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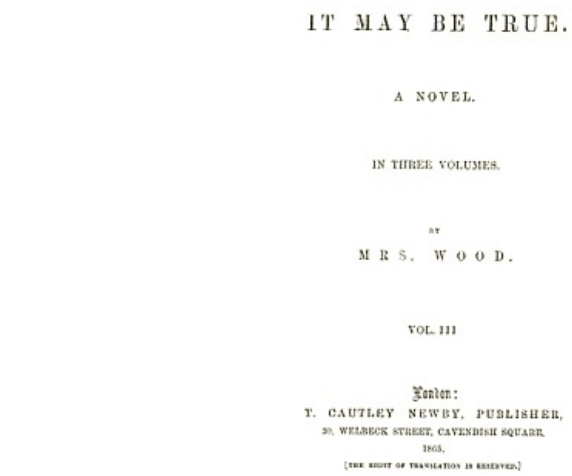

IT MAY BE TRUE.

A NOVEL.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY

MRS. WOOD.

VOL. III

London:
T. CAUTLEY NEWBY, PUBLISHER,
30, WELBECK STREET, CAVENDISH SQUARE.
1865.
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IT MAY BE TRUE.

CHAPTER I.

IS THERE A FATE IN IT?

"The grief of slighted love, suppress'd,
Scarce dull'd her eye, scarce heav'd her breast;
Or if a tear, she strove to check,
A truant tear stole down her neck,
It seem'd a drop that, from his bill,
The linnet casts, beside a rill,
Flirting his sweet and tiny shower
Upon a milk-white April flower:—
Or if a sigh, breathed soft and low,
Escaped her fragrant lips; e'en so
The zephyr will, in heat of day,
Between two rose leaves fan its way."

COLMAN.

Amy had been some three weeks at home, and as yet there had been no improvement in Mrs. Neville's health to justify her daughter's return to Brampton. There was the same lassitude, the same weariness. She would lie on the sofa day after day, with no bodily ailment save that of [1] weakness, and an utter inability to get better, and apparently with no wish to do so. She never complained, but was ever grateful and content. It was as if life were waning away imperceptibly, and her spirits, which had always bravely struggled through all her trials and sorrows, had at last sunk never to rise again.

Amy seldom left her, but generally sat by her side, on a low footstool, reading or working. Sometimes Mrs. Neville would lay her hand gently on the fair masses of hair, and Amy, whose heart was very sorrowful, would hold her head lower still so that her tears might fall unseen.

There was something peculiarly tender and very pitying in the way the hand was placed on her head; at least Amy thought so, and strove more than ever to be cheerful, lest her mother, who lay so silently watching her, should guess at the secret grief in her heart which she was striving so hard, and she trusted successfully, to overcome; while, as yet, no word of it had passed between [2] them. If Mrs. Neville thought her daughter's spirits less joyous, or her manner more quiet, while her eyes no longer flashed with their old bright expression, but at times drooped sadly under their long lashes, she said nothing; and Amy, while obliged sometimes to talk of her life at Brampton, never mentioned Charles's name; yet in the solitude of her own room she sometimes thought of him, and how as she had sat at one of the cross-stations, on her road from Standale, awaiting the arrival of the train that was to take her on to Ashleigh, she had seen Charles amongst the crowd hurrying into the one bound for Brampton; while she, soon afterwards, was speeding along over a part of the very way he had so recently travelled. Both had been waiting some twenty minutes at the same station, and yet neither had been near enough to speak, but had been as effectually separated as though miles had divided them, instead of so many yards. Strange fatality! which might have altered the future lives of both. [3]

Yes, he had gone to Brampton the very morning she had left it: one half hour later on her part, and they would have met. She was glad she had not missed the train, and that they had not met. Glad that she was absent from the park, and not obliged to see him day after day, or hear the children talk, as they sometimes did, of their uncle.

Julia often wrote to Amy all the chit-chat of the park. How Charles Linchmore had returned, and was often at Frances' side; and how the latter's airs had become more intolerable in consequence. How Anne snubbed Mr. Hall as much as ever; but was, in Julia's opinion, more pleased with him, and more contented to put up with his grave reproofs than she used to be; and how Julia thought it would be a match in the end, and wondered what kind of a clergyman's wife she would make. And lastly, that Mr. Vavasour had left the park.

Anne also wrote, but only once, and her letter was short; yet Amy read it over and over again, [4] until she knew the last few lines by heart, and wondered what they meant; or whether they were hastily written, and had no point or hidden meaning, but were simply penned and then forgotten, as many things often were, that were said by Anne Bennet, in her quick impulsiveness. "Come back, Miss Neville," she wrote, "we all want you sadly. As for Charles, he is not himself, and will be lost!"

These were the words that troubled Amy, were ever at her heart all day, and chased away sleep from her pillow, until her tired overwrought brain relieved itself in silent, secret tears—tears far more painful than passionate sobs. Those are at the surface, and soon over, they cure grief by their very bitterness, and by the self-abandonment of the sufferer; the others lie deeper and break the heart.

These words of Anne's, whether incautiously written or not, determined Amy on not returning to Brampton, until Charles Linchmore's leave had expired; and that, she knew, must be in another [5] week or so. If Miss Bennet meant he was fast losing his heart to Frances, and that Amy must go back to wean him away, how little she knew of the pride of her woman's nature. What! seek, or throw herself in the way of a man's love? Scarcely wooed, be won? Amy shrank at the very idea. No, if her love was worth having it was worth winning; and that,—not with the sternness of man's nature, not by the force of his strong will, not by exciting her jealousy with another, but by gentleness and kindness; and then her heart reverted to Robert Vavasour, and she wished she could love him, for had he not ever been kind to her? and gentle, very, even when she had pained him most.

He had been very kind to her, there was no doubt about that, not only to her, but for her sake to those most dear to her. At one time came some beautiful hot-house grapes, at another some delicate game. Little Sarah called them the gifts of the "good unknown."

The rail was open all the way to quiet Ashleigh now, and although the place did not boast of a [6] railway van or even porter, still the station master always found some willing lad ready to take the basket to the cottage, and great was the excitement it caused to Sarah and even quiet old Hannah, but then the latter always knew her darling Miss Amy would marry an Earl at the very least.

Mrs. Neville never questioned, but looked more searchingly in Amy's face, laid her hand more caressingly those days on her head, and spoke more softly and lovingly, while Amy never said a word.

Once, when Sarah came dancing into the room, in her wild spirits, with another beautiful bunch of grapes, Mrs. Neville laid her thin, wasted hand on Amy's, and said gently,—

"Is it all right, Amy?"

"All," was the reply, and Mrs. Neville leant back again, apparently satisfied.

But things could not go on thus for ever. Robert Vavasour, in his lonely home, thought more and [7] more of Amy, and the days he was idly wasting away from her, when he ought to be striving for her love. At length, his solitude became unbearable, he could stand it no longer; whether wise or no, he must leave Somerton, the place was growing unbearable to him, and go to Ashleigh. But could he go without an intimation of some kind to her he loved? Yes, he must; for how send a note to Amy? Would she not look upon his letter as an impertinence, seeing she had given him no permission to write? So he made up his mind to go to Ashleigh without warning, for come what might, he must go.

Robert Vavasour was not of an impulsive character, apt like Charles to be led away on the sudden spur of the moment, but he felt that remaining at Somerton would never advance his interest with her in whom all his dearest hopes of life were centred; he should simply lose the kindly feeling he had already gained in her heart, or what was worse still, be forgotten altogether.

The craving wish to see her, grew stronger and stronger within him each day, until he could no [8] longer refuse to gratify it, and ere another week passed over his head, he was speeding along the road to Ashleigh, arriving there by the one o'clock train.

It was a stormy day, heavy showers of rain, with occasional sunshine, but Robert Vavasour, who saw everything *couleur de rose*, was charmed with the lovely scenery and quaintness of the cottages; in one of which,—perhaps the prettiest in the place,—he secured some, pleasant rooms for the time of his stay and then walked out in the hope of meeting her he loved. Vain hope! as Mrs. Neville seemed so much weaker, Amy did not leave her side. Hannah and little Sarah passed him on their way down the lane, and on their return, gave rather a high-flown account of the tall, handsome gentleman they had seen. Amy never guessed, or even thought of Robert Vavasour, but her heart fluttered strangely as it quickly passed through her mind that it might be Charles Linchmore. But alas! she failed in recognising the description so eagerly given and descanted on [9] by Sarah.

The morning of the next day was hopelessly wet, and Robert Vavasour's courage rose—with his anxiety to see Amy,—to fever heat; and, determined to see her at all hazards, he bent his steps towards the cottage.

Sarah, tired of the dulness within doors, was gazing idly from the window, little thinking that her curiosity concerning the stranger she had seen only the day before was so soon to be gratified. But there he was coming along the road, and very eagerly the little girl watched him.

"Oh! sister Amy," cried she, "here's the gentleman I saw yesterday, do come and look at him before he goes out of sight; he'll turn down the elm tree walk in another moment."

But before Amy could have reached the window, had she been so inclined, he had opened the little gate, and was coming up the gravel walk.

Sarah shrank away from the window, and clapped her hands with delight. "Why he's coming [10] here, only think of that, Mamma. Oh! I guess it must be the 'good unknown' himself."

In another moment all doubt was at an end, and Robert Vavasour in the little sitting-room, welcomed and thanked by Mrs. Neville at least, and Sarah also, if he might judge by her

glistening eyes, although she was too shy to say a word, while Amy, if she did not say she was glad to see him, did not rebuke him for coming, nor appear to look on his visit as an intrusion; and soon he was quite at home with them all, and when Amy, who had been out to Hannah, to try and make some addition to their homely dinner, returned, she was surprised to see on what friendly terms he was.

"I am afraid, dear mamma," she said, "you are exerting yourself too much. You are so unaccustomed to see a stranger."

"Scarcely a stranger, Amy. Mr. Vavasour claims our friendship for his kindness; and besides, he [11] tells me he has known you for some time."

"Some two months, is it not?" replied Amy.

"Hardly so long, I think, Miss Neville. It seems but yesterday since I first saw you."

"Are you only here for the day?" asked Amy.

"I am here for a week," he replied; "some good lady in the village has allowed me to take up my abode with her for that time, or it may be longer, as any one would be tempted to remain in the clean pretty room she showed me."

"It must be Mrs. Turner, Mamma; her cottage is so very nice."

"If it is," replied Mrs. Neville, "you will have no cause to complain, Mr. Vavasour; we stayed with her for a day or two on our first arrival, and were much pleased with her attention, and the cleanliness of the house."

"Is this place often visited by strangers? It must in summer be a lovely spot. It is prettier than Brampton, Miss Neville." [12]

"Prettier, but not so grand; and the views are not so extensive."

"You prefer Brampton?"

"Oh, no! Ashleigh is my home, and then I like it for its very quietness."

"It will no longer be quiet," replied Mrs. Neville. "Stray visitors have often reached it since I have been here; and now the easy access to it by rail will, of necessity, bring more, and Ashleigh will, perhaps, become immortalized by the lovers of pic-nics. But here is Hannah to announce dinner. You must excuse my joining you, Mr. Vavasour, as I am unable to leave the sofa."

After dinner the weather changed; the heavy clouds cleared away, and a faint gleam of sunshine shone out.

Amy proposed a walk, as she thought her mother would be glad of a little rest and quiet after her exertion, so with her sister she went with Robert Vavasour down into the village.

So dreary as the lane looked now, with its tall leafless trees! But their visitor was charmed with [13] everything, and would not allow its desolation. They inspected his new abode, which turned out to be Mrs. Turner's; then through the village, and home by road, and found Mrs. Elrington had come to spend the evening—and what a pleasant one it was! Even Amy allowed that, although she did not feel quite at rest within herself, or satisfied at Robert Vavasour's having come to Ashleigh; still she found herself later on in the evening laughing and chatting, in something of the old spirit, at seeing her mother take an interest in the conversation, and not nearly so weary and tired as she usually was.

"You are so very good," said Amy, as she went out to open the cottage door for Robert, as he went away.

"Good! Miss Neville. How? In what way?"

"In being content with our dull life here."

"It is anything but dull to me. My life lately has been a simply existing one—the slow passing of [14] each day, or counting the hours for the night to arrive, and bring a short respite from the monotony of a dreary life. Being here is—is heaven to me! in comparison to my late existence at Somerton Park."

There was no mistaking the impassioned tone in which this was said. Amy hastened to change the subject.

"I am sure your visit has given Mamma pleasure."

"Mrs. Neville seems a great invalid, I do not wonder at your anxiety for her while absent." As a stranger he had remarked the exhaustion and weariness, although to Amy her mother had seemed so much better.

"Do you think she looks so very ill?" she asked, anxiously.

"I think there is great weakness," he replied, evading a direct answer. "Have you a clever medical attendant here?"

"Yes, I think so. Dr. Sellon, is at least, very kind and attentive, no one could be more so; he says [15]

Mamma merely wants rousing, and we must not allow this apathy and weariness to increase, but strive to divert her mind, even as it was this evening, and all through your kindness."

"Ashleigh is a lovely spot, but rather too quiet for an invalid whose mind requires rousing, and whose vital energies seem so prostrated. I should suggest a total change of scene. A new and novel life, in fact, in a place perfectly strange to her, would, I should think, conduce more towards her recovery than all the doctors and medicine in the world."

"Dr. Sellon has never said so; never even hinted at such a thing," replied Amy, thoughtfully. Alas! how could it be managed, even with the sacrifice of all her salary.

"Have you had any further advice?" he asked.

"No. I wrote the other day to Dr. Ashley, our old doctor, who attended us all for so many years. I thought perhaps he might be coming this way and would call; but, although he wrote me a very kind reply, he does not even hint at such a stray chance happening." [16]

"Does he offer any opinion or advice on Mrs. Neville's case?"

"Yes. You can read it if you like," and she took it from her pocket and gave it to him; "only do not mention anything about it to Mamma, she might not like my having written; or it might make her nervous in supposing herself worse than she is. It is not exactly a secret," she added, blushing slightly, "as Mrs. Elrington knows of it, and approved of my letter."

"Do not wrong me by supposing I should think so, Miss Neville. I will take it home, and read it at my leisure, if you will allow me. Good night."

The door closed, and he was gone before Amy could reply; but as she turned to re-enter the sitting-room, she sighed and murmured,

"There is a fate in some things. Is there in my life?" [17]

CHAPTER II.

FOR BETTER, FOR WORSE.

"My life went darkling like the earth, nor knew it
shone a star,
To that dear Heaven on which it hung in worship
from afar.
O, many bared their beauty, like brave flowers to
the bee;
He might have ranged through sunny fields, but
nestled down to me;
And daintier dames would proudly have smiled him
to their side,
But with a lowly majesty he sought me for his
Bride;
And grandly gave his love to me, the dearest thing
on Earth,
Like one who gives a jewel, unweeting of its
worth."

MASSEY.

A fortnight passed away, and still Robert Vavasour lingered at Ashleigh, although he seemed no nearer winning Amy's love than when he first came; yet he could not tear himself away. Sometimes he was gloomy and desponding; and on these days he never came near the cottage. At [18] others his hopes rose when only a smile or glance kinder than usual came from her he loved, and then he was the life of the little party. But when he fancied Amy was beginning to care for him a little more, she would suddenly shrink within herself again, and become as cold and reserved as ever, but then he never thought that it was his almost tender manner that chilled and frightened her, lest he should think she was encouraging his suit. Still he hoped on, would not despair. What lover ever does? and *he* loved her so dearly.

One morning, finding Mrs. Neville alone, he told her of his love for Amy, of the compact between them, and of his hopes. The widow did not discourage them, she liked Mr. Vavasour, and would have rejoiced at seeing Amy his wife; still she would not influence Amy in any way, but leave her free to choose for herself; but since she loved no other,—and Mrs. Neville half sighed as if she almost doubted it,—she thought in time the young girl's heart might be won. [19]

And with this Robert Vavasour was obliged to be content. Content? he was anything but that; he was impatient, and fretted at the delay and slow progress he was making, he would have been more than human if he had not; but with Amy he was ever kind and gentle; she knew nothing, saw nothing of his anxious heart and sometimes despairing hopes.

And so the days flew on, Mrs. Neville neither better nor worse; some days more languid, at others less so and able to sit up; but with no certainty about it, so as to lead those most anxious to believe she was in anyway advancing towards recovery.

One morning they were surprised by a visit from Dr. Ashley. He had taken a holiday, he said, and thought he could not do better than run down to see his old friends, and was putting up, strange to say, at Mrs. Turner's, whose cottage had been pointed out to him as the prettiest in the village; and had certainly stretched like india rubber for the occasion, but then the gentleman already [20]
lodging there had kindly consented to share the parlour with him; and they were to dine together during his stay.

If Amy suspected Robert Vavasour of being concerned in this sudden move, she said nothing; but then she had grown very silent of late; perhaps she pondered these things more deeply in her heart; certain it was she ceased to be so distant and reserved to Robert, and he in consequence became more gentle and loving. Perhaps if Amy's thoughts could have shaped themselves into words, they would have been, "*He* does not love me or he would be here; and I? what can I do?"

But Charles Linchmore's staying away was no proof that he did not love Amy, believing as he did that her heart was another's; had he not thought so, not even his sister-in-law's frowns and sarcasms would have kept him from her side. As it was, he knew not even of Robert Vavasour's presence at Ashleigh, as Amy, when she wrote to Julia and Anne, never mentioned it, feeling sure [21]
of a bantering letter in return; as of course they would guess of his love for her, and imagine it was going to be a match, whether she denied it or no; certainly they would never think of the true reason that had brought him—namely, her refusal.

It was the second and last day of Dr. Ashley's stay; one of Mrs. Neville's worst days, and she had not as yet made her appearance downstairs when Mrs. Elrington entered the room where the two sisters sat.

"Mamma has not come down yet," said Amy, "she was very wakeful all night, and I persuaded her to rest a little longer this morning, although she was very loath to do so, on Dr. Ashley's account."

"Has he been to see her yet?"

"No, but I am expecting him every moment. Mamma was so much better yesterday that perhaps she is now suffering from the over-excitement of seeing him."

"Very possibly. Old times must have come before her so forcibly, and they are but sad ones for [22]
your mother to look back to. It is perhaps just as well Dr. Ashley should see her at her worst. What is his opinion of Mrs. Neville?"

"I did not ask him, and he never volunteered to tell me; but I must ascertain to-day. Do you not think I ought to?"

"Certainly I do, Amy; you would be wrong if you did not. I think if I were you I would ask his *true*," and Mrs. Elrington laid a stress on the word, "opinion on your mother's case."

"Do you think her very ill?" asked Amy.

"Yes, Amy, I do," replied Mrs. Elrington, gently. "That is to say, I think her very weak, weaker than she was when I wrote to you after her recovery from the severe illness she had."

Amy sighed. "I sometimes fancy," she said, "that Ashleigh, lovely as it is, does not suit Mamma; you know her quiet life here is so very different from what she has been accustomed to; but I do not see how a change is to be effected."

"It would be a great expense, certainly." [23]

"It would, and the means to effect it with will be smaller; as I fear, Mrs. Elrington, I shall have to resign my situation at Brampton; I cannot leave Mamma so lonely, neither can I be happy away from her while she is so ill."

"I have been thinking the same thing, Amy; your mother certainly does require all your care and attention. It would not be right to leave her."

"Do you think Mrs. Linchmore will be annoyed at my leaving in the middle of my quarter without any hint or warning whatever?"

"Not under the circumstances, Amy. You were happy there?"

"Yes, as happy as I shall ever be away from home; I was very fond of my pupils, of Edith especially."

"Was she the youngest?"

"No, the eldest. An orphan niece of Mr. Linchmore's, and adopted by him at her mother's and his sister's death. I shall regret leaving Brampton. I think change must be one of the worst trials of a governess's life." [24]

"It is a sad one, no doubt, when, as in your case, a governess happens to be attached to those she is leaving. Perhaps," continued Mrs. Elrington, as she rose, "I had better not wait to see your mother now. As soon as you have made up your mind, Amy, I would advise your writing at once to Mrs. Linchmore without delay."

Amy leant back in her chair very sorrowfully after Mrs. Elrington had gone. If she had had any doubt about the propriety of leaving Brampton, her mother's old friend—she, whose advice she so valued—had cleared it away; it was evident the step must be taken, however slow her heart

might be to break asunder the one tie that yet seemed to bind her to Charles Linchmore.

"What are you thinking of, Amy?" asked Sarah, who had been watching her sister for some time. "You look so sad."

"Do I? I was thinking of Mamma, and whether we could do anything to make her better; and about my leaving Brampton, Sarah." [25]

"But that will be so nice to have you always here; you can't be sorry about that, sister."

"But then I shall lose a great deal of money; and Mamma will have to go without a great many things she really wants. Port wine cannot be bought for nothing, Sarah."

"Ah! what a pity it is we are not rich, then we might take her back to our dear old home. I am sure she would get well there. Don't you think so?"

"She might, Sarah. But I think if change is to do her good, she will require a greater change than that."

"Further off still?" asked the child. "Where to, Amy?"

"I cannot tell; but Dr. Ashley can."

"But can't you guess at all? Not even the name?" persisted her sister.

"No. But I think somewhere abroad; a long way off. And that would cost money. Yes, more money than we have, a great deal," sighed Amy. [26]

"Ah!" said the child, "when I'm grown up I'll marry a man with lots of money, just like Mr. Vavasour. Hannah says he's awfully rich; and then he should take us away to a lovely place by the sea-side where Mamma and all of us could live like princesses. I am sure she would get well then."

This innocent remark of Sarah's was a home-thrust to Amy; a death blow to her hopes, and roused her at once. Should she sit so quietly and passively when her mother's life was at stake? Nurse and hoard up a love in her heart that she was ashamed had ever entered there from its very hopelessness and selfishness? There was Dr. Ashley coming up the walk, she would first ask his opinion as to the necessity of a change; and if he thought it necessary? Then—then. Once again Amy sighed, and said, "It is my fate; it must be so," and then went out into the other room, and quietly awaited the doctor's coming.

Some ten minutes elapsed, during which Amy was restless and anxious; still she would not pause [27]
to think now, lest her heart should give way; so she walked about even as Frances Strickland often did in her impatient moods, took up the books one by one off the table and looked at their titles—read them she could not—and then the doctor's heavy tread sounded on the staircase, and she went out and met him.

"Will you come in here, Dr. Ashley?" she said. "I want to thank you for so kindly coming to see Mamma. It is so very kind of you." Amy knew nothing of the ten pound note so carefully stowed away in his waistcoat pocket for the expenses of his homeward journey.

"Pray say no more, my dear Miss Neville," he said. "It pains me."

And Amy did not. Perhaps she thought it was painful to be thanked for what in her innermost heart she half suspected he was paid for.

"How did you find Mamma, Dr. Ashley?" she asked.

"Well, not quite so bright as yesterday, but still no material change for the worse. Dr Sellon tells [28]
me she often has these ups and downs."

"Any unusual excitement appears to weaken her for the time. Dr. Sellon does not attend regularly. I only call him in when I think Mamma really requires it."

"Quite right. Your mother's case is one requiring care and—and everything good and strengthening you can give her."

"Do you think Mamma very ill?" Amy could not bring herself to ask if he thought she would recover, although that thought had been at her heart for days, and she had driven it away and would not give it utterance.

"There is weakness,—great weakness," he replied. "I cannot see that Mrs. Neville has any other disease."

"But—but I fear you are evading my question, Dr. Ashley. I wish to know exactly what your opinion is of Mamma."

"My dear young lady," he said, kindly, "the opinion I have given is a true one, though perhaps not [29]
all the truth, and—well, she requires great care. There is a prostration of the vital powers—great want of energy. She wants rousing. Every means should be tried to accomplish that; otherwise, I need not say, this weakness and debility will increase, and of necessity do mischief."

"Every means," replied Amy, "but what means? what must I do?"

"Whatever lies in your power: whatever the patient, which I know she is in both senses of the word, expresses a wish for. She should be humoured in everything, but I need not tell you that, Miss Neville."

"And can nothing else be done?—no change of air tried?"

"Decidedly, if possible. It is the *one* remedy needful; the only remedy, in fact, and I should have named it at first, only I deemed it impracticable of accomplishment." [30]

"You think Mamma might recover if she went away?" asked Amy.

"With God's help, I do; but the step should be taken at once. If delayed it might be too late. And now, keep up your spirits and hope for the best. Remember there is nothing so bad as a tearful face and aching heart for your mother to see."

"Too late!" Those words rang in Amy's ears all day. It should not be too late. And yet how nearly had her mother been sacrificed to her blind infatuation for one who she now felt had never loved her, but only carelessly flirted to trifle away the hours that perhaps hung heavy on his hands. Alas! what would Mr. Linchmore say, did he know that the very fate he had warned her would be hers if she allowed her heart to become enslaved by Mr. Vavasour, had even overtaken her at the hand of his brother.

Not many days after Dr. Ashley had gone, a letter arrived from Anne Bennet. It ran thus:— [31]

"Brampton Park,
"February 25th.

"My dear Miss Neville,

"I have almost made up my mind to torment you with a letter every day, this place being so dull and dreary that the mere fact of writing is quite a delightful episode in my long day. I should be happy enough if Frances were away; but you know how I always disliked that girl. Just imagine my disgust, then, at her remaining here, for, of course, Julia has told you she herself and every one else is gone, excepting Frances and Charles; the latter, I suppose, remains in the hope of soon seeing you. Why don't you come back? I declare it is shameful of you to remain away so long, when you must know how wretched you are making him, and how devotedly he loves you. I should not tell you this, only Frances drives me to it, and I am just at the root of a grand secret. Julia [32] behaved shamefully—would not help me in the least, as she would persist in declaring it was curiosity—how I hate the word!—so I had nothing for it but to take Mr. Hall into my confidence, the result of which has been that I have promised, some long time hence, to become Mrs. Hall; and for the time being, we are turned into a pair of turtle-doves, only instead of billing and cooing, we are snapping and snarling all day. Adieu. Answer every word of this letter, especially that relating to Charles, who is, I am certain, as devotedly yours as

"Your loving friend,
"Anne Bennet."

This letter, with its mention of Charles Linchmore, pained Amy, and roused her slumbering pride. She would answer it at once, every word of it, and for ever put an end to Anne's mention of his name. She should see that Amy was as proud in some things as the haughty Mrs. Linchmore [33] herself, or the defiant Frances. No woman should think she would stoop one iota for any man's love; while as for Charles, Anne was deceived in her belief of his love for her, even as she had been; but it was not well her heart should be reminded of the one image still slumbering there. Was she not as much bound to Robert Vavasour as if she were already engaged to him? or did she ever prevent his coming to the cottage by being ungracious?

No; Amy had made up her mind to love him, and was ever ready to listen to his words, or walk with him. No fits of dread despair assailed him now. His whole life seemed a bright sunshine; even the dull, desolate walk up from the village was pleasant, because every step brought him nearer to the cottage.

That evening—the evening of the day that brought Anne's letter—Amy, while old Hannah cleared away the tea things, went to her room and answered it. The doing so cost her many bitter thoughts, and perhaps a few tears were hastily dashed away. When it was done, her head ached [34] sadly. She went to the window and threw it open. It was a lovely moonlight night. She crept softly downstairs and out into the garden, and leant over the little green gate at the end.

Some ten minutes passed sadly away, and then a step sounded on the crisp gravel. Amy knew well it was Robert Vavasour's, still she did not move or turn her head. Was he going home without saying good night to her? or had he missed her and guessed where she was?

"It is a cold night, Miss Neville," he said as he drew near. "Is it wise for you to be out without a shawl or wrap of any kind?"

"The lovely night tempted me," she replied, "I thought it might cool my head, for it aches sadly."

He did not reply. Amy too was silent; perhaps she guessed what he would say next.

Presently he laid his hand on hers as it rested on the woodwork of the gate. She did not withdraw [35]

it, and then he boldly took the small fair hand in his.

"Amy," he said, softly, while she trembled exceedingly, "do you remember I said I would ask you once again? The time has come. Amy, will you be my wife? I love you more dearly than when I first asked you in the old library at Brampton."

She did not shrink from him or his encircling arm as she replied, "I think I love you now; I am sure I like you better, and will try to love you with all my heart. If this will satisfy you, then I will be your wife."

And it did satisfy him, and he pressed his lips on her clear high, forehead, as, like a weary child, she laid her head on his shoulder as he gently drew her towards him.

"I am very timid," she said, "and you must be patient, and not expect too much from me at first."

These words, spoken so entreatingly and dependently, claiming, as they seemed to him, all his [36]
care and kindness, calmed him at once; he must be patient, and not frighten away by his too tender words the love only just dawning for him.

"My darling," he whispered, "you will never find me other than kind and gentle with you. You have made me very happy, Amy."

"Have I ever caused you unhappiness?" she asked, seeing he waited for a reply.

"Only twice, Amy. Once when you tried to shut out all hope from my heart, and again when I fancied you cared for Charley Linchmore."

That name! How it jarred through the chords of Amy's heart! Only a few moments ago she had determined on tearing it out, and never allowing another thought of him to enter there again. Was he dear to her still; now that she was the affianced bride of another? and that other, ought he not to know of her foolishness and folly? ought not every thought of her heart to be open to *him* now? Yes, now; from this time, this hour; but not the past; that could only bring sorrow to [37]
him, shame to her. No! no! She could not lower herself in the eyes of Robert Vavasour, he who loved her so dearly, and whom she had just promised to try in time to love with all her heart. All her heart! Was this trembling at the mere mention of another's name the beginning of her promise? Would she ever forget Charles Linchmore? Ever love another as she could have loved him?

Amy shivered slightly; but Robert Vavasour, who loved her more than his life, felt it.

"You are cold, little one," he said, "and must go in. You know, Amy, I have the right to protect you from all ill now," and he led her back gently towards the cottage. [38]

CHAPTER III.

LISTENING AT THE DOOR.

If thou hast crushed a flower,
  The root may not be blighted;
If thou hast quenched a lamp,
  Once more it may be lighted;
But on thy harp or on thy lute,
  The string which thou hast broken
Shall never in sweet sound again
  Give to thy touch a token!

If thou hast bruised a vine,
  The summer's breath is healing,
And its clusters yet may glow
  Thro' the leaves, their bloom revealing;
But if thou hast a cup o'erthrown
  With a bright draught filled—oh! never
Shall earth give back the lavished wealth
  To cool thy parched lips' fever.

Thy heart is like that cup,
  If thou waste the love it bore thee;
And like that jewel gone,
  Which the deep will not restore thee;
And like that string of heart or lute
  Whence the sweet sound is scattered,—
Gently, oh! gently touch the chords,
  So soon for ever shattered!

MRS. HEMANS.

Anne had scarcely exaggerated when she told Amy that Brampton Park had become dull and [39]
stupid. It certainly had subsided into its old dullness, while the days themselves were even more

dreary-looking than the house. Spring had commenced, the trees were beginning to put forth their blossoms, and the cold frosty weather had passed away; still the days were misty, and sometimes even foggy, with drizzling rain. Riding parties were scarcely ever attempted, and a walk was almost out of the question; while dancing and music were things unknown—the first impracticable, the latter no one seemed to have the spirits for. Mrs. Hopkins no longer walked about the corridors in stately importance; even Mason's crinoline seemed to have shrunk somewhat, as she flaunted less saucily about than when certain of meeting some one to whom to show off her last new cap.

The two young girls still staying at Brampton did not get on very well together, although there was little show of outward unfriendliness on either part. Frances had long since found out that Anne Bennet disliked and suspected, even watched her; but no fear had she of being detected— [40]
her plans, so she flattered herself, had been too secretly and deeply laid for Anne's simple mind to fathom them; such a worm in her path she could tread upon whenever she liked, and utterly crush when it pleased her. So secure was she that often Anne was attacked with one of her sarcastic speeches. But Anne was too wary to be betrayed into an open quarrel, which would, most likely, have resulted in her being obliged to leave Brampton; so she contented herself by either treating her words with silent contempt or retorting in the same style, with the secret determination of some day having her revenge, much to poor Mr. Hall's dismay, as he was, of course, *faut de mieux*, as Anne said, taken into her confidence.

Some twenty minutes Anne had been standing at one of the windows of the morning-room, which being just above the library, commanded a pretty good view down a part of the long avenue, through the branches of the still almost leafless trees. [41]

It was about a month since the eventful evening on which Amy had penned her reply to Anne.

Charles, who had been reading, suddenly rose, and threw his book, with a gesture of weariness, on the table.

"Are you going out?" asked Frances, laying her embroidery in her lap, as he rose.

"Yes; it's close upon half-past four, and I shall just get a stroll before dinner; the book has made me stupid."

"So has my embroidery. I think I will go with you, if you will let me."

"You!" exclaimed Anne, from her distant post, ever ready to knock on the head any chance that drew the two together; "why your feet in their dainty boots would get soaked through and through, and you catch your death of cold. Do not encourage such self-immolation, Charles."

"Yes," laughed Charles, "your town-made boots, Frances, were never made or intended for country wear. Anne's are, at least, an inch thick, and wade through any amount of mud or dirt: so [42]
if either of you come, it must be Anne."

"I should say Anne would be a lively companion," retorted Frances, savagely. "I suppose by this time she could tell us how many drops of rain fall in a minute, and how many rooks have perched on the trees during the last half-hour."

"I wish one of the rooks would fly and bring me the letter from Miss Neville that I have been expecting, and have been looking out for all the afternoon."

This reply, with its allusion to the governess, Anne knew was the severest thing she could say; so, with a self-satisfied look at Frances' flushed face, she went away to put on her things.

But her water-proof cloak could not be found—was nowhere. Anne was a great deal too independent to summon servants to her aid, so she must needs go down stairs to look for it, remembering, as she went, that she had hung it on the stand in the hall to dry. She was returning upstairs with it on her arm, when Charles's voice sounded in the morning-room. Anne hesitated a [43]
moment; but Frances's low mysterious tone was too great a temptation to be resisted, and with a half-frightened guilty look, she drew near the door and listened, thinking, perhaps, the end to be attained justified the means she was employing in attaining it.

"My heart misgives me sometimes as to whether I did right in leaving her so precipitately, without a word," Charles was saying.

"What would have been the use of speaking?" was the rejoinder, "when she so evidently cared, or rather showed her love for Mr. Vavasour."

Anne could not hear the reply, and again Frances spoke.

"I thought I never should recover her from that death-like faint."

"If any woman deceived me, she did. I could have sworn she cared for me, on that very evening. How she trembled when I took her hand," said Charles.

Again Anne was at fault with the answer; but whatever it was Charles's reply rang loud and clear [44]
—

"I hate that fellow Vavasour!" he said.

"Hush! hush!" said Frances; and Anne could imagine she was entreating him to talk lower; then

the rustle of her dress was heard, and swift as thought Anne flew lightly and softly up the thickly-carpeted stairs. As she paused at the top, breathless and panting, she heard the door below gently closed.

"Too late!" said she, with a smile of pleasure; and then went with something of a triumphant march to her room; where, shutting the door, she gave vent to one of her ringing laughs, which quickly subsided into a repentant, regretful look. "How shameful of me to laugh at such wickedness," said she, aloud; and then, settling herself in an old arm-chair, began to think over what she had heard, and draw her own conclusions therefrom.

This to Anne's quick mind was not very difficult; she guessed it all, or almost all, at once, and [45] never for a moment doubted they were talking of Miss Neville. Had she not given them the clue when she mentioned her name, before going up to dress?

So Miss Neville had fainted. But where, and when? and how had Frances managed to persuade or convince Charles that the faint was caused by love for Mr. Vavasour? Charles had said, "That very evening." What evening? Was it the night before he went off so suddenly from Brampton? the night Mr. Vavasour had been brought home wounded and insensible? Was it possible Amy had fainted at seeing him? Yes, she might have done so; it was most probable she had; and yet that, as far as Anne could see, was no proof of her love for him. The sight might have grieved and shocked her, as it might have done any woman so timid as she was, and nervous and weak from the effects of recent illness.

Anne had indeed arrived at the root of the mystery, and that in a manner she had little dreamed [46] of. What a deep-laid plot it seemed, and how artfully and successfully concealed from her! She felt half inclined to rush boldly down, confront Frances, and tax her with her falsehood and injustice to Miss Neville; but on second thoughts she restrained herself and determined for once on assuming a new character. She would take a leaf out of Frances' book, and act as secretly and silently.

As Anne sat ruminating a knock sounded at her door. What if it should be Frances? She sprung from her chair and busied herself in putting away her things ere she answered, "Come in;" but it was only a servant with letters, and at last Miss Neville's reply that she had been expecting for so many weeks.

"Tell Mr. Charles," said Anne, "that it looks so very wet I have changed my mind and shall not go out. He need not wait for me."

"Let Frances go out with him, if she likes," thought Anne; "hers will be but a short-lived pleasure. I will defeat her to-morrow," and then she once more sat down, and opened Amy's letter. [47]

"Saturday.

"My dear Miss Bennet,

"I feel much pleasure in congratulating you on your engagement to Mr. Hall, and trust the day is not so far distant as you seem to imagine when you will settle down into a pattern clergyman's wife. I fear there is little chance of our meeting again as you so kindly wish, as the very delicate state of my mother's health precludes all possibility of my leaving home at present. It is therefore imperative I should resign my situation with Mrs. Linchmore, much as I shall regret leaving her and my pupils. Your allusion to Mr. Charles Linchmore pains me. May I ask you to be silent on that subject for the future; as, even in joke, I do not like any man being thought to be desperately in love with me, and in this instance Mr. Charles Linchmore barely treated me as a friend at parting. With every wish for your future happiness in the new path which you have chosen, [48]

"I am,
"Yours very sincerely,
"Amy Neville."

This was the letter Amy had written, and which ought to have reached Anne a month ago, but Amy had entrusted the posting of it to a boy named Joe, who always came up every Sunday afternoon after church to have his dinner at the cottage. Unfortunately Joe forgot all about the letter, and before the next Sunday came round he was laid up with a fever, then prevalent at Ashleigh; and when able to get about again the letter never occurred to him until the first Sunday of his going to church; when again he donned his best suit, and on kneeling down, the letter rustled in his pocket. Joe's conscience smote him at once, and as soon as service was ended away he flew to the village post-office, spelling out as he went the address on the envelope; which, when he found was no sweetheart, but only a young lady, he concluded could be a letter of no [49] consequence, and determined on saying nothing about its lying so long neglected in his pocket of his Sunday's best. Joe was not wise enough to know that trifles sometimes make or mar a life's happiness.

Before Anne left her room she made up her mind how to act; not a word would she say that night to Charles, because nothing could be done, but on the morrow she would open his eyes, show him the snare into which he had fallen; the folly he had been guilty of through the cunning and duplicity of Frances.

Anne sang all the way downstairs to the drawing-room as she went to dinner. The idea of having

detected the proud Frances had perhaps more to do with this exuberance of spirits, than pleasure at Miss Neville's being done justice to, and Charles made happy; as for Mrs. Linchmore's frowns, Anne never gave them a thought.

Charles spirits were, if anything, more forced than usual; Frances more reserved and silent, so that Anne's vivacity and evident good humour showed in their brightest colours. [50]

"What spirits you are in, Anne," remarked Mrs. Linchmore.

"Perhaps friend Hall is on the wing," laughed Charles.

"Or perhaps," replied Anne slowly, "my rooks have given me a lesson in—in—"

"Cawing," suggested Frances, impertinently.

"Why not in keeping a silent tongue?" Anne replied, with a scarcely perceptible touch of temper in the tone of her voice. "There is more wisdom in that, or perhaps my birds are wise birds, and have given me a hint where to find the golden link to my chain that has been missing so long."

"When did you lose it, Anne?" asked Mrs. Linchmore, "this is the first I have heard about it."

"Some two months ago, the morning after that poaching business," and Anne looked steadily at Frances; "but it is of no consequence now. I find my chain can be joined again without it." [51]

Frances quailed before that steady, searching look; then rose and crossed the room, passing close by Anne as she went. "Miss Bennet," said she, with one of her coldest and most sarcastic smiles, "Miss Bennet has recourse to enigmas at times,—enigmas not very difficult of solution, although I for one cannot see the point they aim at," and she passed on.

Anne watched her opportunity all the evening, but to no purpose. Frances' suspicions were roused; it was impossible to get speech of Charles, and Anne was obliged to go up to bed with the rest, without having given one sign, or being able to say one word to him.

But Anne was not to be thus foiled; as soon as she gained her room she sat down and penned a note to Charles. She had something of great importance to tell him; would he meet her in the library before breakfast, at eight o'clock? and then away she flew in fear and trepidation down the long, dark corridors, and knocked at Charles's door. [52]

"It is I, Anne Bennet," she said. "Open the door, quick! Make haste, I am frightened to death!"

In another moment the door opened.

"What is it?" said he, with a look of surprise.

She thrust the note into his hand, and was hurrying away.

"Stay, let me light you," he said.

"Oh! no, not for worlds!" she replied, then fled hastily, and gained her room without being seen.

Anne was too restless to sleep much that night, and was up and away downstairs the next morning before the hour she had named, and grew quite impatient at the slow movement of the minute hand of the clock on the chimney-piece, as she walked up and down awaiting Charles's coming. [53]

Suppose he should not come? But, no, he must think it was something important to drag her out of bed at that unearthly hour, full two hours before her usual time. But there was a step coming along the hall now; then the door opened and Charles entered.

"You are sure Frances did not see you?" asked Anne.

"Yes," replied he, in some amazement, "but her maid did."

"Then I have not a moment to lose," said Annie, "come here and listen to me. Do you remember meeting me on the stairs, the morning you left Brampton so hurriedly? and your refusal to tell me why you had determined on doing so? or rather that you left because you had heard that Miss Neville no longer loved you?"

"No, Anne, no, you are wrong," replied Charles, decidedly, "I told you I had found out that Miss Neville had never cared for me, that her heart was entirely another's." [54]

"It is all one and the same thing. I told you then that I did not believe it, and asked you to tell me how you had found it out, did I not?"

"You did. But why rake up old feelings which only tend to wound and bruise the heart afresh?"

"I am glad they do; if they did not I would not say one word in Miss Neville's defence."

"Defence! You talk strangely, Anne. Don't whisper hope to my heart, which can only end in misery and despair. I dare not hope."

"You will hope when you have heard all."

"What have you to tell?" he asked, almost sternly.

"Only this: that you left Brampton because Miss Neville had fainted on seeing Mr. Vavasour

brought home wounded."

"What surer proof could I have of her love for him?" he asked, sadly.

"Proof! Do you call this proof?" said Anne, angrily, "do you forget how ill Miss Neville had been? how nervous and weak she yet was when this occurred? Was it a wonder she fainted? or a [55]
wonder that Frances, who hated and disliked her, should seize upon that accident to betray you both? And why? Only because had you told Miss Neville of your love, or divulged what you had seen to me, you would never have fallen into this snare so artfully laid for you, so cunningly worked out by Frances."

"Who told you it was Frances?"

"She herself," replied Anne, boldly facing the danger. "I have never left a stone unturned since that morning I met you on the stairs almost heart-broken. I was determined to find out why it was so. I suspected Frances, and have watched her all these long weeks, but she was too deep for me, too artful; and I never should have detected her, had I not over-heard her conversation with you yesterday. Then I found it all out; and I tell you Charles she has deceived you."

"Go on," he said, "convince me it is so, and I will thank you from my heart, Anne; and—no, I am a fool to hope!" and he strode away towards the window. [56]

"You are a fool to despair! I tell you Charles, if any woman ever loved you, Miss Neville did. Were not the tears ready to start from her eyes when I gave her your message, and told her you were gone? You allowed her to think for weeks that you loved her, and then, for a mere trifle, left her without explanation or word of any kind. You behaved shamefully; while she never gave you an unkind word. The severest thing she ever said of you, was said in a letter I received from her yesterday. I told her you loved her, because I knew she was miserable thinking you did not; and read what she says."

He took the letter from her hand, his face flushing while he read it. "If Frances has deceived me? If she has dared to do it?" he said. "By Heaven! she shall rue it deeply!"

"And she has done so," pursued Anne, "and you are more to blame than she in allowing yourself to be deceived. How could you doubt Miss Neville? How believe that she, of all women in the world, would give away her heart unsought. You have condemned her unheard, and without the [57]
slightest foundation, and have behaved cruelly to her, and deserve to lose her."

"Not if she loves me," he cried, starting up, "not if any words of mine have power to move her. God knows whether I shall be successful or no; but she shall hear how madly I love her."

"Are you going to see her? and when?"

"Now, this instant! your words have roused me to action!"

He was gone. Anne went into the drawing-room and stood by the window. Some minutes slipped by, and then Frances entered.

"Come here!" said Anne. "Come and look at Charles."

Frances advanced and looked eagerly around.

"I do not see him," she said.

"Hark!" said Anne, "What is that?"

It was the hasty canter of a horse's feet. In another moment Charles dashed past.

Anne remembered the last time he had gone away. How she and Frances had stood together at [58]
the same window, even as they did now; only with this difference, that then, Frances' face was the triumphant one. Now they had changed places.

Anne could not—did not pity her, as she drew near and took hold of her arm.

"He has gone to tell Miss Neville he loves her," said she cruelly, as Frances looked enquiringly in her face.

Frances paled to an almost death-like whiteness as she grasped, "God forgive you if he has. I never will!" [59]

CHAPTER IV.

TOO LATE.

"So mournfully she gaz'd on him,
  As if her heart would break;
Her silence more upbraided him,
  Than all her tongue might speak!

She could do nought but gaze on him,
  For answer she had none,

But tears that could not be repress'd,
  Fell slowly, one by one.

Alas! that life should be so short—
  So short and yet so sad;
Alas! that we so late are taught
  To prize the time we had!

CHARLES SWAIN.

It was the evening after Amy had pledged herself to Robert Vavasour. The sun had slowly faded away, and twilight threw but a faint light into the room where she sat close to her mother's feet.

Amy had been reading to Mrs. Neville and the book still open; lay in her lap, but it was too dark [60]
to read now, too dark for her mother to see her face, so Amy drew closer still ere she broached the subject nearest her heart. There was no shrinking or timidity, as there might have been had her love been wholly his, whose wife she had promised to become.

"Mamma, did Mr. Vavasour ever speak to you of his love for me?" The words were spoken firmly, though almost in a whisper.

"He did, Amy; and he also said you had refused his love."

"I knew so little of him then, that when he named his love it seemed like a dream, so sudden and unexpected. I had never given it a thought, or believed such a thing possible. I know him better now; he is so good, so kind."

She paused, perhaps hoping her mother would speak, but Mrs. Neville said not a word, and Amy went on somewhat falteringly, although she tried hard to speak steadily.

"Mamma, I promised last evening I would be his wife—" [61]

"Have you done wisely, Amy? Are you sure you love him as his promised wife should?"

"Yes," replied Amy, dreamily. "I like him, I am sure I like him very much indeed,—and—and then he is so gentle and loving with me; surely no one could help liking him."

Mrs. Neville half raised herself on the sofa. "Amy! Amy! liking will not do. Do you love him, child?"

"Yes, Mamma. Yes, I think so."

"Only *think*, child? Nay you must be sure of it. Ask your heart if the time passes slowly when he is absent from the cottage. Do you watch and wait, and listen for his returning footsteps? Do you feel that without him life is not worth having, the world a blank? Is your whole heart with him when he is at your side? Do you tremble when his hand touches yours; and your voice grow softer as you speak to him? Do you feel that you dare not look up lest he should see the deep love in your eyes? if so Amy, then gladly will I consent to give you to him. But if not, I would rather, far [62]
rather see you in your grave than wedded to him."

Amy was silent; not from any wish to draw back from her word or plighted troth; no, she had made up her mind to be Robert Vavasour's wife, her mother's thin wasted hand as it rested on hers only strengthened that resolution; the very feebleness with which she raised herself on the couch showed Amy how very weak and ill she was, and this one act might restore her to health. She did not hesitate, she would not draw back; had Charles loved her, it might have been different, but convinced of his falseness and trifling, no regret for him, now struggled at her heart, only shame that she could ever have allowed it to be drawn towards him, unsought.

"You hesitate. You do not answer, Amy?" said Mrs. Neville, sadly, "and have deceived yourself and him."

"No, Mamma, you are wrong. Although I do not love Mr. Vavasour like that; still I do love him, [63]
and in time, when I am his wife, I shall very dearly."

Mrs. Neville sighed. "In this one important step of your life, Amy, when your whole future well-being depends upon it, there should be no secrets between us, recollect this one act may entail much misery; you cannot tell how much. Think of being bound for life to a man you do not love, think of the remorse you will feel at not being able to give him the love of your whole heart in return for his. Amy, my child, his very presence would be painful to you, his very love and kindness your greatest punishment and sorrow."

"Yes Mamma, if I did not love him; but it will not be so. I shall love him."

"And yet Amy, your very words almost forbid it, and fill my heart with fear and trembling," and again Mrs. Neville clasped her daughter's hand, while Amy, fairly overcome, bent down and laying her forehead on the soft pitying hand, burst into tears. [64]

"Hush, Amy! hush! You have done foolishly, but there is yet time; better give him sorrow and pain now than later."

"No, Mamma, no; there is no need to give him pain," said Amy, presently.

"Alas!" replied Mrs. Neville, "then why these tears?"

"I weep," answered Amy, flinging—dashing back the tears as they crowded into her eyes, "I weep to think I have allowed my heart to think of another; one, too all unworthy of a woman's love; one who flirted and pretended to care for me; I weep for very shame, mother, to think how foolish I was, and how unworthy I am to be Robert Vavasour's wife."

"You have been unhappy, my child, so unhappy; but I almost guessed it when I looked in your face months ago."

"Yes, but not unhappy now, Mamma. I was very miserable, for I thought he loved me until he left me—went away without a word. Oh! mother, *that* was a bitter trial to me, and instead of trying to [65] rouse myself and cast his image out of my heart, knowing I had done wrong in ever loving him, and doubly so now I had found out his cruel unworthiness, I nursed my love; bemoaned my fate; and steadily shut my heart against Mr. Vavasour. But it could not be; he was too noble hearted, so patient under my waywardness; sorrowful, but never reproachful; and—and so Mamma I have promised to become his wife; and am happy, not grieved or sad, at the idea; no, I will be his faithful, loving wife, and in his true heart forget this early foolish love that caused me so much unhappiness, and nearly lost me the heart of him who is now to be my husband."

"You are right, Amy, to forget *him*, right to tear *his* image from your heart; a man to treat you so is unworthy of any woman's love; and yet—yet I am scarcely satisfied. I fear this engagement. Is it not hasty, too hasty? Do not rush into a marriage hoping to escape from a love, however unworthy, still struggling at your heart; such a mistake might make the one regret of your whole [66] life."

"I do not. I will not," replied Amy firmly, as she rose, and stooping over her mother, kissed her fondly; "If this is the only reason you have, dear Mamma, for fear, then rest content: my engagement with Mr. Vavasour is for my—all our happiness; will you try and think so? I should feel very unhappy indeed if you refused your consent; or that my marriage grieved you."

"It does not grieve me, Amy. Only," sighed Mrs. Neville, "I wish he had been your first love."

"Nay, that is foolish, Mamma. Now often have I heard you say that few girls marry their first love."

Again Mrs. Neville was silent. "Have you told Mr. Vavasour of this old love, Amy?" asked she presently.

"Oh! no, no, Mamma. What good could it do? It would only grieve him; I,—I told him this much, [67] that I—I hoped to love him better in time."

"And he was satisfied?"

"Quite," answered Amy, "and will you not say you are too, dearest Mamma?" and she laid her head lovingly on her mother's shoulder, and looked entreatingly in her face.

"God bless and protect you, my child," said Mrs. Neville fervently, drawing her closer still, and kissing her fondly. "May He guide and strengthen us both, for indeed I am very sorrowful, and scarcely know whether this marriage is for my child's happiness or no; but I pray it may be with all my heart. You have your mother's best, holiest wishes, Amy."

So Amy Neville became, with her mother's sanction, Robert Vavasour's affianced wife.

Yet for days after that Mrs. Neville's heart seemed troubled and ill at ease, and she lay on the sofa watching, noting Amy's every look or action, until, by degrees, the troubled anxious look wore away; Amy seemed so contented and happy that her mother, who, in her secret heart, [68] wished the marriage might be, gradually lost her fears, and each hour gained renewed confidence and hope. She grew better and stronger, and this alone in itself was sufficient to bring back the smiles into Amy's face, while each day disclosed some fresh trait of Robert Vavasour's goodness and kindness of heart. It was his voice read of an evening to her mother and never seemed to weary. It was his hand raised the invalid, or lifted her, as her strength increased, from the sofa to the easy chair.

Amy rejoiced in the change, and while she never allowed her thoughts to wander to the past, with all its cruel hopes and fears, so she never halted or looked onward to the future; her life was of to-day, neither more nor less. Her mother was better; it was her act, her will, that had done it all. She was contented that it should be so, and fancied herself happy; perhaps was at this time really so, and might have been for ever, had she never seen Charles Linchmore again, never known how [69] he, not she, had been deceived, but that was to be the one thorn in her onward path.

In less than a month Amy was to be married. Mrs. Neville's objections as to haste were overruled, even old Mrs. Elrington had sided with the rest; but then Mrs. Neville knew nothing of Dr. Ashley's opinion, or that Amy had confided to her old friend the necessity there was for an immediate change.

They were to go to Italy. Amy, her husband, and mother, with little Sarah, and even old Hannah accompanying them. What a pleasant party it would be! Already Amy began to picture to herself the delight she would experience in watching her mother's restoration to health and strength in that warm sunny clime, and how happy she would be by-and-by in bringing her back when quite well, to live in her own and Vavasour's home, that home he had so often talked to her of, and where, in a few weeks, she would be roaming about at will as its mistress. [70]

The days crept on steadily and surely slowly to all but Mrs. Neville, and with her the time seemed to fly; she was anxious and restless, while her doubts and fears only shaped themselves in words in old Hannah's presence; to the rest, even to Amy, she was passive and quiet, apparently resigned, only at heart sad.

But old Hannah was a remorseless tyrant, who, feeling deeply and sorrowfully her darling's departure from home, sighing and even dropping a tear or two in secret, yet she never allowed Mrs. Neville to bewail it, but, on the contrary, seemed to look upon her doing so as a weakness and sin, requiring a steady though somewhat underhand reproof. Perhaps the very strength of mind Hannah displayed encouraged and strengthened her mistress.

"We are to lose Miss Amy to-morrow, Hannah," said Mrs. Neville, in a sad tone of voice. "I wish the wedding had not been so sudden."

"There, Ma'am, I don't call it sudden at all in the light wind," then silently and steadily went [71]
upstairs to change her bridal attire for a travelling dress.

It would be quite half-an-hour before Vavasour could return; so she sat quietly awaiting him in the little sitting-room, perhaps for the first time that day feeling sad, just realising her position as a wife, and looking onwards into the future.

She sat lost in a dreamy reverie, and heard not the swift opening and shutting of the little garden gate, or the sound of the still swifter step across the gravel walk, until it sounded quick and strong in the passage; then she started and arose quickly. Her husband had returned! and sooner than she expected. With a smile she turned to greet him, but it was Charles Linchmore who stood in the doorway, flushed and heated with the haste and impatience of his hurried ride from the station, and still more hasty journey.

Amy's heart stood still. Why had he come? Then, woman-like, almost guessed before he spoke [72]
what he had come to say. But ere she could recover from the sudden shock of his presence he, with all the old impetuosity of his nature, was at her feet, pouring forth his long pent-up love, with all its wild jealousy and anguish. How he had been deceived by Frances, and driven well-nigh distracted. How through Anne's agency he had found out her deceit, and had started at once to explain all and be forgiven; how he believed now she had loved him, and still loved, or would love him again; all—all he told, while his words came fast and strong. Amy never attempted to stay them, neither could she, if she would. So he went on to the end; then looked up into her face, that white, wan, pale face, bending so sadly over him, with an agonised stony look spread over each feature, striking dismay into his heart and soul.

"Speak to me!" he cried passionately. "Only say you forgive me my hasty belief in your falseness,
only say that you love me still, and that I am not too late to make amends. Amy! my own Amy, [73]
speak to me!" and again he looked up beseechingly, with all his deep, earnest love written on his face, and speaking in his eyes.

But she was silent and still, very still.

Then the hand he held so tightly drew away from his hot, burning ones, and turning slowly, showed the wife's symbol, the plain gold band encircling the one small finger, while the pale, sad lips parted, and words came mournfully at last, but slowly and distinctly, settling like ice about his heart.

"It is too late—I am married."

Again that hasty, hurried step sounded, ringing out fiercely in the passage and along the quiet gravel walk. Once again the gate swung harshly and roughly on its frail hinges; then the sudden rush of a horse's quick hoofs rung out startlingly in the still, soft air, and in another moment died away in the far-off distance.

"Where is your mistress? is she ready?" asked Vavasour of Amy's new maid, as ten minutes later
he hastily entered the cottage. [74]

"My mistress is not ready, Sir," was the reply, with a pert toss of the head, while a peculiar expression played round the corners of her lips. "She is in the parlour, Sir. Mrs. Elrington thinks it's the heat of the day and the worry that has caused her to faint away."

Yes; Amy lay on the sofa, quiet and motionless with scarcely any sign of life on her pale, sad face, while onward, onward, faster and faster still, rode Charles Linchmore.

Would they ever meet again; and how? [75]

CHAPTER V.

DEFEAT.

"Art thou then desolate
Of friends, of hopes forsaken? Come to me!
I am thine own. Have trusted hearts proved false?

Why didst thou ever leave me? Know'st thou all
I would have borne, and called it joy to bear,
For thy sake? Know'st thou that thy voice hath
power
To shake me with a thrill of happiness
By one kind tone?—to fill mine eyes with tears
Of yearning love? And thou—Oh! thou didst throw
That crushed affection back upon my heart.
Yet come to me!"

"'Tis he—what doth he here!"
LARA.

The great bell rang out at the lodge gate, and Charles Linchmore dashed up to the Hall almost as hastily as he had left it, and with scarce a word of greeting to the old butler, whom he passed on his way to the drawing-room, and never staying to change his dress, he strode on, all flushed and [76] heated as he was, with his hurried journey and desperate thoughts, until he stood face to face with Mrs. Linchmore.

"Why Charles!" exclaimed she, "what on earth has happened? What is the matter?"

"Nothing," he replied. "Where's Frances?"

"Nothing," she rejoined, indignantly, "to come into the room in such a plight as this! Look at the splashed state of your boots; and then your face. No one can look at that and not suspect something dreadful having happened. *I* never saw anything so changed and altered as it is."

"I dare say. I don't much care."

"Are you mad? Where have you been?"

"Nowhere. Where's Frances?" he asked again.

"I do not know. But I advise you to make yourself a little more presentable before you seek her. These freaks—*mad* freaks of riding half over the country, no one knows where, are not agreeable to those you come in contact with afterwards," and Mrs. Linchmore pushed her chair further [77] away from him, and smoothed the rich folds of her dress, as though the act of doing that would soothe her ruffled temper.

"It *was* a mad freak," replied he, and without waiting for another word, or tendering an apology for his disordered dress, he strode away again, with the full determination of finding Frances.

Every room below stairs he searched, but in vain; she was nowhere, and driven reckless by the agony of his thoughts he went straight up to her own room, and opened the door.

She was lying on the sofa, her eyes red and swollen with weeping, passionate, hopeless tears at the thought that long before now he and Amy had met, and he consequently lost to herself for ever.

"Charles!" she exclaimed, springing off the sofa, her cheeks flushing hotly with surprise and pleasure.

But another glance at his face, and her heart sank within her, for its expression almost terrified her. [78]

He closed the door and came and stood opposite to where she was, looking as though he would have struck her.

She quailed visibly before his menacing glance. Then resolutely regained the mastery over herself, and drawing up her figure proudly, she said,

"Do you know this is my room? I wonder how you dare come here."

"Your room? Well, what if it is, I care not," he replied. "I am reckless of everything."

"But I am not; and—and," she hesitated, and tried again to steady her beating heart, "what—what has happened, Charles, that you look so strangely?"

"Happened? Can you ask me what has happened, you who have wrecked the hopes of my whole life."

"I, Charles? You talk in riddles; I do not understand you."

"You dare not say that!" exclaimed he, hoarsely. "You know well that I loved her with all my heart [79] and soul, and you—you schemed to draw her from me. I would have laid down my life for her; and you guessed it, and told me she loved another, and, like a fool, I believed you. You have driven me to despair; her to a life-long living death; and this, all this, I have dared to come and tell you."

"It was no lie. She never loved you!"

"She did!" he cried, hotly; "I swear she did. I saw it; knew it but a few hours since."

"You have seen her?" asked Frances.

"Seen her! Yes; and I wish to God I had died before seeing her," and he clasped his hands over his damp brow in an agony of grief.

"See," he said, presently, "are you not satisfied with my sufferings? Look here;" and he drew his hand across his forehead and temples, and showed the large drops that fell from them. "I loved her as my life. My life, do I say? She was more than life to me, and I have lost her; and this—this is your devil's work."

"Lost her!" echoed Frances, inquiringly. [80]

He heeded her not; but walked the room with rapid strides, then gradually calmed again, and then again burst forth with the hopeless agony of his thoughts, as he recalled Amy's last words:

"*It is too late, I am married.*"

"Aye," he said, despairingly, "too late to save us both; too late, indeed."

Frances could not listen calmly, or see unmoved the strong man's agony; but she never once repented the evil she had wrought, but rather gloried at heart in having so successfully separated him and Amy; and the more so now, because she saw how madly he loved her. She waited quietly, almost afraid to speak, until the paroxysm of grief had exhausted itself. Then she said, timidly,

"Too late, Charles. Did you say too late?"

But her words roused him to fury again.

"I did," he cried; "I said too late; God knows I was too late. A day, only a day earlier, and I should have been in time to save her!"

"To save Miss Neville? And from what?" [81]

"From what?" he cried; "you are not satisfied with my sufferings, then? but would drain the last bitter drop of agony in my cup—the telling; the naming—Oh, God! She is married!"

Married! Frances was not prepared for this. A mist swam before her eyes; a sudden faintness seized her, and she clung to the back of the sofa for support.

"Yes, married!" he cried, fiercely seizing her arm. "You would have me tell you, and you shall hear it too, and remember it to your dying day; and I—I saw her only an hour after she was lost to me for ever."

But Frances' tongue was stayed, and she never answered one word.

"You have driven me mad," he continued savagely, "and it is a mercy you have not a murder on your soul, for, by Heaven, I was tempted more than once to take my life on my road down here? Do you hear?" he cried.

"Oh, Charles! don't, don't talk so wildly: you will kill me!" [82]

"Kill you! No, I don't wish to do that; I'll only wish you half the misery you have caused me, and that shall be your punishment and my revenge."

And then he turned to leave her; but Frances sprang forward and stopped him.

"Do not go away like that, Charles. Do not go, leaving almost a curse behind you. I have not been guilty of half the wickedness you accuse me of. I did say Miss Neville did not love you; but—but I believed it."

"You did not," he cried. "You hated and then you slandered her."

"And if I did, it was your fault; yours, for you taught me to love you."

"You love me! It is like the rest false, and a flimsy attempt to palliate your wickedness."

"No, no; it is true. I have loved you for years past," exclaimed Frances, sinking on her knees, and hiding her face, "and—and I thought you loved me, too, until *she* came and took your love away; and then I hated her—yes, words cannot tell how much I hated her. What had I in life worth living [83] for when your love was gone? and I thought if I could only take her away from you, your heart would come back to me again. If you have suffered, what have not I? and she never could have loved you to have married another. Oh! forgive me, Charles, forgive me! and don't—don't hate me."

"Forgive you!" he replied. "No; years hence, when we meet again, I may, but not now."

"Years hence? Are you going away, then? Oh! you cannot be so cruel!"

"In another month I shall leave England, perhaps for ever,—a broken-hearted wretch, with an aimless, hopeless existence. All this you have driven me to, and yet you ask me to forgive you. For her sake—hers, of whom I dare not trust myself to speak—I will not, cannot forgive you!"

The bitterness of his grief was over; the first burst was past; and he spoke calmer now, although his every word, the tone even of his voice, sank like ice into Frances' soul, convincing her how [84] hopelessly she loved.

"Oh! say not so, Charles," she cried, "or you will crush me utterly. See,—see how I must love you to kneel here, and to humble my pride so entirely as to tell you I—I love you."

"Love! Does love break the heart of the loved one as you have broken mine? Call you such a deadly feeling as this, love? Say, rather, that you hate me."

"No, no; never! Whatever you do, whatever you say, I shall love you still,—love you for ever!"

"Give me your hate," he replied, "I would rather have that."

But Frances only answered by sobs and wringing her hands.

"If," he continued, "you have wrecked my happiness and hers through love of me, I wish to God you had hated me!"

"I could not," sobbed Frances, utterly overcome. "You—you won my love two years ago. Yes! you loved me then." [85]

"Never!" he cried vehemently, almost savagely. "Never! I swear it!"

"Cruel!" murmured Frances.

"Cruel? Yes; what else do you deserve? Had you never told me that falsehood—never deceived me I—I might; but it is too late—all too late. And yet how I love her, love her to madness, and she the —the wife of another!" and he groaned and clenched his hands together, until the nails seemed buried in the very flesh, in utter anguish at the thought.

"Don't talk of her so, Charles, you will break my heart. Have some pity."

"Pity! I have none. What had you for either her or me. I tell you I have no mercy, no pity, only scorn and—and—" he would have said hate, but somehow the word would not come to his lips, as he looked at the bent, bowed figure kneeling so humbly before him.

"Oh! don't go! don't go, Charles. Say one, only one kind word," cried Frances, imploringly, as he turned again to leave her. [86]

"Don't ask me," he replied, "for I have none to give. Don't ask me, lest I say more than I have done. Pray God that he will change your revengeful, cruel heart. I pray that we may never meet again."

"Oh, my God, he's gone!" moaned Frances, as the door closed upon him, "and not one kind word, not one. Oh! I have not deserved it! indeed I haven't," and burying her face in the sofa cushion, she burst into a fresh passion of hopeless, despairing tears.

After a few moments she raised her head again and sobbed and moaned afresh, as she cried.

"He was cruel to the last, and all through her. Oh! I will hate her tenfold for this, and work her more misery if I can. I will never repent what I have done. Never! but will make her suffer more frightfully, if—if possible, than this!"

She tossed back her hair, and almost for the moment regained her former proud bearing; for, [87] strange and unnatural as it may seem, this desperate resolve of making Amy, if she could, more wretched than she had already, soothed and calmed for a time the hopeless nature of her thoughts, and was the one hope that supported her through the long, terrible hours of the night that followed. [88]

CHAPTER VI.

AMY'S COURAGE FAILS HER.

"New joys, new virtues with that happy birth
Are born, and with the growing infant grow.
Source of our purest happiness below
Is that benignant law, which hath entwined
Dearest delight with strongest duty, so
That in the healthy heart and righteous mind
Even they co-exist, inseparably combined.

Oh! bliss for them when in that infant face
They now the unfolding faculties descry,
And fondly gazing, trace—or think they trace
The first faint speculation in that eye,
Which hitherto hath rolled in vacancy;
Oh! bliss in that soft countenance to seek
Some mark of recognition, and espy
The quiet smile which in the innocent cheek
Of kindness and of kind its consciousness doth
speak!"

SOUTHEY.

Time passed rapidly onwards; heedless, in its flight, of bruised hearts or desolate homes, but ruthlessly brushing past, hurrying on far away with careless front and iron tread; perhaps ere he came round again those hearts would be healed and those homes joyous again. Such things happen every day, and well for us that it is so. [89]

The first year of Amy's married life passed quietly by; just as the second dawned her son was born, but ere the third came to its close, her mother faded with the dying year.

Mrs. Neville had been so much better during the first year of their sojourn abroad, so almost well again, that, as her last illness drew on, Amy, who had seen her almost as weak at Ashleigh, could not believe that she would not recover, and wilfully shut her eyes to what to others was so apparent, that this was a weakness even unto death. And so it was. Mrs. Neville died, and for a time Amy was inconsolable; even her baby's caresses failed to cheer and rouse her heart.

Her husband returned with her to England. Amy wept bitterly as she stood in that home, where so often she had so fondly hoped to have welcomed her mother.

Many changes had occurred during Amy's absence. [90]

Anne Bennet had married and was now living steadily enough—so she said—with her husband at his old curacy, not many miles distant from Brampton.

Charles Linchmore, after his sad meeting with Amy, had returned for one night to the Park, and after his stormy interview with Frances, had, much to the astonishment of his brother and every one else but Anne, exchanged and gone abroad.

Frances was still unmarried, perhaps still plotting on and waiting for one whose heart could now only be filled with anger and hatred towards her. But what woman does not hope? Perhaps she hoped still.

A new governess reigned at Brampton in Amy's stead; the third since she had left. Surely there was some mismanagement somewhere? or Mrs. Linchmore had grown more exacting and overbearing; more dissatisfied with the means taken to please her?

Little Sarah was away in London at school; while old Hannah reigned supreme as head nurse to the youthful heir. [91]

Amy was happy, notwithstanding the remembrance that like a dim, indistinct shadow flitted across her of that first sad love. Was *he* happy? and what had become of him? these were questions sometimes in her thoughts, although her heart was with her husband, who loved his fair young wife with all his heart, even more dearly than when first they married; while as yet nothing had occurred to check that love.

Robert Vavasour had been absent from his home a fortnight. It was the evening of his return to Somerton.

Amy drew a low chair close to her husband by the fireside as she said, "How glad I am to have you back again; I have missed you so much, and felt quite lonely, even with little Bertie."

Robert looked down fondly in his wife's face. It was pleasant to know that his coming had given pleasure to her he loved.

"And how was dear Sarah," she asked. "Did she look quite well and happy? Quite contented with school? Pray give me all the news you have, to tell." [92]

"And that will be little enough," he replied. "As to Sarah she looked the picture of health, and gave me no end of messages for you; but I am afraid I have forgotten them all; my memory fails me completely now I have you at my side."

"Well I hope you have not forgotten the present for Bertie: his little tongue has talked of nothing else all day."

"I know I did not forget my little wife," he said, as taking a ring from his pocket he placed it on her finger.

"You are always good and kind," she replied, "always thinking of me."

"Always, Amy."

"And now do tell me all you have been doing this long time, and where you went, and whom you saw. Surely you must have some adventures worth relating?" [93]

"No, none. I went simply nowhere; London is chill enough in November, and even had it been otherwise the charm was wanting to induce me to go out. I saw few people I knew; but I met some old friends of yours, yesterday."

"Yes?" said Amy, inquiringly.

"Can you not guess who?"

Amy's heart whispered the Linchmore's; but refused to say so.

"Have you no curiosity?" he asked, "I thought you were all anxiety a moment ago."

"No, I shall not guess," replied his wife. "You must tell me."

"Must!" he laughed. "And suppose I refuse. What then?"

"You will not," she said.

"You are a tyrant, Amy. It was the Linchmores. I met him accidentally at the door of the club."

"Ah! you went to the Club. You never told me that," was all she said.

"Neither have you told me how many times you have been into the nursery to see Bertie since I have been away." [94]

"The cases are totally dissimilar," laughed Amy. "But what did Mr. Linchmore say? Was he glad to see you?"

"Yes: and took me home to dine with his wife."

"Mrs. Linchmore! How is she."

"Much the same as ever; just as haughty and hard-looking."

"Hard-looking? I never thought her that."

"My wife always has a pleasant thought for everybody," returned Vavasour proudly; "but beautiful as Mrs. Linchmore undoubtedly is, there is a great want of softness in the expression of her face."

"She treated me well, and I had no reason to—to find fault with her." There was a little hesitation, as if the heart did not quite keep pace with the words. Perhaps her husband noticed it, for he looked away ere he spoke again, as if not quite sure that what he had to say next would please her. [95]

"I am glad it was so, as Linchmore asked us to go and stay at Brampton for a time."

Amy started visibly.

"But you refused," she said hastily.

"I did at first, but he would take no refusal."

"You did not promise to go, Robert? Oh, I hope you did not!"

"I could not well refuse. Nay, do not look so sad, Amy; rather than that, you shall write a refusal at once. We will not go, dearest."

And Amy would have given worlds not to; but did not like giving an untruthful reason as the motive for staying away; still, how else could she shape her refusal, or excuse herself to her husband. She dared not tell him that revisiting old scenes, the old familiar walk and rooms, would recall by-gone memories afresh in her heart—another's words! another's looks! No, she could not tell him that; yet as she sat with her hand in his and looked into his face how she longed to open her heart and tell him all! all of that bitter, never-to-be-forgotten past. And yet she reasoned again as she had reasoned once before, against the whisper of her heart, and her mother's better judgment, that it could do no good, but only pain and grieve her husband to think that she, his wife, had ever cared for, or even thought of another; and she sighed as these sad recollections one by one came into her heart. [96]

"Why do you sigh Amy?" asked her husband.

Alas! the question came too late; her resolve had been made and taken. She sat silent, though she would have given worlds to have been able to throw her arms round his neck and tell him all.

Robert drew her fondly and tenderly towards him. "As my wife, Amy," he said, "none shall ever dare whisper a word or even breathe a thought that can reflect upon your former life at Brampton. Have no fear, little one, but trust in me."

He had misinterpreted her silence, and thought the repugnance she felt at going back to Brampton was caused by pride. Well, perhaps it was best so. [97]

"We will go, Robert," she whispered tremblingly, while the words she ought to have spoken remained unsaid, and with her husband and little Bertie she went to Brampton, simply because she saw no help for it.

It was one of those things that must be, and she nerved her heart to brave it. [98]

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST DOUBT.

"And the strange inborn sense of coming ill
That ofttimes whispers to the haunted breast,
In a low tone which naught can drown or still;

Midst feasts and melodies a secret guest:
Whence doth that murmur wake, that shadow fall?
Why shakes the spirit thus?"

MRS. HEMANS.

With a faint shadow of some coming evil, a dull foreboding at her heart, Amy once again found herself driving up the long avenue of Brampton Park.

How things had changed since first as a timid, shrinking girl, she had entered its gates! How her heart had throbbed and beaten since then! been tried and strained to its very utmost. How much she had suffered; how much rebelled and murmured at. Involuntarily she drew closer to her [99] husband, as she felt how near and dear she was to his heart: surely, with his strong hand to protect and guide, his loving heart to shield her, what had she to fear?

Amy half expected to see the children as of old on the terrace impatiently waiting to embrace her as she stepped from the carriage; but no, only the old butler bowed, and seemed glad to see her, as she exchanged a few words with him, ere he ushered her with becoming ceremony into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Linchmore at once advanced to greet her, and for the first time in her life, much to Amy's astonishment, kissed her; but then she was no longer Miss Neville, but Mrs. Vavasour. Ah! things had changed indeed.

Mr. Linchmore was as friendly and courteous as ever, with the same honest welcome as of old; yet Amy thought him changed, but could not quite see wherein the change lay. His hair was becoming slightly tinged with grey, but that could not make the alteration she fancied she had discovered; then he was surely graver and quieter as he handed her into dinner, more silent and [100] reserved; while Mrs. Linchmore, if any thing, was more animated, more beautiful than ever; and she watched for the hard look Robert Vavasour had spoken of, but in vain; it was not there, could not be; while her face was so filled with smiles and good humour.

Again Amy glanced at Mr. Linchmore. Surely her husband had made a mistake; for there the hard look was gravely stamped on each feature, and Amy sighed as she saw it, and wondered how the change had been wrought.

Amy saw nothing of the children all that evening; the next morning she went to the school-room to see them.

Away down the long corridor, past the very window where she had stood long ago with Charles Linchmore. Did she think of that now? or of the events that followed quick and fast upon it; or recall to mind the dark form of Frances Strickland, halting on the very ground she now stood on, [101] then fading away, not softly and slowly but fiercely and hurriedly, in the distance—leaving a strange fear at her heart, only too well realised in the past events of her life. If Amy remembered all this, she never stayed her footsteps, but passed quickly on through the baize door, and in another moment the children's arms were about her neck, their kisses on her face; while Miss Barker, the new governess, rose in stately horror at this infringement of her rules.

"Really young ladies, your reception of Mrs. Vavasour is boisterous in the extreme. Allow me, Madam, to apologise for my pupils."

"Oh! but this is Miss Neville, our dear Miss Neville!" cried Fanny, then catching Miss Barker's still more frigid look, hung her head and dropped her hands she was in the act of clapping with delight, to her side.

"We are old friends," said Amy, smiling: "very old friends, pray do not check them, I am so glad to see they have not forgotten me; and allow me to apologise in my turn for the interruption in their [102] studies my sudden entrance has occasioned."

Miss Barker smiled complacently. "Will you not be seated?" she said.

"Thank you. I have come to ask, with Mrs. Linchmore's sanction, for a holiday."

Miss Barker's brow clouded again.

"I scarcely know what to say to this request, which has come on rather an unfortunate day. Fanny has not, as yet, been able to darn her torn dress in a satisfactory manner; Alice cannot make her sum prove; and Edith has mislaid her thimble—carelessness and untidiness combined."

Each child looked down guiltily, as her shortcoming was being told in a grave voice; while Amy felt inclined to smile at the frigid tone, evidently freezing each little warm heart; but Miss Barker's look forbade even a smile or word, and a dead silence followed.

"In the hope," continued she, presently, "that you will all try and do better to-morrow, I will [103] accede to your Mamma's request. Put away your books, young ladies."

They all rose slowly, very differently from their quick, joyous manner in Amy's time, cleared the table, then returned; and, notwithstanding Miss Barker's frowns, stationed themselves close to their old friend.

"Here is a chair for you, Edith; pray recollect that stoop in your shoulders I am so frequently reminding you of; Alice, my love, try and sit still without that perpetual fidget; Fanny, I am sure Mrs. Vavasour would rather you came a little further away; there is no need for you to stand; here are plenty of chairs in the room."

Amy grew wearied with her slow, methodical manner, and finding-fault tone, never raised or lowered in the slightest. It was a relief when she went away, and left Amy to talk to the children as she would, without feeling that a pair of small grey eyes were disagreeably fixed on her face.

As soon as she was gone, Alice climbed off the stiff high-backed chair, where she had been [104]
perched, and settled herself quietly on Amy's lap; Edith with a great sigh of relief from the depths of her heart, knelt, regardless of the poor shoulders, on one side; while Fanny flew to the other, exclaiming, "Oh! isn't she disagreeable, Miss Neville?"

Amy could not conscientiously answer no, so evaded a direct reply, and merely said, "I am no longer Miss Neville, Fanny, you must try and call me Mrs. Vavasour."

"Yes, so we have, all the time you've been away; but now you've come again it's so natural to say Miss Neville."

"And," said Edith, "we think of you so often, and always wish you back again."

Then they talked away of old times, until Amy's heart grew sad. "Let us go and see Bertie," she said.

Away went the children, with something of the spirit of by-gone days. It was well for them they
did not stumble upon Miss Barker, as they danced along the passage; or sad indeed would have [105]
been the result of the expedition.

Bertie was astonished at seeing so many new faces, and hid himself shyly beneath Hannah's apron, from whence at first, he refused to be coaxed or tormented; but by-and-by a small curly head and bright eyes peeped forth, and at length he surrendered at discretion to little Alice, as being the least formidable of the invaders.

How he prattled away! while his tiny feet seemed never weary of running to and fro to fetch toys for his new friends' inspection. Amy was soon quite overlooked, and Hannah's existence forgotten altogether, until suddenly reminded it was time for his morning's nap; when, notwithstanding a determined resistance on his part, he was eventually overpowered and carried off to bed, with a promise of having a romp with the children some other day.

Hannah had suddenly become within the last few days wonderfully dignified. The moment she
entered the house where her young mistress had lived as a dependant, she thought in her heart [106]
that most likely the servants would be looking down upon them, or setting themselves up in consequence; so she determined upon giving herself airs, if nobody else did, and assumed at once a reserve and stateliness quite foreign to her nature; but which, nevertheless, fitted admirably to the tall, portly figure; gaining Mrs. Hopkins' confidence, and setting Mason's airs at defiance, while it won for her the respect of the other servants, who never ventured upon a word in her presence, even of disparagement against Miss Barker, whom they all cordially disliked.

It was strange what bad odour the latter stood in, trying as she did her utmost to make herself agreeable to all parties. Her appearance was certainly against her, her face at first sight being anything but a prepossessing one. One felt a strange dislike at making her acquaintance, which dislike was scarcely lessened upon a more intimate knowledge of her. Then her tall, freezing
looking form was as little ingratiating to the eye, as the fawning, wiry voice was to the heart and [107]
Mason had been heard to say, that of the two, Miss Neville, even with all her "stuck up" airs, was twice the lady; but the lady's maid distrusted the tongue that flattered her mistress more boldly and cunningly than she did; while Mrs. Linchmore, although she smiled blandly enough, and took little or no notice of the flattery, was sensible of a feeling of relief when the stiff, starched form was no longer present.

Hannah made her acquaintance one morning on the lawn, and was no little astonished at the tight corkscrew curls tucked under the bonnet, and the prim, patronising tone with which the governess addressed her; but nurse did not belong to the house; there was no occasion to conciliate her. Evidently Miss Barker was no admirer of young children, for as little Bertie ran up to Alice, she exclaimed, "Dear me, what a fat child!"

Hannah looked at her for a moment with indignation, and replied, "fat, yes, Ma'am, Master [108]
Bertie, thank God, is *fat*," and then added, in an under tone, loud enough to be heard, "It's just as well if some others were as fat!" and viewed, as she turned away, the lady's thin, spare form with utter disgust.

Amy and her husband were the only visitors at Brampton, yet no one seemed dull. Amy could never be dull with her child, and Mrs. Linchmore appeared ever happy and contented.

They were good musicians, both Mrs. Linchmore and her guest; the former excelled in playing, the latter in singing. Amy's voice was sweet and musical, not wanting in power—one of those voices so charming to the senses, claiming the attention of every hearer, thrilling through the heart with wonderful pathos, leaving pleasing memories behind, or else the eyes filled with tears, as some mournful notes stir the soul with long forgotten memories.

Mrs. Linchmore's voice was at times too powerful, grating harshly on the ear; she dashed at the
notes in the quick parts, and handled them too roughly and rapidly; there was a want of feeling [109]
pervading the whole, which made one feel glad when the voice ceased, and the fingers alone glided softly over the keys. It was marvellous how fast they flew; while the notes sounded clearly and distinctly, like the tinkling of bells. Now the tune swelled loud and strong; then appeared to

die faintly away under the light touch of those wonderful fingers. Mrs. Linchmore knew she played well, however much Amy excelled her in singing, and would sit down after one of the latter's songs, and enchant her listeners with some soft, beautiful air, played to perfection; then would come a song, and after that another piece, short, but more silvery sounding than the first, while Amy's voice was well-nigh forgotten, and Mrs. Linchmore, with her beautiful smiling face and pleasant words, was considered the musician of the evening, and had all due homage awarded her. As it was in music, so it was in everything else, Mrs. Linchmore took by right of "tact" what Amy ought to have laid claim to, but then, one was a woman of the world, the other [110] only just entering it. Amy wanted confidence; Mrs. Linchmore none.

As the days grew shorter still, Robert Vavasour whiled away the long evenings by again, as of old, playing at chess with his hostess, while Amy, who did not understand the game, sat and talked or sang to Mr. Linchmore; at other times she grew weary of those long games, so entirely engrossing her husband's attention, and brought her work or a book, and drawing a chair close by, watched the progress of the play.

By degrees the players themselves claimed her attention; how deeply interested they seemed! how intent on the pieces! Amy, as she plied her needle diligently at the work in her lap, was constantly looking at Mrs. Linchmore. How often her dark eyes flashed across the board in her adversary's face, and when the game was at an end how she laughed and talked, and how the rings sparkled on her white hands, as she re-arranged the pieces again in their places. Amy thought she wore too many rings: they certainly danced and flashed in the lamp light, and [111] dazzled her so that she felt quite fascinated, and wondered what Robert thought, and whether he admired her, or saw still the hard look. Amy half wished he did, or that she possessed only a quarter of the power Mrs. Linchmore seemed to have of pleasing him. Perhaps he had found his evenings dull with only his wife to talk or read to. Why had he not told her he was so fond of chess? she might have learnt it; yes, she would learn it; and again Amy glanced at the board to watch the pieces and try and make out how they moved; then tired of looking, her attention would be once more riveted on Mrs. Linchmore, and with a dissatisfied sigh she wished herself back at Somerton.

Thus came the first doubt to the young wife's heart; yet scarcely known to her, save for a strange cold feeling stirring sometimes within.

Anne rode over one day to Brampton, and the flying visit of her old friend did Amy good: marriage seemed in no way to have altered her, she was just as merry-laughing and joking in [112] much the same style as ever. Her husband was as proud of her as he well could be, rebuking her at times, not with words, but a look, when he thought her spirits were carrying her a little too far, while Anne appeared to look up and reverence him in all things, being checked in a moment by his grave face.

The morning passed pleasantly. As Anne rose to go she said, "Tell Isabella I am sorry to have missed seeing her, although I should have been more sorry had you been absent, as my visit, strictly speaking, was to you, in fact for you alone."

"I will give the first part of the message," replied Amy laughing, "and bury the other half in my heart, as it would be but a poor compliment repeated. Why not remain to luncheon; I expect Mrs. Linchmore home very shortly, she has driven into Standale."

"Standale! I thought she hated the place."

"The place, yes; but not the station." [113]

"What on earth has taken her there?"

"To meet a friend."

"Man or woman?" laughed Anne.

"Indeed I never asked," replied Amy. "It was quite by accident I heard her say that unless Mr. Linchmore made haste she would not arrive in time to meet the train."

"Oh! then he has gone too. Depend upon it, it's some old 'fogy' or another; Miss Tremlow, perhaps, with her carpet bag stuffed full of yellow pocket handkerchiefs; you know," continued she, mimicking that lady's tone and manner, "this is such a damp place, and the rheumatics are worse than ever."

As Anne rode away Amy remained at the window with little Bertie, who had been brought down for inspection and approval, and duly admired and caressed.

"I wish Anne had been going to remain, Robert," said Amy, "she is so pleasant."

"She is all very well for a short time," he replied, "but really her tongue, to use rather a worn out [114] simile, is like the clapper of a bell; always ringing."

"Do you think she talks too much?"

"Most decidedly I do."

"But you do not admire a silent woman," said Amy drawing near the fire, and placing Bertie on the hearth rug.

"More so than a very talkative one; but there is such a thing as a happy medium."

Amy sighed. "I wish we were back at Somerton," she said.

"Is my wife home-sick already? Would she not find it dull after Brampton?"

"I could not find it dull. Should I not have you—" she would have said all to myself, but checked herself and added—"you and Bertie."

"Why not have left out, Bertie?" he replied, "I shall grow jealous of that boy, Amy, if you always class us together. Can you not forget him sometimes?"

"Forget him? Oh! no, never!" said Amy, catching up the child, who immediately climbed from his [115]
mother's arms on to Robert's knee and remained there; while his father, notwithstanding his jealousy, glanced proudly at his boy, and caressed both him and his mother.

"Ah! you are just as fond of Bertie as I am," she said, as her husband drew her to his side.

But even as she spoke she became conscious of a shadow between her and the light which streamed in through the large bay window of the dining-room; while Vavasour rose and held out his hand saying apologetically, "We did not hear the carriage drive up."

"No, I could hardly expect you would, with so much to interest you within doors."

Amy arose quickly as the voice struck her ear.

"Frances! Miss Strickland!" she said.

"Yes, the same. You look surprised. Did you not expect me?"

"No," replied Amy, shortly.

"It is quite an unexpected pleasure, and has surprised us both," returned Robert, as he noticed
his wife's unusual manner. [116]

"It is my fault. I told Isabella not to mention I was coming," returned she. "Perhaps I wanted to see if you would be pleased, or recognise me; every one says I am so very much altered."

"I see no difference," replied Amy, as Frances glanced straight at her.

"There is none," she answered, and the tone went to Amy's heart with a nervous thrill. "And so this is your boy. What is he called?"

"Robert," answered Amy, feeling for the first time a strange dislike at saying his pet name. But her husband was not so scrupulous.

"We call him Bertie," he said.

"And so will I. Come and make friends, Bertie. What lovely hair he has, so soft and curly. I suppose,—indeed I can see,—you are quite proud of the boy, Mr. Vavasour."

"Mrs. Vavasour is, if I am not."

"Of course. All mothers are of their first-born. Do not go so near the fire, Bertie. You make me
tremble lest anything should befall you." [117]

What could happen to the child? Amy drew him further away still, then took him in her arms as if only there he was safe and shielded from all harm.

When Frances left the room Amy sighed more deeply than before, yet scarcely knew why she felt so low and sad, or why Frances' appearance should have brought with it a nervous dread; save that in that long-ago time, which she had tried to bury and forget, Frances had been her bitterest enemy, and she could not but feel that her coming now was disagreeable to her, nay more, caused a sudden, nameless fear to arise in her heart; and now although Frances' words were friendly, yet Amy detected, or fancied she did—a lurking sarcasm in their tone.

"I wish we were back at Somerton, Robert," she said.

"Again!" exclaimed Robert, "now Amy, you deserve to be scolded for this. What an impatient little
woman you are! Shall we not be home in a month?" [118]

"Ah! in a month;" sighed Amy again, as she drew her child nearer to her heart, while her heart
whispered, "Can anything happen in a month?" [119]

CHAPTER VIII.

GOING FOR THE DOCTOR.

> "In God's name, then, take your own way," said Christian; "and, for my sake, let never man hereafter limit a woman in the use of her tongue; since he must make it amply up to her, in allowing her the privilege of her own will. Who would have thought it?"
>
> PEVERIL OF THE PEAK.

Three years and more have passed away since we left Matthew the pikeman counting the stones in Goody Grey's box. Many changes have occurred since then, the greatest of all has fallen on his own cottage—Matthew has grown a sober man.

But we must go back a little.

We left Jane closing the cottage door, after the singular meeting that had taken place between her and Goody Grey, on Marks telling the latter of his sister-in-law's extraordinary fainting fit. [120] When he and his wife returned to the cottage, Jane was carried up to bed, apparently too weak to be able to sit up, and there she remained for several weeks, more crazed than ever to Matthew's fancy, frightening him out of his wits at times, lest his wife should find out anything about the charm, and attribute, as he did, his sister-in-law's illness to it. One night his fears grew to such a pitch, he went and buried the box in the garden, and waited events in an easier frame of mind. Days passed, and at length Jane grew better, but strenuously refused to leave her room, and go below. In vain Mrs. Marks remonstrated, in vain she stormed, Jane was not to be persuaded, and at length was allowed to do as she pleased. But suddenly her illness took a turn; she crawled down stairs to dinner, and one day, to Matthew's intense disgust, resumed her old seat in the chimney corner.

As the months rolled on the scrubbing and scouring within the cottage went on more mildly, [121] while Mrs. Marks' strong stout arm grew thinner and weaker; the brush fell less harshly and severely on the ear, as it rushed over the table; the high pattens clanked less loudly in the yard; while the voice grew less shrill, and was no longer heard in loud domineering tones. The change was gradual; Matthew did not notice it at first, until just a few weeks before Amy returned to Brampton with her husband; then the change was unmistakable, the scrubbing and scouring ceased altogether. Mrs. Marks gave in, and acknowledged she was ill.

How Matthew's conscience smote him then! He knew he had never had the courage to face Goody Grey with the box still filled with the small gravel, as when she gave it him, neither had he dared throw the stones away, lest, in offending the giver, worse disasters would follow; and he was too superstitious to think Goody Grey would know nothing at all about it, and believe as he might tell her that he had done as she had directed. No; he was certain that one word of distrust [122] in his story, and he should break down altogether. He tried to reason with himself, and think that the tramping about in all weathers long ago had made his wife ill; but it would not do, his mind was not to be persuaded, and always reverted with increased dismay to the box, while his eye invariably rested upon its snug resting-place under the laurel, as he passed it on his way out to the gate. Many a time he determined upon digging up the box, and restoring it to its owner, just as it was: but when the time for action came, and he drew near the spot, his courage failed him, and he would pass on, cursing the hour when he had been tempted to ask the wise woman for the charm which he believed had done so much evil; while his fear of telling the secret in his tipsy unconsciousness had done what all Mrs. Marks' storming had failed to do—made him, for the time being, a sober man. He shunned the "Brampton Arms" as if the plague dwelt there, and sat in the chimney corner opposite Jane, gloomy, and fearful almost of his own shadow, while his [123] sister-in-law's eyes seemed to pierce him through more keenly than ever.

Mrs. Marks had steadily kept her promise, silently and secretly working with a will to seek out Hodge's son. Like most energetic women, a first failure did not daunt or dispirit her, it only roused her energies the more vigorously. She was not to be defeated. The more difficult of accomplishment the more determined was she, and in the end successful. She dodged Hodge's "wide-awake" friend, and found Tom; nay more, she spoke with him, tried to reclaim him; but there she failed—she was not the sort of woman to win him over. A kind word might have done much, but that, Mrs. Mark's heart had not for such a reprobate as he. She told him the truth, the plain hard truth, heaping maledictions on his head unless he gave up his evil ways, forsook his godless companions, and returned home. She used no persuasion, no entreaty. Had she spoken to him kindly of his mother, perhaps his heart might have softened; but Mrs. Marks' voice came [124] loud and strong, words followed one another fast and indignantly, so that ere she had well-nigh exhausted all the scorn she had, his mind was made up, and he obstinately refused to return home, simply because she desired, nay, commanded him to do so. What! become the laughing-stock of the whole of Deane? be known and marked in the village as the vile sinner she denounced him to be? He laughed at her threats and taunts, and left her, feeling perhaps more hardened than ever.

Matthew was not far wrong when he tried to persuade himself the walking about in all weathers —so mysterious to him—had ruined his wife's health. A pouring steady rain was falling the day of her interview with Hodge's son, but true to her purpose, she had walked for miles along a heavy road, and across still damper fields to find him; then, flushed and heated with her passionate words and subsequent defeat, had started back again through the same rain, and reached home thoroughly wet through; then came a violent cold, and from that time her strength seemed to fail, [125] although unacknowledged to herself, while her limbs lost their power, and pained her strangely; still she worked on, with the will to get well, but alas! the strength to do so was gone.

She wrote to Mrs. Hodge advising her to have nothing further to do with such a good-for-nothing son, but forget him as fast as she could. Mrs. Marks' letter was not meant unkindly, but she never attempted to lessen Tom's fault or palliate his conduct; the truth stood out in all its glaring hideousness. Having no children herself, she knew nothing of a mother's strong, steadfast love. The knowledge that her son, her first-born, was with a gang of poachers who had wounded the Squire's visitor and killed one of the game watchers, threw dismay into the mother's heart and

broke it. She died, begging her husband to still look for Tom, and reclaim him if possible—a promise her husband felt impossible of fulfilment, as he, like Mrs. Marks, thought badly of his son's heart. [126]

Mrs. Marks could scarcely move her limbs at all now, except to creep down the narrow stairs of a day into the small parlour, where she sat and scolded to her heart's content, Sarah, the girl who came as a help now the mistress was ill, following her every movement with her eyes, if she could not with her feet.

As her sister grew worse, Jane roused herself wonderfully, becoming as active as before she had [127] been idle, and apparently as sane as she had been crazy; while as to Matthew, he turned into a model husband, helping in the work to be done as far as lay in his power, and nursing his sick wife with a tender solicitude quite foreign to his nature, while she grumbled at everything and everyone in turn, her eye, as I have said before, finding out their shortcomings in a moment, and denouncing them without mercy. But she was ill, must be ill to sit there so quietly and allow others to scrub down the table or be up to their elbows in the washing-tub; she deserved their pity and their silence, and they gave her both.

"There, that will do," said she one day, as Matthew tried to settle the pillows more comfortably at her back. "I don't think it's near so easy like as it was before you touched it, but it wouldn't be you if you didn't want always to have a finger in the pie. Sarah, leave off that racket among the cups and saucers; what on earth are you at, girl? Are you trying to break them all? What are you after?"

"I was a-dusting of the shelves, Mum," was the reply.

"Fine dusting, upon my word, and with a corner of your apron, too; be off and fetch a cloth this moment, such slop-work as that'll never do here; let me catch you at it again, that's all, or that clatter of the crockery either, when my head aches and buzzes like as if a thousand mills was at work in it."

"There, rest quiet, Missus," said Matthew; "it'll be all right by-and-bye."

"That's as much as you know about it. I tell yer I never felt so bad, like, in all my life." [128]

"Ain't it most time to take the doctor's stuff?" suggested Matthew, meekly.

"I'm sick of the medicine, and the doctor too. What good has he done me? I should like to know. I can't walk no better than I could a month ago. My limbs is as stiff as ever, and just every bit as painful."

"That comes of them mad walks yer took in all weathers; yer would tramp about, and it's been t' undoing of yer altogether."

A torrent of words followed this, of which Matthew took no heed, until she leant back, apparently exhausted, saying, "I feel awful bad. I wonder whatever in the world ails me?"

"How d'yer feel?" asked her husband, compassionately.

"My head whizzes, and I'm all over in a cold sweat, like; only feel my hand, don't it burn like a live coal?"

"It do seem as though it were afire," he replied.

"Seem!" cried Mrs. Marks. "Is that all the pity yer have in your heart for maybe your dying wife?" [129]

"Lord save us!" exclaimed Matthew. "I've been a deal worse myself, and got well again; don't be a frightening yourself in that way, or belike you'll think you've one foot in the grave."

Then he poured some of the medicine in the glass, and held it towards her.

"Here," said he, "here's what'll make you think different, and send away the dismals."

"I won't take none of it," she replied; "not one drop. It weren't given to me for the fiery pains I've got about me now."

"Come, Missus, come, don't'ee quarrel with the only thing that can do'ee good," said Matthew, coaxingly.

"Do me good!" she exclaimed, with a sudden return of energy. "It's my belief yer trying to pisin me. Be off and fetch the doctor!"

The doctor! Matthew stared in astonishment. [130]

"What are you gaping at? Do you take me for a fool, or yourself, which? Be off, I tell yer, and don't let yer shadow darken this door again without him. Maybe he'll be able to say what's ailing me."

Away went Matthew, in a ludicrous state of bewilderment. His wife must be bad indeed to send for the doctor; why he had never known her do such a thing since they married. What a trouble he had had only a few months ago to get her to see young Mr. Blane, and now she wanted him to come at once. Matthew began to think his wife was crazy, as well as Jane; perhaps she had sent him on a fool's errand. He insensibly slackened his steps as he neared the village, and bethought

him what he should say, as he suddenly recollected he had received no instructions whatever.

The more he thought the more perplexed he grew, and seeing some boys playing at marbles, Matthew drew near, and leaning against the railings, watched them, and turned over again in his [131] mind what he should say; but loiter as he would, he could think of nothing save his wife's angry face, as she had bade him begone; so, after a short delay, Matthew faced the danger by boldly ringing the surgery bell.

"Is the Maister at home?" asked he, fervently wishing he might be miles away.

Yes, Mr. Blane was in, and Marks followed the boy sorrowfully.

"Good morning, Mr. Marks. Come for some medicine? Where's the bottle?"

"No, thank'ee, Sir," said Matthew, twirling his hat about uncomfortably. "My wife's took worse, and wants to know if so be ye'd make it convenient to come and physic her?"

Yes; Mr. Blane could go at once, having no other call upon his time just at present.

"And what's the matter with Mrs. Marks?" asked he, when they were fairly on their way.

"That's more nor I can tell, Sir. She's all over like a live coal, and 'ud drink a bucket full if ye'd give it her." [132]

"Has she taken the medicine regularly?"

This was a poser. Matthew scratched his head, took off his cap; he was in no way prepared for such a question. What should he say?

"Well," said he presently, in a conciliating tone, "Well, you see, Sir, when folks is ill they takes queer fancies sometimes, as I dare say yer know better nor I can tell'ee. Now my wife's got hers, and no mistake; she says you've gived her pisin."

It was Mr. Blane's turn now to be astonished, this being an answer he was not prepared for. "Poison!" he echoed.

"Yes, just pisin, and nothing else; but there, Sir, there's no call to be frightened, her head's that dizzy she can't scarce open her eyes, much less know what she says."

"Has she taken a fresh cold?"

"Not that I knows on, Sir, t'aint possible now: her legs is so cramped she's 'bliged to bide in doors." [133]

"Poor thing! She seems patient enough under it all."

"Lord bless yer, Sir! Patient? Why she lets fly more nor any 'ooman I know on; I can't say but what she do look meek enough when yer'e at the 'pike, but as soon as she's the least way riled she'll find more words at her tongue's end than any other 'ooman in the parish. It's my belief that's all that's the matter with her now; she've bin rating the whole on us roundly one after t'other and has just worked herself into a biling rage, for nothing at all."

"If that is all; the mischief is soon healed," said Mr. Blane, entering the cottage.

Mrs. Marks sat just where her husband had left her, but her eyes were closed and her face strangely flushed. She looked up wearily and languidly, with not a trace of the temper her husband had spoken of, and said not a word as the doctor took her burning hand in his and felt its quick pulse. [134]

"You had better get your wife to bed, Marks it will be more comfortable for her than sitting here."

"Yes, Sir," said Marks, wondering how it was to be accomplished. However he drew near and said, "Dont'ee think, old 'ooman, yer'd best do as the doctor 'vises yer."

"In course," was the feeble reply, so different to the loud angry one Matthew expected that he was staggered, and still more so when she attempted to stand, but could not, and he and the young doctor between them had to carry her to bed.

"What ails her, Sir?" asked Matthew, as Mr. Blane was going away. "D'yer think it's the tongue's done it?"

"That may have increased the fever but not caused it," was the reply.

"The faiver! Oh Lord; what's to be done now?"

What was to be done, indeed?

Jane gave up the house-work and tended her sister night and day, leaving Matthew and the girl to [135] do as best they could without her, while for days Mrs. Marks struggled between life and death; then she grew better, the fever left her, and she lay weak as an infant, but otherwise progressing favourably.

One evening Jane came downstairs and took up her station opposite her brother-in-law, who, instead of rejoicing at the change, viewed her presence with a rueful face. When his wife was present he could sometimes forget Jane, but all alone it was impossible; move which way he

would he was sensible her eyes were on him as she plied her knitting needles at her old work. How he hated that constant click, click!

"Did yer think t'was time for supper?" asked he presently, driven to say something to break the silence, becoming every moment more intolerable.

"No."

"How's the Missus this evening?"

"Better. She's asleep."

"That's all right. I'm glad on it," he said, "for she've had a hard time of it upstairs. When is it likely she'll be about again?" [136]

"What did the doctor say? Didn't he tell you when?"

"He don't trouble to say much. I'm sure I'm right down glad when he don't say she's worse, for that's been the one word in his mouth lately."

Jane made no reply, but the feeling that her eyes were fixed steadily on him exasperated him beyond control.

"What d'yer see in my ugly mug?" he asked. "Have you fallen in love with it?"

"No."

"Then may be yer sees som'ut to skeer yer?"

"It's bad to have anything on the mind," she replied.

Matthew winced a little. "I'll tell you a piece of my mind," he said, throwing his half-smoked pipe into the fire, "I'll take Mrs. Marks' sauce and welcome, but I'm d—d if I take any other 'ooman's living." [137]

"I wonder whatever ails you?" said she, quietly.

"Ails me? D'yer want to make believe I'm going to be knocked down with the faiver? I'm not such an ass, I can tell yer, yer looks a dale more likely yerself; and as to yer mind? yer look as though a horse couldn't carry the load yer've got on it. A terrible bad load too, I'll take my oath on it."

Jane shivered from head to foot.

"I'll take up the broth," she said, "most likely Anne's awake before now."

But her hands trembled so she could scarcely take hold of the saucepan to pour it out, while the cup and saucer rattled and shook as she went across the room.

Matthew sat sulkily by, and never offered to help her.

"Well!" said he, as soon as she was gone, "it's my belief she'd have stuck me, if she'd only laid hold of a knife instead of a spoon. How trembly she was; her hands was all of a shake. She'll 'ave spilt all that 'ere stuff, whatever 'tis, afore my wife tucks it down. Well, if she 'aint crazed, I don't know who is." [138]

He lit a fresh pipe, and smoked away in contented solitariness. Presently, he looked thoughtful, knocked the ashes out of his pipe and said, "she's a-going to 'ave the faiver, or else she 'ave done som'ut bad in her day, and that's what's crazed her."

Matthew was right as to the fever. Not many days passed before Jane was taken ill with it. [139]

CHAPTER IX.

SEVERING THE CURL.

"But ever and anon of griefs subdued,
There comes a token like a scorpion's sting,
Scarce seen, but with fresh bitterness imbued;
And slight withal may be the things which bring
Back on the heart the weight which it would fling
Aside for ever: it may be a sound—
A tone of music—summer's eve—or spring—
A flower—the wind—the ocean—which shall wound,
Striking the electric chain wherewith we are darkly
bound.

And how and why we know not, nor can trace
Home to its cloud this lightning of the mind,
But feel the shock renew'd, nor can efface
The blight and blackening which it leaves behind,
Which out of things familiar, undesign'd,

When least we deem of such, calls up to view
The spectres whom no exorcism can bind,
The cold—the changed—perchance the dead——"
CHILDE HAROLD.

Can anything happen in a month? How often this question was in Amy's mind; how often in her thoughts. What could happen? Her heart suggested many things, strive as she would to think [140] otherwise, and ever reverted with fear to her boy, whom she so passionately loved; old Hannah was surprised sometimes at the injunctions she received and wondered what her young mistress was so nervous about. The boy was well enough and hearty enough in all conscience: there was no occasion to make a "molly coddle" of him.

Bertie had taken a fancy to Frances, and would sit on her knee in preference to others, or hold up his little face to be kissed, when he was shy at being caressed by anyone else. Amy viewed the liking with distrust; she disliked Frances, and could not bear to see her and the boy romping together, and would have checked it, if she could have found some reason for doing so; but Robert countenanced it, and often joined in their play, while Amy alone looked grave and sorrowful.

Why had Frances come to Brampton? Had her stubborn heart at length given way, and did she regret the misery she had caused Amy and come to make atonement? To ask forgiveness and be [141] forgiven? Were they to be reconciled at last? No. Not so. Frances came expecting to find Amy miserable, married to a man she could not love, and weeping the remembrance of the lost love. In that she would have gloried. But she came to find it otherwise; and how great was her disappointment, how bitter became her thoughts, how more than ever determined was she to pursue Amy and make her in the end utterly miserable. It wounded her to the quick to see Amy happy and contented with a husband who seemed to worship her and a child of whom she might well be proud. Was this to be the envied lot of her who had weaned the one heart away, so that harsh, bitter words had fallen on her ear as she had knelt in despair at his feet. Could she ever forget that? or his scorn? No! never! Amy's happiness must be undermined; had she not sworn it on that terrible, never-to-be forgotten night; sworn that Amy's sufferings should some day equal hers! There was little difficulty in accomplishing this if she went cautiously to work: haste alone [142] could bring a failure.

Amy saw little of her husband now; of a morning he rode with Mrs. Linchmore and Frances, or walked miles with Mr. Linchmore: there was always something to draw him from her side. Of an evening it was music and chess. At first Amy had ridden with the rest, but latterly she and Bertie had spent their mornings together; she could see no pleasure in riding by Frances' side, and Mrs. Linchmore was so timid she claimed all Robert's attention.

Doubts fast and thick were springing up in Amy's heart. She shunned being alone with her husband, and insensibly grew cold and constrained. How seldom her eyes looked brightly on him, or her lips spoke loving words! while he never seemed to heed the change, or say aught of his love for her now, but grew colder too.

They were both changed, husband and wife; the one had begun to doubt his wife's love; the other feared her husband's love was fading away, and she without the power to stay its flight. Ah! [143] Frances had already wrought wondrous harm, although only a week since she came to Brampton.

Amy stood at the window one morning, and watched the horses as they were being brought round, Frances's fiery one evincing his hot temper by arching his proud neck and coming along with a quick short trot, while the more sober Lady Emily pawed the ground with impatient hoof. Presently Frances came in ready for her ride, and then Vavasour.

"Are you not going with us, Mrs. Vavasour?" asked Frances. "I thought I heard you say you would."

Amy glanced at her husband. Would he, too, ask her? No; he stood quietly on the hearthrug, apparently indifferent as to her reply.

"Thank you; I am rather busy this morning."

"Busy? What can you find to do?"

"I and Bertie are going for a walk."

"Ah! I thought Bertie had a great deal to do with it. How fond you are of Bertie," and she laid an [144] uncomfortable stress on the name as each time it passed her lips.

Robert spoke at last. "Bertie is Mrs. Vavasour's loadstar," he said, quietly.

Amy felt this to be unjust; not so would her husband have spoken to her a month ago.

"My heart is large enough to hold more than the love for my boy," she replied.

"I expect he holds by far the largest share of it," said Frances.

Amy said nothing until she met Robert's gaze fixed inquiringly on her face. "My love for my child is a sacred love, and scarcely to be called in question, Miss Strickland," she answered.

Frances's eyes flashed; then she laughed and struck her riding-habit with her whip. "Don't look

so much in earnest, Mrs. Vavasour. I dare say you have lots of love in your heart for everybody."

"Not for everyone," replied Amy, gravely.

"Ah! you never fall in love at first sight, then; but when once you love, your love lasts for ever. Is it so?" [145]

"I have never asked myself the question."

"But perhaps Mr. Vavasour has. What say you, Mr. Vavasour, you who are supposed to know every thought of your wife's heart?"

"A woman's heart is too difficult a thing for us poor men to fathom."

"Not always. I am going to call Isabella. You can ask your wife while I'm gone."

Amy stood close by her husband, yet dared not raise her eyes to his. Would he ask her if he knew every thought of her heart, and if she said "no," sternly demand what she had to conceal? Now, more than ever, she wished she had told him all long ago. She knew the question must come. It came at last.

"Amy, is it so? Do I know every thought of your heart?"

"You ought to," she replied, tremblingly.

"True." He sighed, then paused, as if expecting her to say more, but Amy was silent.

"Do you love me better than all others, Amy? better than your boy?" [146]

"Nay, what a question. You know I love you, Robert."

He strained her passionately to his heart: had he held her there a moment longer, Amy might have told him all, for she felt strangely softened; but Frances' voice sounded; he drew away from her without a word, and was gone.

"I will ride to-morrow," thought Amy, "perhaps it will please him;" and Robert did look pleased the next day as she came out on the terrace—where he stood with Mrs. Linchmore,—in her riding habit and hat.

"You are going with us?" he cried.

"Yes, the day is so pleasant, I could not resist the temptation."

Ah, yes! The day! His brow clouded, and he turned away.

"I am glad you are coming," said Mrs. Linchmore, "as Frances does not ride."

Frances not ride! For a moment Amy felt glad, then sorry. Would they think she had come purposely to prevent a tête-à-tête? [147]

"I did not know Miss Strickland was not to be of the party," said Amy, as her husband lifted her to the saddle.

"Nor I," he replied.

"You are not sorry I am going with you, Robert?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Sorry, Amy?"

"I mean; that is, I thought yesterday that perhaps you would like me to go."

"Of course, not only yesterday, but to-day and every day," and then he mounted, and went on with Mrs. Linchmore.

So the ride did not begin very auspiciously.

Amy was a good rider, a graceful and fearless one, although perhaps not such a dashing horse-woman as Frances, and her husband looked at her with pride and pleasure as she cantered along on her spirited horse at his side. The exercise soon brought a glow to her cheeks, and a bright light to her eyes, while she laughed and chatted so joyously that Robert thought he had never [148] seen her look so lovely, and forgot the dark lady at his side and riveted his attention on his wife.

"Take care, Amy," said he, as her horse gave a sudden start, "tighten the curb a little more."

But Amy only laughed. "I like him to jump about," she said, "it shows he is in as good spirits as his mistress."

"I certainly never saw Mrs. Vavasour in such spirits," remarked Mrs. Linchmore, feeling herself neglected.

But Amy was not to be checked by a grave look from her rival. Since yesterday, when she had stood at the window with her eyes filled with tears watching her and her husband ride away, she had determined on standing her ground as Robert's wife; she would not fall away from his side at the first danger that threatened, and quietly without an effort allow another to wean his heart from her, but would win back his love to where it had been; and then, not till then, open her heart —as she ought to have done long ago—and tell him all. [149]

Had Frances known of Amy's determination, or even of her contemplated ride, she would not have been walking so quietly along the lane rejoicing in the success of her stratagems. As she emerged into the road she met Bertie, who clapped his hands, and sprung out of his perambulator before Hannah's vigilant eye perceived him.

"I'll go with you," he said, taking Frances' hand.

"Come back, Master Bertie, this moment," said his nurse.

"Let him come," exclaimed Frances, "you are a very naughty boy, all the same, for being so disobedient."

"Please don't take him far, Miss, for it's most time for us to be turning home."

"No; only to the turnpike gate and back."

She took the boy's hand and away they went, Bertie chatting pleasantly until they reached the gate, where he made a stand and began climbing it, notwithstanding Frances' remonstrances. [150] The continued talking brought Matthew to the window.

"There's some folks from the Hall," said he to his sister-in-law, who was busy peeling some potatoes.

Jane dropped the knife and turned sharply round. "Go out to them," she said, "we don't want them in here."

"It's only a young gentleman a-climbing the gate," he replied.

Jane picked up the knife and after a moment went on with her work; but Bertie had seen a cat with its kitten on the door-step; and had run into the cottage before Frances could prevent him.

"Go away! don't come in here!" screamed Jane.

"Put down the knife and hould yer oncivil tongue, yer dafty!" exclaimed Marks. "What the devil d'yer mean by it! Walk in, young gentleman, y'ere welcome to play with the cat as long as yer like. Take a seat, Miss," and he brought forward one of the chairs and dusted it. [151]

But Frances took no heed of the invitation. "I am very angry with you, Bertie," she said, "What will Hannah say? Come away?"

But Bertie would not, but went up to Jane with the kitten in his arms.

"Very well," replied Frances, "I shall call Hannah," but in reality she went outside and waited for him, while Matthew, hat in hand, followed and talked to the young lady.

"I wish pussy was my very own," said Bertie presently, after playing with it for a few moments.

Jane had seated herself in a chair with her face half turned from him and paid no heed to his remark.

"Will you give it me?" he asked in his childish way, pulling at her dress to attract her attention.

"It isn't mine," she replied.

Bertie put the kitten in her lap. "Isn't it pretty?" he said. "Don't you love it?"

"No." [152]

"Do you love the big cat?"

"No."

"Don't you love anything?"

"No. Nothing."

"What's your name?"

"Jane."

"You're a naughty, cross woman, Jane, and *I* shan't love you."

"You don't need to," she replied. "Go away!"

But Bertie continued playing with the kitten still laying in her lap. As he stooped his little face over it, his soft, dimpled cheek touched Jane's hand, while his fair, curly hair waved almost across the other. Presently Jane raised her hand, took off his cap and stroked his head gently.

Bertie looked up half surprised. "Do you think it pretty?" he asked.

"I don't know." But she did not take her hand away.

"Would you like to have some of it?" he asked again, as Jane passed her fingers through one of the silky curls. [153] "Cut it. Where's the scissors?"

"There on the table over against the window," she replied.

Bertie ran and fetched them, and presently a curl shiny and bright fell in Jane's lap.

"There, that's my present," he said, "now won't you give me kitty?"

"She's too small; she mustn't go from her mother," said Jane, lifting the curl and smoothing it softly.

"Would her mother cry?"

"Oh my God!" exclaimed Jane, burying her face in her hands, "you'll break my heart!"

"But would her mother cry? Would she cry very much?" persisted Bertie, striving to draw her hands away.

"Yes," replied Jane, "cry and go mad, and curse those who took him. But curses don't kill, ah no! they don't kill; they only wear the heart away." [154]

The child drew away, half frightened.

"Bertie! Bertie! are you coming?" called Frances.

"Good bye," he said, shyly. "You'll send me kitty by and by, won't you?"

"Yes,—for the sake of the curl," she replied, wrapping it in paper, and placing it in her bosom.

But Bertie only heard the "Yes." "Send it for me; only for me," he said.

"Yes, for Master Bertie."

"Bertie Vavasour," he said.

"What?" screamed Jane, starting to her feet with a shriek that startled even Mrs. Marks, asleep in the room above. "Don't touch me! Don't come nigh me! Stand off! I'm crazed, I tell you, and don't know nothing. Oh! I'm deaf, and didn't hear it! No, no, I didn't hear it! I won't hear it! I'm crazed."

"That yer are, yer she devil!" exclaimed Matthew, striding up to where she stood, as it were at bay, before some deadly enemy. "Are these yer manners, when gentry come to visit yer?" and he [155] half thrust, half threw her out on the stairs.

"She's crazed, Miss," said Matthew, returning, "and has got one of her fits on her; but she's as harmless as a fly. Don't 'ee cry, young Master," said he to Bertie, who with his arms clasped round Frances' neck, was sobbing violently. "She ain't well neither, Miss," continued he, "I thought, days ago, she were a-going to have the fever."

"The fever!" exclaimed Frances, "what fever?"

"I don't know, Miss, my wife have been sick of it for days past."

"And how dare you!" cried Frances, passionately, seizing him by the arm; "how dare you let the boy come in. Don't you know it is murder. Oh, if he should get it! If he should get it!" and she flew from the cottage, leaving Matthew bewailing his thoughtlessness and folly. [156]

Frances disliked children, and had made up her mind to thoroughly hate Amy's child, long before she saw him; but the boy's determined will, so congenial to her spirit, and then his partiality to herself, overcame this resolution. Her object had been to conciliate the father through the boy; but in attaining this object she had taken a liking for the child, which she in vain tried to surmount; Bertie wound himself into that cruel heart, somehow, and held his place there in defiance of all obstacles.

Her heart sank within her at Matthew's words, and felt strangely stirred as she drew away the little arms so tightly encircling her neck. "For Heaven's sake, Bertie, don't cry so, you'll make yourself so hot," and then she felt his hands and forehead to assure herself he had not already caught the fever.

"She's a naughty woman," sobbed Bertie.

"Yes, yes, she's a naughty woman;" and then by dint of coaxing and persuading there was little trace, when they reached Hannah at the further end of the village, of the fright or violent cry he [157] had had; still, his nurse was not to be deceived.

"What's the matter with Master Bertie?" she asked.

"A poor idiot in one of the cottages frightened him," replied Frances; but she said not a word of the fever, or that the cottage was the one at the turnpike gate, and Bertie's version of the story was a great deal too unconnected to be understood, and merely seemed a corroboration of the one Frances had given. [158]

CHAPTER X.

DOWN BY THE LAKE.

"At length within a lonely cell,
  They saw a mournful dame.

Her gentle eyes were dimm'd with tears,
  Her cheeks were pale with woe:
And long Sir Valentine besought
  Her doleful tale to know.

'Alas! young knight,' she weeping said,
  'Condole my wretched fate;
A childless mother here you see;
  A wife without a mate'"

VALENTINE AND URSINE.

Frances was nervous and anxious for days after her walk with Bertie; the sudden opening of a door made her start and tremble lest it should be some-one come to announce the boy's illness. Sometimes she watched and waited at the window half the morning to catch a glimpse of him going out for his daily walk, or if he did not come would seek him in the nursery, and bring him [159] downstairs. She became Bertie's shadow, and he, in consequence, fonder of her than ever. But the days crept on and there was no symptom that he had taken the fever: so by degrees Frances forgot her fears—or rather they slumbered—and went back to her old ways. But it had become more difficult to deal with Amy now, she appeared to have changed so entirely; there was no making her jealous, even if she could manage to make Robert devote himself half the evening to her hostess. Amy seemed just as happy; she either was not jealous or was jealous and concealed it, and rode with her husband, let who would be of the party, or deserted Bertie and walked with him, even learnt to play billiards when she found Robert was fond of it; so that it was rarely chess now, but all, even Mr. Linchmore, joined of an evening in the former game.

Still Robert's love was not what it had been. His wife felt that it was not; he loved her by fits and [160] starts, while some days he was moody and even touchy; but Amy did not despair. How could she when she felt he still loved her? In another fortnight they would be back at Somerton, and away from Frances, who, Amy feared, was fast weaning her boy's as well as her husband's love from her, though how she had managed it she knew not.

"I have just been talking with Mr. Grant, your head keeper," said Robert to Mr. Linchmore about a fortnight after the memorable walk to the turnpike, "he tells me the poaching goes on as sharp and fast as ever."

"Worse," was the reply, "they are the same set we have always had, that is to say, we suppose so from their cunning and rashness."

"You got rid of two or three of them at the Sessions, if you remember, when I was here nearly four years ago."

"Yes, but the example does not appear to have done much good."

"You want Charley here," said Frances, "to excite you all into going out in a body again and [161] exterminating them. Do you remember your fears, Mrs. Vavasour."

Amy looked up to reply, and meeting Frances' gaze, she grew confused and coloured deeply. "I should be more afraid now," said she with an effort at composure.

"I was sorry to hear you had never succeeded in tracking that man?" said Vavasour, with his eyes fixed on his wife's now pale face.

"You mean the man that wounded you? No, several were taken up on suspicion, but we were unable to prove anything against them, and the watcher, the poor man who was so frightfully bruised and otherwise ill-treated, swore, that none of them resembled his or your assailant."

"I could have sworn to the man, too, I think."

"You were abroad, and so I did not press the matter, and in time the affair blew over altogether."

The conversation ended, and was perhaps forgotten by all save Robert Vavasour, and he could [162] not forget it, but snatched his hat and strolled out hastily into the Park. What had made his wife's face flush so deeply? Had it anything to do with Charles, whom Frances was so constantly throwing at his teeth? He began to hate the very name, and was daily growing more madly suspicious of his wife, and yet had his thoughts framed themselves into words he would have shrunk from the bare idea of suspecting his idol. That she had not loved him with all her heart when he married her he knew: she had told him so; and how easy he had thought the task of winning the heart she had assured him none other had ever asked to have an interest in; but then had she loved none other? perhaps this very man of whom for one half hour he remembered being jealous long ago. When she told him the first, why if it was so, had she not told him the second? Why give him only half her confidence? Perhaps she loved him still? Perhaps the remembrance of him had called the guilty blush to her cheek? "Ah! if it is so!" he cried with angry [163] vehemence, "he shall die. I will be revenged!"

"Vengeance! who talks of vengeance?" said a voice near, and, looking up, he saw Goody Grey leaning on her staff. Involuntarily he tendered her some halfpence.

"I want them not," she said. "It does not do for the blind to lead the blind."

"What mean you, woman? I am in no mood to be trifled with."

"Don't I know that?" she replied; "don't I know the bitterness of the heart? Do you think I have lived all these years and don't know where misery lies?"

"Where does it lie?" he asked.

"In your heart. Where it wouldn't have been if you hadn't been there;" and she pointed in the direction of the Hall. "'Tis a gay meeting, and may be as sad a parting."

"Why so?" asked he again.

"Do the hawk and dove agree together in the same nest?" [164]

"The dove would stand but a poor chance," said Robert.

"True." She turned upon her heel and went into the cottage, and seating herself in a low chair, began rocking it backwards and forwards, singing, in a kind of low, monotonous chant,

"When the leaves from the trees begin to fall
Then the curse hangs darkly over the Hall."

"That must be now, then," said Robert, who had followed her in, "for the leaves are falling thick enough and fast enough in the wood."

"Darker and darker as the leaves fall thicker," she replied, "and darkest of all when they are on the ground, and the trees bare."

"What will happen then?"

"Ask your own heart: hasn't it anger, hatred, and despair in it? Did I not hear you call aloud for vengeance?"

"And what good can come of it?" continued she, seeing he made no reply; "like you, I've had all that in my heart, until curses loud and bitter have followed one after another, heaped on those [165] who injured me, and yet I'm as far off from happiness as ever. I began to seek it when I was a young woman, and look! my hair is grey, and yet I have not found it; while the fierce anger, the strong will to return evil for evil, have faded from my spirit like the slow whitening of these grey hairs. There's only despair now, and hatred for those, for *her* who did me wrong."

"Do we all hate as mercilessly as this? I feel that a look, a word of love would turn my heart from bitterness."

"Then the injury has not been deep. I've lived here a lonely woman twenty years, and a look, a word, will sometimes call the fierce blood to my heart. When the injury is eternal and irremediable then the hate must be lasting too."

"The injured heart may forgive," said Vavasour.

"It may forgive. But forget its hate! its wrongs! its despair! Never, never," said she, fiercely.

"It may be so," said Robert, half aloud. [166]

"May be so? It is so. Hate is a deadly enemy; don't let it creep into your heart; tear it out! cast it from you! for once you have it, it is yours for ever; even death cannot part it from you."

"I doubt that. We know that even a dying sinner's heart may repent and be softened; the thought that he is perishing from the earth nursing a deadly sin at his heart would do much; he would never dare die so."

"Prayers, the pleadings of an agonised, breaking heart may be vain—in vain—was vain, young man, for I tried it," replied Goody Grey, her voice suddenly changing from fierceness to mournful sadness.

"Surely there could not be a heart so hard, if you pleaded rightly."

"Don't tell me that!" she exclaimed, raising her voice, "don't tell me there was anything I might have done. Did I not kneel and pray? Did I not take back my curses and give blessings? Did I not plead my broken heart and withered youth? But death came, even as I knelt; the hate was too [167] strong, and the words I panted to hear were unspoken. What have you to say to that?"

"Hope," replied Robert; "what you have done at a death bed, I have done during life, and been refused; death has come since, and I am seemingly as far off as ever; and yet I hope on."

"Hope on, hope ever," said she, sadly, "yes, that's all that's left me now, but it doesn't satisfy the cravings of my heart; never will!"

"Have you no relations? You must live but a lonely life here," said Robert.

"That is the only living thing that loves me," she replied, pointing to the parrot, sitting pluming his feathers. "He's been with me in joy and sorrow. Don't touch him; he is savage with strangers."

"Not with me," said Robert, smoothing his feathers gently.

"Then he knows friends from foes, or his heart's taken kindly to you like mine did, when I saw you with the bad passions written in your face." [168]

"I once had a bird like this," he replied, thoughtfully, "but it must be years ago, for I cannot recall to my recollection at this moment when it was."

He passed from the cottage, while Goody Grey again rocked herself to and fro' and began her old song.

"When the leaves from the trees begin to fall
Then the curse——"

The rest of the words were lost to his ear, but the sound of her voice was borne along by the breeze, and sounded mournfully and sadly as it swept through the leafless trees.

Robert thought much of Goody Grey as he walked homewards. Here was a woman whose very life had wasted away in the vain search for what for twenty years,—perhaps more,—had eluded her grasp. Would it be the same with him? Would years,—his life slip by, and the mystery of his birth be a mystery still? Would hope fade away, and he, like her, grow despairing in the end? He felt a [169] strange interest in that lone, unloved woman, with nothing in the world to love but a bird. Then his thoughts reverted to his wife, and his love for her. Why had she married him if her heart was another's? Why had she done him this wrong? Why make not only herself, but him miserable for life? But could deceit dwell in so lovely a form as his wife's? only a month ago he would have staked his life; nay, his very love upon her truth. And now—now—

"Where are you going so fast, Robert? Are you walking for a wager? I have been vainly trying to come up with you for the last five minutes," said Amy, taking his arm.

"Have you been out walking without Bertie?" he said.

"Yes, I meant to have gone with you; and ran upstairs for my hat, when I saw you preparing to go out."

"Why did you not come then?" [170]

"I was too late; when I came back you had disappeared, Miss Strickland said down the long avenue: so I followed, and went through the village, and home by the lane, but somehow I missed you."

"Miss Strickland was wrong. I went across the fields into the wood, as far as Mrs. Grey's cottage. What a singular being she is!"

"Have you never seen her until to-day?"

"Yes, several times, but never to speak to. She must have been very handsome in her youth."

"What, with that dark frown on her brow?"

"That has been caused from sorrow," replied Robert, "she has had some heavy, bitter trial to bear; besides that frown is not always there, once I noticed quite a softened expression steal over her face. I feel an interest in the old lady; she tells me she is alone in the world,—like myself. I feel alone sometimes."

"You, Robert!" said Amy, in a tone of sadness and reproach. [171]

"I feel so sometimes, Amy."

"What, with your wife's love?"

"You have the boy to care for. You love him so much, Amy."

"Yes," said she in a tone of disappointment.

"See! there he comes up the walk."

"Yes," she said again, but never turned her head or heeded Bertie's "Mamma!" "Mamma!"

"I love you better than Bertie, Robert," she whispered softly a moment after.

He did not reply; but she felt his arm tighten on her hand and press it slightly to his side. She did not return the pressure, she was only half satisfied as she left him and went up the terrace steps, while Robert's eyes followed her wistfully, until even the skirt of her dress swept through the door out of sight.

Ah! had she only remained with him a little longer.

Robert passed on down the terrace, and stood at the further end. Just then a window was flung open, and Frances Strickland called to his boy. They talked for a few moments, then Hannah [172] passed on with her charge, while Robert still leant against the abutment of the window. Presently it closed gently, a voice saying at the same instant, "Poor Charley! Mrs. Vavasour will break her heart."

Robert sprung to his feet and strode past the window at which Frances still stood, his shadow falling upon her darkly as he went on into the house,—into the room.

Alone! and ready for a walk? That was well, he would not question her there; no, it must be away, far away, and safe from interruption.

"I would speak with you, Miss Strickland," he said sternly, vainly striving to appear calm, and stay the fierce hot blood rushing to his heart and mounting to his brow.

Frances followed him at once without a question; away into the Park, along the very road he had so lately traversed with his wife; she could scarcely keep up with his stride, or heavy iron-sounding step, that seemed as though it would crush every stone and pebble in his path to [173] powder: still he went on; on through the trees and walks, startling the birds from the branches, but striking no dismay into Frances' breast; on, even down to the lake slumbering so peacefully and quietly. Here he stopped, and pointing to the clump of a tree, bade her be seated. Then he stood sternly before her.

"Can you wonder I wish to speak with you?" he asked in a thick, harsh, almost agitated voice, which grew steadier as he went on.

"No," she replied.

"Nor why I have brought you thus far?"

"No," she said again.

"Then speak!" he cried, "and if you speak falsely I will hold you up as a scorn and shame amongst women."

"I am not afraid," she said, "and can excuse your harsh words; but—"

"I will have no buts," he said sternly, "you have slandered my wife, her I love more than my life; [174] you shall either say you have lied falsely, or you shall make good your words."

"Shall I begin at the beginning? Do you want to know all?"

"Begin, and make an end quickly."

And she did begin, even from the time when Amy had fainted, that memorable night, unto where Charles Linchmore had told her he had met Amy on her wedding day; and as she went on he buried his face in his hands, while his whole frame shook and trembled like an aspen.

"Girl, have some mercy!" he cried.

But she had none; no pity. Was not this woman his wife; and had she shown pity. So she never stayed her words, never softened them, she gave him what appeared the hard, stern, agonising truth, and he groaned with very anguish as she spoke.

"Is that all?" he asked at last. [175]

"All."

"And you will swear it. Swear it!" he cried hoarsely.

"I will. But you need not believe me. Ask your wife? See what she says."

He moved his hands from his face. It looked as though years had swept over it. "You have broken my heart," he said, in a quivering voice. And then he left her.

Amy had gone to her room, sad and thoughtful, with the feeling, at last, that her husband doubted her love; and yet, she did love him better than she ever thought she should.

As she turned his words over in her mind, she determined on delaying no longer; but now, at once, tell him all. She dreaded his anger and sorrowful look; but that, anything was better than the loss of his love. So she sat and listened, and awaited his coming. But he came not.

The luncheon bell rang, and she went downstairs wondering at his absence.

"I am sorry to say Mr. Linchmore has heard some bad news, Mrs. Vavasour," said Mrs. [176] Linchmore.

"My husband! Where is he?"—exclaimed Amy, panic stricken.

"It has nothing to do with him," replied Mr. Linchmore, "my brother has, unfortunately, been wounded." And he looked somewhat surprised at her sudden fright.

Then Amy was glad Robert was absent. "I am sorry," she faltered. "I hope it is not serious;" and her pale face paled whiter than before.

"No, I trust not. He has been out with General Chamberlain's force."

"He was very foolish to go to India at all," said Mr. Linchmore. "I dare say he would have had plenty of opportunities of winning laurels elsewhere; but he always was so impetuous,—here to-day and gone to-morrow."

Then the conversation turned upon other subjects, and still Robert came not. Just as they rose from the table Frances came in. [177]

"Have you seen Mr. Vavasour?" asked Amy.

"No. Has he not been in to luncheon? I thought I was late."

Amy passed on up to her room again, and for a short time sat quietly by the fire, as she had done before; then, as the hours crept on, she rose and went to the window.

The sun sank slowly, twilight came on, and the shadows of evening grew darker still; Amy could scarcely see the long avenue now, or the tall dark trees overshadowing it; and still she was alone. Then the door opened; but it was not her husband—it was Hannah, who stood looking at her with grave face.

"If you please, Ma'am, I don't think Master Bertie is well. There is nothing to be frightened about; but he has been hot and feverish ever since he came home from his walk." [178]

CHAPTER XI.

REPENTANCE.

"Whispering tongues can poison truth,
And constancy lives in realms above;
And life is thorny, and youth is vain;
And to be wroth with one we love,
Doth work like madness in the brain."

COLERIDGE.

"My thoughts acquit you for dishonouring me
By any foul act; but the virtuous know
'Tis not enough to clear ourselves, but the
Suspicions of our shame."

SHIRLEY.

Robert came back at last, and years seemed to have swept over his head and gathered round his heart, since only a few hours before he had stood in his wife's room. But he looked for her in vain, she was not there, but away in the nursery, hushing, with tearful eyes and frightened heart, poor sick Bertie in her arms to sleep. Robert longed, yet dreaded to see her. Through all his misery his [179] heart clung to his wife, and hoped, even when his lips murmured there was no hope. He took up the work on the table, a handkerchief Amy had been hemming, marked with his name, and sighed as he laid it down, and thought duty, not love, had induced her to work for him.

So he waited on—waited patiently. At length she came.

"Oh, Robert! I am so glad you are here. I have been longing for you, and quite frightened when you stayed away such a time."

The mother's fears were roused, and she clung at once to her husband for help and support. Her trembling heart had forgotten for the moment all she had been braving her heart, and nerving her mind to tell him. The great fear supplanted for the time the lesser and more distant one.

She had seated herself at Robert's feet, leaning her head on his knee. He let her remain so—did not even withdraw the hand she had taken, for the fierceness of his anger had passed away, and [180] a great sorrow filled his heart. Did he not pity her as much as himself? she so fair and young. Had not she made them both miserable? Both he and her.

But Amy saw nothing of all this—nothing of the grave, sorrowing face—her heart was thinking of poor Bertie's heavy eyes and hot hands, and how best she could break it to her husband, so as not to grieve him too much, for did he not love the boy as much as she did? and would he not fear and dread the worst? But even while she hesitated, her husband spoke—

"Amy! Have you ever deceived me? I, who have loved you so faithfully."

The cold, changed tone—the harsh voice struck her at once. She looked up quickly. There was that in his face which sent dismay into her heart, while her fears for Bertie fled as she gazed. Was she too late? Had her husband found out what she had been striving so hard for months to tell him? Yes, she felt, she knew she was too late; that he knew all, and waited for her words to [181] confirm what he knew.

"Never as your wife, Robert," she replied, tremblingly.

"And when, then!"

"Oh, Robert! don't look so sternly at me—don't speak so strangely. I meant to tell you, I did indeed. I have been striving all these months to tell you."

Alas! there was something to tell, then; every word she uttered drove away hope more and more from his heart.

"Months and years?" he said, mournfully.

"No, no; to-day, this very day have I been watching and waiting. Oh! why did you not come back? Why did you not come back, Robert, so that I might have told you?"

"You dared not," he said, sternly.

"Oh, yes! I dared. I have done no sin, only deceived you, Robert, at—at first."

"Only at first. Only for ever."

"No, no; not for ever. I always meant to tell you, I did, indeed, Robert." She began to fear he [182]
distrusted her words already—she, whose very "yes" had been implicitly believed and reverenced. Alas! this first sin, perhaps the only one, into what meshes it leads us, often bringing terrible retribution.

"Did you not fear living on in—in deceit?" he said. "Did you not feel how near you were to my heart—did you not know that my love for you was—was madness? that, lonely and unloved, I loved you with all the passion of my nature? If not, you knew that all my devotion was thrown away—utterly wasted—that your heart was another's, and could never be mine."

He stopped; and the silence was unbroken, save by Amy's sobs.

"Had you told me this," he said again, "do you think I would have brought this great sorrow upon you? put trouble and fear into your heart instead of love and happiness, and made your young life desolate—desolate and unbearable, but for the boy. He is the one green leaf in your path, I the [183]
withered one,—withered at heart and soul."

"Robert! Robert! don't be so hard, so—so—" she could not bring to her lips to say cruel, "but forgive me!"

He heeded her not, but went on.

"And the day of your marriage," he said, "that day which should have been, and I fondly hoped was, the happiest day of your life; upon that day, of all others, you saw him."

"Not wilfully, Robert, not—not wilfully," sobbed Amy.

"That day, your marriage day, was the one on which you first learnt of *his* love for you, and passed in one short half hour a whole lifetime of agony. Poor Amy! poor wife! Forgive you? yes; my heart is pitying enough and weak enough to forgive you your share in my misery for the sake of the anguish of your own."

Amy only wept on. She could not answer. But he, her husband, needed no reply; her very silence, [184]
her utter grief and tears confirmed all he said.

"Amy, did you never think the knowledge of all this—the tale would break my heart?"

"Never! I feared your anger, your sorrowing looks, but—but that?—Never, never!"

"And yet it will be so. It must be so."

"Oh, no, no! Neither now nor ever, because—because I love you, Robert."

"Amy! wife!" he said, sternly, "there must never be a question of love between us, now. That—that is at an end, and must never be named again. I forgive you, but forget I never can," and then he left her, before she could say one word. Left her to her young heart's anguish and bitter despair, tenfold greater than the anguish he had depicted being hers long ago, because hopeless—hopeless of ever now winning back his love again. And what a love it had been! She began to see, to feel it all now, now that it had gone, left her for ever. [185]

"God help me!" she cried, "I never, never thought it would have come to this. God help me! I have no other help now, and forgive me if I have broken his heart."

Then by-and-by she rose, and with wan, stricken face, went back to her boy.

Mr. Blane was bending over Bertie, who was crying in feeble, childish accents, "Give me some water to drink. Please give me some water."

"Presently, my little man; all in good time."

"But I want it now—I must have it now."

"My mistress, Mrs. Vavasour, sir," said Hannah, as Amy entered, and stood silently by his side, and looked anxiously into his face, as she returned his greeting.

"Dr. Bernard usually attends at the Hall," she said; "but he lives so far away, and I was so anxious about my boy. Is there much the matter with him?"

"Ahem," said Mr. Blane, clearing his throat, as most medical men do when disliking to tell an unpleasant truth, or considering how best to shape an answer least terrifying to the mother's [186]
heart. "No—no," he said hesitatingly. "The child is very hot and feverish."

"I hope he isn't going to sicken for a fever, sir," said Hannah.

"I fear he has sickened for it," he replied.

"Not the scarlet fever?" said Amy, in a frightened voice.

"No. There has been a nasty kind of fever going about, which I fear your boy has somehow taken.

I have had two cases lately, and in both instances the symptoms were similar to this."

"Is it a dangerous fever?" asked Amy.

"The old lady, my first patient, is quite well again, in fact better than she has been for the last six months, as the fever cured the rheumatics, and from being almost a cripple, she now walks nearly as well as ever. And," he said, rising to leave, "I should advise no one's entering this room but those who are obliged to—the fewer the better—and by all means keep the other children away, as the sore throat is decidedly infectious. Good-bye, Sir; take your medicine like a little [187] man, and then we'll soon have you well again," said he to Bertie.

"My boy, my poor Bertie," said Amy, as she sat by his side, and held the cool, refreshing drink to his parched lips. Did she need this fresh trial coming upon her already stricken heart?

"Don't let the boy see you crying, Ma'am," said Hannah, "or perhaps he'll be getting frightened, and I'm sure that'll be bad for him."

"No," said Amy. But though no tears were in her eyes, the traces of them were weighing down the heavy swollen eyelids; but tears she had none to shed, she had wept so much.

So she sat by the side of her sick child's little cot with aching heart, all alone and lonely, with no one but old faithful Hannah to sympathize and watch with her; he, her husband, she dared not think of, or if she thought at all, it was to almost wish he would not come; so stern and grave a face might frighten her boy. [188]

"Are you not going down to dinner, Ma'am?" said Nurse at last, in a whisper, for Bertie had dropped off into an uneasy slumber.

"Dinner? Ah! yes. I forgot. No, I shall not go down to dinner to-day. I shall not leave my boy."

"I can take care of him, Ma'am, and then shouldn't you tell the Master? Haven't you forgotten him? There's no use keeping the bad news from him."

Forgotten him? How could she forget? Were not his words still fresh at her heart?

But Nurse was right, he ought to be told; there was Mrs. Linchmore, too, she—all, ought to know about Bertie.

So Amy rose and went away in search of her husband. Where was he? Should she find him in his room? She hesitated ere she knocked, but his heavy tread a moment after assured her he was there. She did not look up as the door opened, but said simply, "Bertie is ill, Robert, very ill. Mr. Blane has been to see him, and says he has caught some fever, but not a dangerous one." [189]

All traces of sternness and anger fled from his brow, as he listened and caught the expression of his wife's face. He wondered at the calmness with which she spoke. His boy ill, little Bertie, in whose life her very soul had seemed wrapt? and she could stand and speak of it so coldly, so calmly as this? He wondered, and saw nothing of the anguish within, or how the one terrible blow he had dealt her had for the time broken and crushed her spirit. Only a few hours ago, and she would have wept and clung round his neck for help, in this her one great hour of need. But that was past, could not be; he would not have it so, her love had been forbidden.

"I will go and see the boy," he said, gently.

She turned and went on her way downstairs to the drawing-room.

"Good gracious, Mrs. Vavasour! what is the matter?" cried Frances, her heart beating savagely, as she looked at the poor face, so wan and still, telling its own tale of woe long before the lips [190] did.

Amy took no notice of Frances, but passed on to where Mrs. Linchmore sat with the children. It was Alice's birthday, and Bertie was to have come down too, and as Amy remembered it, her heart for the first time felt full; but she drove back the tears, and said—

"My child is ill. He has caught some fever; but not a dangerous one."

How fond she was of repeating this latter phrase, as if the very fact of saying that it was not a dangerous fever would ease and convince her frightened, timid heart.

The words startled everyone.

"I am extremely sorry," said Mrs. Linchmore, drawing Alice away. "I trust, I hope it is not infectious?"

"I very much fear it is, at least, Mr. Blane thinks the sore throat is, and advises the children, by all means, being kept apart."

"They must go away, shall go away the very first thing to-morrow morning. It is as well to be on [191] the safe side. Don't you think so, Robert?" said Mrs. Linchmore.

"Decidedly. They can go into the village for the time or to Grant's cottage."

"There are cases of the same fever in the village," said Amy.

"Then they must go away altogether," said Mrs. Linchmore, hurriedly. "We must send them to

Standale."

"I am so sorry for Bertie, he'll have such lots of nasty medicine," said Fanny; "but won't it be nice to be without Miss Barker?"

"Be silent, child!" said her mother, "Miss Barker will of course go with you."

"Oh! how horrid!" returned Fanny. Even Mrs. Linchmore's frown could not prevent her from saying that.

Amy passed out again even as she had come, almost brushing Frances' dress, but without looking at her, although, had she raised her eyes, she must have been struck with the whiteness of her face, which equalled, if not exceeded, her own. [192]

"Master has been here, Ma'am," said Hannah, as Amy returned, "and bid me tell you he had gone to fetch Dr. Bernard."

Again Amy sat by her boy watching and waiting. What else was there to be done? He still slept—slept uneasily, troubled with that short, dry cough.

Later on in the evening, when Dr. Bernard—whose mild hopeful face and kind cheering voice inspiring her poor heart with courage,—had been, and when the hours were creeping on into night a knock sounded at the door.

"Miss Strickland is outside, Ma'am, and wants to come in. Shall I let her?" asked Hannah.

Amy went out and closed the door behind her, and looked with unmoved eyes on Frances' flushed and anxious face.

"How is he? May I go in?" she asked, eagerly. [193]

"Never, with my permission," was the chilling reply.

"Only for five minutes; I am not afraid of the fever, and my looking at him can do him no harm. I will promise not to stay longer than that."

"No. You shall not go in for half a minute, even."

"You cannot be so cruel," said Frances; "you cannot tell how frightened and anxious I am. Oh! do let me see him."

"I will not," said Amy, angrily.

"Cruel, hard-hearted mother," cried Frances. "I know he has asked for me. I know he has called for me!"

"I thank God he has not," replied Amy, "for *that* would break my heart."

"Then he will ask for me; and if he does, you will send for me, won't you?"

"Never!" said Amy, as she turned away.

"Oh! Mrs. Vavasour, I love the boy; don't you see that my heart is breaking while you stand there so pitilessly." [194]

"Had you loved the boy," said Amy, "you would not have crushed the mother's heart. What had I done to you, Frances Strickland, that you should pursue me so cruelly, first as a girl, when I never injured you, and then—now you have taken my husband's love from me, and would take my boy's also? But I will stand between him and you, cruel girl, as long as I live."

"Don't say so. Think—think—what if he should die?" said Frances, fearfully.

"Ah! God help me!" said Amy; she could say no more. But Frances clung to her dress.

"It is I who should say, God help me!" she cried; "don't you know I took Bertie to the cottage where he caught the fever? Oh! Mrs. Vavasour, you don't know half my agony and remorse, or what I suffered when I found out what I had done."

"My boy's illness, my husband's scorn, broken hopes, and grieving heart, my crushed spirit, all—all I owe to you. May God forgive you, Miss Strickland." [195]

"Yes, yes; God forgive me. I deny nothing. But, oh! will not you forgive me, Mrs. Vavasour? I will try, I will, indeed, to make amends."

This abject appeal from the proud Frances? But Amy scarcely heeded it.

"You cannot make amends," she said, despairingly. "It is past atonement—this great wrong you have done."

"Oh! do not be so harsh and cruel to me; your heart was soft enough once."

"It was. You have changed it, and are the first to feel its hardness. I am no longer what I was; but for my boy I should turn into a stone, or die."

"And I? What am I to do? If—if anything should happen to Bertie. Oh! I shall go mad," she cried. "Think of my grief then. I, who unwittingly gave him this fever; think what my heart would feel,

what it even feels now; and be not so merciless." [196]

"No, not half so merciless as your bad heart has been. I can give you no greater punishment than your own guilty remorse, and frightened heart. I will remain no longer, Miss Strickland. You shall not see my boy!"

And Amy left Frances weeping, perhaps the first *genuine* repentant tears she had ever shed.

Robert sat at his boy's bed-side all that night, cooling his burning forehead and heated head with the cold wet cloth dipped in vinegar and water, or holding him up in his arms while his poor parched lips feebly yet eagerly drank from the cup his mother held so tremblingly before him, while Frances alternately walked her room despairingly, or crouched away in the dark on the stairs near, her ear vainly trying to catch the words of those mournful watchers and nurses who stepped about so softly in the sick chamber beyond. [197]

CHAPTER XII.

A FADING FLOWER.

"The coldness from my heart is gone,
  But still the weight is there,
And thoughts which I abhor will come,
  And tempt me to despair.

"Those thoughts I constantly repel;
  And all, methinks, might yet be well,
Could I but weep once more;
  And with true tears of penitence
My dreadful state deplore."

SOUTHEY.

The long hours of night wore away, and the morning broke, bright, fresh, and frosty. Then the long corridor and passages echoed with the sound of hasty footsteps hurrying through them, while the quick, sudden opening and shutting of doors betokened an unusual stir in the Hall. The children were preparing for their journey. [198]

Half an hour later all was silent and still, more so than it had been for days. The children were gone.

Again we enter the sick room. Bertie is no better, but, if anything, worse; his little face more flushed and heated, his burning hands wandering restlessly about, to and fro, as he tosses and turns upon his little cot, his anxious eyes no longer looking mournfully, and as it were imploringly in his mother's face for help from his pain, for Bertie is delirious, and does not even recognise her; his thoughts ramble, and he talks incoherently and strangely.

Mrs. Hopkins often came to see him, bringing, as was her wont, in cases of illness, broths and cooling drinks she had prepared with her own hand; but Bertie was too ill to heed them, and Amy could but look her thanks—words she had none.

It was on returning from one of these visits, with cup and saucer in hand, that she met Frances Strickland. [199]

"Have you been to see Master Bertie?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss," replied Mrs. Hopkins, with a sigh.

"And how is he? Do you think he is any better this morning?"

"No, Miss, I don't. It's my belief he couldn't well be worse; but the doctor'll know better than me. I suppose he'll be here presently."

"What makes you think him so ill?"

"I've been the mother of four, Miss, and lost them all, and none of them looked a bit worse than Master Bertie, poor, innocent lamb."

"But you had not two doctors," returned Frances.

"No, nor half the nurses to wait on mine; but I'd the same loving, craving mother's heart and the same God to look up to and hope in," and the housekeeper passed on, as the rebuke fell from her lips.

"Oh! I wish I could hope, I wish I could pray," cried Frances, as she went once more into the solitude of her own room; not only did she grieve for Bertie, but the terror lest through her means he should die had at last brought repentance to her unfeeling heart; she had been so wicked, so relentlessly cruel to his mother, that perhaps the boy's death was to be her punishment; and she could think of, scarcely look forward to, anything else. [200]

Dr. Bernard stayed at the Park all that night; he whispered no decided hope to Amy's heart. There was only a very grave look on his face as after bending over Bertie and feeling the quick,

sharp pulse beating so fiercely against his finger, he said, "While there is life there is hope," and Amy was obliged to content her poor heart with this, and repeat it over and over again to herself all through that long sad night; the second of Bertie's illness, and of her own and her husband's watch, for Robert scarcely ever left his boy, but remained through the weary hours of night patiently by his side; only old Hannah snatching every now and then a moment's sleep. [201]

Towards the morning Bertie grew more composed, the hands tossed about less restlessly, and the weary, anxious eyes closed in sleep: so calm and still he looked that Amy bent down her head to catch the faint breath.

"It is not death?" she said to Dr. Bernard, who had been hastily aroused.

"No. The crisis is past I hope. The fever has left him. It is weakness, excessive weakness," but he did not add that that was as much to be dreaded as the fever; while Amy only prayed that when he awoke he would recognise her, so long it seemed since his little lips had said "Mamma."

Just before luncheon, Anne with her husband drove up to the Hall. She was rushing into the morning-room with her usual haste and merry laugh, when she was checked by Mrs. Linchmore's grave face.

"Has anything happened, Isabella? How grave you look."

Yes a great deal had happened; she had a great deal to hear, and Anne sat herself down to listen to it all patiently—or as patiently as she could to the end. As soon as it was told, she was rushing impetuously from the room. [202]

"Is the boy in the small red room?" she asked.

"Yes. But Anne, the fever is infectious; you had better stay away. Mrs. Vavasour can come and see you here."

"As if she would leave him?" she cried, "not a bit of it, I know her better, besides I am not afraid of anything. I shall go." Anne was right, there was very little indeed she was afraid of.

"But Anne, think of your husband; he might not like it."

"Ah! true; how tiresome it is sometimes to have a husband! I suppose I shall have to wait a whole hour before he thinks of coming back."

"Did he drive in with you?"

"Yes, and has gone on in the pony carriage to call at the Rectory. Isn't it provoking. I have a great mind not to wait for him." [203]

"It might have been a great deal worse; suppose he had not driven in with you?"

"Then I should have braved his anger and been at the boy's bed-side long ago," and she walked to the window, and strained her eyes impatiently down the drive.

"Have you seen the child today?" she asked presently.

"No, not since his illness; but Dr. Bernard tells me the fever left him early this morning."

"It did? Oh! then he'll soon get better."

"But he is so excessively weak, that he holds out small hopes of his recovery."

"Poor dear Amy, how sad for her. Ah! there's the carriage at last; how delightful! Mr. Russell could not have been at home." And away she flew down the stairs, and stood impatiently on the terrace.

"My dear Thomas," she exclaimed, "how slowly you drive. I always tell you you indulge the pony fearfully when I am not with you."

Mr. Hall looked in surprise at his wife's anxious face. "Why, Anne," he said, "I had no idea you were in such a desperate hurry to return home, or I might have driven a little quicker." [204]

"Return," she cried, "I am not thinking of such a thing. I want to stay for a week, if you will only let me, and Isabella does not object; you can go and arrange it with her presently," said she, in her impetuous way.

"But I have yet to hear why I am to do all this," returned her husband.

"Ah, I forgot! It's because poor Amy Vavasour's child, that little boy we saw when we were last here, is dying of some fever. They say it's infectious, but you will not mind that, will you? I am not a bit afraid, and I do so want to comfort Amy."

Mr. Hall looked very grave.

"Oh, don't consider about it," she said, "you can stay, too, you know; there is no reason why you should go home before Saturday."

"It is not that," he replied, "but this fever is infectious, Anne, and you will be running a great risk." [205]

"Do not think about it, Tom. I shall fret myself into a worse fever at home, and besides, think of poor Amy. I do not believe you can be so hard-hearted as to refuse me."

So in the end, much against his wish, Mr. Hall yielded, and while he went to propose the plan to Mrs. Linchmore Anne went off on her mission of mercy, and was repaid by the sad smile, and almost glad light in Amy's eyes as she greeted her.

Anne was shocked at the change in the boy; shocked too, with the mother's wan, haggard look.

"My Mistress hasn't been in bed for these two nights past, Miss," said Nurse, interpreting Anne's thoughts.

Not for two nights? It was absolutely necessary she should have some repose; so Anne set herself to work to accomplish it. [206]

"Why not lie down, Amy, while your boy is asleep?"

"Impossible!" was the firm reply, "I could not."

"But you will wear yourself out, you cannot possibly be of any use while he sleeps. I will sit by him for you, and call you the moment he wakes."

"No, I must be by him when he wakes, I could not bear to think he looked at anyone else first; he has not known me for so long, that my heart is craving for some sign to show that he recognises me."

This was conclusive, and Anne urged no more, but Robert said, "I think Mrs. Hall is right, Amy, in advising you to rest."

"But I cannot leave the room, indeed I cannot."

"There is no occasion for your doing so, you can lie on Hannah's bed."

Anne expected a fresh expostulation, but no, Amy moved away at once, and did as her husband wished. [207]

"Where can I find a shawl for Amy, Mr. Vavasour?" said Anne, presently, "she will be frozen over there, without some wrap."

He went away, and returned a moment after with one, which he spread over Amy as she lay, but without, to Anne's astonishment, one loving word or even look.

"Try and sleep," he said, gently, "I will call you in an hour."

She thanked him, and closed her eyes.

But long before the hour had passed away, she was at Bertie's bed-side, with the little head nestled in her bosom, and the soft, thin hand clasped in hers; he was too weak to say much, but he had named her, had recognised her; that was enough, he would not die now, without giving her one loving look. Die? Yes, she felt he would die, so thin and wasted, so hollow his cheeks, so weak, so utterly weak; and then the sorrowing faces of those around, the still graver one, and pitying words of the old doctor. Ah! there was no need to tell her; her boy, her beautiful boy, [208] must die. Oh! the anguish of her heart, surely if a fervent prayer could save him, he would be saved yet.

Anne stole away by and by to her husband, and found him busy unpacking a carpet bag.

"I have been home and back again, Anne," he said, "and made Mary put together the few things she thought you might require. I hope you will find them all right."

"Oh! Tom, I do believe you are the only devoted, kind husband in the whole world; how fortunate it was I married you when I did."

"Why so?" he asked.

"Because I see so many bad specimens of married life, that if I had waited until now, I would not have had you at any price."

"Oh, yes, you would," he said.

"Don't be so conceited," she replied, "remember you have never been drilled yet."

"I have my wife to be conceited of," he said, fondly; "and now Anne, tell me what news of the child?" She was grave in a moment. [209]

"There is no hope. None whatever. Dr. Bernard gives none."

"And the mother?"

"She is very quiet, very submissive under it all."

"She knows the worst, then?"

"She guesses it, and bears up wonderfully. How it will be by-and-by, when the worst is over, I don't like, cannot bear to think of; you must come and talk to her then?"

"I?" he said, "no, that will never do; she has her husband."

"He's a wretch! I have no patience with him. As cold as an icicle."

"My dear Anne," he said, reprovingly.

"Oh! my dear Tom, I am so glad you are not like him," and then she burst out crying, a most unusual thing for her, "and I am so glad now I have no children: it must be dreadful to lose them. After this I will be the most contented little mortal going."

And she went back again to Amy, leaving her husband somewhat surprised, and regretful that he should have consented to have allowed her to remain in a scene evidently too much for her. [210]

Bertie had roused again. "Where's Missy? I want Missy?" he said, feebly.

The cry went like a sharp knife through the mother's heart. She brought him toys and pictures, telling him the history of each, and quieting him as well as she could. At first he was amused and interested, but he soon wearied, and said again, "I want Missy."

"Is it Alice he is crying for?" whispered Anne, as Amy moved away, and sent Hannah to take her place by the bed.

"No, not Alice. Oh! Anne, he will break my heart. I had so hoped he had forgotten her."

Again the little fretful cry sounded. "Tell Missy to come."

"I *must* go," said Amy, "there is no help for it."

Frances had thrown herself despairingly on the bed, shutting out Jane, her maid, who had tried to comfort her, and even Mrs. Linchmore. At one moment she would not believe there was no hope —would not,—the next she wept and moaned with the certainty that there could be none; as she saw Amy enter, she covered her face with her hands, and groaned aloud; thinking there was but one reason the mother could have in coming to see her, and that was to upbraid her for having caused the death of her boy. [211]

"Miss Strickland I said you should not see my boy, but I cannot refuse his,—" Amy faltered, —"perhaps last request. He is asking for you. Will you come?"

"Come!" exclaimed Frances, springing from the bed, and tossing back the hair from off her throbbing temples, "do you think I could refuse him—you, anything? and oh! forgive me, Mrs. Vavasour, for having caused you all this utter misery."

"It is a fearful punishment," said Amy, looking at the ravages grief and remorse had made in her beautiful face. [212]

"Fearful!" she replied, "it will haunt me through life. Think of that, and say one word of forgiveness, only one."

"I cannot forgive you, Miss Strickland. For my poor Bertie's illness I do; that was an unintentional injury, but his mother's misery—broken heart, no; that you might have prevented, and—and, God help me, but I cannot forgive that."

"How could I hope you would," said Frances despairingly, as she prepared to follow Amy.

"You must control your grief, Miss Strickland; be calm and passionless as of old. My boy must see no tears."

"I wonder I have any to shed," she replied, "and God knows how I shall bear to see him."

Anne looked bewildered as the door opened and Amy returned with Frances, and still more so when she saw the child's face light up with pleasure, and he tried in his feeble way to clasp her neck.

"I cannot bear to look at it," said Amy, as she softly left the room. [213]

"Naughty! naughty Missy," he said as he kissed her.

Frances felt as if she could have died then, without one sigh of regret. For a moment after he released her she did not raise her head.

"My dear,—dear Bertie," she said, struggling with her tears. Then presently she sat down and fondled and stroked his thin small hand, soothing and coaxing him as well as she was able. If her heart could have broken, surely it would have broken then.

"Ah! he's thin enough now, Miss," observed Nurse, "even that sour stiff-backed lady would have a hard matter to call him fat. He's never been the same since she looked at him with those sharp ferret eyes of hers;" and then she moved away and went and seated herself by the fire, recounting the whole history to Anne, of not only her dislike for Miss Barker, but the reason of Bertie's apparent partiality for Frances; while the latter sat and listened to Bertie's talk, he wounding and opening her heart afresh at every word he uttered. [214]

"Naughty Missy not to come to Bertie!" he said; and Frances could not tell him why she had stayed away; she could only remain silent and so allow him to conclude she had been unkind.

She took up some of the books Amy had left.

"Here are pretty pictures," she said, "shall Missy tell you some of the nice stories?"

"No, you mustn't. Mamma tells me them; I like her to, she tells them so pretty."

"Is there nothing Missy can do for you? Shall she sing you a song?"

"Mamma sings 'Gentle Jesus;' you don't know one so pretty do you?"

"No, Bertie, I am sure I don't."

Presently his little face brightened. "I should like you to get me kitty," he said.

"Yes. Who is kitty though?"

"That's what Master Bertie cried for the very day he was taken ill. It's the kitten he saw in the village, Miss," said Hannah. [215]

"Bertie shall have kitty," said Frances, decidedly. "Missy will fetch her."

"Yes, she's big now, her mother won't cry," he said, as if not quite satisfied that she would not.

It had come on to rain, since the morning but what cared Frances for that; she scarcely stayed to snatch her hat and cloak before she was hurrying through it. What cared she for the rain or anything else? Her whole soul was with Bertie—the child who through her means was dying, and yet had clasped her neck so lovingly as she bent over him dismayed and appalled at the ravages illness had made in his sweet face.

There was only Matthew in the little parlour as she entered the cottage.

"You'd better not come in, Miss," he said "no offence, Miss, but my sister-in-law's been ill with the fever these days past."

"It can make no difference now," she said, bitterly, "that little boy I brought here only ten days ago is—is dying of the fever he caught here." [216]

"Lord save us! Miss, dying?" said Matthew regretfully.

"He has just asked for the kitten he saw here. Will you let him have it? It may be," she said despairingly, seeing he hesitated, "only—only for a day, or for—a few hours, you would never have the heart to refuse a child's last wish." In days gone by she would have abused him for the hand he had had in causing poor Bertie's illness, and her misery. But it was different now.

"No, Miss, you're right, I haven't the heart to. What's the kitten's life worth next to the young master's. Here take it and welcome; though what the Missus'll say when she finds it's gone, and the old un a howling about the place I don't know, but there, it can't be helped," said Matthew philosophically, as Frances wrapped the kitten up carefully in her cloak, and hurried away.

The evening had closed in by the time Frances reached the Park again. She hastily changed her wet things, and went at once to Bertie's room, but her heart misgave her, as, going down the long [217] corridor, she saw Anne seated on the ledge of the large window, with the traces of tears on her face.

"I am not too late?" she asked.

"I don't know," replied Anne. "He is very, very weak. I could not bear to stay."

Frances went on, Robert, as well as Amy, was in the room. He moved a little on one side to allow Frances to come near. "Bertie, my boy," he said, "Missy has brought you Kitty."

Frances leant over, and placed it beside him.

He opened his eyes feebly, then took the kitten so full of life, and nestled it to his side.

"Bertie is very sick," he said, weakly, as he tried to murmur his thanks.

This was the first time he had spoken of feeling ill. How pitifully his little childish words smote upon the hearts of his sad, sorrowing parents.

"Bertie is very sick," he said again. "I think Bertie is going to die. Poor Bertie!"

His mother's tears fell like rain. "God will take care of my boy for me," she said. "My boy, my [218] precious Bertie!"

"Yes; but you mustn't cry, you and Papa, and Hannah."

Robert's face was wet with tears, while old Hannah sat away in a corner, with her face covered up in her apron, sobbing audibly; but she stifled her sobs upon this, his—might be—last request.

"God bless you, Bertie," said Frances, in a broken voice, ere she went away.

"Good night," he said. "You may have my top, for bringing me Kitty. Papa will get it for you."

And then he turned his head away wearily, and begged his mother to hush him in her arms to sleep. Robert lifted him gently, and laid him close to Amy. She drew him near, nearer still to her poor breaking heart, but she dared not press her lips to his, lest she should draw away the feeble

breath, already coming so faintly, growing fainter and fainter every moment. [219]

"Kitty must go back to her mother," he said. "Take care of Kitty—pretty Kitty."

But soon he grew too weak to heed even Kitty, and could only murmur short broken sentences about Papa, Mamma, and sometimes Missy.

Presently he roused again. "Don't cry, Papa, Mamma—Kiss Bertie—Bertie's very sick. Tell Hannah to bring a light—Bertie wants to see you."

Alas! his eyes had grown dim. He could no longer distinguish those he loved best, those who could scarcely answer his cry for their tears. They brought a light, old faithful Hannah did.

"Can you see me, my own darling?" asked Amy.

"No—no," he murmured, and his eyes closed gently, his breathing became more gentle still; once more he said, lovingly, "Dear Papa,—Dear Mamma," and then—he slept.

"Don't disturb him, Robert," sobbed Amy to her husband, who was kneeling near. [220]

But Bertie had gone to a sleep from which there was no awaking.

Bertie, little loving Bertie, was dead.

"Softly thou'st sunk to sleep,
From trials rude and sore;
Now the good Shepherd, with His sheep
Shall guard thee evermore."

[221]

CHAPTER XIII.

JANE'S STORY.

"An old, old woman cometh forth, when she hears
the people cry;
Her hair is white as silver, like horn her glazed eye.
'Twas she that nursed him at her breast, that
nursed him long ago.
She knows not whom they all lament, but soon she
well shall know;
With one deep shriek she through doth break,
when her ear receives their wailing,
'Let me kiss my Celin ere I die—Alas! alas for
Celin!'"

LOCKHART'S SPANISH
BALLADS.

The news of the sad death at the park spread like wildfire through the quiet, little village, and soon reached the turnpike gate, where Jane was fast recovering from the fever that had proved so fatal to poor Bertie. She, like Frances, moaned and wept when she heard of it; like her, her heart cowered and shrank within her; and for three days she could scarcely be persuaded to eat or drink, or say a word to anyone. Day after day she lay in her bed with her face steadily turned [222] away from her sister, who as usual, tried to worry her into a more reasonable frame of mind, but finding it useless, left her to herself, and called her sullen; but it was not so, Jane's heart had been touched and softened ever since the unfortunate day of Bertie's visit; he had done more towards bringing repentance to that guilty heart than years of suffering had been able to accomplish; for Jane had suffered, suffered from the weight of a secret, that at times well-nigh made her as crazy as Marks imagined her to be. It was this terrible secret that had made her so silent and strange, this that had driven her neighbours to look upon her as half-witted. But she wanted no one's pity, no one's consolation, had steeled and hardened her heart against it, and let her life pass on and wither in its lone coldness. As she had lived, so she might have died, smothering all remorse, driving back each repentant feeling as it swept past her; might have died —but for Bertie's visit. Since then, the firm will to resist the good had been shaken; she was not [223] only weak from the effects of the fever, but inwardly weak; weak at heart, weak in spirit. She battled with the repentant feelings so foreign to her, fought against what she had been a stranger too for so long, but it was all in vain; she resisted with a will, but it was a feeble will, and in the end the good triumphed, and Jane was won.

One morning, the fourth since Bertie died, Mrs. Marks took up Jane's breakfast as usual, and placed it on a chair by the bed-side.

"Here's a nice fresh egg," said she, "what you don't often see, this time of the year, I wish it might strengthen your lips, as well as your stomach. I'm sick of seeing you lie there with never a word. I'd rather a deal have a bad one, than none at all," and she drew back the curtains, and stirred up the freshly-lit fire.

"I'm ready and willing to speak," replied Jane, "though God forgive me, it's bad enough, as you

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say, what I have to tell."

Mrs. Marks was startled, not only at Jane's addressing her after so long a silence, but at the changed voice, so different to the usual reserved, measured tone, and short answers given in monosyllables. But she took no notice, and merely said,—

"What's the matter? Ain't the breakfast to your liking?"

"It's better than I deserve," was the reply.

Mrs. Marks was more amazed than before. "You don't feel so well this morning, Jane," said she, kindly, "the weakness is bad on you, like it was on me; but, please God, you'll get round fast enough, never fear. Here!" and she placed the tray on the bed, "take a sup of the tea, and I'll put a dash of brandy in it; that'll rouse you up a bit, I'll be bound."

Jane made no resistance, but as Mrs. Marks put down the cup, she placed her hand on hers, and said, "You won't think me crazy, Anne, if I ask you to send and beg young Master Robert to come and see me?" [225]

"Don't you know he's been dead these four days past? There—there, lie still, and don't be a worriting yourself this way; your head ain't strong yet."

"It's stronger and better than it's been many a long day. Anne, I must see Master Robert, not the dead child, but the young Squire. I've that to tell him that'll make his heart ache, as it has mine, only there's sin on mine—sin on mine," said she, sitting up in bed, and rocking herself about.

"Then don't tell it. What's the use of making heart aches?"

"I can't bear the weight of it any longer. I must tell. Ever since I saw that child I've been striving against it; but it's no good—no good. I can't keep the secret any longer, Anne. I dare not. If I do it'll drive me clean out of my mind."

"Just you answer me one question, Jane. Is it right to tell it? Can any good come of it?"

"Yes, so help me God. It can! It will!" [226]

"Then," replied Mrs. Marks, "I'll send Matthew at once; mother and I always thought there was something had driven you to be so strange when you left your place up at the Park fifteen years ago."

Jane laid herself down and covered up her face, while with a troubled sigh Mrs. Marks went below to seek her husband.

Matthew was surprised and confounded when bidden go up to the Hall and fetch the Squire.

"What!" he said, "are yer gone clean crazy as well as Jane! It's likely I'll go and fetch the Squire at the bidding of a 'dafty.' How do I know, but what it's a fool's errand he'll come on?"

But reason as he would, his words had no weight with Mrs. Marks, and Matthew had to go in the end, though with a more misgiving heart and rueful countenance than when he had gone to the young doctor's.

There was little occasion for misgivings on Matthew's part, Mr. Linchmore received him kindly, and promised to call at the turnpike during the day. [227]

What setting to rights of the cottage there was when Marks returned with the news! It was always tidy and clean, but now for the especial honour of the Squire's visit all its corners were ransacked and everything turned topsy-turvy. Mrs. Marks was still unable to help much in the work, but she dusted and tidied the cups and saucers, and knick-knacks, although they had not seen a speck of dust for days, and certainly not since she had been downstairs again; Sarah's arms ached with the scrubbing and scouring she was made to do in a certain given time, while her mistress stood by, scolding and finding fault by turns. Nothing was done well, or as it ought to be done; but then, as the girl said, Mrs. Marks was so finicking, there was no pleasing her, she should be glad enough when she was able to do the work for herself, and she could go home to her mother.

When Mr. Linchmore came, he scarcely rested in the newly swept parlour at all, but desired at once to be shown to the sick woman's room. With many apologies from Mrs. Marks at her sister's inability to rise and see him, she preceded him up stairs. [228]

Jane was sitting propped up in bed with pillows, her pale face looking paler and more emaciated than usual. Mr. Linchmore's heart was touched with pity as he noted the care-worn, prematurely old face, with its deep lines telling of sorrow or sin. Sin! Surely if this woman's life had been sinful, what had he, with his strict principles of right, to do with such as her? What had she—as Marks assured him—to tell, that nearly concerned himself? His heart reverted to his mother. Was it of her she would speak? of her whose ungovernable temper had driven his father to seek with his children that happiness abroad that had been denied him at home? But then his mother had been mad, at least he had been taught to think that the one excuse for her strange conduct. How severe and tyrannical she had been, not only to his brother and himself, but to that sweet, uncomplaining sister, whose life had been, he truly believed, shortened through her violence, and yet again, when the passion was over, how fiercely loving, how vehemently passionate in her cravings for her children's love, which she alienated from her more and more each day. No; [229]

others might love and reverence the name of mother, but Mr. Linchmore's heart was stirred with no such feelings; only a vague sense of fear, a nameless dread of evil came across him as he fancied it might be of her Jane had to speak.

He drew near, and bent down kindly. "I fear you have been very ill," he said, "with the same fever that has wrought such desolation in my home."

"Yes, sir, I have been ill—am ill; but now it's more from remorse; from the guilt of a wicked, cruel heart, than this same fever you speak of."

There was a pause. Jane spoke with difficulty, her breath came quick and short, as though her [230]
heart laboured heavily under the load of sin she spoke of.

"Turn more to the light," she said, "so that I may see your face. So—that is well. Still like your mother, strangely like, with none of her hard passions or cruel hate. Your love might be fierce, burning, and strong, but unlike her you would sacrifice your own happiness to secure the well being of the one you love. Had she done so, what misery to her, what misery to me might have been spared?"

"Did you know my mother?" asked Mr. Linchmore.

"Tell him, Anne," said Jane, as Mrs. Marks held some wine and water to her pale lips, that seemed too feeble to utter another word.

"If you please, sir," said Mrs. Marks, dropping her deepest curtsey, "this is Tabitha, my sister 'Tabitha Jane,' who was brought up so kindly by your lady mother; but there, I don't wonder you
don't remember her. I had a hard matter to myself, when I went over to Dean to fetch her, come [231]
four years ago this next Christmas."

"Tabitha! This Tabitha! The pale, meek girl, who bore so uncomplainingly what we boys resented. Can this be Tabitha?"

"Yes," replied Jane. "It can. It is. The weight of a guilty secret has ploughed my face with these deep furrows. Call me not meek; I was anything but that, I was a sinful, wicked woman. Oh! I have much to tell: much that has been locked up in my heart for more than thirty years. How I have suffered under the burden that at last has grown too heavy for me to bear, and I sink under its load, must divulge it; must have her forgiveness, ere I die!"

"Your words fill me with a foreboding of evil," replied Mr. Linchmore. "Think well before you speak, Tabitha. Is it necessary that this secret, sinful as you say it is, should be divulged. Does it concern, does it benefit those living?"

"If it did not, I would never speak it, but struggle on with its sorrow, till I died. No hard, and cruel [232]
as my mistress was, not from Tabitha should come the tale that will denounce her and her evil ways."

"She was my mother, Tabitha," said Mr. Linchmore, as if reproaching her harshness.

"True, she was. I do not forget it; still I must speak, must tell of her sin and mine, for it is sin, fearful sin. I would, for your sake, Master Robert, that it were otherwise; but when I tell of my wrong-doing, with mine must come hers. It must. Justice must be done. The mother's craving, broken heart must be healed."

"God forbid that I should be the one to stand in the way. Speak, Tabitha! but be as merciful as you can; remember you speak of one whose memory ought to be dear to me. I will steel my heart to hear—and bear."

"Do so," she said. "It is a long story. I must go back to the days when I was a child, and your
mother, Miss Julia, took me away from my home to hers. She was of an imperious will and proud [233]
nature; her mother had died at giving her birth, and her father had never controlled her in any way. She was as wild and wayward as the trees that grew in the forest near here, when they were shaken by the wind. With her, to ask was to have, and when she brought me home and declared her intention of bringing me up, and making a companion and plaything of me, no objection was raised, and she petted and scolded me by turns, as it suited her haughty will. At first I disliked her, then feared, and at length loved, worshipped her, as some beautiful spirit. Her father died; but then it was too late to save his child, or let others teach her wild spirit lessons of meekness and obedience; then your grandmother came and took us both away to live in her own home. She was a widow, with two sons, the eldest not quite so old as Miss Julia.

"A change came over your mother. She loved. Loved the eldest of the two, your father; loved as
only she could love, with all the wild, impetuous passion of her nature. It would have been [234]
strange had he not loved her in return—so beautiful, so wayward, so bright a being as she was then. They were engaged to be married, and, I believe, had they married then all would have gone well, and perhaps the evil that followed been averted. But they did not marry, they tarried—tarried until another girl, a niece, was left desolate, and she too came to Brampton."

Jane, or Tabitha, paused for a moment, then went on more slowly,

"She was, I believe, an angel of goodness, as pure as she was fair, and as meek and gentle as your mother was ungovernable. From this time nothing went right. Your father and my mistress had words together oftener than formerly; but while she wept and lamented in secret, he would

seek Miss Mary, and pour out his wounded heart to her. By degrees Miss Julia grew to learn it, and became jealous. Then, with the fierceness of her nature, she would storm and rave if she but saw Master Robert speaking to her; and yet, when the angry fit was over, be as humbly loving, as passionately sorry. [235]

"Things could not go on like this for ever. I believe her temper was fairly wearing out your father's love, and that he would gladly have turned over to Miss Mary if he could; but I, who was set as a watch and a spy over the poor young thing—she was eighteen years younger than your mother—saw that her heart was another's, even young Mr. Archer's, who was part tutor, part companion to your father's younger brother. How I hated her then—for I had dared to love him myself—and determined on her ruin! How I hid the secret that would have made Miss Julia so happy in the deepest recesses of my heart, and urged my mistress on to believe that Miss Mary loved Master Robert!"

Again Jane paused, then continued as she turned her face away from Mr. Linchmore, who was listening intently to her,

"One morning, I remember it well,—I had quietly wrought Miss Julia up to such a pitch of frenzy, that I believe she would have stopped at nothing to accomplish the removal of her hated rival,—the door was suddenly flung open by your father; his face was pale, and he was evidently labouring under strong excitement. 'Julia,' he said, 'do you still wish to be my wife?' [236]

"There was no need of a reply, could he not see the sudden light in her eyes, the quick bright flash that spread like wildfire over her face.

"That day week they were married, and went away from Brampton for a time.

"I remained behind with my enemy, watching and waiting; but I could do her no harm. Your grandmother loved her as the apple of her eye. I could see Miss Julia—now Mrs. Robert Linchmore,—was as nothing to her. Then I tried to cause a quarrel between her and young Mr. Archer; in vain; they loved too well, my arts were useless, my plans and wishes powerless.

"Your parents returned. A year passed away, and then you were born; but I could see your father was not happy. He still loved Miss Mary, strive as he would against it, while your mother treated her like a dog. [237]

"Another year, and your sister was born; but things went worse. Your mother was no sooner up and about again than your uncle's health failed terribly, and he and Mr. Archer went abroad.

"Six months passed, during which your mother grew more insanely jealous of Miss Mary, and more tyrannical. She bore it all uncomplainingly; but I saw that she worried and fretted in secret, and grew thinner and thinner every day.

"One morning I went hastily into her room, and found her working a baby's cap, which she hurriedly thrust on one side as I entered; but my suspicions were aroused at her evident confusion, and glancing at her, her sin—if sin it was, became evident to my eyes, and I flew, rather than walked to my mistress's room. The scene that followed between her and Miss Mary I will not describe; but through it all—although she did not deny the imputation we cast on her,—she vowed she was innocent, and Mr. Archer's lawful wife. I believed her then. I know she told the truth now. [238]

"That night she fled from the Park, while your father left soon after to join his brother, declaring he would never live with his wife again until she had done Miss Mary justice. Your grandmother never recovered the shock of all these terrible doings, she took Miss Mary's sin to heart. I don't think she believed it: but she sorrowed, and refused to be comforted, and soon after died. Then news reached us of Mr. Archer's death."

Jane stopped again, and lay back feebly against the pillows.

"With the news of his death came a letter, addressed, in his handwriting, to Miss Mary. I recognised the writing, and kept the letter, mad as it made me to read those loving words of his written to another. She never had the letter, or her marriage lines, which were with it." [239]

"Wretched woman!" said Mr. Linchmore, sternly. "Had you no heart—no mercy?"

"No, none. And now I must hasten to close, for I am weak and faint. I told no one of the letter, but tracked, by my mistress's order, Miss Mary. I found her at last. She had heard of her husband's death, for she wore widow's mourning, and looked heart-broken. She was poor, too, with only the small annuity old Mrs. Linchmore had been able to leave her; for her husband, Mr. Archer, had not, I believe, a farthing to give her at his death; but what cared I for that. I took away the one tie that bound her to this earth—I took her child."

"That was not my mother's sin," said Mr. Linchmore, interrupting her. "Thank God for that!"

"Stop! Don't interrupt me! I did it, because she bade me do it. I don't think then I should have done it else, because *he* was dead, and my heart did not feel so hard as it had done, and I should have told my mistress how I had belied Miss Mary to her, had I dared summon the courage to do so; but I dreaded to think of her anger at being deceived. Well, enough, I took the child. He was a lovely, sweet infant, gentle and fair like his mother had been, and I could not find it in my heart to do the evil with him my mistress wished; for her heart could not but feel savage at the thought of his being her husband's child. So I kept him hid away till long after I had stolen him; then I [240]

carried him to Mr. Vavasour, a kind, mild looking, middle-aged gentleman, who had often visited the Park at one time; but now, ever since Mrs. Robert had been left in possession, never came.

"Mr. Vavasour refused to take the child at first, but I pleaded so hard; I told him what the boy's fate would be if he turned a deaf ear to my entreaties; that the mother hated him as a love child, and that the knowledge of his birth would bring sin and shame upon her, and much more beside, [241] and in the end he consented to adopt him,—and did. Four years after this, your father returned home, and things went on more smoothly; your brother Charles was born, and my mistress seemed at last happy, and her restless spirit satisfied; but her temper, at times, was as bad as ever, and I don't believe, at heart, she was happy with the weight of the sin she thought she had been guilty of, on her conscience. How Miss Mary came to guess we had aught to do with her boy, I know not. But about a year after your brother's birth she came and taxed us with the theft. How altered she was! Grief and the mother's sorrow had done their work surely, and I scarcely dared look on the wreck I had helped to make.

"She told us that the loss of her child had driven her mad, and that for months she had been watched and looked after. She conjured us—implored—all in vain; my mistress denied our guilt, and defied her; but your father believed the poor, sorrowing, frantic creature, and never spoke to [242] his wife after, but left her, taking his children with him.

"He never saw your mother again.

"My mistress bore up bravely after he was gone. None guessed of her desolated heart, or that it still loved so passionately. During the five years that followed, I scarce know how she lived; I could see her heart was fast breaking, and that all her hope in life was gone. She grew more tyrannical than ever; there was not one of the few servants we had but did not fear her and think her mad. She would go down the small staircase that led from her room out into the park, and roam for hours at night. As she grew weaker and weaker, and I felt she would die, my heart relented more and more. I could not bear to witness her misery. Then I owned the boy was alive, and begged and implored her to let us find him and restore him to his mother; I dared not say I knew where he was, or that he was not her husband's child; but she resisted my entreaties with violence, and made me swear I never would tell what we had done. She grew worse and worse; [243] but struggled on, defying every thing and everyone. I had a hard matter to get her to see the young doctor even.

"One night she was so weak she would lay on a mattress on the floor, not having the strength to get into bed; as I sat by her side and watched, she fell into a deep sleep. Soon after, I heard steps coming up the secret stairs; I needed no one to tell who that was—my heart whispered it was Miss Mary long before she stood before me. She never said a word, but sat away on the other side of my mistress. My heart shuddered as I looked at her; she was more altered than ever; her hair was quite grey, such lovely fair hair as it had been!—the softness of her face was gone; the sweet gentle look had gone too, and a painful frown contracted her forehead. While I gazed, I forgot Miss Mary, and could think of nothing but the angry, bereaved, half-crazed Mrs. Archer. I knew then, that those who had injured her had no mercy to expect at her hands, and I felt afraid [244] of her, and yet I dared not bid her go, but wished my mistress would tell her the truth when she awoke from that death-like slumber. I prayed she might,—for what harm could that angry mother do to a dying woman? But my prayer was not answered. I forgot, when I breathed it, my own sinfulness,—forgot, even, that if vengeance came at all, it would fall on me; and, if I had thought of it, I would not have stayed the truth from being told then. I swear I would not. I was too miserable. God knows, I would have told, myself, but for the sake of my oath, and that angry look on Mrs. Archer's face; it tied my tongue.

"When my mistress roused, I shall never forget her anger at seeing Mrs. Archer. She heaped a storm of abuse on her head, while Mrs. Archer prayed and wept by turns; promising even to bless those who had robbed her, if they would only give her back her lost treasure. 'Give me back my boy!' was the ever repeated, fervent, agonized cry of her heart." [245]

"She did not, could not plead in vain," cried Mr. Linchmore. "No, no, my mother was not so bad as that!"

"Nerve your heart to bear the rest, it is soon told. Tears streamed from her eyes in vain. She pleaded in vain. My mistress was obdurate. 'I die,' she said, 'but I die with the knowledge that you, who have been the one stumbling-block of my life, and have made it miserable, and a curse to me, are even more wretched than myself, for I will never speak the word that will make you happy. The secret shall die with me.' When Mrs. Archer saw that all her pleading was vain, she grew frantic, and scarce knew what she said in her madness. My mistress grew even more angry than she. I strove to quiet her, to stay the torrent of words, but her whole frame shook with angry passion as she sat up unaided on the bed. I saw it was too much for her, tried to avert it, but, before she could utter a word, she fell back again. 'God have mercy upon me!' she cried, and with that one prayer on her lips she died. I know no more, I fell insensible, as Mrs. Archer, seeing her [246] last hope gone, gave one terrible fearful cry of despair."

Jane paused. "I have no more to tell," she said feebly, "I thank God I have told it; I never would, but for the sake of the curl. I daren't let it lie in my bosom else."

It was many minutes before Mr. Linchmore could speak, and then his voice quavered and shook, and his hands trembled as he drew them from his face, and asked, "Where is the mother—the child?"

"Mr. Vavasour, up at the Park now, is the child. Mrs. Archer, the mother, lives down in the wood, yonder. I have never seen her but once since I came here; I have fled the sight of her. You know her as Mrs. Grey. You will see her, tell her what I say; she will believe it fast enough."

"Your sin has been fearful; God knows it has," said Mr. Linchmore, trying to speak composedly.

"I have been a sinful woman; humbly I acknowledge it, but if my sin has been great, what has [247] been its punishment? Look in my face, you will read the traces of suffering there; but my heart, you cannot read that; and that has suffered tenfold."

"What proof have you of all you say?"

"Mrs. Archer will need none," she said, "if you tell her Tabitha swears it's the truth. But here's the letter with her marriage lines," she added, taking one from under her pillow, "many's the time I've been tempted to destroy it, but somehow daren't do it; and here's another old Mr. Vavasour gave me to keep, stating when and how we had received the child; in it you'll find the beads he wore round his neck when I stole him."

"Are these all the proofs you can give?"

"No. I've a stronger one than this. The child had a dark mark on his arm, it could not have escaped his mother's eye; it can't have worn away, it must be there now, and that'll tell who he is plainer and better than any words of mine. "Are you going?" she asked, as Mr. Linchmore rose. [248]

"Yes, the sooner I tell the dreadful tale the better, if my heart does not break the while. Have you anything else to say? Would you wish to see Mrs. Archer?"

"Oh! no! no!" she said, "don't send her; I know I've no mercy to expect at her hands, I showed her none. She'll hate and curse me, may be."

"You have little mercy to expect from one you have so deeply injured," replied Mr. Linchmore, "but I will see you again, or send another to speak with you. My thoughts are in a whirl, and I cannot—I feel incapable of talking to you today."

"And must I be satisfied with this?" said Jane, "well, I submit; I have not deserved a kind word from you. Still I loved your mother."

"She would have been better for your hate," he replied, moodily, "but in case I should not come again, I leave you my forgiveness for the evil you have helped to work, though it goes hard [249] against my heart to give it; but you have a higher mercy to ask for than mine. I trust you have implored that already—humbly and sincerely."

"God knows I have," replied Jane, feebly.

Mr. Linchmore went slowly from the cottage, scarcely heeding Mrs. Marks' curtseys and parting words, and struck across the fields towards the wood.

It was a sinful, grievous tale, the one he had just heard, and a bitter trial to him, not only to listen to it, but to know that from his lips must come the words to denounce his mother,—proclaim her guilt. It went bitterly against him, although he had no loving reverence for his parent; still, it must be done, his misery must make another's happiness, must restore the son to his mother. He hesitated not, but walked firmly on, perhaps angrily.

At the corner of the wood he met Marks, but his heart was too full for words with any one, and he merely acknowledged the passing touch of his hat, as he turned off into one of the by-paths, a [250] nearer cut to Mrs. Grey's cottage. Just as he was about to emerge again into the broad beaten path, scarcely a dozen yards from the cottage, he stopped for a moment to collect his thoughts. A slight rustle in the bushes near attracted his attention. He looked up, and saw a man, gun in hand, creeping cautiously out of the underwood.

At another time Mr. Linchmore would have confronted him at once, but now he allowed him to pass on unmolested. The man crossed the path, reached the opposite side, and was about plunging again into the bushes, when Robert Vavasour's hand arrested his footsteps.

"What do you here with that gun, my man?" he asked.

It was growing dusk, almost twilight in the wood; still, as the man suddenly turned his face full on Vavasour, the latter exclaimed,

"Ah! it is you, is it? You villain! you don't escape me this time." [251]

A short quick scuffle, a bright flash, a loud report, and Robert Vavasour dropped to the ground.

With a great oath, the man sprang up, but ere he could stir one step, Mr. Linchmore's hand was upon him. A desperate struggle ensued; but a stronger arm, a more powerful frame, contended with him now, and in a few moments he lay prostrate, but still struggling, on the ground.

"Could you be content with nothing less than murder?" asked a voice, sternly.

Mr. Linchmore shuddered as he recognised "Goody Grey."

"For God's sake, Mrs. Grey, go and seek help for the wounded man yonder."

"Why should I?" she exclaimed, fiercely. "I will never stir a finger for you or yours. I have sworn

it."

"It is your son, your long-lost son! Tabitha bid me tell you so."

Goody Grey,—or rather Mrs. Archer's,—whole frame trembled violently; she quivered and shook, [252] and leant heavily on her staff, as though she would have fallen.

"Fly!" he continued. "For God's sake, fly! Rouse yourself, Mrs. Archer, and aid your son."

"My son!" she repeated, softly and tenderly, but as if doubting his words.

Again Mr. Linchmore implored her, again she heard those words "It is your son!" which seemed to burn her brain. But the power of replying, of moving, seemed taken from her.

A minute passed, and then the weakness passed away. Her eyes flashed, her face flushed, then blanched again, while with a mighty effort she drew up her tall figure to its utmost height, and proudly, but hurriedly, went over to where Robert lay.

She staunched the blood flowing from the wound, and tenderly knelt by his side and lifted his head gently on her bosom.

There was a slight break in the branches of the trees overhead, so that what little light there was, [253] streamed through the gap full down on the spot where Mrs. Archer knelt.

She raised his coat sleeve, and baring his arm, bent down her head over it.

A moment after a wild cry rent the air, and rang through the wood.

"Oh! help! help!" she cried; "Oh! my son! my son!"

There was no need to cry for help; the sound of the gun had been heard, and the keepers came crowding to the spot, and with them, Marks.

A litter was soon constructed for the wounded man, and once more he was mournfully and sorrowfully borne away towards the Hall.

Marks drew near the captured poacher, now standing sullenly and silently near.

"Ah!" said Marks, as he was being led away, "I thought no good had brought farmer Hodge down here, four years ago. You'll may be swing for this, my lad; and break your father's heart, as you [254] did your mother's, not so long ago."

With which consolatory remark, Marks went back to his cottage. [255]

CHAPTER XIV.

DESPAIR!

"Ah! what have eyes to do with sleep,
That seek, and vainly seek to weep?
No dew on the dark lash appears,—
The heart is all too full for tears."

L. E. L.

"The world's a room of sickness, where each heart,
Knows its own anguish and unrest,
The truest wisdom there, and noblest art,
Is his, who skills of comfort best,
Whom by the softest step and gentlest tone,
Enfeebled spirits own,
And love to raise the languid eye,
Where, like an angel's wing, they feel him fleeting by."

Christian Year.

Anne sat in the solitude of her own thoughts; not alone, for her husband was at a table near, busy with his morrow's sermon; but Anne, for once, did not mind the silence, she had many things to think of, many things that made her sad. First, the little dead child lying now so cold and still; [256] then his poor, sorrowing, heart-broken mother, whom she had tried, but ineffectually, to comfort; and then the father, who ought to be the one earthly stay on which the wife's heart might lean, and whose love should wean away the sad remembrance, or soften the blow. But Anne had found out that a great gulf lay between husband and wife, though what had separated them baffled her utmost skill to discover.

Robert must love his wife passionately, else why had he lifted her so tenderly in his arms, as she lay insensible when the truth of her great loss broke upon her; why had he carried her away, and as he laid her on her own bed, bent so lovingly over her, murmuring, as he chafed her hands, "My poor, stricken darling. My own lost love;" and yet, when consciousness returned, how self possessed! how altered! kind and considerate as before, but the loving words, the loving looks were wanting. And Amy, who had seemed so happy only a month ago, surely more than grief for [257]

her boy had fixed that stony look on her face, and caused those tearless, woeful eyes.

Anne's thoughts grew quite painful at last; the eternal scratch of her husband's pen irritated her.

"Do put down your pen for a minute, Tom. I feel so miserable."

"In half a moment," he said. "There—now I am ready to listen. What was it you said?"

"That I was miserable."

"I do not wonder at it, there has been enough to make us all feel sorrowful."

"Yes, but it is more than the poor child's death makes me feel so."

"What else?" he asked.

"Why Amy herself, and then her husband."

"Let us pick the wife to pieces first, Anne."

"Oh! Tom, it is no scandal at all, but the plain truth. I wish it were otherwise," she said with a sigh.

"Well, begin at the beginning, and let me judge." [258]

"You put it all out of my head. There is no beginning," she said crossly.

"Then the end," he replied.

"There is neither beginning nor end: you make me feel quite vexed, Tom."

"Neither beginning nor end? Then there can be nothing to tell."

"No, nothing. You had better go on with your sermon and make an end of that."

"I have made an end of it," he said, laughing, "and now, joking aside, Anne, what have you to say about Mrs. Vavasour?"

"If you are serious, Tom, I will tell you, but not else," she replied.

"I am serious, Anne; quite serious."

"Then tell me what is to be done with that poor bereaved Amy,—who has not shed a single tear since her child's death, four days ago now;—or her husband, who I verily believe worships her, and yet is as cold as a stone, and from no want of love on her part either, for I can see plainly by the way she follows him with her eyes sometimes, that she is as fond of him as—as—" [259]

"You are of me," he said.

"Nonsense, Tom. They were so happy last time we came over to see them, that I cannot understand what has caused the change. Can you make any guess at all so as to help me? for oh! Tom, I would give the world to know."

"Curiosity again, Anne?"

"No, not so," she replied, "or if it is, it is in the right place this time; as I want to help them to make up the difference, whatever it is but do not see how I can manage it, when I am so totally in the dark. One thing I am certain of, Amy will die unless I can bring her to shed some tears, so as to remove that stony look."

"She has *one* hope, *one* consolation. Surely I need not remind my wife to lead her heart and thoughts gradually and gently to that."

"I have tried it, tried everything; but, Tom, there is no occasion whatever for preaching.

"Anne! Anne!" [260]

"Yes, I know it's wrong to say so, but it is the truth notwithstanding; I feel something else should be tried. She is too submissive under the blow, too patient; not a murmur has escaped her lips, if there had, I should stand a better chance of seeing tears; but as it is there is no need of consolation. I verily believe she wants to die. And then that Frances, I sometimes think she has had something to do with it all; you know I always disliked that girl, and never thought she had a spark of feeling in her, until I saw her coming away from poor Bertie's room that sad evening, and a more woe-begone, remorseful face I never wish to see; and then see how distracted she has been since. Isabella tells me it is dreadful to be with her."

"Poor girl, I pity her with all my heart, she feels she has been mainly instrumental in bringing all this misery upon Mrs. Vavasour."

"I am sure," said Anne, more to herself than her husband, "she has a great deal more than Bertie's death to answer for; she nearly broke his mother's and Charley's heart four years ago, [261] and I half believe she has had something to do with the husband's now."

"Be more charitable, Anne, and do not lay so many sins to her charge. That last is a very grievous one."

"Well," said his wife, rising, "after all my talk, Tom, you have not helped me one bit, I do believe I am going away more miserable than ever to that poor Amy."

"Things do look dark indeed, Anne," said he as he kissed her, "but we must hope in God's mercy all will be better soon; may He help you in your work of love with the poor heart-sorrowing mother."

As Anne went out she met Frances Strickland's maid, "If you please Ma'am, where shall I find Mr. Hall, my young mistress wishes to see him."

"I will tell him myself," said Anne, and back she went.

"Tom! Frances Strickland wishes to see you." [262]

"To see me!" he exclaimed. "I have promised to walk as far as the turnpike with Linchmore. That woman from whom the child caught the fever sent to beg he would call on her some time this morning; he named two o'clock, and it is close upon that now. Will not Miss Strickland be satisfied with you as my substitute?"

"I never thought of asking, and, indeed, I should not like to. She might think I was jealous." Mr. Hall laughed outright.

"You are in such a dreadfully teasing mood this morning, Tom; I have no patience with you! Perhaps Frances is going to clear up all this mystery? I told you a moment ago I suspected she had had something to do with it, and now her remorse may be greater than she can bear; repentance may have come with her grief for poor Bertie. I only hope, if it is so, that she is not too late to make amends."

"Then I must make my excuses to Linchmore, and give up my walk," he said, with a sigh; "and go and hear what she has to say?" [263]

"Yes, do, Tom, that will be so good of you. I will wait here, but do not be long, as this is your last day with me, you know."

As soon as Mr. Hall had gone, Anne half regretted that she had not done as he suggested, and seen Frances instead. Suppose she should try and sow dissension in his heart? Anne's face flushed hotly at the bare idea, then again she consoled herself with the thought that he would be sure to come and tell her if she did, for the sake of the love he bore for her; still Anne passed a fidgety, uncomfortable half hour ere he returned.

Mr. Hall's face was grave; graver than Anne ever remembered to have seen it, and she waited for him to speak first, and checked the impatient question already on her lips.

"It is worse than I thought, Anne, much worse. Your judgment did not lead you astray. She has separated husband and wife."

"Then she has told you all, Tom. Oh! how glad I am, not only for Amy's sake but for her own; it would have been so dreadful for her to have lived on upholding the falsehoods she must have told to work her ends." [264]

"That is the worst part of the business, Anne, she has unfortunately told the truth, and, as far as I can see, the chance of reconciling those who ought to be heart and soul to each other is remote indeed. Time and the wife's love—you say she does love him—may, by God's grace, do much. I see nothing that you or I can do."

"Wretched girl! What has she told?"

"What Vavasour ought only to have heard from his wife's lips. Of her previous love for another and of their unfortunate meeting the day of her marriage."

"I always hoped she had told him," said Anne, clasping her hands despairingly. "The concealment was no sin on Amy's part, only weakness. But as for Frances, there can be no excuse for her. She has been cruelly, shamefully unkind, and revengeful!"

"She has; there is no denying it, but all through your friend's own fault; she nursed in her heart—which should have been as clear as day to her husband—a secret; and that one sin has brought in the end its own punishment, and while we blame Frances' culpable revenge, we must blame the wife's breach of faith and disloyalty." [265]

"Oh, Tom, what hard words!" cried Anne, "poor Amy's has not been a guilty secret."

"No, but appearances are sadly against her, and we know nothing of what the husband thinks; even if he does believe her guiltless, he must naturally feel wounded at his wife's want of love and trust."

"Yes," replied Anne, sadly, "what you say is very just and true. Can nothing then be done? Nothing at all?"

"Frances is ready to make what atonement she can for her fault; it may help us a little, but very little, I fear. She has promised to tell Vavasour that her own jealousy and grief at being supplanted in another's love by his wife, determined her on being revenged; she cannot unsay what she has said, because it is the truth; but she who caused the breach may be allowed to plead for forgiveness for herself and the wife she has injured. The repentance is no secret, Anne; [266]

she desired me to tell you all, and beg you to plead for her with Mrs. Vavasour."

"Do you think I shall plead in vain, or that she will with Mr. Vavasour?"

"I trust not," he said, doubtfully; "the knowledge that his wife has not intentionally sinned, but only through fear of losing his love, and the conviction that she loves him may soften his heart."

"May; but I see you think it will be a long time first, and in the meantime Amy will break her heart. Oh! Tom, I don't believe he can be so cruel if he loves her; just now, too, when she is so heart broken, so sadly bereaved. Do make Frances tell Mr. Vavasour at once."

"I intended to have done so," he replied, "but Vavasour has gone out, so we must wait as patiently [267] as we can until he returns. In the meantime, Anne, I will give you something to occupy your time and thoughts. I have promised Miss Strickland that you will ask Mrs. Vavasour's forgiveness for her. She says it is hopeless; but that cannot be," he said, as Anne thought, somewhat sternly; "you had better go at once and ask it; she who has sinned herself, and knows the repentant heart's craving for forgiveness, what hope can she have of pardon if she withholds hers from one who has sinned against her even seventy times seven."

Anne said not a word, but with desponding heart prepared to go.

"I have only an hour to spare," said Mr. Hall. "It is now three, and at four I must get ready to start home. I have ordered the pony-carriage at half-past."

"I shall be with you long before that," replied Anne, as she closed the door.

Amy sat just where Anne had left her only an hour ago; the same hopelessly despairing, fixed, [268] death-like look on her face, which was as white as the shawl wrapped round her. As Anne looked, she wondered if Frances alone had wrought the sad change, while her heart sank within her at the apparently hopeless task her husband had imposed upon her, and she hesitated and faltered slightly ere she went at once, as was her wont, to the point in view. Her sister Julia would have brought the subject gradually round to Frances, but that was not Anne's way; she was, in fact, too impetuous, rushing headlong into a difficulty, facing the danger, and braving it with that strong, true heart.

"My husband has been to see Frances Strickland to-day, Amy."

There was no reply; Anne hardly expected any, but Amy raised her eyes, and looked hastily and inquiringly in her face. Anne took courage; perhaps the very fact of Amy's knowing another held her secret might open the floodgates of her heart.

"She hid nothing from Tom; told him all, everything, and is desperately sorry, as well she may be, [269] for all the misery she has caused you."

"As well she may be," repeated Amy.

"She is repentant—truly repentant, Amy."

"I know it; have known it for days past," was the cold reply.

"She begs your forgiveness most humbly."

"I know that also, and have given it."

"She says otherwise, Amy," said Anne, rather puzzled.

"I have forgiven her for my darling's loss. But for the other; if she has dared tell you of it—of her cruelty, I never will. I have said so. Let us talk of something else."

"No, Amy, I must talk of this—only of this. Does not the very fact of her having owned her fault show how sincerely sorry she is. Think of Frances, the proud Frances, sueing for forgiveness; think how miserable, utterly miserable, she must be to stoop to that. How, almost broken- [270] hearted! Surely, Amy, for the sake of her prayers—all our prayers, for the sake of the love your poor Bertie had for her, you will forgive her."

"No. Had my boy lived he would have avenged his mother's wrongs, and hated her, even as I do."

"Alas, Amy! You hate her. Your heart never used to be so cruel as this."

"No, it did not. She has made me what I am. Has she not pursued me with her revengeful cruelty for years? Has she not taken my only earthly hope from me, even my husband's love? And yet you wonder that I am changed—can ask me to forgive her."

"No, Amy, not taken your husband's love; he loves you still."

"If he did, I should not be sitting here, broken hearted and alone, with nothing but my own sorrowful thoughts, and—and you to comfort me."

"He will forgive you, and take you to his heart in time, Amy."

"Never! How can I convince him that I love him now? His very kindness chills me—so different to [271] what it was; the changed tone of his voice tells me I have lost his love. He lives; yet is dead to me, —is mine, yet, how far off from me; and she who has wrought me all this misery, done all she has it in her power to do, now sues for forgiveness. Is it possible I can forgive, or clasp her hand in

mine again?" The stony look was gradually relaxing, a slight, colour mantled her cheeks, and she concluded, almost passionately,—"No, Anne, I will not forgive her! Will not! Urge me no more. I cannot speak to her, much less see her again."

"And yet think of her kindness to your boy. He remembered it, and gave her his top when he was dying."

"You are cruel to remind me of it," said Amy, taking some fresh flowers off the table she was wreathing into a cross for Bertie; her last sad, mournful, but loving work.

Anne drew near, and passed her arm lovingly round her waist. [272]

"This," said she, touching the cross, "is the emblem of your faith; and what does it not teach? It tells you that He who died on it to save us miserable sinners forgave even his murderers. 'Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do.' Not only forgave them, but excused their faults, and interceded for them. Amy, if this is your belief, if you indeed take Him as your model, then forgive, even as he forgave; if not, never dare to lay this sweet white cross on your dead child's breast; would he not now, a pure and immortal spirit, sorrow at his mother's want of faith, and hardness of heart."

Amy's head drooped; every particle of angry colour fled from her face, while the hard, unforgiving look gradually died away as Anne went on.

"Spare me, Anne! Spare me!" she said.

"No, Amy dear, I must not, although it is as cruel to me to speak to you so harshly as it is for you to listen, and believe me when I say that your child, your little Bertie, was never further off from [273] you than now, when you forgive not another her trespasses, even as you hope your own will be forgiven. Oh, Amy! think—can you kneel night and morning, and repeat that one sentence in your prayers, knowing how utterly you reject it? Can you press a last loving kiss on your child's pure lips, knowing how you are hugging one darling sin at your heart? Amy, Amy! listen to my warning voice, and forgive even as you hope to be forgiven," and Anne bent forward and lovingly kissed her forehead.

The spell was broken: as Anne gently withdrew her lips, tears welled up from the poor overcharged heart, and Amy wept,—wept an agony of tears.

"Oh, Anne!" she said presently, "Stop! stop! You will crush my heart. I *will* forgive her, for the sake of my boy, my darling Bertie."

"God bless you, dear Amy," replied Anne, delighted at not only having gained her wish, but at the sight of the tears she was shedding. "These tears will do you good. My heart has ached to see, [274] day after day, your cold, calm, listless face."

Anne could have cried herself for very joy, to think how nicely things were coming round; as for Robert Vavasour, of course, with Frances to plead for forgiveness, and his wife to throw her arms round his neck, and vow she loved him better than all the world beside, his stubborn heart must give in; so Anne sat quite contented and happy by Amy's side, and let her weep on. Then, as her watch told her the hour for her husband's departure drew near, she soothed and comforted Amy's weak, quivering heart, as well as she was able, and went—for Amy would go at once—as far as Frances Strickland's room door with her, then flew, rather than walked, to her own. Mr. Hall, carpet-bag in hand, was just coming out, and nearly ran over her as she burst open the door.

"Is it you, Anne?" he said, as he staggered back, "I thought, at least, it was a cannon ball coming."

[275]

"It's only my head," she said, laughing, "I was in such a hurry. I felt I should be too late. I ought to have packed up your things before I went to Amy."

"Ought is a very fine word, but it is generally a late one."

"I am so sorry," said Anne in a repentant voice.

"My next wife shall never say she is sorry," he said smiling.

"What a hardened wretch she will be!"

"Not so," he replied, "she shall be the most gentle, submissive creature in the world; everything shall be in its right place, and there shall be a right time for everything."

"Yes, Tom, I know I do try you dreadfully; but, all the same, you will never get another little wife to love you better than I do."

"True, Anne," he said, "or one that I could ever love as I love you."

"And now, Tom, do put down that horrid carpet-bag, I hate to feel you are going to leave me here [276] even for a few days all by myself; and for the first time too. I can't think what I shall do without you."

"But it is more than half-past four," he replied.

"But not railway time, only the poor old pony's, and I am sure he will not mind waiting just to oblige his mistress."

Mr. Hall sat down, and placed her by his side. "And now, Anne," he said, "tell me what success you have had with Mrs. Vavasour? but do not make a long story of it, as I really must be away in another ten minutes."

"I had a hard matter to persuade her, Tom, but I managed it at last, and she is with Frances now. I feel so happy, because I am sure all will be right; poor Amy! how she did cry."

"She cried at last, then?"

"Heartily; and I know it will do her a world of good; she looked far happier when I left her than she has done for days."

"And now, Anne, I really must go and see after the pony, and settle the carpet bag, but I will come back once more, and say good-bye." [277]

Ten minutes, twenty, slipped by, and Anne began to fear her husband had forgotten his promise; she wondered at his delay, and looked round to see if he had forgotten anything. His sermon, blotting book, small ink-bottle, all had gone. She turned to the chest of drawers and was ransacking them hurriedly, when she heard him come back.

"Why, Tom," she said, without turning round, "Here are all your handkerchiefs, every one of them! Don't talk of my carelessness after this," and she laughingly held them up as a trophy.

But her husband's face was white, so very white, that Anne's heart turned sick, and almost stopped beating.

With a faint cry she crept up to him, and with a timid, frightened look, gazed into his face.

"What is it?" she whispered, "are you ill? Oh! tell me! Tell me!" [278]

"No, no. It's worse, Anne, worse," he murmured hoarsely.

"Oh! for God's sake tell me, Tom! or I shall die."

"It is Vavasour," he said, as he took her in his arms and held her to his heart. "Forgive me for having frightened you so, Anne. But Vavasour has been shot."

"Thank God you are well?" said Anne, bursting into tears, "But, oh, Amy! my poor darling Amy!" [279]

CHAPTER XV.

THE LAST OF LITTLE BERTIE.

"She put him on a snow-white shroud,
A chaplet on his head;
And gathered only primroses
To scatter o'er the dead.

She laid him in his little grave—
'Twas hard to lay him there:
When spring was putting forth its flowers,
And everything was fair.

And down within the silent grave,
He laid his weary head;
And soon the early violets
Grew o'er his grassy bed.

The mother went her household ways,
Again she knelt in prayer;
And only asked of Heaven its aid
Her heavy lot to bear."

L. E. L.

On leaving Frances Strickland, Amy went to poor Bertie's room to lay the fair white cross in his coffin, and was bending down over her lost darling in an agony of tears which old Hannah vainly attempted to check, when the sudden, hasty gallop of a horse away from the stables struck her ear. It was the groom going for Dr. Bernard. [280]

Amy's mind, already unnerved and unstrung, was easily alarmed.

"Alas! Hannah," said she, drawing near the darkened window "has any accident happened that some-one rides so furiously?"

"My dear Miss Amy," replied Hannah, forgetting in her tender pity Amy's new tie, and thinking of her only as the wee child she had so lovingly nursed on her knee, "you must not be frightening yourself this way. What should have happened? God knows you've had enough to worry you. There, don't tremble that way, but let go the blind, and come away from the window."

But Hannah's persuasions and entreaties were alike useless. Amy, with fluttering anxious heart [281]

still looked out through the deepening shadows of the day, now fast drawing into evening.

Her husband was away. Oh! how she wished she could see him or hear his firm, yet for the last few days mournful step. Her heart had taken a strange fear, which she could neither shake off, nor subdue; a trembling nervous dread of some fast-coming evil.

Mr. Linchmore came up the drive, and for a moment a joyous thrill crept through her as she thought it was her husband; but no, he came nearer still, then disappeared up the terrace with Mr. Hall, and only the groom with the pony carriage was left, standing quietly as it had stood ever since she had so eagerly strained her eyes from the window.

Then once again—as it had done long, long ago—that strange, dull tramp from without smote her ear.

Meanwhile, Anne had nerved her heart as well as she could, and gone sorrowfully enough to break the sad news to Amy. [282]

Not finding her either in her own or Miss Strickland's room, she guessed she was in poor Bertie's: besides, she missed the white cross.

"Oh! Tom!" she said, going back to her husband, "What can I do? She is with her poor dead child, surely I need not; and indeed I feel I cannot go there and tell her."

"No," replied Mr. Hall, after a moment's consideration, "perhaps it will be best to try and get Vavasour into his room without her knowledge. I think with caution it might be done. Go and remain near the nursery door, Anne; they will not have to pass it on their way up, and I will go and enjoin silence and caution."

Anne sped away, and took up the post assigned her, listening eagerly, yet fearfully for the sound of the muffled footsteps, and straining her ears in the direction of the stairs, so that Amy stood before her, almost ere she had heard the opening of the door.

Anne saw at once Amy guessed at some disaster, for she gently but firmly resisted Anne's endeavours to arrest her footsteps, and said, while she trembled excessively, [283]

"My husband! Is he dead?"

"No. Oh no! Amy darling."

Then as Amy would have passed on, she whispered, in a voice she in vain attempted to steady,

"Don't go there Amy! pray don't!"

But Amy paid no heed, but went and stood at the head of the stairs on the landing.

In vain Mr. Linchmore and Mr. Hall gently tried to induce her to leave; she was deaf to reason.

"I must be here," she murmured, with pale compressed lips, "I must be here."

There was no help for it; so they bore him up slowly past her on into his room, and laid him on the bed, and there left him.

"Do you think he will die?" asked Amy, fearfully, as she grasped old Dr. Bernard's arm tightly, some time later as he sat by the fire.

How he felt for her, that old man, she so young, and so full of sorrow. He drew her hand in his, and stroked it gently and kindly. [284]

"Trust in God, and hope," was the reply.

"I do trust," she replied, firmly. "I *will* try and hope. But, oh! I love him! I love him!" she said.

And this was the one cry for ever, if not on her lips, at her heart.

She sat by the pale insensible form day after day; she knew no fatigue, heeded not the lapse of time. Once only she stole away to imprint a last loving kiss on her dead Bertie's lips ere they bore away the little coffin to its last resting-place in the cold churchyard; then silently she went back to her old place by her husband's bed-side. Would he die without one word? without recognising his wife who loved him so entirely? Oh! surely he would speak one loving word if but one; give her one loving look as of old. She felt that her boy's death was as nothing in comparison to this.

As the love deep and strong welled up in her heart, she felt half frightened at its intensity, while it crept with a great fear as she whispered over and over again, "He will die." If he would but speak; or say one word. [285]

Alas! the words came at last, but only incoherent murmurings, indistinct unmeaning words. His eyes opened, and wandered about without knowledge, and though they rested on her, knew her not. His burning hands returned not the soft pressure, the loving touch, of hers. Would he die thus, and never know the deep love she had for him; the tenderness, devotion of her heart? She groaned in utter anguish and misery; but patiently sat on.

In vain they tried, those kind friends, to draw her away; or if they did succeed in persuading her to lie down on a mattress on the floor, her large mournful eyes never closed in sleep, but still kept watch on the one loved form; her heart ever fearing he would die—praying that he might

not.

And Mrs. Grey, or rather Mrs. Archer, the newly-made mother; where was she? She kept watch, too, over her long-lost son, but without being the slightest help to the poor heart-broken wife, having apparently no thoughts, no words, no looks for anyone but the son who had been lost to her for so long. Fear mingled with her joy; fear like the wife's lest he should die. [286]

Amy was told part of her story by Mr. Linchmore, and made no objection to the poor mother sharing her watch; she was her husband's mother, that was enough. What he loved, she would love.

Very silent and motionless Mrs. Archer sat. Amy sometimes wandered about restlessly, or gave way to passionate weeping now; but very patiently, very sorrowfully, the mother sat. They exchanged no words with each other, those two mournful watchers; Mrs. Archer had been told the young girl's relationship to her son, and sometimes her eyes rested lovingly on the pale, beautiful face.

When Amy went to take a last look at her boy, she took Mrs. Archer's hand, and drew her away with her, and together they had stood and gazed at the little white marble face. Amy said no word, but as Mrs. Archer moved away, she murmured,— [287]

"Better thus, than lost. Lost for years."

The shock of all these events proved too much for Anne, and when her husband returned on the Tuesday morning he could not but notice how wan and pale she looked, and so excitable, that the least thing in the world upset her. Instead of the glad, but perhaps sober welcome he expected, she threw her arms round his neck, as she had done at parting, and burst into tears, which she had a hard matter to prevent ending in hysterics. Mr. Hall's soothing, gentle manner soon calmed her; but she was very nearly giving way again that same evening, when he urged her immediate return home.

"What! leave Amy, Tom, in all her trouble? Oh, no, never!"

"The worry and excitement is too much for you, Anne, I cannot shut my eyes to that fact, and must not allow you to sacrifice your health for the sake of your friend." [288]

"My dear, dear husband, do let me stay?"

But the look on her husband's face convinced her that his resolution was taken, and inflexible. She ceased to coax and persuade, and bethought her what could be done. Frances Strickland was still weak and ill; besides, her companionship was not in any way to be desired for Amy.

"Have I not heard you, Anne," said Mr. Hall, as if answering her thoughts, "speak of some kind old lady, a great friend of Mrs. Vavasour's mother? Surely her aid as a companion, though not as a nurse, might be called upon now."

Of course. Why had not Anne thought of it?

In a few moments, with her usual haste, she was speeding away in search of Mrs. Linchmore, to beg her permission, before she invited Mrs. Elrington. It was given, though with Anne thought anything but a good grace, and the letter written and despatched, and Anne tried to appear content and satisfied that she was leaving; and doing right; and that Amy might not think it unkind. As she packed her box, she was forced to confess she *was* weak, and that it was perhaps as well she had a husband to look after her some times, and that Mr. Hall was right, as he always was, in wishing her to have rest. [289]

The next few days passed much as the former ones to Amy, being, so to speak, a misery of doubt and hope; but on the morning of the third there came a change—a change for the better. Robert Vavasour slept. Not that dull, insensible sleep, a hovering between life and death, such as it had been when Amy first watched by him, but a soft, natural sleep; the breathing came faint, but regular; the face wore none of its former set, rigid look, but gradually grew into the old, old expression she loved so well. Then Amy knew her husband was better; God had been very merciful; he would not die and leave her desolate and alone; she knew it long before old Dr. Bernard's anxious face wore that pleasant, cheery smile, or Mrs. Archer had thanked God so fervently on her knees. [290]

Robert Vavasour slept, slept for hours; and during that long sleep Amy and Mrs. Archer arranged their future plans; her husband must not be told of his mother's existence yet; in the first place, he was not strong enough to bear any excitement, and in the next, the poor, fond mother hoped to win a little of his kindly feeling, if not his love, before she held him to her heart.

"I hope to win his love in time," she said quietly to Amy, "to feel he loves me before he knows he is bound to do so. I cannot hope now for the first strong love of his heart—that deep earnest love with which he loves his wife; but I feel nevertheless that I shall be satisfied with my son's love. His face is like his father's, and he must be as noble and as good, to have won such love as yours."

Then Mrs. Archer went away to seek Mr. Linchmore, and hear the story of her wrongs, leaving Amy to watch sadly and alone for her husband's awaking. Sadly, for how would his eyes meet hers? Would they have the same stern, severe look that had shivered her heart for so long? Would he still think she loved him not? But she would tell him all by-and-by. She could not live as [291]

she had lived: he must hear and judge whether she was as guilty as he thought her.

Robert awoke to consciousness: awoke to see the soft eyes of his wife, looking mournfully, doubtfully, but oh! how lovingly at him. As his eyes met hers, a tender light played in them; he even pressed the hand she held so tremblingly in hers; but only for a moment, the next, as she bent down and pressed her lips to his, he gave a deep sigh, and turned his face away wearily.

"He has not forgotten!" murmured Amy mournfully, as she rose and went to seek Dr. Bernard, "He has not forgiven!" [292]

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CLOUDS CLEAR.

"Nor could he from his heart throw off
The consciousness of his state;
It was there with a dull, uneasy sense,
A coldness and a weight.

It was there when he lay down at night,
It was there when at morn he rose;
He feels it whatever he does,
It is with him wherever he goes.

No occupation from his mind
That constant sense can keep;
It is present in his waking hours,
It is present in his sleep."

SOUTHEY.

Mrs. Elrington could not resist Anne's pleading letter, but decided on going at once to Brampton; her heart was too compassionate to refuse to aid those in distress, and especially one who had ever held, as Amy had, a high place in her esteem and love. [293]

As soon as Anne received the answer so favourable to her wishes, she prepared at once to return home, and went to Amy—not with the glad news of the now expected guest, that she decided had best not be mentioned—but to say good-bye, and a very sorrowful one she felt it.

Amy was sitting working in her own room, once poor Bertie's; her mind as busily employed as her fingers, only more mournfully; when Anne burst open the door in her usual hasty way.

"Here I am!" she said, "Did you expect to see me? Did you think I should come to say good-bye?"

"How should I?" answered Amy, "I never knew you were going to-day, and I am sorry to see you cloaked for your journey."

"And so am I; but Tom would not rest quiet without me any longer, so dear, I must go; the pony chaise will be round directly, and yet I should have liked to have sat with you for an hour or so before leaving." [294]

"Then why did you put off coming to see me until the last moment, Anne?"

"I did not know I was going until half an hour ago. How is that wretched Frances? Will you say I had not time to stay and see her; I should so hate—although, mind, I pity her with all my heart,—giving her a sisterly embrace."

"But," said Amy, "What occasion is there for such a warm farewell?"

"Ah! thereby hangs a tale. The fact is I don't wish to see Frances Strickland."

"Poor girl! She has suffered so much."

"I wonder you can find it in your heart to pity her; but you were always an angel of goodness."

"You are wrong, Anne," sighed Amy, "and I think you should go and see Miss Strickland."

"You are evidently in the dark, Amy; I thought Julia would have written to you, and told you, as—she has me,—that she has been so stupid, so foolish, as to engage herself to cousin Alfred, [295] Frances' brother. Is it not tiresome of her?"

"But the marriage will scarcely affect you, Anne?"

"Oh, but it will, though; for I had made up my mind Julia would be an old maid; she always said she would, and come some day and look after my children, if I ever have any," said Anne, blushing; "for I am sure I should puzzle to know how to dress them, much less understand how to manage them. Mamma says Aunt Mary—Mrs. Strickland—is very angry about the marriage, so I really do think Julia ought to give it up."

"Why does your Aunt dislike it?"

"Because Julia is penniless and a nobody; meaning, I suppose, that Alfred should marry some high born girl, who would, I have no doubt, snub him in the end. But then it would be so nice for Aunt to say, 'My daughter-in-law, Lady so-and-so-that was,' or the Earl of *somebody*, my son's [296] father-in-law. Instead of which she will only have to recall the plain and *poor* Miss Bennet, that was. Fancy Alfred coming to stay with us in our nutshell!"

"I never thought Mr. Strickland gave himself airs," replied Amy.

"Nor does he. But it is disagreeable to see a man sitting over the fire all day; or in summer time basking lazily in the sun."

"But Julia will probably change all that laziness and inaction. She is full of life and work herself. I think *he* has chosen well."

"Of course *he* has; but I consider Julia to have sacrificed herself. And now, do come down and see me off."

Amy put down her work and went.

"I shall see you again soon, Amy dear," said Anne, with tearful eyes, as together they stood on the terrace. "Tom has promised to drive me over some day next week, not entirely for his dear wife's sake though; but because he has taken a great interest in some dreadful sinner in this parish, and [297] she as violent a liking to him. The old rector has given Tom permission to visit her whenever he likes, glad enough, I dare say, to be rid the trouble of it himself. Poor woman! she cannot live long—a breaking up of nature, or something of that sort; but Mrs. Archer knows more about it than I do."

"Anne! Anne! What are you talking about?" asked her husband, catching a word here and there, of her rambling speech. "Come! jump in, the pony is quite impatient to be off."

"And so is his master," laughed Anne; "we shall drive off in grand style, and then dilly-dally for half-an-hour, or more, at the turnpike, while he chats to his heart's content with Jane; that's the name of his new friend, dear. There, I really must say good-bye, or perhaps Tom may go without me." And almost smothering Amy with kisses she sprang down the steps and in another moment was seated by her husband, and they drove off.

A few hours after, Mrs. Elrington arrived at the Hall; but as she had truly said, long ago, it was [298] pain and grief to her to look on Mrs. Linchmore's face again; and she leant heavily on Mr. Linchmore's arm, as she passed from the carriage.

She paused a moment, as he would have led her into the drawing-room to his wife; and pointing through the half-open door, said simply, "We meet as strangers."

And so they did—the once adopted daughter and fondly-loved mother; but it cost them *both* an effort; for while Mrs. Elrington's hand trembled and shook like an aspen on the top of the stick with which she steadied her footsteps, Mr. Linchmore thought he had never seen his wife look more proudly beautiful and magnificent.

Anne's letter represented Amy as heart-broken, not only with the loss of her child, but sorrow stricken with the anxiety caused by the fresh trial of her husband's illness. Anne said not a word of the *living* grief consuming her heart, but Mrs. Elrington had not been many days at Brampton ere she suspected it; that pale, sweet anxious face, so thin and care-worn, told its own tale, with [299] the faltering, uncertain step; the mournful yet loving way with which she tended her husband now rapidly approaching convalescence. How she anticipated his every wish. Yet there was a hesitation, an uncertainty about it, all too evident to a watchful eye; it seemed as though with her anxiety to please, there was an evident fear of displeasing. Surely the wife needed the most care and tenderness now: the first she had, but the latter, where was that? Where the nameless attentions and thousand loving words her husband might speak?

Mrs. Elrington saw with sorrow the coldness, and estrangement, that had crept between the two. Was that fair young wife so recently afflicted—so loving, so doubly bereaved at heart—to blame? or Robert?

Mrs. Elrington loved Amy, and could not sit silently by without risking something to mend matters, so one day, when she and Robert were alone, she spoke. [300]

"I trust you are feeling stronger this morning, Mr. Vavasour?"

"Thank you. Yes, I am I believe, mending apace."

"I am glad of it, as I think your wife needs change, she is looking far from well; the sooner you take her home the better."

"Bertie's death was a bitter trial; and she felt it deeply."

"Bitter, indeed, it must have been, to have changed her so utterly. She is greatly altered since her marriage."

Robert Vavasour sighed.

"You are right," he replied. "I myself see the change, but without the power to remedy it now."

"How so?" she asked.

"You say altered since her marriage. It is true; for when Amy married she wilfully shut out from her heart all hopes of happiness."

"You speak in riddles, Mr. Vavasour, which I am totally unable to comprehend." [301]

"I am a rich man, Mrs. Elrington, and that alone might have tempted many a girl, or led her to fancy she loved me."

Mrs. Elrington drew up her head proudly. "But not Amy Neville," she replied, "no amount of wealth would have tempted her to marry a man she did not care for."

"Care for," he repeated bitterly, "caring is not loving."

Mrs. Elrington had arrived at the bottom of the mystery now; he fancied Amy did not love him! Amy who was devoting herself to him day after day, never weary of, but only happy when she was in his sick room, nursing and tending him as few wives would, treated so coldly, giving him all the loving worship of her young heart; while he refused to believe in it, but gloomily hugged the morbid fancy to his heart that she loved him not.

Mrs. Elrington could have smiled at the delusion, if Amy's happiness had not been at stake; as it was she replied gravely, "You are mistaken, Mr. Vavasour, wilfully blind to what is openly [302] apparent to all others who ever see you and your wife together. Why I verily believe Amy worships the very ground you stand on; but I fear no words of mine will convince you of the fact, while the indifference with which you are treating her is well-nigh breaking her heart."

No, Robert Vavasour was not convinced.

"She did not love me when she married me; her oath was false, she—" but no, his pride refused to allow him to tell of her love for another.

"I cannot listen to this," replied Mrs. Elrington, rising, "whatever her love may have been in the days you speak of, I am convinced Amy has never acted falsely towards you since you called her wife; neither do I believe there lives a man who *now* claims or holds one thought of hers from you. I am an old woman, Mr. Vavasour, and have seen a great deal of sorrow, and one heart broken through the cruelty of another; let not your wife's be so taken from you, but believe in her, trust in her, watch over her as the apple of your eye, for indeed she needs and demands all [303] your love and tenderness; crush not the love that is even now struggling in her heart, at your hardness and neglect, or take care lest you build up a wall that you will find it impossible hereafter to knock down, or when falling, will bury her you love beneath its ruins."

Robert's heart was strangely ill at ease and stirred by these words of Mrs. Elrington's. Perhaps he began to fear that even if his wife loved him not, he *had* been unnecessarily hard and severe, and pitiless, very pitiless and unloving. Might he not yet succeed in winning her love—the only thing in the wide world that he coveted? But then again, the thought that she had loved another, had cruelly deceived him, when he had loved and trusted her so entirely, was gall and wormwood to him, and turned his heart, when he thought of it, to stone. No; even allowing that she might love him, he could never love her so passionately again. So Vavasour thought, and so men and [304] women have thought, and will think again, as long as the world lasts, and yet, do what they will, the old love *will* come again, with all its old intensity, overthrowing all their wise and determined resolutions.

Deep in thought, Vavasour sat, until the minutes crept into hours, and then Mrs. Archer came, looking very different from the Mrs. Grey of old. The frown had not, it is true, disappeared, but it had faded and given way to a mild, happy expression pervading every feature of her face. There was still a mournful look—how could it be otherwise?—the mournful remembrance of the past; but even that was growing dim beside the ever-living presence of her son, and of her love for him. She had gained her wish, too, for Robert loved his mother, and, I think, was somewhat proud of her. There was nothing to be ashamed of, nothing he need blush for; she was his mother, he her son, acknowledged to be so by all the world.

She was dressed in black silk, and grey-coloured ribbons in her cap; her glossy, almost snow- [305] white hair, still beautiful in its abundance, rolled round her head. She had grown quiet and gentle, and had none of the wild passions or fits of half-madness now. As Robert sat gazing at her, he thought she must have been very beautiful in her youth, when that mass of hair was golden.

"Amy is not here," she said, looking round.

"No. I am alone, and rather tired of my solitude, with a don't-care feeling of being left any longer by myself just creeping over me."

"I thought Amy had been with you, or I should have been here before. Ah! I see she has been, by the fresh flowers on the table. She is always thinking of you, my son; her love always in her heart."

Robert moved impatiently. Had every one combined together to din his wife's love into his ears? Was he the victim of a conspiracy? So he replied, touchily.

"Amy is kind enough, and I dare say I am an ungrateful wretch." [306]

"Not ungrateful; but you might be a little, just a little, more loving to her sometimes. She is such

a loving, sweet young wife."

"You think she loves me?"

Mrs. Archer laughed. "Are you in earnest, my son?" she asked.

"Never more so in my life," was the reply.

His mother looked at him almost reproachfully.

"Can anyone doubt it?" she answered. "I believe her whole soul is wrapt up in you, and I thank God that it is so, my son."

Robert was silent,

"She is a fragile flower," continued Mrs. Archer, "one that the slightest cold breath might crush, yet withal strong in her deep love for you. It must be that, that has enabled her to bear up as she has, for she has had enough to try the strongest of us, and, I fear, looks more thin and shadowy every day."

"Mother!" cried Robert, in alarm. "You do not think Amy really ill?"

"I don't know what to think. She suffered an agony while she and I sat watching those dreadful [307]
weary hours by your bed-side; and I know Dr. Bernard has now prescribed a tonic; but she does not gain strength, and seems more feeble than ever. Forgive me, my son, but I sometimes fear there is a coldness, a nameless chill between you, which makes my heart tremble for the future of both. For hers—because she will die, loving you so intensely, and—" Mrs. Archer hesitated a moment, "and with little return; for yours—lest, when too late, you will see your error, and the remorse may break your heart. Oh! my son, if she has erred, it cannot have been wilfully, and surely she has been sufficiently punished. Think," she added, laying her hand on his, as she was leaving the room, "think well on my words, for I can have but one wish at my heart, and that is my son's happiness."

And Robert did think—think deeply all the rest of that day. He seemed never tired of thinking, while his eyes rested oftener on his wife, and he watched her intensely. [308]

What if she did love him? Ah! if only she did. His heart leapt wildly at the thought, and his jealous hatred seemed to have no place there now, but to be a far-off dream; or if it did intrude, he set it aside as a bugbear, or felt less savagely inclined than heretofore.

Could it be for him—she, his wife, brought fresh flowers for those already fading? How graceful she looked as she arranged them; not hurriedly, but slowly and tastefully—as though her heart was with the work,—in the glass. Was it for him she trod so softly over the room, while everything she touched assumed a different look, and slid quietly into its place, as though under the influence of a magic wand.

Hard and cruel! How chill those words of Mrs. Elrington's fell, like a dead weight on his heart, and had been ringing in his ears ever since. If Frances Strickland had told him a lie, then he had been hard and cruel. But his wife had never denied the facts, hideous as they appeared; but had Frances exaggerated the story, and why had he refused to listen to Amy's explanation? Might she [309]
not have cleared away half its hideousness? His heart surged like the troubled waves by the sea-shore, and his breath came quick and hot, as he felt that he might have been mistaken in fancying his wife loved him not. If all this long time it had been so, then, indeed, he had been hard and cruel; and would she ever forgive him? or could he ever forgive himself? Tormented with doubts and fears, he watched and waited, and gave no sign to his wife that he did so, while she grew paler and paler, fading imperceptibly.

The days crept on—three more slipped by, and found Robert still undecided, still undetermined. Again Amy brought fresh flowers, and stood at the table arranging them as before, and again her husband's eyes watched her, and had she only looked up as the last flower was being placed in the glass, her heart would have found its rest, for her eyes must have seen the love trembling in her husband's; but Amy never looked, but went and sat over by the fire, without a word. Then [310]
Robert spoke—

"Those flowers are very beautiful, Amy."

The words themselves were nothing, but the tone was the tender tone of old. Had he spoken coldly she could have answered at once, but the old, old loving tone, smote on her poor overcharged heart, and she could not answer a word, while the heavy tears gathered under her eyelids, and trembled as they fell. But her face was from her husband, and as yet he did not see them. Then some one came in, and they were interrupted. But the time Amy sighed for was not far distant, it was only delayed awhile.

Again they were alone; and again Robert spoke.

"Were the flowers gathered for me, Amy?"

The words were even more tenderly spoken than before; still there was no reply, and Robert half raised himself, and stooped forward to look into his wife's face; but she kept it steadfastly hidden: she dared not look until she could control some of the emotion, which seemed as though it would [311]
suffocate her.

They were both silent now. Robert grieved at her silence, while Amy sat striving and fighting with her sobs; yet so very still that none could have guessed the pent-up agony she was enduring.

By-and-bye she grew more composed; had conquered and mastered her emotion, and turned her head towards her husband; but he was reading, and if he saw her, never raised his eyes from his book.

Unconsciously her thoughts wandered, wandered away to the days at Somerton when she had been so happy. Ah! what a world of woe had overtaken her since then. Her boy dead, her only one; her husband worse than dead, his love estranged, perhaps gone for ever! and yet if he had only allowed her to speak,—not to attempt to palliate her fault, but only to tell how dearly she loved him! she felt she *had* rightly forfeited some of his esteem, but scarcely deserved all the bitter misery his coldness had cost her. [312]

Would he ever trust her again? Ever believe her love? Yet if she died for it, she must tell it him; the weight of it was killing her, and she clasped her small white hands tightly over her knees as she thought that perhaps the time for her to speak had come. Only a few moments ago he had spoken almost tenderly to her, and more like his former self, and he was better, almost well now, and able to bear what she had to say. The excitement of her sad tale would not hurt him half so much as the telling it would grieve her.

He was no longer weak, but gaining strength every day; there was scarcely any trace of his illness now, save that ugly scar near his temple, and that was gradually fading away.

How should she begin? What should she say? As she essayed to think, the suffocating feeling arose again in her throat; again the large heavy tears dropped one by one; but her face was turned full on her husband now, his eyes on hers, yet she knew it not; knew not that his book had [313] been laid down long ago, and that he was watching eagerly the various emotions flitting over face.

As the tears sprung from her eyes, he said, hastily reaching out his hand,

"Come here, Amy! Come nearer to me."

She saw him *then*. Their eyes met, and that one glance told *him* his wife's love was his; told *her* she was trusted and forgiven. In another moment she had tottered forward and was gathered to his heart, her tears falling like rain on his breast.

"Oh! Robert! Robert!" she wailed.

But loving words poured impetuously in her ears, loving arms were round her.

"My wife! my own! My darling Amy. Hush! hush, love!"

But she could not hush; but lay weeping, weeping passionately, nestled close to him; clasped tightly in his arms, as though he feared to lose her.

He thought those tears would never cease, and almost grew frightened at their intensity, but they [314] stopped at last, subsiding into sobs; and presently they were gone altogether, and she rested gently and quietly in his arms while she told him the tale that had nearly broken her heart and his; and if he thought her to blame, as without doubt she was, he forgave her now from his heart, and bitterly accused himself of being hard and cruel indeed; and thanked God he had not been too late in breaking down the wall that had severed them, and nearly buried them both in its ruins.

Mrs. Elrington came in, but was moving softly away again when Robert called her back.

"She does indeed love me," he said proudly and humbly; while he resisted Amy's efforts to free herself from his grasp, "Your words, dear lady, were severe but well timed. I deserved them and can thank you for them now; while all my life long I will strive to make amends for what my wife has suffered." [315]

Amy looked up, her bright face flushing with smiles, but her husband covered her mouth laughingly with his hand as she attempted to speak; possibly he thought she would, like a true woman, strive to hide his fault by exposing her own. But she struggled to free herself and said,

"I am more happy than I deserve to be, dear Mrs. Elrington, my one sin so bitterly repented of having taught me the value of my husband's love, and how dear, how very dear, he is to me."

"Heed her not! heed her not!" cried Robert.

"God bless you both, my children," said Mrs. Elrington fervently. [316]

CHAPTER XVII.

SUNSHINE.

"Here may ye see, that women be
In love meke, kynd and stable:
Let never man reprove them then,

Or call them variable."

THE NUT BROWN MAID.

Then only doth the soul of woman know
Its proper strength when love and duty meet;
Invincible the heart wherein they have their seat.

SOUTHEY.

Mrs. Elrington did not remain much longer at Brampton, she and Mrs. Linchmore parting as distantly as they had met, Mr. Linchmore grieving that the visit from which he had hoped so much had failed in reconciling those who had once been bound together by the strongest ties of affection. They were severed utterly and for ever: the remembrance of the old tie only bringing sorrow to the hearts of each. [317]

Mrs. Linchmore never once relaxed from her pride and haughtiness but seemed to her husband's sorrow to bear herself more proudly and stormily every day; whatever her inward sufferings,—and she did suffer acutely,—she gave no outward sign, deceiving her husband into the belief that she was the injured one, who would not make one step forward to mend matters or heal the old wound, lest it should be construed into an acknowledgment that she, having done the wrong was anxious to make atonement.

Mrs. Linchmore knew did she implore or even plead for Mrs. Elrington's love, it would not be given: forgiveness unasked had been granted her in that letter received long ago; but love the old love, could never be hers again. The injury was too deep wherewith she had injured her; the deceit too cruel and wilful. Her son's broken heart could never be forgotten; how could she love her who had broken it? It was a lasting injury; one neither could forget. It had well-nigh broken the mother's heart as well as the son's, leaving broken hopes; lonely, sad, even painful recollections: it had changed Mrs. Linchmore more sadly still. [318]

Mrs. Elrington apparently gave no heed to the contemptuous indifference with which she was every day greeted, but behaved as a guest who now sees her hostess for the first time, and only to Amy did she ever say—and that but once,—how changed, how sadly altered she thought Mrs. Linchmore.

Jane never recovered from the weakness consequent on the fever, but gradually grew more feeble every day, weaker each time Mr. Hall went to see her; her one sorrow being the misery she had in her wickedness caused others; her one fear lest so grievous a sin could never be atoned for or forgiven; but a visit from Mrs. Archer—which she had never dared hope for, although she had over and over again begged her forgiveness through Mr. Hall, and been assured of it from him—served to calm and tranquillise her troubled spirit, and led her to look—to hope for a higher forgiveness still. Jane died thoroughly, sincerely repentant; the last few days of her life being the only peaceful happy ones she had known for years. Mrs. Marks regained the [319] use of her limbs, and stormed at Matthew, and held her own sway in the cottage as much as ever, if not more so; but Marks said he did not mind it now, and was right down glad to hear his old woman's tongue going at it harder and faster than ever; it was dead-alive work enough when she was ill, and as he had ceased to frequent the "Brampton Arms," and was satisfied with his wife, why should we find fault with either her or her tongue?

Tom Hodge did not fulfil Marks' prophecy, either as to the hanging, or breaking his father's heart; William Hodge came down to Standale to see his son, and left it an altered, almost an aged man. Like his wife, he took his son's crime to heart, and although Mrs. Marks said, in a sympathising way, Tom was *only* in jail awaiting his trial for an attempt to kill, yet Hodge could not shut his eyes to the fact that he might have been heavily ironed for murder, and the thought crushed him. A change imperceptibly crept over him from that time, and although he struggled with the shame he felt for his eldest son's evil doings, and held his head as high as ever, the old [320] hearty good-humoured manner had fled, and not many months passed ere he gave up the smith's business,—that had once been his pride and pleasure,—to his other and younger son.

Tom Hodge's crime was proved; his reason for shooting at Robert Vavasour the second time being, that the latter had recognised him as the man who had wounded him four years ago. The act was not premeditated, but the momentary impulse of the surprise and sudden recognition. He was sentenced to penal servitude for a lengthened term of years; let us hope he returned a wiser and a better man.

Frances, anxious to make all the amends in her power, and atone for the fault that had cost her so much, begged—when strong enough, and recovered from her illness, which was more of the mind than body—to see Mr. Vavasour; but he was obdurate.

"Tell her," he said, "that I believe in my wife's faith and love so entirely, I need no assurance of it from one who *tried* to injure her so deeply, no explanation of what I ought never to have [321] doubted."

So Frances left Brampton, carrying with her the life-long remembrance of poor little Bertie's death, which she could not but be persuaded was mainly attributable to her, and sent as a warning and punishment for her pride and revengeful wickedness. Perhaps, had the child lived, her bad, passionate heart might never have been touched, and she might have lived on still in her sinful revenge, working, if it were possible, more and more misery; but Bertie's sad early death wrought the change, bringing to her stony, unfeeling heart both sorrow and remorse, while the

end for which she had so wickedly striven she never attained, losing in time all interest, all kindly, cousinly feeling even, in the heart, to gain which she had wrought so much evil, and brought all the worst passions of her nature into play.

And Charles Linchmore? What need to say anything of him? He has ceased, perhaps, to hold any place in my reader's interest; but in case some care to know of his well-being, I may mention that [322] he recovered from his wound, and when last heard of was talking of returning home to England.

Mrs. Archer's days glided peacefully on, calmly, happy at last in her son's love, in witnessing his and his wife's happiness; and when another little Bertie, almost rivalling the first in beauty and spirits—in all save his mother's heart—played about in the old house at Somerton, the frown had faded away more visibly still, though the remembrance of the anguish of mind and miserable days she had passed, consequent upon her deceit and one false step, could never be forgotten, or cease to be regretted. Her mind could scarcely ever be said to have entirely recovered from the shock it had sustained, though all angry fierceness and bitter fits of half madness had fled, never to return.

The mysterious light that had so troubled Amy, and been a source of superstition to the servants and villagers, was fully accounted for, as Mrs. Archer, in touching upon her previous miserable [323] life to her son, mentioned, that having a key of the door leading up the secret stairs into old Mrs. Linchmore's room, she had sometimes been seized with an uncontrollable desire to revisit the scene where with the closing of the life of one, had died out so she thought, her sole cherished hope, the hope of ever finding her son. She had never divested herself of the idea that old Mrs. Linchmore had stolen the child; through all her wild dreams she had held to that, and fancied that at Brampton only should she ever hear of him again; and when, on his wife's death, Robert Linchmore's father had searched for and found her, she would accept nothing at his hands, poor as she was, but the cottage which, at her own earnest request, he built for her, while the secret of her relationship with those at the Hall had, she hoped, died with him, she having asked him never to divulge it; and he who had loved her once, nay, loved her still, and had been the unwitting means, through his wife's mad jealousy, of causing her so much misery, granted, though unwillingly, even that. At his death Mrs. Archer changed her name, and came to [324] Brampton, fearing no recognition from those still living. How could they recognise in that broken-hearted, wild-looking woman, the once fair, gentle Miss Mary of the Hall.

Anne came to see Amy as she had promised, and spent the day at Brampton, her heart feeling really rejoiced at the happy change in her friend. There was still a shade of sadness on Amy's face, but the weariful look was gone, and she appeared almost as bright and youthful as on the day when Anne had first made her acquaintance; while as to Robert Vavasour? Anne wondered how she ever could have thought him an icicle or indifferent to his wife, so fond of her as he seemed now, so anxious that she should not over exert herself; for she was anything but strong or recovered from the shock of the severe trials she had gone through.

"I do think," said Anne, as Amy was busy putting together a few last things—a work which she either did not wish, or would not trust her maid to do for her; "I do think your husband is a most [325] devoted one, Amy; there is only one other that excels him, and that's—my own!"

Amy laughed. "Are you quite satisfied with your husband, Anne?"

"What a question!" answered Anne indignantly.

"Opinions formed hastily easily change," replied her friend, "Did not you say you would only marry a man with fierce moustaches and whiskers!"

"I did," said Anne consciously, "and—and—well you have not seen Tom lately, or you would not say *that*, because a beard does improve him so much; and between ourselves, dear, I am nearly fidgeting myself to death, lest he *should* grow a moustaches, for I have changed my opinion, and don't like them!"

"The carriage is at the door, Amy," said her husband, entering the room.

"Oh, Mr. Vavasour! how sorry I am you are going to take Amy away. It may be years before we meet again, as I know Mrs. Vavasour will never come to this odious place if she can help it."

"Brampton," replied Amy, sorrowfully, "will always hold one little spot of ground towards which [326] my heart will often yearn. As the resting-place of my boy, Anne, I think I shall—must revisit Brampton."

"True. I am always wrong, and speak, as Tom says, without considering in the least what I am going to say. Forgive me Amy, I quite forgot for the moment your grief."

"I hope," said Robert, as he drew his wife away, "you and Mr. Hall will soon come and see us, at Somerton. Amy and I will give you a hearty welcome."

"I accept the invitation with pleasure, that is," said she correcting herself, "if Tom can find anyone to do his duty during his absence."

As Amy drove away with Mrs. Archer and her husband, Anne waved a tearful adieu until the carriage turned the drive, and was out of sight.

As they drove through the park Amy sat very silent; her husband did not interrupt her thoughts, perhaps he guessed her heart was too full for words: but as they passed through the large gates

her eyes looked wistfully towards the—churchyard, little Bertie's last resting place, and as she pictured to herself the small white marble cross, looking whiter still with the sun reflected on it, and the little mound almost green now, and covered with the early primroses she had strewed there that morning,—her eyes filled with tears, and she sighed involuntarily. [327]

Robert drew her gently, but fondly, towards him.

"Our boy is happy, Amy, darling. And you?"

"I?" she replied, smiling and struggling with her tears. "I, Robert, am happier than I deserve to be, with you to love and to take care of me."

"Not so, Amy," he said. "We have been both to blame. Perhaps, had it been otherwise, we should never have found out how dear we are to each other. Is it not so, my own dear love?"

Amy did not reply, save by the loving light in her eyes, as she nestled closer to his side.

If she had been greatly tried, she had indeed found her safest and best earthly resting-place now and for ever!

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