Her hair—it looked almost golden by the fire-light—was plainly braided, though the brush had scarcely been able to smooth the waving luxuriant masses—and wound simply round a comb at the back of her small head—'Madonna-wise,' as Charles had once said. [148]

Her naturally fair complexion—so fair, that it almost rivalled the clear white muslin dress—was set off by a slight colour which tinged her cheeks, caused, perhaps, by the eagerness with which she wrote; for Amy knew full well, that the dinner over, she would have to go below, with no chance of finishing her letter that night, for the morrow's early post.

But now her task is done; a pleasant task for her, so filled as her heart is with love for her fond and anxious mother. A few tears glistened in her eyes, as she sealed and directed the letter, and, "I wish dear Mamma would write to me," fell scarcely audible from her lips.

It was nearly a month since Mrs. Neville had written; not once during all the time of Amy's illness; but then she knew nothing of that, Amy never mentioned it; it would have made her mother too anxious and unhappy. [149]

How slowly the days crept by! and how anxiously every morning Amy looked forward to the afternoon, when the postman made his appearance at the park; yet each day she was disappointed, Mrs. Neville did not write.

Mrs. Elrington wrote constantly, at her friend's earnest request and wish, so she said. But did this satisfy Amy? No; she longed once again to see her dear parent's handwriting; she felt an aching void at the heart; and was most anxious and nervous, fearing she knew not what, whilst a thousand wild suggestions filled her brain, and sad thoughts trembled in her heart.

Amy's desk was scarcely shut ere Mrs. Hopkins came in. She hesitated half-way between the door and the table, uncertain whether to advance or not, but Amy's voice soon assured her.

"Come in, Nurse," said she, "and sit down. I am not busy; I have been writing, but my letter is finished, so I am quite ready to talk to you, which will be far pleasanter to me than sitting alone." [150]

"Thank you, Miss; it is so long since I had a talk with you—not since your illness; I hope you are feeling well and strong again?"

"Quite, thank you; I am entirely out of the doctor's hands now, and hope I shall not want him again for a long time. How are you and Mason getting on? more amicably, I hope?"

"No, I can't say we are; her head is filled with French nonsense. It was a thousand pities Madam ever took her to France, she has never been the same woman since—such airs and graces; such bends and courtesies! such twistings of her body! and as for her waist, why it's just half the size it was; I wonder she doesn't burst sometimes—I'm sure her face looks red enough, and all through being squeezed so tight; but there, it's no business of mine, I only wonder Madam puts up with it. [151]

"Then as to master," continued Mrs. Hopkins, "I never did see a gentleman so altered as he is. I thought the staying at Brampton, and having company here, would have enlivened him; but Lord

bless you, Miss, he is worse a great deal. He always was grave, like; but then he'd a pleasant smile and good word for everybody in the house; but now—" Nurse sighed, stroked and doubled up the corner of her apron, and looked thoughtful.

"And now?" asked Amy, enquiringly.

"Now, Miss, he's quite altered, quite changed—melancholy, like. 'Tis true he says, 'Good morning, Mrs. Hopkins;' but that's all. The butler tells me he seldom smiles with the company; but sits and talks like a gentleman absent in his mind."

"You surely must be mistaken, Nurse," said Amy, thoughtfully, "I see no difference."

"Very likely not, Miss; but we servants see it. There's scarce anything ever goes on amiss in a house that servants don't notice it. I don't pretend to know why master's changed; but certain as I am sitting here, he is changed. May-be he has something on his mind. How different his father was. God rest his soul, poor old gentleman." [152]

"Was his father much liked? was he popular at Brampton? for all seem to respect and love the present Mr. Linchmore."

"He never lived long enough down here for people to know enough about him to like him. He wasn't over and above fond of his lady, nor of her doings neither—so I've heard my mother say. He was, by all accounts, a very wild gentleman in his youth."

"And old Mrs. Linchmore, his wife. Why was he not fond of her?"

"She was a fearful woman!" replied Mrs. Hopkins, drawing her chair nearer Amy's; "very handsome in her youth. Mr. Linchmore married her for her beauty, and sorry enough he was for it afterwards. That's her picture hangs over the chimney-piece in the dining room, and a beautiful face it has; only too proud and stormy, like, to my mind." [153]

"Did you ever see her?"

"Yes, Miss. I mind her just before she died. Six months before that happened, the housekeeper, who was a friend of my mother's, got me the under housemaid's place here. I seem to see the lady now, tall and straight as a needle, with such a stately step and proud look; her eyes bright, black, and piercing as a hawk's, although she was gone forty and more. I used to tremble whenever she looked at me, and many's the time I've run for the life of me down the long gallery to get out of her way. Oh! she was a fearful lady!"

"How so?" inquired Amy, hoping to gain some intelligence as to why her room was so pertinaciously kept closed.

"They say, Miss," replied Nurse, glancing uneasily about her, "that the house was haunted when she was alive. I can't say as ever I saw anything; but I believe it all the same, and so did my fellow-servants, though it was never whispered between us; certainly she was no good christian any more than Tabitha, her maid, who had lived with her ever since she was a girl, and knew all her secrets; and would be muttering to herself all day long. This was a strange house then, and I don't wonder the villagers were 'frighted to come near it." [154]

"Why so? surely a woman could do them no harm?"

"Well, Miss, they said she could, and did do a deal of harm to them she didn't like; and then there was that bad story they had about her husband's cousin."

"What was that, Nurse?"

"I can't scarce tell you all the rights of it, Miss, only what I've heard people say, as you see it happened afore my time; but 'twas all about a cousin of her husband's, who had been adopted by his mother. My old mistress was fearful jealous of her, as well she might be if all accounts was true about her gentle, loving ways. But there, they didn't save her from being suspected by Mrs. Linchmore of carrying on at a shameful, scandalous rate with her husband, Mr. Linchmore. Poor young lady! She disappeared one night, and 'twas given out that she had fled from the Park to hide her shame. But there, people ain't blind; and then she never came back again, and so the villagers whispered 'twas a darker deed than that took her away so sudden." [155]

"But what did Mrs. Linchmore's husband say?"

"He and his wife had fine words about it, Miss, and he went off soon after and left her for good. But there worse than that happened; for his poor mother, her as adopted Miss Mary—that was the poor young lady's name, Miss—broke her heart about it all, and died. She was a nice, good old lady, and very fond of Miss Mary, and on her death-bed she told my mother she died believing the young lady innocent; and no one was ever to believe anything else until they saw Miss Mary again, and then all wou'd come right, and everybody hear the truth. But there, we never did hear the truth, for we never saw Miss Mary again; so it was just as well the old lady was took when she was, and went so happy and peaceful." [156]

"But her daughter-in-law, your old mistress, what became of her? I think she died suddenly, did she not?"

"Very, Miss Neville. She would have no one but Tabitha to wait on her when she was ill; but none of us cared much about that; and they used to abuse one another terrible sometimes. It was a

long time before she'd see the doctor, and then she wouldn't take his medicine; we found all the bottles ranged like a regiment of soldiers in the cupboard after she died—not even the corks out of them, or a drop of medicine taken. When she got worse she wouldn't lay in the bed, but had the mattress moved off on to the floor. She died that very night quite sudden, for none of us thought her so bad as that, not even the doctor; but there, he was quite a young man, and I mind well his coming in the morning. She hadn't been so well the evening before, so he came quite early, as I was cleaning down the hall. I went upstairs with him, and knocked twice at my mistress's door, but nobody answered; so the doctor opened it, and went in, and I followed, terribly frightened, but so curious like, I couldn't keep back anyhow." [157]

Nurse paused, and then sunk her voice almost to a whisper as she went on,

"Oh! what a terrible sight we saw. My mistress was quite dead; one of her hands clutching the bed clothes, the other thrown above her head, and closed so tight, it looked as though the nails were buried in the flesh. Her eyes were wide open, and a frightful look her face had, as though she had died in torments.—She was an awful corpse;" and Nurse shuddered, and her hands trembled as she stirred up the fire.

"But where was Tabitha? How was it she had not called for anyone?" [158]

"She was lying by the side of the bed on the floor, and at first I thought she was dead, too; but she came to life again when we carried her into the open air, and a scared look she had when she opened her eyes; but it was weeks before she got well again, and then she left, and none of us felt sorry, I can tell you."

"Did she give you no account of the lady's death?"

"The doctors said she died in a fit, but we all knew her end was something awful, for one of the maids who had been put to sleep in a room near, in case she might be wanted, told us she heard in the dead of the night an awful noise in Mrs. Linchmore's room—it woke her; and then a loud talking; as if my mistress was angry about something, and presently a loud scream and laughter; and then she was so frightened she dropped off insensible, like, and didn't come to herself until she heard us all astir with Tabitha in the morning." [159]

"Where was Mr. Linchmore?"

"He was away abroad somewhere with his two little boys; and didn't get here till three or four days after her death. We all thought he would shut up the house and go abroad to foreign parts again, as he had done for years past; but no, he had it all fresh painted and papered; all except his wife's two rooms,—there's a dressing-room adjoining, but only the one door for the two—he never went near them again I believe, but can't say for certain, as I married and left the place. My mistress was buried in great state, ever so many carriages and grand folks,—some of them from London,—and a mighty lot of beautiful feathers nodding and bobbing over the hearse; but for all that we wern't sorry to lose her, we all feared her, and though a crowd assembled in the churchyard, 'twas out of curiosity, many of the villagers never having seen such a grand funeral before; there wasn't, so I heard my old man say, a wet eye amongst them, not even the master's, and as for the company of mourners, Lor' bless you, Miss, they laughed and joked over their luncheon afterwards as though they had been to a wedding." [160]

"Has Mrs. Linchmore's room never been occupied since her death?"

"Never, Miss, that I know of. I don't think my old master ever went into it again; my present master don't seem to love it neither, and as for Madam, she says it's the worst room in the house; all old fashioned and gloomy."

"I should like to see the room some day, Nurse, will you show it to me?"

"I, Miss? I wouldn't go into it for any money. John at the lodge says he's seen a queer sort of light there lately; bright and blue, like. Half the maids in the house are talking about it; and go about in couples to turn the beds down. But he only saw it once, and then for only half a minute, so perhaps it was his fancy."

"Is the door kept locked?" [161]

"I shouldn't like to go to sleep if it wasn't. Yes, Miss, the key's kept down in my room below. I couldn't bide comfortable in bed with it in my room above stairs, at night. No, I was mortal afraid of the old lady when she was alive, and couldn't face her dead anyhow, and she such an awful corpse too."

Just at this moment Anne, who had entered the room unperceived, clapped her hands. Nurse nearly dropped off her chair with fright; even Amy was startled.

"Now, that serves you right!" exclaimed the intruder, "for talking about such horrible things. Mrs. Hopkins, let me put your cap straight; now don't tremble so, and shake your head, or I shall put it on awry,—there that will do; and now come away, Miss Neville; who would have believed you were so superstitious? Imagine Miss Tremlow's astonishment when she hears it. 'Miss Bennet,' said she, just now, 'if you are going upstairs do let Miss Neville come down with you; and open the door *ve—ry—gent—ly*, as I dare say she is busy writing home.' Instead of which my gentleness nearly frightened you into fits, and instead of writing you are listening to all kinds of horrors." [162]

"What a mad young lady she is," soliloquised Mrs. Hopkins, as the two girls left the room together, "I declare for the moment I thought it was my old mistress herself; she used to clap her hands just that way when she was vexed. I'll go below, it's lonely here now Miss Neville's gone. She's a sweet young lady and deserves a better husband than that Mr. Vavasour, who John says is hankering after her, and makes eyes when Madam isn't looking. There's no good in a man as keeps company with two young women at once, and one of them married too, he ought to be ashamed of himself; but there, I suppose it's only what the gentry call flirting. Ah! well, for my part I don't like it; and how Miss Neville's mother would vex if she knew it. I musn't forget her letter neither, but'll put it with the rest for the post; and that reminds me I never gave her the one that came for her this afternoon, but I'll lay it on her dressing table, she'll be sure to see it when she goes to bed. Poor dear! I suppose she'll be kept up pianning it till her fingers are most ready to drop off." [163]

CHAPTER VI.

 [164]

THE WARNING.

"Oh! life is like the summer rill, where weary daylight
dies;
We long for morn to rise again, and blush along the
skies;
For dull and dark that stream appears, whose waters in
the day,
All glad, in conscious sunniness, went dancing on their
way.
But when the glorious sun hath 'woke, and looked upon
the earth,
And over hill and dale there float the sounds of human
mirth;
We sigh to see day hath not brought its perfect light to
all,
For with the sunshine on those waves, the silent
shadows fall."

CAROLINE NORTON.

Frances Strickland was seated at the piano, singing, when Anne and Amy entered the drawing-room.

"I wonder who asked or persuaded her to sing, for she always requires an immense amount of pressing. However, so much the better for you, as she will, I doubt not, remain perched on the music-stool half the night," said Anne.

Amy sat down in her usual place, near the window, so as to be almost hidden by the heavy drapery of the curtain, and mechanically her eyes wandered in search of Mr. Linchmore, as her thoughts dwelt on Mrs. Hopkin's words, "Master has something on his mind." [165]

Was it so? Was it possible? and if so, why was he unhappy? Young and inexperienced in the ways of the world, Amy had no suspicion of the real cause of Mr. Linchmore's sadness; in fact, as she told Mrs. Hopkins, she had not remarked it. Why should he be changed? What should he be sad about?

Often, in after days, Amy wished she had never found out the dreadful cause of this alteration.

Mr. Linchmore held a book in his hand, but his eyes had wandered from its pages. Amy followed their direction.

At the farthest end of the room sat Mrs. Linchmore, and by her side Mr. Strickland. Listlessly she sat, and listlessly she appeared to be listening to her companion's words, although he seemed to be exerting himself in an unusual manner to please her, not a yawn, or symptom of fatigue about him. They seemed to have changed places, the weariness all on her part; she was evidently inattentive and absent. [166]

Robert Vavasour leant against the back of the sofa on which she sat; like Mr. Linchmore, he held a book in his hand. Was he reading it? No. Impossible! the leaves were turned over carelessly, and at random, two or three together, not one by one.

A little farther off sat Anne, laughing and chatting merrily with Mr. Hall, while he was bending low, and speaking, in a soft, subdued voice, such things as only those who love know how to speak—Anne looking pert, and trying to appear indifferent to his words.

"He loves her!" thought Amy, as she watched them, "and she? yes, I think she does, or will love him too. How happy she looks, not a cloud to darken her bright path; everything is smooth for her, and appears in gay, golden colours. Happy Anne! May the light that sparkles in your eyes never be quenched, nor your merry laugh be chased away by the sad, sorrowful look that tells of the heart's best hopes faded away, and bright days gone never to return." [167]

Again Amy looked towards Mrs. Linchmore. Robert Vavasour had taken the vacant seat by her

side. Alfred Strickland was gone.

How different she appeared! No longer listless or inattentive, her face was brightened by smiles. She was all animation, talking and laughing almost as merrily as Anne.

How sad it is to see those we love smiling on others as they never smile on us, or whilst our hearts are overcharged with sorrow and heaviness, theirs are careless and unconcerned, insensible to our misery, if not even mocking our anguish. Then it is that in bitterness of heart we could lie down and die, or at least weep drops of agony, to think that our love could be so lightly valued, or we ourselves so neglected and forsaken.

Mrs. Linchmore knew her husband's eyes were watching her, knew, too, partly the agony of his heart, yet she trifled on, caring little for the feelings of him whose slightest wish she should have studied to please, and striven to obey. [168]

Mr. Linchmore closed his book. It accidentally fell to the ground. His wife,—whose attention had been seemingly engrossed by Robert Vavasour, nevertheless watched her husband uneasily. When would his patience be exhausted? When would his pride take the alarm? Now! thought she, as she started at the slight noise the book made as it reached the ground. Calling to remembrance her husband's previous suspicions, she asked Mr. Vavasour to beg Miss Neville to play for a dance.

He was at Amy's side as Mr. Linchmore rose from his chair. Very stiffly she received him.

"Does Miss Neville intend retiring from observation all night? It was with some difficulty I found her out in this out of the way corner."

"This is my usual seat when I am not required to play. I should have thought Mr. Vavasour had seen me here too often to have searched for me elsewhere." [169]

"You are right, I did not look for you elsewhere. What I meant to say was, that I wished you would take a seat somewhere, where one might catch a glimpse of you, instead of beneath the shade of this detestable window curtain. Have I got into a scrape by so wishing?"

"Certainly not," replied Amy.

"You think too little of self, Miss Neville. Look at Miss Strickland, who always plants herself in the most prominent position, so that no one can fail remarking her the moment they set foot into a room."

"Do you not think it is rather her beauty strikes the eye of a stranger?"

"It may be so. I do not admire her."

"Not admire her?" exclaimed Amy, "I must condemn your bad taste, surely everyone must think her beautiful."

"Because everyone thinks so, is that a reason why I should?" [170]

"No, but most men admire beauty. It seems so strange you should not."

"I have the bad taste not to care about mere beauty such as Miss Strickland's; she is too proud, and, if I mistake not, her temper is none of the sweetest; no, I shall not choose my wife for her pretty face."

"Perhaps you seek a miracle of perfection, mind and face both."

"No miracle, Miss Neville, for I have seen both."

He looked at her so earnestly, that Amy felt confused, while Charles, who savagely watched them at a distance, felt as surly as a bear, and as miserable as he well could be. He could stand it no longer.

"Miss Neville," said he approaching them, "Has Vavasour given you Mrs. Linchmore's message?"

"No. I quite forgot it," replied he, "It was something about dancing wasn't it? but I for one don't care a rush about it." [171]

"Because you do not, is no reason why others should not," retorted Charles, turning on his heel.

"The next time a message is entrusted to Mr. Vavasour," said Amy rising, "I hope he will not forget to deliver it. I will ask Mrs. Linchmore if it is her wish I should play."

"Stay, Miss Neville, I can answer the question She does—but—"

"Thank you, I need no further commands," replied Amy proudly.

As they left the recess, Alfred Strickland,—who sitting close by had overheard almost every word,—turned lazily round on the sofa.

"Well done for the schoolmistress!" muttered he, "by Jove! how she snubbed Vavasour. That last was a settler!"

Robert Vavasour leant over Amy as she arranged the music and commenced playing.

"You misjudge me, Miss Neville; but I hope a time will come when you will think better of me."

"I do not think badly of you," replied Amy as he turned away.

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"Thoroughly snubbed! old fellow, eh?" said Alfred Strickland, as Vavasour passed the sofa where he still sat, "never mind, cheer up! and better luck next time!"

"Did you speak, sir?" exclaimed Vavasour fiercely.

"No, no, nothing of any consequence. It's chilly, don't you find it so?"

"Very," replied Robert, as he passed on.

Had Mr. Linchmore, as Mrs. Hopkins said, anything on his mind, or was he blind to all that was passing around him? Partly so; he had seen Vavasour's flirtation with his wife with uneasiness and displeasure, determined in his own mind to put a stop to it; but the scene suddenly changed. Miss Neville appeared, and he immediately transferred his attentions to her, or certainly a great part of them.

For a short time Mr. Linchmore was puzzled, but ere long he set him down as that most selfish of human beings, one who systematically storms a woman's heart until it succumbs to him, and is all his own, when gradually and quietly he releases himself from his victim, and leaves her heart to break or recover as best it can.

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A female flirt is bad enough, but there are oftentimes excuses to be made for her. She becomes so from the force of circumstances, from undue admiration or a natural love of it; from some secret sorrow, or unhappy home, made so by a husband's desertion, something there must be to urge her on.

But how many men glory in and boast of their conquests, and tell of the many hearts they have broken. How sad is the idea of some young girl, just entering life, made the sport of one of these. She surrenders her truthful, guileless heart, in all its first strong love, to him who she truly believes is all her young fancy ever pictured in her brightest dreams—all that is good and noble.

Too late she finds out her mistake, too late knows she has been deceived, and her heart trifled with. She becomes in her turn a flirt, and her heart hard and callous. The world is no longer in her eyes the bright world it was, but a hollow, heartless pageant.

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Mr. Linchmore liked Amy. Should such be her fate? Should he sit quietly by and see her heart thus sacrificed, her peace of mind so destroyed? God forbid! If he had the power to prevent it; it should never be. So he watched her and Mr. Vavasour narrowly, determined to warn her himself.

The grand piano Amy played on was so placed as to command a view of the dancers, as they flitted past her. Robert Vavasour, although he said he cared not a rush for it, was flying along in a waltz with Mrs. Linchmore. Somehow Amy did not like seeing him so soon with her again, she felt sorry; and her eyes involuntarily sought Mr. Linchmore, but she had not far to look, he was close beside her; and placed a chair as she finished playing.

"You must be tired, Miss Neville," he said kindly.

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"No; I am so accustomed to play, that I think the dancers would get tired before I should."

"My wife never tires."

"How beautiful she looks to-night!" said Amy.

Mrs. Linchmore was always well dressed; this evening, perhaps, more simply than usual. A rich white silk dress, fitting her to perfection, with a few scarlet roses in her hair and bosom.

"She grows more beautiful every day," replied he, sorrowfully. "Are you fond of gaiety, Miss Neville?"

"Yes, I think so, or fancy I should be. I have seen little of it; but it must be so pleasant to thoroughly enjoy oneself."

"I doubt if very many feel it to be thorough enjoyment; even balls and parties have their cares; but you would hardly think so to listen to the talking and merriment around."

Anne, at this moment, played a galop, and again Robert Vavasour whirled past with his hostess.

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"Mr. Vavasour dances well," was all the remark Mr. Linchmore made. "You appear well acquainted with him, Miss Neville. Is he an old acquaintance?"

"No. Oh, no!" replied Amy, hurriedly and confusedly.

"He is a man who soon ingratiates himself with the fair sex. Of a proud, reserved nature, a word from his lips is of more weight with them than half the good deeds of a better man. He is a man who could humbug the wisest, and flirt with the silliest; and without the slightest intention of losing his own heart, or becoming entangled himself. He is not a marrying man; and for that simple reason every girl will try to win his heart; or will fall into the snare he sets, believing that she is the chosen one, and that his iron will and heart has succumbed to her; and be naturally proud of her supposed conquest, until she finds out her mistake, as most assuredly she will."

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"I have warned her," thought Mr. Linchmore, as he left her, nor stayed to see the effect of his

words.

While Amy inwardly murmured, "I shall never fall into the snare."

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CHAPTER VII.

MISGIVINGS.

Gay fowlers at a flock of hearts;
Woodcocks to shun your snares have skill,
You show so plain, you strive to kill.
In love the heartless catch the game,
And they scarce miss, who never aim."

GREEN.

How often it happens that in realising our fondest hopes, we experience not the happiness we expected.

Each and all of us, at some unhappy period of our lives, have been led to exclaim, "Ah! if this state of uncertainty were but at an end, this suspense over. Let the worst come, we are prepared for it: it cannot make us more miserable than we are." Yet fortified as we deem ourselves against the worst, braced up as it were, and prepared for aught that may happen; how feeble we are, at the very best, when the ruin, sickness, death of those we love, or whatever sorrow it may be, overtakes us; how often—always—unequal to bear the blow. Then we sigh for our former state of uncertainty; it was bliss compared to our present grief, when, fancying ourselves prepared for the worst, gentle hope filled our hearts, and bade us look trustfully onwards for bright smiles, wreathed with roses; where, alas! we found only tears beneath a crown of thorns.

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"Such is life;
The distant prospect always seems more fair;
And when attained, another still succeeds,
Far fairer than before,—yet compassed round
With the same dangers and the same dismay;
And we poor pilgrims in this dreary maze,
Still discontented, chase the fairy form
Of unsubstantial happiness, to find,
When life itself is sinking in the strife,
'Tis but an airy bubble and a cheat."

Thus it was with Amy Neville. She had been uneasy and unhappy at not hearing from her mother; evil forebodings had filled her heart, and all kinds of imaginary fancies her brain. She had sighed again and again but for one short letter of explanation, clearing away her mother's mysterious silence, and lifting the veil that seemed to hang so gloomily and heavily between her and her home.

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It came. It had arrived the evening before. It was the letter Mrs. Hopkins had forgotten to give her, and had placed on her dressing table, and there Amy found it on retiring for the night.

How eagerly she seized and perused its contents, read and re-read every word of it, till her eyes ached and swam with tears, and she could no longer trace the handwriting on the sheet of paper. Then wearily she crept to bed, and placing the letter beneath her pillow, so as to be able to read it again the first thing in the morning, fell into a troubled sleep, with but one thought at her heart, and that one, that her beloved parent had been ill,—very ill.

The letter was from Mrs. Elrington, assuring her that although Mrs. Neville had been seriously ill, all danger was over now, and the invalid in a fair way of recovery; yet Amy, whose eyes were heavy with recent tears and unrefreshing rest, could scarcely reconcile to herself that it was so, and how her heart beat as she read an account of her mother's sufferings. How gladly would she have watched by the sick bed, and ministered to her relief. How gladly have shared with Mrs. Elrington in the kind attentions and unremitting care she knew she had bestowed on her good and gentle parent.

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Mrs. Elrington's letter was kindly and thoughtfully worded, well calculated to soothe and tranquillise an anxious daughter's heart.

Mrs. Neville, she said, had certainly been very ill, though not in any immediate danger. It had been her express wish throughout that Amy should not be told of her illness, as there was no necessity for her incurring an expensive journey at such an inclement season of the year; "and," continued Mrs. Elrington, "your mother rightly judged that had you known she was ill, your anxiety would have been great if not allowed to share in nursing her. Thank God, she is able to leave her room, and now reclines on a sofa in the little parlour, and is gradually regaining her usual strength, though we must not expect her to become well all at once; but I hope in a few weeks she will be able to occupy her usual seat as of old, in the easy chair by the fire-side, which said chair Sarah is very busy making a new chintz cover for, in readiness for the invalid, and in honour of the day when she first sits up. So dear Amy," concluded Mrs. Elrington, "you must keep up your spirits and your roses, or your mother will outvie you in both when you see her again,

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and be sure that I will send for you at once, should she not go on as well as we could wish."

And with this letter Amy was obliged to rest satisfied, though for many days after that she grew nervous and restless as the hour for the post drew near; and could scarcely control the impatient desire she felt to walk half way down the road to Standale to meet the postman. Once she did walk down. [183]

Though now approaching the end of January, it was quite like a November day—foggy, with a thick drizzling rain falling, yet Amy heeded it not, but walked quickly on, wrapped in a thick seal-skin cloak. She passed through the village and reached the turnpike gate. Here at the cottage door stood William Hodge.

"A nasty damp day, Miss," said he, touching his hat civilly.

"Yes," replied Amy, "quite a change from the cold, frosty, snowy weather we have had."

"We shall have more rain yet, I'm thinking."

"I hope not. How are Mrs. Marks and her husband?"

"Well. Very well, thank'ee, Miss."

"Are they from home, that you have charge of the Gate?" asked Amy, surprised at seeing a stranger.

"Mrs. Marks is, Miss, and that's why I'm here. I'm keeping house with her husband while she's away. Her mother's took very bad." [184]

"I am sorry to hear that; but I hope it is nothing serious?"

"Well I don't expect anyhow she'll get over it, Miss, she ought to be dead by this time, and if she isn't I can't bide here no longer, I must be turning about home. Mrs. Marks promised fairly enough to bide only a week, and it's near upon three by my calculations. She's going to bring back a sister along with her, one that's dazed," and he tapped his forehead with a knowing look.

"A sad charge," replied Amy, "and one rather unsuited to Mrs. Marks."

"I don't know that, Miss. Yer see neighbours think Jane wouldn't be so bad if she worn't humoured, and she ain't likely to get much of that down here. To my thinking Mrs. Marks is just the right sort to cure her; she'd racket any poor body to their senses, if 'twas possible."

"Has Mrs. Marks' sister always been in such a sad state?"

"All as I can tell yer, Miss, is, she worn't born so, it's comed on her since, and when I've said that I've said all I do know about it. Her mother comed down years ago now to Deane,—that's my home, Miss,—with three daughters. Mrs. Marks was one of 'em, she married off, and came down here with her husband. Then t'other one she married too, but as for Jane, she never had no chance of a husband, for who'd marry a 'dafty,' Miss? They was pretty close people, and never wagged their tongues with nobody, so nobody knew nothing at all about them nor where they comed from; only folks make a guess at things somehow; and down at Deane they thinks they comed from Stasson, a place none so far from this neither; and more than that Miss, that Jane was the reason why they comed so sudden and secret, like; but there, if they thought the sight of a new place 'ould cure Jane they was mighty mistaken, for from that day to this she've never been no good at all to them, and to my thinking never will be." [185]

"It's a sad story, indeed," replied Amy. [186]

"You may depend upon it, Miss, if we knew the rights of it, it's a *bad*, as well as a sad story, but there, I've no call to say so. For certain, Miss, there's a something very strange and mysterious 'bout Jane. Perhaps the Brampton folks'll turn out more cute than the Deane ones, and find out what 'tis. It's on my mind, and has been scores of times, that Jane's mortal afraid of summut or other."

Amy smiled at Hodge's suspicions, and passed on.

Marks did not make his appearance, fond of a gossip as he was, and of saying good-morrow to everyone who passed through the 'pike. Probably the "Brampton Arms" was too strong a temptation, and,—as Hodge had predicted it would be,—he was taking his swing there while he could, though three weeks was rather a long time to be intoxicated; but then there was the better chance of his being sober when Mrs. Marks did return, and he should begin to try the effect of the "charm."

On Amy went. The road seemed quite deserted, not a soul to be seen, even the donkeys which usually grazed along the hedges were nowhere. [187]

As Amy walked on her thoughts unconsciously wandered towards Jane and the strange account Hodge had given of her, and anxious as she was about her mother's letter, her mind was almost as much occupied now with Mrs. Marks' sister. She and the letter seemed irretrievably mixed up together in hopeless confusion. The fact was, Hodge had excited Amy's curiosity without being able to satisfy it in the smallest degree, so she was making innumerable conjectures at the truth, all more or less improbable when they came to be analysed. *Would* the Brampton people be more clever than the Deane ones, and find out what seemed such a puzzle, and, as Hodge said, mystery

to everyone? There was Mrs. Taylor, the village chatterbox, she surely would ferret it out, and what a wonderful tale she would make of it. Amy thought she would call at her cottage some day and broach the subject, and hear what she had to say about it. It could do no harm to hear what the village gossip said of poor crazy Jane and her sorrowful story. [188]

As she arrived at this conclusion, a horseman came in sight. It was Charles Linchmore. He was almost close by ere he recognised her. Then he drew rein.

"Miss Neville!" he exclaimed, in surprise, "surely after your illness it is hardly prudent for you to be out on so damp a day."

"It will not harm me," replied Amy.

"Are you going much further? You will find it very dirty walking. Would it not be wiser to return home?"

"No, I think not, as least not just yet; I am too anxious to remain at home. The walk will do me good."

"I doubt that last assertion very much. It can do no one good being out in such weather," and dismounting, he walked by her side.

"Why did you venture?" she asked. [189]

"I? Oh, nothing brings me to grief. I am a soldier, and ought to rough it."

"Are ladies in your opinion so fragile that a slight shower will wash them away?"

"This is not a slight shower, Miss Neville, but a nasty, misty rain, that does a deal more damage than a heavy down-pour."

"I do not agree with you. The one is certainly disagreeable, but the other thoroughly drenches, and is more than disagreeable—it makes one out of temper."

"I have thought more than once that that latter assertion of yours is with you an impossibility."

"Ah! you were never more deceived. I am feeling vexed now," replied Amy.

"Now?" returned Charles.

"Yes. I have been terribly anxious all day, and it vexes me to hear anyone say I should return home, when I have come out purposely to get rid of my weariful thoughts. I know such a damp mist as this will never harm me half as much as they would." [190]

Charles waited, hoping she would say more, but she did not, so he broke the silence.

"I have been to see Grant," he said.

"I trust there has been no more fuss with the poachers?"

"No," replied he carelessly, "but it seems they expect an attack to-night, that is, they are going out in expectation of something of the kind."

"Of a fight with the poachers?"

"Yes; they had scent of them last night, but did not come up with any. To-night they hope for better luck, and Grant and a lot of the game watchers are going in quest."

"It seems to me such a sad way of risking one's life," said Amy.

"Property must be protected, Miss Neville. None of these fellows going out to-night go with the idea of losing their lives."

"Perhaps not; but look at the fate of poor Susan's husband."

"You mean the man who was shot? That is a bad spoke to put in the wheel of your argument, as his sad end has only urged on those who are left to annihilate such a set of ruffians. I have half made up my mind to join in the night expedition." [191]

"You!" exclaimed Amy hastily, "pray do not think of such a thing," and then fearing she had said too much—betrayed too deep an interest in his welfare, added, "every one would think it foolish!"

"Would you?" he asked.

"I? oh yes! of course I should, and besides, every one would be so anxious. What would Mrs. Linchmore say?"

"My brother's wife's opinion is naught to me. Would *you* be anxious, Miss Neville?"

"I shall be anxious for all those who put their lives in jeopardy to-night," replied Amy, coldly, "And now as I see nothing of the postman, I think I will turn back."

"Are you expecting a very important letter?" asked he, harshly, his jealousy creeping to the very tops of his fingers. Surely it must be some one she cared very much about, to induce a walk in such weather. [192]

"My mother is ill," replied Amy.

The words were simple enough, but he fancied they were spoken in a reproachful tone; or otherwise his suspicions at an end, he was ready to accuse himself. Disarmed at once, he was too generous not to make the one atonement in his power. Springing on his horse, he exclaimed,—

"I will fetch the letter for you, Miss Neville," and was out of sight in a moment.

Amy turned, and retraced her steps homewards, thinking he would soon overtake her, as it was past four o'clock, and the postman always reached the Park by half-past, so that he must of necessity be some way on his road when Charles would come up with him. But no, she walked on, reached the turnpike, and next the village; and then she loitered, went on slowly, and at length stopped and looked back. Still no signs of him.

She went on more slowly still, through the village, and at last, delay as she would, reached the park gates; then an anxious, restless expression came over her face, she began to feel nervous, as she always did now when the chance of meeting or seeing Frances Strickland presented itself, with ever that one fear at her heart, that she should know or find out Charles Linchmore was doing her any act of kindness, however simple, and in revenge, tell him what she suspected and accused her of. [193]

Amy hesitated ere she entered the park. Should she retrace her steps? She turned as if to do so, then the thought came across her, what if he should think she wished him to walk home with her? Hurriedly she went through the gate, and tried to shake off the fear she felt of being seen with him, but the very speed she walked at now, showed she could not, while, instead of walking up the long avenue, she struck across the park.

But all to no purpose, for just as she emerged again into the drive, close to the house, a horse's hoofs rang out over the ground, and Charles Linchmore came up with her, his horse bespattered with mud, as though he had ridden hard and fast. [194]

"Here is your letter, Miss Neville," said he, "I almost feared I should miss you, and that you would have reached home," and again he dismounted, so that there was no chance of escape, or of hurrying on.

"I am sorry you should have had so much trouble on my account, Mr. Linchmore, thank you very much for my letter," and her eyes brightened, as at length she recognized her mother's hand writing on the envelope.

"I am fully repaid by seeing the pleasure the sight of the letter gives you."

"Yes, it is my mother's writing, so she must be better."

"You would have had it sooner, but there had been some accident or delay with the train, I did not stop to hear what. It had not arrived long before I got there."

"Had you to go all the way to Standale? How very kind of you!" [195]

"Not at all. It was just as well you turned back," and he pointed smilingly at the muddy state of his boots.

"I think it very kind indeed of you," replied Amy again, and then wished she had never said it, because he looked so more than pleased.

They were close to the house now; to the windows of which Amy dared not raise her eyes, but hurriedly wished him "good-bye."

"I will get your letters for you every day, Miss Neville," he said, as he pressed her hand rather warmly in his.

"No, no. Do not think of it for a moment," she said, and passed on.

That evening, when Amy took her pupils down stairs, she found on entering the drawing-room, all the ladies clustered around Mrs. Linchmore.

"Such a piece of work, Miss Neville," said Anne, advancing from the circle, and going over to her, "here are all the men wild to go on a poaching expedition—so fool-hardy, isn't it?" [196]

"What does Mr. Linchmore say to it?"

"He's going too, I believe. It is all that abominable Charles's doing; he came home with some fine story or another Grant had told him, and sent all the rest mad. I call it downright folly."

"I met Mr. Charles Linchmore this afternoon," replied Amy, "and he mentioned his intention of going with Grant, but I thought little of it then, as I fancied it would most likely fall to the ground when the time for action came."

"You were wrong, then. For the plan was seized on with avidity as soon as proposed, but I am surprised at Mr. Linchmore, I did not for one moment think he would have seconded it. As for Charles, any hairbreadth danger pleases him. I do not believe he has ever been in a real fight, so he thinks to try a mock one."

"I hope it may simply prove such," replied Amy, "but the last was anything but a mock fight; I do [197]

not think you were here at the time, but I dare say you may have heard of it."

"Yes, and it is just that that makes us all fearful; as to Frances, she is just wild about it, I know, but to look in her face you would think her a piece of adamant, for aught you can find written there. I wish Charles would give it up; I think if we could only get him to throw cold water on it, the rest would soon follow his example. Do you mind helping me to try, Miss Neville?" asked Anne, knowing full well in her own heart that Amy's voice would have its full weight with one of the gentlemen at least.

But Amy declined. She felt she dared not so brave Frances; and Anne, after expressing her belief in her unkindness, left her.

Frances' face did look like adamant, so still and set; and yet she was feeling at her heart, more perhaps than any one there present in that large room. Would her voice have any weight with Charles? Would he stay behind if she asked him? While a chill fear crept over her as the thought flew through her of what might happen if he went; might not his fate be that of the man they had spoken of so recently? might he not be brought home even as he was—lifeless—and she never see him more? and then what would life be worth to her? As she watched him in the circle round Mrs. Linchmore, laughing and joking, and turning the fears of those near him into ridicule, she felt that now he was so near danger he was nearer and dearer to her heart than he had ever been before. He should not, must not go, if she could prevent it.

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Presently he moved away from the rest. She went and joined him.

"Charles," she began, "are you really in earnest?"

"About what, Frances?"

"Determined on this expedition in spite of all opposition?"

"Of course I am. What made you think otherwise?"

"I thought you might have been persuaded to stay."

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"Then you thought wrong, cousin," said he, laughingly.

"It is surely no laughing matter, when we are all so anxious."

"It is that very circumstance makes me laugh. We must not show craven hearts just because women cry and sob."

"But we are not doing anything of the kind."

"At heart some of you are."

"I am not for one," replied she, indignantly annoyed that he should suspect her.

"Then why ask me to stay?"

"Because you were the one who started the expedition; and if you say nay, all the rest will."

"And think me a fool for my pains. No, Frances, what needs—must. I shall not draw back now, it is not my way, as you know; I am sorry for you, if any one is going you particularly care about. I'd have my eye on him if I knew who he was, but I don't."

This to her? Frances could have wept with vexation. Was it possible he did not see it was for himself she was anxious? Perhaps she did look a little reproachfully as she replied, somewhat sorrowfully,

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"No one is going I care about. Only take care of *yourself*, Charles."

At another moment the words might have struck him, and perhaps sent conviction into his heart; but now?—

"Then do as I told my brother's wife just now," he replied; "have supper ready for us by the time we come back; I'll answer for our doing justice to it."

"Can you think of nothing but eating and drinking?" she asked, bitterly and yet could have thrown herself on her knees, and implored and besought him to stay. Ah! if only in days gone by she could have allowed her warmer nature to have had play, have crushed out her pride and stubbornness, things might have been different between them, and she have been dearer to him; now she was his cousin, nothing more, and with no thought of what she was suffering, he turned away without any reply, rather annoyed at her words than otherwise.

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A few moments later he joined Amy.

"I trust you do not give me credit for being such a sinner as the rest of your sex do? or throw all the onus of this expedition on me, Miss Neville?"

"Every one seems to think it originated with you."

"Perhaps it did; but then every one need not follow in my footsteps. Surely I am not answerable for any one but myself?"

"It seems," replied Amy, evading his question, "to have thrown a damp on every one's spirits. I

suppose it must be undertaken now?"

"If you had said the last words to me to-day, Miss Neville, it might have been different."

Then, as she made no reply, he added, "You do not ask me to stay."

"I would do so, if I thought you could retreat honourably."

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"And you do not think so? You do not blame me for going?"

"Certainly not. Things have proceeded too far. You must go. I am only sorry to see so many sad faces."

"Thank you, Miss Neville, those are my own feelings entirely. I am in no way to blame for the actions of others, and should have gone myself, whether or no. Good-bye.—God bless you!" he added, softly, as he held her hand in his.

It was only for a moment; even Frances could not have found fault with the length of time he held it, and Amy scarcely felt the pressure of his fingers; yet she felt and saw the mark his ring had made as his hand clasped hers so tightly; felt and thought of it for many days after that.

Nearly all the gentlemen passed out after Charles. Robert Vavasour hesitated as he drew near the spot where Amy sat; but she did not look up from the book she held in her hand; and, after a moment's delay, he, too, went out, and most of the ladies followed.

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"Are you not going Alfred?" asked his sister, advancing towards an easy chair, near the fire where he had made himself especially snug.

"What's all the row about?" said he.

"You know as well as I do. What is the use of pretending ignorance? Are you going or no?"

"Have they all been such fools as to go?"

"Most of them have."

"What a confounded shame not to let a man enjoy a quiet evening. I suppose I must go with the rest, but it is a deuced bore all the same."

"You think everything a bore that entails a little trouble."

"Yes, I do. That fellow Charles ought to know better than to drag us out against a rascally set of low ruffians."

"Don't work yourself into a rage," said his sister, "it is not worth while."

"No, of course not," replied he, yawning and closing his book. "Well I suppose I must be off, so here goes."

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"I ought to have been born the man, not you," said Frances, contemptuously.

"With all my heart," said he, "and what an easy life I would have had of it."

"I do not find my life such a very easy one. You had better make haste if you are going. There, they have opened the hall door."

"I'll owe Charles a grudge for this," said he, rising slowly, and seemingly in no hurry to be off, "turning us all out on such a damp, dirty night. As black as pitch too," said he, as he reached the hall, and glanced through the half-opened door.

His sister helped him on with his great coat, he grumbling all the while, and vowing they ought to go to bed, instead of going out on such a fool's errand, risking their lives for sheer humbug, as far as he could see.

His sister listened in silence, and then said suddenly,—

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"Take care of Charles, Alfred, will you?"

"Oh, yes," he replied; "and who will take care of me, I should like to know? I may get a sly dig in the ribs, while looking after my neighbours."

"No, no, you will be safe, but he is so rash and foolhardy. Do take care of him Alfred, promise me you will?" and she laid her hand entreatingly on his arm as she spoke.

He looked surprised as he heard her words and noticed the action, and turning round, caught a glimpse of her pale face.

"Well, don't look like that, Frances; I'll make no promises, but I'll try and do the best I can for you. Good-bye."

And he, too, was gone. They were all gone, and Frances turned again into the drawing-room, where Amy still sat apparently so quiet and still, but inwardly listening intently to the last foot-fall; the last faint echo of one voice. Now she lost it,—again it reached her ear—was gone!

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CHAPTER VIII.

A DARK NIGHT.

"The moon had risen, and she sometimes shone
Through thick white clouds, that flew tumultuous on,
Passing beneath her with an eagle's speed,
That her soft light imprison'd and then freed:
The fitful glimmering through the hedgerow green
Gave a strange beauty to the changing scene;
And roaring winds and rushing waters lent
Their mingled voice that to the spirit went.
To these she listen'd; but new sounds were heard,
And sight more startling to her soul appear'd;

And near at hand, but nothing yet was seen."

CRABBE.

Amy felt oppressed in spirit as the last sound of Charles' voice reached her ear, nor dared she question her heart wherefore she had listened for it, why she had strained every nerve to catch its sound. Was she allowing a warmer feeling to enter her heart than she had hitherto entertained? Was she beginning to care more for him than she ought? No; she would not allow it. She merely felt grateful for his kindness, that was all, for he *was* kind to her, there was no doubt of that, and her heart could not but be touched by it, so lonely and so uncared for as she felt; so utterly alone in that large house. [207]

Had he not on that very day ridden several miles for her pleasure? and had he not offered, nay promised, to fetch her letter every day? and she had been obliged to give him but cold thanks for his kindness, and still colder looks, when her heart was all the while longing to tell him how more than grateful she felt. Even but a few moments ago, she knew she had been cold to him; but it could not be helped. It could not be otherwise, it must ever be so between them. And yet as she recalled his last words, and the fervent "God bless you," she thought that had she not been a governess, he might have loved her. Now, it could never be.

She grew restless; the quiet stillness around her became oppressive, most of those who were left having retired into the drawing-room; so when the children had said good night she took them up to bed herself, and as each little one knelt down, she joined earnestly in the simple prayer that "God would bless dear Papa and Mamma, and all their relations and friends." [208]

Mary did not put them to bed, one of the other servants did the office for her. Amy enquired where she was, and whether she was ill?

"No, Miss, not ill," replied the girl, "only worrying herself."

"About what? I trust she is in no trouble."

"Well, you see her father's gone out against the poachers to-night."

"True," replied Amy. "Poor girl! I quite forgot her interest in the matter."

"She's most worrying and fretting herself to death about it, and all to no good, as we all tell her, but she won't listen to none of us."

"Words are poor comfort in such cases."

"Yes, Miss; and what's worse, I believe they've threatened to do for him, her father—I mean." [209]

"That may be mere idle report; there is no authority for the rumour."

"Except the words of the man that was hung, Miss."

"Poor wretched criminal! Do not let us talk or dwell on such scenes. I will go and see Mary, if you will show me the way."

"Indeed I will, Miss, and I'm sure it will do her good. She's in her own room."

And, guided by the other, Amy went.

Mrs. Hopkins sat by the side of the bed on which Mary lay, worrying and fretting herself to death, as her fellow-servant had said, and refusing to be comforted or calmed.

"Ever ready to do any one an act of kindness, Miss Neville," said Mrs. Hopkins, as she rose on Amy's entrance. "This is sad work."

"Yes; it is an anxious time for all of us, but it is surely not wise to give way to imaginary evils, which after all may only exist in our own brains and foolish fancies." [210]

"No one knows," sobbed Mary, "how I love my father."

"We all believe it, Mary. Do you know that your mistress's husband is also gone with the rest?"

"No one has threatened his life, like they have my father's."

"But will your crying remedy that? Will it not make things a thousand times worse, by making you too ill to see him when he does return?"

"He may never return, Miss, never!" sobbed Mary afresh.

"It's of little use talking, Miss," said Mrs. Hopkins, "she will cry and worry; and nothing will stop her that I can see. She will be sorry and ashamed enough to-morrow when she thinks of it."

"I think she should hope the best, and not so readily look forward to the very worst that can happen. Try and think that there is a good and kind Providence watching over us all, Mary." [211]

"I do. But it's no use Miss—no use."

"Here drink this, Mary," said Mrs. Hopkins, handing her some salvolatile, "It's no use talking, Miss, we must dose her."

"I believe it is the best plan," replied Amy, half smiling; then as the girl sat up to drink it she added, "If you must cry, Mary, why not go down below? you can cry just as well there, and watch for the men's return."

"Oh! I daren't, I daren't—" she said.

"Her father will be quite frightened when he does see her face," said Mrs. Hopkins, as she bathed her forehead with cold water, "and as for her, she won't be able to open her eyes to look at him they're that swelled."

Amy seeing her presence could do no good, left, and went to the school-room, intending to spend the rest of the evening in writing home, but she found the attempt useless, so she closed her desk and put away her pen in despair. Reading was better than writing, she would fetch a book. She glanced at the bookshelves Charles had made and put up for her but a few short months ago. He was nothing to her then; simply Mr. Linchmore's brother, but now?—Again she grew restless. Why would her thoughts so often wander towards him? He could never be more than a friend, never! She would go below. The gloom and solitariness of the room struck her more forcibly than it had ever done before, and she grew nervous and timid and stole away to the drawing-room. [212]

When she entered it, she was surprised to find how soon things had resumed their usual course. Mrs. Linchmore was at the piano singing, Anne at a game of drafts, every one chatting and laughing as though nothing had occurred to disturb their hearts, Amy could hear the rattle of the bagatelle balls quite plainly in the inner room from where she sat, and the sound jarred upon her nerves. Surely Frances could not be one of the players, for Amy well knew how anxious she must be; and she crossed the room to where Julia had taken up her position by the fire, and looked in as she passed the arch which divided the two rooms. No, Frances was not playing—was not even there. [213]

"I feel entitled to roam about at will," said Amy, seating herself by Julia, "as so few of the gentlemen are here, and I think you look lonely. Are you anxious, Miss Bennet?"

"Very."

"I wonder what time they will be home?"

"It may be early, it may be late. Can you imagine how my cousin is able to sit there and sing to those boobies?" and she pointed to where Mrs. Linchmore sat, with one or two young men as listeners.

"Some people are able to control their feelings better than others," replied Amy.

"You are always ready to think kindly of everyone, Miss Neville; but there is no excuse for her; she is in no way put out; her voice is as clear as a bell, and to hear the way in which she is singing that mournful, pathetic song, you would imagine her to be a woman of deep feeling, when in reality she has none, not even for her good, kind husband." [214]

"Mary, the children's maid, is fretting herself to death upstairs," replied Amy, anxious to change the subject.

"What is the matter with her?"

"Her father is the gamekeeper, Grant."

"And her lover one of the game watchers, I dare say."

"No, I think not, at least I heard no whisper of it."

"Perhaps not; but girls don't fret to death for their fathers; they must die in the course of nature, but a lover is not easily replaced."

"I never heard you speak so unkindly," replied Amy.

"No, you must not mind it; I am not myself to-night. I feel out of spirits, and could have a good cry, like that foolish old Miss Tremlow did just now; I marshalled her off to bed, for if anything was to happen she would send us all crazy." [215]

"I see Mr. Hall has not gone with the rest."

"No. And much as Anne talks about men being brave and fearless in danger, I am certain she is glad of it."

"Perhaps she has not found out that she cares for him?"

"Many women, when it is too late, find out they care for a man. Look at Frances, for instance."

"What of her?" asked Amy nervously.

"Nothing, only I fancy she is *au désespoir*," said Julia carelessly.

"I do not see her anywhere."

"No, you would not, when her feelings are such that she can no longer hide them. Then she hides herself."

It was even so. Frances had hidden herself away in the library; she could no longer sit in the glare of the many lamps, and listen to the laughing and talking going on around; and not only listen, but be obliged to talk herself. It was too much, she could not do it. Instead of trying, like Amy, to shake off the gloom that oppressed her, she nursed it, and sat alone, sullen and miserable. [216]

Had not her voice failed to persuade Charles to stay; failed to win one kind word from him? Had he not, the rather, heartlessly mocked at her anguish? Had he not left her and gone over to Miss Neville, and given her his last parting words, the last clasp of his hand? When, if he had cared for her, every moment would have been precious to him, even as it was to her. How she wished she could hate him? But still the cry of her heart was "He shall not love her."

It was true she was advancing slowly, very slowly; but still, to advance at all, was better than making no progress, to feel that Amy was having it all her own way, and she without the power of preventing her, doomed to sit quietly and look on at the wreck of all her hopes of happiness. But that last should never be, and her eye flashed more brightly as she thought that not one single opportunity had she lost of loosening the hold Amy seemed to have over Charles's actions, the interest she had created in his breast. [217]

Ever on the watch, and restless when Charles was absent, lest he should meet with her rival, and she not be there to prevent his joining and walking with her, her life was one perpetual state of disquietude and excitement.

He should never find out Amy loved him. Never! never! So Frances sat on in the gloom of the one small lamp, and thought such thoughts as these; and bitter enough they were to her. How she hated to see Amy enter the drawing-room each night, and more especially this last evening, when instead of sullenly standing aloof, as he had once or twice done, Charles had joined her. Had they met without her knowledge, and had she won him over to her again, sent all the jealous suspicions which Frances had instilled into his mind, to the winds? Oh! if it should be so? She sprung from the chair, and walked up and down the room, in utter desolation of heart. [218]

And so we must leave her, and return to Amy.

The evening had worn on. It was growing late. Twice the butler had himself come in and replenished the fire. Was he also anxious? Amy thought so, as she watched his face, and noted how he loitered about the room, and was in no hurry to be gone; but glanced round gravely, as he went slowly out, and again, a few moments after, entered it once more, looked to the lamps, and a number of other things there was no occasion for.

Still the hours crept slowly on; again her thoughts were with the absent, again they wandered into the park. There, far away, was one coppice she knew right well; so thick the bushes, so close the shade, she could almost fancy she was there, so vividly did it come before her. Surely it would be there the poachers would be, there the affray would take place, there they would watch and meet with them. [219]

Each hour now seemed to drag more slowly than the last, the minutes were hours to her impatient fancy; while the noise of the company, the noise of the piano grew intolerable. Oh! if she could go out into the park, and learn what was doing; even if not near, she could still hear if a shot were fired, and that would be something gained; but then she might be missed—might be enquired for? No. It would never do to be found out alone in the grounds, on such a night. Was all the game in the world worth the misery of such thoughts as these? Oh! the agony of waiting—and waiting for what?

Amy trembled, and a slight shudder passed through her; her anxiety was growing past control.

The music was still playing, surely she would not be missed; and rising softly she passed into the hall. Should she go into the library, where Frances still moodily paced up and down? No, she would hear nothing there. On into the billiard-room she went. [220]

There was no lamp alight, she was glad of it; all was darkness, save for the flickering of the fire in the grate. She drew near, and tried to be patient and hope for the best; but it would not do, her thoughts would turn to *one*.

As she grew accustomed to the gloom, each object became dimly visible. There was the table; it

was but yesterday all those who were now absent had played on it. Would they ever meet there again? How well she remembered seeing Charles Linchmore; it was not so long ago, she could almost fancy she was passing by the door now—waiting for Fanny, who had rushed to Papa on some fruitless errand—and that she saw his form as he leant across the table; but no, he might never play there again, nor ever live to return home.

She could bear it no longer, but went over to one of the windows, passed behind the curtain, drew back the shutter, opened the window softly, and looked out. The rain had passed away, and the moon shone brightly enough when the thick clouds that were hurrying across it would allow. It was not a very cold night, at least Amy did not feel the cold even in the thin light dress she wore; her eyes were fixed on the one part of the Park where she guessed they must be; her ears straining to catch every sound. But none came. All was silent and still. [221]

How long she stood she never knew, she was aroused from her thoughts by a dull, distant sound. She listened intently.

It came from the other side of the park. Her fears had deceived her. They were coming at last. It must be them. Relieved at last, she drew back from the window, then returned again, but stood further in the shade. They must pass by. She would stay and see them.

The sound she had heard became more distinct, then faded away with the wind which blew in gusts through the leafless trees, then grew nearer still. Strange no voices reached her ear,—now—yes, it was near enough for her to distinguish the heavy tread of men's footsteps. [222]

Nearer and nearer they came.

It was no tread of many feet, but the dull heavy tramp of footsteps treading in unison together. It could not be they; they would not walk like that; so silently, so strangely.

Still Amy waited and watched—a heavy fear slowly creeping over her heart, and almost staying its beatings.

They came nearer still; yes, onwards they came round the turn of the drive as it swept up to the house; they passed it, and now their dark forms came slowly but surely on in the varying moonlight, with still that one dreadful tread. They were close by; passed under the window where she stood. What was that dark object they carried so fearfully, so carefully?

Amy moved away from the window, reached the door of the room, and stood in its deep shade like a statue of stone, every nerve strained, every pulse beating almost to bursting. [223]

The servants had heard it then, or had they like Amy been watching? There stood the grey-headed butler; how ominous was his face, how grave the faces of those men near him, all waiting, all dreading—what?

Mr. Linchmore was the first to enter; a painful, anxious expression on his face.

"Thank God!" exclaimed the old butler, as he saw him; he had been anxious for his master, whom he had known as a boy. Were his fears then at rest? No; he was again about to speak, when,—

"Hush!" Mr. Linchmore said. Then to those behind, "tread softly," and again, "where is your mistress?"

He passed quickly on, almost brushing Amy's dress, as she stood so white and still in the shade, looking on, watching, noting everything.

The other half of the hall door opened; on they came, those dark forms, and others with them, steadying them, clearing the way for them as they went. [224]

They bore a litter, but the form that rested so motionless on it could not be seen, a cloak covered it.

One man stood quite close to Amy as he held open the door for the rest to pass through. She touched his arm gently. She tried to speak, but her tongue refused to utter those anxious words. But there was no need; he looked in her face and understood the mute anguish, the agonised look of her eyes.

"It's only one of the young gents, Miss. Mr. Vavser I think they calls 'im."

It was not Charles Linchmore, then. The reaction was too great. As they bore the litter on past her up the staircase, she uttered no cry, but her slight form trembled for an instant—wavered—and the next fell heavily almost at Charles' feet, as he hastily entered the hall.

CHAPTER IX.

GOING AWAY.

"Our faults are at the bottom of our pains;
Error in acts, or judgment, is the source
Of endless sighs; we sin, or we mistake."

YOUNG.

"It is not granted to man to love and to be wise."

BACON.

For a moment Charles stood mute with amazement, the next he bent over the poor prostrate form, and lifted it tenderly in his arms.

"Bring her in here," said a voice, while a hand was laid on his arm, and he was impelled with gentle force into the library. There he laid Amy on the sofa, and kneeling by her side, took the small lifeless hand in his, and pressed it to his lips and forehead; then gently pushed the soft fair hair off her face, and as he did so felt the marble coldness of her cheek. Then a strange fear crept over him: he rose, and bent his ear close to her mouth; but no gentle breathing struck his ear. All was still and silent, even his loving words and the endearing names he called her, failed to bring back life, or restore warmth to that still and apparently lifeless form. [226]

He turned his face, now blanched almost as white as the one he was bending over, to Frances, for it was she who had asked him to bring Amy there, and now stood by the door so despairingly, watching his every action, listening to his words; those loving, cruel words which told how completely, how entirely his heart was another's. If he could but have seen into her heart, how averse he would have been to ask her assistance for Amy! How much misery might have been spared him.

"Is she dead?" he asked, fearfully.

"Dead!" exclaimed Frances. "No, she has only fainted."

"I never saw any one look so like death," he said softly, as he again took her hands and chafed them in his. [227]

"Perhaps not. I dare say your experience is not very great?"

"Can nothing be done for her? must she die like this?"

"A great deal might be done for her," replied Frances, advancing, "but nothing while you bend over her in that way. I will soon bring her to, if you will only let me come near."

"Then why in the name of fortune don't you begin to try something? For God's sake, Frances, do rouse yourself a little from that cold marble nature of yours, and throw a little warmth and feeling into your actions."

She took no notice of his hasty, almost angry words.

"Could you fetch me some Eau-de-Cologne?" she asked. "Go quietly," for he was rushing off in desperate haste, "it is as well no one suspects or knows of this, and bring a glass of water also."

"Dead!" thought Frances, as she gazed at the pale inanimate form, "I wish she was; how I hate her; but for her none of these dreadful thoughts would enter my head. Am I not a murderess, wishing her dead? and it is all her fault, all; she has taken his love from me, and in taking that, has made me wicked, and put all these cruel revengeful feelings in my heart." [228]

She bathed her with the Eau-de-Cologne Charles brought, even dashed some of the cold water into her face; but all to no purpose; not a sign; not a movement of returning life gave Amy; the shock had been too great; she lay as dead.

As Charles stood and watched all the efforts Frances made, as he thought, so indifferently, he grew impatient.

"Where is Anne? or Mrs. Hopkins?" exclaimed he, "confound that woman! she's never in the way when she's wanted," and he was for darting off again, only Frances restrained him.

"Do not call either of them," said she, "even you must not remain here when Miss Neville returns to consciousness." [229]

"I shall stay, whatever happens," he replied, decidedly.

Had he made up his mind to tell Amy he loved her?

"She would not like it," she replied, "would any woman like to think such a secret was found out?"

"What secret?"

"That of her love for him."

"For him! For who?"

"I thought you knew," replied Frances, quietly.

Too quietly, for her apathy maddened him, and he exclaimed angrily.

"For God's sake, Frances, speak out, you'll drive me mad with your cold replies and words!"

"Hush! Go away, she is coming to."

"I will not stir!" he replied, "until you tell me why she fainted."

"She saw them bring Mr. Vavasour into the hall, and—"

[230]

"How could she tell it was him?" he asked, suspiciously, with a half-doubt on his mind.

"I do not ask you to believe me," replied Frances haughtily, "you asked me to answer you, and I have done so."

"Not my last question."

"I should have thought a lady's word would have been sufficient; but as it is not so, you had better ask Joe, that man that comes here sometimes with Grant. I heard him tell Miss Neville it was Mr. Vavasour that had been killed, and then—"

"Then?" he asked.

"She fainted."

Whatever Charles thought, he said not a word; a determined, despairing expression stole over his face; he looked hard at Frances as if he would read her very soul, but she returned his look, and flinched not. Presently a faint colour returned into Amy's face; he moved away, placed the glass he still held on the table, and said slowly, for even the tone of his voice had altered, and was unsteady and husky,

[231]

"Tell her *he* is not dead,—not much hurt, even—"

And without a look, or even a glance at Amy, he went with a slow, uncertain step across the room. As he reached the door, Amy moved slightly and sighed, but ere she opened her eyes, the door had closed on his retreating form, and he was gone.

"Are you better now?" asked Frances kindly. She could afford to be kind now she thought the field was won, and Charles' heart turned from her, she hoped for ever.

"Thank you, yes," said Amy, confusedly, and striving to collect her thoughts. "How came I here? Who brought me?"

"Do not talk just yet, you are scarcely equal to it. One of the men carried you in here."

"One of the men? No one else saw me, then?"

"No one."

Then it could not have been Charles Linchmore's voice she had heard, as she lay only half-restored to consciousness? Nor his form she had dimly seen retreating through the half open door, as she opened her eyes? She must have fancied it.

[232]

"I was so shocked, Miss Strickland," began Amy, trying to make some apology for her fainting, "and you know I am not very strong yet, and—"

"Do not make any excuses, Miss Neville; the sight was enough to frighten anyone. I felt sick myself, but there was not much occasion for it, as I have ascertained Mr. Vavasour is not much hurt; but I thought, as you did, he was dead."

Amy made no reply, she was too truthful to do so. It was best Miss Strickland thought *that* the reason and cause of her faintness.

"Had you not better remain a little longer?" continued Frances. "There is little chance of any one coming in here; and they will be all at supper presently."

But no—Amy felt well enough to go; longed to get away to the quiet of her own room, and went.

[233]

Dr. Bernard, hastily aroused from his sleep, came and stayed all night at the Park. He corroborated Charles's opinion: Mr. Vavasour's was but a slight wound. The faintness and insensibility that had alarmed them so, proceeded more from the effects of a severe blow on the head, which had stunned him for the time being. In a few days, with a little quiet nursing, he would be all right again; so the excitement and fears of everyone tamed down, and the supper prepared at Charles's suggestion was partaken of heartily by everyone but himself, and he was nowhere.

Two of the poachers had been overpowered, after a desperate resistance, and taken; but the rest, all armed with sticks, or some other weapon of defence, had succeeded in getting clear away, though not without injuring, not only Robert Vavasour, but two of the night watchers also. One man kept his bed for weeks afterwards, and was unable even to appear and give evidence against the two men who had been taken; one supposed to be the man who had fired the shot, either purposely or accidentally, that had wounded Robert, while at the same moment a severe blow from some murderous weapon felled him to the earth, and in the confusion which this occasioned the rest got clear away, though not without a suspicion that some of them had been disabled by the shower of blows with which they were assailed; they proved themselves, as Charles and others had hinted they were, a desperate set of ruffians, whom the recent violent death of one of their band had in no wise alarmed, but the rather made them thirst to revenge it.

[234]

Charles Linchmore was up betimes the next morning, and away across the park long before any of its inmates save the servants were stirring. He had passed a sleepless night. At one time Amy's love for Vavasour appeared as clear as day; the next he doubted, and could not make up his mind

that it was indeed so. Morning found him still unreconciled to the thought, still undecided. Frances might have been mistaken; he would seek Joe, and find out what had been told Amy. It was impossible the man could have any interest in telling him a lie. [235]

He had not far to walk, Joe met him at the lodge gate, where he was evidently detailing to the man and his wife who kept it, an exaggerated account of the last night's affray.

"Good morning, Joe," began Charles, "how are you and the rest after last night's work? and where are you off to now?" as Joe touched his cap, and was proceeding onwards.

"Up to the house, Sir. The Master bade me bring news this morning of the two men who got hurt, Sir."

"Well, how are they?"

"There ain't much the matter with one, Sir; but Jem's awful bad, his head swelled most as big's two, Sir. Mr. Blane—the village doctor—wouldn't give much for his life, I reckon."

"Your Master will be sorry to hear it. And now, Joe, I want a word with you. How came you to tell one of the ladies last night that Mr. Vavasour was dead?" [236]

"Please, Sir, I couldn't help it; the lady did look so kind of beseeching at me, and tried to speak; but, poor lady, she was that bad at heart she couldn't say a word. I could no more refuse nor tell her, Sir, I should have been afeard to; unless I'd had a heart as hard as a *haythen's*, and I hadn't, Sir, so just out with the news, and—"

"That will do; be more cautious in future."

And away went Charles with still faster strides than before; half over the park and then home again, and up to his room, where he thrust his things hastily into his portmanteau; it was but a few minutes' work, and then he was off downstairs again. Here he met Anne.

"Why Charles," said she, "where have you been all the morning? We have finished breakfast. What a lazy creature you are!"

"I am going to make a start of it," replied he. "I am off to join again."

"Going back to your regiment!" exclaimed Anne in amazement at the sudden announcement. "When?" [237]

"Now, this moment."

"What will Isabella think? How surprised she will be!"

"No, not a bit of it, she is too accustomed to my sudden movements, and scarcely volunteered a remark when I told her."

"But your leave is only half expired?"

"Isn't it?" he replied, as if he had never thought at all about it. "Well, so much the better, I can knock about abroad for a short time. Good-bye."

Anne looked in utter bewilderment, until she suddenly caught sight of the sorrowful, despairing expression of his face. What had happened?

"Don't say good-bye like that, Charley," said she, her kind heart roused at once at the sight. "Something has vexed you. Can I help you in any way? I am ready and willing, if you will only tell me how."

"No. I am past help, Anne," and he dashed away a tear which had started at the sound of her kind voice, and then added bitterly—"I am a fool to care so much about it!" [238]

"About what, Charles? Do tell me, I am certain I could help you."

She pitied him entirely, and would have braved a dozen Mrs. Linchmores to have seen the old happy, merry expression on his face again.

"You have always been kind, Anne, and so I do not mind telling you, what I dare say you have seen all along, although I've been such a blind fool to it! It's no fault of hers, Anne,—but—but she loves another."

"Impossible! I don't believe it!" said Anne, hastily, forgetting all her wise resolutions of never helping him to find out Amy cared for him.

"Nor I, for a long time," and he thought of the long sleepless hours he had passed in pacing up and down his room. "But it is so."

"How did you find it out? Did she tell you?"

"No; but some one else did, little suspecting the interest I had in the matter. I could not believe, at first, that all my hopes were to be dashed aside at once in that way. I could have sworn she took an interest in me, but there I have convinced myself and—and—I am a miserable wretch, that's all, with my eyes wide open to my dreadful fate. Bid her good-bye for me, Anne. I could not trust myself to do so without showing her I love her. Thank you for all your kindness." And he wrung her hand. "Where is Frances?" [239]

Frances! What had she to do in the matter? Anne's curiosity was roused, and for once rightly, and in a just cause. She had long thought Frances bore no good feeling towards Miss Neville; perhaps she was jealous of her, for it was certain Amy had supplanted her in Charles's affection;—if he ever had any for her. Ah! that was it. It was all as clear as day to Anne now. But if it was as she suspected, Charles was, indeed, a fool to believe it; she was certain if she were in his place she would not, but then men were so easily convinced of a woman's falseness; but how could he look in Amy's eyes and believe it? Miss Neville a flirt? Impossible! But then Anne suddenly recollected how she had thought so herself, simply because she and Robert Vavasour had walked home together. No, after all she could not blame Charles so much, perhaps she should have thought the same. At all events, she determined to watch Frances closely when she gave her his message. [240]

"Charles wants to speak to you, Frances; he is in the dining-room." And Anne fixed her eyes full on her face as she spoke.

But Frances was gaining experience every day; learning to attain a self-possession and control equal to any emergency.

Only a faint—very faint, colour tinged her cheeks as she replied,

"Charles must wait until I have finished reading this chapter; I am too interested to leave off in the middle of it."

"Oh! very well. I will tell him so; but you will miss shaking hands with him, as he is going away." [241]

This time Anne succeeded. Frances' face expressed the utmost astonishment, while her cheeks paled to an almost marble whiteness.

"Going away!" she gasped. "How? When?"

"How? By the train I suppose. When? Now this moment. You had better come at once if you wish to see him."

She followed Frances to the dining-room, and stood at the window while she went up to the fire where Charles stood. Anne watched them.

He turned his face, still with the same gloomy, despairing expression, towards Frances and said a few words. What were they to cause her pale face to flush so hotly, while a proud, triumphant look shone brightly in her eyes? Anne would have given worlds to have heard them, certain as she was they contained some clue to the mystery shrouding his hasty departure.

They were said, those few words, and he moved towards the door. Frances followed him after an instant's thought, and arrested his footsteps, slow and uncertain as they were. Anne could hear quite plainly now. [242]

"One moment, Charles. I am so sorry you are going," said Frances.

"Never mind," he replied, "it is best I should go."

"I suppose so. I suppose you must go?"

"You know I must. You best of all others," he replied, sternly.

"Alas! yes," was the reply.

The next moment he was whirling rapidly past the window in a dog cart; with Bob seated on the cushion at his side, instead of running at the horse's heels as he usually did. "The only living creature who cared for him," as Charles had once said to Miss Neville; become doubly dear now she had proved faithless. Bob nevertheless seemed uncomfortable in his exalted post, and did not approve seemingly of his new position in society; for while his Master cast not a glance behind him, saw not Anne's sympathising face at the window or Frances' tearful one; he seemed to give a wistful side-look—as well as the jolting of the cart on the hard gravel would allow—at the comfortable home he was leaving for the Barrack yard, and his old surly companions of the canine species he had so often fought and won many a hard earned battle with, for Bob, though not a savage dog, never allowed a liberty to be taken with him without resenting it. [243]

CHAPTER X.

JANE.

"Oh, memory, creature of the past!
Why dost thou haunt me still?
Why thy dark shadow o'er me cast,
My better thoughts to chill?"

I spread my fingers to the sun,
No stain of blood is there;
Yet oh! that age might see undone,
The deeds that youth would dare!"

ANON.

[244]

Mrs. Marks had returned home. Her mother was dead, and she had brought back Jane as she had threatened, much to Matthew's intense disgust. He was afraid of his wife's tongue, but had been so long accustomed to hear it going, that he could not understand a woman who could keep hers quiet, and sit the whole day long by the fire-side, scarcely saying a word, in his own favourite corner too,—seldom lifting her eyes from her knitting. As he watched the progress of the socks she was making, he vowed in his own mind never to wear them when they were finished, believing as many of the ignorant in his class of life do, that they would be bewitched, and cause him to meet with some harm, perhaps fulfil Goody Grey's prophecy that some one in the cottage was going to die. [245]

He found it more difficult than ever to resist the temptation of going to the "Brampton Arms," now that his home was even more uncomfortable than it used to be. How could he seat himself at the other corner of the fire-side, and smoke his pipe, with his sister-in-law's eyes so constantly and intently fixed on him? Matthew longed to see Goody Grey to ask for a new charm to spirit away Jane and her unholy presence, which was a constant irritation to him. Meanwhile he had twice tried the effect of the charm and each time apparently without the slightest success; as not only had Mrs. Marks eyes, but her tongue also, flashed ten thousand furies at his extraordinary silence, while Jane, to whom during the storm he looked for sympathy, sat perfectly heedless, and mindful only of her dreadful knitting. [246]

William Hodge was still with the Marks', when he heard of the poaching affray and its consequences. His mind was at once filled with alarm, and he determined on going into Standale. What if his son should be one of the men taken, and now lodged in the jail there?

Hodge kept very quiet at first, and talked it over with Mrs. Marks,—who had returned a few days after,—and at length made up his mind to go to the town and gain a sight of the two men; but this was easier said than done, he had to wait quietly until they were brought up before the magistrates; when he returned to the cottage with the satisfactory intelligence that neither bore the slightest resemblance to his son Tom. Still he was more certain than ever that Tom was down there, for on mentioning his name casually to the landlord of the inn where he had put up, a man seated in the bar had turned round suddenly, eyed him keenly, and asked him to join him 'in a glass.' This, Hodge, who had his wits about him, was not slow to do, and both played at cross questions with the other, and tried to find out where each came from, and where bound to; but each proved a match for his fellow in cunning and sharp-sightedness, and they parted mutually dissatisfied, certain in their own minds that each could have revealed something of interest in which they both took part, had he so willed it. [247]

A few days after Hodge's return, as he was going across the fields, he again met with his acquaintance of the inn, who passed him close by without renewing their former intimacy, indeed, without a word or greeting of any kind, as though they were strangers, and now met for the first time. Hodge thought he must have been mistaken in his man; but no—a second and yet a third time, he met him on different days; and now Hodge was convinced he was right—they had met before; but why this apparent forgetfulness on his part? Why this perpetual crossing of his path? Hodge grew uneasy, perhaps the man was employed as a spy to watch him? If it was so, there was nothing for it but to return home; but the thought of his wife's sorrowful face, as he should tell her of his fruitless search, deterred him, and he waited yet another day, hoping that a few hours might disclose his son's whereabouts, and unravel the mystery of his absence; but no, the days crept on, and still found him as far from the clue as ever, while he never stirred from the cottage without seeing his mysterious friend, or it might be enemy, either close by or in the distance, too far off to distinguish his features; but there was the unmistakable slouching walk, awkward gait, and broad-brimmed hat. [248]

"Mrs. Marks, Ma'am," said Hodge one day, when they were alone, with only Jane in the chimney-corner for company, and she was supposed to be just nobody, "I've come across that man again, and I don't like the look things are taking—I think they look sort of queer. I never done no harm to nobody, why should this chap follow me about like a dog? I'm beginning to think he's a kind of spying to find out what my business is down here, leastways, I can't see what else brings him so often in my road." [249]

"Why not up and ask him, like a man?" exclaimed Mrs. Marks.

"Well, Ma'am, you see, that's just what I would like to do. Many's the time I've had it in my heart; but somehow I'm afeard to."

"Afraid! Well, Mr. Hodge, I thought you'd more pluck. I know there's few men would frighten me, if I was in your place. Good Lord! what's the world coming to when all the men's so chicken-hearted!" said she, indignantly.

"And the women so uppish!" retorted Hodge, somewhat angrily. "I wouldn't be afraid to knock him down with one blow of my fist," and he stretched out his strong muscular arms, and clenched his knuckles, "if he came to me openly and insulted me; but it's this underhand way of going to work that bothers me. I'd like to pick a quarrel with him, Ma'am, that I would, and bad luck to his walks for the future, if I did; that's all!" [250]

"If those are your opinions, William Hodge, I'm sorry I spoke. I've never set eyes on the man myself; but I think you're over-suspicious, maybe."

"Not a bit too much so. What for should he come across me wherever I go. I saw him the other night as Matthew and I came home. It was broad moonlight, and he was hidden away under the

shade of the trees, just before you come to the mile-stone; but I saw him for all that, and so I do most every time I set foot outside the cottage. What the devil can he want with me? and why was I such a born fool as to tell my real name?"

"That's it," said Jane, from the chimney-corner, as if talking to herself. "It's the devil puts all the badness into our hearts."

"Don't mind her," said Mrs. Marks, seeing Hodge looked startled. "She understands nothing, and is only talking to herself. And now what do you mean to do?" [251]

"I must go home agin, as wise as I was when I came."

"And without a word of Tom? Why Mrs. Hodge will nigh break her heart."

"It can't be helped. I've done all I can. You see, I've been thinking this man may be a kind of spy of the Squire's, and on the look-out for Tom, and if so, I may do him more harm than good by staying here. Who knows? perhaps he's guessed I'm Tom's father, and so thinks, by dodging me, to catch him, so, you see, I'd best be on the road home; he won't learn nothing there, save a cracked crown, if he comes that way meddling."

"I tell you what it is," said Mrs. Marks, "you go along home, and leave me to ferret it all out. I've never said nothing all this time you've been racking your brains, and walking about most over the whole country, till I should think you knew every stone and stick in it. I warrant a few weeks don't go over my head before I get at the bottom of it all. You men think yourselves mighty clever; but, after all, there's nothing like getting a woman to help you over the stile." [252]

"Well, Mrs. Marks, I believe you're most right. It's certain I couldn't leave the business in better hands. I know you'll do the best you can for me."

"Of course I will, there's my hand on it. And now just point out this chap in the wide-awake, and I'll be bound to say I'll find out every secret concerning him. And if he knows anything about Tom, why I'll find that out, too; so just rest easy in your own mind, and keep quiet, and bid Mrs. Hodge do the same; and take my advice, and be off home to-morrow—you won't do no good down here, only harm."

And home Hodge went.

A few days after his departure, as Matthew was lounging at the turnpike gate, who should pass through but Goody Grey. As she came in sight at the turn of the hill, Matthew began to prepare his thoughts as to what he should say to her. She would be sure to ask about the success of the charm; he felt proud at the idea of being able to tell he had not added to the number of stones in the box, but on the contrary two had been thrown away. What a fortunate thing for him Mrs. Marks was out, he could talk to Mrs. Grey without a chance of her shrill voice calling him and bidding him attend to his business, and not be gossiping out there. [253]

"Good morning, Mrs. Grey," began he, taking up a position so as to command a view of the whole road by which the enemy, in the shape of his wife, should first come in sight on her way home.

"The same to you," replied she civilly, and was passing on, when—

"I've tried the charm, Ma'am," said Matthew, mysteriously.

"The what?" asked she sharply.

"The charm, Mrs. Grey. The box with the gravel in it, that you give me."

"True, I had forgotten. What was the result?" [254]

"If you mean what good did it do, why then it just did no good at all," said Matthew, sorrowfully.

"How often have you tried it?"

"Twice, Ma'am, I'm proud to say; and a hard matter I found it, going so nigh the Public, that I could most smell the baccy, and hear the drawing of the beer; but there I stuck to the 'structions yer give me, and turned back home agin, but only to hear my wife's tongue going faster and sharper than ever."

"I dare say, at first, it may be so; but persevere, and in the end your wife will be silenced."

"I wish I could think so," he replied; "but I'm afraid, Ma'am, her tongue have been going so long now, that nothing 'cept a miracle won't stop it."

"Is Mrs. Marks at home?"

"No, Ma'am, she's out. And that's another thing bothers me, she's taken to going out all hours now, no matter what kind of weather 'tis. It's a puzzle to me where she goes to, tramping about in the mud." [255]

"Well, I cannot help you there," replied Goody Grey, "her tongue I might stop, but not her actions, you must look to those yourself."

"And so I mean to, Mrs. Grey, so I *will*," said Matthew, determinately. "I only thought so this very day, as I was leaning on this very gate, just before I saw you."

"It is a wise resolution, but fools see wisdom or learn it sometimes."

"Don't you begin that old story agin, Ma'am, nor say one word about the trees that's going to fall; for I can't abide it, and don't want to know nothing about what's going to happen. Death's near enough for us all, but we don't want to be knowing when he's going to knock us up."

"Where there's a storm there's sure to be a wreck," said she.

"Stop there, Ma'am," replied Matthew, "and don't be after looking that way at the cottage. What do yer see?" [256]

"I saw the face of a woman at the window."

"No, that yer couldn't," replied he, "Mrs. Marks is out!"

"Are you sure she is out?"

"Lord save yer, Mrs. Grey, in coorse I am. Didn't I watch her out? and wouldn't I have heard her voice calling out after me, long afore this," and Matthew grinned at the very idea.

"Who was it then?"

"Yer couldn't have seen no one. There's only crazed Jane in the place, and she don't never move out of the chimblly corner for no one. She's no curiosity, like Mrs. Marks says I have."

"Who is crazed Jane? Where does she come from? and what does she in your cottage?"

"Just nothing save to be knitting all day long, and follering me about with her big eyes. She's my wife's sister, yer see, and is living with us, she don't need no charm to keep her tongue quiet. She's just the only woman I ever met as could, saving yer presence, Ma'am; and is every bit as knowing as yerself, and could tell yer a deal if yer liked." [257]

"About what?"

"About whatever yer liked to ask her. It's my belief she could tell the weather just every bit as well as yerself. If yer'd lost anything she'd know where to clap eyes on it again, just as yer did the bit of copper t'other day, and a deal of other things as don't cross my mind now."

"I don't believe it! I don't believe it!" exclaimed Goody Grey fiercely. "If I did—I'd tear her very heart out, if she didn't tell me."

And she passed on, leaving Matthew horrified at her words. He watched her all the way down the road, which she traversed with a quick, hasty step, striking her staff defiantly into the ground as she went, until the turn of the road took her out of his sight.

"What a fearful body she is!" thought he, as he turned into the cottage.

But there his horror and astonishment was still further increased at finding crazed Jane lying in a heap on the floor. [258]

At first he was for rushing to her aid; but on second thoughts, he reached his hat off the peg, and darted out of the cottage. There taking to his heels he ran as fast as his legs could carry him along the road Goody Grey had taken.

"For the love of Heaven!" said he overtaking her, "come back!"

"Come back!" exclaimed she, "and what for should I come back?"

"To take away the curse and witcheries yer've put upon Jane; or she'll die."

"What are you raving about? What have I to do with Jane and her curses?"

"Yer know well what I mean, Ma'am; yer've most killed her with yer evil eye. I know yer're a fearful 'ooman, and a wise 'un too, but for the love of Heaven don't leave her like that, but come back."

"You're a fool!" replied Mrs. Grey, "I've no more power over her than a fly," and she passed on, bidding him seek his wife's help. [259]

And again Matthew started off faster than before to find Mrs. Marks, with an inward malediction on Goody Grey.

He was scarcely out of sight ere she halted;—hesitated—then turned back with rapid steps towards the cottage.

Jane had fallen near the window from which Goody Grey had seen her gazing, and lay almost under it, so as to be entirely concealed from the broad glare of its light. She lay on her side with one arm across her face. Her visitor gently moved away the arm, and looked at her. It was but a momentary glance, and the fainting woman rested, as I have said, away from the light. Was it this made Goody Grey fail in recognizing her? or was it the sharp, pinched features, and worn haggard face, with those deep furrows ploughing it so roughly in every direction.

Filling a jug with water, Goody Grey lifted Jane, and tried to force some down her throat, then dashed the rest over her face and forehead, but her efforts at restoring life were useless, and after a few more ineffectual attempts she left her, and went and seated herself by the fire, [260]

thinking perhaps it would be but neighbourly to remain and await Mrs. Marks's return.

Not many minutes elapsed ere Jane opened her eyes, and the first object they rested on was the old woman's face and figure, as she sat looking at the fire, her profile fully marked out, and apparent to Jane's gaze, whose face assumed a terrified, horror-stricken look, as she almost glared at her, seemingly too fascinated or frightened to look away.

Evidently Jane's memory served her better than Goody Grey's did, for she recognized her, although the old woman did not, and after a minute or two she sat up on the floor, and clasping arms round her knees, buried her face in them and groaned aloud.

Goody Grey started and turned at the sound, then rose and went over to her.

"Are you better?" she asked kindly, "you've had a long faint." [261]

Jane made no answer, only moaned and shivered from head to foot.

"You are too cold to drink this water. Is there no brandy anywhere that I can get you? Try and get up, and I will help you over to the fire."

It was astonishing to hear the gentle, almost soft, sweet voice with which she spoke, so different from her usual harsh, sharp manner. But the more gentle she was, the less Jane seemed to like it, never raising her head or answering a word, but moaning and rocking herself backwards and forwards as she sat; and Goody Grey, seeing words or deeds, however well meant, were alike wasted upon her, rose to go; saying as she did so,—

"I'm sorry to see you so sullen, woman. Have you never a word of thanks to give me?"

But Jane continued silent as before.

"Well, well," she muttered, in something of her old, impatient, sharp voice, as she stepped across the threshold of the door. "That fool said she was a 'dafty.'" Then in a milder, almost sorrowful tone, she added "it is better to be crazed than broken-hearted." [262]

Jane raised her head as she caught the last sound of Goody Grey's voice; then, as the last foot-fall died away, she got up stealthily, and closed and bolted the cottage door.

CHAPTER XI. [263]

THE CONSERVATORY.

"All other ills, though sharp they prove,
Serve to refine and perfect love:
In absence, or unkind disdain,
Sweet hope relieves the lovers' pain:
But, oh, no cure but death we find
To sett us free
From jealousy,
Thou tyrant, tyrant of the mind.

False in thy glass all objects are
Some sett too near, and some too far;
Thou art the fire of endless night
The fire that burns, and gives no light.
All torments of the damn'd we find
In only thee,
O jealousy!
Thou tyrant, tyrant of the mind."

DRYDEN.

January had drawn to an end, and with Charles Linchmore had gone all the visitors from Brampton, save the Stricklands and Bennets, and they being cousins remained on, as Mrs. Linchmore said it would be wretchedly dull to be entirely deserted when Robert Vavasour was too weak to be moved, and kept her and Mr. Linchmore tied to Brampton. This plan appeared to please everybody but Frances, who seemed to require a great deal of persuasion before she would consent to remain, though at heart she was only too glad to stay; but Julia and Anne acquiesced at once. [264]

Robert Vavasour's illness was of longer duration than was at first expected; even when the pain from the severe blow on the head abated, there was still the wound in his leg with the inflammation attending it, so that he could not leave his room for some few weeks after Charles's departure, and then only to come down of an evening and recline on a sofa in the dining-room, where all in turn tried, or did their best endeavours to amuse him, save one—Miss Neville.

As he lay there, evening after evening, with nothing better to do than watch those around him, he soon became aware that his eyes and thoughts were ever constantly with the governess, He watched her with no common interest. He who had vowed his heart should never soften towards any woman now found himself listening eagerly to catch the faintest sound of her voice, or the [265]

outline of her figure reflected in the glass as she moved across the room. As he noted her quiet ways, so different from the haughty Frances, or the bustling Anne, or the numbers of other girls he had known, he grew more in love with her than he liked to acknowledge to himself, and determined she should be his if she was to be won. If she loved him what to her would be the shade and mystery of his birth; for he would make no secret of it, but tell her all he knew, all that made him so reserved, and at times impatient.

Mr. Linchmore was wrong in the opinion he had given Amy of his character, for, although Robert Vavasour was ready to flirt with every girl or woman in the room, his hostess included, yet he had long felt Miss Neville was not to be so trifled with; she was superior to them all. A being to be revered and loved with all a man's heart. She must be his wife—if she so willed it—and if she did not, none other ever should. How he chafed with impatience at being obliged to lie so utterly useless and idle, when he would have given worlds to be at Amy's side pouring soft nothings—as men only know how to—into her ear and striving to win her love and make her his own.

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Meanwhile Anne watched Frances as the spider watches the fly, but as yet had found out nothing likely to unravel the mystery shrouding Charles's hasty departure. She had sought out Amy almost immediately, and delivered the message and hurried adieux entrusted to her; had noted the agitation vainly attempted to be suppressed, the quick flushing of the face and trembling of the lips before the studied words came slowly forth expressing her thanks at his kindness in remembering her. Anne's heart opened to her, even as it had done but a short half-hour earlier to her cousin; and she pitied Miss Neville, and was more than half tempted to tell her all she knew—all he had said—but there was a something in Amy's manner that day which forbade Anne's communication; and she remained silent, yet waiting and watching ready to seize the very first opportunity of discovering and unravelling the plot, which seemed so persistently to baffle her; and then not only could she make two people happy, but what pleasure in being able to defeat Frances! What a triumph it would be!

[267]

Frances went on silently and secretly. Her wishes were only half fulfilled. The end was yet to be worked out.

She felt Anne suspected her the moment Charles drove away from the door; but what signified that? What could the simple Anne Bennet do? She was a mere worm in her path. A nobody. Still Frances was more cautious than ever and more wary. Anne was to be avoided, not openly, but secretly, while others of far more consequence were to be gained over, so as to drag Amy more completely into the snare, from which there was to be no escape.

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There was no need to urge Robert Vavasour on now. Frances saw plainly enough that he was ready to sacrifice everything and anything to gain Amy's love; and she must be his wife; even if it broke her heart.

He was better now, able to walk about again, and generally devoted part of the evenings to Amy. Poor Amy! who saw not his love—wanted it not—yet felt grateful at his kindness in talking to her when nobody else did; besides, did it not keep him away from Mrs. Linchmore, with whom she could not bear to see him, fancying Mr. Linchmore always looked sad and dejected while he was at her side. Little did Amy think that while there was no fear of her losing her heart, Mr. Vavasour was fast becoming enslaved to herself for ever.

It was true Mr. Linchmore did not like Vavasour's attentions to his wife, but he liked his attentions and devotion to his governess far less. He felt his warning had been of no use, and that Miss Neville was falling into the snare he had essayed to lead her from. As he sat one evening resolving it all over in his mind for the twentieth time, Frances joined him.

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There was no knowing how soon they might be interrupted, so she went to the point at once without hesitation.

"Mr. Vavasour has quite recovered from his recent illness, and appears to be making up for lost time in Miss Neville's good favour."

"He will hardly make good his footing there," replied Mr. Linchmore. "Miss Neville is too sensible a girl to be won over by a little fulsome flattery, however adroitly administered."

"But there seems more than flattery here; at least, I hope so."

"Why should you hope it?"

"For Miss Neville's sake, as I think—nay, am sure he is winning her heart."

"Impossible!"

"He does not think it so impossible, otherwise he would not be so devoted; men never are when the one object is proved to be unattainable."

[270]

"I trust you are mistaken, Frances. For if she loves him he will break her heart," replied Mr. Linchmore, sorrowfully.

"It is you who are mistaken. That she loves him I am certain, or she would never have fainted like dead when she heard he was wounded; and as for him, I believe he loves her with all his heart, only he is afraid to tell her so. At all events, her fate rests in your hands, to make or mar as you please." And having said all she wished, Frances left him to dwell and ponder on it as much as he liked.

Was it so? Did Miss Neville's fate, indeed, rest in his hands? If so, then, he must no longer remain inactive, but must bestir himself. He looked around, but during his conversation with Frances, short as it was, Miss Neville had disappeared. As Frances and the rest adjourned into the billiard-room for a game he again sought Amy; surely she had not gone with the rest? No; there she sat alone in the inner drawing-room. [271]

"You are almost in total darkness, Miss Neville," said he, drawing a chair near her, as she sat within the shade of the alcove or arch dividing the two rooms.

The fire burnt low in the grate, while the lamps were all out save one, which threw a strange, fitful light every now and then across the room.

"Mrs. Linchmore likes this room kept dark; she says it is sometimes pleasant to come into, and a relief to the eyes after the brilliant glare of the other rooms," replied Amy.

"Perhaps she is right; it certainly is a pleasant rest for the eyes after the intense glare of the many lamps out there."

"Yes; and then one is almost sure of being quiet and alone late in the evening, as no one cares for this dull room then; the lamps are never trimmed after being once lit, but are allowed to die out as they like."

"Slowly, like the hopes of our hearts." [272]

Amy looked up surprised.

"It is best to have no hopes," she said.

"That would be contrary to human nature. We all hope, even the most satisfied mortal, and sometimes our hopes last a life time, and only fade with our lives."

"It is true; but perhaps our hopes, if realised, would only render us miserable. It is best after all to go hoping on."

"It is best," he replied, quietly.

Amy thought what a strange mood Mr. Linchmore was in. Why did he speak and talk so gloomily? Had Mr. Vavasour vexed him again by devoting himself too much to his wife? or she been flirting more than usual?

This inner room they now sat in was not so large as the drawing-room, part of it being taken off for the conservatory, which ran its entire length, and then adjoined the drawing-room at the point where the arch which separated the two rooms terminated. In the day time the smaller room was the prettiest and most cheerful, as the windows at the end commanded a fine view of the magnificent woods and country beyond, with the lawn sloping down in front almost to the banks of the lake, whereas the view from the drawing-room on that side was entirely concealed by the conservatory. [273]

As Mr. Linchmore silently revolved in his mind how he should begin about Mr. Vavasour; how broach the subject so as to find out how far her heart had been won—or as he thought, lost—thrown away on so unworthy an object; given to one who neither cared for or valued the rich treasure he had won, and Amy sat in silent wonderment as to what he would say next; the rustle of a silk dress was heard, and in another moment two forms were indistinctly seen through the flowering shrubs and exotics of the conservatory.

Amy's breath was hushed, her very pulse was stilled, as she distinguished Robert Vavasour and Mrs. Linchmore.

Yet why should they not have separated from the rest? There was nothing so very strange in it. But Amy felt as if some impending calamity hung over her, or was near, and she without the power of averting it; and would have given worlds to have turned and fled. Brave as she was, she felt a very coward now, and would have warned them how near they were to others if she could; but it could not be, the windows were closed, no sound might reach them. [274]

And now Mr. Linchmore's eyes were fixed in the same direction. He had seen them, too.

Amy rose as if to go. She would leave him and join them, come what would, but—

"Sit still, Miss Neville," he said, sternly, and in a tone that compelled obedience, and Amy sank down again without a word; in dread and fear; feeling more utterly helpless than ever to avert the coming storm her heart suggested.

Once more she looked through the evergreens and tall dark plants. They were still there, close to one of the doors now, and almost opposite. He gathered and offered a flower. [275]

That she received it with a flush of pleasure, could be surmised by the gentle bend of the proud head, and the soft smile which could almost be distinguished flitting across her features.

They came nearer still. Oh! when would they go away? What could interest them so deeply, and why did he look so earnestly in her now averted face? What could he be pleading that she would not—did not wish to grant?

She has turned her head towards him now, and is looking down on the ground as though loath to

meet his gaze—is speaking—has granted his request, whatever it is, and he has seized her hand and is kissing it again and again.

A hasty, passionate exclamation from Mr. Linchmore, as he suddenly sprang to his feet, and in another moment would have dashed into the conservatory, shivering the slight glass door into a thousand fragments, but Amy threw herself in his path.

"Oh, stay, stay!" she said. "Don't go, please don't!"

[276]

"Away!" he said. "Out of my way! He shall rue this deeply!" and he tried to shake her off, but in vain; she clung more firmly to him than before, beseeching him to stay.

"Don't, don't go," she continued, imploringly. "I must not let you go! Pray, pray, listen to me; you will be sorry if you don't. Oh! Mr. Linchmore, be advised. You cannot tell why he has taken her hand."

"Villain!" he muttered, between his clenched teeth. "Scoundrel!"

"No, no! you are mistaken," said Amy, hurriedly, "indeed you are. How can you guess at anything? He may be entreating her good will, may be telling her of his love for another. Oh! Mr. Linchmore, be yourself again; don't give way to this sudden anger until you are certain you are right, and you may be wrong. Believe me, you *are* wrong. Oh, don't harm him, pray don't!" and Amy's eyes filled with tears, as she felt she could urge nothing more; was powerless if he would go.

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But as her voice grew hushed, and she relaxed her hold, he turned and said,

"Miss Neville, you love this man?"

"Oh, no, no, no!" replied Amy, now fairly sobbing.

"Then why this interest in him? Why seek to palliate his conduct, base as I believe it to be?"

"I would not, if I thought it base, but—but I do not. I am but a poor ignorant girl, but I implore you, for your wife's sake—your own sake, do nothing rashly."

"I will not. I am calm again—as calm as you wish; but this must be sifted to the very core, must be explained till all is as clear as the moon, which shines so brightly through that half-darkened window. No half measures will satisfy me. I must not only be convinced, but feel so. You say he is pleading his love for another—entreating *her* good will in his behalf. Be it so. Then who is this other?"

He was quiet now, very quiet; with a firm, gloomy determination from which there could be no escape, no loophole to creep out of. All must be as clear as day. He had stood his wife's heartless conduct too long, he would stand it no longer. No half measures, as before, would now satisfy that angry husband, with the demon jealousy roused in his heart—that stern yet loving heart.

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Alas! this jealousy, what mischief it causes. What hearts it sunders and wounds with its fierce stabs; and how powerless are most to rise above it or shake off its strong iron grasp. If once allowed to enter our hearts it is an enemy difficult to contend with; still more difficult to get rid of, for although only a small corner may be taken possession of or unwillingly granted it at first, yet in time what a much larger portion becomes its share.

"Who is this other?" again asked Mr. Linchmore, more gently.

"I cannot tell," replied Amy.

"I am willing to believe, Miss Neville, it is as you say; but there must be no more trifling or prevarication, matters have become too serious for that. This other you speak of. Who is she? I *must* know; and if this man's heart is capable of love, and she loves him," and he looked fixedly at Amy, and spoke more slowly as if wishing her to weigh well every word, "then let her be his wife; if she wills it so; but—it will be to her sorrow."

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"You cannot tell that," replied Amy, seeing he waited for her to speak. "He may love her with all his heart."

"He may. But what is all his heart when he is so ready to trifle with others? Miss Neville," and his voice was still more gentle, and very pitying in its tone; "you are alone, perhaps feel alone in this house, and are young, very young to be so thrown upon the world, which you find a cold and desolate one, I have no doubt. *He* has been ever kind and courteous. I fear too much so, and I do not wonder he has created an interest in your heart, and at last won it. But he must not be allowed to trifle with it while I stand by. No. It shall never be!"

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"Oh! Mr. Linchmore!" exclaimed Amy, now indeed feeling utterly desolate at this continued accusation, and belief in her love for Robert Vavasour.

"Hush!" he rejoined, gently placing his hand on her soft hair, as she sat with her face bowed in her hands. "Poor girl; poor desolate young creature; your happiness shall be my first care, you shall no longer feel alone; there is no need to tell me anything. I know all that your heart cannot speak, even to your fainting when you saw him brought home the other evening."

Amy's sobs burst out afresh; she felt totally unable to stay them or convince Mr. Linchmore he was mistaken.

"Well, well," he continued with a sigh, "it cannot be helped now, things must take their course; but with him I *will* have a reckoning," and the old stern look once more flitted across his face. [281]
"But fear not, Miss Neville; for the sake of your love for him, I will be calm and control my anger."

"You will not tell him I care for him—love him, Mr. Linchmore? Oh! no, no, you could not do so!" said Amy, with fear.

"I will not; that must rest with you alone, with that I can have nothing to do, your future happiness must be made or marred by yourself alone. You need have no fear, but trust; only trust in me, Miss Neville."

"And I shall see him, shall speak to him myself—alone?"

"You shall do so. He shall hear no word of your love from me."

"You promise it, Mr. Linchmore," said Amy, now for the first time raising her eyes to his.

"I promise it, Miss Neville, most faithfully."

"Thank you! thank you; then all will be right."

"I wish, oh! how I wish it could be otherwise," sobbed Amy, as he left her; "but I must not murmur, I must be thankful,—thank God it is no worse than it is; but how can he think that I love him?" [282]

Amy felt utterly miserable. Did she deny Vavasour's being the cause of her fainting, would not Mr. Linchmore naturally enough wonder what had been the occasion of it? or perhaps in the end guess of her love for his brother, even as he had supposed it to be for Mr. Vavasour? No, rather let him think anything than that! a thousand times rather.

Mr. Linchmore had promised she should see Mr. Vavasour—there was some comfort in that; she could appeal to him, he would be reasoned with, would listen and believe her even if he loved her—if?—Amy began to think there was no need of a doubt, and that it was true he loved her. Why should Mr. Linchmore be deceived? All the latter's warnings, and Mr. Vavasour's kindness were accounted for now; but love her as he would, she could not be his wife. No—even if she had never had a thought for another, it could not have been, and now?—now she would never be any man's wife. [283]

Alone? Yes, hopelessly alone. Alone with that one secret love in her heart, that no one must know or guess at, not even her mother. Yes, it was hard, very hard. Was she not striving hard to forget him? Perhaps she would die in the struggle, she felt so hopelessly unequal to face the storm; perhaps it was best she should die. But then her mother? Yes, she must live for her, and forget him. It would not be so difficult, seeing he loved her not, would perhaps never see her again. She was glad *he* had not known of her fainting. And who could have told Mr. Linchmore? Was it Frances?

CHAPTER XII.

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LOOKING FOR THE "BRADSHAW."

"Yet though my griefe finde noe redress,
But still encrease before myne eyes,
Though my reward be cruelnesse,
With all the harme, happs can devyse,
Yet I profess it willingly
To serve and suffer patiently.

There is no griefe, no smert, no woe,
That yet I feel, or after shall,
That from this minde may make me goe,
And whatsoever me befall,
I do profess it willingly,
To serve and suffer patiently."

WYAT.

"I am two fools, I know,
For loving and for saying so."

DONNE.

Amy was not the only one who wept that night; Frances also did so at heart, for very anger and vexation.

She had missed Mr. Linchmore almost immediately after she had sought Miss Neville; had suspected why he had done so, and managed to overhear almost every word of the latter part of their conversation, and when Amy went so sorrowfully out of the inner drawing-room Frances walked straight over to the fire, and seated herself in the easy chair where Amy had only a few minutes before sobbed out her very heart, almost. [285]

Frances had good cause for tears and anger, feeling she was being foiled and defeated when the end was almost won. Her conversation with Mr. Linchmore had been a false move, she had urged him on too quickly; but for that, he never would have seen his wife and Mr. Vavasour, and all would yet have been well; now all was going on wrong—utterly wrong.

That Robert Vavasour would propose for Miss Neville was certain. That Miss Neville meant to refuse him was certain, too. The first she had fully calculated upon, but not the latter. She had intended the first to take place only when Amy had been so hopelessly entangled that she could not escape, could not say no, and now to be defeated at the very moment of victory, was almost more than her proud spirit could brook.

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Was all her plotting to be of no use? all to be lost? and to be lost now? Now that the end was all but attained, and it wanted but one final stroke for Amy to be lost to Charles for ever!

A dull, heavy despair was fast creeping over her spirits; what could be done now? Oh! for some one to aid her! What if she spoke to Robert Vavasour, and urged him on to make Amy his at all hazards; she felt certain he loved her with all his heart. Suppose she told him of Amy's secret, and apparently hopeless love for her cousin, as the true reason why she would refuse to listen to his suit. But then again, he might be too proud to marry a woman whose heart was another's, on the mere dangerous chance of being able to win it in the end, and if he should think so and give her up? might not Charles hear of it and return, and then all her hopes be dashed to the ground, just as they seemed on the point of being accomplished?

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Frances sat moodily by the smouldering fire, tapping her foot impatiently on the ground in utter vexation of spirit, her heart aching and her temples throbbing with the anguish of her thoughts. She had a strong ruthless will; but how to make others bend to it? How bring them under the influence of it? She chafed with angry vexation; no rest had she that night; but lay restlessly tossing about the bed, when at last, utterly worn out, she threw herself impatiently on it. It was the first drawback she had had in the task she had set herself to accomplish. If Robert Vavasour would only defer his proposal to Miss Neville for one day? Give her time to think of some fresh stratagem! But no. Mr. Linchmore had willed it otherwise. Had she not heard him tell Miss Neville he would have an explanation from Mr. Vavasour of what he had seen in the conservatory; and that Frances knew right well could lead but to one result: a repetition of his conversation with Mrs. Linchmore, disclosing his love for her governess.

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As Frances drew up her blind in the morning, almost hating the winter's sun as it streamed in at the window, she knew a few short hours would decide Amy's fate and hers. A reprieve she could not hope for: it was simply impossible. Still she did not give up all hope; a trifle might yet turn the tide of events in her favour; so she went downstairs to breakfast, her head filled as much as ever with schemes and plots. How it beat with renovated hope as she heard that Mr. Linchmore had been suddenly called away on business early that morning. How she wished it might last for days!

The studies did not progress very happily that morning, although Amy set herself resolutely to work, and strove to drive away the troubled thoughts that crowded into her brain. But they would come back do what she would. How many false notes were played by Fanny, without being noticed, at her morning's practising; and mistakes made by Edith at her French reading without correction. Every moment Amy expected and awaited a summons from Mr. Linchmore; but none came; and as the morning wore on, she grew restless and impatient.

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The afternoon drew on, and Amy grew still more anxious; could settle herself to nothing; but sat and watched the sun as it sunk lower and lower, and wondered at the reason of the delay. Mary entered with a letter. It must be later than she thought, almost half-past four, and still no summons.

She drew near the fire-light, and opened her letter. It was from Ashleigh, and as if to verify the old adage that troubles never come alone, her mother was worse, and Mrs. Elrington asked Amy to return home for a week, as she thought the sight of her daughter might rouse and cheer the invalid. It was the apathy and apparent want of energy the medical man feared, nothing else; and it was thought Amy's presence might dissipate it.

All minor troubles were now swallowed up in this; with tearful eyes Amy sought Mrs. Linchmore and obtained the wished-for leave. This time there was no regretful tardiness in granting it, no unwillingness expressed.

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"Pray go as soon as you like, Miss Neville," she said, "and do not hurry back on the children's account, a week or so will make no difference to either them or me."

Amy felt grateful for her kindness in so readily granting her request, although the words themselves were somewhat stiffly spoken; but her thoughts were so entirely engrossed by her mother's illness and the feeling of being so soon at home again, they could not long dwell on anything else; all were trifles compared to that.

"I will not say good-bye," added Mrs. Linchmore, "as we shall meet again in the drawing-room this evening."

But Amy excused herself. She had so much to do, and to think of. There was her packing not begun even.

"Then I will make my adieux now. I trust you will find Mrs. Neville better, or at all events mending. I fear you will not see Mr. Linchmore; he was called away early this morning to attend

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the death bed of a very old friend of his, and had to start at a minute's notice; but I will desire the carriage to be ready for you at any hour you like to name, or you can send word by Mary."

Mr. Linchmore was away then; hence the reason of his not having fulfilled his promise. Amy was glad of the reprieve, perhaps before her return, things might wear a different aspect; at all events, her heart felt lighter, and she went to her room with a less weight on her spirits.

"Where is your governess?" asked Frances, entering the school-room soon after Amy had left it to seek Mrs. Linchmore.

Fanny was nursing her doll, and scarcely deigned to look up as she replied, "She is busy packing."

"Packing!" exclaimed Frances in bewilderment. "Packing! and for what?"

"To go away," was the curt answer.

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Go away. Another step backwards in the wheel of fortune.

"She is not going for good?" she asked.

"Oh! no. Only for a week. Are you not sorry, cousin? I am," said Fanny, in somewhat of a saucy tone. The child still remembered the "Holy Work:" thought of her hurt arm.

"Very sorry," replied Frances sincerely enough. What could she be going away for? but anxious as Frances was, she disdained to ask the children, but sat down and awaited quietly Miss Neville's coming.

Amy went on steadily with her packing, which, with Mary's help, was soon finished, and then went down to the library to look at the "Bradshaw," and find out which was the very earliest train by which she could start on the morrow. But it was not on the table. She turned over the books one by one, removed the inkstand and papers, but her search was fruitless. It was gone.

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As she stood undecided what to do next, Robert Vavasour came forward; she had not noticed him in the dim uncertain twilight.

"Can I assist you, Miss Neville?" he asked. "What is it you look for?"

"I was looking for the 'Bradshaw,' which is usually kept on this table; but it is gone."

"It is here," he replied, taking it off a chair, where it had been hastily left by Mr. Linchmore in the morning. "Allow me to find out what you wish, this book is a puzzle to most people."

Amy explained her wishes. "You are going away?" he asked.

"Yes; but only for a short time, a fortnight at the furthest."

"It is a long time—to me," he said, gently; then lit the taper, and busied himself with pen, ink, and paper, and the 'Bradshaw;' while Amy stood by, wishing she had not come down, but had sent Mary, or one of the children instead.

After dotting down the times of the trains as they arrived and left the different stations, he closed the book; still he did not look up, or give her the memorandum.

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"Thank you," said Amy, "that will do very nicely."

"You cannot leave the Standale station before the 9.10 train," he said presently, "that is express, and will take you with less delays on the road than any other, and will only detain you some twenty minutes or so, when you join the ordinary train. I will write this time table out better and more clearly for you, and let you have it before you start."

"Do not take that trouble. What you have written will be quite guide enough for me. Good-bye, Mr. Vavasour," and she held out her hand.

He hesitated a moment, then took it in both his, and held it fast.

"I cannot say good-bye, Miss Neville." All the love he felt for her was welling up into his heart, and striving to be heard. He must speak. "I cannot let you go thus," he said, "had you remained it would have been otherwise, and I would not have opened my heart to you yet; but, as it is, I cannot help myself. Miss Neville, I never loved any woman till I saw you—never thought I could do so. I had but a poor opinion of your sex. Had not my mother deserted me, and was not that enough to fill my heart with hatred and bitterness? There is a mystery shadowing my birth, which seems to me to be growing darker and darker every day. I have no claim even to the very name I bear, and cannot tell you who my parents are; perhaps this silence is better than the knowledge that they live, and are ashamed to own me. I thought I was too proud to ask any woman to overlook that, and vowed I never would; but then I trifled with them all, even with you. Do you remember the flower I sent by Fanny? how many a sleepless night has the remembrance of that folly cost me? But, knowing all I have now told you, all that at times drives me to the solitude of my lonely home, and distracting thoughts, will you come and comfort me,—pity me—love me? Amy, I love you with all my heart. Will you be my wife?"

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He could not see her face, the light was too uncertain, and she stood in the shade; but he felt that she trembled as she withdrew her hand from his.

Yes, it was even so. Amy was quite prepared when he began, to say she did not love him; but he claimed her pity, and her woman's heart felt for him at once.

"Will you let me love you, care for you, Amy, as never woman was loved or cared for before? Speak to me, Amy, say one word—one word of hope."

But Amy could give none. "I am sorry," she replied, falteringly, "believe me, deeply sorry; but hope? Alas, Mr. Vavasour, I can give you none."

"You do not love me?" he asked, sorrowfully.

"I like you, have always liked you. You have been so kind to me, the only one almost who has; and I have felt grateful for that—it would be strange if I were not; but I do not love you," she said softly, fearing the pain she was causing. [297]

"I have been premature in asking your love, I know. I have had so little opportunity of winning it, how could I expect you would love me with scarcely any wooing at all. May I ask you one question, Miss Neville? I feel I have no right to ask it, and it may be a death-blow to my hopes?"

"Yes," replied Amy. How could she refuse, and he so sad and heart-broken.

"Forgive me; but has another claimed your love?"

"No. No other has ever spoken to me of love, or loved me," she said sadly.

"Thank you, Miss Neville. Then I will—must hope. Why should I not win your love, when I love you so very dearly; how dearly you know not? I will wait patiently; but strive to win you I must. In my dreary, sad life it is the one bright star to lead me on to better things. I have trifled away life—hated it at times; but now I will begin to live. You are going home, Miss Neville, let this tale of my love be as if it had never been. I will be content to take my chance with others; let us be friends again, as hitherto. I promise no word of love shall ever pass my lips. When you know me better, and, perhaps, judge me better than you do now, then once again I will ask you to be my wife; and then, if you reject me—well. Then we must never meet again; but while your heart is free I must hope. Shall it be so?" he asked. [298]

Alas! what could she say? She could not tell him her love was another's unasked and unsought for, when she was striving to shut it out of her heart for ever. She could only murmur that she did not love him, and could give no hope. While he, thinking her love yet unwon, believed it might be his in the end, and that he had told her of his love too soon.

"You will not refuse my request, Miss Neville, will you?" he asked, sorrowfully.

"I do not like to refuse," she replied, "and yet I doubt if I ought to grant it. It will only make both you and me unhappy, because it can lead but to the same result as now." [299]

"I dare not think so," he said. "Surely God will be more merciful than to leave my life an utter blank. No mother's love have I ever known; mine has been, and is a dreary, unloved lot. Is it a wonder my heart clings to you, loves you so madly? and yet you will not even let me try and win you; but would shut out all hope. If you loved another; then—then indeed I would not plead; but, as it is—it is scarcely kind, Miss Neville; forgive me for saying so."

"Believe me, I do not wish to be unkind," faltered Amy. "I think my decision would have been the kindest in the end. But enough; it shall be as you wish, only you must not blame me hereafter."

"Neither now nor ever!"

And so they parted, both sorrowful at heart, both feeling the future which seemed to loom so gloomily for each; neither daring to look beyond the shadow even now flitting across their path. [300]

Little did Frances Strickland think while loitering in the school-room awaiting Amy, that the very meeting she had come to prevent had taken place.

Just as she was growing impatient, and wondering at the unwonted delay, Miss Neville entered.

"I have been waiting to make my adieux," she said, "having heard you were going away, and I did not like you should go without a word of farewell."

Amy was quite unprepared for this, and looked her surprise.

"Do we part friends, Miss Neville?"

"I can scarcely say yes," replied Amy, "our acquaintance has been but short, and—and—you have never liked me, Miss Strickland; if you recollect you almost told me so once."

"Ah, you have not forgotten that stormy interview. But I was angry and passionate. I have regretted what I said then ever since. Even you must know I never carried out my threats." [301]

"I cannot tell," replied Amy. "I know I feared them, and the thought of what you had threatened—the shame—made me ill. No, Miss Strickland, we can never be friends."

"And why not?"

There was a slight touch of hauteur in her tone, do what she would to hide it. Amy saw it, and felt more than ever convinced Miss Strickland did not like her; never would like her. Why should she

so persistently wish to be friendly now, after all her anger and rudeness Amy could not divine, but she suspected Frances, and thought some motive lay hidden deep in her heart. She answered coldly,

"Our paths in life lie so very wide apart, that being friends is simply impossible."

"Not so," replied Frances. "Our lives may be nearer knit together than you think; you will not be always teaching."

"As yet I see no reason to think otherwise, and as I think I told you once before, I am reconciled to it, or I trust nearly so." And Amy felt she was growing more ungracious every moment. [302]

Perhaps Frances saw it too, for she held out her hand as she said, "Do we, or rather are we to part friends, Miss Neville?"

"I do not wish we should part as enemies. Good-bye, Miss Strickland." She wished she could thank her for coming, but she could not.

"Well, good-bye, I think you will be sorry some day for refusing my friendship. I suppose you will not come down this evening; so this is a final leave-taking."

She turned as if to go, then stopped. Her anger at Amy's refusal got the mastery over her wise resolutions, and her eyes flashed fire as she said,

"There can be no middle course, Miss Neville; if you will not have me as a friend, I can be a bitter enemy."

"I know it," replied Amy, "and cannot help it." [303]

"Very well, then, I bid you beware! We shall see which is defeated. You or I. I will be relentless."

And she passed out.

"Why do you look so sad, Miss Neville?" said little Fanny, creeping up close to her, "I am glad you don't like her, because I know she can't bear you."

"I don't know, Fanny. She says she does, or rather did."

"But that's a story. Only see her eyes when she went away!"

"Yes, Fanny; but that was my fault. I fear I was not wise to brave her; but then it could scarcely have been otherwise. I could not like her."

"I know I don't!" replied the child, "and am glad no one does. She nearly pinched Edith's arm a minute ago like she did mine, because she told her Uncle Charles put up those book shelves for you; and oh! she looked so angry. She's just like the dog in the manger. Isn't she?" [304]

Ah! Had there been no such person as Uncle Charles in the world, these two young girls might have been friends. But as it was; that was the sore point which kept their hearts, the one so distant; the other so revengefully inclined. Frances, who nursed and encouraged her love, knew it was so: while Amy, who dared not think of or allow her love, tried to imagine a hundred other reasons as the true cause of her dislike.

The children were up betimes in the morning to take a tearful farewell of their governess; Fanny crying heartily and aloud, until severely rated by Anne Bennet, who, with her sister Julia, was also there bidding good-bye while Amy's boxes were being stowed away in the carriage.

"I can't help crying," said Fanny, when rebuked, "indeed I can't! so it's of no use, Cousin Anne."

"Then cry to yourself, child; or stay, here is my handkerchief to stuff into your mouth; your noise is enough to scare an inmate of Bedlam, and nearly drives us all crazy. Good-bye, Miss Neville; you will write to me, won't you? A long letter, mind, when you are settled at home." [305]

"I have promised your sister a letter," was the reply.

"Just like my luck. I ought to have asked you sooner. But I shall write to you all the same. I dare say I shall have lots of news that Julia will know nothing about."

Then the carriage drove away, and Amy wondered why Mr. Vavasour had never given her the time-table as he had promised, and felt a little disappointed at his forgetfulness; either he did not care for her so much as she had imagined, or he felt her going away too deeply; at all events his now appearance made her feel sad. She had learned to like though not to love him.

But when she reached the Standale Station, and the carriage steps were being let down; the first person she saw was Mr. Vavasour, awaiting her at the door. [306]

"Mr. Vavasour! you here?" she exclaimed, involuntarily, and perhaps with a slight welcome of gladness in the tone.

"Yes; why not? Did you suppose I would let you go alone, and uncared for? The train will be here in another moment; I almost feared you would be late."

Then he went away for her ticket, and presently she was leaning on his arm as they walked along the platform. It seemed like a dream.

"Here is the time-table, Miss Neville," he said, as soon as she was seated in the carriage, "I think you will be able to understand it, and you must allow me to lend you this railway rug, it will be of use to you, both going and returning, and I shall not require it," and he drew it over her feet as she sat, "I wish you a safe journey, though I fear it will scarcely be a pleasant one; I trust you will find Mrs. Neville better. God bless you."

There was a banging of doors, the whistle sounded, and she was carried away out of his sight, feeling she had been more cared for and thought of during those few minutes than she had ever been before in all her life; yet his last three words stirred her heart strangely, bringing as they did that last sad evening of Charles Linchmore's stay at Brampton vividly before her, when he had held her hand, and softly said the same words. [307]

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