

THE

L. P. Moore

COUNTRY NEIGHBORHOOD.

BY MISS E. A. DUPUY,

AUTHOR OF

"THE CONSPIRATOR," "CELESTE," "FLORENCE; OR, THE FATAL VOW," &c., &c.

"When exiled from my native strand,
Where have I found a fairer land,
Or lovelier love, or truer hand?"

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CHAPTER I.

HEAVY and threatening clouds lay piled up on the edge of the horizon, through which the departing sun cast a lurid glare on a scene the gloomy genius of Italy's gifted son would have delighted to depict.

Undulating hills, clothed with the wild luxuriance of nature, or teeming with the evidences of the laborer's toil, inclosed on either side the shores of a wide creek, which, in seasons of continued rain, was full from bank to bank, and went rushing and roaring on its tortuous way, the resistless current sweeping every thing before it. At such seasons it recalled to the imagination the dark waves over which the parted soul is fabled to be wafted; and the wail of the blast among the giant trees that line its banks, the rush of the turbid waters, seemed a requiem for the earth-born spirit which had been severed from its dearly-cherished mortal part.

Now, however, it presented quite a different aspect. Many weeks had passed since rain had fallen, and the abrupt earthen walls inclosed only a wide waste of sands, which lay glittering and white in their treacherous bed. In the centre of this flowed a small sparkling stream, so shallow that a child might have waded across with impunity, had the bottom been as firm as it appeared, yet one unacquainted with the ford dared not venture over it, lest his temerity should be punished by a plunge in the quicksand below.

The spirit of the storm was evidently rising in its might; the wind came in gusts, bending the tall trees before its power, while a thin, gray haze spread itself over the heavens, and mutterings of distant thunder were heard, occasionally accompanied by a brief flash, sharp, piercing, and brilliant, which darted its arrowy path amidst the darkest portion of the clouds.

In the curve of the stream, where the hills swept away in the form of a crescent, was a plantation under such careful cultivation that the fields presented undulating waves of their snowy produce, as the wind swept over the luxuriant cotton. Clustered at the foot of a hill lay a small village of white cabins, shaded by forest trees, and this was the quarter appropriated to the slaves.

On the highest elevation, overlooking the whole panorama, was the residence of the owner. The sloping hill-side covered with the fine forest trees, the original growth of the soil, formed his lawn;

and the evidences of female taste were not wanting in the skillful arrangement of flowers, amidst the wildness of nature's decorations. Clinging vines had been trained in long wreaths from the lower branches of the trees, and now hung in verdant festoons at the mercy of the blast. The house was of wood, painted white: it consisted of two large rooms in the centre, with wings on either side. A wide gallery, supported by massive pillars, extended the whole length of the front and around one end; the view from this commanded miles of the sinuous windings of the stream, and the lands stretching away on the opposite side.

The dwelling was not a solitary one, for amidst the masses of foliage in the distance might be discerned the white walls of several other residences. One, nestled away in its trees and embowering shrubbery, bore the appropriate name of Roseneath, and a fair flower was sheltered in its walls. Another, whose stately front loomed grandly from its carefully-trimmed hedges, offered a contrast to its unpretending neighbor, and stood forth confessedly the home of ostentatious wealth. Overlooking these, together with the whole valley, was the house upon the hill, with the wimpling burn flowing at its base, on which the owner had bestowed the name of Braeburn.

Like many plantation houses, the principal room occupied the centre, and a door, protected by green blinds, opened directly into it. Large, lofty, and well-lighted, this apartment was furnished with a degree of luxury a stranger would scarcely have expected to find in the interior of a new country. The walls were covered with pearl-white paper, ornamented with embossed medallions, each one containing a finely-colored scene, selected from the most picturesque portions of our wide-spread land. Curtains of crimson damask, with embroidered lace hangings, fell in voluminous folds from the windows, and velvet-covered sofas, lounges, and ottomans invited to repose. A carpet of a rich and fantastic pattern covered the floor, and an open piano, with a music stand filled with books and loose music, showed that cultivation and refinement had gone hand-in-hand with wealth.

In the centre of the room stood a circular table, and on its marble top lay many splendidly-illustrated books, which invited the inspection of the

idle or the intellectual. A portfolio of fine engravings was half open; and among them were many sketches of scenery, which indicated no inferior talent in the person who executed them.

An arched door, half unclosed, opened into a smaller room in one of the wings of the building, which was fitted up as the peculiar sanctum of the owner. The walls of this room were filled with bookcases of dark wood, quaintly carved, and the windows were shaded by green blinds. The floor was covered with a heavy carpet, wrought in a cabalistic design which the owner had himself furnished to the manufacturer; for he had traveled in foreign lands, and made himself familiar with their best and worst features; and gladly had he returned to end his life in the quiet of his country home, where he amused his leisure hours by cultivating the study of astronomy, blent with a few wanderings into the mystic sister science of astrology. He was also a firm believer in magnetism, and his experiments had established for him rather a weird reputation among the more ignorant of his country neighbors, who could only behold in the singular effects produced the agency of magic. The chairs and library table in this room were of walnut, elaborately carved; and opposite to the seat usually occupied by its proprietor, hung a veiled picture, with the curtain slightly drawn aside, which represented a young and beautiful woman, with large spiritual eyes, cast upward with that expression which seemed to say, "Lord, though thou slay me, still will I trust in thee."

A flight of steps led to an observatory above, in which was placed a telescope of considerable power. This apartment was now tenanted by two persons. One was a man verging toward his grand climacteric, whose tall form was slightly bent with age; but the clear gray eyes were piercing in their glance as in youth, though the brows that overshadowed them were silvered by time, as were the few locks that still shaded his temples. His features were marked and expressive, evincing the possession of superior intellect, while the high, massive forehead, in its peculiar development, indicated ideality and marvelousness in an uncommon degree. The mouth expressed indecision and self-indulgence in the original man; but time, sorrow, and bitter struggles, had stamped upon his features an expression of quiet resignation, which spoke of triumph over the baser portions of his nature; and as the soul assumed the higher type to which it had struggled, the outward form seemed to partake in some degree of the elevation of its actuating spirit. He wore a dark suit of cloth, over which hung the loose folds of the scholar's gown, and on his bald head was a velvet cap, confined to his temples by a band embroidered by the fingers he loved best. His hands were white, slender, and of remarkably graceful form.

The companion of this venerable man was a young girl of twenty, of a light and elegantly-moulded figure. Her complexion was a clear olive, through which the brightest carnation glowed on her cheeks and lips. Her hair and eyebrows were intensely

black, though the latter were lightly and gracefully penciled, and large, full-orbed eyes of the same hue, flashed vividly beneath their long curved lashes. Her features were irregular—the freshly-colored mouth was a little too wide, and the nose slightly *retroussé*; but it was a face of brilliant expression, and singularly attractive to one skilled in reading the workings of the spirit within. There was genius, passion, and power in the speaking lineaments of that mobile countenance: warm-hearted, generous, and unselfish was this attractive being, who was the living sunbeam to the existence of her aged parent. His only and adoringly-loved child, dark was the day to him which was not greeted by her smile; nature was joyless without the music of her voice.

The dress of this young girl was peculiar and becoming. She wore a robe of crimson cashmere, which perfectly fitted her supple form: it was clasped at the throat and wrists with large pearls, and finished with a fall of fine lace, from which the delicate hands gleamed white, graceful, and expressive; for there is great expression in a beautiful hand. In front, her raven hair hung in long curls nearly to her waist, and at the back of the head it was braided in a thick plait, which wound several times around the plain comb that held it in its place. A crimson ribbon, with long fringed ends, was drawn through this braid, and knotted together on one side, forming a fanciful and becoming head-dress.

The old man, leaning back in a large cushioned chair, his eyes fixed on the shifting clouds without, which seemed momentarily to assume a more threatening aspect; while the girl sat beside the window, and seemed to be watching for the appearance of some one with much solicitude. A spy-glass was placed near her, and occasionally her eye was applied to the tube, and she eagerly scanned the sandy bed of the stream, and the open country beyond.

She at length arose, and stood with her clasped hands resting lightly on the window-seat. Her father's eyes glanced toward her, and he gazed earnestly and lovingly upon the expressive profile and glowing cheek which was turned toward him. At length he spoke: "You no longer expect your friend, my dear Flora? Those threatening clouds will deter her from crossing the creek; and there is no reason why she shall leave her home, when she may be prevented from returning for several days."

"Oh, that is of no consequence, father," she replied, in a clear, sweet-toned voice. "Helen is not of so much importance to her aunt as to render her presence at home a matter of much moment. I earnestly desire to see her, for I have much to say to her concerning—" She paused abruptly, and impatiently drummed upon the window with her slender fingers, while a wilder blast swept around the dwelling, and a cloud of autumn leaves were dashed against the casement.

Her father gravely said:

"If it concerns this new suitor of hers, you had better suffer Helen to yield to the influence of her aunt, my daughter, if any is to be used.

It is a delicate thing to interfere either in making or breaking a match."

The color upon the young listener's cheek deepened, and she earnestly said:

"Not even if I believed her whole happiness at stake? Oh, father, Helen is a good girl, who is too yielding to contend against the fate pressed upon her, though she knows she is forfeiting truth and good faith in acceding to the wishes of her aunt."

"I am to understand then, Flora, that Helen has been imprudent enough to form a clandestine engagement which will be objectionable to her relations? Well, affairs begin to wear a romantic aspect, for Mrs. Wilmot is not a woman to be thwarted in her plans."

"My dear father, I betrayed more than I intended in my thoughtless speech; but I know poor Helen's secret is safe with you. You are aware that she was hurried from the North on account of an entanglement with the brother of one of her class-mates, who was not considered her equal by her purse-proud relatives. Helen was actually betrothed to him, and he continues to address to her the most impassioned letters. These letters, I confess to you, pass through my hands. Helen knows that I have one now, and she will not fail to come before the storm bursts over us."

"My child, you are very imprudent."

"I do not fear Mrs. Wilmot, father. She has no influence over my destiny, therefore I do not hesitate to aid this poor depressed girl, who owes her such a debt of gratitude, that she is afraid to assert the right all human beings possess, to choose the one into whose keeping they are willing to confide their happiness."

"Do you really think it right in Helen to form so serious a thing as an engagement of marriage without the consent of the relation who was educating her, in the hope, I have no doubt, that her beauty and accomplishments would secure a brilliant match for her?"

Flora hesitated—

"If Mrs. Wilmot had been her mother, it would certainly have been extremely wrong; but her aunt is so strange—so unlovable: and then she is so ostentatious with all her kindness to Helen, that it is difficult to feel that grateful tenderness toward her which would naturally lead to a consideration of her wishes."

"All this may be very true, but your friend has acted unwisely, to say the least of it, and is thus plunged in a sea of difficulty from which I can see no extrication for her. Mrs. Wilmot is not one to give up a scheme she has once set her heart on; and she has the power to hold Helen in absolute subjection to her will through her widowed and impoverished mother, who draws her principal means of subsistence for herself and her younger children from the liberality of her more fortunate sister. Mrs. Wilmot would be quite capable of withdrawing her assistance, if her niece disappoints her by refusing to accept the wealthy lover who now awaits her decision."

Flora looked surprised and annoyed.

"This is a view of the subject which has never before been presented to me. I was not aware that Mrs. Somers was at all dependent. I knew her circumstances were not very prosperous, but I thought she possessed enough for a support, without actually requiring the aid of others."

"She has three sons and a daughter to educate, all younger than Helen, and the annual income from her own property would not amount to five hundred dollars. Thus you see, my love, that Helen Somers must not take her own inclinations alone into consideration. She must remember those young brothers, and that sister, to whom she may secure advantages equal to those she has herself enjoyed, by acceding to the wishes of her aunt."

Flora seemed pensive. After a pause she said, "But it is absolutely wrong to marry a person for whom one has no preference."

"She may be attached to Mr. Hilton in time. The happiest marriages are not always the romantic love matches, my daughter."

"Ah! you have not seen Mr. Hilton, papa, or you would not speak of love springing from association with him."

"Is he so extremely repulsive?"

"Judge for yourself. Imagine a man so tall and thin that the German story of the man without a shadow seems hardly an exaggeration: a complexion as cadaverous as that of the dead, and surmounting this pale, repulsive face, a quantity of red hair, which looks as if the action of fire had slightly crisped it. Ah, I know such a man will be desperately jealous!"

"You have certainly not sketched an attractive picture; yet why should you fancy him more inclined to jealousy than other men?"

"Because he must feel and know that it is impossible for any woman to become attached to such a being as he is; and he will be afraid to permit his wife to come into the society of others more attractive, lest she should draw comparisons, which must inevitably be to his disadvantage."

"Well reasoned, my little girl; but according to this theory, all ugly men would eschew the presence of handsome ones near their wives."

"Oh! you misunderstand me. It is not mere beauty that is a passport to a woman's heart. It is elegance, high-breeding, command of language which can clothe vivid thoughts in appropriate drapery. 'Tis generous and noble feeling shining through the often ordinary features of their possessor: but Mr. Hilton has none of these advantages. He is selfish, dull, and odiously fastidious."

"But he makes a thousand bales of cotton annually, my daughter; that fact covers a multitude of deficiencies," replied the old gentleman, with slight sarcastic emphasis.

Flora's eye flashed, and her red lip curled disdainfully.

"And for money must this poor, trembling girl be sacrificed, at the bidding of a woman who has more wealth at her command than she can possibly use? Shame—shame on the state of society which holds that human being guiltless who assumes so fearful a power over the fate of another!"

"Such things have occurred from the earliest ages, I fancy, and will occasionally take place as long as our planet continues to exist; or at least until the millennium arrives. Since you and I do not expect to live until that blessed period, we must take the world as we find it, and make the best of the curious anomaly it is."

"Oh, father, you take this matter so lightly. It seems to me your old affection for Helen must suddenly have grown cool. I assure you it is a question of life or death with her."

"Not quite that bad, my love, for she will scarcely imitate our French neighbors by committing suicide when things go contrary to her wishes. If Helen reasons herself into accepting Mr. Hilton, she will live to enjoy his fine fortune, and in time come to believe that she could not exist without the indulgences it will purchase for her. I love my fair Pearl very sincerely, but I would rather not meddle with edge tools, if you please; and this aunt of hers is rather too much on the sharp order to suit my taste."

Flora sighed.

"Poor Helen! That seems to be the universal feeling. How is it that I am not afraid of this tormagant aunt of hers?"

"Because you do not know her as well as older persons. Yet Mrs. Wilmot has her good traits."

"I am sure I can not discover them. Who was Mrs. Wilmot, that she should assume the station of lady paramount in our neighborhood, and find no one who has the hardihood to dispute her supremacy?"

"Of her origin I am not prepared to speak. I only know that after her youth was passed she married Wilmot, who was a rich and reckless inebriate. She exacted from him a promise to retire to the country after their marriage: she claimed the fulfillment of the promise when she found that her influence was insufficient to reclaim him in the midst of his former associates. He refused, under the plea that his plantation had no house on it which was fit for a residence. She succeeded in obtaining from him a pledge to accompany her to it when a house was built. An architect soon furnished a plan which pleased them; she drove out to the place with him, and together they marked out the site of the future building. She pursued her object with such energy, that in six months from its commencement the elegant residence she now inhabits was completed. It was built in the midst of the forest, and when she triumphantly announced to Wilmot that the house was ready for their reception, he was astonished. He was just recovering from one of his intemperate frolics, and he flatly refused to go until a garden was made. This excuse she knew was merely intended to procrastinate the time of departure, for he was aware that the thick forest surrounded the house, and the cotton fields were too far off for any portion to be converted into a garden. Then the superior tactics of the wife were apparent: she immediately ordered the carriage, and going

out to the plantation, sent a trusty servant around in the neighborhood to the negroes on the different places, offering them high wages to labor for her on the following Sunday. Nearly two hundred assembled on the appointed day, and under her own directions they proceeded to cut down the trees, grub out the stumps, and maul rails. Before sunset the garden was fenced in, plowed up, walks laid out, and seed planted. Mrs. Wilmot then returned to town, to pack up her husband, and bring him out in triumph. Since that day she has banished the use of wines and liquors of every kind from her house, except when she gives a grand dinner party; Mr. Wilmot's annual visit to New Orleans is the only opportunity he has to indulge in his favorite propensity."

"And did he make no effort to maintain his independence? He surely did not succumb at once?"

"Oh no; the waves of passion would surge occasionally, and give her some trouble. He pretended to be afflicted with violent spasms, occasioned by the want of excitement, to which he had been accustomed. She consoled with him, and congratulated him on the discontinuance of his dissipated life, which must have destroyed him had it continued much longer. He gradually yielded to her dominion, and sunk into the quiet, insignificant little person he now is."

"Poor creature!" said Flora, contemptuously. "I can very well imagine that there was no resisting such a dragon."

"Yet you are willing to brave her displeasure, by assisting Helen to evade her authority?"

"Oh, I do not belong to her, and therefore I do not fear her. Here comes Helen, and with her a gentleman—and a stranger too! I knew she would be here to night."

About a quarter of a mile above the house the creek made an abrupt bend, and just below this lay the ford, which three persons on horseback were crossing; one was a girl with a long floating riding-skirt, and a small cap with a veil fluttering from it. She was accompanied by a gentleman mounted on a fine bay horse, which he managed with great skill. Behind them came a negro boy on a pony, and he amused himself by feats of activity, such as are practiced by a clown in the circus, while his young lady and her cavalier rode rapidly onward to escape the gathering storm.

These figures were distinctly outlined against the bed of glittering sand over which they fleetly careered, and were lighted up by lurid gleams of sunshine, which streamed through an opening in the clouds, as the god of day sunk behind the tree tops.

The fair watcher shaded her eyes with her hand, and gazed earnestly upon the two.

"How can you at this distance distinguish if Helen's companion is a stranger? He may very well be one of our neighbors," said her father.

"No," replied Flora, decisively. "My eagle glance, which you have often tested, has not deceived me. The gentleman who accompanies

Helen is a stranger to this house, but not to either you or me. Do you remember the Mr. Lenox whose acquaintance we formed while at the bay of St. Louis last summer? It is he."

Her father smiled, but did not appear particularly pleased.

"Did you encourage him to pay us a visit, my daughter?"

"I do not know that I did, unless he interpreted my enthusiastic description of my beloved home into a desire that he should behold its beauties for himself. However, I assure you Mr. Lenox is well worth knowing. He is intelligent, cultivated, and what is rare in our country, an agreeable

talker. How graceful Helen rides! Upon my word she is an exquisitely beautiful creature: I can almost worship her loveliness myself at times, for she seems to have more of the goddess than the woman in her outward form.

"Coupled with all a woman's weakness and want of self-reliance, I am afraid," replied her father, gravely. "A poor shrine would that be on which to offer the oblation of worship. You are too much of an enthusiast my child."

Flora kissed him, smiled, and passed rapidly from the room, for by this time the equestrians were cantering up the hill-side, and in another moment would be at the front entrance.

CHAPTER II.

GRACEFUL and unembarrassed was the welcome of the young lady of Braeburn to her guests. Helen Somers sprang lightly from her steed, and imprinted a kiss upon the glowing cheek of her friend, as she said,

"I hope I render myself doubly welcome by the company I bring with me. Mr. Lenox has just arrived at my uncle's this morning, and when he heard that I had an engagement to spend the evening with you, he overruled all my aunt's objections to our wild ride in the brewing storm, and here we are."

"Yes, Miss Forrester, I have ventured within the magic circle you so eloquently described at our last meeting," said the new guest. "The home picture you then drew, possessed a potent attraction for one who, like myself, has long been a solitary waif upon the tide of busy and struggling life, which is found among the busy haunts of men."

"You are welcome to our retired nook, Mr. Lenox, but do not expect to find in it any thing but the monotony of repose. We live in one of the out-of-the-way places of this vast globe, and are only linked with its struggles by the human sympathies which we are careful to cultivate. I am afraid you will soon weary of the extreme quiet of our happy valley, as we have egotistically named it."

"With such bright spirits for ministers, that were impossible," he replied, with a courteous inclination of his head, as he followed the fair hostess into the house.

As Helen Somers removes her riding-cap, and stands in the doorway, with the fading light falling upon her, we will give her the precedence due to her sex, and describe the beauty which so charmed her friend. Her form arose slightly above the usual height of woman, but it was charmingly proportioned, and the spiritual face, with its high, full brow, and dark clear eyes, was full of attraction. Her complexion was pure and radiant as the petals of the delicate blush rose, with the

faintest shade of carnation at its heart. Her hair, of a rich sunny brown, lay in shining bands around her gracefully formed and well-poised head. The mouth was perfectly curved, and the lips of the vivid hue of the polished coral; but their expression corresponded with the dreamy softness of the dark hazel eyes. The heart of their fair owner had already known sorrow; the glad life of youth and hope had mingled its current with the turbid waves of suffering and anguish, and as the flush produced by recent exercise faded away, Flora saw that she was pale as the marble Juno, for whose model she might have stood.

Lenox glanced from the fairer beauty to the brilliant face of Miss Forrester, and mentally decided that, in their different styles, it would be difficult to find two fairer specimens of feminine young America; but to him Flora Forrester was by far the most attractive; perhaps because she was so decided a contrast to himself.

He was a man of tall and well-proportioned frame, graceful bearing, and with that cast of features which proclaimed him at once of the Anglo-Saxon race. There was an expression of calm command in his full blue eye: his hair was light, and clustered in short yellow curls around his high brow, and the whiskers which shaded his cheeks were slightly tinged with auburn. Altogether he was a very distinguished-looking man, yet the air of calm superiority he habitually wore had nothing offensive in it. It was simply the bearing of a man who understood his own value, and was at the same time willing to give to others all the consideration they merited.

Mr. Forrester came forth from his own sanctum, and received the new comers with that courteous welcome, for which the Southern gentleman is noted by all who have had opportunities of enjoying his hospitality. Mr. Lenox bent almost reverently before his patriarchal appearance, and Helen offered her cheek to his salute with the freedom of a petted child.

"The heavens have given you a rough recep-

tion at Braeburn, Mr. Lenox," said Mr. Forrester, glancing at the heavy clouds, from which large drops of rain now began to patter on the gallery floor; "but you will find warm hearts within, and such entertainment as our country home affords, is always offered freely."

"Thank you, I doubt it not, dear sir. I trust the clouds are not ominous of my future in relation to you and yours; for it is my earnest wish to cultivate the most sunny and grateful remembrance of our acquaintance."

The old gentleman bowed, and glanced toward his daughter; but she was occupied with her friend, and did not appear to be listening to the words of the gentlemen.

After a brief absence from the room, the two girls returned; the autumn had been so mild that fires had not before been needed, but to give more cheerfulness to the large apartment, Flora ordered one to be lighted. The heavy screen was removed from the hearth, and soon a bright blaze from the fragrant pine-wood cast its genial glow throughout the room. The window-blinds were closed, the curtains lowered, and the lamps lighted; thus shutting out the glitter of the forked lightning, while the roar and battle of the elements without, only seemed to add to the sense of security and comfort within.

Supper was served in the adjoining room, a delicate yet substantial repast; and the snowy table-linen and glittering service impressed the new guest with a high idea of the housewifely abilities of Miss Forrester; for he was aware that she had entire control of her father's domestic establishment.

After supper came music, of course. Our fair performers were not prodigies in that line, but they both played with considerable skill, and their voices blended sweetly together in several duets. Their musical abilities, like their other talents, had been cultivated as a resource against the monotony of an uneventful forest life; for both were sensible girls, and knew that pleasant employment is the true secret of happiness. With music, books, drawing, sewing, and such society as the valley afforded, they passed a contented and joyous existence; at least until sorrow, in the shape of an unwelcome suitor, came to the dependent one.

This evening Helen sang mechanically, and the early paleness of her cheek soon gave place to a small spot of vivid rose, which was evidently the offspring of intense excitement; yet her eyes retained their sorrowful depth of expression; for it was not joy alone which thrilled that delicately-organized nervous system. Fear, anguish, and happiness, all had their portion in the tumult that lay hidden beneath the quiet outer seeming of one who already had learned to "suffer and be still."

Flora was performing a favorite waltz for the stranger, and Helen sat down near Mr. Forrester. He looked kindly at her, and said—

"My fair Pearl might exchange her *soubriquet* with bright little Bessie, if she were here tonight. The ruby's glow is on your cheek and

lips, my love; yet there is no gladness in your eyes. Confide in an old friend, Helen: perhaps he may be able to assist you."

Helen shook her head, and her lips trembled, but she said nothing for some moments. At length she seemed to rally her courage, and after sighing deeply, replied,

"I am in a difficulty I acknowledge, dear sir; but I believe it is only because I shrink from a very important decision which must come from my own heart."

"And is that a divided empire?"

"Ah! yes; cruelly, cruelly so. It is torn by the conflict between duty and inclination."

Mr. Forrester looked steadily at her, and slowly said—

"In your case I know not what to advise, Helen; but it is my firm conviction that if duty were *always* consulted before inclination, the world would be better, wiser, and happier."

"But individual cases may be exceptions," she hurriedly responded. "In some instances it is so difficult—so almost impossible, to follow the straight path marked out by duty—that, I despair of walking in it."

"Never despair of that which is right, Helen. You know not what strength will be given you, if you go forward with that consciousness."

Helen shuddered, and seemed ready to burst in tears.

"But I am not strong. Oh! weaker, weaker than a child I feel myself, and there are *some* things my heart can never nerve itself to struggle against. I wish I were cold, hard, impassive as the iceberg. Utter insensibility were preferable to the wild rush of thought and feeling, which often seems as if it will destroy me."

The poor girl bent her head forward, and pressed her fingers upon her eyelids, to repress the bitter tears which threatened to gush forth and destroy all the barriers she had been able to raise against the tumult of emotion within her breast. Mr. Forrester regarded her compassionately.

"Poor dove," he murmured, "life's bitterness has come early to thy heart; no wonder that it writhes and struggles beneath the terrible burden laid on every human soul. Helen, who is it says, 'to bear is to conquer our fate?' Can not that idea inspire you with heroism? Perhaps imagination exaggerates your difficulties?"

"No, no! I stand on a dividing line, which I *must* pass. On one side lie hope, happiness, and *disobedience*—on the other, despair, degradation, and *duty*. Let us speak no more on this subject; I can not bear it. I would have sought Flora tonight, even if I had known that the storm in all its fury would overtake me. In her I can trust—on her I can lean."

"Because she sustains you in the path to which your own wishes point? Is it not so, Helen? My child, I fear that Flora is not the wisest counselor you can have."

Helen looked at him with a frightened expression, but her reply was prevented by the approach of the others. Lenox drew the portfolio of engravings toward him, and selecting from them

the few colored pictures, sought to compliment his young hostess on their execution.

"I am entitled to very little credit for the drawing," she replied, "for my father assisted me materially. He has viewed the scenes there sketched; and, indeed, the greater portion of them are copied from his own drawings made on the spot."

"Ah! you have been a wanderer in foreign lands I perceive, Mr. Forrester. Here are scenes familiar to the imagination of every reader of European travels."

Mr. Forrester bowed, and Flora took up an exquisitely-colored little picture.

"Here is the grave of Keats, with an Italian sun shining over the mound which received the mortal part of that divinely-gifted spirit. This is the palazzo occupied by Byron in the romantic city of Venice. I can imagine him standing on the balcony with his friend Tom Moore, and amusing himself with fancying the rush and stare that would take place, if the good people passing below only knew what world-wide celebrities were looking down upon them."

"Are you an admirer of Byron, Miss Forrester?" asked Lenox, looking in her bright face.

"You mean, 'Am I an admirer of his genius?' I presume; for the man himself seems to be a satyr forever struggling against the divinity within him. As to his great gifts, there can be but one opinion. Italy, the world-renowned, has never found a voice so worthy to sound her praise as this English aristocrat. Read Childe Harold, and then tell me if her beauty, her desolation, and her glory do not rise up before the mental vision with a halo his genius has thrown around them? The inspiration and the theme were worthy of each other."

"He is not the only poet who has contributed to give Italy the renown she possesses."

"True; I do not forget the classic authors, but I can scarcely appreciate them justly; for, except through translations, I know nothing of them. I speak as one of the million, to whose sympathies Childe Harold is addressed. Written in our own noble language, the inspiration of the poet comes home to the heart at once, and without seeking to analyze his merits, through the subtle distinctions of criticism, we *feel* that this is a draught from the pure Helicon, worthy to have been made an offering to the gods themselves."

"You are, indeed, an enthusiast in your appreciation. Had you been old enough to read his poems when his fame was at its zenith, your admiration would probably have led you to some of the extravagances practiced by his adorers. I believe at eighteen I must plead guilty myself to an open collar, à la Byron, and great care of my hands, to render them as aristocratic in appearance as possible."

Flora laughed, and glanced at the white hand which held another picture toward her.

"I do not know—I can not answer for what absurdities I might have been guilty of in a different state of being, and under different influ-

ences. Ah! here is another celebrity brought before the magic mirror of the imagination. This is the residence of Madame de Staël, in Switzerland. In such a lovely retirement, it seems to me I could scarcely bring myself to regret even Paris itself."

"Because you have been reared amidst the beauties of nature, and have never had an opportunity of knowing what Paris is to a Parisian," said her father. "I, who have spent several years in that city, can understand how one educated within the sphere of its excitements found the most charming abode beyond its walls excessively monotonous."

"After all, it was unworthy of the conqueror of nations to be afraid of a woman. As one of the sex, I rather pique myself on the fact that Napoleon found it necessary to send her into exile."

"I suspect it was not so much fear as irritation. He, who subjected all before him, did not choose to have an opponent rise up on his daily path from that sex whom he believed, within his soul, born to the subordinate destiny of ministering to the pleasures of his lordly race," said Lenox.

"It is some consolation, at all events, that his culminating star was that of a woman: with her, his fortune arose to its zenith; without her, it sunk into nothingness. In his fate, it seems to me the fable of Prometheus is almost realized. The one stole fire from heaven, the other scattered it in a desolating shower over the greater portion of the civilized world, and was then chained to that rock-bound island, with regret and remorse forever gnawing at his mighty heart."

"That heart which the rats are said to have stolen after his death! Oh, greatness, thou art indeed a shadow! But what do you think of Madame de Staël herself? She, too, has linked her fame with that of Italy."

"Yes; and Corinne is a noble work; but it does not live within my memory in vivid pictures, as do the words of our English bard."

"But the woman herself, with her marriage of convenience at twenty, and that of love at forty; the last formed, too, with one so much her junior."

"Apropos to the last is a remark lately said to be made by Louis Philippe—that 'genius never grows old.' Madame de Staël at forty, with her vividness of perception, her impassioned spirit, was not in heart really older than M. Rocca at twenty-seven; than the majority of her own sex at twenty-five. Of her first union we should not judge without taking into consideration the custom of her country, which seeks an eligible match for a young girl without allowing a choice on her part. In early youth, dazzled by the brilliancy of the position offered her, she accepted it, without asking of her heart the sanction of affection. She lived to feel its want most bitterly, and when such love was offered as she felt to be an echo from the deep fount of feeling within her own breast, she scorned the censure of the world, and linked her fate with that of him who gave it."

"I can scarcely fancy that I am listening to a

young lady who has scarcely yet passed out of her teens herself," said Lenox, with a smile. "I could almost imagine the precocious wisdom flowing from your lips the oracles of some ancient dame, who has made life and its strangely changing phases the subject of study throughout her whole existence."

Miss Forrester placed her hand upon her father's shoulder, and said:

"Here is the source of any premature wisdom I may display. I have been the companion of my father, and his opinions have become mine. I dare not claim originality in my views. I have read with him, have discussed literature and art with him, until my mind seems only a feeble reflection of his own. I gladly give all the credit where it is justly due."

Her father raised the slender hand, and tenderly pressed it, as he said:

"I am not ashamed of my pupil, though she sometimes soars so far beyond me that I tremble for her safe return from the land of dreams and visions. My daughter is a great enthusiast, Mr. Lenox, sensibly as she has been talking. It is one thing, you know, to have opinions, and quite another to act upon them."

"But I seek to be wise, dear father, and we are told that 'they who seek diligently shall find.'"

"True; earnestness of purpose can accomplish most things. Without it, we are poor creatures, reeled about by every breeze of fancy. But let us have one more song, my love. Sing me the

Mariner; it will blend with the wailing of the storm finely, and send our thoughts abroad over the wide ocean on this dreary night, and give us some faint idea of the toils and perils of those who 'go down to the sea in ships.'" Flora obeyed, and sang this fine old air with great expression. As the concluding strain died away an enameled clock on the mantel struck the hour of ten. Rising from her seat, she took a small silver bell from a stand, and rang a clear peal upon it. Lenox supposed this was a summons to bring in chamber-lights; but the door leading into the dining-room unclosed, and the servants belonging to the household were seen arranged around the open space.

At a sign from her father, Flora again placed herself at the piano, and played an old-fashioned church melody, which Helen joined her in singing. When this was completed, Mr. Forrester read a few verses from a prayer-book; then they all knelt, and he repeated the simple and beautiful service for the evening, not forgetting to pray for the storm-tossed sailor on the seething main.

A young negro then brought in a waiter, on which the chamber candles were placed. Flora kissed her father, and with a bright smile to her guest, said—

"We bid you good night Mr. Lenox, and I trust that Braeburn will offer you the welcome of balmy sleep and bright dreams."

"Thank you. I doubt it not, for I shall dream of its fair mistress and her charming friend."

CHAPTER III.

UNCLOSING a door opposite to the one leading into her father's apartment, the two girls crossed a small vestibule containing a work-stand and several rocking-chairs. Flora's own room opened from this. It was a large, airy apartment, luxuriously furnished; a carpet, woven in imitation of moss, with a tuft of flowers occasionally peeping through the varied shades of green, covered the floor; a French bedstead, with lace curtains and snowy coverlet, stood on one side, and between two large windows was an *armoire* of dark mahogany, the doors of which were mirrors; a handsome dressing-stand occupied a recess beside the chimney, and on it were two cases of ebony inlaid with pearl—one was a dressing-case, and the other a work-box, for the lady of Braeburn did not lead a useless life, as will be seen.

A set of swinging shelves hung against the wall, on which might be found the favorite authors of the young heiress. They were principally travels and biographies, for the world in which we live was a subject of inexhaustible interest to her; and with the remarkable people who have figured in it during their brief day, she

sought to be acquainted through the memorials left of them: a few volumes of standard poetry, and several of Scott's novels, were found among them.

As Flora closed the door, her companion sprang forward, placed her hand upon the work-box, and said—

"The key—give it to me quickly, dear Flora. I am in a tremor of anxiety and impatience. Cruel girl! how could you keep me in such suspense during all these long hours?"

"Had I not the right to withhold the sight of my own letter from you, *ma chérie*? even if it was written by your lover: especially as I knew if you read it, you would become excited, and shed tears—probably become so nervous as to compel you to remain in solitude during the remainder of the evening. Your Argus-eyed aunt would have been sure to hear of your sudden indisposition, and, with her usual shrewdness, she would soon have arrived at the truth. Then behold our plans shattered, our intercourse prevented, until she has made you the wife of the fascinating Mr. Hilton."

"God forbid!" said Helen, with energy. "You

were right, love—I know that, but I have suffered tortures. Open, open quickly, or my impatient heart will burst its bounds! It threatens to suffocate me now with its wild throbbing."

Flora saw that her excitement was indeed great, and taking a small key from her watch-chain, she unclosed the box. Helen snatched a letter that lay in view, and found the seal unbroken.

"How is this? It is addressed to you, and still unopened."

"I reserved it for you to uncloset. My share in it is small I know, so break the seal as quickly as you please."

Helen did not need a second permission; her trembling fingers soon extricated from the envelope an inclosure addressed to herself; she stood beside the stand, and with many varying emotions perused her letter. She wept, smiled, and trembled by turns.

"You see I was right!" said Flora. "If I had given it to you when you first came, you would have been in too agitated a condition to join us in the parlor."

"Yes, dear, considerate friend, you were right, as you always are. I have been inexpressibly wretched for many days past, and now I am equally happy, simply because I hold in my hand the renewed assurance of what I have never doubted. Oh! there must be something divine in such a passion! for my heart lately so crushed, so wretched, thrills with an emotion kindred to the bliss of heaven's angels, as I read his words of trust and deep affection."

Her face was radiant with happiness as she stood with clasped hands and half-parted lips.

"And this trust, Helen?" asked her friend. "Do you still hesitate about the right course of action? I think it wrong to vacillate between the two. Your aunt can not force you to accept a lover against your own inclinations, and you should at once make your intended course clear to her, as well as to Mr. Hilton."

An expression of painful indecision crossed the features of Helen, and she sighed deeply.

"Ah, Flora, you do not at all understand my aunt. There are considerations too, which bind me to perform her bidding, even if my heart should break in the struggle to obey. It is this conflict which makes me wretched; you do not know how utterly dependent I and mine are upon her."

"I do know, Helen, and I have decided that nothing short of actual force should make a girl give her hand to one man, while her heart clings to another. Think of it, Helen; the wrong to both, the deeper wrong to herself. Oh no! Gold has been called a curse, and if it leads to this, it is rightly so called. Poverty, want of luxury, can be borne, but never want of self-respect."

"But my aunt has been a parent to me; how then can I trample on her commands—bring down sorrow upon my own mother? Flora, mine is a cruel position; wrong and blight must fall, whichever way my decision tends."

"My dear Helen, you must first be true to yourself, and the inalienable right all human beings possess to secure their own happiness, provided in so doing they do not actually injure another. Mrs. Wilmot is unreasonable, for there is no rational objection to Mr. Clinton; he is a gentleman, a man of good education, and respectable family; he is not rich, but he can support you in comfort, and has a prospect of becoming independent. Merely to gratify her wish to see you the wife of a man of wealth, she recklessly thwarts this well-grounded attachment, and would force you, shrinking and heart-broken, into the arms of another. Is this right? Is it just, Helen?"

Helen raised her pale face—

"When I am with you, Flora; while I listen to you, I feel as if armed for resistance to the will of others; but my own heart so strongly prompts me to the same course; my soul thrills with such happy thoughts at the idea of controlling my own destiny, that I shrink back. The path of duty never was so bright, so glowing with happiness."

"That is one of Mrs. Wilmot's blue notions, which your own good sense should enable you to correct. According to her, one would think that we are only put in this world as in a sort of purgatory, to expiate the sins of some former state of being. On the contrary, I insist that our great Father intended us to be happy, and therefore he has scattered the means of enjoyment in lavish profusion every where. If we are true to ourselves, I believe the means of securing contentment, at least, are placed within the reach of all."

"But God himself says, 'Honor thy father and thy mother,' and my aunt stands in the relation of a parent to me. Her authority is also sustained by that of my own mother."

"Because with her it is a question of personal interest. She looks on four younger children, whose future must be provided for; and she offers her eldest born as the sacrifice on the altar of maternal pride and worldly aggrandizement. I have done, Helen. I have pointed out to you what I consider the right path; your own heart indicates it, and you are left to decide for yourself."

Flora wrapped her dressing-robe around her, and with great energy loosened the bands which confined her glossy hair. A young negro girl was now summoned, and, with evident pride, she proceeded to brush the silken tresses confided to her care, and arrange them for the night.

Helen again bent over her letter, and seemed absorbed in its contents, while Flora took a book, and was soon buried in its pages.

All lovers of reading consider books a blessing, but by no class are they so highly appreciated as by those who live in the by-ways of the world; the out-of-the-way places, in which the bustle and the stir of life are never known. Amidst the retirement of country existence, they create a mimic life, often invested with greater charms than that of reality. The city man, in the rush

of business and pleasure, has little time to bestow on books; it is the student in some retired nook who most truly appreciates the excellence of an author; who dwells on his beauties with greatest delight, and is too grateful for the pleasure afforded him to become critical. Whereas in a city, two thirds of the readers "are nothing, if not critical," and the work which furnishes them with the means of uttering a clever sarcasm which will tell in society, is sacrificed to their own self-glorification.

Flora Forrester was a passionate reader, and her secluded life was filled with pleasant friends from the realm of imagination—friends who never bore us, for we can lay them aside when they become wearisome. Bright forms, crowned with the gorgeous fancy of the poet, hovered around her daily paths; they came at her bidding, and departed as willingly; holding themselves always in readiness to emerge from the bosky dells and Eden-like groves, in which their homes forever are. Oh, blessed power of the imagination, which people a realm in which the soul can more freely breathe! in which we behold the representatives of our earthly nature, idealized into the beauty they would have worn had man never fallen—had the blight of sin never entered the world.

Helen declined the offered services of Jetty, for such was the fanciful name bestowed by Mr. Forrester on the merry-looking negress who officiated as lady's-maid to his daughter; and the girl was proud of the soubriquet, for, as she said herself—

"Ole massa only give de name of jewels to four young ladies. Miss Flora be his diamond, Miss Helen his pearl, Miss Bessy Graham his ruby, and I be Jetty," and she had almost forgotten her original name of Kitty in her fanciful appellation.

As the girl retired from the apartment, Flora laid down her book, and said:

"How did it happen, Helen, that you had an opportunity of forming an attachment for Charles Clinton in so strict a school as that of Madame B——'s? I thought young gentlemen were eschewed there, as devoutly as in the walls of a nunnery."

"True enough; but it so happened that I was ill, almost unto death, during the first month of my residence under Madame B——'s roof. I was a stranger; and although I was not really neglected, still there were hours of lonely suffering, which no one came to relieve or cheer. One evening I was lying in a state of hopeless dejection, weeping such tears of weakness and desolation as only the sick sojourner in a strange land can shed; when my door opened, and a young girl, not unlike yourself, came into my room. She had a sweet, earnest voice, which sounded at once like that of a friend. She drew near the bed as lightly as a fairy, and told me she was a good nurse, and would assist me to get well. She arranged my pillows—removed the cups which had been used—bathed my brow tenderly, and sprinkled an aromatic essence over the

floor. This young girl occupied the dormitory opposite to my own, and she had remarked my languid and suffering appearance as she passed my half-open door. She requested permission to visit me, and had it not been for her quick sympathy, her lively conversation, I do not think that I should ever again have lifted my head from my pillow; for, young as I was, I believe I was dying of hopelessness."

"My dear Helen, that is a strange disease for a child to suffer from."

"I was no longer a child. I was nearly fifteen years old, and the scenes I had witnessed in my own home, before I left, had made me prematurely old. After the sudden death of my father, and his utter ruin became known, you are aware that my aunt adopted me, and sent me to the North to complete my education. Before I recovered from the stunning blow which had so recently overwhelmed me, I found myself suddenly thrown among entire strangers. Ah! at no period of life can such things be felt more keenly than I felt them then. The very elasticity of my youth seemed destroyed; and but for Mary Clinton, I believe I should have died without a struggle. Perhaps it had been better, even thus."

"Never yield to despondency, dear Helen. There is work yet before you, which, if unaccomplished, leaves your destiny unfulfilled. Hasten to the *dénoûment*—I am impatient for the meeting with your conquering hero."

"It came about very naturally. When vacation came, I was still thin and weak. My physician said that country air would restore me: Madame B—— intended visiting a fashionable watering-place, but that was not what I needed: the quiet and the pure air of a secluded country home, free from all excitement, the doctor desired for me; and when Mary Clinton gave me a cordial invitation to accompany her to the homestead of her parents, the autocrat of our little empire signified her consent. This was not done, however, without first ascertaining that the only son of the family was absent in Europe, and was not expected home for several months."

"On the appointed day, Mr. Clinton, a venerable, gray-haired old gentleman, came in a plain chaise, and took us to his residence. It was an old-fashioned farm-house, about six miles from the city; and the green yard, the old trees, and the odor of the flowers, gave the first thrill of pleasure to my heart which it had felt for months. The good mother received us so maternally, so kindly—for I too shared her caresses—that from the first moment I felt at home. There were two younger daughters at home, but the eldest born, the son of whom I heard frequent mention made, had gone to Europe, as supercargo on a ship in which his father owned an interest."

"To cut a long story short, he came back sooner than Madame B—— expected. We met beneath his father's roof, and formed an attachment, which I believe is of sufficient strength to influence both to our latest hour. His parents sanctioned it; I dreamed not of opposition from

my family, and during the two years I remained in Philadelphia I occasionally saw him, and constantly corresponded with him, through the good offices of his sister. This was accidentally discovered by Madame B——; my aunt was immediately informed of all she knew, and I was hurried home without being permitted to pay a farewell visit to the friends who had cherished me as if I had been their own child."

"On my arrival at home, I was at once informed by my aunt that she had other views for me, and I should never, with her consent, be united to my lover. I then felt and understood how imprudently I had acted. Her anger when I acknowledged my partiality for Charles was terrible. Then I was made to feel the dependence of those who are dear to me, in all its bitterness."

Helen paused, and Flora said—

"Mrs. Wilnot endeavors to secure your submission by threatening to withdraw her present assistance from your mother; but even if you refuse obedience, I scarcely think she will do so. She has no children of her own; and as the younger members of your family can not be held accountable for your fault, it will be manifestly unjust for her to visit her displeasure on them."

"If I thought so, I would not hesitate; but my aunt is a singular woman, and often acts from caprice."

"One thing I must say, Helen, I will no longer be the medium of keeping up this correspondence, unless you pledge yourself to be true to Clinton. This want of decision on your part, will be productive of terrible unhappiness to both of you, if you do not overcome it. I would tell you to wait, and by your affectionate attentions, endeavor to soften your aunt; but I know it will be impossible for you to live in the same house with Mrs. Wilnot, while you maintain one independent feeling of your own. Your lover is now settled in business: marry him, and leave her rage to grow cool at its leisure. Excuse me, but you know if I speak at all, it must be with perfect frankness."

Much further conversation ensued between the friends, and the timid, shrinking Helen at length consented to write to her lover to come to the South, and she would give him her hand—even without the consent of her connections. This appeared to the more self-relying Flora the only course left to rescue Helen from a very painful position; one of the very few which could justify deliberate opposition to the wishes of her family.

It was past midnight when Flora arose from her seat and unclosed a window which looked toward the stream. There was a lull in the storm, and the clouds had broken partially away, leaving the pale, watery-looking moon sailing through a sea of silver haze. Volumes of white mist rolled above the shores of the creek, and darkly below them roared and eddied the whirling waves, where so lately murmured a peaceful streamlet. The wind came in fitful gusts, as if the spirit of the blast was moaning over the desolation it had brought to the heart of the woodland. Trees were stripped of their foliage, and the naked branches arose grimly and darkly toward heaven, as if reproaching it with their unsightly appearance.

"It is grand to listen to the rushing of restless waters on a stormy night," said Flora. "It stirs my soul with emotions kindred to those of the soldier who hears the martial music sound to the charge of battle."

"How different we are, Flora. To me, there is no sound so soothing."

"Very natural. You are quiet and given to dreaming; while I like to encounter opposition and overcome it. The flowing waters are to you a type of beauty, grace, and elegance, on which your fancy loves to dwell; while to me, their resistless sweep, the rapidity and certainty with which they dash away every opposing barrier, find a sympathetic chord in my bosom. You are really shivering, Helen. Pardon me, this chill night-wind is not laden with the softness of the South. Let us to bed, and 'in the coil of sweet dreams forget the inevitable ills that flesh is heir to.'"

CHAPTER IV.

HELEN SOMERS was the daughter of a vain and worldly mother, who had once played a brilliant part on the stage of life, and her days were now spent in repining over the change in her worldly position. In youth, Mrs. Somers had been beautiful, and her fine person won the admiration of a man who was supposed to be the possessor of great wealth: he was merely a reckless and daring speculator, whose available means were really very limited. Mr. Somers was a dashing, gay man of the world, whose motto was "Live while we do live," which with him meant, enjoy all the world offers, whether it be just yours or not. He owned a magnificent residence in the town of Natchez, which was sumptuously furnished. He gave splendid entertainments, of which his beautiful wife did the honors with unexceptionable grace, and he was what the world calls a happy man; but beneath this brilliant exterior lay coiled the serpent, whose trail was indeed over all his earthly flowers.

Mr. Somers knew that all this seeming prosperity had a false basis, and at any moment the brilliant fabric his own genius for financiering alone sustained, might crumble into fragments at his feet; yet he resolved to "play the play out," and leave the future to take care of itself. He sometimes felt remorse when he looked upon his children, and thought of the lot which probably awaited them; he however, consoled himself with reflecting that the girls promised to be as handsome as their mother, and would probably marry well; and the boys could struggle upward as he had done himself.

At length a crisis came. Ruin could no longer be averted, even by the bold genius who held the fortunes of the firm in his hands, and the house of Somers and West was pronounced insolvent. On the same evening, Mr. Somers retired to a room appropriated exclusively to his own use, after informing his wife that an unusual press of business would occupy him during the greater portion of the night. As this was no uncommon occurrence, and Mrs. Somers was in complete ignorance of what had taken place, she merely gave the necessary orders to secure him from interruption, and then dressed for a brilliant party, where she found herself an unusual object of attention to the gay crowd around her.

A few whispers met her ear which puzzled her, but she soon dismissed them from her mind, and gave herself up to the enjoyment of the evening.

At a late hour she returned home, and in the morning did not wake until long after the usual business hours of her husband. When she at length rang, and ordered her breakfast to be brought up, she observed that the servant who entered, wore an air of great perturbation.

"Has any thing happened, Janet? Is either of the children ill, that you look so alarmed?" she asked.

"No-o, ma'am," stammered the woman. "The children are quite well; but—oh! mistress, I can not tell you."

Very much alarmed, Mrs. Somers threw a shawl around her, and pushing the servant aside, when she would have impeded her, rushed instinctively toward the apartment of her husband. There she found the whole household collected around the sofa on which he reclined. The group parted, and she beheld him she sought lying still, white, and cold, evidently in the iron embrace of that slumber which only the last trump shall break.

Papers lay scattered over the table, the candles had burned down in their sockets, and there was every appearance that the grim destroyer had claimed him as he slept the sleep of weariness and exhaustion after his midnight vigils; but many hearts doubted, and scarcely one of the frightened group failed to come to the just conclusion, that by his own agency the spirit had been severed from its earthly tenement.

Mrs. Somers fell into violent hysteric spasms, and was conveyed to her room. A dark suspicion of the cause of the suicide deprived her of all rest. She did not so much mourn the husband, whose prosperity she had shared, as she trembled before the probable ruin his death heralded. She endeavored to console herself with the thought, that from the wreck of so large an estate a handsome competency might yet be preserved to herself and her children; but soon this last hope was torn from her.

It was immediately known that the ruin was complete, and to escape disgrace, Somers had braved death. By the exertions of her friends, an income of a few hundred dollars was with difficulty secured to the widow and her helpless family; and this gay butterfly, who had lived for the world alone, found herself dependent for actual subsistence on a pittance which would not once have covered the expenses of her toilet.

She left the town which had been the scene of

her prosperity, and buried herself in a small cottage in the country, which was offered her as a shelter by her more fortunate sister.

Helen Somers was the eldest child, and she was keenly alive to all the wretchedness which this change in their fortunes produced. She had been tenderly attached to her father, and this fatal event gave a shock to her sensibilities, from which it was feared she would never recover. A morbid melancholy preyed upon her mind, which the selfish repinings of her mother did not tend to soothe. Helen was old enough to understand and sympathize with her grief; and no feeling for the evident depression of this young being, compelled to bear so heavy a burden, induced the mother to refrain from adding to the sorrow which lay deep in her lacerated heart. She had heard the whispers of others, and comprehended them; and her vivid imagination, her quick intuition, enabled her to penetrate the circle of horror from which there was no escape for her beloved father, save death. She grew wan and thin, but her mother attributed this to the change which had taken place in their mode of living, and she would probably have perished beside her blind and self-occupied parent, had not Mrs. Wilmot paid them a visit, and observed her condition.

Mrs. Wilmot was several years older than her sister, and she assumed the direction of her affairs as a matter of right, for she was a woman who managed every thing that came within her influence. She at once decided that Helen must be removed from home, and as she intended taking her under her own care, she should be forthwith sent to a northern school, where change of scene and constant employment would arouse her from the state of languor into which she had fallen. Helen could only acquiesce, and the sufferings she there endured have been depicted in her own words to her friend.

We have said that Helen lacked decision; she was too easily influenced by those she loved, to sacrifice her independence of action; too ready to risk her own happiness for their gratification. This proceeded from great generosity of temper, but, with her, it was carried to such excess as to become a serious fault; and Flora Forrester was right when she warned her against its influence on her future happiness.

Mrs. Wilmot was a most intensely worldly woman. She beheld the influence of wealth everywhere around her; she remembered her own insignificance before she attained to its possession; her sudden consequence after she gained it, even by such questionable means as a marriage with her dissipated husband, and she naturally considered money as the great necessity of life. To be rich, was with her every thing that was desirable.

The failure and sudden death of her brother-in-law had been a severe blow to her, and she did not spare his memory even in her conversations with her sister. To these reproaches to the dead Mrs. Somers listened without reply, for she was too politic to offend the only friend to whom she looked for assistance; and after Mrs. Wilmot

had exhausted her spleen, she informed the widow that her intention was to adopt Helen, and marry her to some wealthy man, so soon as she was old enough to make her *début* in society. In the mean time, she would allow her a sufficient sum in addition to her income, to enable her to live in comfort so long as her daughter was amenable to her authority. Should Helen rebel against her wishes, the annuity should cease at once.

Thus she enlisted the mother on her side, and all the letters Helen received from home, tended to impress on her the necessity of implicit obedience to the wishes of her aunt. The poor girl often felt crushed by the weight of obligation she was under to Mrs. Wilmot, and at times considered herself bound by every tie of honor and gratitude to sacrifice herself to the welfare of her family.

Most unfortunately for Helen, she formed a strong attachment for a man whose high crime in the estimation of her kindred was, that he was not born to the inheritance of wealth, but had his own fortune to make. In her own mind Mrs. Wilmot had already settled the future destiny of Helen, and consequently her unfortunate prepossession in favor of another met with no mercy from her. Her husband had a wealthy cousin, who was a frequent visitor at her house, and his open admiration of the childish grace of her niece, suggested the idea of a future union between the two.

With her talent for managing others, Mrs. Wilmot did not doubt the ultimate success of her plans; and ruthless in her determination to bend Helen to her will, she spared no effort to keep alive the interest of Mr. Hilton in this fair young being during her absence.

This was by no means difficult. Mr. Hilton was a man of few ideas, and tenaciously cherished those he was so fortunate as to possess. Mrs. Wilmot had adroitly hinted to him the eligibility of a union with her beautiful niece, when her education was completed; and gradually the thought became to him one of the fixed facts of the future. Helen was to return lovely, charming, and accomplished, to accept his hand, and grace his station.

It never occurred to him that she would object to so eligible an offer as himself, and her unfortunate prepossession in favor of another was cautiously withheld from him by Mrs. Wilmot. As she had that evening said to Mr. Forrester, a crisis in her destiny had arrived, for Mr. Hilton had formally proposed, and insisted on an explicit answer. Her aunt had set before her all the evil consequences to those she was bound to consider, if she refused so unexceptionable an offer, and poor Helen, tossed on a sea of perplexity and doubt, knew not what decision to make. On one hand stood her lover radiant in happiness, claiming the pledge she had solemnly given; on the other, the cold, imperious woman, whose iron will had completely overshadowed her dream of bliss. Her mother, her young sister, and orphan brothers seemed to claim from her the acceptance which

would greatly improve their worldly condition, as Mr. Hilton made most liberal offers of assistance to his future mother-in-law.

Helen wavered in her decision until the bridegroom they would force on her acceptance came

before her excited fancy in all his repulsiveness; then a thrill of aversion—a shiver of terror, at the idea of belonging to him, gave her strength to brave the united power of the world to yield her up to so dreadful a fate.

CHAPTER V.

THE following morning arose clear, brilliant, and beautiful. The calm sky bent as lovingly over the quiet valley as if no cloud had ever marred its blue tranquillity. One who has never beheld it, can not imagine the lucid atmosphere of a southern sky, after a driving storm has cleared away every impurity; the windows of heaven seem to have unclosed, and suffered a portion of its own radiance to transmute the far depths of ether, and while gazing in infinity, the imagination soars away to the great white throne on which sits Him whose footstool is the earth.

The evidences of the storm were seen in the trees stripped of their autumn foliage, the swollen creek, whose waters were nearly even with their banks, and went careering by in hoarse murmurs, as if wailing over their sudden descent from their elevated home to lave again that planet which they arrogantly fancied they had forever soared above. The air was cool and invigorating, without being sharp; for in that fair land, when the bright sunshine lays glittering upon hill and valley, it brings with it a genial glow even in the depth of winter.

Flora arose early, and quietly performed her matin toilet, for she saw that Helen lay in a troubled slumber, and her pale cheek revealed to her quick sympathy the fact that she had passed a sleepless night. Noiselessly closing the door after her, she went forth to her morning duties. She visited the kitchen, and gave her orders for the day to the sable queen of that realm—thence she passed to the poultry-yard, where throngs of feathered flatterers were receiving their morning meal from an elderly negress. The old woman smiled as she held her basket to her young lady, and said—

"Miss Flora, you is bright as de flowers dere-selves dis mornin'. I wonder what de buckra gemman think o' de diamond o' Braeburn?"

This was said with a sly smile, as she peered in the face of her young mistress, to detect any emotion of pride or pleasure in reference to the new guest, who was already an object of speculation among the slaves; for to them it was a matter of much importance that their future owner should choose for her husband one likely to be a kind and judicious master. Hence their young lady's suitors were of nearly as much importance to them as to herself. Flora laughed as she plunged her hand among the golden grains of corn, and scattered them to the fluttering throng at her feet.

"I do not much care what he thinks, Aunt

Annis," replied she, using the term common among southern children to elderly slaves under whose eye they have been reared. "But I rather suspect he thinks

"None knew me but to love me,
None name me but to praise."

Mistaken sadly though, isn't he?"

"Not 'cordin' to my notion any how, Miss Flo'."

"Ah! you are as great a flatterer as our new visitor, Aunt Annis, and I shall not stay any longer to be puffed up by your praises. Good-by, pretty creatures," and she scattered her last handful of corn, as she turned away with a light step and beaming smile.

"I mus' take anoder look at dis tall white man," muttered the crone. "Miss Flo' preten' she no like him, but I can see by-de sparkle in her eye, and de color on her cheek, dat she be better pleased wif his visit dan any dat's gone befo'."

Chuckling over her supposed discovery, she continued her daily duties, with a new subject of interest for her thoughts.

Flora proceeded toward a small house which stood on one side of the yard. This contained several rooms: in the outer one was a loom and a spinning-jenny, at which a woman and a boy were at work, converting the cotton grown on the place into cloth for home consumption. Exchanging a few words with the woman, she passed into the next apartment, which was occupied by the seamstress. Shelves lined the walls, and on them were more than a hundred suits of winter clothing already completed, and ticketed with the names of their future owners; the mulatto in charge of this apartment was busy at a large table cutting out new garments, which herself, and a young girl who assisted her, were to fashion into shape. This woman was a tall, fine specimen of her caste; but there was an expression of care and weariness upon her features, strikingly in contrast with the broad, shining good-humor of her black co-laborer. The glitter of her intensely dark eyes revealed the curse of the mulatto—an evil and irritable temper. Occupying an anomalous position between the two races; holding herself far superior to the negroes, feeling keenly her inferiority to the whites, the heritage of this unhappy being seemed to have been scorn for one race, and hatred toward the other. Mr. Forrester purchased her of a slave-trader in New Orleans, who recommended her as a good seamstress. She appeared quite indifferent to her fate; and in reply to his question as

to her willingness to live on a plantation, she had replied—

"It is now a matter of no importance to me where I live. One place is as good as another."

Trusting that kind treatment would ameliorate her bitter temper, Mr. Forrester became her owner, and she had now been a resident at Braeburn more than a year. A capable and faithful servant she proved; but she held herself aloof from all intercourse with the blacks, for she happened to be the only one of her own caste on the place. Only once had her fierce temper broken the bonds she had imposed upon it, and then she nearly strangled her assistant in the sewing-room, on account of a few impertinent words addressed to her by that sable handmaiden. At the intercession of Flora her punishment for this offense was light; she understood Lisette's isolation, and pitied her; she always showed marked consideration for her, and trusted that the woman appreciated her kindness, though an occasional gleam in her fierce eye sometimes startled her into the momentary belief that she herself was an object of aversion to the unhappy being. Yet the apparent improbability of such being the case, again caused her to dismiss the thought as idle and injurious to one who was dependent upon her. Yet such was truly the fact; for the ill-disciplined creature cherished a bitter spirit of malice and envy toward her mistress, because she was beautiful, prosperous, and happy.

This morning there was a gleam of malicious triumph in her eyes as she looked on the bright face she so loathed, that she would with a look have marred its loveliness, had such fatal power been hers. Flora, without remarking it, inquired after the progress of her labors; approved of the work submitted to her inspection, gave a few directions, and then said—

"You have been very closely confined of late, Lisette, and as you are pretty well through with the fall work, I will give you a holiday on this beautiful day. You may take the sorrel horse and ride over to —, and choose a dress for yourself. I will give you an order for it when you are ready."

This was an indulgence rarely accorded to the most favored slaves; but Flora had remarked the aversion of Lisette to wearing the same material worn by those around her, and she hoped to afford her a gratification by permitting her to choose the color and pattern of her own dresses.

The woman looked pleased, though she coldly answered,

"Thank you, Miss Flora; I will accept your offer, and I will not abuse your kindness by staying longer than is necessary."

"Oh, I give you the day, Lisette; for you have labored faithfully to get through with all this work. You may enjoy the holiday as suits your own humor. I only wish to render you happy, in return for your faithful services."

The woman smothered a deep sigh, and something like a tear glittered in her eyes as she turned away with muttered thanks for her kindness.

She could not graciously receive even a favor from the one she hated.

"Poor creature!" thought Flora, as she pensively turned away. "I am afraid she never will be happy here. I wish I knew her former history; perhaps such knowledge might enable me to ameliorate her fate."

She returned to her own apartment to find Helen awake and looking brighter than she had expected. While they again review the subject of the previous night, we will follow Lisette into her own room. This was a small chamber opening from the work-room: it contained a cot-bed, scrupulously clean; on one side was a wooden shelf, with a white drapery falling from it to the floor, and hanging above it was an oval mirror in an old-fashioned frame. A tin dressing-case, and a box covered with engravings highly varnished, stood upon it. Into the latter she threw her sewing materials, and then securely fastened the door. Unlocking a large trunk that stood beside the bed, she drew forth a basin and pitcher of fine porcelain; pouring water into the former, she stood before the mirror and laved her face, throat, and arms, and her features flashed with fierce pride as the yellow stain flowed into the limpid element, leaving a clear brown skin as soft and bright as satin, through which her rebellious blood gleamed rosily. She then threw aside the bandana which was twisted around her head in a species of turban, entirely concealing her hair; removing the comb which held it, shining waves of jet flowed over her graceful figure nearly to the floor. She carefully brushed this beautiful hair, and rolled its silken texture in curls around her fingers, as if its beauty were a delight to her; then with a sigh, and an expression of scornful bitterness, she gathered it together, and closely bound it around her head; after which she covered it with another gaudy bandana, carefully concealing every stray curl.

After a long, lingering glance upon her own striking features, she drew from her bosom a small box containing the yellow powder with which she discolored her complexion. As she applied it, she scoffingly muttered—

"The quadroon, or the mulatto, what matters it which I seem? Both bear the accursed stain which no time can wash out. I am fifth in descent from the pure African, and no bistre tint is seen even in my nails to betray the stain, but I bear it unmistakably in my glance; the fiendish sparkle of this black eye is never seen in one of pure Saxon blood. Ah, me! that such should have been my fate. I who once dreamed of so brilliant a future; whose ambition soared to so great a height, only to sink into such a slough of degradation and despair."

Her hands drooped—a tear fell upon her cheek, and for a few moments her whole form appeared to collapse with the anguish of some fearful remembrance. Quickly arousing herself, she proudly dashed away the evidence of her weakness, and hastily completed her toilet for an excursion she had already taken several times. In turning over the articles in her trunk in search

of something she needed, a small casket clasped with steel accidentally touched her hand. She shuddered, pushed it away; and then apparently changing her mind, she suddenly clutched it fiercely and touched a spring, as she muttered—"I will look on him once more."

The top flew up, and revealed a gold case containing the miniature of a young man of handsome person, with bright blue eyes and golden hair. A chain, with several costly trinkets attached to it, lay in one corner of the casket. Lisette bent over this image, and fastened her gleaming eyes upon it with almost maniac passion; she wildly pressed it to her lips, and muttered—

"Oh for one glance at the living representative of this senseless image! But one look of love from him, and I could die at his feet; yet, oh humiliation! he never loved me; he turned from me with indifference, even when he knew not I was one of a degraded race; that knowledge would only place the seal upon his aversion: he would *pity* me. My God, that I can only claim pity from the man for whom I would gladly die! Go, go, I will never again look upon you, cold semblance of one of that detested race, whose mission is to trample mine into the dust and mire of existence."

Passionately dashing the miniature into the case, she quickly shut it, and buried it in the depths of the trunk. She then drew forth a large bonnet, so made as to conceal the features completely; a deep curtain hung from it over her shoulders, reaching nearly to her waist; she again approached the mirror, and as she adjusted it, her curling lips continued to mutter—

"My mistress thinks she is very kind to permit me—me to go on this errand, to choose a pretty talisman, unlike the livery worn by the blacks around me. Ha! ha! if she only knew the past—if she could only glance into yonder receptacle, and behold the delicate and costly fabrics which once adorned my person, would she not be amazed? I hate this girl! yet she has given me no cause; she is always kind—always considerate. It is no wrong to me that she occupies a position similar to that I once thought my own; yet I feel, I know that a deeper wrong to me than that of holding me as her serf is yet to be perpetrated. I felt it the first hour in which we met, I feel it whenever she approaches me. Yes—I hate her!"

The last words were uttered with an expression of concentrated malice it would be vain to attempt to portray. After a pause she continued—

"There is a new lover too, and his name struck a thrill through my heart, for it is one of his; though fortunately not the last. That would indeed have added the last gall-drop to the cup my evil destiny compels me to quaff. Yet a wild thought occurs to me—"

She sat down pale and gasping for breath. A struggle enabled her to conquer this strong emotion, and she continued her mutterings, for amidst the isolation in which she lived, it had become a habit to commune aloud with her own thoughts—

"His father cast him off because he refused to wed the supposed heiress, with all her thousands. He came to Louisiana and took his fate into his own hands. I could not trace him when I inquired for him by his father's name; may he not have dropped the last one, and thus escaped me? Be still, my heart—do not break in this wild struggle to verify my fears. Ah, if it should be so!"

She buried her face in her hands, and her frame shivered and swayed to and fro with the storm of passionate emotion that swept through her bosom. At length she arose, calm and self-possessed; she put every thing in order in the room, securely locked the trunk, and then passing out, fastened the door carefully behind her.

That which we most dread we often intuitively feel must come to pass. Thus it was with the quadroon, as she went forth to verify what a lightning gleam of conviction had assured her was the truth. She steeled herself to the necessity of endurance, and not a nerve quivered as she firmly walked toward that wing of the house in which she knew the stranger had slept.

Mr. Forrester's apartment, and the one occupied by Lenox, opened on the gallery which extended around the eastern side of the building, and as she drew near, she heard the voices of the two gentlemen in conversation. They were standing together near the railing, and a convenient clump of shrubbery offered the concealment the intruder needed. She paused in its shadow, and with compressed breath and clinched hands, peered through the leaves upon the two. Lenox stood with his back toward her, and she gazed earnestly upon his figure; that, together with the turn of his head, which seemed so familiar, almost convinced her that her conjecture was correct, and she breathlessly awaited the confirmation the sound of his voice would give.

It came at last, and she fell as if pierced through the heart by the sudden blow of a sharp sword. In a few moments she recovered, arose, and proceeded slowly toward the apartment of Miss Forrester; lightly tapping upon the door, she requested Jetty, who unclosed it, to ask her mistress for the order she had promised her.

In a few moments Flora came into the vestibule herself, with a slip of paper in her hand, on which the order was written. She offered it to Lisette, as she said—

"As I passed through the yard, I told John to saddle the sorrel for you, Lisette, and you will find him in the stable-yard. You do not look much as if you have been used to doing such things for yourself."

"Thank you, ma'am," replied the woman in a choked voice, as she held out her hand for the paper; "you are too good. It is more than I deserve."

"Oh no—a faithful slave is valued as a true friend. The first you already are; the last I would have you become to me, Lisette."

"Friend—oh no! to that I can never dare aspire," replied the quadroon, with an emphasis Flora was far from comprehending, and she

passed from the room with a feeling of such deadly and bitter hatred in her heart, that the innocent being who elicited it would have shrunk away in terror from this serpent on her path, had she dreamed of the venom which rankled in her soul against her unconscious self.

In a few moments the figure of Lisette was seen proceeding at a rapid pace down the wind-

ing road which led to —. This village consisted of a church, store, blacksmith's shop, and post-office. Lisette rode directly there, selected her dress, and then seeking the deep woodland, she remained until late in the evening alternately revolving her future plans and yielding herself to wild paroxysms of fury against her mistress.

CHAPTER VI.

IT was known to the family at Braeburn that their guest had commenced his career fortuneless and friendless in the city of Natchez. He emigrated from the State of Georgia before he attained his twenty-third year, and his native home was never referred to by him. No one among his circle of acquaintances knew precisely from what portion of the State he came, for his reserve on the subject of his early life was impenetrable. He had commenced his career as a merchant's clerk in Natchez, and his prepossessing appearance and gentlemanly manners won warm friends for him wherever he was known.

His employer was a man advanced in years, with no family ties, and he became so warmly attached to young Lenox, that when his death occurred, two years after he entered his employment, he bequeathed to him the half of his fortune: the remainder went to a distant relative.

As necessity and not choice had influenced the fortunate legatee to adopt a mercantile career, he abandoned it so soon as there was no necessity for continuing in so arduous and uncertain a vocation. He invested the bequest of his deceased friend in a plantation on the coast above New Orleans, and spent several years in embellishing a place which already blossomed with tropical luxuriance. In the improvement of his property and cultivation of his mind three years glided by, and he began to feel that the solitary life he led might become nobler and happier by daily and hourly association with some bright spirit, who would bring sunshine to his lonely hearth.

Lenox did not set forth in search of a wife, for he was far too romantic to tolerate such an idea; but he resolved to put himself in the way of seeing some fairer specimens of "Heaven's last best gift to man" than his immediate neighborhood afforded. He therefore looked over the list of watering-places, and decided on a visit to the Bay of St. Louis; a place of popular resort for southern planters and their families.

Here he formed the acquaintance of Mr. Forrester and his daughter. They remained but a few days after his arrival, but in that time the sparkling grace of Flora made so vivid an impression upon him, that he sought no further. Before she left the Bay his mind was made up to follow her to her home, which he heard with

great pleasure was situated in the same neighborhood with the residence of Mr. Wilnot, who was an old acquaintance, and joint-heir with himself to the property left by his deceased friend.

Lenox had often been invited to Bellevue, and on his return home lost no time in apprising Mr. Wilnot that he would pay him the long promised visit in the course of the next month. He arrived on the preceding day, and gladly availed himself of the pretext of Helen's engagement with her friend, to accompany her to Braeburn, in defiance of the approaching storm.

All he beheld in that pleasant abode impressed him with a higher idea of his fair fascinator, and he arose from pleasant slumbers with the firm determination to win Flora Forrester as his bride, if it were possible to do so; and without being vain, he believed that he should succeed. "Will is power," says the adage, and his will was fixed as fate itself to attain to the accomplishment of this coveted destiny.

The two girls came forth to the morning meal, and Flora looked as blooming as Hebe herself, with the sunshine of her happy spirit radiating around her, and forming an atmosphere of womanly fascination which the guest found quite irresistible. A cheerful and animated conversation drew even Helen from her abstraction, and they lingered long over the matin meal.

As they arose from the table, Flora said—

"My father rides every morning, Mr. Lenox, and I am his usual companion; but to-day I will leave him to your society, as Helen and I can find employment within doors. You are our guest perforce for at least twenty-four hours longer, as the creek will not be safe to cross in less time."

"I believe I should not murmur, Miss Forrester, if it would remain stationary during my entire stay. With your friend and yourself on this side, Bellevue must yield the palm to Braeburn."

Helen glanced smilingly at him:

"I am afraid that my share in the attractions of Braeburn is a small one, Mr. Lenox; but as little things make up the sum of life, I take what is offered, and am thankful."

At that moment the horses were announced as ready, and the two young ladies went out on the gallery to see the equestrians mount. Flora

carried her father's gloves and riding-whip, which she presented to him herself, and he rewarded her care with a kiss, before mounting the steady old horse which had borne him in his daily rides for many years.

The two rode slowly down the declivity on which the house stood, for Lenox reined in his more fiery steed to suit the pace of the old man, for whom he already felt the reverence of a son. Absorbed in a bright dream of the future, he scarcely heeded the different points of view in the scenery which his companion pointed out to him. Little did he dream of the evil genius that was on his path, plotting the destruction of his hopes with a refinement of cruelty which would distill the deadly venom of her hatred, drop by drop, into the bosoms of her victims.

As the last glimpse of the equestrians was seen, Flora threw her arm caressingly over the shoulder of her friend, and said—"Now you will write the answer to your letter, dear Helen. I hope, by this time, your mind is firmly made up as to its tenor."

"I believe it is," replied Helen, with a faint smile. "I must play the rebel to my aunt's authority, I am afraid."

"Write, then, to Mr. Clinton to meet us in New Orleans in December, when we go down to make our annual visit to the city. Then I think we can evade your aunt's authority, and accomplish a marriage without her consent."

"Many weeks must pass before that time rolls round, Flora, and Mr. Hilton presses for an answer. Who knows what my aunt may suspect, unless I deliberately deceive her?"

"Your happiness for life is at stake, Helen, and therefore I counsel you to that which, under other circumstances, I should condemn. Ask for time to enable you to overcome your aversion to the proposed union: suffer Mr. Hilton to play the devoted lover if he choose to do so. I dare affirm that his sensibilities will not suffer too severely, even when he finds himself jilted."

While they thus spoke, the two girls entered Flora's room. She unclosed her writing-desk, laid out paper and pens, and pressing Helen down into the chair, kissed her, and said—

"Now, do your devoir quickly, while I finish some caps for my old women."

Seating herself beside the window of the vestibule, which commanded a pleasant view of hill, hollow, and flowing water, Flora drew her work-basket toward her, and took from it a plain muslin cap, with a border of the same material. Several others of a similar kind lay on the stand, and, as she had said, they were intended for two or three favorite old servants, who thought those little

articles of apparel, if fashioned by the dainty fingers of the young mistress, of more value than the finest head-dress that money could purchase.

Faintly-breathed murmurs of song occasionally flowed from her lips, for her spirit was young and glad, and the bright sunlight upon the hill-sides was not more gay and dancing than the buoyant heart of Flora Forrester on that beautiful autumn day. She at length sprang up, tossed her work aside, and went out, and rousing a young greyhound from his dreamy repose, she danced the length of the gallery several times, pursued by the bounding, graceful animal. She then threw on her bonnet, and set forth on a ramble, accompanied by her trusty companion.

Of what did she muse in the deep shadows of the woodland? What comparisons was her busy fancy making between one lately known, and the wooers who had gone before? They were evidently to the advantage of him who occasioned them, for her lips smiled, and the color deepened on her cheek, as she recalled a few words uttered by him: they were trifling in themselves, but full of meaning from the manner of the speaker.

Flora at length remembered that hours had passed in this pleasant reverie, and she turned her steps toward the mansion. On her arrival, she found that Helen had completed her letter—her father and Lenox had returned, and luncheon was served. The pleasant group gathered around it, and Helen looked almost happy in spite of her resolution to disregard the wishes of her aunt.

After lunch Mr. Forrester retired to his study; Flora and Helen brought out their sewing, and Lenox selected a volume from the table, which he read aloud, interrupting himself occasionally to comment on the text, and fix his fascinated gaze on the flashing face of Flora, as she listened or replied to his criticisms.

Flora felt, and almost trembled before the magnetic glance of that bright blue eye; for it seemed to her that her mastery over herself was fast departing, and her gay spirit howling before the mysterious attraction which thrilled her heart with new and undefinable emotions.

Her eye fell before his; the color came fitfully to her cheek, and a faint smile quivered on the lip of Lenox; his blood bounded with exultation as he felt the conviction that the soul of this fair young creature was as a mystic lyre whose chords responded to his lightest touch.

The announcement of dinner only aroused them from this pleasant pastime; that over, Flora and her friend left the gentlemen alone until summoned by Mr. Forrester to play a game of *bagatelle*, and thus the day ended.

CHAPTER VII.

ON the following morning the waters had subsided, and the bed of the creek lay bare and firm, looking like a floor of gray marble veined with silver, as the light flashed on the tiny streamlets that flowed in graceful curves amidst the damp sands.

Both Helen and Lenox felt an emotion of regret as they looked out and saw that the flood had subsided and the way was open to Bellevue. Cattle were crossing the quicksand in safety, and there was no further excuse for a prolonged stay.

While lamenting the necessity for their departure, a messenger came over with an invitation to Mr. Forrester and his daughter to spend the day at Bellevue, where they would also meet the family from Roseneath. This was at once accepted, and Flora said to Lenox—

"You must first see Bessie Graham in her own home. We pass Roseneath on our way to Mr. Wilmot's, and we will stop and take Bessie with us."

"Is Miss Graham so much more attractive at home than elsewhere?" he very naturally asked.

"She is charming every where, but the atmosphere of her own home seems to be peculiarly calculated to show her to the best advantage. The Graham family is an interesting one, I assure you, and their acquaintance is well worth making."

"I do not doubt it, for they are friends of yours," replied Lenox, with a smile.

As they intended calling at Roseneath, the carriage was ordered at an earlier hour than Mrs. Wilmot would expect them. In view of the fatigue of spending a day from home, Mr. Forrester declined his morning ride, and Lenox availed himself of the time thus gained to loiter away a most delicious hour on the gallery with Flora, while Helen practiced a song to which she had taken a sudden fancy.

Lenox spoke not of love, though both were fully conscious that each moment that passed but more indissolubly linked their souls together. Flora so carefully guarded her manner, that only from her fluctuating color could he judge of the emotions passing within her; she already knew that to love this man with all the strength of her spirit was to be her inevitable destiny. Why did she not shrink from his side, and refuse to repose that fearful trust, her earthly happiness, in his keeping? Because she had no power to resist the strong sympathy which bore her away, as in the vortex of a torrent that human strength was powerless to struggle against. There was a se-

rene confidence in the glance of her eye as it was raised to his, which said plainly as words themselves—"I have faith in your truth and honor. My soul already clings to yours with the confidence of years of ordinary intercourse."

At least it was thus he dared to interpret the glances of those eyes, which but lately flashed on all alike. As they thus stood, a shadow passed the end of the gallery, a hand was raised menacingly, and the figure vanished. Soon afterward, Flora left him to make her toilet for the proposed visit.

As she knew Mrs. Wilmot to be fond of show, she dressed herself richly to do honor to the occasion. A handsome dark silk, variegated like the throat of the humming-bird when the sun glints upon it, fell in rich folds around her graceful figure. A delicately-embroidered collar, and a white scarf of light net-work, fastened at the throat with a fine cameo, gave an appropriate finish to the costume. Bracelets made of her father's hair, cut before the silvery hue of time had fallen on its dark lustre, were clasped with cameos, to match the breastpin, and confined ruffles of delicate lace to her slender wrists. Her abundant hair was dressed as she usually wore it, and the glossy curls played over a glowing cheek, while her dark eyes glittered with the light of a new-born happiness. Jetty stood before her, holding her shawl and veil, and regarding her with admiring eyes. Just then Lisette's assistant in the sewing-room appeared at the door, looking very much alarmed.

"What is the matter, Winny?" asked her young lady, quickly. "Has any thing happened?"

"Not much, Miss Flora, only Lisette be in a mighty strange way; and I'm 'fraid to stay by myself in de room wi' her. She may take it in her head to give me another choke, tho' de Lord knows I never mean to give her no more cause as long as I live."

"Is she ill? If so, why have I not been informed before?"

"I don't know 'bout her bein' ill, but she goes on mightily—as if she be a-goin' mad. She was in a strange way all de mornin', but 'bout an hour ago she went out and staid a little while, and when she come back, she looked like a tiger. Ever since, she have bin runnin' up and down de floor, a-tossin' her arms above her head, and a-carryin' on so, I'm afeard of her."

Surprised and alarmed, Flora threw her veil over her head, and hastened across the yard. When

she entered the sewing-room she found it vacant, but the door that led into Lisette's apartment was slightly ajar. She lightly approached, and unclosing it, saw the form of the quadroon lying across the bed, with her face buried in the pillow, and the overpowering emotion that agitated her was visible in the convulsive movements of her frame. Flora drew near her, and laying her hand on that of the excited woman, she softly asked—

"What is the matter, Lisette? Are you—"

She could say no more, for the touch of her hand seemed to have an electric effect upon Lisette. She sprang up at a single bound and stood with livid features and glaring eyes, a spectacle of maniac passion to the dismayed girl.

"So you come to mock me—to triumph over me with a show of sympathy you never felt. Avaunt! your touch is more fatal to me than the sting of the venomous serpent."

Flora grew pale as she encountered the expression of those vivid black eyes, of which the iris and the pupil were of the same intense hue; for a lurid fire seemed to burn in their dark depths, awful as the smouldering flames of Tartarus. Yet she was not afraid, for timidity formed no part of her character. She bravely stood her ground, and asked, in the commanding tones of authority—

"Lisette, what does such conduct mean? Are you attempting to frighten me, or are you really ill?"

The sweet, yet imperative tones of her young lady's voice seemed to recall the wandering senses, which frantic passion had for a time obscured. The head of the quadroon drooped upon her breast, and her whole form appeared to collapse as she again sunk upon the bed. She pressed her hand upon her burning temples, and muttered—

"Pardon me, Miss Flora. I—I—took you for my evil genius. I am suffering—suffering terribly. My brain seems on fire."

Flora again approached her, and laid her cool hand upon the quivering pulse, which seemed to recoil from her, though by a strong effort Lisette held her arm firm. She half closed her eyes, and suffered their long lashes to veil the expression of bitter hatred which she knew was shining from them, while her fingers worked convulsively, as if eager to clutch the slender throat that bent above her, and press the life-breath from the lips of her detested rival.

"You do not seem to have any fever, Lisette," said Flora. "You are only in a state of great excitement, for which I will send you a composing draught. My own nurse shall come to sit beside you until you are better."

"Thank you, Miss Flora; but I would rather be alone. Let Winny bring me the draught; she can stay in the next room, and if I need anything, I can call on her for it."

"Very well. She can do so, if you will not frighten her again; but she is already much alarmed at your violence, and you know she has good cause to remember its former effect upon herself."

An expression of scorn crossed Lisette's features. "She need not fear me. I shall never again seek to harm her."

"Endeavor to compose yourself, and I will send Winny to you with the medicine."

"Thank you," murmured Lisette, as she turned her face away; and Flora left the room.

The quadroon raised her head, and listened to her retreating footsteps. Rage against herself seemed to have seized upon her. She ground her teeth together, and muttered—

"Fool—fool! is this self-control you vowed as necessary to the success of your plans? Down—down rebellious blood! Mar not my vengeance by your passionate outbreaks. I will rule my own spirit to its attainment, or die in the effort. I watched them, as they stood together this morning, and I saw what they scarcely yet know themselves. They are winding a life-chain around each other. Ay—so be it. Love—love, until the strong soul is bowed before the entrancing passion; until it will be death to sever the tie; then will I come as a dark shadow between ye, bringing desolation and despair." She sunk back, and after a pause continued—"Do I still love this man? No—no; scorned, refused in the zenith of my beauty, when he knew not, when I suspected not the real position I held; all softer emotion must long since have been dead within me. Yet why is my soul stirred to its inmost depths when I look upon him? Can this be the hatred of a woman scorned? or is it the lingering remains of that passion which was the first strongly-developed emotion of my life, and will continue to sway me to the close of my wretched existence?"

Her bitter reverie was interrupted by the entrance of Winny with the promised draught. Lisette took the cup, and looking earnestly at the negro, said,

"I wish it were poison, and would bring oblivion to my struggles."

Winny fired up in a moment.

"Pizen, indeed! It's great imperance in you to hope a lady like Miss Flora would bemean herself to send you pizen, when she mixed dis w' her own lily hands. I hopes 'twill 'fect your liver, if it will make you any better tempered."

By a strange transition of feeling, Lisette burst into a ringing peal of laughter at the girl's blunder. This so offended that sable handmaiden, that she flitted out of the room, dashed around the seats in the next apartment, and finally settled herself at her usual employment.

In the mean time, Flora returned to the house in a state of disagreeable perplexity. Remembering the extreme violence of Lisette on a former occasion, she almost feared to leave home, lest another outbreak should lead to a difficulty with the overseer in the absence of her father; which, with the turbulent temper of the quadroon, might lead to some fatal result.

When the carriage drove to the door, she sent Jetty to see if Lisette was tranquil, and the report brought back that she was apparently sleeping, reassured her.

The two girls entered the carriage, and Mr. Forrester and Lenox escorted them on horseback.

"You look very grave, Flora," said her friend. "I hope you apprehend no serious result from the illness of Lisette?"

"No; for I do not believe she is really ill, except from the sudden outbreak of a terrible temper. I was thinking of her, for she interests me and puzzles me."

"In what respect?"

"Have you never remarked her evident superiority to others of her caste—the purity of her language—nay, at times, its passionate eloquence? And when she is unconscious of observation, her carriage is that of one born to command. Nature surely never designed her for a slave; though I am afraid she would never, under any circumstances, be a really conscientious, good woman. I regret that my father was induced to purchase her."

"Was any unusual inducement offered to Mr. Forrester to become her master?"

"Nothing beyond a vague history which interested both him and myself. She received some advantages of education, and until the death of the master who afforded them to her, she believed her freedom secured. No such evidence was found after his decease, and the next heir, whom she had offended by her imperious temper, availed himself of his power to sell her to a slave-trader. He brought her to New Orleans, and there she hoped to find a friend who would extricate her from her unhappy fate. All her inquiries proved fruitless; she knew that Mr. Wallace lived in Louisiana, but the precise place of his residence she could not tell. All her efforts to trace him met with no result save disappointment, and at length she grew sullen and indifferent. When my father proposed to purchase her, she made no opposition; but I own to you that I begin almost to fear her. Those wild eyes of hers seem at times to gleam with insanity. I will try what gentleness and forbearance can accomplish, but if these outbreaks of temper continue, I can not have her near me."

"Have you been able to learn any thing of her personal history from herself?"

"Not a word. I questioned her when she first came to Braeburn about her early home, and the causes that led to her being sold from her native State. She talked with the hauteur of a queen:

"Miss Forrester, it is sufficient for you to know that I am henceforth your bondswoman. The future is my own; the past is my own; I shall hold it sacred."

"I was silent, and no allusion to her former life has since been made by either of us. Wallace—Wallace," she musingly continued, "I know of no one by that name. It is by no means common."

At that moment Lenox rode to the side of the carriage, and caught her concluding words.

"May I be permitted to ask what is so uncommon, Miss Forrester?" he said.

"Only a name. One belonging to the heroic history of Scotland, but not often found on this

side of the water. I was merely saying that Wallace is rather an uncommon name, at least among my acquaintances."

Lenox started, and grew slightly pale, but his emotion was unnoticed, as the gate leading into the grounds of Roseneath at this moment swung open, and the carriage swept around a circular drive, overshadowed by tall trees, whose branches interlaced overhead, forming a Gothic framework from the living hand of Nature herself.

A drive of half a mile brought them in front of a long, low plantation-house, painted white, with wide galleries extending all around it. Two fine horses, caparisoned for the use of ladies, were in front of the house, and a black groom was leading out a third, for the use of his master. As Bellevue was only a mile from Roseneath, Mrs. Graham had not thought it necessary to order the carriage for so short an excursion.

As the sound of approaching wheels was heard, a group gathered on the gallery, consisting of Mr. Graham, a tall, sallow, middle-aged man, of gentlemanly bearing; his wife, a rosy, good-humored woman, whose bright smile gave the stranger an assurance of welcome, and several children. The eldest of these looked scarcely more womanly than the curly-haired girl of twelve, who sheltered herself behind her mother as a tower of defense against her own shyness.

Bessie Graham came forward to welcome her young friends, while her father himself assisted Mr. Forrester to alight, and conducted him into the house. Bessie was scarcely of the medium height—*pétite* and delicate as a sylph. Her complexion was very fair, but the brilliant coral of her lips, and the living roses on her cheeks, fairly entitled her to the epithet of Ruby, which we have said was her pet name with Mr. Forrester. She wore a dark-blue silk, which was not deeper nor brighter in tint than her eyes, and her style of wearing her blonde hair, in long curls sweeping to her waist, contributed still further to the extreme youthfulness of her appearance.

The stranger was introduced and welcomed with the cordiality of the sunny South; and he entered the comfortable-looking parlor of Roseneath with the pleasant conviction that he had that day added an agreeable household to the list of friends worth cherishing in his heart of hearts. The room was large, lofty, and handsomely furnished, yet there was nothing in it too fine for use. It had the air of an inhabited spot, and not a stately reception-room designed alone for the use of guests. It is an indisputable fact, that apartments constantly used, possess a more attractive aspect than the most sumptuous halls in which only the stately courtesies of life are passed. They seem to catch a warm glow of humanity from the constant stir of life that pervades them, and are linked in the mind with so many of the petty incidents of the drama of domestic life, which, after all, is the soul's true atmosphere, that the silent walls are more prolific to the fancy of one who has dwelt amidst their daily associations than even the halls of the Vatican, or those of the romantic Alhambra.

Mr. Graham's was emphatically a happy family; they were united among themselves, and cordial in their kindness to others. He had been an invalid for many years, but his imperfect health did not embitter his kindly temper. This, perhaps, was in a great degree owing to the sunshine his sprightly wife managed to diffuse over her household, even amidst the domestic squalls which will sometimes occur in the best-regulated families, in which eight heirs of immortality are rearing to fulfill the lot assigned them by Providence. There was also a nephew, now grown, who had been received and educated as a son of their own, on the death of his parents.

Mr. Graham shook hands with his new guest, and said:

"I think you are not an entire stranger to me, Mr. Lenox. I distinctly remember seeing you in Natchez, before the death of Mr. Wilnot, senior. You are welcome to our neighborhood, and doubly welcome to Roseneath, for the sake of my old friend's appreciation of your good qualities."

"Thank you," replied Lenox. "In time, I hope to convince you that I am worthy of a welcome also on my own account."

"This, then, is not a mere passing visit to our retired nook. We may hope to claim a longer acquaintance with you."

"Can you doubt it, when such attractions are to be found amidst its seclusion?" he asked, with a smile, as he glanced toward the three girls, who stood grouped together in earnest conversation.

Mr. Graham's eye followed his.

"We can show a few rather fair specimens of mother Eve's descendants, and I am nearly as proud of my stately Helen, my brilliant Flora, as of my own little gipsy; for they have all grown around me, more like one family than those who are really alien in blood."

"The ties of blood are strong, but those of choice and fitness are firmer yet. The associates we select for ourselves, often have a deeper hold on the affections than even near kindred. You know the love of David and Jonathan passed that of brothers."

"True," said Mr. Forrester. "Yet family union seems to me a type of that great brotherhood, into which all the just shall be gathered, after the struggles of existence are passed. 'It is beautiful for brethren to dwell together in harmony,' says the inspired book, which, to my interpretation, means to cling to each other through good and evil repute with that sustaining power to which only a common origin can give strength and vitality."

"Why not carry out the principle, Mr. Forrester?" asked Lenox. "Christ said, 'Love one another,' and, if we follow his command, will we not all be brothers, one to another?"

"If!—ah, it is a small word, but eloquent of mighty consequences. When your 'if' is realized, my young friend, the Millennium will have arrived. Yet, it is well at your age to have visions of the perfectibility of the human race. Young ladies," he continued in a louder tone, "are

you aware that it is fast verging toward the hour at which we will be expected at Bellevue? Therefore I warn you to cut short your gossip. My pretty Ruby, where is your bonnet? Your little tongue can chatter in the carriage, while you are conveyed to your destination in time to escape a scolding."

Bessie laughed, and took up a straw hat with an immensely wide brim, which she had decorated with a green veil. She put it on her head, and looked archly from the deep shadow it seemed to cast over her.

"Philip's new Panama, I declare!" exclaimed Mrs. Graham, "and he has been searching the house over for it for the last hour. Why, Bessie, what on earth do you want with such a fright upon your head?"

"Because I have nothing else left, ma'am, except my new silk hat, which I do not wish to wear on a social visit of this kind. Phil has amused himself by making war on my bonnets, and yesterday he threw my last head-covering for ordinary use into the great sycamore by the cotton-gin. I now think it but fair to take possession of his chapeau in my turn."

A voice here spoke through an open window; a handsome, roguish face looked in on the assembled company, and Philip opened the defense for himself.

"My dear aunt, make Bessie tell you the provocation she gave me. It is not fair to give such a version of our disagreement on the score of bonnets. Here, I maintain, are the most unbecoming things that were ever invented. I would turn milliner myself before I would wear such disfiguring frights."

"I declare, Phil, you are incorrigible," said Mrs. Graham, with a laugh. "I wonder if you ever thought any thing in the world beautiful enough for the adornment of Bessie. After submitting to such treatment, I shall not make her resign your hat, so you may look out for some substitute for yourself."

"Very well, ma'am, I can easily suit myself, though I am fastidious about what such a dainty little creature as Bessie may choose to wear."

He here picked up a dreadfully battered hat, with a piece torn out of the brim, and stuck it jauntily on the side of his head. As he had dressed himself with unusual care, this addition to his costume produced a singular effect, that the girls joined in laughing at him.

Phil looked around with an expression.

"Oh, I have chivalry enough to suffer in the cause of beauty," he said, "and she is welcome to the hat, only the neighbor will declare that she is suffering from a sudden inflation of the brain."

This was uttered with such pompous emphasis that it increased the mirth of the light-hearted party.

"Phil, your pony must have been on short commons lately, and eked out his meal by a bite from your hat," said Mr. Forrester.

"*Et tu Brute!*" exclaimed Phil, tragically.

"I did not expect an attack from you, sir. As to these butterfly womenkind, their buzzing only amuses me."

"After all, lad, I suspect the faintest buzz they can give is of more importance to you than the sagest piece of wisdom my threescore years could coin for your benefit."

"It does not become me to contradict my senior," replied the youth, with mock resignation. "Come, Bessie, if I am to escort you with that tower on your head, let us start before any one else; for I do not wish to furnish a subject of mirth to the rest of the party."

"Phil, I will make a compromise with you," said Flora. "Bessie shall surrender your chapeau, if you, in your turn, will give up her company, and let her take a seat in the carriage with Helen and myself. We have matters of portentous import to confer upon before we reach Bellevue."

"Oh, yes; to decide the color of your next ball dress, or whether flowers or feathers will be the most fashionable wear for your winter campaign. When so mighty a question is at stake, I can not refuse to relinquish the company of my little coz. Come, Lina," he continued, turning to the second daughter, "you need not ride behind your ma to-day. You are promoted to the undisputed possession of Lightfoot, and we will see if he does not deserve his name."

Lina eagerly followed her cousin, and was soon

mounted on a spirited bay; Philip Maitland cantered beside her, wearing his restored hat, and they were lost to view, while the rest of the party was getting ready to follow them.

The mother of Philip Maitland was the only sister of Mrs. Graham. The boy was deprived of both parents before he completed his first year, and his aunt took him to her own home, and reared him with her children. Bessie and himself shared the same cradle in infancy, and as they grew older, the strongest attachment was formed between them. Philip considered his cousin the most perfect specimen of mortal mould, and very good indeed she must have been to bear with the manifold teasings of his bizarre humor. The youth was the mover of all mischief in the household, and no one, save his uncle, was considered safe from his pranks. Even Mr. Graham he sometimes ventured to annoy in a manner that was peculiarly irritating to him. He had a great reverence for sacred things, and Phil's knowledge of the Bible seemed to have been gained only for the purpose of being travestied. If he made a quotation from it, he was sure to apply it in a sense so different from that meant in the text, that it was almost impossible to refrain from smiling. However, it was rarely he ventured on this, as his uncle had read him so many lectures on the subject, that he was almost ashamed to use his wicked wit against what he felt should be held sacred.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE stately mansion of Bellevue soon appeared. It stood on a slight elevation, and the avenue was bordered by carefully trimmed hedges. The Laurens Amanda, whose enameled carriage was of a vivid tint of green throughout, was clustered in groups so as to conceal the front of the mansion. The usual wayfarer, for Mrs. Wilnot was a house set upon a hill, for the benefit of herself and her party, wished the world at her feet, and accordingly viewed in every direction to afford a view of the pillared front of the mansion.

A conservatory, built on a light and beautiful model, occupied one side of the lawn; and on this bright day the doors were opened wide to display the wealth of flowers within. A circular table occupied the centre of the floor, and on it stood a vase of elegant shape, in which grew an orange tree, bearing both fruit and flowers. Vases of smaller size were arranged around it, containing the various tribes of brilliant crimson flowers; a yet smaller row encompassed these, holding blossoms of a more delicate hue—the whole forming a pyramid of rare and exquisite

beauty. The walls were lined with shelves, rising one above another, filled with every flowering shrub the luxuriant tropics can produce.

Mrs. Wilnot spared no expense in ministering to this purely feminine taste, though it was a marvel that she, who was so little feminine herself, should have possessed it. The grounds in the rear of the conservatory were laid out in fantastic curves, half-moons and triangles, and planted with the hardier shrubs that will flourish in the open air.

The carriage passed this fragrant temple, and soon drew up in front of the house. A flight of steps, guarded on either hand by a lion couchant carved in stone, led to a portico supported by six Corinthian columns. From this you entered the vestibule through a wide door, on each side of which was a window filled with ruby-colored glass. The reflection from these cast a brilliant glow on the gilt paper-hangings, and assisted in giving a mellow tint to several paintings of questionable merit; but as a compensation they were very gorgeously framed.

But we must turn from the inanimate to the living objects that claim our attention. Foremost among them is the tall figure of the mistress of

Bellevue, who claims precedence over all of minor importance. Mrs. Wilmot was a woman of large frame and little superfluous flesh: rigid and hard was the expression of her figure, and that of her face was in harmony with it. A light, clear, cold blue eye, a prominent nose, and very thin lips, were the most striking traits. She had a high, bold forehead, from which her hair was combed entirely back, and above it was placed what old ladies call a front; but why Mrs. Wilmot wore one at all was a mystery; for the false hair was placed at least two inches from the edge of her forehead, leaving her own whitened locks visible beneath it. Above this hair-plaster was a small French cap ornamented with artificial flowers. The remainder of her dress was rich, and suited to her age. Her voice was clear, decisive, and rather high-pitched. She looked altogether like a very sensible woman, who had made the business of life her study; and having found what she considered the best path, she intended to make all around her travel in her own footsteps as nearly as possible.

She welcomed the party graciously, and then permitted her husband to be heard. Mr. Wilmot was a small man, of extremely insignificant appearance, who had the air of a person in a state of perpetual bewilderment. He was probably lost in wonder that he should ever have occupied his present position toward his dictatorial spouse. "Glad to see you all," he chirped, in a shrill, treble voice. "Ah! Mr. Lenox, we have had an addition to our domestic circle since you left, in the person of a relation of my own, whom we estimate highly. I am happy that you will have an opportunity of forming his acquaintance before you leave us."

Helen changed color, and whispered to Flora, "I feared as much; Mr. Hilton is here."

"Helen, my dear," said Mrs. Wilmot, in an even tone, "while the young ladies take off their shawls, run up to your own room and change your dress. There is other company here that I wish you to appear well before."

Helen obeyed without reply. When she entered her room she found her aunt's maid ready to attend to her, and her dress for the day was already laid out, together with the ornaments Mrs. Wilmot wished her to wear. The dress was a dark silk tissue, with richly-colored flowers raised on the surface in imitation of embroidery; fine lace sleeves and cape were to be worn with it, and a set of costly emeralds lay glittering in their open case.

In the hurry of her spirits Helen did not observe the jewels until the woman took up a bracelet, and clasped it upon her arm.

"Where did these come from?" she asked, in surprise.

"My mistress placed them there herself, Miss Helen, as a part of your dress to-day. They are beautiful, and very becoming."

"My aunt is too kind," said Helen, with a sigh, as she suffered the costly gems to be arranged upon her own lovely person, to which they could not add a grace; but they certainly

embellished those she possessed. She hurriedly descended, with a bright color burning upon her cheek, for she felt nervous and excited.

Mrs. Wilmot's cold eye gleamed with something like triumph as she glanced at her niece, and said, "You look uncommonly well, my dear. Your jewels are worn with elegance. I must congratulate you on becoming the owner of so beautiful a *parure*."

"Are they not, then, a present from you, aunt? I was about to thank you for them," said Helen, making a sudden motion, as if she would remove them from her person.

Mrs. Wilmot seemed to understand the feeling that prompted her, for she quickly said, while a slight frown gathered on her brow—

"Am I your only relative, Helen? Is not your uncle often seized with a generous whim, which generally finds vent in a present of jewels?"

"Ah! then my uncle is the donor!" said the young girl, as the expression of apprehension passed from her features; for a very different idea had for an instant gained possession of her mind. "I must go to him and tell him how very much obliged to him I am for remembering me in so pleasant a manner."

"You will do no such thing," said Mrs. Wilmot, decisively. "Your uncle has enough to think of to-day, without being troubled with your thanks. He will see you decked with the ornaments, which is enough for the present. At some other time you may tell him how grateful you are."

Accustomed to yield implicit obedience to her aunt, Helen acquiesced, and the group passed from the state bedroom, into which they had been ushered to remove their wrappings, to a large and gorgeously-furnished drawing-room. The foot sunk at every step in the costly carpet, and the size of the room was apparently magnified by the mirrors that lined the walls. The Parisian workman would have been surprised to find his latest wares adorning a home in this secluded spot, in the vicinity of New Orleans, the American market offers to the wealthy the means of procuring every European luxury.

Mr. Wilmot had already been out, and Lenox and he thought of purchasing, but only one remained in the room. This was a tall, thin man, who looked so white and emaciated, as to give a stranger the impression that he had just recovered from serious illness. His features were well cut, but sharp and cadaverous, and his lips had around them an expression of morbid animation, which might well make one recoil from falling in his power. This repulsive face was surmounted by a quantity of hair decidedly red in its hue, and of a crisped, wiry appearance, as if all the determination of its owner's character could not reduce it to proper subjection. He was dressed with the precision of an exquisite, and on his left hand glittered a large diamond, which was frequently displayed in his efforts to arrange his rebellious locks.

The changing color of Helen would at once

have announced this personage as Mr. Hilton, even if he had been unknown to the rest of the party. He came forward, made an elaborate speech to each one of the young ladies; and in addressing Helen he contrived to possess himself of her hand, though she endeavored to prevent him from doing so. The glitter of the bracelet caught his eye, and a rapid and meaning glance passed between him and Mrs. Wilmot. Helen intercepted it, and a painful thrill shot through her heart. She suspected that she had been duped into accepting a costly present from Mr. Hilton, as she had hitherto declined the most trifling gift he had offered her. She turned a reproachful glance upon her aunt, but Mrs. Wilmot was too busily engaged to heed it, or to permit her niece to obtain an opportunity of speaking to her in private. Helen felt that she must bear this wretched uncertainty until she could ascertain from her uncle if he were really the donor. This she found no means of doing throughout the day, and before its close, she knew from Hilton himself that the jewels had been his gift; and her appearance in public ornamented with them he considered a pledge, on her part, that she would no longer withhold her consent to become his bride.

Our party was soon increased by the arrival of several carriages filled with guests, for Mrs. Wilmot had a double object in view in collecting the élite of the neighborhood beneath her roof; she wished to do honor to Lenox, and to seize the opportunity to announce the approaching marriage of her niece to Mr. Hilton, in such a manner as would induce the timid girl to believe it impossible for her to recede from the engagement.

The company divided in groups. Some collected around the fine-toned piano, and appeared to enjoy the music afforded them by the young ladies of the party. The elder ladies sat together in a group, and conversed on such sage affairs as their household cares afforded; and it would have amazed, or perhaps enlightened a more youthful listener, to hear the excellent maxims for managing refractory children and servants which emanated from this wise jury of matrons. Their lords, eschewing music, discussed the prices of cotton, the last news from Europe, crops, and such kindred topics as seemed of worth to these "lords of creation."

Time passed on; dinner would soon be announced, and still Philip and his young charge had not made their appearance. At length Mrs. Graham grew uneasy, and dispatched a servant in quest of them. In about half an hour the man returned with the following lines, scrawled on the back of an old letter:

"Dear aunt, let not any fears for Lina's safety prevent you from 'rejoicing in hope' (of a good dinner), from being 'patient in tribulation' (of a tiresome one). Mrs. Wilmot comes near fulfilling the command of St. Paul: if she does not 'distribute to the necessities of the saints,' for which shortcoming she is excusable, as they are hard to find in these latter days, she does what

is next best in her estimation—contributes to the entertainment of her neighbors, and is 'given to hospitality,' according to the literal command. Therefore do you 'rejoice with those who rejoice,' and Lina and I will give you no cause to weep. We will come in with the third course, for my patience can not last through one of Mrs. Wilmot's state dinners. She will scold, perhaps, but never mind—we are of too little consequence to have many words wasted upon us on so grand an occasion."

The man reported that he found Master Phil and Miss Lina gathering nuts in the forest, while their horses grazed near them. As Mrs. Graham read the note, Bessie joined her to inquire about the runaways; for she too had missed her cousin, though she was not greatly surprised at his escape, as she was well aware of his antipathy to Mrs. Wilmot's stately entertainments.

Dinner was soon after announced, and the company seated themselves around a table sparkling with silver, cut glass, and flowers. Mrs. Wilmot glanced down the length of it, and congratulated herself that, in their way, nothing could be more perfect than her arrangements; and she had the further satisfaction of knowing that not one of her guests could pretend to compete with her in the sumptuousness of her réunions. Her keen glance detected two vacant seats, and she now first remarked the absence of young Maitland and Caroline Graham.

"I hoped Mr. Maitland and my pet Lina would be here to-day, Mrs. Graham. Are they in disgrace, and stay at home to do penance, that they have not appeared?"

"I am afraid they will be disgraced with you, when you learn that they set out for Bellevue before I did, and have not yet reached here."

"Ah—h," replied Mrs. Wilmot, dryly—"Were I you, I should teach them that there is a virtue in punctuality."

"If you had such a household as ours to manage, Mrs. Wilmot, you would find it necessary to be blind and deaf to many things that you now consider sins of glaring heinousness," said Mr. Graham, coming to his wife's rescue.

The lady smiled grimly, but made no reply. The satisfaction of seeing Mr. Hilton playing the devoted lover to Helen soon chased away the light cloud which Phil's delinquency had caused to gather on her brow; for he was really a favorite with her, and his absence annoyed her. Soon the merry chatter of voices filled the room, and all went off as well as the hostess could desire.

Toward the close of the third course, Philip and his young cousin came quietly in behind several servants, and slipped into their seats without attracting the attention of the lady of the mansion. Phil congratulated himself on having performed a very clever manoeuvre, and hoped to escape any remark from Mrs. Wilmot; but such was not to be his fate. The dessert was placed on the table, and his next neighbor asked the hostess to take wine with him. In bowing to him, her eagle glance detected the delinquent. Shaking her finger at him, she called out—

"Ah, Mr. Philip Maitland, 'better late than never,' as the adage says, and I am happy to see you at my table, even at the eleventh hour."

Philip arose, bowed gracefully, and placing his hand on his heart, said—"You honor me too highly, dear madam. It is my maxim as well as St. Paul's, that 'every soul shall be subject to the higher powers,' but to-day the spirit of rebellion seized me. The flesh bade me come hither to enjoy these carnal delights spread before me, but the spirit said, 'Go into the woodland and enjoy the sunshine.' 'A house divided against itself shall fall;' hence I must bear my disgrace as well as I may."

"Philip!" said a deep voice near him in a warning tone, and our young gentleman subsided suddenly into his seat, with a deprecating glance toward his uncle.

Many merry smiles were directed toward him, but Philip sat, looking as sober as if the spirit of mischief had never entered his mind.

Concealed from his wife by the flower vases which stood between them, Mr. Wilnot availed himself of the opportunity to drink as much wine as he could reach, and before the ladies arose from the table he was considerably the worse for his libations. He had a dim recollection of a duty his wife had imposed on him, but he could not possibly call to mind what it was. After waiting in vain, his better half at length sent a servant to say to him that the time for the announcement had arrived. Mr. Wilnot endeavored to assume an intelligent look—his awe of his spouse had the effect of recalling the subject of her injunctions; and making an effort to steady himself, he arose to his feet, and after casting a bewildered glance around, commenced, in a tolerably clear voice—

"I rise with pleasure to address this honorable company. Ladies and gentlemen, it is customary in England when a marriage between people of consequence is on the tapis, to make a formal announcement of it to the friends of the parties. It affords me the sincerest gratification to announce, that one object we had in view in collecting you all here to-day, was to do honor to our young friend, Mr. Lenox, joint-heir with myself to the property of Wilnot senior, and also to inform you that our well-beloved niece is about to become the bride of my kinsman, Mr. Hilton."

"Oh, uncle! how can you!" exclaimed Helen, growing pale as marble, but an imperious gesture from her aunt silenced her—and as Mrs. Wilnot gave the signal for retiring, she arose with the rest and passed out of the room, bewildered and oppressed by the unexpected turn her uncle's words had taken. The ladies made comments in an under tone on the singularity of this proceeding, and the embarrassing position in which it placed Helen. But Mrs. Wilnot had her own reasons for the course she pursued, and she was indifferent to the remarks of others.

Escaping from the congratulations which were pressed on her, Helen, sick at heart, ascended to her own room, to endeavor to calm her mind,

and consider the new position in which she found herself placed. Flora soon joined her, and expressed her indignation at the course Mrs. Wilnot had taken to force her niece into her measures.

"My aunt will make me his wife yet—I feel it—I know it, Flora!" said the poor girl despondingly.

"Not if you will be true to yourself, Helen. Let her take her course, and we will take ours. Act toward Mr. Hilton as if you acquiesce in her wishes; it will render our own plans easier of accomplishment, and since he joins your aunt in her oppressive course toward you, he deserves to be deceived."

"Dear friend, I listen to your counsels—I will abide by them, for I am desperate at the thought of being forced to become that man's wife."

"Do not look so pale, Helen; all is not lost yet. But we must go down now, or your aunt will readily surmise that I am counseling you to rebellion."

Helen shuddered—she knew herself better than her friend understood her, and she felt something of the terrible fascination with which the serpent charms his victim. The idea had taken firm possession of her mind, that she must become the wife of Hilton, deeply as she loathed the thought; and she felt that another link had that day been added to the chain with which they sought to fetter her to misery.

The younger portion of the gentlemen joined the ladies before coffee was brought in. After swallowing the strong black liquid, which was offered in diminutive porcelain cups, a walk through the conservatory and grounds was proposed. The sun was yet some distance above the horizon, and the air was bland and soft as that of the tropics. The language of the northern poet can not with propriety be applied to autumn in the south.

"The melancholy autumn days are come, the saddest of the year,"

may with truth be parodied thus—

The bright and happy autumn days are come, the loveliest of the year.

The long and tedious summer months have run their fiery course; the heat, the dust, the overpowering sunshine, are but memories of the past, and the body seems renovated with new life by the cool air, which has all the invigorating properties of a frosty atmosphere, without its chilling breath. The sunshine seems to have a brighter gleam of gold as it lays in broad masses on the forest glades, and life itself appears to gain a new value in the clear ether which causes even the languid life-pulse to quicken beneath its influence into something like the vivid existence which belongs to youth and health.

The day had been cloudless, and the sun was now sinking to rest, amidst a sea of golden radiance that floated up toward the zenith, and made the whole atmosphere luminous with his amber-colored rays. After strolling around the highly-cultivated grounds, the party approached a high wall of verdure in the rear of the garden, which

extended around a circular pond, that had been artificially formed for the irrigation of the parterre at all seasons. To intercept the miasma rising from the still waters, a double row of Laureia Amanda had been planted about fifteen feet apart, and permitted to grow to their full height; these being closely crowded together, their branches had spread out above, interlaced, and formed an impervious screen from the ardent rays of the sun, even in the depths of summer.

This was known as the Lover's Walk, and of the various couples that wandered in the garden, but two entered this leafy temple. Lenox drew Flora beneath its shadow, to listen to the language of impassioned love, and she heard his declaration with beating heart and downcast eyes. The few words she uttered in reply, were not those of discouragement, though she insisted that their acquaintance was yet too brief to speak of that enduring love which makes the happiness of home secure.

Lenox protested that he already cherished it. She smiled, and told him he must yet win it from her; and he knew that it was more than half won before the permission was accorded.

Hilton had kept near Helen throughout the day, and he seized the opportunity to obtain a few moments alone with her, by luring her within the shadows of the Lovers' Walk: she also wished to have an interview with him, in reference to the strange announcement which had so recently been made; and she submitted to be led apart from the others, while she listened to his rapturous felicitations on his own good fortune with a cold self-possession he had not remarked in her before.

"Mr. Hilton," she at length said, "I can not suppose you are ignorant that what has passed to-day was entirely unexpected by me. I have never given you such encouragement as to lead you to hope that I would become your wife. Why my uncle has assumed the fact of an engagement existing between us, I can not imagine. His words filled me with painful amazement."

"Your words are strange and ill-timed, Miss Somers; when you hear upon your person the *gage d'amour* which my note expressly stated should be worn alone by my betrothed bride."

"These, then, are your gift!" replied Helen, pointing to the jewels. "Since I ornamented myself with them, I feared as much; though I assure you I received no note, and I supposed them to be a present from my aunt at the time I assumed them. They shall be returned to you to-night, as I can not consent to be considered in the light of your betrothed bride even for an hour."

"But you are already so considered—your most intimate friends have been taught to regard you as such, and you can not now recoil without drawing censure on yourself."

"I care not. Engagements have been broken, even where the feelings were deeply implicated; and my heart in this affair has been so outraged—so trampled on, that I have spirit to resist even the will of my aunt."

"And you really have resolved that you will not become Mrs. Hilton?"

"Such is my fixed determination."

"You will change it."

"I shall not."

"We will see, fair Helen."

"Mr. Hilton, this is strange wooing."

"You are an uncommon girl, Helen. There is something piquant in opposition. I like to overcome it."

"You surely will not seek to wed with one who recoils from the thought of accepting you?"

"There will be some merit in making you love me, in spite of your determination to the contrary."

"That I shall never do."

"Do not be positive Helen, for I know that you will yet be mine, and a union without love would not be agreeable to either party. My vanity requires that you shall become attached to me, and after the public announcement of our engagement to-day, both pride and vanity unite to make you mine, in spite of every opposition you may offer."

"Am I then to have no choice in the matter?"

"Your choice is already made, and the badge publicly worn," he replied, with a half sneer, as he pointed to the gems Helen felt inclined to tear off and trample in the dust.

She asked—"Do you think this ungenerous conduct on your part likely to win my affections?"

"Once mine, it will be your best policy to love me very dearly."

"But I repeat it, I will not become yours."

He regarded her with a cynical smile.

"Even as you utter that, your heart belies it, for you know that what your aunt wills, what I will also, is doubly bound to be accomplished. I never even relinquished a whim: think then if I am likely to give up the woman I have selected from all her sex as the one most suited to become my wife! You are beautiful, Helen: so queenly in your stately loveliness that my pride will glory in calling you mine. You are gentle, accustomed to obedience, and hence you would be speedily tamed to my will, for my wife must have no wish but mine. Once tamed, you shall be the pet dove of my household. Say, fairest, shall it not be so?"

Helen listened with a kind of bewildered fascination. To one so easily swayed, there was something terrible in this confident manner of asserting his claims. She summoned courage to say—

"It can not be, for I love another."

"Ah—so I have heard it whispered," he coolly replied. "Well—greater will be my triumph to win you from my rival."

"But that is impossible. I love him with truth and—"

"Hush, Helen: do not admit too much. You are not bound to bear witness against yourself. In days to come, you may not wish to recall even the memory of this love. My wife must forget even the existence of him she once favored above myself."

"When I become your wife, perhaps it may be necessary to do so: but I repeat it—I will never marry you."

"And I assure you that within the circle of three months, you will not wish to recall those words, for you will then be Mrs. Hilton."

"Mr. Hilton, you are the most incomprehensible of men! Will nothing convince you that I am in earnest?"

"I believe you to be so; I am only *still more* in earnest, and I have a will that can master yours. I would marry you, Helen Somers, if all the world stood arrayed against it; but such is not the case. Your own opposition is all I have to conquer, for every thing else is in my favor."

"And is not my unwillingness of more importance than the approbation of all the rest of the world?"

"It would be, if I did not feel within myself the assurance that I shall overcome it."

"For once you will fail in what you undertake."

"Do you consent that the effort shall be made?"

"It seems that it matters not whether I do or not."

"May I try?"

"If you choose to battle against impossibilities."

"I do," he emphatically said. "But remember, all stratagems are fair in love and war."

"I *shall* remember it," replied Helen, firmly.

"And act on it, I infer, from the tone of your voice. Very well—if you outgeneral me, I will resign you to my rival. If I defeat your own schemes, I win you from him."

Helen made no reply—it seemed to her useless—and having completed the circuit of the walk, they issued from it, and joined the others.

The sun was setting, and soon afterward the carriages were in requisition to convey the guests to their homes. The same company was invited to assemble at Roseath on the following day, and they parted with the expectation of meeting again on the morrow.

CHAPTER IX.

TRULY had Mr. Hilton said he was never known to give up an object he had once determined on possessing, and Helen Somers he had long looked on as his own. So soon as the company had departed, he sought Mrs. Wilmot, and related to her the conversation which had taken place in the Lovers' Walk. Their consultation was long and earnest, and as they arose to separate, he said—

"I hope you will not think it impertinent in me, dear madam, if I suggest to you that Helen is too often with her friend Miss Forrester. She is a young lady of singular independence of character, and if we wish to bend Helen to our will, it may be best to throw some obstacle in the way of their constant association."

"Such a thought has already occurred to me. I will act on it, though I really think Helen will not dare to thwart my wishes. I shall, however, keep a constant watch upon her until she becomes your wife. That accomplished, I leave her in your own hands."

"Oh, she will be tractable enough when once she is mine," he replied, with a confident look. "Only give her to me, and you will see that I can mould her to my wishes."

Mrs. Wilmot grimly smiled, and went out in search of her niece. She found her in her own room, weeping violently.

"This is quite a sudden change," she dryly remarked, as she seated herself opposite to the agitated girl, with the air of one who meant to have quite a long conversation. "Is the change from the atmosphere of Braeburn to that of your own home so repulsive, that so soon as company departs, you are found bathed in tears?"

"Oh, aunt, if you knew how miserable I am, you could not speak to me thus!" replied Helen, making an effort to repress her emotion.

Mrs. Wilmot glanced around the elegantly-appointed room, and said, with strong sarcastic emphasis,

"Truly you are much to be sympathized with. Cared for, attended to, and robed like a princess, still the spirit of discontent is strong within you. Thankless girl! where is your gratitude for all I have done for you, and am still doing for your elevation and advancement?"

"But not for my happiness, alas!" murmured Helen. "I loathe the splendor in which I live, for it is purchased at the price of my independence and self-respect. Let me return to my mother: I will gladly share her humble home to escape the insulting pretensions which are here forced upon me."

Mrs. Wilmot's cold eye gleamed a lightning glance upon the drooping form of her niece, and her lip slightly curled, as she said,

"Such language is new from you, Miss Somers; and I know full well to whose influence I am to attribute your rebellious words. You go no more to Braeburn while I have the control of your actions. Thank Heaven, my responsibility will soon be ended, and Mr. Hilton can then act as he pleases in reference to the choice of your associates. Nay, start not, as if my words revealed something new to you. To-day, you accepted and wore the bridal gift he offered."

"But without being aware that he was the donor, as you well know, madam. Your own words deceived me into believing that my uncle had presented the jewels to me. Here they are:

I beg that you will yourself return them to Mr. Hilton, and explain to him the mistake I made. He will find his note in the case, with the seal unbroken."

Mrs. Wilmot coldly motioned them away.

"Put the jewels in your drawer, Helen, for neither they nor Mr. Hilton shall be refused, although you have seen fit to assume so lofty an air of independence. Child, child, do you not know that the fate of yourself, and all that should be dear to you, is at my mercy? Why do you brave me thus? What new phase of character is this that you have thought fit to assume?"

"Alas! it is but the struggle of the worm that feels its very existence is crushed by remorseless cruelty," said the pale girl, in a tone so hopeless that even the stern Mrs. Wilmot was almost touched. "If my mother loves me, she will not accept this terrible sacrifice."

"Your mother!" scornfully repeated the hard woman. "Has she not known too bitter poverty to peril the pittance which enables her to live? How will you dare appeal to your mother, when, by gaining her sanction to your rebellious conduct, you take the bread from the children who are younger and more helpless than yourself?"

Helen bowed her face upon her hands, and sat in hopeless despondency. After a pause, her aunt went on,

"I consider your union with Mr. Hilton as settled. It has already been publicly announced. I have written to New Orleans to order your *trousseau* from Madame ——. It will be completed in six weeks; immediately afterward, the marriage will take place."

These words were uttered in that cool, imperious manner, which had been so long used by Mrs. Wilmot as to become habitual to her. Her hard tones seemed to cut through the barriers opposed to her by the will of another, and disperse all obstacles, as if they were so much mist which a breath could dissolve. Helen felt her determination yield before this strongly-asserted authority, and she trembled before her own consciousness of her inability to compete with her aunt's power; especially when unsustained by her more courageous friend. As she made no reply, Mrs. Wilmot sharply asked,

"Do you understand me, Miss Somers? Have I made our mutual positions sufficiently intelligible?"

"I comprehend well, madam, that you intend to drive me to desperation," bitterly replied Helen. "I believe, were death or marriage with Mr. Hilton offered me, I should prefer the former. Judge then of my antipathy to the proposed union."

"I shall offer no such alternative," calmly replied her aunt. "On the day of your marriage, I shall take your sister Gertrude to fill your place here, and I will also double the allowance I now give your mother. Mr. Hilton charges himself with the education of the two elder boys. Your mother will then only have the two smaller children to provide for, and she can return to the sphere from which she has so long been ban-

ished—which she is so eager to re-enter. I leave you to reflect on all this, and there can be but one decision."

Mrs. Wilmot here arose, and swept majestically out of the room, leaving poor Helen more wretched and bewildered than ever. She reflected on her mother's improved prospects, purchased by her obedience, and almost regretted the letter she had dispatched to her lover only a few hours before. Then arose the vision of her future life shared with Hilton, and she felt nerved for any struggle, sooner than yield to such a fate. She remembered that she now possessed no right to recoil from the fate she had embraced on the previous day, when she commanded her lover to come for her, and she would brave the displeasure of kindred and friends to become his.

A little calmed by the conviction that the die was cast, and she no longer possessed the power to change the current of her destiny, she bathed her eyes and descended to supper, to play for the stake of happiness with a steadiness of purpose she had never before displayed. Deception was no longer a crime; it was a sacred duty she owed to him who had trusted to her truth and good faith. She would permit Mr. Hilton to believe himself less repulsive to her; her aunt to believe her submissive to her iron will, until this seeming subjection enabled her to secure her own happiness.

When once beyond her power, she did not believe Mrs. Wilmot would refuse to her mother the assistance she now offered as the price of her subjection to her will.

In pursuance of her resolution, she passively permitted the attentions of Hilton, listened without apparent shrinking to the allusions to their union, which her aunt purposely made; and that lady congratulated herself on her own firmness in conquering opposition.

Mr. Hilton did not trust so implicitly; he was by nature suspicious, and he resolved to keep a strict watch over her until the irrevocable vow, which made her his, was uttered. While Helen dreamed of evading the authority of her aunt, her cadaverous lover had resolved on a system of espionage, which, if carried into effect, must baffle her hopes, and bring her effectually in his power. It may seem strange that Mr. Hilton persisted in the pursuit of one who openly avowed her aversion to a union with him; but he was a man of unwavering determination, and a thoroughly selfish one. He admired the uncommon beauty of Helen, and he liked the defect in her character which threatened to wreck her happiness. Want of firmness in a woman was a virtue in his estimation, for she would be easily swayed by the one who was nearest to her, and he intended his wife to be under his own influence alone. He placed no very high estimate upon the sex, and believed that they should be treated only as "children of a larger growth;" hence he was firmly persuaded, that if he surrounded Helen with all the luxuries of life; if he removed her from her dependent position, she would soon learn to love

him as the source of all her prosperity, and the arbiter of her earthly fate.

On the following morning, Roseneath was the scene of busy activity in preparing for the company which was that day expected to share its hospitality. Philip volunteered his services to seek out the late flowers, with which to decorate the parlors; and, with the assistance of Lina, the vases were arranged with considerable taste.

Bessie, in a dark morning dress, with her long curls imprisoned beneath a little lace cap, which her cousin declared to be the greatest abomination in the shape of a head-dress which she had yet invented, occasionally looked in upon them, and expressed her opinion as to the result of their labors, or, with a few magic touches of her fairy fingers, gave an air of elegance to the most straggling bouquets.

She was busily engaged in assisting her mother to prepare the dessert; for Mrs. Graham prided herself on her good housewifery, and though no effort at display was ever made in her abode, every thing was of the best of its kind, and always elegantly served. Good taste and unaffected hospitality rendered the réunions at Roseneath far more agreeable to the guests than the more sumptuous entertainments at Bellevue.

"Phil," said Bessie, when he had completed his decorations in the parlor, "bring me a basket of monthly roses, and some arbor vitæ into the pantry, with which to idealize my earthly condiments."

"A fine use, truly, to make of the treasures of Flora, putting them on vulgar human food! Fie, Bessie! you violate the scriptural command—'for meat destroy not the work of God;' and are not flowers most especially his works?"

"Oh! Phil, you do pervert things so strangely. However, I do not desire them for meat; that is the cook's department. I only prepare the poetry of the feast, so bring me the flowers quickly."

"Who could refuse the request of so fair a priestess at the shrine of poesy and gourmandism? But stop, Bessie, which of the Nine do you personate, or shall we add a tenth muse in the person of Miss Bessie Graham, confectioner and decorator to the Parnassian group?"

But Bessie had vanished at the summons of her mother, and Philip went forth to execute her commission. He took especial pains to select the most beautiful roses that remained, and soon entered the pantry, carrying his spoils in triumph. By the joint labors of himself and Bessie, the cake stands were soon decorated to the entire satisfaction of Mrs. Graham.

"Dear aunt," said the young man, "can I assist you in any thing else?"

"No—thank you, Phil. You have done your part, and done it well."

"And when will your part be finished, pray?"

"When the guests have all departed; the china, glass, and silver all put away, and the house again brought in order," she replied, smiling.

Philip raised his hands.

"And yet, we read of the patience of Job! It

is easy to see that history was written by a man, or one of his own sex would never have been selected as the martyr of patience. No wonder Mrs. Job scolded, for, in my opinion, she had more to bear than he had; yet she is only spoken of as one of his afflictions."

"A scolding wife is an affliction, Phil; a truth you may realize one of these days, should you chance to get one of that class."

"Oh! I shall make certain of that by taking none at all, for 'he that is married careth for the things of the world, how he may please his wife.' Now I intend to exert the lordly privilege of my sex, to please myself; ergo, I shall never become a Benedict."

"Well reasoned, Phil; but after you did condescend to make your appearance yesterday, I thought you seemed rather struck with that pretty little Miss Benson from Natchez."

"I paid her some attention, because Hilton told me she is highly accomplished, and has lots of tin."

Mr. Graham at that moment chanced to look into the pantry in passing by, and he caught Phil's closing words.

"Two slang words in one sentence, Philip! Yet you know how detestable they are to me."

"Excuse me, sir," said his nephew, demurely, "I did not know that you were in hearing; but I can bring very good authority for the use of the last word, in the way I applied it."

"What is it, pray?" inquired Mr. Graham.

"A diploma from Young America, granting to her sons the power to abuse and distort our noble language as seemeth good unto their crudeness?"

"Oh! no, indeed, sir; my authority is quite venerable; in fact, it is nothing less than the Bible."

Mr. Graham stared, and Philip went on, with a sly smile peeping from the corners of his eyes.

"It is even so, uncle. Isaiah, the prince of prophets, in his first chapter and twenty-fifth verse, says: 'I will turn my hand upon thee, and purge away thy dross, and take away all thy tin.' Now, if the old Hebrew did not mean money here, I should like to know what he could mean! The loss of tin merely, unless they happened to possess mines as valuable as those of Cornwall, could not have been of much moment to them; but if used in a metaphorical sense—if it means wealth, how significant it is! What goes before seems a confirmation of this idea, for he says: 'I will purge away thy dross,' which simply amounts to the same thing. There, sir, have I not made good my defense?" he triumphantly asked.

Overwhelmed by his fluency, his uncle looked at him in surprise. After a pause, he said:

"Boy, you are overwise in your own conceit; and even in the Holy Book you dare to seek food for your satire."

"No, dear uncle," said Philip, penitently. "I have no intention to bring disrespect on what I really reverence, I assure you. I have studied the Bible until its language is familiar to me as a strain of poetry which has been committed to

memory. The grotesque application I sometimes make of its texts, I am impelled to by a spirit of vaggery that will not be quelled. Pardon me: I will try and not offend again."

Somewhat mollified, Mr. Graham said:

"See that you make the effort, youngster, for of late you seldom unclose your lips but to utter something which sounds to me almost like profanity."

Mr. Graham walked away, and Philip sat drumming his fingers on the table, apparently absorbed in meditation. Lina approached him, and whispered—

"Never mind pa's scolding, Cousin Phil. He will soon forget all about it, and some day Bessie will keep peace between you."

"What can the child mean?" asked Philip, gazing on her in surprise. "I shall never need Bessie's intervention between my uncle and myself."

"Who knows?" said Lina, with a roguish laugh, as she ran off. "You are dull of comprehension, Master Philip Maitland, but I am not blind, I assure you."

"I protest the rising generation is wise in its own conceit, as my uncle asserted," muttered the youth. "Juvenile America is rather precocious to make such discoveries as Lina hinted at just now. Heigh-ho! I must take a canter around the farm, and gather up philosophy enough to bear the burden of this dinner-party. I wonder why civilized people give dinners, for they are horrible bores."

When the company assembled, Flora sought an opportunity of speaking with Helen. This Mrs. Wilnot saw, and she maneuvered to keep them apart. This was done from no feeling of mistrust respecting her ultimate control over the destiny of her niece, but simply because it pleased her to circumvent the wishes of one who tacitly defied her, as Flora so often did.

When dinner was announced, the two friends were necessarily separated so far from her as to escape her surveillance for a season. As they passed into the dining saloon, Flora found means to whisper a few words to Helen, which caused her to grow pale, and then flush to the deepest hue of the rose. She held Mr. Hilton's arm, and her emotion was not lost on him: he had not heard the faintly-breathed communication, but he knew that something of deep interest to Helen must have been said; and as he glanced in her eloquent face, he felt the conviction that more than mere resistance to Mrs. Wilnot's commands was in the thoughts of both the friends. To discover and circumvent their plans was his firm resolve, and from that moment every glance of the two was watched so quietly that neither dreamed of the suspicions aroused in his bosom.

Flora was in brilliant spirits; and Lenox, who sat beside her, thought her more attractive than ever. The time for the ladies to leave the table at length came; and as they passed out of the room, Flora seized the hand of Helen, and drawing her toward the gallery, said—

"Be brave, Helen, and defy your aunt for

once; for I must speak with you. I know she has prohibited our free intercourse; I can read it in your constrained manner; but I care not. It is now too late for you to permit yourself to be sacrificed to her wishes. Come with me into the grove, where we will be uninterrupted."

Helen yielded, and they passed into the yard. As they crossed the lawn, Hilton saw them through the windows; and complaining of sudden indisposition, he excused himself, and left the table.

Passing beneath the shadow of the trees, the two girls unclosed a small gate leading into a thick grove of noble forest trees. The undergrowth was cleared away, and the green turf was kept clear of fallen leaves and weeds. Scattered beneath the trees were many grotesque-looking seats, the production of Phil's mechanical ingenuity; and toward the most sequestered of these Flora led the way. This was called Bessie's Bower; and the clinging tendrils of many wild forest vines had been twined together, so as to form an impervious shelter from the noonday sun, should his beams chance to penetrate to this favorite spot.

"Now, Flora, what is the news you so mysteriously announced as we passed into the dining-room?" asked Helen, with deep solicitude.

"It is very important; but first tell me, quickly, what has passed between your aunt and yourself since we parted?"

"She has forbidden me to go to Braeburn—and she has declared my union with Mr. Hilton is settled, and shall take place so soon as the preparations can be completed."

"Cool, I declare! but it is in character with Mrs. Wilnot. However, affairs have now so nearly reached a crisis, that it is of no consequence."

"Explain, Flora. I am trembling with suspense."

"Know, then, that on my return home last evening I found a letter from Mr. Clinton. In it he informed me that some business connected with the firm in which he is now a partner demands the presence of an agent in New Orleans. He assumes the supervision of it, and will be in that city in the early part of the winter. So soon as he can possibly leave his business, he will come up the river in search of the spot which holds her who is most dear to him. He requests me to communicate his expected arrival to you, and between us to make such arrangements as will baffle the opposition of your relatives to your well-grounded hope of happiness in a union with each other. His letter ends thus—

"I have relinquished all hope of gaining the consent of Helen's relatives to our marriage, and therefore I shall withdraw Helen from their protection without scruple. The usual objections to an elopement are in our case void, and she shall never have cause to repent the trust I ask her to repose in my honor. Dear Miss Forrester, prepare her for what must follow my arrival in your neighborhood, if Helen prove true to the pledges she has so often given me."

Helen took the letter which Flora held, and

glanced over it with tearful eyes. Her friend asked—

"Now, Helen, dare you recoil?"

"I neither dare nor wish it. I am driven to rebellion. If my aunt did not persist in pressing forward this marriage with Mr. Hilton, I would try what patience could do in softening her in my favor."

"Rely upon it, my dear, it is better as it is. I have heard of marble being worn away by the slow dropping of water; but your tears might flow forever without moving Mrs. Wilmot from a purpose she has once formed."

Helen sighed as she admitted the truth of her friend's words. Flora continued—

"And now, Helen, since we will not be able to meet for several days, it is necessary to make some arrangement for communicating with each other. I do not like to arouse Mrs. Wilmot's suspicions by coming too often to Bellevue; I will write all I have to say, and cause a faithful messenger to deposit my note in the old bird's nest in the Lovers' Walk, in which we have put letters before to-day. You remember the place?"

"Oh yes—the mocking-bird's nest on the southern side. I remember the spot well."

"That shall be our post-office."

"But who will be the Mercury?"

"Leave that to me, and rest assured of my prudence in the choice I shall make. Now let us return before the ire of your aunt becomes uncontrollable, and she resolves to imprison you for plotting treason with my dangerous self."

They arose, and without suspicion of having been overheard, passed along the pathway, still engaged in earnest conversation. As they issued from the gate, and were lost to view by the curve in the road, Hilton passed from behind the bower, and threw himself at full length upon the seat

they had so lately occupied. He had made a circuit of the grove, and reached his place of concealment just as Flora was describing the sylvan receptacle they would use for their correspondence. He was annoyed at missing the conversation which preceded it, but at all events the clew to their future proceedings was in his own hand. He would keep a watch on the nest himself, and ascertain the contents of these missives before they reached Helen: thus he could easily circumvent any plot they might set on foot.

Chuckling over the power he had thus acquired over the helpless Helen, his pale features looked more repulsive than ever, as he reclined within the bower of bright little Bessie on that clear autumn day, and plotted the entanglement of a shrinking girl in a snare which would end in making her his own, without her consent. "By Heaven! there would be something romantic in that," he muttered, "and the punishment to her would be well merited for attempting to play a double game. I will think of it—will mature my plan, for it seems feasible. Ha! ha! gentle Helen—subtle Flora, I will yet outwit ye both, and make ye in truth acknowledge that 'all stratagems are fair in love.'"

He arose; sauntered carelessly toward the house, and found the party just dispersing.

Lenox accompanied Mr. Forrester and his daughter to Braeburn, and Hilton returned with Mrs. Wilmot, though he did not reveal to her the intended interchange of letters between the friends. He reserved that for some future opportunity, when his mind was less occupied with the details of the cruel counterplot he meditated against the fair being who sat opposite to him in the carriage buried in a reverie, the subject of which he could well divine.

CHAPTER X.

SEVERAL weeks have passed since the dinner at Roseneath, and it seems long to Flora since Lenox took his departure, though letters from him are constantly received.

Mr. Forrester and his daughter sat together beside the hearth, on which a bright fire was blazing; for the keen wintry air rendered its warmth necessary. Flora seemed restless, as if the arrival of some one was momentarily expected; and her father, although apparently engaged with a book, noted her listening attitude, as an approaching footstep drew near—the deep flush that crimsoned her cheek, and the expression of disappointment which overspread her features, as some ordinary claim on her attention was made by some of the household.

She at length went to the door; looked forth a few moments on the clear sky of night, studded with brilliant sparkles of light, and then returned to her place near the hearth. Her father closed his book, and looked up at her.

"You are impatient to-night, Flora. Are you expecting letters of great importance, that the delay of your messenger occasions so much solicitude?"

Flora blushed, and a half smile parted her lips. "I do expect a letter of some consequence this evening?" she ingenuously replied. Interpreting the expression of her father's face, she quickly added—

"It is not a love-letter, I assure you. His last missive was answered only yesterday."

"Whose correspondence then elicits such deep interest, may I ask?" said Mr. Forrester, gravely.

Flora paused a moment, as if to consider some question in her own mind, and then replied—

"You must be taken into our confidence at last, father, and I had better inform you at once of the romantic plot I have woven together, and which I hope to bring to a successful termination."

"Of which I presume Helen Somers is the heroine. I have not been so unobservant as you may fancy."

Flora laughed.

"You must be a wizard, my dear, kind, considerate papa. It is so indeed, and I ventured to calculate on your assistance, in defiance of the cold eye of Mrs. Wilmot and her stately anger."

"Why should I fear the latter, my daughter, when you are bold enough to brave it? Let me into your secret, and I promise at least not to betray it to the overbearing aunt, nor the repulsive lover. Since I have seen Mr. Hilton, I am not surprised at Helen's aversion to the marriage."

"Ah, you acknowledge then that my description of him was not exaggerated! I despise him, for I believe that any man who could play the part he does toward Helen, would be capable of any meanness. The letter I expect to-night is from Mr. Clinton, the lover of whom I once before spoke to you. He has now been in New Orleans several weeks, where business of great importance chains him, or he would have visited us before. You are aware that Mrs. Wilmot originally intended the marriage of her niece to take place about this time; but moved by some sudden caprice, she has consented to postpone the ceremony until she makes a visit to New Orleans. Mrs. Somers and her daughter will accompany her, and, of course, Mr. Hilton is to be one of the party. This change in her plans plays directly in our hands; for it will be much easier to effect an elopement from a large hotel like the St. Charles, than from Helen's own home."

"Well reasoned, my little girl; but will Helen possess the requisite nerve to carry this through, do you think?"

"She will not fail now, father; but I shall feel uneasy until I am near enough to give strength to her wavering courage. Mrs. Wilmot can not refuse to permit me to accompany her in her annual visit to the city, as I have been so long in the habit of going with her, and I shall be conveniently blind to her late coolness. Will you not make arrangements to go down, dear father, now you know of what importance to Helen my presence is? In anticipation of your consent, I have already won from Mr. and Mrs. Graham a promise that Bessie shall accompany us."

"But are you sure the lynx-eyed aunt will not suspect something, Flora? She may circumvent you yet."

"That is impossible. She is not aware of Mr. Clinton's presence in New Orleans; besides, Mrs. Wilmot would never imagine that you would lend your aid to rescue this persecuted girl from her thralldom."

"Yet my gipsy of a daughter appears to think it a matter of course that I shall do so."

"Because she knows and understands all your kindness of heart, dear father, and feels assured that she can rely upon your assistance in the cause of humanity," said Flora, caressingly. "You will aid us with your advice, will you not?"

"I must consider about it first, my love. Reflection should always come before decision."

"To render the latter favorable, I will show you the notes written to me by Helen since she

has been prohibited from coming to Braeburn. The state of her mind is so touchingly revealed in them, that I am sure you can not withhold your assistance after reading them."

As Flora spoke she arose, took up a candle, and went toward her own room. As the light flashed into the open door of the apartment as she crossed the vestibule, she heard a slight noise within, and as she entered, she was certain that a dark figure flitted through the door on the opposite side; she called aloud to Jetty, thinking she had possibly been in the room to arrange it for the night, though it was strange that she should attempt to perform such service, with no light save that from a dim and nearly extinguished fire, which smouldered on the hearth. No voice answered, though a retreating footstep evidently crossed the passage leading from the room, for she heard the floor creak, as it often does on a cold night, beneath even the lightest tread. Surprised at this, Flora quickly reached the door, threw it open, and followed the retreating footsteps.

The rear of the house had originally been constructed of logs, and when the apartments in front were added, a narrow corridor had been left between the wall of Flora's bedchamber and that of the dining-room; this terminated at the further end in a small portico and a short flight of steps leading into the yard, and by this entrance Jetty was in the habit of seeking the apartment of her mistress.

As Flora threw the glare of the light she held in her hand into this passage, again the outline of a form was visible in the doorway, and as it stood clearly revealed for one instant against the starlit sky, she saw that the intruder was much taller than her waiting-maid.

"Who are you?" she imperiously demanded; but the figure vanished, and no reply came to her question. A stranger to fear, and reared with that feeling of security and protection in the midst of the slaves, which is the heritage of a southern planter, Flora pressed forward, and holding the light above her head, looked carefully around. No human being seemed near; the deep and breathless quiet of a clear starlit night rested upon the lawn, and no crouching form was seen endeavoring to elude the bright eyes which glanced earnestly on all within the scope of their vision.

Had she stepped forward a single pace, the light she held aloft would have fallen on one who stood within two feet of her, almost stifling her breath to prevent her proximity from being known.

A small platform extended from the door, and a massive square pillar on either side sustained the roof. In the shadow of one of these stood the person who had eluded her search, and without discovering her proximity Flora turned and re-entered the house. Well it was that she did so, for the hand of the quadroon grasped a small sharp dagger, which lay concealed in her bosom, and the pressure of her teeth upon her pale lip, the wild gleam of her snakelike eye, showed

that she was prepared to glut her hatred at once, if premature discovery threatened her. Fortunately for the unsuspecting girl, she dreamed not of the vicinity of this dangerous being, and for that hour she escaped.

On re-entering her own room, she looked carefully around: every thing remained in exact order, except her port-folio; that she was certain she had left on the writing-desk, and it was now lying on the dressing-stand, where it seemed to have been suddenly dropped; for it lay partly resting against the frame of the mirror. The key was in the lock, and on touching the leaf, it yielded to her hand. She often kept money in this receptacle, and the painful thought came to her that robbery had been intended. Quickly taking out the notes she knew it contained, she saw at a glance that none were missing.

"I came upon her too soon," she thought; "and now, who can it possibly be? for such a thing has never occurred before."

Taking the port-folio in her hand, she returned to the parlor with it.

"You were long returning, my daughter," said Mr. Forrester; "I was about to seek you when you entered; and now I look at you, you are paler than when you left me. Has any goblin alarmed you in your solitary room?"

"I can not say that I have been alarmed, but I have met with an adventure since I left you, which I do not find agreeable."

She then related what had occurred, and together they examined the port-folio. Nothing appeared to have been disturbed, except the letters of Lenox; Flora had received several from him. They had been tied together with a ribbon, which was now removed, and they lay apart, as if they had been hurriedly dropped into the case. On examination, the first one she had received from him had been torn nearly through, as if an ungovernable burst of passion had caused the reader to give a sudden and violent wrench to the paper.

Flora trembled, in spite of her self-command, as she held it in her hand. It seemed to her as if an evil phantom had passed between herself and him she was beginning to regard above all others—this letter, the manly outpouring of a noble heart and sincere affection, had been mysteriously injured, and by whom? Was it a living form that flitted so spirit-like before her, or were the powers of darkness conspiring against her happiness? Rejecting the superstitious thought, she vainly endeavored to elucidate the strange event in a probable manner. Mr. Forrester glanced down the mutilated page, and said—

"Did I not know that such can not be the fact, I should say that a bitterly jealous woman had read these love passages, Flora, and in a paroxysm of fury gave this rent to the letter."

"There is no one here who can even read, except—" She paused, as if unwilling to utter the name that rose to her lips. Her father finished the sentence.

"Except Lisette. She has been ill in bed

for two days past, and can not be the aggressor. Besides, why should she seek to penetrate into your secrets? Save when her evil spirit gets the better of her, she seems to be a quiet, well-behaved woman."

"True—it could not be; yet the form I saw was about Lisette's height. Oh no, it could not have been Lisette; to make assurance doubly sure, however, I will go to her room and see if she has retired."

Throwing a shawl over her head, the fearless girl crossed the dining-room, and a gallery in the rear, which communicated with the yard by a wide flight of steps. The sky was brilliantly clear, and the atmosphere seemed to have been chilled into stillness by the frosty influence of night. The house occupied by Lisette stood darkly against the deep blue of the heavens, and not a ray of light issued from any portion of it. Lightly approaching the window of the quadroon's room, Flora struck on the glass, and the voice of Lisette, sounding as if just aroused from slumber, demanded who was there.

"It is I," replied Flora. "I merely wished to ascertain if you are in your own room."

The window was immediately raised, and Lisette looked forth on her young lady. By the dim light, the working of her features was invisible; and her well-trained voice, obedient to the strong control she put on herself, betrayed none of the passionate struggle that shook her frame, as she asked—

"Is any thing the matter, Miss Flora? Can I serve you in any way?"

"I do not need your services. I merely wished to inquire if you have left your room within the last half hour?"

"Not unless I walked in my sleep, Miss Flora, for I have been in bed since dark. You know I have not been well for several days, and I retired early. What has happened?"

"Nothing to alarm me; close your window, and retire again. The night air may injure you."

Flora turned away, and retraced her steps, while the quadroon lowered the sash, and following her retreating figure with her gleaming eyes, she muttered—

"Better not suspect me too soon, mistress of mine, or the dream of happiness I permit you to indulge must be cut short at once. The angel of destruction hovers over you, but I wish him to settle slowly—slowly over the numbing heart, that all the horror of his insidious approaches may be seen and felt, with the terrible certainty that they can not be evaded. Then, when he beholds you fading, perishing thus mysteriously, he may, perchance, feel a portion of the fiery anguish that consumes me."

Flora returned to her father, who stood on the gallery awaiting her. They entered the house together, and Mr. Forrester said:

"You found her in her own apartment, as I expected. Strange as is this mystery, I think Lisette must be guiltless."

"It would seem so; yet, father, I begin to have a feeling of singular repulsion when she

approaches me. I have reasoned with myself, and endeavored to overcome it, but in vain. I wish that you had never purchased her."

"I regret that this should be so, Flora, for she is a faithful slave in the department awarded her. My conscience would not be easy if I sold to another the mastery over her, who might not treat her well, and would not consider her wild temper in seeking to control her."

"True; yet it is uncomfortable to have a fire-brand thrown in the midst of a peaceful plantation, such as this has been. The few privileges granted to Lisette over the blacks, have already aroused a spirit of jealousy, and I can not help thinking that she is not grateful for them either. I am uneasy whenever I leave home even for a few hours, lest another outbreak should occur; and unwilling as I am to have her for a personal attendant, I shall be forced to take her with me to New Orleans."

"I am sorry, my love, that this responsibility has been given to us; but since we own this woman we must do the best we can with her. Unwearying kindness may in time soften the bitterness of her temper, and she may at least become contented with the sphere Providence has awarded her. You must not permit this feeling of dislike to grow on you, Flora, for it will prevent you from doing justice to such good qualities as she may possess."

"I will try, dear father; but let us dismiss the subject, and return to Helen. Here are her notes, and they, too, seem to have shared the scrutiny of my unknown visitant. Can Mr. Hilton be base enough to employ an agent to learn the subject of our correspondence? Yet no—he does not know that we write to each other. Mrs. Wilnot may suspect it, and—I am lost in conjecture, and dare not affix the outrage on any one."

"Be more careful of your port-folio in future, my love, and keep it so secured as to defy the scrutiny of others. These letters of Helen might touch even as hard a heart as Mrs. Wilnot's. Poor girl—we must endeavor to save her from this marriage."

Flora's face brightened, and she forgot her own annoyance in pleasure at her father's evident interest in the fate of her young friend. While they were engaged in looking over these outpourings of poor Helen's fears and unhappiness, a heavy step approached, and starting up, Flora said—

"Ah! here is Stephen at last, and he brings me a letter, too!"

A slender negro buttoned to the chin in a heavy blanket coat stood respectfully at the door, and bowed, as he offered his mistress a parcel containing papers, letters, and magazines.

"What detained you so late, Stephen?" she asked, as her busy fingers opened the package.

"De mail didn't git in at de right time, Miss Flora, and I had to wait; but I brought a good haul when I did come, and Miss Flora knows it's a berry cole night—bery cole, dat is, for de season."

Flora laughed, for she understood the insinuation at once. She went to the sideboard in the

next room, and pouring out a drink of spirit, gave it to him.

"Thank you, Miss Flora; you is a born lady every inch of you," said the black, with a low bow. "Here's wishin' dat de diamond o' Bracburn may long continue to sparkle as bright as now."

"Thank you, Stephen. You grow quite poetic, I declare." With another low bow the man retired, and carefully closed the door after him.

Flora found the expected letter from Clinton, and her face was brilliant with animation as she read its contents.

"Every thing is arranged," she at length said. "The evening before our departure from New Orleans, we must meet Mr. Clinton at the Episcopal church on Camp Street. He will be attended by a friend, and have a carriage in readiness to convey Helen to the ship in which they will embark for the North. Before Mrs. Wilmot is apprised of the marriage, they will be far on their way down the Mississippi."

"It is easy to plan, my love, but the execution of the scheme is the difficulty. I assure you, I shall think you very clever if you really outwit Mrs. Wilmot. Until the poor girl is actually gone with the husband of her choice, I shall believe that her aunt will yet bend her to her will."

"Age has taught you fear, father; whereas I only listen to the voice of hope. I am sanguine in my expectations of triumphing over Mrs. Wilmot's selfish views for her niece."

"You have my earnest wishes for your success, my darling; and such assistance as I can render, I will cheerfully afford. I have made up my mind that this is one of the few cases in which an elopement is justifiable. Good-night, love. I trust that the annoyances of this evening will not prevent your slumbers from being sweet and refreshing."

"Oh no! I will see that the door is secure, and with the company of Jetty, I shall defy fear."

When no strangers were at Bracburn, prayers were said immediately after supper; so Flora kissed her father tenderly, and with her last words retired to her room. She found a bright fire burning on the hearth, and a bed made in one corner on the floor, which was usually occupied by Jetty, when there was no company with her young lady. That sable handmaiden sat on one side of the hearth, with her head bent forward on her arms, the heat of the fire throwing its scorching rays directly upon her brain. Flora only smiled as she noted the favorite position of the black, but did not arouse her from her slumbers.

She placed her port-folio before her, and again considered the contents of her lover's letters, and pondered on the strange mutilation one of them had undergone. She took up the latest one, unclosed it, and bent over the messages of love it contained with a heart thrilled by each emotion the eloquent page expressed. While thus employed, a faint odor exhaled from the open sheet, the subtle influence of which penetrated to her brain: the writing flashed before her vision, appearing to assume hues of living light, which

faded into a dull haze, that seemed to float and glimmer before her for many moments.

As sight and perfect consciousness returned, she became faint and sick; her head drooped upon her breast, her senses receded, and she lay, white, cold, and motionless. How long she remained thus, Flora knew not; but when she recovered sufficiently, she aroused Jetty, and with her assistance prepared for bed.

"Goodness gracious, Miss Flora! you is white as if you seen a ghost," said the girl, as she looked in her face. "You mus' be sick. Shall I call Mammy?"

"No, Jetty. I am not ill enough to require any assistance but yours. I will get to bed, and to-morrow I shall be quite well."

"Did you see nothin' 'tall dat make you so white an' frightful looking, Miss Flora?"

"No—I saw nothing, child, so you may sleep in perfect security. Have you fastened both the doors leading from the yard?"

"Oh yes, ma'am. I never forgets dat."

"All is right, then. Put out the light, and sleep as soon as you please."

But Flora herself was not able to follow the example of her attendant, who was soon buried in a profound slumber. All the blood in her body appeared to rush at intervals with frightful violence to her brain, and phantoms, clothed with vivid light, seemed to flit before her excited vision. As these passed away, a sensation of gasping giddiness, such as is felt by one falling from a vast height, succeeded them, and for a long interval she would lie motionless and helpless, as one from whom life is passing away.

Recovering from this, she endeavored to arouse Jetty, but her voice was so weakened, and the girl slept so deeply, that she found it impossible to do so. She then raised herself from her pillow, determined to get up and seek assistance; but the room seemed to glide before her, as the waves of an unsteady sea; mocking faces leered and gibbered in her own, and with a shudder she sunk back, and remained perfectly quiescent. Gradually her vision cleared; the glowing life-current slowly resumed its wonted flow, and the power to reason, to assist herself, returned. She remembered that a bottle of aromatic salts had been left on the stand near her bed, and with an effort she reached out her arm and grasped it. Its pungent odor dispelled the painful feeling of imbecility which seemed to have invaded her brain, and soon she felt as if restored to her usual state of bodily health. Fearful of a return of this singular attack, she thought of arousing her father, but her unwillingness to alarm him at length induced her to wait for some warning symptoms of its recurrence. Sleep thus stole over her senses, though it was troubled, and filled with frightful visions.

The sun was shining brightly when she awoke, and Jetty informed her that breakfast was waiting. A feeling of languor seemed to enervate her whole being; but she struggled against it, and arose at once, hoping the fresh morning air would dispel the lassitude which was so unusual

with one of her gay temperament and excellent health.

When she entered the breakfast-room, her father was startled by the change in her appearance, and made many inquiries as to its cause. Unwilling to render him uneasy on her account, she assured him that she felt quite well, and to a restless night her unusual paleness might be attributed.

"A canter on horseback will correct that," she said; "and if you will accompany me to Rose-neath, I will go over and arrange our visit to New Orleans with Bessie."

Mr. Forrester assented, and the horses were ordered. As Flora arose from her scarcely tasted breakfast, Lisette came in to ask some trifling directions about her work. This was not unusual, and her young mistress paused and gave her the information she needed. The keen glance of the woman rested on the changed features of her young lady with exultation; and she read upon them the evidences of the past night's sufferings. Her form seemed to dilate with the triumphant conviction that she held the fate of one so bitterly detested in her own hand. Flora caught the expression of the smile that flickered on her lips, and her heart painfully contracted, she knew not why. She suddenly asked—

"Lisette, do you think you would be happier elsewhere? Your looks do not indicate contentment here."

"I never hope to be happy any where," replied the quadroon. "That dream has long since passed away. I can fulfill my mission here, Miss Flora, as well, or better than elsewhere."

"And what is your mission?" asked Flora, without thinking of the purport of her question.

The woman's eye blazed with lurid light, and a bright gleam of crimson shot over her sallow cheek. The momentary excitement passed away, and she coldly said—

"That of all earth-born mortals—to suffer and die."

"And is that all our wonderful capacities were given to us for?" asked Flora, regarding her compassionately. "God pours his sunshine upon the earth; He supplies the wants of his meanest creatures: even the little violet that hides its head beneath the moss, obtains the drop of dew needful to its sustenance; and think you He so wonderfully and fearfully made us, only to suffer and die? Fie, Lisette! It is not seemly thus to slander the great Father of all."

"He has been but a stepfather to me," replied the quadroon, almost fiercely. "It is well for you, around whom all the graces and amenities of life are clustered, to speak of the goodness of God. He has blessed you; but I—I bear his curse. In me, and such as I am, the denunciation of Scripture is literally fulfilled."

Flora's head drooped upon her breast. After a pause, she murmured,

"It is true. Unfortunate race! the sympathies of your half-brethren should at least be yours. Lisette," she continued, in a louder tone,

"do you desire to be free? Could you make an honest livelihood if you were left to your own exertions?"

"I am an expert needle-woman," replied Lisette, on whom the prospect opened by her young lady's words did not produce the electrical effect she had expected—"I might, by laboring many hours every day, procure a subsistence."

"Then," said Flora hastily, "I will use my influence with my father to bestow on you the freedom to use your own time as you choose. I shall take you with me to New Orleans in a few weeks; you can then look around for a situation which will suit you, and I think I can guarantee my father's consent to your remaining there. Here you have no associates, for I know you have received sufficient education to render you superior to the blacks. In a city you will find those of your own caste, and not live as you now do, cut off from all social sympathies."

Lisette gazed at her, as if doubtful of the meaning of her words; but the expression of perfect sincerity on the face of Flora, convinced her that she was in earnest.

For an instant she was touched by this generosity, but the native bitterness again predominated, and she said—

"Perhaps Miss Forrester wishes to rid herself of one toward whom she has a dislike? It is unfortunate for me, if I have inspired such a feeling."

Flora blushed, for it was too near the truth, and she quickly replied—

"Not if it leads to conferring freedom upon you."

"You do not deny it, then?" said Lisette, gazing fixedly upon her. "If such be the fact, I will not refuse the boon you offer, but I feel myself excused from returning gratitude for it."

"It matters not," responded Flora, coldly. "Prepare to accompany me to New Orleans as my personal attendant. When once there, I will see what can be done for you."

She left the room, and in a few moments issued from the door in her riding-cap and flowing skirt. A high-bred and daintily-caparisoned steed stood awaiting her, and quickly springing into the saddle, she cantered beside her father, revolving in her own mind the most feasible manner of making her proposal in favor of Lisette. She was aware that a high price had been paid for the scamstress, and although her father was not a grasping man in worldly affairs, she knew that he was careful of money, and looked on the institution of slavery as ordained by a higher wisdom than that of earth. Hence the sympathy that moved her to extricate the quadroon from her bonds would be likely to meet with little response from him. However, she was fully aware of her own influence over him, and was sanguine in her hopes of being enabled to remove the evil spirit from her life, which she intuitively felt this woman to be.

Lisette stood upon the hillside, and watched the lessening figures of Mr. Forrester and his daughter. She muttered—

"I would give much to know what prompted this sudden wish to be rid of me. Not so fast—not so fast, mistress of mine! Did last night's visions give birth to the vague belief that I am the spectre on your path? Ha! the evil one who rules the earth would not permit such warning. Free me! ay—do so fair lady, and I will return the boon. You cause the shackles forged by man to fall from my limbs; and I will cause the fetters of clay to loose their clinging hold, and the angel spirit to be freed from all mortal ties. Those heavy eyes—that hueless cheek, assure me that the Spaniard's boasted powder is really worth its weight in gold."

Her lips continued to move, and her eyes to gaze on vacancy, long after the father and daughter had passed beyond their vision. Her bitter reverie was interrupted by the voice of Winny.

"I want for know when you cum to cut out mo' work, Lisette? Miss Flo' said de jackets

must all be done to-day, so you better not be standin' dar gaping at de sunshine."

"Have you not once before been chastised by me for impertinence?" said the seamstress, sharply turning on her. "Who bade you follow me?"

"I didn't wait for no biddin'. You aint de queen o' de valley I reckon, dat I can't tell you o' your business. Ef you choose to be idle I don't, cos them what has a good report at Christmas gets a new dress and a head handkercher from my Missis herself."

Lisette's lip curled at the prospect of these humble rewards, and she followed the girl in silence to the scene of her daily toil. Deeply did she loathe this spot—constantly did she contrast it with the luxury which had once surrounded her, and more repulsive did its aspect daily become; yet she felt no relenting toward her whose generous nature prompted her to aid her in escaping from it.

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. GRAHAM received her guests in her usual sitting-room. This was a pleasant-looking apartment, with a southern exposure, and two large windows were open on this bright and balmy day, although a fire burned on the hearth. Sloping hillsides, and shadowy dells, over which the lingering hues of autumn still threw their brilliant garniture, were visible from the windows, and the yellow sunshine seemed to lie lovingly upon the slopes, which yet retained their verdure in many sheltered spots. A flock of sheep with tinkling bells, completed the pastoral beauty of the scene, and carried the imagination to that land of hill and heather from which the father of Mr. Graham had emigrated to the United States.

The room itself was just such a cheerful, cozy spot as one would choose for comfort. The walls were covered with a delicately-tinted paper, on which flowers and tropical birds were mingled in inextricable confusion. A bright-hued carpet covered the floor, and a Franklin stove, as polished as ebony, diffused warmth throughout the apartment. A work-stand of capacious dimensions occupied the centre of the floor, and on it stood several baskets. One of mammoth size was placed in the most conspicuous spot, and was called by the children the "mother basket," because of its queenly appearance in comparison with the smaller ones around it.

This leviathan among its tribe, was filled with children's garments in different stages of completion, quite an army of cotton spools of all sizes, needle-books, scissors, dilapidated children's books, scraps of twine, marbles, and other odds and ends, which proved that it was a general receptacle for all the household.

There was Bessie's basket, of light open-work, lined with crimson silk, and filled with gayly-colored worsteds and patterns for tapestry work. Lina's, a little stubby-looking thing, so closely woven that she might have stood upon it without injury to its texture, holding an odd jumble of battered working implements, half hemmed ruffles, nuts, and other characteristic trifles. Then came a wee thing, lined in imitation of sister Bessie's, belonging to the youngest darling, a little girl of four: this served as a receptacle for broken toys, dolls' clothing, etc.

A wide sofa, covered with flowered chintz, stood between the windows, and large chairs of every comfortable form were scattered about the room.

Mrs. Graham, looking neat, happy, and smiling, sat beside the mother basket, assisting Bessie to assort its multifarious contents, and reduce them to something like order—a task which was performed once every week, or the confusion would have become worse confounded. Lina had volunteered to assist the youngest in repairing a violent wrench which one of the boys had given her favorite doll, rudely severing head and body; and the two sat on the sofa, busily engaged in performing rather an uncommon surgical operation on the patient victim.

Two sprightly-looking boys of six and eight years of age, were rolling marbles on the floor, and a stranger who looked in on the busy, yet orderly room, the tidy-looking children, with their healthy, happy faces, would have known at once that this was a well-conducted household.

When Mr. Forrester and his daughter entered, all left their occupations to welcome them, for they were both favorites with every member of

the family, down to little Angela, who held up her rosy mouth to be kissed, and forgot her headless doll in her admiration of Flora's pretty riding-cap and long curls.

The ride and the morning air had dispelled the pallor from the features of Flora, and once more her blood went bounding through her veins with its usual buoyant flow. She laughingly exclaimed—

"Congratulate me, Mrs. Graham; I have gained the victory. Papa has consented to set out for New Orleans at the same time with the Wilmot party."

"I can not think why you and Bessie are so anxious to see the pompous preparations making for the sacrifice of that poor child, Helen Somers," said Mrs. Graham, almost sadly. "Were I her mother, I think I would more gladly lay her in her last resting-place, than give her to so coarse a man as the intended bridegroom."

"Oh! it is the last free intercourse we shall have with Helen, for when she belongs to that odious Mr. Hilton, I expect we shall not often see her. And then, you know, dear madam, we are privileged by our sex to take an interest in finery of every kind. Mrs. Wilmot spares no expense in decking the victim for the sacrifice."

"And you wish to see that it is done with unexceptionable taste, I presume?" said her father. "Where shall I find Mr. Graham, madam? I will leave you, ladies, to discuss Helen's prospects while I seek him."

"He is in the library. Robert, go with Mr. Forrester to your father."

"Never mind, my little lad. I can find the way myself."

Mr. Forrester left the room, and then commenced an interchange of ideas on the subject of the approaching wedding. Flora was careful to keep her own secret, and not betray the *dénouement* she hoped to accomplish. Even Bessie was as yet in ignorance of the intended elopement, as Flora wisely thought that the fewer who knew their plans, the less danger there was of their betrayal. When they reached New Orleans, she would take Bessie into their confidence, and together they would accompany the fugitive bride to the altar, and witness her clandestine espousal.

At length Flora inquired for Philip. Lina looked up, with her eyes sparkling with mischief.

"I believe I have found out a secret," she archly said.

"What is it, Lina love?" asked the fair guest, smiling, and half anticipating her answer.

"That you and Cousin Phil are carrying on a flirtation."

"Bless me!" exclaimed Mrs. Graham, "how does the child happen to know the meaning of the word?"

"Oh! I know very well, for I heard Mrs. Wilmot say that Miss Flora and Mr. Lenox had got up quite a flirtation with each other, and I looked into the dictionary to see what she meant."

"And you made a great discovery thereby," replied the laughing Flora, although the color deepened on her cheek. "I think I must be

rather notorious in that line, or you would not accuse me of flirting with Phil also. Let me hear your proofs, my precociously wise one."

"Only these. You always ask for Cousin Phil, lately; and I have seen him slip a letter in your hand, when he thought no one was looking, and—"

"Enough—enough. I plead guilty. But, Lina dear, do not seek to render Bessie jealous. See how her eye is sparkling, and her cheek glowing at the bare possibility that her very dear friend should interfere with her prior claims on Cousin Phil's affections."

"Papa does not approve of such near relations marrying," said Bessie, demurely. "So we can not be rivals, at any rate, Flora. Phil and I are like brother and sister."

"True enough, but we shall see what the future will reveal," said Miss Forrester, mischievously. "Now, Lina, I must resort to bribery and corruption, and promise a pretty Christmas gift from New Orleans, if you will be conveniently blind and deaf to my proceedings in regard to Cousin Philip. And above all, be silent."

"Oh! I can keep a secret well enough, Miss Flora, only I wished to tease Bessie by telling on you to-day."

"Teaze me, indeed!" retorted Bessie, with a half curl of her red lip. "Phil's proceedings are of too little consequence to me to produce such an effect, I assure you, sister of mine."

"I'll tell him that, and then he'll not think it necessary to neglect the most important demands I make on his leisure to gratify your slight caprice."

"Bravo! Lina, that speech is worthy of being put in a book," said Phil, as he entered the open door. "Pray, what is it all about?"

A rapid glance passed between Flora and young Maitland, and as she offered him her hand, they dextrously exchanged a letter each one held. Bessie, whose eye was fixed on them, saw it, and, for the first time in her life, she felt a pang of jealousy. Philip had heretofore been so exclusive in his devotion to her, that she had never dreamed of analyzing her own feelings toward him. Now, she comforted herself with thinking that she only felt sorrow that her cousin should give his young affections to one who would never reciprocate them, in spite of the good understanding which appeared to exist between them.

Flora read and understood the expression of her face. She leaned over her, and furtively showing the address on the letter, whispered—

"I read your thoughts, Bessie. Be not so unjust to me: see the writing of Helen; but as you value her happiness, betray not this confidence."

"Thank you," said Bessie, looking up with a bright smile, "it was only painful to doubt you, my friend, for I know that Phil has no chance in a rivalry with—"

"Hush," said Flora, warningly. "Emulate not Mrs. Wilmot, I pray."

Mrs. Graham had left the room to order lunch, and just as it was brought in, and the party, increased by the entrance of Mr. Forrester and Mr.

Graham, gathered around it, a carriage drove to the door; the ladies from Bellevue, with Mr. Hilton, were announced, and immediately afterward entered. Mrs. Wilmot led the way, looking unusually good-humored; her icy stateliness had actually thawed to the temperature of smiling civility.

The wreck of a once beautiful woman followed her, wearing an expression of discontent and fretfulness, which seemed to have become stereotyped upon features that had in early life been so fair to look upon: this was Mrs. Somers, and even the prospect which brightened before her, through the cruel sacrifice of her child upon the altar of Mammon, could not remove from her brow the cloud which had now become habitual to it.

Helen, looking delicate and *spirituelle*, with a complexion that seemed to vary with every breath, brought up the rear, with Mr. Hilton by her side. He was running his fingers through his wiry hair, an irritation it did not need, for it stood out in a perfect brush, as if each particular hair was gifted with a stubborn will of its own.

"By Jupiter!" muttered Phil, "I have seen cabbage-heads run to seed before, but if that Hilton don't mind what he is about, all his substance will go to sustain the fiery colors he hoists on his knowledge-box."

After greetings had passed around, Mrs. Wilmot turned to Flora, and graciously said—

"As it is too late to extend our call to Braeburn, it is by a lucky chance we find you here. Since I have determined on going to New Orleans, Helen has manifested great anxiety that you and Bessie shall be of the party. As it is the last gratification we can afford her while she remains under my protection, I trust you will be able to accompany us."

"Thank you," said Flora, coolly. "I have already made my arrangements to go. I understood, several days since, that Helen's marriage was deferred, and you would first visit New Orleans. As we have for several years gone down at the same time, I concluded you would consider it as a matter of course now."

Mrs. Wilmot regarded her in frigid amazement. How dared she have the presumption to suppose her company would be desired, until she had been specially invited by her own royal self? However, she deigned to pass it over, and after a pause said—

"I find it absolutely necessary to go. My orders were interpreted in so contradictory a manner, that I was annoyed to death. As Helen marries in so wealthy a family, I am extremely anxious that every thing shall be in the most elegant style."

"I fancy that Helen in the plainest attire will look more lady-like than any one of the family she enters, if the groom is a fair specimen of them," said the incorrigible Flora, with a depreciating glance toward Mr. Hilton, who had walked to the furthest end of the room to examine his features in a small magnifying mirror, which he knew usually hung there.

"Still, we have pride in seeing that her *trousseau* is unexceptionable," continued Mrs. Wilmot, swelling with the conscious importance of wealth. "She makes a fine match, and no one shall have cause to sneer at her outfit."

"I am only afraid they will sneer at her choice," said Flora, in a low tone, but her words reached Mrs. Wilmot.

"A thousand bales of cotton annually may well enable her to dispense with outward beauty," she retorted. "I am quite satisfied: her mother professes to be so, and mere friends need scarcely be more fastidious than those who are so near to her."

"Oh, if Helen herself is contented with the husband you have provided for her, all is right," replied Flora, moving toward the lunch-table, around which the rest were gathered.

Animated and talkative was the group that now stood around the circular table, for all seemed bent on improving this accidental meeting. Presently Flora whispered mysteriously to Philip, and they left the room together for a few moments. Their absence had scarcely been remarked, except by Mr. Hilton; he watched Flora unceasingly. He had taken the glass from its hook, and was thrusting it in the face of every one, with the polite remark—

"See how handsome you look!"

When this pastime was ended, he pretended to be looking at his own image in it, but in reality he held it in such a position as to see the two friends, who at last succeeded in standing side by side. He saw a letter pass from the hand of Flora to that of Helen, and he muttered—

"That is robbing a bird's nest with a vengeance. The old lady must get a sight of that missive, or our plot is all smashed."

At the moment the transfer was made, Flora whispered—

"You do not falter, Helen?"

"I am firm as iron," she briefly responded.

"It is well—trust bravely, and all will end as it should."

"I pray fervently that it may be so," breathed Helen, as her mother turned suddenly toward her, and said in an indolent, drawling tone—

"We have really made a visit of Gothic length. Pray excuse our want of *bon-ton*, Mrs. Graham. Helen, your aunt is moving."

"We do not aspire to be fashionable," said the well-bred hostess. "I am glad you found us sufficiently interesting to detain you so long."

"Still one should never forget what is due to the customs of the circle to which one belongs. The canons of criticism are laid down—why not those of fashion too? To spend half the morning chattering over a lunch-table is an outrage on the laws of refined society which seems to bring one within the circle of savage life."

"To be savage is to be very agreeable then; especially with such company to keep us in countenance," said Mr. Graham, bowing to the faded beauty as he handed her to the carriage.

"A silly compound of vanity and parade," was his comment to his wife, as they drove away.

"I do not often criticise departed guests, but that woman always did arouse all the contempt in my nature. Poor Somers might have had a different fate, had he chosen a wife with more sense and good feeling. Now she is consummating the iniquity of her life, by selling his unhappy child to that coarse, stupid man, to purchase ease for herself."

Mr. Forrester and his daughter had mounted their steeds, and now rode up in front of the house to bid the family adieu. "Bessie shall positively go, Mr. Graham!" said Flora, as she waved a farewell with her riding-whip.

"Yes, indeed—and Philip too, if you wish it."

"By all means; let it be so settled. Come over to-morrow, Bessie, and spend the day. I have something to explain," and her form vanished behind the trees.

Bessie and Philip were left standing alone on the gallery.

"You need not seek an explanation there, Bessie," he said. "You know that Mrs. Wilmot keeps so strict a watch on Helen of late, that she is not allowed free intercourse with any of us. She and Flora have contrived to correspond without her knowledge, and I am the messenger."

"Why do you think it necessary to give me this information now?" asked Bessie.

"Because I—I—really I feared I might be placed in a false position toward you."

"I am not so anxious to misinterpret your actions, Phil. We are cousins, and the best of friends. Why then should this fear have assailed you all at once?"

Philip paused and looked her full in the face; and there was something in his expression which made her shrink and quiver a little.

"Now, Bessie, you understand as well as I do, only you choose to play the provoking part of your most tantalizing sex. Shall I speak out?"

"Why not?" asked Bessie, with great apparent simplicity, though she could not prevent a tell-tale flush from mantling her cheek.

"Then I will, by heaven!" and he stooped forward, and whispered three words in her ear—words that have thrilled more hearts with bliss

than any other sentence in the language. Bessie blushed more deeply, but she archly said—

"We have told each other that from the time we could lisp, Phil. Why should you whisper it now?"

"Because, you sly gipsy, you know well enough that a different feeling moves us now."

"Us, indeed! Speak for yourself, Cousin Phil. I have by no means made up my mind yet that I have more than a cousin's love for you."

"But I have made up mine, Bessie."

"To what?"

"To marry you, and nobody else."

"That is cool, I declare. I have not said yes, and pa will say cousins should never marry."

"He will change his mind; for I have been so good a boy that I have not made a single quotation from the Bible for three weeks. I am getting into favor."

"Perhaps; but I shall not like you the better for that."

"No—because you like me well enough already," said the provoking lover, as he turned off and left her at the summons of his uncle.

When Helen reached home she seized the first opportunity to hurry to her room and read the letter of her lover.

So soon as he found himself alone with Mrs. Wilmot, Hilton said to her, "Our encounter with Miss Forrester was unfortunate, for it enabled Helen to receive a communication from her, which is now in her possession."

"Fear not," replied Mrs. Wilmot. "I have the means of access to every secret recess belonging to her, and I will see it before our plans demand the information I may derive from it."

While the hapless girl is trembling with joy at the prospect of escape opened to her, this ruthless pair smiled over the idea of the terrible snare they were deliberately preparing for her. Mrs. Wilmot excused herself to her own heart under the plea that deception on Helen's part rendered it necessary on her own. She did not choose to reflect that artifice is the only weapon of the weak; and in Helen's case it was excusable, for it offered the last frail defense between herself and despair.

CHAPTER XII.

THE day of their departure for New Orleans at length arrived. It proved clear and pleasant, and happy were the youthful hearts, and animated the faces that occupied Mr. Forrester's carriage. Mrs. Wilmot had graciously permitted her niece to accompany Flora and Bessie, while Mr. Forrester accepted a seat in her luxuriously-appointed vehicle.

The near prospect of a meeting with her lover, and the temporary release from the thralldom in which she was held, gave an unusual degree of vivacity to the depressed spirits of Helen; and on this day the bright sunshine was not oppressive to her heart, as of late it so often had been.

The bloom on Flora's cheek was less clear and brilliant than of yore, though in the excitement of the morning the change was less perceptible than it had been on the previous day. Twice since that first inexplicable attack she had suffered in the same manner, though less severely than on the first occasion. Once, on re-perusing the letters of Wallace, and again on receiving one from him which had arrived in her absence, and had lain on the table in her room several hours before her return home. Flora concealed these transient illnesses from her father, knowing how tremblingly alive he was to the slightest danger that menaced her; but Mr. Forrester had noted the air of languor which began to pervade her once buoyant figure, and the sudden paleness which often overspread those features, so lately brilliant with the lovely glow of health and happiness. He rejoiced in the prospect of change of scene and amusement, which might possess the power to restore her to what she had so lately been.

Lisette rode on horseback in company with the two servants of Mrs. Wilmot; but she maintained what seemed to them the most sullen reserve. She scarcely replied to their attempts at social companionship, and plainly showed that she considered herself too far superior to them to tolerate their advances.

Flora's entreaties, but still more the strong antipathy she expressed to retaining Lisette in her service, had induced Mr. Forrester to consent that she should remain in New Orleans in the employment of a nominal master, and endeavor to make a support for herself. Flora certainly possessed no evidence that Lisette wished evil to her, but there was that vague, intuitive feeling of repulsion, which sometimes gives warning of the presence of that which is inimical to us; as the vicinity of some deadly serpents is said to be

known by the sickening odor exhaled from their bodies.

There were two roads leading from the valley to Rodney, a shipping port of some importance on the Mississippi, though the town itself is of insignificant size. One of these was an ordinary thoroughfare, leading over hill and hollow, in the prosaic manner customary with public roads; and this was chosen by Mrs. Wilmot as the route she wished to pursue. The other wound for miles through the bed of the creek, now a mere thread of limpid water, flowing through sands that had settled down into marble-like compactness. The youthful portion of the party preferred this more romantic route, and as Mrs. Wilmot was still in a most gracious humor, she made no objection to the arrangement.

The carriage wound slowly through the sinuous bendings of the creek, which sometimes narrowed its abrupt banks until the tall trees that grew on them interlaced their branches, nearly shutting out every glimpse of the blue concave which spread so serenely—so cloudlessly over all. A sudden turn would bring a wider prospect in view, with sloping hillsides clothed with the luxuriant undergrowth of the forest, down to the edge of the snowy sands, with the sun glinting through such openings as were pervious to his searching beams. Piles of drift-wood, left by the last freshet, lay in every bend, but not in sufficient quantities to obstruct the road.

As their progress through this sandy bed was necessarily slow, they did not reach Rodney until some hours after the rest of the party had arrived. This little village, built at the foot of a romantic-looking bluff, has only two streets—one facing the river, and a more private one, running up the valley in a narrow gorge, shut in by high hills, and intersected by a small stream which winds its tortuous way onward, to offer its tribute to the mighty Father of Waters.

A magnificent steamer, named for the most beautiful forest flower of the South, "The Magnolia," was at the landing, taking on her freight of cotton; and many bales lay upon the shore, which swarthy white men and shining blacks were busily engaged in transferring to the steamer. Our fair party was received upon this floating palace by the captain himself, for he was a man of gallant bearing to the fairer part of creation, and also had a great respect for these future owners of cotton bales, which might in due time become freight for his boat. They had frequently traveled with him before, and our Three Graces

gave him their brightest smiles, for with them he was deservedly a favorite. He accompanied them to the ladies' cabin, where the evidences of a luxurious taste were seen on every side, and the most fastidious lounge must have been contented with the sofas and chairs, which seemed to have been contrived for the Castle of Indolence itself.

Mrs. Wilmot had already established herself to her satisfaction in one of the most capacious state-rooms. As her lord must unavoidably escape from her surveillance for a season, she gave the most positive orders to Sambo, the black servant, not to lose sight of his master, and if there was any apprehension of his attempting an excess in drinking, to inform her immediately, that she might exercise the marital authority she had so long usurped. He, poor man, wandered about with a sense of freedom which such occasions only gave, and watched for an opportunity to escape the argus eyes of his black overseer, and get into the bar-room for a drink of *can de vie*. This, however, he found impossible; and he dared not openly enter the forbidden precincts, lest his formidable spouse should be warned of his delinquency, and follow him there, to exhibit to all around the authority she wielded over him. Such scenes had occurred in his married life, and the little pride left in his withered body made him recoil from becoming the hero of another.

Mrs. Somers had taken a room for herself and her daughter, and she reclined on the lower berth, professing to be exhausted with her long drive, and every instant demanding some service from Helen. These were rendered with patient sweetness, although Helen looked wearied and pale herself; but Mrs. Somers so habitually considered herself alone, that no one who knew her well expected any thing better than to minister to her ever-recurring wants. Flora and Bessie took possession of their room, and had time to establish themselves in their new quarters, and to make such changes in their dress as they thought proper, before dinner was served in the outer cabin.

In the evening Philip Maitland and Mr. Hilton joined them, and not a moment too soon; for the piles of cotton had vanished from the shore as if by magic, and were now placed around the bow of the boat; while the preparatory snorts and puffs from the steam-pipes—the lumbering motions in the gigantic machinery below, showed that the fire-king was about to resume his sceptre, and take the control of this vast mass of matter in his own hands. Soon was heard the dashing of wheels, and the cries of the hands, as the boat backed out from the landing, made a sweeping curve, and went careering gallantly down the rapid stream, leaving a broad belt of foaming and seething waters in her track.

The sun was setting behind a sea of luminous clouds, gorgeous as the drapery of heaven alone can be, and the bright wintry moon floated in the clear vault above in solitary majesty during the brief struggle between the fading twilight and advancing night. While the golden glow of departing day yet lingered in the edge of the horizon,

the stars gleamed out, one by one, from their azure bed, until the whole deep-blue ether was gemmed as never monarch's robe can be; for this is the embroidery of the great Architect himself, and speaketh to the loving and believing heart a language of trust, faith, and hope, which form the true seal of the divinity upon the human spirit.

The passengers crowded the guards to look back upon the place they were leaving. It was a singular break in the monotonous scenery; the shore above and below the town was low and unpicturesque; suddenly high abrupt hills stretched themselves forward almost into the river: at the foot of these lay the village, a confused and irregular collection of houses, some gray with weather stains, others glaring with white paint, and nearly all wearing the appearance of buildings erected on the spur of the moment, when convenience alone was consulted.

The chill air of night soon dispersed the passengers, and they retired to the illuminated cabins. A good-toned piano soon yielded most sweet music, and after supper a fine bugle-player stationed himself on the upper deck and performed with skill upon his instrument. The sweet, wild notes, blended with the dashing of the waters, with the measured hiss of the steam from the escape-pipe, at intervals echoed back from the banks of the stream as the huge palace of light swept past a bluff that reflected the sounds, formed a scene of wild attraction to one of imaginative mind; and Flora wrapped a shawl over her and stole forth to enjoy it a few moments amidst the solitude of the deserted guards.

There was something in the swift motion, the rush of the waters, and the solemn night, which brought vividly to her imagination the fevered struggle of existence—the rapid approach of all sentient creatures to that blending of time with eternity, which seems aptly typified in the flowing of a river to the sea. Until very lately she had scarcely thought of death; she was so young, so joyous, that a long vista of happy years seemed to stretch before her, and the inevitable close was not thought of as a stern reality that must come to all. She did not fear to die, for she knew that of intentional evil she was innocent; her duties to God and man she had been taught scrupulously to fulfill, and she indeed felt toward the "All Father" a "love which casteth out fear." But of late the golden promise of her life had become dim. Death, as a pale shadow, seemed to stalk in her footsteps—to mingle in all her dreams of the future, and raise his warning finger when, in a moment of excitement, the joyous flow of existence caused her to forget the chilling blight he was casting around her.

This seemed peculiarly painful, just as new and bright hopes had dawned upon her—when love, as pure and ardent as ever cast its charm over one of earthly mould, had spread his sweet illusions around her: she felt within herself a warning—a presentiment that time for her was fleeting rapidly away, and the father, whose darling she was, would be left companionless in his old age; the lover, to whom she clung with more fervent

affection as the conviction of their early parting forced itself upon her mind, would be doomed to sorrow over her early tomb.

These were bitter fears—strange emotions to one who had been shielded from every grief by the most watchful affection. Every soul must bear its own burden, and this Flora now knew and felt: yet hers seemed a grievous one to one so untried in the school of affliction. The sudden and mysterious attacks of illness which of late had unnerved her she could not account for. She fancied that they proceeded from some organic defect in her physical system: she had known persons to die suddenly of disease of the heart, for which no remedy could be found, and she firmly believed that such would be her own fate. Why then distress her father by revealing her fears to him? Soon enough must the dire calamity become known to him, for after each attack she sensibly felt that the vital energies of her frame were slowly exhausting themselves, and soon she would be unable to rally from them as she had hitherto done.

She prayed—how fervently, only the stricken soul may know. She asked of Heaven strength to bear the burden laid upon her; to relinquish all that made life so valuable, so beautiful to her, and resign herself to the will of Him who careth for all his children. In the excitement of the day she had for a brief space forgotten her apprehensions, but in the solitude of night they returned more vividly than ever.

She sat in a large chair in the shadow cast by the deck above, lost in melancholy reverie; some gladness, however, mingled with her dreams, for on the morrow the boat would stop at the plantation of Lenox, and take him on board. She would see him again; would find new life in his presence perhaps, or at least detain him near her until the dark veil which threatened to fall over their hopes of happiness had actually spread its sombre folds around her, and shut her forever from his sight.

Not long had Flora mused thus when the door of her state-room, which opened on the guard, slowly unclosed, and a light step drew near. Absorbed in her own thoughts, she would not have heard the stealthy tread, even if the various sounds around her had not deadened its echo. A woman wrapped in a dark cloak, the hood of which was drawn over her head, stood motionless, and gazed down on the drooping figure of the young girl. Her arm rested on the railing and her head was supported by her hand, while her eyes were fixed on the receding shores with that vague expression which betrays that the thoughts are turned inward, and the passing scene has no power to mirror itself in the mind, filled with other and more absorbing objects.

A sudden bend in the river threw a long line of moonlight upon the guard; it streamed upon the fair face of Flora, and she who gazed upon it, saw that tears were glittering on her cheeks. She retreated as silently as she came, and as the faint light from the cabin penetrated the state-room, and fell upon her features, an exulting ex-

pression was visible upon them. She muttered—"Weep on! weep on! Now I know the arrow has reached its mark. To-morrow you meet him, and yet tears are on your cheek. I understand their source! Where the dream of wedded love so lately nestled is now a vision of the charnel-house and the tomb. Ha! ha! Look on your chosen one, scornful man, and see the plague-spot spreading. Clasp her to your heart in the mad hope that of your own abounding life you can impart strength to baffle the fell destroyer. In vain—in vain! Death shall enter your soul—in the dust shall your proud head be bowed, and then, perhaps, you will not scorn the consolation I may deign to offer."

Lisette proceeded to arrange the state-room for the night: as she took out the robe of her mistress, she opened a small silver case which hung from a chain around her neck; touching a spring, the lid flew up, disclosing an inner surface perforated with minute holes. From these she carefully shook forth a few almost imperceptible grains of fine powder upon the lace ruffles around the sleeves. While thus employed she held her breath, and turned her head partially away, then hurriedly folded the garment and laid it across the foot of the berth.

At that instant the voice of Bessie was heard, and she entered the room in quest of Flora.

"Lisette, where is your mistress?" she asked.

"You will find her on the guard, Miss Graham," she calmly replied, though she trembled at the thought, that had Bessie entered a moment earlier, her fiend-like act would have been detected, and possibly her fatal purpose defeated, and herself punished, before her terrible aim had been accomplished.

Bessie laid her hand upon her friend's arm before she was aware of her presence, so deep and painful was the abstraction of her mind.

"Flora, dear, we have missed you long. The night air is too chilly to continue in. Your father is inquiring for you."

"I will come with you," and she arose immediately.

"I am the messenger of good news," continued Bessie, gleefully. "The captain came in just now to inform us that a band is on board, which has been to Vicksburg to attend some celebration, and they are on their return to the city. The cabin is cleared, and we are about to 'trip it on the light fantastic toe.'"

Flora soon forgot her recent depression. She was all animation in a few moments, for she was passionately fond of dancing, and excelled in that most graceful and elegant exercise. She soon found herself in the midst of the joyous crowd, the gayest and most excitable among them.

Several other young ladies were on board besides our Graces, and quite a crowd of gentlemen, many of whom were known to the stately Mrs. Wilmot. She therefore did not object to the young girls under her charge joining in the amusement of the evening.

Mr. Forrester followed the movements of his daughter—he watched her sparkling features

with the hope that the lassitude he had lately remarked in her appearance was passing away. He certainly had never before seen her more animated or beautiful, and he did not dream that this brilliant flow of spirits was but the reaction from a recent state of depression that was almost as sorrowful as death itself.

At twelve the ladies retired, and Flora found her attendant in her room when she and Bessie entered. The glow of recent exercise was on her cheek, the bright gleam of enjoyment in her eyes; but both faded, as if by enchantment, as her glance fell on the calm features of the quad-room, and she hurriedly said:

"I sent you word not to sit up for me, Lisette. Bessie and I will wait on each other. There is no need of your services."

"I was amused watching the dancers," replied the woman, "and I thought I might as well wait until you came in."

"Very well, you may go now. My father has secured a berth for you in the children's apartment below."

"Can I do nothing for you? Had I not better remain until you and Miss Graham are ready for bed?"

"No, we shall not need you," said Flora, decisively, and she passed out, and closed the door.

"May God forgive me for the feeling," continued Flora, "but I believe if that woman were to continue near me, I should end by hating her. I am glad my father has consented that she shall remain in New Orleans."

"And you are really pleased to give up the services of so valuable a seamstress?"

"Pleased! I can not tell you how rejoiced I am to be rid of her. I have an intuitive feeling that she is a dangerous inmate in any family; it matters not in what capacity she may be received."

These remarks were overheard by Lisette, who stood without, listening to catch what might be said by her mistress, and she laughed when she thought that not in vain had she been sheltered beneath the roof of Braeburn, since it had enabled her to mar the destiny of one she so hated. It was a terrible laugh, for it was filled with the spirit of malicious mockery.

The two girls discussed the events of the evening with that joyous flow of spirits peculiar to their years, and Flora began almost to fancy her late fears a hideous fantasy, which was the offspring of depression alone. It was some time before they seriously addressed themselves to the task of preparing for rest. At length Flora donned her night robe, and stood before the mirror to brush out her long curls before putting them up; in doing so, the lace trimming on the sleeves came nearly in contact with her lips. She was speaking at the moment, but suddenly she faltered, grew pale, and would have fallen, had not Bessie sprung up in time to sustain her in her arms.

Dreadfully alarmed, she supported her to the bed, chafed her hands, and threw water in her

facc. As she seemed to revive a little, Bessie said—"What is the matter, dearest Flora? Shall I call your father?"

"Not for the world," whispered the pale girl. "Look in my reticule—give me the salts you will find there; they will relieve me more than any thing else."

"My dear Flora, are you often thus?" she tenderly asked.

"Of late, I have been ill several times. But I have concealed it. It would render my father so wretched; for I believe there is no help for one affected as I am."

Bessie looked appalled.

"No help!" she repeated. "Oh! Flora, you are so young—it can not be as you fear."

"I am young; and I was so happy, Bessie: oh! too happy; and God saw there was danger that I should become wedded to the things of earth; it was not his will that this should be, and he has sent his warning to me to set my house in order, for soon an account shall be demanded of the things done in the body."

These words, so faintly breathed that they seemed as if life and death were struggling for the mastery, caused a flood of bitter tears to Bessie, and she clasped the cold hands of the sufferer in her own, and endeavored to restore warmth to them, by rubbing them tenderly.

It was many hours before Flora slept. Again the wild phantoms of a brain whose balance is fearfully disturbed swept across her vision. Again came that horrible sinking down—down into nonentity, from which she seemed to rescue herself by a clutch upon the hand of her who watched beside her with trembling solicitude. At such moments she smiled with the momentary consciousness of present safety, but instantly relapsed, and seemed to float forth upon a sea of golden clouds, which enveloped her in their gauze-like folds; but, incapable of sustaining her, she sank down to an abyss that yawned to receive her. Just as she seemed about to be swallowed in its darkness, sense and consciousness would return, and the fair face of Bessie be seen bending above her as an angel of salvation.

At length, utterly exhausted, she slept heavily: a leaden stupor seemed to seal her senses in forgetfulness, and after watching uneasily over her, Bessie at length yielded to the influence of fatigue, and with her arm clasping the neck of her friend, she too slumbered.

When she awoke, the bright light of day was shining into the room, and Bessie raised her head to look at her friend. Flora lay before her, pale as the white pillow on which her head rested; her heavy eyelids were livid, and dark circles were drawn beneath her eyes. She breathed deeply, like one whose sluggish blood forces its way slowly and painfully through the frame. Her steady gaze seemed to possess some magnetic power, for a faint shade of color streamed over the deathlike face, and after an effort, she unclosed her eyes and looked around.

"Flora, darling, how are you this morning?" asked Bessie. Flora pressed her hand upon her

brow, and seemed to make an effort to recall what had occurred.

"I have been ill, then?" she said. "Did I appear to suffer much, Bessie?"

"Greatly, but you are better. You will soon be quite well."

"I hope so," she replied, despondingly. "Yet I fear not. My brain is sadly bewildered this morning. Do you know, Bessie, that I sometimes fear this illness is affecting my mind? Ah! death were indeed a kind friend—a good angel, if it delivers me from that!"

"Flora, do not talk thus. You distress me beyond measure. Tell your father of your sufferings—let him consult a physician. There are many skillful ones in New Orleans—they may be able to help you."

"Alas! I fear there is no help from man. No—my heart must be diseased, and there is no remedy for such an affection. I would spare my father the anguish of knowing my condition, so long as it can be concealed from him. Soon, alas! that will be impossible, for each attack weakens my powers of resistance, and seems more difficult to struggle against."

"One whose heart is affected should never take violent exercise, Flora: perhaps dancing occasioned this illness."

"Perhaps so—in all probability it did. I will be more cautious in future. But promise me one thing, Bessie; you will not hint to any one that I have been ill?"

"But they will remark your changed appearance. You look very pale, Flora."

"Do I? Well, I will shake off this numbing lethargy that seems to hold my frame in bondage, and dress quickly. It is more than an hour to breakfast, and the fresh air from the guards will brighten my complexion. No eye but my father's will see that I am not as well as yesterday, and his inquiries I will baffle. You will not breathe a word to any one?"

"If you wish it, Flora; but I think you are wrong. When the discovery can no longer be avoided, the shock will be greater to him than to know it now, when human skill may have power to defer, if not to avert the fatal stroke."

Flora covered her face with her hands. She murmured, "It will be terrible; poor, poor father, who shall console him? What shall give interest to his failing years when I am gone? Oh! Bessie, thank God that you are not an only child. If I had brother or sister to whom to bequeath this desolate old man, I think I could more resignedly lie down in the grave which I feel is unclosing to receive me; but I am his all."

"Dearest Flora, compose yourself. This agitation may bring on another paroxysm of your disease. Reflect calmly on your situation, and endeavor to gain firmness to tell your father all. Indeed, it will be best."

"Perhaps so; but not now—oh! not now. Let this visit be over; when we are once more in the quiet of our own home, I may be able to break it to him, but not in the bustle and crowd we shall be in for the next week."

"You may be right. Shall I aid you in dressing?"

"Thank you. Lisette should be here; but I suppose she thinks we are not stirring so early."

As she spoke, Lisette knocked, and immediately afterward entered. She seemed surprised to find they had already risen, and her keen glance was fastened at once upon the changed features of her mistress.

"Are you ill, Miss Flora?" she asked, with a most natural expression of interest.

"I was slightly indisposed last night, but I am now quite restored," replied Flora. "Assist me to make my toilet, that I may go out in the morning air."

She complied with an appearance of assiduous zeal, though her callous heart exulted as she noted the extreme effort it cost her young lady to assist herself in arranging any portion of her dress. It seemed as if life was wrestling against the paralyzing influence of the deadly aroma she had inhaled. Struggling to recover the mastery of herself, Flora went forth, and walked to and fro on the guard. The sharp morning air seemed as the elixir of life to her; and gradually the slow faltering step quickened, the dulled blood flowed more rapidly, and the hue of life returned to her cheeks and lips.

The sun had risen; the boat was many miles below Natchez, and was approaching a high bluff which reared itself above the waters. The deep, rich yellow of the rifted earth, shaded with soft tints of brown, contrasted with the evergreens that waved their foliage above, and formed a scene an artist would have been charmed with.

This spot was the theatre of a well-authenticated Indian legend, and is still known as the Fawn's Leap. Two high cones once reared their heads above the Mississippi, with a deep and wide ravine between them. Hotly pursued by the runners of her tribe, a young Indian girl dared the fearful leap, gained the opposite peak in safety, and escaped with her lover from the blood-hounds on her track.

The place is changed since then; the action of the waters has undermined the base of the cliff, and an immense slide a few years since robbed the Fawn's Leap of much of its picturesque loveliness, but enough still remains to attract the interest of one who has an appreciation of the beautiful in nature.

There are few points of interest in the monotonous scenery from Natchez until the cultivated country below the mouth of Red River is reached; then the coast seems one long continued village, with wide fields pertaining to each mansion, until the great southern emporium itself appears in view.

When Bessie joined her friend, she found her so much better to all appearance, that her own apprehensions were somewhat allayed; and Flora made such strenuous efforts to appear as usual, that when breakfast was announced, Bessie Graham was half inclined to believe that the events of the past night were the offspring of a horrid nightmare, which had affected herself alone.

CHAPTER XIII.

ABOUT the middle of the afternoon, the boat came in sight of a sugar plantation in a high state of cultivation. The level fields were divided by thickly-set hedges of the Cherokee rose, instead of the unsightly rail fences commonly in use. The cottages for the slaves stood in two parallel rows, and were shaded by the native forest trees, which had been left standing for that purpose when the place was cleared.

A sugar house stood some distance from the river, and from its substantial appearance, might have been mistaken for some fortalice, built for refuge and defense, had not the steam issuing from the pipe in the roof, shown that the spirit of utility has superseded that of chivalry, and the spot over which the wily Indian once stalked as a destroyer, the blessings of peace and industry have converted into a blooming and beautiful Eden, in which taste, cultivation and refinement found their home.

The dwelling belonging to this place was situated in a graceful curve of the river. It was a Norman-French cottage, with octagon towers at each corner, connected by a light veranda. The luxuriant shrubbery of the South gave its abounding shade and beauty to this lovely spot, and Miss Forrester, who stood on the hurricane deck beside her father, remarked—

"This is the most attractive-looking place we have yet seen. If the interior corresponds with the outer view, it must be a charming home."

At that moment the bell sounded, and figures were seen issuing from the house.

"We are going to stop," said Mr. Forrester, "and from appearances, a passenger is coming on board from that beautiful spot. You may be able to judge if the inmates are worthy of the paradise they occupy."

Flora scarcely heard him, for her heart began to beat quickly—a bright glow mantled her cheek as she recognized the gentleman who descended the bank, with his overcoat thrown carelessly over his arm, while a black servant followed, carrying his trunk.

"This, then, is Oleanda," she thought, "The home I so lately thought would be my future ark of refuge. Oh, Lenox, you little dream of the blow that awaits you. You know not that the Eve of your earthly paradise is bewailing the decree which says, that she too must go forth and leave the beauty and glory of life behind her."

By this time Lenox had recognized them, and he waved his hand as the boat rounded to. He

looked eminently handsome as he stood there in the bright sunlight, with the glow of happiness upon his features. There was something, too, superior to mere beauty in his appearance: an air of noble candor—an expression of refinement, that seemed to give a clew to the animating spirit within.

Flora suffered her gaze to fall upon his fine face with all her heart in her eyes—for at that distance he could not read the revelation they made—and the fate that gave her to death, instead of such a bridegroom, seemed harder to bear than ever.

Another eye also looked upon that stately form, from the guards below, and she set her teeth firmly together, and clinched her hands until the nails nearly pierced the flesh, as she marked the expression of joyous happiness which suffused his features in the prospect of meeting with his betrothed. Forgetful of where she was, she muttered—

"All is bright now, but the shadow will soon fall, and so darkly, that the light of hope will at once be quenched. Oh! sweet it is to think that ye both, rich, powerful, free as ye think yourselves, are in my snare, and can not escape from it."

Again that low sneering laugh escaped her lips; and a tall man, with piercing black eyes, whose falcion glance seemed to read every emotion of the heart, turned suddenly and looked keenly upon her.

Unconscious of his searching observations, she continued to watch the movements of Lenox until he stepped on the deck of the boat, her working features revealing to him who gazed much more than she would have cared to betray.

The stranger watched her with curious interest for several moments, and then abruptly asked—

"Girl, to whom do you belong?"

Lisette started, and for the first time met his penetrating gaze, which she instinctively shrank from. Collecting her thoughts, and assuming an air of proud humility, she replied—

"To Mr. Forrester of Mississippi, sir."

"The old gentleman with an only daughter?"

"Yes, sir, the same."

"Hem—Were you reared on his plantation, or only a purchased slave?"

"He has owned me but a year."

"Ah—h! And that gentleman who has just gone on deck to join them, was he a stranger to you?"

"He has visited my master's house, sir. I believe he is an admirer of Miss Flora's."

The interrogator fixed another piercing glance upon her features, but by this time she was too much on her guard to betray what she wished to conceal; and he turned away to ruminate on the dark glimpse he had obtained into the mysteries of a heart his penetration told him was ruthless as death, and fixed in some purpose of evil, which was rapidly maturing in her mind, if not already in the process of consummation.

He presently ascended to the deck, lounged toward our party, and watched an opportunity to address Mr. Forrester while Flora was engaged in conversation with her lover. The old gentleman found him to be an intelligent and agreeable companion, a man of varied acquirements, and a keen observer of the minutiae of life around him.

He was evidently past the prime of life, and he casually informed his new acquaintance that he had acquired a competent fortune in New Orleans by the practice of medicine; that he had retired from the active duties of his profession, and was now on his return from rather an extended European tour.

"My name," continued the stranger, "is Ledru, which will betray my French origin. However, I am a Creole of the country, and equally familiar with the language and habits of the two races who inhabit it; for my mother was an American, of Anglo-Saxon blood, and my father a native of Paris. I do not often thrust my acquaintance on strangers, Mr. Forrester, but the appearance of your daughter has so irresistibly interested me, that I determined to make myself known to you."

"Thank you," said the fond father, looking much pleased. "My child is very fair to me, and of course it is gratifying to me to know that strangers find her so, as well as her doting old father."

"It is not her beauty that attracts me," replied Dr. Ledru, deliberately, as he fixed his remarkable eyes on the profile of Flora, which was turned toward him. "I acknowledge that it is a very charming face; but there is a transparency in the complexion—a fluctuating color, and a dilation of the pupils of the eyes, which seem to me not to be accounted for by natural means. Does your daughter enjoy uninterrupted health?"

The father's heart contracted painfully, as he listened to this confirmation of the vague fears which had lately assailed him. He replied—

"Until very recently, Hebe herself was not more radiant in youth and health; but your words only confirm the apprehensions which have crossed my own mind. I hoped this journey would dissipate the unusual appearance of languor, and last night she seemed quite recovered; but this morning I perceive that the old lassitude has returned, though she makes an effort to conceal it from me."

"Hum—really this is a singular case, and I am about to make a strange request; but I am a strange man, as you will find out when you have

known me long enough. Will you employ me as your daughter's physician? Not for pay, however—that I no longer take; but I retain the keenest interest in any new phase of disease. I will study her case, and I promise you, on the honor of a man, that no remedy shall be used of the results of which I am at all doubtful. I have knowledge—I have skill; and all shall be devoted to restoring her to what she so lately was."

Mr. Forrester looked into the face of his new friend. It was earnest and honest in expression, though decidedly sharp. He felt confidence in him, and he offered him his hand, as he said—

"You can have no motive but kindness to me and mine. I accept your offer as frankly as it is made. However, I do not wish to alarm Flora, by informing her of our compact."

"There is no need just yet. I must observe her—study her case, and when I have mastered it, there will be time enough to inform her of the position I have assumed toward her. There seems to be little danger just at present; only the eloquent symptoms of that which threatens in the future. I will not seek an introduction to your daughter just now, for she seems happily engaged. This evening I will join you again, and observe her more closely."

The father again warmly thanked him for his intended kindness, and Dr. Ledru strolled away to meditate on the clew he believed he had found to one of those domestic tragedies, in comparison with which the chronicles of bloody warfare grow pale. At present all was confused and dim before him, but he felt confident that light would gradually dawn on him, and the path be made clear, to defeat the machinations of that evil one into whose dark soul he had that day fortuitously chanced to glance.

In the evening, the band again poured forth its glad strains, and cotillions were speedily formed; but afraid of renewing the illness of the previous night, Flora declined dancing. Dr. Ledru availed himself of the opportunity to enter into conversation with her; and her graceful sprightliness interested him yet more deeply in her condition. Closer observation convinced him that the first symptoms of a subtle and fatal disease were slowly developing themselves; but whether they were naturally produced, or the offspring of a deadly foreign agent, introduced by stealth into the system, he could not yet determine.

Several times during their conversation Flora raised her hand to her brow, as if the lights, the noise, and the moving figures were painful to her. This was remarked by her shrewd companion, and he asked—

"Is your head aching, Miss Forrester?"

"It does not pain me, but there is a confused whirling in my brain, at intervals, which seems to mingle with the music and the murmur of conversation into a sound like muttering thunder. At such moments the rays of light seem to concentrate around the figures moving in the dance. At this instant, if Helen Somers had wings, I could fancy her an angel of light as she passes before me."

A ray of intelligence brightened the features of her companion.

"You describe a singular state of vision, Miss Forrester. I am a physician, you know; so you will pardon me if I inquire how long you have been so affected, and what first caused it?"

Flora looked up at him. There was something so kind, so paternal in his regard, that she felt the confidence of a child toward him. She glanced around; neither her father nor Lenox were within hearing, and she said, a little tremulously,

"I have not been quite well of late; and if I could have done so without consulting my father, and needlessly alarming him, I would have sought the service of a physician; but I fear that it can be of little benefit."

"Why so, my dear young lady?" he eagerly asked. "I seem to have been providentially thrown in your way. Forget that I am only the acquaintance of a few hours, and state to me your apprehensions without reserve. I assure you that all the secret arcana of physical and organic chemistry are known to me, as far as they have been developed, and I will devote my whole knowledge to your assistance and relief."

"Thank you—oh, thank you!" said Flora, raising her humid eyes to his with an expression of touching sensibility. "This is indeed more than I could have hoped for."

She then, with simple eloquence, described to him the attacks from which she had recently suffered. His questions elicited every minute particular, and after pondering a few moments, he said—

"When you are again ill, Miss Forrester, preserve the last thing you touched before this strange dizziness attacked you. It may give me the clew to an important discovery. I will see you every day during your stay in the city, and if no illness takes place during that time, I will return with you to your own home. This singular case I must follow to its consummation."

"And that consummation," faltered Flora, "will it not in all likelihood prove fatal?"

"I trust not, my dear young lady. Old Ledru will not permit his skill to be baffled in your case. I will give you a preparation to-morrow, which will produce a reaction in some degree; but until the cause of your illness becomes more apparent, I can not effectually baffle the enemy."

"Is not my heart, then, diseased?" she apprehensively inquired.

"Nonsense! Your heart is as sound as mine, unless that young gentleman, who eyes us as if he thinks I am monopolizing an unfair portion of your attention for so old a fellow as I am, has not made a wound in it, which all my surgical skill can not repair."

Flora blushed, and half-smiled.

"Ah! I see how it is, my fair patient; so I will retreat while I can abandon the field with grace."

He was soon lost amidst the crowd, and Lenox took the seat he had lately occupied. He asked—

"Will you not dance a single set with me,

Flora? I thought you were fond of the amusement."

"So I am; but I did not feel quite well, and I thought it best to decline joining in it this evening."

He bent an earnest and half-startled gaze upon her face.

"I have noted a change in you, Flora, since we last met, but I hoped it was my own fancy."

"It is nothing," she hastily replied; "I already feel much better than in the early portion of the evening. I will dance with you."

She arose at once and joined the set that was forming, and her father, who had been pained to hear her refuse to participate in an amusement of which he knew her to be so fond, gladly saw her take her place among the joyous crowd of dancers. Once on the floor, she sat down no more until the company dispersed, and she retired to the privacy of her state-room.

In the interest inspired by Miss Forrester we must not forget our other dramatis personae. Mr. Hilton was all devotion to his fair fiancée, and Helen resigned herself to his attentions, as she believed she was now fairly in the path that led to her deliverance from them for the remainder of her life. Lulled into a false security by the unusual indulgence and consideration of her aunt, not a suspicion of the snare into which she was hastening found a place in her heart.

The ruby of Roseneath—pretty, graceful, lively Bessie Craham—won hearts in every direction; and Philip Maitland began to feel most uncomfortably jealous as he noted the attentions she received from some half a dozen beaux, any one of whom was sufficiently attractive to become a formidable rival. The sly gipsy seemed to enjoy this exceedingly, and a roguish glance was often cast toward Phil, as if to ascertain how he bore the tantalizing flirtations she openly carried on before him.

Among her admirers was a handsome Frenchman, the son of a wealthy planter on the coast. This young man was credulous, desperately enamored, and withal spoke and understood English so imperfectly, that Phil resolved to play off a rare prank on him as a punishment for making such violent love to the girl he was pleased to consider his own especial property.

Young Lacroix had met with Bessie on a previous visit to New Orleans, and Philip was aware of the reception of more than one letter from him, filled, as he could well imagine, with most impassioned declarations of attachment. Great, then, was his annoyance when the boat stopped at the plantation of the elder Lacroix, and took his son on board. It was an unlucky chance, but he would make him render himself ridiculous in the eyes of his cousin, and then there would be no further hope for him, in spite of his prepossessing appearance and reputed wealth.

In pursuance of this design, he attached himself to the young Frenchman, and listened to his encomiums upon his fair cousin without laughing, although they were expressed in a most extraordinary manner.

"Mees Bessie Grahame ees von-angele; une belle dame—Oh, mon cœur! it be break, smash, if dees colombe, dees vite pigeon, vill not say de leetle vord dat make me de happy man."

"So you really are in love with my pretty cousin, Monsieur Lacroix?" said Philip, soberly.

"In loov! Ah! mon cœur be smash—it be consume wid de fevaire of de grande passion. Quelle belle chevelure! Dose curls—ah! ha! dey wind bout my heart."

"Well, Monsieur, I am afraid your chance is small, because so little time remains to act in."

"Time? leetle? I no onstan', Meester Maitland."

"Ah well, so much the worse for you. Let me explain: you see, Lacroix, my cousin is in what we Americans call a predicament."

He paused, and looked at the Frenchman, who appeared bewildered. Philip added, by way of explanation—

"A regular fix, you understand?"

"Ah, oui: a feex, a feex. Je comprend; I onstand vary weel—vat next?"

"It is this: she has quite a pretty property, left to her by a queer old woman who was a relation of her father's. The will provides that if she marries at nineteen, the property shall at once be hers; if not, it must be held in trust for ten years, and then to be equally divided between herself and a younger sister. Queer old commodity, wasn't she, to make such a will?" and he gave a side glance at his victim.

"Ah, oui—cela est bon. Vary good; vat does de provairbe say? 'Tis one sick win' dat blow nobody no good! C'est moi meself, dat sall be de luck man to get dees leetle properties, and de sweet leetle vife."

Here he made a pirouette, and Philip laughed spasmodically. When he recovered sufficiently, he said—

"Believe me your fast friend, Monsieur; but I must warn you of one thing—my cousin has had her head filled with romantic nonsense by reading poetry, and she declares she will never marry any man who does not make furious love to her."

"Eh—vat? furore? I can get in one grand passion; I can speak de vords vich your poet

say catch de breath and scorch up de—de—diable! I do not know vat!"

"Thoughts that breathe, and words that burn," suggested Phil.

"Ah, ha! dat be de nex thing, I can no keep in mon tête. Oui, Meester Maitland, I can play de louvaire à merveille to your belle cousine."

"I do not doubt it, Monsieur, but your knowledge of our language is very imperfect, and we have so many strange idioms which you can not be expected to understand, that there is danger of your making some blunder, which would be fatal to your cause with so romantic a girl as my cousin."

"But she do onstand de Française. Mes lettres vas in dat langue."

"Truc, she can read it very well, but as she lives altogether among her own nation, and hears English alone spoken, you can not expect her ear to be sufficiently familiar with the sounds of a foreign language to comprehend what you are saying. That would be bad, you know."

"Oui, but I can sen' von tother lettaire."

"Your letters have hitherto produced no effect, and I would advise you by all means to try your own eloquence. In fact, I have heard Bessie say, that the most passionate effusions on paper produced little effect, in comparison with half the fervor orally expressed."

The Frenchman looked rather crest-fallen, but Philip undertook to comfort him.

"If you desire it, Lacroix, I will give you a few lessons before you make your declaration to my cousin. Nothing will be easier, as we will stop at the same hotel, and shall be much together."

"Remercie, mon vary good freen; ten tou-san' tank. I sall be ver gratitude. I sall with plaisir commencey mes leçons with you dees vary day."

"Very well, Monsieur, I am at your service. I will commence my instructions the very first moment we are alone, as there is no time to be lost, I assure you."

Quite delighted to have secured so good a friend, the Frenchman accepted the offer of the wicked trickster in good faith, and carefully conned over the absurdities he represented as the subtle distinctions of the English language.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON the following morning the steamer reached New Orleans. Rooms had been engaged at the St. Charles for our travelers several weeks before, and they were soon established in an elegant suit of apartments, in which the most luxurious accommodations were found.

Within an hour after her arrival a letter was brought up to Flora, with the card of Mr. Clinton. He was in the general reception room, and she at once descended to it to hold their interview there, as it would be safer from Mrs. Wilmot's intrusion than their own parlor.

It was yet early, and the large room was nearly deserted. At the upper end stood a young man of pleasing appearance; he was not strikingly handsome, but there was much spirit and intelligence in his features, and his manner, as he advanced toward her, was so pleasant a blending of respect and graceful ease, that she was at once favorably impressed by it. He said—

"I believe I have the pleasure of greeting a true friend in Miss Forrester, although I have hitherto been personally unknown to her. Permit me to thank you in the name of her who is inexpressibly dear to me, as well as in my own, for the interest you have manifested in our happiness."

"You owe me no thanks, Mr. Clinton, for I have only gratified myself by taking the course I have pursued. It would be a hard heart that refused to aid Helen in escaping from her present unhappy position."

"Where is Helen?" he eagerly asked. "Can I not see her a few brief moments?"

"I fear that will be impossible, as she is in the room with her mother, and suspicion might be aroused if she were known to receive a call from a stranger. We had better risk nothing until our plans are so nearly matured as to defy defeat."

"When can we meet then, dear Miss Forrester? I am sure I need not tell you how eager I am to see her—how anxious to sustain her trembling courage, in view of the effort which awaits her."

"I understand all that, Mr. Clinton, and I have used all the fertile resources of a woman's wit to bring about a meeting without alarming the fears of those who watch over her. She has three guardians, in her mother, aunt, and lover, who are all equally determined on completing the match which they have brought her here to prepare for."

The lover sighed. "And what course has your ingenuity devised, Miss Forrester? Only

accomplish a meeting between us, and I will answer for the success of the rest. But to know that she is near me, and I dare not approach her, is terrible. At moments I am almost tempted to brave this dragon of an aunt and claim her openly."

"Only to have your claims defied, and Helen forever separated from you. No, no; that will not answer at all, Mr. Clinton; if you would succeed in winning her, you must practice the strictest self-control. I have thought of a plan for accomplishing a meeting. To-night we go to the theatre. Mrs. Somers will remain at home, and I will so arrange it that Helen shall come to my room after her toilet is made, to get a new style of head-dress, which I will send word to Mrs. Somers my hair-dresser's assistant has just brought in. You must be that assistant. Go down into the French portion of the city, find a coiffeur, and bribe her as high as may be necessary to enter into our plans. When we are ready to receive you, I will send her to summon you to my room."

"That promises fairly. I will seek the most tasteful hair-dresser to be found in the city, I assure you."

While this conversation proceeded, the two engaged in it did not heed the vicinity of a man who sat partially screened by a heavy window-curtain. He had entered the room immediately after Flora, and as he advanced toward his present position, both herself and Clinton had observed that he carried an ear-trumpet suspended from the breast of his coat.

As this seemed to indicate extreme deafness, they gave no further heed to the position in which he placed himself. He sat within a few feet of them, with his head bent down, and the folds of the curtain so placed as to catch every syllable that fell from the lips of either one.

"And now," said Flora, "before we part, give me the minute particulars of your intended elopement, that we may take such measures ourselves as will insure success."

"I still adhere to the plan I last wrote: all that now remains is to effect Helen's escape from the hotel without suspicion."

"I have thought of quite a romantic method for that. On the evening before our intended departure, the first fancy ball of the season will be given. Masks are always admitted on such occasions: you can come under that disguise, join us, and seize the first opportunity to escape with Helen."

"That will be admirable. I will come in a plain domino, and on the left sleeve you will see a pearl fastened. That will tell Helen at once who it is that joins her. I will now detain you no longer, Miss Forrester, lest Mrs. Wilmot should seek to discover who has had the happiness to be entertained by you."

"Good morning, Mr. Clinton; I forgot to inform you that my father is in our confidence. I would recommend you to call on him at twelve; I will inform him of your intention, and he will so arrange it as to receive you in his own room."

"Thank you, most thoughtful of friends. I will be punctual to the hour. *Au revoir.*"

He bowed, and passed out. Flora paused a moment beside one of the windows, and looked through it. Hilton was leaning against a post on the opposite side of the street, and seemed to be surveying the building with much interest. She supposed he was admiring its architectural beauty, and would have given no further thought to him, if she had not remarked the quick look of interest he cast on Clinton as he crossed the street just in front of him.

"He can not know him," she thought. "I wonder if some intuitive feeling reveals to him the presence of his rival."

Thus meditating, Flora tripped toward her own apartment and joined Bessie Graham.

She had no sooner left the room than the seemingly deaf man arose, and quickly descended into the rotunda. There he was speedily joined by Hilton, and together they passed out. When clear of the crowd of idlers around the door, Hilton eagerly asked—

"Did you discover what I wish to know?"

The man laughed. "Did you ever know Jack Simmons to be foiled, eh? I went into the parlor, and sat myself down near enough to hear every word they said, while this little dangler here made them think me stone-deaf."

"And what did you hear? I am impatient to learn."

"Are you? Well, I suppose that is natural under the circumstances, but just curb your impatience a little, while I express my wonder that you did not fall in love with that bright sparkle who is seeking to rob you of your fair one. By Jupiter! such an eye! such a manner! such a voice! I can hardly find it in my heart to thwart her plans."

"Jack, do not be a fool!" said Hilton with asperity. "Seek to gain the embodiment of self-will in the person of Miss Forrester indeed! I am much too wise for that. I wish to obtain but one woman in the world, and for a handsome consideration you have consented to aid me; so lay aside this nonsense and tell me what you have learned."

"Ah! true. That consideration is of vast importance to me, so I must even prove traitor to this pretty piece of humanity, and let you into the romantic plot formed in that active little brain of hers."

Mr. Simmons then proceeded to relate the substance of the conversation he had overheard be-

tween Clinton and Miss Forrester. Hilton laughed with sardonic mirth at the thought that the clew to their whole plans was now in his possession. Mr. Simmons was an old acquaintance, with whom he had first met in a gambling-house in New Orleans, and it was not the first time he had found occasion for his services. He knew him to be full of resources—unscrupulous, but faithful to him who paid him well.

When Hilton first ascertained the presence of his rival in that city, he wrote to this man, and gave him such information as enabled him to place himself as a spy upon the movements of Clinton at once; and on the arrival of his employer, they were faithfully reported to him.

To this worthy was now confided the task of carrying into effect the necessary arrangements to throw Helen completely in his power. After a long and earnest conversation they parted, and Hilton sauntered slowly back to the St. Charles.

"If I could only prevent this interview for to-night," he reflected. "I can easily enough, by telling her mother; but then the woman is a fool, and I am afraid to trust her too far. Let them meet, then: they would contrive to have an interview at any rate, and I be none the wiser for it. This shall be the last meeting, fair Helen—I swear it!" With this determination he ascended to the parlor, and found the ladies with their bonnets on, ready to go out on the all-important business of shopping. He glanced at Helen, and saw by the clear light in her beautiful eyes, the bright flush upon her cheek, that Flora had found means to inform her of the recent interview with her lover, and the meeting she had arranged for that evening. His heart was boiling over with rage against her, but he did not waver in his determination to make her his, in spite of her desire to escape from him to the protection of another. All the vindictiveness of his ungenerous nature was aroused, and he vowed within himself that he would claim her as his wedded wife, even if the wretchedness of both were sealed by the contract.

Poor Helen! this day's employment was odious to her. She was dragged from store to store, to select the most elegant fabrics suitable for a bride; and Hilton insisted on her accompanying him to the most fashionable jeweler's to inspect and approve the jewels he wished to present to her. Heart-sick, nervous, and terribly excited, how she went through it all she knew not. That this odious deception must soon end was her only consolation. She returned to the hotel so exhausted that she was unable to go down to dinner.

Fully aware of the plans in progress, Mrs. Wilmot permitted this brief respite to the unfortunate girl, and she said nothing when Flora arose and took a plate of fruit in her hand with the avowed intention of carrying it to Helen. She would lull them into complete security by her apparent indulgence: not for worlds would she have Helen suspect the net that was surely closing around her. Fitly punished for her meditated disobedience would she be, when the appalling knowledge came to her of how cruelly she had been circumvented in her efforts to secure happiness.

"Come, Helen," said Flora, as she entered her room; "you must eat a little of this fine orange I have brought you, or you will be unfit to go out to-night. You know your meeting with Mr. Clinton depends on that."

She raised herself from the couch on which she was reclining, and tenderly kissed her friend.

"You are the truest and best of friends to me, Flora, and whether I shall be so fortunate as to escape with my lover or not, I will ever retain the warmest and sincerest sense of your efforts to serve me."

"There is no rational doubt of our success, Helen," replied Flora, cheerfully. "I hope you do not permit yourself to fancy such a thing!"

"Strong misgivings assail me at times. This promised happiness which woos me into the crooked paths of the dissembler seems too great to be secured by such means."

"Dear Helen, did not God create all beings for happiness? Why, then, shall he deny it to you, poor trembling dove? Light dawns on your path, my love; take courage from it, and walk steadily forward."

"I will endeavor to do so, dear comforter," she said, as she laid her poor throbbing head upon the breast of her friend. "It is a strange destiny that gives one so weak and trembling as I am this tangled labyrinth to tread, while you so strong, so full of courage, meet with no difficulties—no crosses."

"Our training has been so different, dear Helen; I, spoiled, accustomed to have my own will, have early been taught that I am a self-dependent being; while you have never been permitted to decide for yourself, even in the most trifling matters. Now, dear love, bathe your brow, array yourself in your most becoming dress, and make ready for the important interview."

"Oh, Flora! if you knew how my spirit trembles within me in the anticipation of the events of the next few days, you would feel pity for me. If we should fail! Some evil demon seems to whisper to me ever, that my hope has perished—that the darkness of despair is about to fall on me, and crush me in its desolation."

"Helen, this is mere fantasy. Pray, do not yield your morbid fancy to such visions, when all your strength is necessary to meet the realities of life in which you are about to take so prominent a part. On yourself now principally depends the success of your evasion."

"I will struggle with my fears. I will not be found wanting, Flora; yet pray for me, my friend. Ask God to prosper our undertaking, for I have sore misgivings, in spite of all the efforts I can make to overcome them."

"If my prayers are answered, Helen, you will surely be happy," replied Flora, tenderly. "And now I leave you to prepare for the brief moment of happiness which awaits you."

A beautiful smile irradiated the features of the trembling girl: she fervently thanked Heaven for even this gleam of joy, and endeavored to have faith in the future. With tremulous fingers she arranged her dress, with the assistance of her

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aunt's maid, and never had she looked more lovely.

Mrs. Somers fortunately did not come in at all, and when the concerted message came from Flora, there was no one to oppose her instant departure. The distance to Miss Forrester's room was trifling, but so great was her agitation, it was with difficulty she passed over it, and found shelter in the one she sought. As she entered, Flora flitted past her and closed the door. In another instant the strong arms of her lover were around her, sustaining her sinking form; straining her to his beating heart so tenderly, so reverentially, that she suffered her head to fall upon his breast, and gave herself up to the brief transport of knowing that she was sheltered in those arms to whose support she would willingly trust throughout life.

"Helen, my life—my angel—have we at last met? Oh, best beloved! it seems almost a dream that I again clasp you to my heart, as true, as lovely as in the days of yore."

"My faith has never faltered," she whispered. "Make me yours as speedily as may be, dear Charles, and take me from the wretched position I now occupy."

"All is arranged, my sweet Helen. A few more days and a wide gulf shall be placed between yourself and those who have so long set our happiness at naught. Lift up your head, my own, that I may once more gaze on that sweet face, which has haunted me as a vision of loveliness since the day we first met."

"And I, too, would look upon your noble brow, my love; for it is long since last we parted," she murmured, as she raised her head and suffered him to draw her toward the light.

Then flashed the eye of Clinton with exulting love, and the soft blush deepened on the cheek of Helen as her glance met his, with that expression which seems to melt into the soul, and stamp a look upon the memory in lines which eternity itself can not efface. This mute assurance of affection lasted nearly a minute, and then, as if moved by the same impulse, the two bent toward each other, and their lips met.

"Mine—my wife!" murmured the lover. "In that caress our souls mingled, my Helen, and man may not put asunder what God hath joined. Mine in soul and spirit you are from this hour, my beloved."

"Yours I will be, or die!" returned Helen. "I have no hope but in you. Pride is dead within me. Once I would have recoiled from the step I am about to take, but it is no longer so. I will fly with you—trust you as my saviour and my future guide. Oh, Charles, I have deeply suffered!"

"I see it, love. Not less beautiful but more fragile are you, I perceive. Endure a few more days, and then—then, my Helen, you shall be nobly repaid. The ship which bears us far away is even now nearly ready to sail. Your friend Mary impatiently awaits your arrival."

"Dear girl, how happy I shall be to see her again."

"And how happy I trust my darling Helen

will find herself in the humble home I can now offer her. A few more years, and she shall find herself again surrounded by all the luxury she now relinquishes for my sake."

"If you knew," said Helen, earnestly, "how heartless is the pageantry in which I live—how I loathe the bondage it has imposed on me, you would think I have made a blessed exchange in entering the home in which contentment and love will dwell. No—no, dear Charles, I have no misgivings as to our future happiness, if we can only effect our escape."

"Set your heart at rest, my precious Helen. That man's life will not be safe who attempts to come between us now."

She grew pale, and grasped his hand.

"Should any thing occur to betray us, dreadful as it would be—should another attempt to interpose, you will not use violence? You will not render me the wretched cause of blood-guiltiness to you? Such a fear would destroy me!"

"Calm yourself, my own," he tenderly said, "You will ever be my first object. Think not then, dear Helen, that I would do aught that can affect your peace of mind."

At that moment the signal for separation was heard. Two taps sounded sharply through the room, and Flora appeared at the door.

"Quick! Mrs. Wilmot comes. Pass through the window, Mr. Clinton, and remain on the balcony until she leaves."

Helen flew to the window with the speed of light, pulled down the wide folds of the curtain, while her lover threw up the sash and passed out before her terrible aunt reached the door. Flora pretended to be seeking her fan and gloves when Mrs. Wilmot looked in. She asked—

"Are you ready, young ladies? It is quite time to start."

"We will come in a moment, madam," replied Flora.

"Helen," she whispered, "pinch your cheeks, for if your aunt sees them looking so white, she will declare you are too ill to go out."

Mrs. Wilmot passed on without waiting for them, and Clinton immediately issued from his concealment. He kissed Flora's hand and again thanked her—whispered a few words in the ear of Helen, and vanished.

CHAPTER XV.

THE St. Charles theatre was crowded to overflowing with a brilliant audience to witness the first appearance for that season of a celebrated danseuse in the Giselle.

The dress circle sparkled with lovely faces and elegant toilets; and among them our fair party was not the least remarked by connoisseurs in female loveliness.

Helen Somers, fair and stately as a lily, never looked more attractive than on this evening, with the softest and clearest light in her beautiful eyes, a faint tinge of color on her cheeks, and an air of preoccupied feeling which might have given so keen an observer as Dr. Ledru a clew to the emotions that were thrilling her heart. For the first time for many, many months, the brilliant halo of hope encircled the future, and she gave herself up to the remembered bliss of the late interview with him she had so long and fervently loved. The brilliant scene, the flashing lights, the gorgeous panorama unfolded before her, were all unheeded. The exquisite acting of the heroine in this interesting piece made no impression upon her until the closing scene arrived, in which madness was so naturally—so terribly personated, that Helen forgot her absorbing emotion, and gave undivided attention to what was passing on the stage. It was a wonderful piece of acting, and moved her soul to its very depths, she knew not why.

As she looked, she felt the shuddering conviction stealing over her, that as deep anguish as

wrecked the mind of the Giselle must soon be hers, yet Heaven would deny to her the madness which shattered memory and hope at one crushing blow. Just as she felt ready to shriek at the dreadful interest inspired by the story, she accidentally caught the eye of a gentleman in the pit fixed intently upon her. Again hope returned—a half smile parted her lips, and the dark presentiment of evil fled at once before the presence of her lover. Clinton had placed himself in such a position as enabled him to gaze upon her without observation, and vainly had Hilton endeavored to discover his whereabouts, for he felt convinced that he was in the house.

Bessie Graham, bright and airy, looking as the queen of the fairies, made a deeper wound than ever in the heart of M. Lacroix, and he mentally resolved that he would make desperate love to her so soon as he had mastered those terrible idioms, in which he had already taken several lessons from the treacherous Philip. The latter looked on his devotion to his cousin with philosophic composure, for he believed it impossible for the heart of any girl to be touched by the most fervent love expressed as grotesquely as were the utterances of the unfortunate Frenchman.

Flora had that morning received the promised elixir from Dr. Ledru, and she fancied that a few drops of it had already produced a beneficial effect. In truth, she possessed confidence in him; and the fears which so lately darkened her mind,

her sanguine temperament had already dismissed. She was this evening serenely happy: her soul seemed to bathe itself in the golden effulgence which beamed around our first parents before sin and sorrow entered the abode over which the spirit of the Godhead presided. Her bright eyes were suffused with a softness Lenox had never before remarked in them, and her sweet voice seemed to possess a deeper meaning in its rich and mellow tones, as she replied to the few remarks the interest of the performance permitted him to make.

Mrs. Wilmot, stiff, stately, and pompous, seemed a female Cerberus empowered to watch over this very lovely group, and more attention was certainly given by her to their proceedings than to what was acting before her. A word, a look, not precisely in accordance with her ideas of propriety, was quickly frowned on, and the offender made to feel that her freezing eye was upon her. Helen and Flora, absorbed in their own emotions, gave little cause for displeasure; but poor little Bessie found herself several times during the evening spell-bound by this icy regard; but she fortunately soon recovered her spirits under the influence of the oddly-expressed opinions of M. Lacroix.

The curtain had fallen: many left the house, anxious to preserve the impression of the fine acting they had just witnessed; but as the cast for the evening was very good, the majority of the audience remained. Among them, our party retained their seats, and now they had leisure to look around, recognize acquaintances, and make comments on the scene before them.

The box occupied by them was in the curve of the elliptic, and it commanded a good view of the private boxes on the opposite side. The curtains of the upper one had been kept drawn during the evening, though it had been evident that it was occupied, from the frequent motion given to the crimson drapery which concealed the person within.

This was now suddenly drawn aside, and revealed a lady entirely alone. The railing in front was low, and she could be seen sitting in an indolent position in a large chair; and those who looked would certainly give another glance to the graceful woman, who surveyed the crowd below with an air of superb unconsciousness that she herself had suddenly become an attraction to nearly every opera-glass in the house. She seemed above the medium height of her sex, with a gracefully-developed form, around which a black velvet robe fell in rich folds: in contrast with it, and by the deceptive gas-light, her neck and arms seemed fair as drifted snow. Her features possessed a piquant beauty entirely their own, and an abundant suit of black hair was braided with strings of pearl, and wreathed around her head in the form of a coronet. A fair, ungloved hand, glittering with gems, hung over the arm of the chair.

When Miss Forrester first remarked this personage, a strong expression of surprise crossed her features, and her lips unclosed as if to give utterance to the emotion she felt. Quickly rais-

ing her lorgnette, she saw that the person who had excited this interest was looking at herself, but the expression of her features seemed to be neither amiable nor friendly.

"It is certainly the most extraordinary resemblance," she at length said, more to herself than any one else. Lenox overheard her, and asked, "What interests you so deeply, Miss Forrester?"

He had not remarked the withdrawal of the curtain, and the fair occupant of the box was as yet unseen by him.

"I believe you have never yet seen the woman I brought down with me as an attendant?" said Flora.

"I think not—I have no recollection of having seen her."

"Strange as it may seem, if I did not know it to be impossible, I should say that lady in the private box on the opposite side of the theatre is my waiting-maid in masquerade, with her dusky complexion changed by some magical process to the fairness of my own."

Lenox looked up, caught the fixed gaze of the lady in velvet, and some powerful emotion seemed suddenly to move him. His breast heaved, the color receded from his features, and he unconsciously spoke in the deep tones of suppressed feeling—"My God, it is she! When I have most reason to hope our last meeting on earth had taken place, she appears before me!"

"Mr. Lenox, you seem strangely moved," exclaimed Flora, frightened by his violent emotion. "Who is this woman? Do you know her?"

"I do—I have known her from early childhood. I must see—I must speak with her. Excuse me for a few moments."

Before Flora could reply, he had left her, and was rapidly threading his way to the opposite side of the theatre. There was nothing in this desire of her lover to greet an old acquaintance to arouse the jealousy of Flora, or shake her faith in his truth and honor; yet she could not overcome an uncomfortable conviction that this woman had once exercised some powerful influence over him. If not, why should he have betrayed such unusual emotion at the sight of her?

Her eyes were fixed upon the box; again she drew the face of its occupant so near to her that she could read every flitting emotion upon her features. The late colorless cheek was now radiant with the deepest rose-tint; the eyes, so wonderfully like those of Lisette, were sparkling with triumph as they regarded her, and her whole air was that of eager expectation.

Flora saw the shadow of Lenox as he unclosed the door behind her chair—saw her start up, and then the crimson drapery was swept down by a rapid motion of her right hand, and the meeting was left to her own imagination.

Time passed: the curtain again arose upon a scene of fairy land: the brilliant after-piece came to a conclusion; yet Flora was left to her own conjectures as to the interest of the interview which so long detained her lover from her side. The audience was rapidly leaving; Mrs. Wilmot

had just inquired with displeased emphasis for the truant escort, when Lenox reappeared.

He silently folded Flora's mantilla around her, drew her arm within his, and followed the rest of the party. She looked up to his face; he felt that it was a questioning glance, yet he only replied to it by one of deep tenderness as he bent his head and murmured—

"I love you, Flora. Suffer not a doubt of my truth to enter your heart."

"I will not," she replied, with perfect sincerity, though she beheld the traces of recent and violent emotion upon his expressive features.

His manner seemed more gentle, his solicitude for her unquestioning confidence greater; and, amidst all, there was an expression of protecting love, as if he would shield her from anticipated danger. He did not allude to the interview which had just taken place, and she was too delicate to refer to it herself. She could wait for his confidence, and trust implicitly in the honor of the man in whose power she had consented to place the happiness of her future life. Upright and true herself, she disdained to believe the one she loved inferior to herself in those higher qualities which, in her estimation, ennobled the man, and made him worthy to aspire to possess the undivided love of a pure-hearted and affectionate woman. He had sought her, he had won her, and undimmed should be her faith and trust in his honor.

She slept as calmly that night as if no meeting had taken place between himself and his early friend; yet, in spite of her conviction that such a thing could not be, she looked around for Lisette when she entered her chamber. The quadronee was sitting beside a table, with her head resting on it, apparently in a deep sleep. The noise of their entrance aroused her, and she proceeded to fulfill her nightly duties with the usual air of insolent vacuity which characterized her movements in the presence of her mistress; yet, beneath that apathetic mask, was smouldering a lava flood of bitter and passionate rebellion, which at moments shook her frame to agony. She examined the flushed features of her young lady with her basilisk glance, and in the radiant bloom she too seemed to discover the clear flow of renewing health, though how or why it chanced she knew not; for Dr. Ledru had laid a positive injunction on Flora to inform no one of the elixir he had given her, and to keep the vial containing it in her own possession. Though surprised at what she considered his unnecessary caution, she strictly complied with his wishes, and thus preserved the priceless remedy from being tampered with by her dangerous attendant.

A deeper and wilder spirit of hatred filled the heart of Lisette toward her fair mistress on that night than had ever before moved her; and, as she heard the happy laugh of Flora, while she and Bessie spoke with girlish glee of the enjoyment of the evening, her hand wandered instinctively to her breast, while she mentally vowed that the deadly agent there concealed should accomplish its fatal errand before many days had passed. With fiendish malice she would so contrive it,

that by the side of him who loved her her detested rival should perish.

That the cause of this state of bitter feeling may be better understood, we will now return to the interview which had taken place between Lenox and the waiting-maid of Miss Forrester, for Lisette and the fair woman in velvet were indeed the same.

As Lenox entered the box, she sprang toward him, impulsively seized his hand, and carrying it to her lips, said, in a voice stifled by emotion—

"Once more—once more do we meet—cruel, cruel George! How I have yearned for this interview—how I have pined to listen once again to the tones of your voice, no creature but one as impulsive, as passionate as I am, can comprehend."

"And I am not that being, Linda Munroe," he replied, with stern composure, as if seeking to control the emotion he really felt. "Long since did I labor to make you comprehend our mutual positions. When I recognized you to-night, I felt it to be an imperative duty to speak with you, and ascertain your present situation; for, reared as we were, I feel that you have claims on me."

"I put forward but one," she haughtily replied; "that upon your honor. We were betrothed in childhood; you won my girlish love, and then—then refused to fulfill the contract when our fathers pressed forward our union."

He gazed at her in silence some moments, and then slowly said—

"How deep my aversion to that union was you are well aware, when you know that I left my home, abandoned even the name of my father, and cast myself a youth upon my own resources, sooner than wed a woman with whom I felt that happiness could never be enjoyed. The engagement you refer to was made by others—I never sanctioned it: I never sought your love—it was given unasked. These are hard truths, Linda, but you have been so deep and dark a shadow on my path that I feel myself forced to utter them."

The face of the listener was terrible to look on as he thus spoke. Almost maniac passion convulsed her features, and those awful eyes gleamed with a vivid and burning glare, that seemed as if they would consume whatever they looked upon. She hissed through her closed teeth—"And a deeper, darker shadow will I yet be, George Wallace. I bid you beware! A woman such as I will have vengeance, if she sinks herself to destruction to accomplish it. Think what this passion must be which has defied contempt, absence, evil in every shape to subdue it, and tremble."

"I am not one to tremble before a woman's threats," he calmly replied. "I would gladly serve you in any way that is compatible with my own honor. Tell me, Linda, of your present position. I have heard a vague rumor of your father's death, and that the estate he owned had passed into the hands of strangers. Of you, I could learn nothing. Why you were disinherited, or how it could happen, I knew not, for your father had the reputation of possessing wealth."

"And justly—my father was rich."

"It is not then true that you were left destitute!"

A hollow laugh broke from the lips of the woman.

"Do I look like one left destitute? Clad in costly array, seated in a private box at a fashionable place of amusement, who would fancy such a thing? You would know *why* my father's estate passed to others! You have not then heard, you do not know the awful sequel to the history of his pampered and haughty child!"

"How should I! The sternness of my own parent forced me from his side, and the letters I ventured to address to him were returned unopened. I have held no intercourse with any one in the neighborhood in which I was reared, and, of course, your life since the day we parted is a blank to me."

She meditated a moment, and then decisively said—

"And such it shall remain. A year since I sought you every where: I would then have confided all to you, and asked your assistance, for I sorely needed it, but now the humiliation were needless. I will keep my secret locked within my own breast, for nothing but contempt and increased loathing can be gained by its revelation."

"As you please," replied Lenox, "I have no wish to pry into what you do not choose to reveal."

"And now," continued Linda, "I will give you one warning. Guard well that fair girl who sat beside you this evening."

"What do you mean, Linda?" he sternly asked.

"Only this. I will not bear the knowledge that another has won the love refused to me. I will destroy my successful rival, even if my life should expiate the crime."

"She shall be placed beyond your reach," he calmly replied. "You know of old that threats nor promises can turn me from a course I have once resolved on."

"Scorn the warning if you choose; but the beloved one shall surely become my victim."

"Woman, is this madness, or a fiend-like contempt of every generous or noble feeling? What injury can that fair girl have inflicted to deserve doom at your hands?"

"The wrong which a jealous woman never forgives. When she passes between you and me, she dies!"

"Forewarned is forearmed." I shall take such measures as will defeat your machinations."

"I defy you to do that," she coolly rejoined. "But it is time that we part. The performance draws to a close, and as I only came hither to

meet you, my purpose has been answered, and I must retire."

"How did you know I would be present?"

"That I shall not reveal. Return to your party. I must leave before the crowd is dismissed, as I came alone."

"Will you not then tell me any thing of yourself? Of your life since the decease of your father?"

"Seek not to look into *my* life," she bitterly replied. "It is no record of luxuriant indulgence, I assure you. What it *has been*, I do not choose to reveal—what it *will be*, I can easily foresee."

"What will it be?" asked Lenox.

"A dream of baffled love—a reality of bitter retribution to him who trampled on my offered heart."

"Hush, Linda! Heaven will turn you from your fatal purpose. You will reflect—you will see that the innocent should not be made to suffer for the guilty, if there be guilt in refusing to accept a love I deem it my greatest misfortune to have inspired."

"Leave me," she imperiously replied; "and place trust in any thing sooner than in the forbearance of a slighted and insulted woman."

"I obey; but should you need my services in any way, claim them as freely as from a brother. I discredit your threats, Linda, because I think no one of your sex, as tenderly nurtured as you were, could fulfill them."

He took her passive hand, pressed it lightly in his own, and left her. She stood an instant motionless, and speaking rapidly to herself, as was her common habit:

"Tenderly nurtured—ay; but you know not the gall and wormwood that have been poured upon my spirit since those days. You dream not of the rankling curse that has corroded every soft and merciful feeling within my soul. Go—go join the beloved—trust to my relenting, and see what will be the result."

She hurriedly wrapped a dark mantle over her person, completely concealing her features, and descended the stairs communicating with the lobby. Swiftly crossing this, she reached the street, where a carriage awaited her on the same spot on which she had left it two hours before. She was driven to the door of the hotel, gained the apartment of her mistress, and divested herself of her dress before the return of Miss Forrester.

It was the consciousness that for his sake Flora was threatened by this undisciplined being, which gave such unusual softness to the manner of Lenox when he returned to her. Never had she appeared half so femininely beautiful—half so dear to him, as when he contrasted her with the fierce and savage creature he had just left.

CHAPTER XVI.

ON the following morning, M. Lacroix, through his friend Philip Maitland, requested the honor of a few moments' conversation with Miss Bessie Graham.

Phil was much too wise to deliver the formal message with which he was charged, for he well knew that his cousin would be certain to find some ingenious excuse for evading the interview. He did what he considered much more clever: he asked Bessie to accompany him to their parlor, when he knew the other ladies were variously engaged. She went, of course, for she supposed Philip had something to show her, or something of importance to communicate.

Great, therefore, was her surprise, when she found M. Lacroix pacing the floor in a state of agitation there was no mistaking. Casting a reproachful glance at her wicked cousin, she motioned him to remain; but Phil was conveniently blind to her meaning, and very soon left the room.

The Frenchman then sat down on the sofa beside Miss Graham, and with a look of most impassioned admiration, said—

"Belle ange—bootiful leetle seelph, je suis in von grande passionne."

"I am sorry, monsieur, that any thing should have occurred to ruffle your temper. I hope I have done nothing to offend you," she said, with demure simplicity.

"Offen' me? Non—non—quite de contraire. You take my heart by von tornado—l'orage—ah, ha! you onstan'!"

"I can not say that I do, M. Lacroix. What a storm can have to do with your affections, I can not see."

"Ah, ha! dat be de vord. Vous take my heart by storm—dere is de bon Inglese."

"But suppose I decline taking it either by storm or by sunshine, monsieur?"

"Vous will not be so cruel, mon ange. May de fate peckle me from sooch despair, ma belle amie!" murmured the impassioned Frenchman, in a voice that sounded like the last expiring sigh of sentiment. "I can nevaire leev widout you, pouls of my heart."

Bessie preserved her gravity with great effort. "I think you have quite enough acid in your nature already, M. Lacroix, without the addition of vinegar," she quietly remarked.

"Vinegaire! diable stoof!" exclaimed the excitable lover, tearing his hair. "What for you talk of vinegaire, mon ange, when I uttaire de langue of my passionne for de swat, de douce leetle dame like you one self!"

"Oh! as you talked of pickling, it unavoidably reminded me of the chief ingredient used in the process."

"Ah, sacra! anoder blundaire in dis vile langue, vich ees not fit for nobody, but von stoopid Doochman to speak. Oh, mon cœur! he will be break—be smash, vat you call it! bruler—burn to ash—to ceendres," and he grasped the region over his heart with such violence that Bessie began to be frightened. She, however, sat perfectly still, determined to act the farce out, since Philip had seen fit to force it on her. At length Lacroix became more tranquil, and said—

"Miss Bessie Grahame, vill you take me for vorse nor for bettaire? See me down on my marrow-bones a-beggin' for dat leetle vord vich vill peckle (dat sacra vord again!) vill—vill—oh! mon Dieu, can I not nevaire make you onstan' vat I vish to say?"

He had thrown himself upon his knees before her, and Bessie began to feel that, in spite of his absurd language, he was terribly in earnest. All inclination to laugh ceased at once, and she felt more vexation toward her cousin than had ever before found place in her gentle bosom; for she understood immediately the trick Philip had played on the credulous young man.

"Rise, M. Lacroix," she said, with great dignity for so *pétite* a person. "I would have saved you this, for I have as much as possible avoided encouraging you. I can never marry you; but you will not break your heart over this knowledge. You will soon forget me, and select one of your own nation, to whom you can make a declaration without such difficulty."

"Ah! ça—dere is none so bootifool as you. I doos not vish for nobody boot you."

"I am sorry, monsieur, that it is so; but I must inform you distinctly that your pursuit will be vain. I shall never marry a foreigner."

"But I am not foreignaire, mademoiselle—je suis Americain; von creole of Louisiana."

"True; but our habits, manners, language—all are unlike; and, therefore, we are foreign to each other. Suffer me to end this interview, as its continuance can only be painful to us both."

"And sall I nevaire see you no more?" he dolefully asked.

"If you seek me in friendship alone, monsieur."

"Weel—dat is bettaire dan noting at all. I vill spik de Inglese bettaire, and den ve sall see."

"Learn English by all means, monsieur, for

it is a noble language; but do not expect to gain me by acquiring the use of another tongue."

"Ah, ha! dere would be nevaire no need of noder tongue, if I could get de nice leetle vun dat spik so fas' in your coral leeps. Oh, mon cœur! mon cœur!—it be vun smash. I vill go put out de feu your eyes has keendled vith the vataire of the great Mississippi."

"The fire will soon die of itself, if you will study hard at your English. Find something to do, monsieur, and you will soon forget me. Good-morning—I must leave you."

As she quickly passed out of the room, she found Philip near the door, and, after a few reproachful words, she sent him in to console his dupe. He found the Frenchman tearing his hair, and running up and down the floor in a perfect fever of excitement. On seeing Phil, he paused and said—

"Ah, ha! my freen', I sall nevaire be vorth noting more, for dat belle ange vill not nevaire be my vife."

"I told you how it would be, Lacroix, if you persisted in speaking to her before you had made greater proficiency in our difficult language," said Philip, gravely. "Come, my good fellow, it is useless to take on so. You know the old distich:

"If a woman will, she will, you may depend on't; And if she won't, she won't—so there's an end on't."

Let us take a walk; you will soon get over your disappointment."

"Ah! dat ees not vrai. I sall not nevaire get ovaire it."

"You'll think better of that. In the mean time, come with me; I have an engagement to lunch with some pleasant fellows at a celebrated restaurant in your own part of the city."

Philip knew Lacroix to be a great gourmand, and this was touching him on a tender point. His features relaxed, his hand mechanically arranged his disordered locks, and he suffered himself to be persuaded to stroll down the lively and crowded street to a fashionable eating-house, where a gay party of young men awaited Philip's appearance.

In the mean time, a most extraordinary scene was acting in the apartment of Mrs. Wilmot. She had prepared to go out with Mrs. Somers and Helen, when, just as she was issuing from her door, her unfortunate little mate appeared before her in a most hopeless state of inebriety, supported on one side by his own servant, and on the other by one of the waiters belonging to the house.

"How did this happen, Sambo?" she severely inquired. "Did I not give you strict charge to watch over your master, and prevent his disgraceful fondness for liquor from reducing him to this?"

"Indeed, ma'am, I could not pervent it," said Sambo. "Master would go in where the crowd of gentlemen was, and I couldn't follow him. I knowed 'twas no use to tell you, cos you couldn't a-gone down where all those people was, and fotch him out."

"I do not know that," replied the mistress, with cool determination. "I would not shrink

from my duty if all the world was looking on; and it is my plain duty not to permit my wedded husband to make a beast of himself."

"Beast—beast," muttered the drunken man. "Who called you a beast, my dear! Very impertinent, I must say, for you're only a vixen—a cursed virago that stops the liquor of the head of the house without authority. The woman shall obey the man, says Holy Writ, but you reverse the order, and make the man obey you."

"I can give you common sense on the subject, if it lacks the authority of the Bible," said his spouse, contemptuously. "Sense shall rule imbecility, says Nature, and I follow her command. Put your master on the bed, Sambo, and then obey my orders. I have often threatened to sober him, and now I intend to do it."

The helpless little man was placed, like a gigantic baby, upon the couch, where he attempted to conciliate his irate wife by blowing kisses toward her; but she received them only with an expression of disgust and disdain.

Mr. Wilmot was not so thoroughly overcome with liquor as to be unable to understand the preparations which now commenced before his eyes, and had volition been possible, he would have made strenuous efforts to escape the fate which threatened him. Sambo was ordered to bring in several buckets of cold water, which were ranged in a line with what appeared to be a handsome wardrobe, but was in reality a shower-bath.

The doors were then opened, and the intoxicated man, in spite of his struggles and threats, had his coat forcibly removed from his person, which was induced in a calico dressing-gown, and placed *volens volens* in the large tub in the bottom of the machine. Unable to sustain himself in an upright position, he sunk down, a most pitiable object, crouching before his iron tyrant, and entreating to be spared the deluge which threatened him.

In vain: soon an avalanche of water came down on him—a brief respite was allowed to arrange another deluge, and to permit him to gain his breath. Four times the torrent descended, and then, half dead but quite sobered, the unlucky recipient of this summary treatment was taken out, his wet garments exchanged, and his drenched body wrapped in blankets to restore the vital warmth. A slight shaking administered by his wife finished the discipline for that day, and she gave him warning in the following words:

"It is the first time I have ever proceeded to such extremities with you, Mr. Wilmot, though I have often threatened it: it will not, however, be the last, if you persist in your disgraceful course."

"But, my dear, you need not have added insult to injury at any rate," whined the exhausted and wretched object of her vigilance. "When I am in an ague-fit already, I think it needless to give me a shake."

Mrs. Wilmot looked grimly down at him over her spectacles:

"So you would endeavor to be witty at my expense. That is my reward for my care of

your health and morals. Well—it is the way of the world, and I scarcely expect gratitude from any one. I was going out to-day on important business, but I am compelled to give it up, because you must go and make yourself an object of contempt to every decent person. I must now content myself to stay within doors and attend to you."

"Pray, do not think of it, my dear. I shall do very well without you."

"I dare say: but I shall not leave you, nevertheless. I have a book here, describing the awful effects of a continued use of ardent spirits upon the human stomach. I am going to read it aloud to you, that you may see what you are hastening to."

Unable to resist, the helpless creature lay there during the long hours of that weary morning, and listened to the monotonous tones of his wife's voice, while she read of horrors to which he vainly endeavored to turn a deaf ear. An occasional slumber would give him a brief respite, from which he awoke to a renewed consciousness of his complete subserviency to the will of this dragon, and he was convinced that temporary madness must have induced him to invest her with such power over his destiny.

In the afternoon Dr. Ledru called on Miss Forrester, and he was delighted to find her in fine spirits and what he hoped was an amended state of health.

"You have taken my life-drops I perceive, my fair friend," he said, as he looked in her brightened eyes.

"Life-drops you may indeed call them, dear doctor," she gayly replied, "for they seem to have imparted new existence to me. I do not know how far imagination may assist their effects, but I am willing to impute my improvement to your skill alone."

"May it suffice to you, Miss Flora, is my ardent hope," he seriously rejoined. "I do not know that this medicine can have power to prevent a recurrence of your mysterious malady, but of this I am certain: it will prevent a fatal termination to the paroxysms, and before the disease has made more serious progress I hope it may be arrested entirely."

"And do you think you will be able to do this, doctor? Life is very sweet to me, but I do not wish a delusive hope to be held out to me."

"Dear young lady, I would not deceive you for the world. I am as yet groping in the dark as to the origin of your illness; but I trust soon to have a gleam of light thrown upon its cause. That once known, I think I can deal with it."

At that moment Lisette came in to deliver a message from Miss Graham to her young mistress. The piercing eye of the physician was fixed on her, but her features remained perfectly impassive; she betrayed no consciousness of ever having seen him before.

When she left the room, he abruptly asked—

"Is that woman your constant attendant, Miss Forrester?"

"Oh no—that is an unfortunate creature I

have brought down with me, in the hope that she may be able to remain in the city. She has no associates on the plantation, for our slaves are all blacks, and this woman has received sufficient education to render her superior to them."

"Do you intend to sell her?"

"Such was not the intention with which my father brought her hither. I have induced him to permit Lisette to seek for some one who will be responsible for her good conduct, and allow her to hire her own time."

"Hum—Why is this? Is she not a valuable servant?"

Flora colored. She did not like to avow her unconquerable repugnance to the woman, for it seemed to her cruel and unreasonable. She replied—

"Lisette is a good needle-woman, and I can not say that she is an unfaithful servant; but—but the blacks are jealous of any privileges awarded her above themselves, and—really doctor, to tell you the whole truth, which your keen eyes seem to force from me, I am unreasonable enough to shrink from having her near me, though I really feel that this repugnance is unjust to her who inspires it."

"Not so much so as you may imagine perhaps. I have strong faith in natural antipathies. I dare be sworn now that she loves you no better than you do her, if she dared utter her true sentiments."

"I do not know. Until of late, she was seldom near me, and I am willing to be rid of her as soon as possible."

"Suppose I should offer to be the nominal master—would you accept me?"

"Oh, gladly, for it will relieve my father of the only hesitation he has about leaving her. He would not place her under the protection of any one in whom he has not perfect confidence, and it is demanding a great favor of a friend to ask him to take charge of a turbulent slave: for I must tell you that Lisette, when her temper is roused, is more like a demon than a woman."

"As to that, I care not. I shall be glad to get some control over her, for I am unwilling to lose sight of her just yet—why, I will tell you before a month has passed; but not now, so you need not give me that questioning glance. Consider that point as settled. I am her future master."

"See my father about it. He will readily accede to your proposal, I am certain."

Mr. Forrester came in before the interview concluded, and the agreement was soon ratified. Lisette was summoned and informed of the transfer of authority which had been made. She seemed singularly indifferent, and acquiesced in the arrangement without appearing to care into whose hands the chances of fate might throw her future destiny.

There was a sarcastic quiver of the thin lips, as she turned and left the room, and an air of triumphant defiance, which seemed to argue an internal consciousness of power to baffle the arrangement to which she had just been made a party.

CHAPTER XVII.

IN the constant excitement of company and amusement the days passed on, until the important evening of the fancy ball. In every place of public resort Lenox again sought for the features of Linda Munroe, for their last meeting had left a very unsatisfactory feeling concerning her upon his mind. He disregarded her threats, for he considered them as merely the outpourings of the bitter and vindictive spirit he knew she had ever possessed; and he fully believed she would not dare to execute them.

He wished to ascertain her condition, for he distinctly remembered hearing casually, that on Mr. Munroe's death his nephew had taken possession of the estate, and his daughter had left the neighborhood, stripped of the wealth which had been supposed justly her own. How this was brought about he could not ascertain; and her refusal to enlighten him as to her subsequent adventures, left him in a cloud of doubt and uncertainty as to her real position.

This woman had loved him from childhood—her father and his own had been friends, and his generous nature prompted him to desire earnestly to ascertain her real condition, and if it were not as prosperous as could be desired, he would offer such assistance as she could not refuse from the companion of her infancy.

His hopes, however, were vain; and the eve of his departure arrived without gaining any further clew to her. He little suspected that the waiting-woman he had several times encountered in passing to and fro was the being he sought. Lisette, even in the house, wore a large flat bonnet, which completely concealed her features; and even if she had not taken pains to disguise herself, he would scarcely have dreamed of finding the object of his pursuit in the slave of Mr. Forrester. Had he known of her vicinity to his beloved Flora, he would indeed have trembled.

Helen's affairs seemed in a fair train to accomplish the destiny she desired, for no movement on the part of her aunt indicated a suspicion of the intended elopement. Her harassed spirits had a brief season of tranquillity, which they sadly needed; and she suffered herself to believe that Fate itself could no longer thwart her hopes of happiness with him to whom her affections were wedded.

Clinton and herself had not met since their first interview, but at every public place in which she appeared she saw him; and a glance and a smile exchanged between them, served to keep hope and happiness alive in her bosom.

The three friends were to appear as the Graces, and elegant costumes were prepared for them. Lenox and Philip Maitland determined to wear no fancy dress, but merely to appear as American gentlemen, though Philip intended to wear a mask.

Mr. Hilton had announced his intention to join the maskers, and test the ingenuity of his fair friends to discover his identity; and he offered bets of gloves and ribbons that they would not be able to do so.

Constant communication by letter had been kept up between Clinton and Miss Forrester, and every thing was in readiness for the successful departure of himself and Helen. He had taken passage on board a ship which would leave shortly before the dawn of day, and in a few more weeks they hoped to be landed safely in Philadelphia.

Helen was wonderfully composed. All doubt and indecision were at an end; and she believed that on her own self-command now depended the security of her earthly happiness. At ten o'clock the party assembled in the parlor, with the exception of Hilton, who had delegated to Mr. Forrester the duty of escorting Miss Somers. Helen was only too happy to make the exchange, and devoutly hoped it was the last time she should ever behold his face.

Just as they were about to join the revelers, Lisette came in, bearing a bouquet of magnificent flowers. Her features were composed as usual, when performing her rôle of waiting-maid, and although she felt the eye of Lenox upon her, no consciousness of his presence appeared in the well-trained features of this consummate actress. She saw him change color, and heard him say to Flora—"The likeness you remarked is, indeed, wonderful;" yet she betrayed no outward emotion. It was possibly stilled before the tragic catastrophe she believed the next few moments would consummate.

Did not her heart relent as she looked on that beautiful girl, radiant in youth and happiness?—on that gray-haired man, whose best treasure she was?—that noble lover, who had garnered his earthly hopes in her? Alas! if such repentance had been hers, it was now too late. Flora stretched out her hand for the flowers. Lisette said—

"They have just arrived, Miss Flora, with the compliments of the gentleman whose card is among them."

Flora extricated a card from the leaves, and

read on it—"To the best-beloved," with a bright glance toward Lenox, whose answering smile assured her that her conjecture was right. She raised the fragrant offering to her lips. A single cry escaped her—feeble, yet full of suffering—and she lay lifeless in the arms of Lenox.

In an instant all was confusion and terror. They placed her on the sofa, and Bessie flew to their room to get the sal volatile which had before revived her, while Mr. Forrester retained sufficient mastery over himself to dispatch a messenger for Dr. Ledru, who fortunately had rooms on the opposite side of the street.

Flora lay white and motionless; Lenox believed her dead. Suddenly a thought darted through his brain, which seemed to scar it as it passed. He hoarsely asked—

"Where is the woman who presented those flowers? Let her be secured, for as surely as there is a God in heaven, I believe they are poisoned."

Mr. Forrester shuddered at the terrible idea thus presented.

"No, no; that is impossible. Lisette has no cause to injure my darling child, for she has been the kindest of mistresses to her."

"My brain is a chaos of wild suspicion and dimly-seen horrors!" exclaimed Lenox; "believe me, she must not escape: bring her hither, that I may confront her. If it be—oh God! spare me—spare me this awful confirmation to my fears!"

He rushed from the room as Bessie entered it with the salts. While Helen supported her head, the weeping Bessie opened the pungent aromatic, and permitted its penetrating odor to diffuse itself around her friend. A faint movement was soon perceptible in the colorless lips—a slight convulsive twitching of the features succeeded, and by the time Dr. Ledru reached the scene, a faint and struggling effort to breathe showed that the vital powers were rallying once more.

The physician placed his fingers on the fluttering pulse; he took from his pocket a small vial, and administered to her a few drops of the liquid it contained. This seemed to possess some magical property, for the deadly paleness was succeeded by a faint rose-hue on cheeks and lips; the heavy eyes slowly unclosed, and Flora made an effort to rise.

Dr. Ledru placed his hand on hers, and said—"Lie still, my dear Miss Forrester. Be perfectly quiet for a few moments, and then you can be conveyed to your room. Tell me, Miss Graham, what caused this seizure?"

"The odor of flowers, I believe," replied Bessie.

"And where are the flowers?" he quickly asked. Lenox had returned just as Flora began to revive, and he was examining them carefully, while his clouded brow and wandering eyes bore testimony to the violence of the shock he had sustained.

"They are poisoned!" he whispered. "They were offered by the servant girl, and she can not be found. Oh, doctor! can you save her?"

"I trust so; I believe I can. At all events, all present danger is past."

Lenox wrung his hand, and again approached the suffering girl, while Dr. Ledru held the flowers close to the light, and endeavored to detect the presence of some corrosive substance on their delicate petals. A white japonica crowned the centre of the bouquet, and on its pearly leaves he thought he detected traces of a very fine powder, so nearly resembling the pollen of the flowers themselves, that mere examination by the eye could not detect the difference. He carefully folded this flower in a paper for further tests in the privacy of his own apartment.

Lisette was vainly summoned to the assistance of her mistress. She could not be found, and Mr. Forrester reluctantly admitted the idea that she had really absconded. Flora was conveyed to her own room, and after administering another potion from his life-giving vial, the physician commanded perfect quiet to be kept around her.

"Dear doctor," she murmured, "I must speak a few words with Helen Somers. More than life depends on it."

"In that case, it would perhaps be more injurious to refuse your request than to grant it. Miss Somers, your friend wishes to communicate something to you."

Helen bent over her. Flora whispered—

"Forget my illness, dear girl, and go to the fulfillment of your own destiny. I am not in any immediate danger, but with you every hope is at stake."

"I can not bear to leave you, Flora; yet if this evening should pass without securing my happiness, God knows what the result may be."

"Dear Helen, your first duty is to yourself, and him who trusts in your good faith. My father will remain with me, and I need no other attendant, for the doctor has ordered me to be kept without excitement of any kind. I already feel the influence of the potion he has given me mounting to my brain, and I shall soon sleep. Kiss me, love, and take with you my best wishes for your happiness."

A tear fell on her brow, as Helen stooped forward and fervently pressed her farewell kiss upon her lips.

The two young girls then slowly left the room, unwilling to join a scene of festive gayety while their beloved friend lay so ill; but both felt how imperative was the necessity, since the fate of one was so deeply implicated in the events of the night.

Mrs. Wilmot and her sister were still in ignorance of the attack of Flora, for they had been more than an hour in the ball-room when it occurred. As they intended to be merely spectators of the scene, they had gone at an early hour, for the purpose of securing seats where they could have a good view of the brilliant crowd, leaving the younger portion of their party to the guardianship of Mr. Forrester.

At the earnest request of Flora, Lenox consented to leave her side for a few moments while he escorted Helen into the ball-room, and promenade with her until they were joined by the

blue domino with a pearl upon his sleeve. To his protection Lenox was then to surrender her.

In about half an hour he returned, and found that Miss Forrester had fallen into a deep slumber, over which her father and Dr. Ledru both kept watch. On his entrance, the latter whispered to Mr. Forrester that he was only going into the next apartment, and if Flora awoke he must be instantly summoned. Then making a sign to Lenox, they retired together to Mr. Forrester's room.

"Has any trace of the woman been yet found?" asked the physician. "It is of the last importance that she shall be secured."

"Why?" asked, Lenox anxiously. "I greatly fear it will be difficult, if not impossible, to trace her."

"I tell you, Mr. Lenox, that she must be found. Like yourself, I believe that poison has been administered to Miss Forrester through the medium of those flowers; and I must get that diabolical woman in my power, that I may force from her the secret of its preparation. I may then be able to prepare an antidote."

"But surely, doctor, your skill will enable you to do that," said Lenox, growing very pale.

"That my skill can arrest the fatal effects of the agent is very certain, or Miss Forrester would not now be living. Fortunately, I have already ascertained from herself that she suffered from these attacks, and I gave her a medicine which I knew would in a measure counteract the deadly effect of the poison she has evidently inhaled. My skill may restore her for the present, but unless I can obtain the secret of this infernal preparation, and know precisely how to baffle it, she will never again know the buoyant health she once enjoyed; length of days will not be granted to her, and the light of reason probably be darkened before life is extinct."

Lenox covered his face, and his strong frame shook with emotion. Dr. Ledru regarded him in silence some moments, and then said—

"There is one question I wish to ask, Mr. Lenox, and I trust you will answer it frankly. Did you know this woman before she became Miss Forrester's attendant?"

"If you had asked me that question only three hours since, I would unhesitatingly have replied in the negative; but now, I am plunged in such vague and horrible perplexity that I know not what reply to make. Why do you ask?"

"Because my first interest in Miss Forrester originated in imperfectly hearing this Lisette mutter words which gave me a clew to the jealous workings of her mind. It was on the day you got on the boat. I subsequently conversed with Miss Forrester, and providentially obtained her confidence, with the conviction that some devilish scheme of vengeance was brewing in the mulatto's brain. I gave her an elixir which would prepare her system to resist the most fatal effects of poison. For such a crime there must be a sufficient motive: can you—will you furnish me with the clew?"

"Would to God that it were in my possession!" said Lenox, earnestly. "I am in a labyrinth of doubt, from which I can not extricate myself. If I believe the evidence of my eyes, which brought this woman before me as a mulatto slave, I should say that I know her not. But in spite of the difference in complexion and position, there is so wonderful a resemblance to one I once knew, that it seems possible she may be the same; and yet it is impossible, for she was fair as you are, and the daughter of a man of wealth. How then could she be the purchased slave of any man?"

"Your words puzzle, but do not enlighten me, Mr. Lenox."

"Because all is darkness in my own mind. I will relate my early history to you, and you will then know as much as I myself understand of this mysterious affair:

"My father is a planter, in moderate circumstances, who still resides in Georgia. He had but two children; an elder brother and myself. Our nearest neighbor was a man whose early career had not been very reputable; but he had amassed great wealth, and he was received every where. Mr. Munroe had an only child, a very handsome, but terribly spoiled girl, whose temper was the terror of the whole household.

"Linda Munroe and myself were thrown much together in childhood, and she unfortunately imbibed a passion for me which has been the bane of my life. Like every other impulse of her wayward spirit, this was expressed without restraint, and led her indulgent father to propose to mine that a future union should take place between us. Dazzled by the prospect of future wealth for me, my father consented, and for years Linda and myself were taught to believe ourselves designed for each other.

"So long as childhood lasted, I acquiesced in this arrangement; but as I grew old enough to comprehend my own nature, I felt that this passionate and unprincipled being could never become my wife. There was in her a want of refinement that was absolutely repulsive to me; and the violence of her temper, which increased with her years, made me tremble at the thought of linking my fate with hers.

"The determination was speedily matured in my own mind to break the false tie which united us, at all risks to myself, and the opportunity of declaring my intentions was soon offered. Mr. Munroe intimated to my father that we were quite old enough to take upon ourselves the responsibilities of life, and he was ready to portion his daughter handsomely when the marriage took place. I had never on any occasion used the language of a lover to Linda, and I instantly avowed my determination never to be forced into a marriage which must render me wretched.

"I pass over the terrible scenes that ensued. The fury of the father, the hysteric passion of the daughter, and the more terrible anger of my own parent. You may imagine what the latter was, Dr. Ledru, when I tell you that I was exiled from my paternal home, and came to the Southwest nearly penniless, and quite friendless."

Lenox paused. Dr. Ledru had listened with deep interest.

"And this girl," he asked, "this Linda Munroe, what has been her subsequent history?"

"I accidentally heard, nearly two years since, that Mr. Munroe was dead, and his daughter did not inherit the property. Why, I know not."

"And have you neither heard from nor met with her since?"

"The evening after my arrival in this place, Linda Munroe appeared suddenly before me in a private box in the theatre. I joined her for a short time, but I could ascertain nothing of her life since her father's death. She then uttered threats against Flora, which I treated with contempt. I had never beheld the face of Miss Forrester's maid until she came in with those fatal flowers to-night. I was then startled by the wonderful resemblance, save in color, between the two women. Now, Dr. Ledru, you know as much as I can inform you of, and if you can help me out of this sea of terrible doubt, I shall be grateful to you."

The physician seemed to ruminate on what he had just heard; he then decisively said—

"Impossible as it seems, yet I believe that Miss Munroe and this slave are the same person."

Lenox shook his head. That solution seemed to him incredible.

"I know not why, but I feel the conviction that it is so," continued the other. "Did she know you to be a lover of Miss Forrester's before she was purchased by her father?"

"Mr. Forrester has owned Lisette a year, and I met with Flora last summer for the first time."

"That alters the case again. God knows how it is, my young friend; but one thing is certain—she must be found."

"And when found, should this strange identity be proved, she would baffle your investigations, if she supposed Flora could be saved by them," replied Lenox, dejectedly.

"We shall see to that," said the physician, with confidence. "Her act has rendered her amenable to a severe punishment, and if I find her, I will take the law into my own hands."

"How? I do not understand."

"Simply by making her feel that she is in the power of one, who, in the cause of justice, can be as merciless as she is herself. All the minute mechanism of this wonderful frame of ours is familiar to me, and I will inflict such torture on her through the medium of my art, that she will be glad to purchase ease for herself by restoring life to her victim."

His listener shuddered. He asked—

"If this knowledge can only be procured as the price of life itself, what then?"

"Ah! do not fancy me such a tyro in my profession. No—life I will not touch, but I will make it a curse to her, until she reveals the secret I would know. Come, let us put the police officers on her track, for I am impatient to begin my experiments, that Miss Forrester may be rescued from her perilous situation."

"I have already taken such measures for the

pursuit of Lisette, that, if she remains in the city, she must be captured within twenty-four hours."

"Very well; follow that up by giving orders for the arrest of this Linda Munroe, and furnish an accurate description of her to the officers. My life on it, with her in our power, the mystery will soon be unraveled."

"I trust so indeed; and now to business."

Two hours later, when they again returned to inquire about Flora, the doctor found her in a tranquil slumber, though she still looked extremely pale. Her father sat beside her, holding her hand clasped in his, and watching every breath, as if he feared that with each respiration life would cease to animate her frame. After carefully examining her appearance, he whispered—"She is doing very well for the present, Mr. Forrester. You have received a severe shock to-night, and I insist upon your retiring to rest, while I take your place here."

The father looked earnestly at him.

"You would not deceive me? You would not send me from her, if she were really in immediate danger? Think—she is my all. Oh! Heavenly Father, if I should lose her!"

"My dear sir, I would not deceive you if my own life were at stake. Your daughter will rise tomorrow to all appearance as well as usual. To that, I pledge you my honor. I will sit beside her until the return of Miss Graham, and then we may safely leave them together."

"I will go, then, for I am terribly overcome by this awful shock."

With a long and tender gaze upon the sleeping girl, he softly pressed his lips upon her brow, and arose from the bedside. Lenox respectfully offered his arm, for he saw that the old man tottered as if scarcely able to sustain himself. As they passed out, he accidentally looked toward the dressing-stand. Upon it, in a conspicuous place, lay a letter addressed to Mr. Forrester. He took it with trembling hands, and unclosed it. The writing within was irregular, and evidently disguised.

"My dim eyes can not read it," he said. "See what it contains if you please, Mr. Lenox."

Lenox eagerly cast his eyes over the page, and saw that it was from Lisette. It contained the following words:

"Mr. Forrester—I take the freedom of action which was offered me on condition that a master should still hold authority over me. I will submit to no such terms, for the power is mine to evade you so completely that you will never be able to trace me.

"If your daughter could yet answer, I would ask her if it was not strange that the letters and gifts of her lover should have produced such fatal effects. Adieu, Mr. Forrester: I consider one year of service from such as I am ample payment for the sum you gave for me. Free as the wind I am, and like the wind you will find I will ever evade your grasp. LISETTE."

Mr. Forrester looked bewildered.

"Did the wretch then really intend to kill my

daughter? I thought in her fright at being the one to offer the flowers which apparently produced such fearful effects, she had only disappeared for a time. Good Heavens! what provocation can my child have given to such malice? And what can she mean by her allusion to your letters and gifts?"

"Only that what was naturally most precious to her in our position, was to be made the medium of death," replied Lenox, in a broken voice. "Flora has inhaled a subtle poison, Mr. Forrester, which must have been administered to her through the diabolical malice of this woman."

The father sank on a chair, quite unnerved at this terrible revelation.

"And she was near her at all hours," he feebly said. "The mercy of God is visible here, or my darling had perished."

"With the assistance of Heaven I will yet save her," said Dr. Ledru, cheerfully. "And now, my dear sir, you need rest after all this excitement, or I shall have you, too, ill on my hands."

Mr. Forrester arose mechanically, and permitted Lenox to assist him to his own apartment, where he immediately retired, but it was long before his excited nerves would suffer him to sleep.

As Lenox lightly passed Flora's door, Dr. Ledru stopped him, and said—

"Does the writing of the note furnish a clue to the two women?"

"It does not—yet who but Linda Munroe could have written it? Who beside herself could have felt such malice toward one so lovely as Flora Forrester?"

"True enough; and if I catch her, I will proceed as if she were the guilty party, I promise you."

CHAPTER XVIII.

BRILLIANT was the crowd which thronged the fine saloon, and sweet was the music which filled the air. The greater portion of the ladies wore elegant fancy costumes, but were without masks, thus displaying their own native charms to the greatest advantage. American, Turk, Jew, and Christian, found representatives among the gay crowd of promenaders, for it was almost impossible to dance. The magnificent costumes of the various courts of Europe glittered on forms that had never stood within the guarded precincts of a monarch's palace, and their wearers would probably have scorned the idea of bending in homage before the crowned head of the greatest of earth's potentates.

The most brilliant eras of European history found their representatives, and the favorite characters whose tragic fate has cast an interest around them, which shall last for all time, again walked the crowded saloon in all the pomp of royal attire. The beautiful Mary Stuart, Lady Jane Grey, Anna Boleyn, and Marie Antoinette were on this occasion represented by women quite as lovely as their prototypes themselves in their brightest days.

Groups of maskers gave variety to the scene, and furnished amusement to those who were desirous of identifying them as acquaintances, while not a few of the interrogators found themselves mercilessly quizzed by those who felt secure from detection behind the concealment of the mask.

Amidst this brilliant scene our Graces were ushered with quickly-beating hearts, forgetful of the fact that the third sister was missing; though, even if it had been remembered, it was now too late to make any alteration in their costume. Immediately on their entrance, a mask in a dark-blue domino joined them. A single glance assured Helen that a large pearl was placed on a conspicuous portion of his sleeve, and with a trembling

heart she suffered him to draw her arm within his, while Lenox excused himself for leaving her to the protection of her new escort.

The domino whispered, in a voice stifled by the folds which enveloped his face—

"Fear nothing, dearest love—all is right, and your betrothed is beside you. You were late appearing, and my heart began to misgive me that all would not proceed as fairly as we had hoped."

"For the success of our plans all seems smooth enough," answered Helen, sadly. "But I left my dearest friend very ill. Nothing but the imperative necessity of escaping to-night, or not at all, would have induced me to leave her side."

The domino started—and there was nothing regretful in the tone of his voice, as he said—

"Miss Forrester is ill! Occupied with you, my angel, I had not observed her absence. I trust it is nothing serious."

"I trust not, though you speak very lightly, Charles, of the illness of one who has been so true a friend to both you and me."

"Did I, dearest? Pardon me, then, for I owe Miss Forrester much—very much, and she shall soon find that I can repay—"

He paused, as if uncertain how to end his sentence, and at the moment the attention of both was claimed by a gay party which entirely surrounded them. Philip had obtained a mask of such grotesque ugliness, that it attracted attention immediately on his entrance.

A Sicilian peasant girl stepped up to him and inquired, "Pray, what is your style and title, Monsieur, of the ugly phiz?"

"I am called the Knight of the Proboscis, at your service, fair dame," replied Philip, putting his thumb upon his enormous nose, and spreading out the fingers of his hand in the manner used by waggish boys when they make that provok-

ing inquiry—"Does your mother know you are out?"

This produced a laugh at the expense of the interrogator, but she replied to the mute gesture very promptly.

"My maternal progenitor is quite aware of my presence in this festive scene, and would be pleased to make the acquaintance of so distinguished a representative of the gigantic noses."

"Thank you; but my dignity does not permit me to consort with those of whom I really know nothing," replied Phil, pompously. "Napoleon said, when he wanted good head-work done he employed a man with a large nose. You perceive that I belong to the aristocrats of the brain, and am therefore mindful of the dignity of my position."

"Though wearing a peasant's costume, I think I may venture even to assert that the dignity of a Proboscis will not be lowered by an association with me."

"Excuse me, fair lady; but a brain inflated by pride and self-consequence does not entitle you to rank with one of my distinguished family. We are self-made men, and rely not on the glitter of fortune to sustain our pretensions."

The young lady, who was known to many around to belong to a very supercilious and haughty family, whose pretensions were based on the possession of wealth alone, made no further reply, but quickly passed on amidst the smiles of those around.

"How could you speak thus to Miss Singleton?" asked Bessie, in a low tone. "She knows you, and will never forgive you."

"So be it, then. I have witnessed so much of her impertinence since I have been here, that I wished to give her a rebuke, however rude it may be in me."

They encountered many acquaintances in their promenade around the rooms, and were constantly assailed with inquiries as to the cause of Flora's absence. Among the numbers he exchanged witticisms with, Philip sought eagerly for Hilton, but saw no one on whom he could fix with certainty as the person it was so necessary to avoid. At length Helen's escort whispered something to him, and he replied—

"It is time we were going. I have looked every where for Hilton, but I have not recognized him yet. Our only chance is to leave the room, and trust to Providence to preserve us from his observation."

Something like a stifled laugh sounded beneath the mask of him he addressed, but he promptly replied—

"We are near the door—Mrs. Wilmot has left the room, and now is as good a time as any."

As he spoke, he drew the arm of the trembling Helen more firmly within his own, and whispered—

"Courage, my best love; we shall soon be beyond observation. Oh, Helen, my heart is filled with rapture at the thought that a few more moments will make you mine forever."

Helen had passed through this gay scene like one walking in a dream. The lights, the

music, the gay figures had passed before her, without eliciting more interest than a brilliantly-tinted picture would have commanded. At moments every pulse in her frame throbbed with such violence, as almost to stifle breath itself; then a short interval of self-control would succeed, in which her own entire calmness surprised her.

They left the ball-room, and entered a smaller one, where shawls and hoods had been placed ready for use. These were soon thrown over their light evening dresses, and they descended a staircase leading to a private entrance, opening on a cross street. A carriage was drawn up close to the curb-stone, with the steps lowered, and a muffled figure watching for their arrival.

"All is right," said he in a low voice to the blue domino, as he sprang into the vehicle after the others.

The door was quickly closed, and the carriage dashed rapidly up the narrow street to the next turning, and then swept through a wider thoroughfare. A few moments brought them in front of a small, modest-looking edifice. As they alighted, a side-door unclosed slowly, and the party entered the cold building, dimly lighted by a single lamp upon the altar.

The painfully-excited bride shuddered in spite of her efforts to repress such emotion, and turned toward him to whose arm she clung with nervous trepidation. For the first time she observed that he still retained his mask, and a vague feeling of mistrust and fear assailed her.

"Dear Charles, why do you not unmask?" she tremblingly inquired.

"I will, dearest, so soon as it is safe to do so. You know the features beneath this mask, then why remove it?"

"Because I wish it: your voice sounds strangely. My heart misgives me, yet such fears are foolish."

"It is a silly little heart to give you such unnecessary alarm, Helen. My mask changes the tone of my voice, and I can not remove it without taking off the whole disguise, as it forms a part of the dress itself. I can do so, if you insist on it, but it will be a strange proceeding in sight of the clergyman who awaits us."

Helen was too timid to insist, as he well knew, and they advanced, and stood together in front of the altar. The ceremony immediately commenced. Once again, when the hand of the unhappy girl was clasped, cold and trembling in that of him to whom she was plighting her faith for life, a thrill of emotion convulsed her frame, and a faint cry arose to her lips, but was stifled before it found utterance. That grasp was more like the clutch of iron with which foe meets foe than the gentle pressure of tenderness and devotion. The fatal ring encircled her finger—the vows were uttered—the congratulations of Bessie and Philip were hurriedly offered, and in a few moments they were again in the carriage, proceeding rapidly toward the ship in which the clandestinely-wedded pair were to embark.

Bessie was not to accompany her on board,

and during their drive, Helen gave to her reiterated messages of affection for Flora, with assurances that she would write immediately on her arrival at her new home. With many tears they parted, and as the carriage turned to bear Bessie and her cousin away, the hapless Helen could not account for the feeling of desolation which swept over her spirit: she shuddered, in spite of her efforts to overcome the sudden terror that seized her, as the one she had just promised to love and honor clasped her waist to steady her steps as they ascended together to the deck of the ship.

"We've been waiting for you an hour," said a rough voice. "But as the rest of the party was here already, I thought I would not leave until you came aboard."

"That was our agreement, I thought," replied the same stifled voice which had baffled Helen during the night, for every time it spoke a vague emotion of mistrust crossed her mind. It seemed so childish to yield to this feeling, that she repressed it by reflecting that no voice sounds natural beneath a mask.

She now said to her companion in a low tone—

"What can the captain mean by the rest of the party? I thought we would be alone, with the exception of the attendant you have engaged for me."

"I have prepared an agreeable surprise for you, my angel: you will soon see how provident I have been."

In spite of the muffled tones there was a sarcastic emphasis on the words, which thrilled painfully upon her heart, and the terrible fear came to her that he had ceased to feel for her that tender and respectful devotion he had hitherto manifested. Had she lowered herself forever in his estimation, by throwing herself so completely under his protection? she fearfully asked of herself. Yet this was so unlike the generous nature of Clinton, that she strove to reassure herself as she crossed a large saloon handsomely fitted up, and approached the cabin appropriated to the use of the lady passengers.

The doors between the two were closed, and complete silence reigned within. Helen trembled so violently that her companion paused a moment, as if to allow her time to conquer her agitation. He then slowly unclosed the door, and she stood gazing on the scene revealed to her, with dilated eyes, rigid features, and a form that seemed turned to stone.

The cabin was brilliantly illuminated, and in the centre stood a bridal table, profusely decorated with orange flowers, and covered with cakes, fruits, and wines. Beside it, sat her mother, her dreaded aunt, and Mr. Wilmot. The unhappy bride raised her hand, and passed it across her eyes as if to clear away this terrible illusion, for such it seemed to her it must be, but in vain.

She turned her bewildered glance upon the ominous figure at her side. Mrs. Wilmot arose, and seemed to await their approach, but her mother sat still, looking very pale, while Mrs.

Wilmot appeared to be in a state of extreme agitation.

Words seemed to force themselves from the white lips of Helen—

"O father of the helpless, aid me in my extremity! Have I indeed sinned beyond forgiveness, that this dread punishment should overtake me?"

Then turning her burning eyes upon him who stood beside her, she said—

"Who—who are you?"

"The humblest of your slaves, and your lawfully wedded husband," replied he, as he threw aside the domino, and Hilton appeared before her, wearing an air of triumphant satisfaction. "I think my wager is won fair, Helen."

Helen reeled, and would have fallen, had he not put forth his arm to sustain her. With an expression of loathing, scorn, and horror, she recoiled from him, and making a great effort, succeeded in reaching a seat on which she sunk, looking so wild and terror-stricken that even her iron-hearted aunt was alarmed.

She approached her and said—

"Although you have chosen so romantic a method of completing your engagement, Helen, do not think that I am offended with you. Your choice, you long since knew, has my fullest approbation."

The selfish and apathetic mother also drew near her, and attempted to say something to the same purpose; for it had been previously arranged that the marriage should be treated by them as a romantic freak on the part of Helen; but there was something in the face of her daughter, which caused the words to die away upon her lips.

The unhappy girl looked at her, and said in a thrilling whisper—

"And you, too, my mother, joined in this terrible deception! Do you not know that to gain luxury for yourself you have given me to a despair, than which the fate of lost souls, whose wail forever ascends to heaven, is scarcely more terrible? I can die, but I can never acknowledge myself the wife of that man, who stands there exulting in a deed which his base and heartless nature could alone have compassed."

"Helen, beware!" said Hilton, with an expression which made her shiver. "If I have braved so much to make you mine, think you I can not conquer the feeble spirit that would rebel against my power? You are mine—legally mine. The voice of Heaven, by its accredited servant, has pronounced the words which unite us for all time; therefore, be more respectful to your wedded husband."

"And the clergyman?" she asked; "could he—dared he lend himself to so infamous a deception?"

"Oh no—he, good man, thought he was uniting a very romantic young lady to the lover of her choice. As my baptismal name happens to be the same as his who would have supplanted me, neither the minister nor the pretty trembler beside me detected the difference. However, as mine

is the best-sanctioned claim, it will be your wisest course to submit to the inevitable decree of fate."

"You can not mean to say that you consider this ceremony binding, when you know that I would sooner die than become yours."

"Mine you are already, my beautiful, and you will live to regret the strong language you now use. It is many weeks since you permitted me to devote myself to you as your affianced husband; I have suffered myself to be trifled with long enough, and at last only secured you through a well-timed *ruse*. Understand me at once, Helen: I am your husband; and if you display a rebellious spirit I will use the authority of one to subdue it."

Helen's gentle nature seemed fairly goaded into resistance; she scornfully retorted:

"I defy your authority. It is based upon a falsehood that cries to heaven for punishment; and not in vain shall it do so. As to the charge of trifling with you, you know that I have long been the victim of the most heartless domestic tyranny, and you have taken advantage of it to further your own views. I never have concealed from you my reluctance to fulfill the engagement my relations forced upon me."

"Upon my word!" said Mrs. Wilmot, "this is a fine return for all my kindness. Sister, did you believe that child of yours could speak so ungratefully of one who has done so much for her and hers as I have? And now, when my vigilance has preserved her from a clandestine union with a mere nobody, she turns on me and calls me a domestic tyrant!"

"Madame—aunt—you know that I love, am beloved by another. I was willing to risk the chances of poverty with him, for death in his arms would be preferable to the most luxurious life with yonder man. Mother, speak! Tell them to have mercy on me, for I see no relenting in their cruel eyes," continued the half-maddened girl, turning toward Mrs. Somers, who had again seated herself.

"Helen, what is the use of all this ranting?" drawled her mother, a little more slowly than usual, which was the only evidence of emotion she betrayed. "It has been long settled that you were to marry Mr. Hilton, so what does it signify how the marriage was brought about? For my part, I think you will soon get over all this nonsense, and feel grateful that we did not suffer you to throw yourself away on that nobody you were about to elope with."

"Nobody!" repeated Helen. "To me he is every thing! I love him with a truth and fervor that you can not comprehend, for you never felt it. Where is he? What have you done with him?" she asked, turning her eyes on Hilton. "Have you murdered him? for it seems to me that death alone could have prevented him from rescuing me from this fatal snare."

"He is in safe hands, and will continue under strict guard until my wife returns to her senses, and seems to have a just comprehension of the new duties she has this night assumed."

"In your power?" she faintly asked. "How

—how has this demoniac enterprise been carried to so successful a termination?"

"Simply by robbing a birdsnest," he carelessly replied. "Your correspondence passed through my hands before it reached Miss Forrester's. In a city like the one we are leaving behind, it was not difficult to find agents to perform my will in reference to my rival. He is in my power; and I swear to you he shall never be released from duress until you bid me free him by admitting the validity of the tie that unites us."

"That I will never do. I will denounce you as a violator of the most sacred rights. The laws of my country will protect him I love from your violence."

He laughed sardonically.

"When you again appeal to them they may release him."

"What do you mean?"

"That we are on our way to Cuba, and there we shall remain until your destiny has become so supportable to you that you will cling to me as your husband. Until this rebellious spirit is tamed, you do not again set your foot upon your native soil. It may be months—it may be years; but Clinton shall remain in the power of those who now restrain his liberty until you bid me release him."

"When he is released he will take your life," she solemnly said.

"I do not fear him. I shall know how to protect myself," he disdainfully replied.

How Helen had sustained herself during this interview she knew not: strength, born of her despair, seemed to have been given her; but now her short-lived spirit deserted her. She felt as if abandoned by all the world to the mercy of him who had no such attribute in his character; and as all the anguish of her position forced itself upon her, she felt as if life were receding from her frame. With a sudden effort she arose, threw herself at the feet of her uncle, and raising her imploring eyes to his face, said—

"You—you are not marble, my good uncle. You will rescue me from this horrible fate. I am not the wife of that man; every thrilling nerve in my frame denies the odious claim. Save me from him, if you would not see me die at your feet."

Mr. Wilmot stooped forward to raise her, and she saw that his tears were falling fast.

"May God help you, my poor Helen," he said, "for I am afraid it is not in my power to do so."

"Oh say not so, best, dearest uncle! They will listen to your remonstrances. Oh Heaven! to think that those who should have protected me from such unutterable wretchedness, should thrust it on me! should make me a victim to their love of money! Am I not sold to yonder wretch, who would make my love for another the means of forcing me to acknowledge the infamous tie which was forged this night?"

Hilton made a menacing gesture toward her, for anger was fast overpowering his self-control; but Mrs. Wilmot interposed between him and

the unhappy dupe of their wicked heartlessness.

"Leave me to manage her," she said, in a low tone. "I have not so long held her under my control to have my authority defied now. Rise, Helen," she imperatively continued. "Your uncle can not help you, as you well know. I lent myself to this deception for your own good, and it is quite useless for you to act in this frantic manner. You can not now evade the destiny I have awarded you. After risking so much, do you think we would permit you a chance of escape? Speak, then, of Mr. Hilton with the respect due to the position he holds toward you."

"Uncle—uncle, you will not suffer it? You surely can protect me, and restore me to liberty? Disown me—leave me to toil for my daily bread—but give me not to him!"

Exhausted by the violence of her emotions, she sunk on the floor in violent convulsions. At a motion from Mrs. Wilmot, Hilton endeavored to raise her in his arms to place her on a sofa which stood near; but she uttered such violent shrieks at his approach that he was compelled to retire, and leave her to the care of her mother and aunt.

So violent and long-continued was the attack that they had serious fears as to the result: but by a powerful anodyne it was at length mastered, and Helen lay white and motionless in that death-like stillness produced by utter exhaustion. Her mother sat beside her; and after gazing long upon her pallid features, she ventured to say—

"I believe it will kill her, if we persist in our purpose, sister."

"Nonsense—the worst is over," replied Mrs. Wilmot, with that harshness of manner which never forsook her, even under circumstances which to others were heart-rending. "Helen will soon submit to our will: she is not formed of the stuff for long-continued resistance. I understand her better than you, and much as she deprecates the idea of acknowledging Mr. Hilton for her husband, she will yet do so. The uncertain fate of her lover will powerfully advocate his cause: to purchase freedom for him she will be capable of sacrificing herself."

"Is he, then, really imprisoned? I considered that as a mere assertion made to bend her to his will."

"It is certain that this Clinton is in the power of a desperate character, who undertakes to keep him out of the way long enough for our purpose. When Helen writes to him such a letter as I shall see fit to dictate, Clinton will be at liberty to go where he pleases, but not before."

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Mrs. Somers sighed, for she felt some pity for the unhappy girl.

"But should she refuse, what then? It was a terrible discovery for her to make that Hilton had personated her lover. I did not think of it until I saw her white face looking so awfully on me."

"It was no more than she deserved for her duplicity. She would have made us the theme of all the gossips in the country, by running off in so disgraceful a manner. I consider it fortunate for her, and all connected with her, that we were able to put a stop to her scandalous proceedings, and force her into the marriage she has permitted me to go to such expense in preparing for. I do not think that Mr. Hilton has deceived her worse than she would have deceived him."

"It is better to be jilted by one you prefer, than to be united by fraud to one you dislike," asserted Mrs. Somers, vaguely.

"Sister," said Mrs. Wilmot, with severe emphasis, "do you intend to sustain this rebellious girl in the course she would take, if she dared brave me? If so, I disown you both. You may live in deeper poverty than you have yet known, for I will withdraw all assistance from you."

The weak woman hastened to deprecate her anger.

"I had no such thought, indeed. I have lent myself willingly to your plans, and really have no intention of thwarting them. I am sorry for Helen, for she suffers much; but, as you say, she will soon become reconciled to what is inevitable. Mr. Hilton will be kind to her, I trust."

"That I am sure he will be, in his way. He will lavish on her all the luxury of wealth, for he is not parsimonious; but he will demand implicit obedience of her. She will find none of that tender devotion she now fancies can alone render domestic life tolerable; but she will learn to do without that, as thousands of women do. Life is no love dream, as you well know, and the sooner Helen awakens from her romantic illusions, and looks on existence as it actually is, the better for her future happiness. I have secured her a brilliant position in society, and she would be unreasonable to demand every thing from destiny."

Poor Helen! she had only asked for that freedom of choice in a matter of vital importance to her own happiness, which is the inalienable right of every human being; but such was not permitted to her; and now, calculating on her submissive temper, the three who had committed this great wrong, looked forward with certainty to fixing her in that lot which had been awarded her by the most nefarious human agency.

CHAPTER XIX.

FLORA awoke with a slight feeling of languor, but in other respects quite as well as she had been on the previous day. She had slept heavily, and it was late before she aroused herself from the influence of the drowsy god. Her father had looked in several times during the morning; and Dr. Ledru had also examined her features and pulse very critically while she still slumbered.

His report to Lenox was cheering, though he urged upon him the necessity of finding Linda Munroe as soon as possible, and the young man spent the day in unavailing search for the evil genius of his life. The most intelligent of the police force were employed to ferret out her place of concealment, and neither trouble nor expense were spared in the efforts to trace her.

When Flora unclosed her eyes she found Bessie sitting beside her bed in tears, and, from the appearance of her eyes, she had evidently been weeping violently. Imagining they were shed for herself, she put out her hand, and clasping that of the distressed girl, softly said—

"I am in no imminent danger, dearest Bessie. I feel quite restored this morning; so well, indeed, that I shall rise immediately."

"Oh, Flora, 'tis not for that I weep. Our trip has turned out so disastrously that I wish to heaven it had never been undertaken."

Flora started up, and looked earnestly at her.

"Has any thing happened besides my illness? Did not Helen get off safely? Oh, I see; you are frightened at the anger of Mrs. Wilmot when she discovered her flight. It was unlucky that I was not by to save you from the first outpouring of her wrath. I can well imagine what it was."

"If that were all, I could bear it very philosophically, but Mrs. Wilmot has completely outwitted us."

"How? Oh, Helen, after all my efforts, are you still in the power of that callous woman? Tell me quick—quick, Bessie—I can not bear this suspense. Was not Helen married last night?"

"Yes; but to Mr. Hilton."

Flora sunk back, completely overwhelmed. After a pause she feebly said—

"I understand now the half sneering defiance of his manner, so often shown toward me of late. Poor Helen! she will not surely suffer this fraudulent tie to bind her to him. Go on, Bessie; let me hear how this terrible dénouement was accomplished!"

"Here is a letter from Mrs. Wilmot, addressed

to both of us, which gave me the first intimation that all had not gone right. I accompanied Helen to the levée, and supposed the blue Domino, in whose care I left her, to be Mr. Clinton."

Flora eagerly grasped the letter, which ran as follows:

"Young Ladies,—I dare say you have considered yourselves as very superior plotters, and quite justifiable in aiding a rebellious girl to evade the lawful authority vested in her nearest relations. But Providence, which so often baffles the schemes of the wrong-doer, fortunately afforded me the means of discovering and counterminating your romantic plot."

"Know, Miss Forrester, that your arrangement to correspond with Helen, and make a certain spot in my grounds a depository for your letters, was discovered by Mr. Hilton, and used to his own advantage. We have been aware of all your movements since Mr. Clinton has been in the Southwest, and have taken our measures accordingly. He has been under the constant surveillance of an agent employed by Mr. Hilton, and it has not been found impossible to circumvent all your arrangements, as you will learn when I tell you that Helen is now the wife of him who has so long been permitted to regard himself as her future husband. I considered it quite justifiable in her betrothed to gain her by personating an individual who should never even have been known to her. In the firm conviction that I have secured to my niece a brighter lot than could have been hers with the object of her silly prepossession, I have sanctioned this deception; but by what means success was secured I shall not explain."

"Let it suffice, that Helen is forever separated from her audacious lover, and in spite of herself, given to one whose claims I shall sustain with all the weight of my authority, joined with that of her mother."

"I have not scrupled to leave you under the circumstances. I have long desired to visit Cuba, and avail myself of this opportunity to do so. Helen's bridal trip will be made to that land hallowed by containing the ashes of the great Columbus, and in its tropic beauty she will soon learn to reconcile herself to the change in her destiny. When you behold her again it will be as Mrs. Hilton. Hoping you will soon recover from the chagrin inspired by your defeated plot, I remain as much your friend as ever; for she who conquers can afford to be generous."

"S. WILMOT."

Flora dropped the letter, and large tears rolled over her cheeks. She slowly said—

"Poor—poor Helen! Yes, you will bend to them: you have not strength to resist persecution long; and this they well know. They will frighten you with the scandal of having this horrid *contre temps* known to the world: they will make you a victim to appearances."

"It is dreadful to think so," said Bessie, mournfully. "And I stood by and saw her really married to that odious creature, and congratulated her on having secured her happiness. Where can Mr. Clinton be?"

"Heaven knows! Put out of the way by Hilton for the time being; or perhaps—Really I can not lie here; I am in a perfect fever of impatience to be doing something to discover him. Assist me to make my toilet, dearest Bessie, for we have now no waiting-maid. Where is my father?"

"He has already inquired after you several times this morning. He went out with Dr. Ledru and Mr. Lenox a short time since: they are endeavoring to obtain a clew to Lisette's place of concealment."

Flora's face grew even more serious.

"If none of us could hear of that woman again, I should be glad. The last distinct recollection I have before falling last night, is the glitter of her eyes. I have often fancied that she does not like me, but that ferocious gleam laid bare the workings of her heart. Her ruling passion is, I am convinced, deadly hatred of myself, though why it should be so I know not."

By the time Flora had made her toilet and breakfasted, her father came in. She heard his door open, and immediately followed him into his apartment. Mr. Forrester had thrown himself wearily on a seat, and was indulging in sorrowful reverie, of which his daughter was the subject, when she stood before him, looking as brightly beautiful as ever; for the excitement of the recent discovery had lent a brilliant glow to her cheek, and a vivid clearness to her eyes, which took from her all appearance of recent indisposition.

"Flora, my darling—my restored treasure," he said, as he arose, and folded her to his breast.

"The God of all mercies has preserved you from imminent peril. Lately, when I knew your heart had wandered from its paternal rest, and was clinging to the stranger, I felt as one bereft of the most priceless portion of his earthly treasure. But I reflected that it was not just to claim you all to myself—you could diffuse happiness amidst a wider circle than the one you now bless, and I submitted, though not without a struggle. Last night God made me feel how trifling was such grief in the great calamity that threatened me, when I beheld you stricken as with sudden death. Oh, Flora, my darling child—hope of my age, never before did I know how unutterably dear you are to me. Let us return thanks to Him who has so mercifully dealt with us."

Flora knelt with him, and her deep heart responded to the brief but earnest thanksgiving

which arose from his inmost soul to the throne of the Most High. Both were silent some moments after they arose, and the young girl sat with her hand clasped in that of her father, gazing upon his venerable features with an expression of tender reverence which was extremely touching.

Over her bright face a shadow had fallen, for again that vague fear of early death came to her mind. The medicine on which her recent reliance had been placed had failed to avert the dreaded attack, and ignorant of what had really caused it, her first conviction that her heart was diseased returned with greater force than ever. Mr. Forrester did not wish to enlighten her, and Dr. Ledru also considered it best that she should remain in ignorance of the foe she had to contend with, lest the powerful aid of imagination should be enlisted in favor of its insidious effects.

She at length said—"Dear father, I come as a petitioner to you."

"Any thing I can grant is at your service, my darling."

"You are already aware of the terrible turn the affairs of Helen have taken. Will you make some efforts to discover where Mr. Clinton is detained? for I am certain he has been unlawfully seized and imprisoned."

"Philip Maitland is already in pursuit of him. Since the discovery was made, he has been seeking a gambler and desperado about town, who has been seen with Hilton several times lately. If they can trace Simmons to his haunts, there is little doubt that a bribe will induce him to betray his knowledge of where Clinton now is."

"God grant that he may soon be released; yet I dread the sight of his despair. Oh! father, Mrs. Wilmot has acted in the most unjustifiable manner. How can Helen ever pardon the wrong they have so deliberately inflicted on her? Mother, aunt, lover, all leagued against her happiness."

"Helen is different from you, my love; her temper is a much more placable one, and it is possible she may yet forgive them, and make the best of the fate she can not avoid. In the mean time, my darling, do not permit your sympathy to be too keenly aroused. Remember the state of your health, and for my sake, endeavor to take care of yourself. For the present, I have decided on remaining in New Orleans, that you may be near Dr. Ledru. Philip returns home to-morrow, and I will write to Bessie's parents, requesting them to permit her to remain with you as long as you stay."

"Thank you, dear father; I also will write to Mrs. Graham."

"Before we leave," continued her father, "I hope to trace this ungrateful woman who has acted so badly."

"Dear father, pray let her take her own course. She would only have been nominally a slave had she remained on the terms proposed. Why then should you take any trouble to recover her? In getting rid of Lisette, I feel as if a burden has been lifted from my heart."

"She shall not again cross your path, my

daughter; but I have reasons for wishing to regain the control of her fate, which you shall know in good time."

"I will endeavor to restrain my woman's curiosity until the revelation can be made," she said, with a smile. "But what is this, father?"

A small ebony casket lay upon the table, and after examining it, Flora continued—

"I do not think I have ever seen this before."

"No, my daughter; until to-day, I have kept it from your sight," he replied, with a degree of emotion that surprised her. "You know that I am no contemptible artist; and this little case contains faint images of some of the brightest, and also of the most painful reminiscences of my life. I do not often gaze upon them, for whitened as are my locks, and palsied with age as are my limbs, the power to feel, to remember, is not dimmed; and mine is a history of self-reproach, my child."

"What! you, the good, the considerate, the benevolent; you suffer self-reproach, dear father! Alas! who, then, shall escape it?" said Flora, tenderly.

"Ah! my daughter, the parent you have known has been purified through suffering; and last night it seemed to me that the expiation is not yet completed. The child I cast from my arms when her feeble infancy most needed my care and tenderness, I have seen apparently lifeless before me when she has become every thing to me."

Flora regarded him with astonishment, for as far back as her memory extended, she had no recollection that was not linked with the devotion of her father.

"I do not understand you, father. To me you have ever been the kindest of parents."

He sighed deeply, and after a pause said—

"I have always intended to relate to you the humiliating history of my early life, Flora, and now it seems demanded of me as an expiation."

"If it will give you pain, leave me still in ignorance of that which there is no necessity for my knowing. It is sufficient, beloved father, that you have been the best and kindest of parents to me since I have been old enough to appreciate your tenderness."

He embraced her, and then motioning to her to examine the contents of the casket, he said—

"The pictures will reveal something; the rest I will explain. Since I have alluded to the past, it will be best to make the revelation now. It will at least divert your mind from dwelling too intensely on the untoward fate of poor Helen."

Flora no longer hesitated; she unclosed the lid, and beheld a picture of a young girl in the dress of a *religieuse*, and the large, dark eyes, half-veiled by the drooping lid, with its sweeping fringe of jet; the beautifully curved mouth, so sweet in its expression, told Flora that this was the miniature resemblance of that mother whose portrait hung beneath the curtain in her father's library.

After gazing long and tenderly upon it, she pressed it to her lips, and, laying it aside, lifted

the second. An Italian sky was bending over a scene of desolate beauty; a lonely column stood as a sentinel over its companions, which lay in the dust. A broken arch, that seemed held together by the clinging tendrils of a forest vine, offered its shelter to two who were evidently lovers. The same form, enveloped in its sable drapery, sat beside a man in the maturity and strength of manhood; yet he bent toward her with the loving gaze of early youth, and it was not difficult to fancy a depth and earnestness in that passion, which the evanescent dreams of opening life are incapable of inspiring. That she listened to the outpouring of his love with sweet emotion, was evident from the soft glow upon the cheek, and the half smile that dwelt upon her rosy lips.

The third, represented a form bowed beside a cradle in which an infant reposed, and the disheveled tresses, the utter prostration of soul which could be read in the drooping figure, spoke eloquently of the tempest of feeling which warred within her breast.

The fourth portrayed the closing scene. At rest was the struggling spirit: she reposed within the white folds of her shroud, the marble face fixed in rigid immobility; the black hair, faded and lustreless, lay in long, lifeless folds nearly to her feet, amidst which flowers had been wreathed, as if in mockery of solemn, cold, remorseless death. She lay alone; no mourner bent in silent woe above the lifeless clay; no passionate wail of despair arose to heaven beside the once fondly-wooded being, whose soul had winged its way to the abode of angels while youth and beauty were yet hers.

Flora gazed in bewildered silence upon those mute revelations of the long-buried past. She waited for her father to furnish the clew to them, for she dared not, even in imagination, put the interpretation upon them they seemed to demand. She placed them side by side, and her eyes wandered toward the venerable form of her father, and silently compared it with that nobly-developed one in the picture of the lover. He seemed to read what was passing in her mind, for he sadly said—

"My outward form is much changed from what it was in those days, Flora, though even then I had passed the meridian of manhood; but my inner life has gained more in proportion than the frail casket has lost."

"Listen to me, my child, and I will give you as brief a history as possible of my former life. You know that I inherited wealth, and my guardian took care that I should have an accomplished education. I graduated at the institution of learning founded in my native State by one of our greatest statesmen. Perfect freedom in regard to religious opinions was, by its charter, guaranteed to the students. I had received no instruction in that most important branch of education, for my parents died while I was yet too young to comprehend the sublime mystery of Christianity."

"I entered the halls of the college indifferent to all such matters: I left them a decided Deist."

I traveled in France two years; read the most popular French authors of that day, and made a step further in my progress toward stripping poor human nature of its last refuge amidst the calamities and unsatisfying struggles of life: I became an Atheist."

"I shudder now when I recall the years of existence which were passed in reckless enjoyment of the present hour, for I fully acted up to the precept, 'eat, drink, and be merry, for to-morrow thou diest.' Youth, health, and fortune, were mine, and the career I pursued I will not describe. It was that of a heartless, sculless man of the world, who deems himself free from accountability to any higher tribunal."

"Years glided by, and I began to feel this search after pleasure pall upon me. I had reached that age when reflection will come, when the youthful fervor of the blood has begun to cool, and what once delighted is beginning to become 'flat, stale, and unprofitable.'"

"I looked around for some new source of enjoyment, and for the first time a serious thought of seeking happiness in domestic life occurred to me. I had not thus far escaped the passion of love entirely. I had been strongly attracted by several beautiful women, at different times during my career; but there was always something to disenchant, and, among my few intimate friends, I had gradually acquired the epithet of 'the fastidious.'"

"When the desire to marry seized me, I looked around the circle of my female acquaintances. Many among them, I doubted not, would accept the still handsome Forrester, with a competent fortune to offer with his hand; but I had still one lingering touch of romance in my nature. I wished to be loved for myself; and these fine ladies were too deeply imbued with the spirit of worldliness to suit my taste."

"About this time a dear friend was preparing to embark for Italy, to pursue the study of painting. He insisted that I should accompany him; and, as I had nothing better to do, I consented. We at length reached Rome, which I had visited years before, when life was young and joyous, and a vague feeling of melancholy oppressed me, as I wandered through the ancient city, and contrasted my present self with what I was when I last trod its hallowed precincts."

"Amidst those time-honored ruins I encountered the only woman I have ever truly loved. It is needless now to relate the circumstances of our first meeting: I was enabled to perform a trifling service for a young Sister of Charity, whose beauty, in spite of her disfiguring garb, made a deep impression upon me. She was nursing an invalid, who lodged in an old building near the place of our first meeting, and in the twilight of evening she was in the habit of walking among the ruins. Here we often met, and I learned from her that she was the orphan daughter of Irish parents, who had both died a few months before, leaving her in a foreign land, and unprotected. They were rigid Catholics, and enjoined Theresa to enroll herself among the Sisters of Charity, and

perform the duties of one, until an opportunity offered to return to her native land."

"With the assistance of the priest who had attended upon her parents during their last hours, this was easily done, and Theresa O'Donnell now only awaited the return of an Irish family, which would leave Rome in two months, to be restored by them to the protection of her relatives."

"The second picture in that series will show you that I soon loved her with a fervor of which I had not believed my heart susceptible. She was lovely, dependent, and desolate, and spite of the difference in years, her heart responded to the impassioned breathings of love which I poured in her ears. She did not return with the family of Mr. Desmond, for before their departure she became my wife."

"She was beautiful, refined, and cultivated; and I pleased myself with surrounding the child of simplicity and truth with all the luxury which wealth and taste could lavish on her. She lived the queen of a fairy realm of beauty and elegance, of which she was the fitting deity. With no higher or holier worship, I made this being of earth my idol. In my eyes she had but one fault: she was superstitiously, fanatically religious. She was, of course, a Catholic, and had been reared in the belief that the heretic may not enter the kingdom of Heaven; think then, what would be her horror, should she discover that he she loved sincerely denied even the existence of that Holy One she bowed before in deep humility and reverence?"

"In uniting myself with her, I practiced a deception which was to bear bitter fruit. I suffered her to believe me a member of the church to which she belonged, and as it was a matter of indifference to me who pronounced the nuptial benediction, we were united by a Romish priest. Months of happiness glided by, before a doubt of my sincerity arose in her mind; she at length remarked my constant neglect of the services of the church, and she timidly spoke of it to me. I made some plausible excuse, for she was so pure, so lovely in my eyes, that I could not bear to lower myself in her estimation by revealing my true self to her."

"At length, my Flora, you were given to us—a pure blossom from the tree of humanity, which we were to rear for future usefulness; a bright jewel, which my Theresa believed would glitter in the diadem of eternity, but for whom I only asked a brilliant earthly lot."

"We still lingered in Italy, that land so full of interesting associations and glowing sunshine. I was too happy to desire a change, and as the greater portion of Theresa's life had been passed there, she, of course, felt more at home in that lovely clime than elsewhere. The birth of our child we considered the seal to the great happiness we enjoyed. Alas! that innocent little being was to become the cause of all our after sorrow."

"The ceremony of baptism, like all of her faith, Theresa thought should be performed as soon as possible. She spoke to me of its necessity—I

listened coldly, for I had an invincible objection to taking part in it. I knew not why, but I recoiled from the thought of standing in the temple of God, with my sinless child in my arms, to take part in what seemed to me a mere mummery.

"Theresa pressed the subject on me until it became wearisome and irritating. I know not what madness prompted the revelation, but I believed that she was now too firmly attached to me to recoil from me, even if I stood before her such as I really was. I at length refused to permit the sacred water of baptism to flow upon the brow of my child, and told her I considered it a mere form. Never shall I forget the wild look of incredulity that flashed over her features, gradually darkening into the deep shadow of despair as the conviction came to her that now only had she truly known me.

"And all this time a wide gulf, which hope may not span, has lain between us," she said, in that low, concentrated voice, which evinces emotion too deep for tears. "I, who have laid bare my soul before you without reserve, have never before been permitted to have a glimpse within yours. I am a Christian woman; what community can henceforth exist between us?"

"The sweetest and most rational, my lovely wife," I replied, "for it is that of pure and undefiled love."

"She shuddered.

"No human love is undefiled: that is the attribute of divine love alone. Oh, my husband, seek it, find it, or I am lost to you forever!"

"She rushed from the room, and I remained in a most uncomfortable state of mind. I concluded to leave her to reflect in solitude on what had passed, believing that her strong affection for me would induce her to palliate what was evidently a crime in her eyes. I wandered forth—it was a most lovely day, so calm, so peaceful, that the serenity of nature seemed to rebuke the restlessness of my own soul.

"The expression of pale despair, convulsing those features which had so lately beamed with quiet happiness, haunted me. A voice whispered—'Examine the subject once again—you have read that alone which argued against this momentous question. Study those writers who advocate the cause of Christianity, and having weighed both sides, judge between them. Surely this which concerns the immortality of the soul is worthy of attention. Consider the humblest flower beneath your feet, how wonderful its structure, how nicely adapted to its position, and learn to 'look from nature up to nature's God.'

"I felt humbled at the reflection that I had hitherto been contented with the opinions I held, without seeking to know what could be said to refute them. That this should no longer be so, I was resolved. I arose; went slowly back to my home, determined to tell my Theresa that I was open to conviction—I would listen to her arguments, and commence with her the study of the Bible, for the holy volume had hitherto been almost a sealed book to me.

"Had I found her alone, all would doubtless

have gone well; but, unhappily, in my absence the priest who acted as her confessor called. Father Osborne was a man for whom I had conceived a strong antipathy; but he was the countryman of Theresa, had been kind to her when she was left alone on the decease of her parents, and I forebore to disturb the relations they held toward each other. He was literally a 'fat, oily man of God,' for his devotion to the pleasures of the table rendered his appearance repulsive to one who had made himself a slave to his eye, and cultivated a fastidiousness of taste which usurped the place of nobler qualities.

"In the state of mind I then was in, I could not bear that this man should come between me and the wife I adored: it seemed sacrilege to all I held sacred, that to him should be confided the cause of our disagreement; and I felt that conviction which is innate, I believe, in every human being who has reached maturity untrammelled by the dogmas of that church which claims to be infallible—that the soul needs no interpreter between itself and heaven; least of all, when that interpreter presents himself in the shape of a man partaking our own fallen nature, and bearing upon his person unmistakable evidences of being 'of the earth most earthly.'

"The interview between the priest and Theresa lasted so long that my impatient spirit was irritated almost beyond endurance. I at length knocked upon her door, for I had heard sobs distinctly several times, and I could no longer bear the wretched state I was in.

"After a brief pause the door opened, and the purple face of Father Osborne appeared before me. I was about to pass him, when he put forth his hand and attempted to stay me, while he said—

"Sin can not enter in where dwelleth purity. Unholy scoffer at the most sacred truths, leave the daughter of the church in peace, and profane not the sanctuary which should be sacred to her."

"Arrogant fool! how darest thou attempt to sow dissension between those whom you yourself asserted God had joined together?" I exclaimed, as I hurled him aside with such violence that his head came in contact with the door-frame, and he fell bleeding at my feet.

"Theresa had been kneeling before a crucifix in tearful prayer; she shrieked—started up, and rushing toward the priest, raised his head, and with her handkerchief endeavored to stop the flow of blood from his temple."

"Was this also needed?" she reproachfully asked. "Is not unbelief a sufficient insult toward God, that you must add to it the sacrilege of a blow to his accredited servant?"

"That mass, bloated with over-feeding and wine, a chosen vessel of grace!" I scoffingly said, as I spurned the prostrate form with my foot in an ecstasy of rage. "If there be truth in your faith, think you the infinitely pure and holy being you profess to worship would deign to send the inspiration of his spirit to this creature?"

"God seeth not as man seeth," she murmured.

"At that moment the priest recovered from the stunning effects of the blow. He raised his head and endeavored to look solemn, but he only looked scared. He said—

"Judge not lest ye be judged, is the scriptural command. Man of violence, little did I dream that in giving this tender flower to thee I was bestowing her upon a wolf in sheep's clothing. Ye were not wedded in the spirit, and therefore the church pronounces the union null and void."

"A faint wail escaped Theresa, and she tottered to her feet, white as a snow-drift. I offered her the support of my arm, as I said—

"Let not such idle words alarm you, my precious one. We will cling to each other in defiance of their threats, for the church itself cemented the bond between us."

"To my rage and astonishment the being I had been wont to see cling to me with such fondness, now shrank away as if pollution were in my touch, and a mortal paleness overspread her features. Unable to sustain herself, she sunk on a seat, and raised her hands as if to shut out the angry gleaming of my eyes, as she said—

"Do not—do not look at me thus! I can not bear it, for my heart is already broken by the knowledge that we must part."

"Part! Who dares speak of such a thing? I furiously demanded. 'Is not your first duty to me? Have you not promised to be forever mine?'

"My first duty is to Him whose laws you repudiate," she meekly replied. "I belonged to him before I knew that you existed. Come with me to the throne of grace, and I am yours; refuse, and—"

"Her voice sunk into an inarticulate murmur, and the priest, who by this time had quite recovered, took up her words:

"Refuse, son of wrath, and the tie which unites you to this woman is as though it had never existed."

"Know," I retorted, "that the tie you speak so lightly of is indestructible as the eternity of which you preach; for it is founded in nature and truth, and the fiat of such as you can never loosen it."

"He sneered—"You will soon see which is right. Daughter, I have pointed out your duty to you; swerve not from it, at the peril of your precious soul."

"Out of my house, canting, miserable dreg of humanity!" I exclaimed, transported beyond all endurance, "and should you ever attempt to enter it again, you will meet with the punishment due to him who dares to interfere between husband and wife."

"I go, man of unrighteousness, at your bidding. Daughter, give me a sign before I leave that the spirit is strong to battle for the right, even if the flesh be weak."

"As he slowly retreated, gazing earnestly upon Theresa, she raised her white hand and made

the sign of the cross upon her brow, which seemed already to wear the impress of death upon its marble purity.

"I will not dwell upon all that followed, my child, for it harrows my soul yet to recall the scenes which then took place. Strong in her devotion to her faith, Theresa would not yield to my reiterated assertion that the bond which united us was sacred as ever. Offended at what I considered her obstinacy, I would not reveal to her my resolution to seek for the truth, that the happiness of our home might be restored to us.

"Thus several weeks dragged slowly away. Theresa always delicate, began to wear the ethereal appearance of one who had laid aside the grosser cares of mortality, and was about to wing her way to the abode of angels. It then occurred to me that change of scene would be beneficial to her health, both of body and mind. It would also remove her from the immediate influence of the Romish clergy; for I could not resolve to play the tyrant so far as to refuse them admittance as usual to my house, with the exception of Father Osborne, who made no further attempt to visit her. I hoped she would then be wrought on to take a more rational view of the duties to which she was pledged.

"I announced my intentions to her, and they were received with apparent submission; but on the morning of our intended departure, she availed herself of my absence from home for a few hours to escape from my protection, carrying her child with her. A few lines she left behind her informed me that, much as she loved me, she dared not live in open violation of what she considered right. It would be useless to reclaim her, as she had placed herself under the protection of one so high in rank in the church, which is all-powerful in that country, that she could not be forced to return to me.

"The shock this letter gave me, combined with the previous irritation of my mind, threw me into a violent fever, from which I was many weeks recovering. When I was once more able to go forth, and institute inquiries, all clew to the wife and child I so fondly loved was lost. Vain were all my researches: if the grave had already closed over them, they could not have more completely evaded me.

"Weak, wretched, and desolate, as a resource against the consuming anguish of my spirit, I took up the study of that subject I had heretofore so criminally neglected. Light soon began to dawn on me—light, which gradually became bright and glorious day. Truth penetrated the armor of skepticism I had so long opposed to it: unworthy as I was, the Comforter came to my bosom, and I bowed in heartfelt prayer before the Redeemer of the world.

"Then I asked the restoration of those I had lost. Never did more fervent aspirations arise to heaven than I poured forth to behold once again the idol of my heart. The prayer was granted—but not until the dread angel had indeed severed us, was I permitted to behold her as the fourth picture represents her, lying on the couch of death.

"Late one evening I was summoned to a nursery belonging to one of the strictest orders of the Romish church, and on entering the cell into which I was ushered, there lay before me all that remained of her who had made one little year of my life a dream of happiness, beside which every other memory seemed pale and worthless. I learned from those passionless women, that she faded from the hour we parted, and pined for her home; but the spirit of fanaticism ruled her, gentle as she was, and she died a martyr to the exactions of that faith which was never yet known to give up its victim.

"You, my child, I claimed, and with some difficulty regained, but I could not bear to have you near me. You brought back too forcibly the memory of all I had loved and lost. I returned with you to my native land, and placed you with those who attended carefully to your wants; but for years I held myself aloof from you. You were four years old before I again visited you, though I heard constantly of your welfare. I then considered it necessary to remove you to a sphere more suited to your future prospects than the family of your nurse, and I went myself to bring you to the new home I had provided for you.

"I had no idea of placing you beneath the same roof with myself; but your infantine beauty—the many blandishments of an endearing child, won so much upon me during my journey, that at its close I could not bear to part from you. I had removed from my native State and purchased the plantation on which we now reside. Thither I

bore you, my precious one, and together we have lived from that hour. I trust God will pardon my early errors, and spare my darling child to close my aged eyes when my spirit shall be summoned to his presence."

"Doubt not that it shall be so, beloved father," said Flora, with deep emotion. "The merciful All Father has seen and accepted your repentance for that unbelief, which even in this world has met its punishment. He delighteth not in suffering, therefore will the one lamb of your pasture be spared to you."

"You are a sweet comforter, my daughter, and I would fain believe you. These pictures have been the work of my solitary hours; they were painted years after the events portrayed had transpired. Calmness and resignation came at length to my deeply-tried soul, and it was a solace to me in my loneliness to reproduce the images of that which had once been. I designed them for you, and from this hour you may claim them as your own."

"Thank you—oh, thank you! They will be inexpressibly precious to me."

"And now, my daughter, the excitement of this relation is as much as you can bear at present. Your cheek is flushed, and your hand tremulous with emotion. Go and take rest, for I see that you need it greatly."

"I obey you. And you too, dear father, may set your heart at rest. I am already better—I shall soon be well. I feel the assurance that it will be so."

CHAPTER XX.

A MONTH passed away, and in defiance of the efforts made to trace them, neither Clinton nor Linda Munroe had been heard of. Philip Maitland had returned home, and letters came from Roseneath, according the desired permission for Bessie to remain with her friend.

Lenox, who comprehended the full danger of her he loved with deeper devotion on account of the evils which threatened her, was in a fever of impatience to discover the unhappy woman in whose power the ultimate fate of Flora seemed to rest. Day after day was spent in what seemed a useless search, but still he could not abandon it; and in the evening he would join the little circle in their drawing-room at the hotel, often worn out and spiritless from the sickening suspense he endured. He watched the varying color of Flora, and listened to the tones of her clear sweet voice with an emotion that often shook his strong soul to its centre. Must that brilliant loveliness, that bright intelligence be marred by demon hate? Must he behold them slowly perishing before him, without the power to tear from the guilty one the secret which might yet save her?

Alas! so it seemed, for no clew yet offered itself to the refuge of the quadroom.

At times he fancied that he could detect a dilatation in the pupils of her large dark eyes—an expression of wildness that was not natural to them, and he involuntarily listened to her words, to see if in them he could detect the incipient indications of that disorder of the mind, of which Dr. Ledru had spoken; but thus far her intellect seemed as clear as ever.

The good physician was also indefatigable in his efforts to discover Linda. With him it was a question of science and skill, and the case of Miss Forrester inspired him with nearly as deep an interest as was felt by her lover himself. He daily visited her, and encouraged her to hope for the entire restoration of her health; but when Lenox would sometimes fancy her better, the doctor invariably replied—

"She is better, but not out of danger. That infernal woman *must* be found."

The destiny of Helen still remained a mystery to them: no letters came to any of the party, and the most tantalizing suspense seemed to be the

lot of all interested in her fate, as well as in that of Flora.

One evening at twilight Lenox entered the study of Dr. Ledru: he threw himself upon a chair with an expression of despondency which told its own tale of disappointment.

"Another day lost, eh, my young friend?" said the physician kindly. "Courage—perhaps to-morrow's success may repay you for all your previous annoyance."

"I do not believe it will," he gloomily replied, "and I have made up my mind to the course I shall pursue."

"What is it, Mr. Lennox?"

"To marry Flora at once, and thus gain the right to watch over her when this awful calamity falls on her; for so far as human sagacity can penetrate, this woman seems as completely lost to us as if she had buried herself in the earth."

"It seems so, indeed. But do you realize what you do! The poison inhaled by Miss Forrester may act so subtly on the brain, as to produce aberration of mind at any moment. I know not—I can not say that such will be the result, but it is my duty to warn you of the worst that may happen."

"You have now conscientiously performed it, doctor, and I must as honorably perform mine. If Flora is rendered happy—if her mind is filled with pleasant images, she will gradually forget the state of her health. She is not aware of the worst danger that threatens her, and you know how powerfully the mind affects the bodily condition. But for the intervention of that wretch, our union would have taken place ere this time. I will now insist on the completion of her promise, and if you do not object, she will not deny my prayer."

"I object! Indeed, I shall do no such thing, noble, generous man! How few would cling to one situated as this unfortunate girl is—menaced with the most terrible—"

"Stop, doctor—I can not bear it! Let me at least dream that she may be spared. There is no generosity in my determination, for should this fatal malady seize her while I had not the right to be near her, to watch over her, I should be unutterably wretched. To make her mine, while she can yet appreciate the joy of knowing herself united for life to him who adores her, is now my first wish. The uncertainty of the future I can then bear; if she must be snatched from me, let it not be at least without a faint realization of the light vision of happiness we once indulged."

"So be it, in God's name," replied Dr. Ledru, fervently.

With his intentions thus sanctioned, Lenox went at once to seek Flora. He found her alone, for Bessie had been persuaded to accompany a party of new friends to the opera, to hear Norma, and Mr. Forrester had gone out to fulfill a business engagement.

As he entered, she looked up with a smile, and said—"I have been looking for you with eagerness, to tell you how much better I am to-day. Last evening you seemed so worn out and depressed that I felt uncomfortable about you after

you left me. I trust you are no longer apprehensive of any danger to my health!"

"Flora," he replied, as he drew a seat beside her, "it is in your power to drive this depression far from me. Can you not guess its origin? Was not this the month originally named for our espousals? To-morrow is its last day, and it will pass without giving you to me."

Flora grew pale as she listened.

"You know that while the shadow of death lingers over me, I dare not think of linking my fate with that of another. You might be left desolate in the first month of our union."

"Believe that the shadow has passed, my love, and it will take its darkness from your spirit," he passionately replied. "I claim your pledge, Flora. I have consulted Dr. Ledru, and he does not consider you in danger of death. Speak, then, the words which will render me happy. Name an early day for our union. Let it be this week, my beloved Flora."

A brilliant glow mantled her cheeks, but her eyes did not seek to avoid the tender glance of her lover. There was a humid softness in them which spoke eloquently to his own, as she murmured—

"Generous man, would you, indeed, take the stricken one to your heart—to sustain her feebleness—to drive away her fears? Alas! do you know that I am no longer the same Flora you wooed? The high spirit seems palsied within me; the bounding hopefulness which once bore me over every difficulty has deserted me, and I feel myself becoming a victim to some incomprehensible nervous disease. I would have deceived you, as I do my father, for I can not bear that you shall suffer unhappiness on my account; but now I dare not; you must know the truth."

Lenox repressed the groan that rose to his lips, and he pressed her hands to his heart in an agony of emotion.

"Flora, I ask this one boon of Fate. Let it give you to me, and I leave the rest to that overruling Providence which, we are assured, works together all things for the good of those that love God and trust to his mercy."

"That I will, I can do," replied Flora, with tremulous sweetness. "I grant your wish, dear George, and in becoming your wife I give to my father a son to console him for the loss of his daughter, should that great and good Being find it best to remove me from those I so truly love."

"Thanks, best—dearest! When shall this great happiness be mine? Speak, my Flora; name the day which I may securely hail as the brightest of my life!"

"I would be married in my early home, amidst those who have loved me from my childhood. In a week we can be quietly established at Bracburn, and in three weeks from to-day I will become yours. As the bright spring approaches, I pine for the freedom of my woodland home. I should have petitioned for a speedy return under any circumstances."

"And now, my own," said Lenox, after uttering his happiness in language of such tender

earnestness as reached her full heart, "I have a confession to make which will surprise you."

He then gave her an outline of the same history he had already related to Dr. Ledru, and, in addition, informed her that he had dropped his last name at the time of his departure from his paternal home; but he took especial pains to prevent her from suspecting the identity of Linda Munroe and the slave who had recently absconded. He finished by saying—

"This revelation was necessary, Flora, before I could wed with any one; but I have no intention of resuming the name of Wallace. Lenox was originally the name of my family, and my father exchanged it for that of a distant relative on coming into possession of an estate he inherited on those terms. I have only retained the patronymic of my forefathers, and I shall henceforth be known to all men by that alone."

"And your father—does he still live?" she softly asked. "It is a tender tie to be so utterly sundered."

"He lives, and will, I trust, at some future day, welcome back his son. My elder brother continues with him; he is married, has a young family growing up around him, and in their endearments the old man forgets the outcast from his roof."

"Oh no!—believe not that he has forgotten. In secret the father's heart yearns for the child he so unjustly cast off; but the obstinacy of age may prevent him from acknowledging it. Make one more effort to gain his forgiveness, and see what will be the result."

"I will, sweet counselor of right. I will write to my brother, inform him of my success in life, and renounce all claims on the paternal inheritance, for I need it not. I will describe the bride I have won for myself, in place of the one they would have forced on my acceptance."

"The reply will be all you can wish, I am certain."

At that instant a knock sounded on the door. Lenox arose and opened it, and a gentleman wrapped in a dark overcoat, with his hat pulled over his brows, asked, in a hoarse tone, "if he could see Miss Forrester?"

Flora arose and invited him to enter: he lifted his hat, and she uttered a cry as she beheld the features of Clinton; but so changed, so ghastly, that the most careless observer must have seen the traces of such despairing anguish as makes the heart shrink within itself even to imagine.

Lenox recognized him also, and feeling that the interview he had sought must be sufficiently painful without the presence of one comparatively a stranger, he passed from the room and closed the door.

Clinton approached Flora, took both her hands within his own, and pressed them to his lips and heart in voiceless emotion. After a pause, she softly said—

"We have caused you to be sought for, Mr. Clinton. Where have you been spirited to? for I know at such a crisis you would not have absented yourself except through force."

"You are right, Miss Forrester," he replied, with that effort to be composed which only betrays the most terrific struggle with anguish. "This night, I believe, I am the most miserable wretch upon this wide globe, and that is saying much, when we think of all the varieties of wretchedness to which life is heir. Yet no; there is one even more unhappy than I: she who has proved herself unequal to the trust reposed in her."

"How! what do you mean? Have you, then, heard from Helen?"

"I have; and she has herself consented to place a barrier between us that may not be removed. Had she been true, I would have torn her from their grasp, even if violence had been necessary to accomplish it; but—"

His voice sunk to a feeble whisper, and Flora was compelled to bend her head to catch the meaning of his rapidly uttered words.

"Helen has weakly renounced the hope of happiness, and become the slave of that wretch; for nothing better can one so basely gained be considered."

As he spoke, he drew from his pocket a letter bearing the Havana post-mark, and placed it in her hands.

"That, I can easily believe, was dictated to her, and she wrote what they wished; but there is one inclosed for you, which she probably found means to write without their knowledge. Read it, I beg, and before I leave let me know what she says for herself."

Flora first glanced over the few lines addressed to Clinton. The writing bore few traces of the agitation one might expect to find evinced in a farewell penned under such painful circumstances. Ah! could they have known what force the unhappy Helen had put on herself to steel her nerves to the accomplishment of the task required of her!

Her note contained the following words:

"We are parted forever. Another stood beside me at the altar when I thought you were my wedded bridegroom. Had Heaven smiled on our union, this deception could not have succeeded. I bow to its decree. I dare not again place my own rebellious wishes against the visible will of a higher power. All I now ask is that we may never meet again; and as you have loved me, I charge you seek not to sever by violence the bond which unites me to Charles Hilton."

HELEN."

He pointed to the signature with a ghastly attempt to smile.

"You see she had the forbearance not to sign that man's name in connection with her own. Considerate, wasn't it, Miss Forrester? Read, read! let me see if in yours there is one evidence that this renunciation was made with such suffering as I have felt for her."

Flora unclosed a sheet blotted with tears, and written in so faltering a hand that it was with difficulty she deciphered its meaning.

"Flora, I am not mad, but I could be guilty

of the impiety of wishing that I were so, if madness would enable me to forget this gnawing pain that racks both heart and brain, yet never grows dull by endurance.

"Ah! it sometimes requires great courage to live—to bear the burden of breath, with the nothingness it brings with it. It is horrible to look out on God's sunshine, and feel the heart a heavy mass of hopelessness, from which light and joy are forever excluded; yet such is henceforth my fate. Pity me, my dear friend: let not your gentle heart too severely blame me, when I tell you that I was too weak to contend successfully against those who hold me in their bonds of iron."

"Think—there was my unyielding aunt, my mother, to argue, threaten, and implore, until sunk in the apathy of despair, reckless of the future, knowing myself severed from the one I love, I suffered them to place my cold hand in that of him who claimed it so unfairly, and mechanically uttered the words of forgiveness they dictated to me."

"They then required me to write the letter in which I must find means to inclose this. Until it is received, they assure me that my—oh no! no longer mine, wretch that I am!—that Clinton will be held in durance. I have purchased his freedom by resigning my own. Speak to him, Flora. Calm his anguish. It shakes my soul to think of what his sufferings will be, when he knows that I myself have resigned all hopes of future happiness with him. He loves me, and I—yet no, no—I dare not look into my shrinking heart, so torn with the conflict between duty and affection. Let him think me unworthy of his regard: let him console himself with the belief that one too weak to struggle against fate is no fitting mate for him."

"I try to be calm, Flora, for they promise me, as a reward for seeming cheerfulness, that I shall return home with the opening spring; and to be near you once more—to behold you and my dear Bessie is the only solace now left to my cruelly lacerated heart."

Clinton eagerly devoured these lines with his burning glance, and intuitively seemed to comprehend the meaning of the most illegible words. He bowed his head upon his hands, and wept the bitter tears wrung from man in his deepest agony.

Flora could only weep with him, for words seemed to her powerless to console under such a calamity. At length he looked up; he caught her sympathetic glance, and pressing her hand to his heart, he said—

"For years it has beaten alone for her who has been made a victim to the duplicity and cunning of that man who now claims as his right all the tender love, the sweet devotion to which years of mutual affection entitled me alone. Tell me, Miss Forrester, what punishment is due to him, who has thus recklessly trampled on the feelings most sacred to every human being?"

"Has not Helen endured enough already?" asked Flora, earnestly. "Oh! Mr. Clinton, inflict not on her the additional anguish of knowing that crime has been added to your other sufferings."

He groaned heavily.

"And must I bear it? Must I live with the consciousness that she is in the power of a tyrant, yet dare not release her, and avenge the base fraud Hilton has practiced, lest I inflict deeper sorrow upon her? Oh! bitter, painful lot! I see no light, no hope wherever I turn!"

Wishing to divert his mind from dwelling on this theme, Flora said—

"You have not yet informed me of your own adventures since we last met."

"True; absorbed in my own feelings, I had forgotten that you are still in ignorance of what has befallen me. On the evening of our intended elopement, I set out about twilight to visit the ship in which we were to embark, and see if all things were in readiness for our departure before the dawn of day. As I approached the levee, I became aware that two men were following me. When I made the discovery, I was in a narrow cross-street, feebly lighted, and as I imagined they wished to attack and rob me, I quickened my pace to reach a more public thoroughfare."

"As I did this, two other men entered the street just ahead of me, and walking on the same side, drew rapidly near. Their presence reassured me, but a whistle given by one of those in the rear, and responded to by the persons in front, revealed to me that I had fallen into a snare. I sprang forward to make a dash between the two who approached, when a lasso, thrown with dexterity, caught me around the waist and pinioned my arms to my sides. You may imagine that my struggles were useless against such odds, but I did not resign myself to my fate without a desperate effort to escape."

"One of my captors at length said: 'Be quiet, and we'll not harm you. No robbery is intended.' 'What, then, is your object?' I asked, as a cold thrill darted through my frame, for I thought of Hilton, and almost divined the truth."

"Only a few weeks' restraint, and a little traveling for the benefit of your health," replied the same one who had first spoken. 'Come along, young man; you must start a kittle sooner than you expected to leave this wonderful city, and without the most agreeable part of the company.'

"I will die first," I resolutely replied. 'By what right do you seize upon me thus, and trammel my freedom of action?'

"I don't go by rights, young man; four men can manage one, as you will soon find out, so you had best come along."

"I would have remonstrated, but he uttered an oath, and commanded one of the others to put on the extinguisher. This was soon done, in the shape of a cloak, which was thrown over my head, and fastened over my mouth, with the aid of a handkerchief, in such a manner as to leave me scarcely the power to breathe."

"At this juncture a carriage, which they seemed to be expecting, turned into the street, and drew up near us. I was lifted in; taken down to a steamer, which was on the eve of starting, and locked in a state-room. One of the men ac-

accompanied me; and I heard him inform the captain that I was a lunatic who had escaped from his friends in Missouri, and he had been employed to pursue and take me back to them.

"When an accusation of such a nature is brought against a man, it is astonishing how impossible it is to make others believe that he is as sane as themselves. Simmons did not find it necessary to keep me closely confined to my room, after he had an opportunity to disseminate his story among the passengers. Not one of them would have raised a finger to succor me; on the contrary, they assisted him to keep such a watch on me, as baffled all my attempts to escape. I related my wrongs to them, and they shrugged their shoulders, and looked compassionately upon me, for he had told them such was the delusion of my madness. When I grew furious at their unbelief, and reckless with my own misery, they considered it confirmation of what had been told them.

"I will not attempt to depict to you what I suffered, Miss Forrester; it would too severely wound your tender heart. You may read its record in my haggard and changed features. Alas! they convey but a feeble image of the desolation within my outraged soul.

"At St. Louis I was again pinioned, and conveyed to another steamer, bound up the Missouri. In this I was kept in close confinement until we reached a small town near the head waters of navigation. There I was left by Mr. Simmons, with the assurance that I might now find my way back to the point from which we started, as his employer had by this time succeeded in accomplishing the views which led to my detention.

"You will wonder, perhaps, that I did not attempt to destroy this man, but I reflected that he was only the subordinate. On the principal must my vengeance fall, or on none at all. I fortunately had with me a small sum of money, and a valuable watch; by the aid of these, I was enabled to reach New Orleans, still buoying myself up with the hope that Helen would refuse to acknowledge the validity of the tie which was so fraudulently cemented. I thought she might find means to write to me, and so soon as I landed I hurried to the post-office. Two letters were given to me: one was that terrible confirmation of my worst fears; the other was from my sister, and should have reached me long since. My mother lay dangerously ill when she wrote, and pined for a sight of her eldest born before her eyes

closed in death. It is possible she no longer lives; they have vainly looked for me beside her couch, while I was myself enduring worse than death. Oh! Miss Forrester, can I bear all this cold-blooded man has inflicted on me, and yet permit him to live, to exult in the consciousness that he has stripped me of what I held most dear?"

"*'Thou shalt not kill,'* is the command of One who can bring light even out of such darkness as that which now surrounds you," said Flora, seriously. "Add not remorse to your present suffering, I conjure you, Mr. Clinton. Let not the cup of poor Helen have this last drop of bitterness poured into it. Go to your mother: she may yet live to bless your return."

"That is plainly my duty," he gloomily said. "I will once more enter my native home, but it will not be to carry with me the sweet spirit of hope and happiness which I so lately deemed myself secure of possessing. I will give no pledge in reference to the future, Miss Forrester. I will make an effort to resign myself, if Helen is happy; but should that man prove unkind—should she pine away amidst the splendor those heartless ones have considered worth the sacrifice of every holy and natural feeling, I can not answer for myself."

"Seek not to know if such be the case. Endeavor to consider Helen as lost to you forever, and you will be able to resign her."

"I can not—I can not. I have loved her almost from her childhood; she was so nearly mine—her heart, I know, belonged exclusively to me. And that she, so gentle, so tender, so yielding, should have had her most lovely qualities turned against her own happiness—ah, it is madness!"

He started up and measured the floor with rapid steps until he became more calm; then approaching Flora, he took her hand, and said—

"I see that I only distress you, Miss Forrester. Pardon my violence, when you reflect on its cause. Do not tell Helen of the anguish I have betrayed. Let her enjoy such peace as may now be hers. I sought this interview because I could not leave without once more seeing her who has been so sincere a friend to both Helen and myself. I shall leave this place for Mobile in the morning, for I must reach home as soon as possible. Adieu! Should we ever meet again, may it be under happier auspices."

Without waiting for a reply, he dropped her hand and rushed from the room.

CHAPTER XXI.

BEFORE he slept, Lenox had an interview with Mr. Forrester, and gained from him the ratification of Flora's promise to give him her hand immediately after her return to Braeburn. To him also he related the history of his early career, and was happy to find that one he esteemed so highly fully approved the course he had taken.

Preparations for departure were soon completed, and on a bright evening in March the party bade adieu to the busy city. As the boat pushed out from the landing, the two young girls came out on the guard, accompanied by Lenox, to wave a last adieu to Dr. Ledru, who stood on the levee. He had pledged himself to the father and lover that the efforts to discover the whereabouts of Linda Munroe should not be relaxed on account of their absence.

An invitation to the approaching marriage had been warmly pressed on him, but he had made no positive promise to be present, as he had a strong hope that before that time the quadroon would be in his power.

Only on that morning one of the police force had waited on him with the information that a woman in male disguise had been discovered by them in the lower part of the city, and from some points of resemblance he thought it not impossible that she was the person Dr. Ledru was so anxious to discover.

He instantly issued his orders to the man not to lose sight of her, and on his return to his rooms he expected more definite information, as a few hours were only asked by the expert agent of the law to discover all he desired to know in reference to the disguised one.

A large pile of cotton bales lay on the levee, and against these the physician leaned as he returned the farewell salutation of the young party. When Flora first appeared her features were concealed by a veil, and as she lifted it from her face, Dr. Ledru was electrified by a sound from the other end of his fleecy tower, which was evidently that of a suppressed cry. It was not a wail of anguish, but resembled more the burst of rage from a wounded tiger than an expression of human suffering. Ever quick to comprehend and to act, he darted forward, ready to grasp the person who uttered that cry, with the conviction that she who had so long eluded him was at last found.

As the bales had been carelessly pitched down, they had fallen in such a manner as to form a small recess, in which was crouched a figure wrapped in a dark cloak, with a fur cap drawn

over the brow. As Dr. Ledru first obtained a view of this person, two small hands were raised above the head, as if invoking some terrible malediction. One glance at the upturned eyes was sufficient to assure him that his first thought was correct. In spite of the male attire, the fairer complexion, and the closely-cropped hair, he knew those demoniac orbs at once.

It was but the work of an instant to lay his powerful grasp upon her, and raise her to her feet.

"So, Madame Lisette, I have found you after a weary chase. You need not struggle; for you shall not escape me now, I swear to you."

The features of the person thus unceremoniously seized became livid with rage and fear.

"Why do you seize me, man? Are you mad? Do you not see that I am no woman? What can you mean by this attack?"

"Softly—softly, my good friend. I would advise you not to struggle, nor to attract the notice of others; for in that event I must hand you over to the public authorities, and have you arrested as the fugitive slave of Mr. Forrester, who is guilty of the heinous crime of having attempted to poison his daughter."

The form he sustained seemed to collapse with fear as he held it in his vice-like grasp, and the pretended boy said in a faint tone—

"I am no slave. Do you not see that I am fair as you are? My name is Pierre Lafonde, and I am of French origin."

"Ay, ay; more likely of infernal origin, you female imp," growled the doctor. "I never in my life have made a mistake in the identity of a person I once remarked attentively; and your face I scanned thoroughly the first time I ever saw you. You are Lisette, lately the slave of Mr. Forrester; I am aware that you have an alias besides that you have so obligingly given me just now. Perhaps the quadroon, Linda Munroe, may comprehend that she is in the power of one with whom her flimsy artifices have no chance of success."

As he uttered the last words she shuddered, and looked fixedly at him.

"If you have heard that I am called Linda Munroe, you must also have been informed that my station is very far superior to that of Mr. Forrester's slave!"

"It is a mystery how you became so, and one I have much interest in solving. That you are the woman Lisette, I will swear in any presence; that you have been guilty of crime which will

give you to the gibbet, I can also testify; so it is useless to attempt to keep up your disguise any longer."

After a pause, she asked—

"And what do you propose to do with me, should I consent to accompany you?"

"I will answer that when we reach an asylum I have been preparing for you, for I was certain that sooner or later I should catch you."

She wrung her hands, and seemed in great perplexity. She at length said—

"You will hand me over to justice at last. I may as well refuse to accompany you now."

"Ah, well—just as you please. The story will soon be told then, and you will be put out of the way safely enough by the agency of the law. My friends will have nothing further to apprehend from you; their union, which takes place immediately, will be the happier for knowing their deadly enemy is forever at rest."

His words had the effect he anticipated. Her eyes seemed to scintillate with rage; her features became purple, and slight froth gathered on her lips.

"And with death in her veins—madness seething in her brain, she will dare to give herself to him!" she fiercely muttered. "Man—what saved her from utter annihilation on the night I last performed the duties of her slave?"

"My skill," he quietly replied. "I read your soul the first moment I encountered you. I gave Miss Forrester the means of preservation from your fatal powder; and I will yet save her to bless those who love her."

"Never! I defy you. The secret is mine, and it dies with me."

"We shall see. Will you go with me quietly, or shall I take you to a magistrate's office and state the particulars of your crime?"

"I care not which. My fate for the present is in your hands. Do with me as you choose; but I warn you, I will baffle you yet."

Dr. Ledru made no reply; but he drew her arm within his, and holding her hand with a grasp of steel, moved from the shelter of the cotton bales, and beckoned to a hackney-coachman who had just driven down a load of passengers for a departing steamer. In a few moments he was seated in the carriage, still holding Linda Munroe by the arm.

His directions were briefly given to the driver, and he wound his way over the crowded levee until he came to a comparatively open street; then dashing off at full speed, the houses seemed to fly behind them in their rapid progress.

The city proper, the suburb of Lafayette, were passed over, and the open road leading to the village of Carrollton was soon gained. At length the carriage diverged from the main road, entered a gate leading into a large park-like inclosure, and after traveling about half a mile the vehicle stopped in front of a small cottage, with green blinds to the windows, and a portico in front.

As the doctor almost lifted his companion from the carriage, the door opened, and a middle-aged negress appeared before them. She was of strong

and powerful frame, and looked capable of bearing labor or fatigue without shrinking. Her ebony features brightened with a smile, as she said—

"Ah! master, is that you at last?"

"Yes, Dorcas; and I have brought with me the patient you have so long expected. I hope all things are in readiness for her reception."

"Oh yes, sir; all in fust rate order," she replied, as she curiously eyed the seeming boy.

"All is right, then."

He tossed the driver his fare: entered the house, almost carrying the quadroom, who seemed on the eve of fainting, and in a few moments ushered her into a room about fifteen feet square, which was warmed by a pipe passing from a stove in the next apartment. There were two windows strongly grated, which could be further secured by inside shutters fastened with heavy bolts. A thick carpet covered the floor; a narrow couch occupied one side of the room—and it did not escape the quick glance of Linda that a coil of strong cord lay upon it. Two chairs of heavy appearance, and a small table, completed the furniture.

Having placed her on one of the seats, and dismissed Dorcas with orders to prepare supper, Dr. Ledru secured the door, put the key in his pocket, and drawing the other chair opposite to his prisoner, leisurely surveyed her.

Linda had apparently made up her mind to the course she should pursue; she sat calm and impassive, with her hands clasped together, and her intense black eyes seemingly fixed on vacancy.

After a long silence, the doctor said—

"You asked me what I proposed to do with you, should you accompany me. Shall I tell you now?"

The lips of the woman half unclosed, and a slight convulsive movement was visible around her mouth; but no words escaped her.

"Silence gives consent," says the old adage; and therefore I take it for granted you would like to know my intentions. I will not deceive you. You have in your possession the deadly compound with which you have worked evil to a lovely and beloved woman. I am interested in her fate: I must learn precisely the component parts of this fatal poison, that I may know where to seek its antidote. You carry this about your person, I am certain: you dare not swallow it, because it will kill you, and you are not yet ready to die. There are no means of concealing it in this room where my scrutiny would not discover it. I intend to tie you to yonder couch as we confine lunatics, and then Dorcas, who is strong enough to conquer you even if you were free, shall examine your person and take from it what I desire."

A gleam of malignant exultation lighted up her features, and she said—

"It will be useless: I have it not. I have securely concealed it, where you will never find it. On that night when I felt certain that the deed was consummated, I took the precaution to secure the box containing the powder, in case I should

be arrested before I could escape from the city, and the discovery he made of the agent I had used."

"Ah—h! you acknowledge it then?"

"I care not any longer to deny it, since I failed of immediate vengeance. I have now made up my mind to await the inevitable effects of what has already become incorporated with the very springs that move life in yonder dainty bride. Ha! ha! He will watch the eye lose its gleam of intelligence: he will see the form of his beloved wither and fade, with the knowledge that to me he owes his wedded happiness."

A strong expression of disgust sat on the features of the physician, and as she continued to speak, it darkened almost into a gleam of ferocity.

"Wretch! do you comprehend the loathing you arouse within me—the power you thus brave? If it be true, as you say, that this poison is concealed, I will force from you the secret of its hiding-place, if all the horrible resources of my profession have to be exercised to torture you into making the revelation I demand. Do you hear? I will inflict upon you such ingenious suffering as even the Inquisition never dreamed of, through my knowledge of the subtle agents that can work upon the human frame."

The quadroom visibly shuddered, though she steadily replied—

"No torture shall force this secret from me. What! give health, life, and happiness to that detested one! Never! I will die with this undiluted."

"I shall see what you will answer four days hence," he coolly replied, and rising, he summoned the negress to his presence. At a sign from her master, she placed herself at Linda's back, and although the latter prepared for resistance, she found herself in the hands of two such powerful captors that it was useless to contend. The physician raised her up with a single motion of his hand, the negro threw her long wiry arms around her, and carried her to the couch as easily as she would have taken a struggling child. In a few moments she was securely pinioned to it, and Dorcas made a critical examination of every portion of her dress which could conceal the article demanded by her master. In vain: Linda had asserted the truth. It was not about her person.

The taunts and defiance she uttered as this scene proceeded were intended to exasperate the calm man who stood there as the minister of fate to her; but they were not needed: already had he made up his mind to the course he should pursue, and her insulting language could not add to the severity of the punishment he had prepared for her.

To save Flora he was ready to go all lengths, short of inflicting death, upon the wretched and malignant cause of all the suffering she endured. He took from his pocket a case containing a few diminutive powders—he mixed one of these with water, and approached the couch. Linda firmly closed her teeth, and was deaf to his command

to open them. Dr. Ledru then produced a small steel funnel, and by a dextrous application of his thumb and forefinger to the jaw, the teeth relaxed, the tube was forced into her mouth and the medicine poured through it. He then held her head firmly upon the pillow until Dorcas had so secured it that she had not power to move; her hands were already pinioned with the rest of her person, and she lay there helpless and boiling over with rage at the position in which she found herself.

"Now," said the doctor, with that calmness which only exasperated her the more, "you will soon know what it is to brave such a man as I am. I tell you, Linda Munroe, that in compassing the ends of justice I am ruthless as fate itself. You shall reveal to me what I demand. Men of my profession are often called in to try all the resources of their art to produce the oblivion of sleep—I now seek the opposite result. The medicine I have just given you is intended to prevent the blessed dew of forgetfulness from descending upon your agonized spirit. You shall wander in fancy incessantly over the past, and the phantoms of your crimes shall rise as hideous monsters before you, until repentance comes to your hardened soul, and you voluntarily restore the means of regaining health to her you so recklessly detest."

"That hour will never arrive. I swear to you that death itself shall not force confession from me."

"Death would be Elysium to what you will endure," he disdainfully replied. "You will implore it at my hands, but I shall be very careful not to touch the principle of life. That I will leave to be extinguished by the hangman, should you really have strength to persist in your refusal."

The pale face of Linda became deathlike at this threat, and she closed her eyes as if to reflect on his words. She presently looked up again, with all the concentrated malice of her nature gleaming through the inky blackness of her eyes, and said—

"Do your worst; I care not. Flora Forrester shall surely perish by slow degrees, and I will not afford you the means of saving her."

Finding nothing was to be gained on that evening, Dr. Ledru left her and retired to the adjoining room. This was comfortably furnished, and was frequently used by him as a place of retreat from the turmoil and bustle of the city. A bright fire burned on the hearth, and a table was placed in front of it, covered with a white napkin, on which rested a tea-set of fine porcelain, intended for the use of one person.

A daintily-prepared supper soon made its appearance under the supervision of Dorcas, and after discussing it, he gave himself up to meditation on the difficult task before him. Several times he approached the door of Linda's room, and listened, but no sound issued from it.

With Spartan firmness she was repressing every expression of the suffering he felt assured she must endure. A movement of compassion

more than once caused him to lay his hand upon the bolt of the door, that he might enter and release her from her bonds, but he checked the impulse. He felt the conviction that he must at once make her feel that he was terribly in earnest, and if possible, frighten her into compliance before proceeding to extremities.

On the following morning at an early hour Dr. Ledru entered the room of the quadroom, and examined her appearance. She lay with closed eyelids, but he was certain she did not sleep. The pulse that throbbed beneath his fingers with rapidly-accelerated motion told him that repose would have been denied to her, even if she had been allowed the freedom of change of position.

He quietly loosened the bonds that confined her, and said—

"You suffer from excessive thirst. I have brought water to allay it; but know that it is imbued with the same spirit of unrest which has caused you to pass this wretched night. Every drop you drink, while your obstinate determination remains unchanged, will have the same preparation mingled with it."

Linda had put forth her hand eagerly to press the welcome fluid to her parched lips, but at his last words she drew back.

"I will do without it," she articulated with difficulty.

"You will not be able to do so: the tortures of thirst will compel you to drink; but even should your diabolical spirit enable you to bear such suffering as I can see in your changed features, it will not avail you: I will force the potion on you, as I did last night."

A violent, burning thirst was consuming her, and with a glance of fire she took the offered pitcher, and swallowed a small portion of the fluid it contained. The slight relief she thus obtained was but of momentary duration; again returned that sensation of suffocating heat in her throat and breast, and again the fatal liquid was raised to her fevered lips, with the consciousness that she was only quaffing what added fuel to the flame that consumed her, yet she could not refrain.

Her blood was coursing with lightning velocity through her frame, and objects wavered and grew dim before her excited vision. Every nerve in her frame appeared strained to its greatest tension, yet it seemed to her that each instant of time but increased the excitement she had no power to control.

Breakfast was brought to her by Dorcas, but she turned with loathing from the sight of food. She was not again confined to her couch, but paced the floor of her room throughout the day without intermission, like some wild animal just caged, which chafes to madness against his prison bars.

Late in the evening she took bread from the plate which had been left on her table, and with an effort swallowed a few morsels. Night—darkness again came, and she was left to its

gloom, peopled with her own wild fancies and desperate thoughts. Through its long sleepless hours, she tossed upon the couch which offered no repose. She could not even keep the lids closed over her burning eye-balls; they stared open on the hideous darkness until the very intensity of their gaze brought before them arrowy gleams of flame, tinged with hues of green and violet.

No sleep—no rest—it was horrible! yet the deadly rancor of her hatred still upheld her. She would not give renewed life to her rival.

When Dr. Ledru entered her room on the second morning, he found her panting and exhausted—her cheeks fallen, and a purple circle around her mouth; the large black eyes, wilder and more terrific in their expression than they had ever before been.

"Linda," he said, "you begin to comprehend the sufferings of those who die by poison. I have given you a medicine capable of producing all the effects of the most deadly drug, save the one which in your present condition would be most welcome—death."

"I do not wish to die," she furiously answered; "I would live to exult in her doom. That thought can make all you can inflict endurable."

"We shall see what you will say to-morrow," he significantly said, and left her.

Another day of unremitting, ever-increasing torture, to be followed by a night she shuddered to think of. It seemed to her that sleep would never again visit her. Every pulse in her frame vibrated to agony, yet she would not give up. She asked herself how long this could continue. When her fearful jailer found her resolution invincible, what new tortures would he devise? She would show him on the morrow that this at least should not prevail.

The morrow came, and found her in such a condition that even her captor pitied her; but his own resolution did not falter.

"Linda," he said, in those calm tones which were an additional irritation to her, "you now have some idea of the tortures of lost souls, ministered to by fiends from the fiery abyss of the inferno. What do you say to-day?"

"Kill me, fearful man! Let me go with my victim to the shades of eternity. Death for death is the law of justice."

"Ay—when death has actually been compassed, but such is not now the case, and your victim must be rescued."

She groaned painfully, and asked—

"How long can I endure this torture and live?"

"Under my treatment it will seem an eternity; for when the vital power begins to flag, I will give you that which will produce rest, reinvigoration sufficient to bear anew what you now suffer."

"Oh, God! are you a demon, or a man?"

"I am one who will not be defeated in what he has once undertaken. I pity you for the suffering I am compelled to inflict on you, but I do

not relent. The object I have in view justifies to myself more extreme measures than I have yet taken."

"And if I reveal what you wish, what shall be my ultimate fate?"

"I will guarantee freedom to you, but it must be enjoyed in another land. You shall not be molested for your half-accomplished crime, unless you attempt to return to the State in which Lenox will reside."

She seemed to meditate a few moments, and then feebly said—

"Give me unadulterated water with which to quench my thirst, and I will consent to any thing."

The water was soon brought, and after taking a long draught, Linda went on:

"Until the evening before you met me on the levee, I had been several miles below the city, in the cabin of a woman belonging to the plantation of Mr. Perrier. In old Jane's house, concealed beneath the hearth in the left-hand corner, you will find a small *vinaigrette*, which contains the poison inhaled by Miss Forrester."

Elated at his success, the good doctor ordered nourishing food for her, and administered a sedative which acted like magic on her excited nerves. He had not left the cottage since Linda's installation in it, but he now ordered his horse, with the intention of proceeding at once on his errand of discovery.

After laying strict injunctions on Dorcas to keep a vigilant watch upon his prisoner, Dr. Ledru departed. It so happened that the negress was desirous of visiting a neighbor who was indisposed, and she thought her master's absence extremely well-timed, as it afforded her the wished-for op-

portunity. She looked on the drooping form of the quadroom, and felt confident that she was too securely imprisoned to render escape possible; therefore her master would never be aware of her disobedience to his orders. She went forth immediately after his departure, leaving Linda alone in the cottage.

The knife which had been brought in with the food of the quadroom, still lay upon the table. Her listless glance fell on it, as she heard the receding sounds of the departure of her jailer, and her features brightened with sudden hope. She snatched it up and tried its point, in the belief that it would afford the means of escape. After eating a small portion of the viands prepared for her, Linda felt so much revived that all her courage returned. She knew that she had only practiced a *ruse* against her captor, to obtain a slight alleviation of the torture she was beginning to find insupportable; and she looked forward to his return with dread amounting to horror.

To raise the window and attempt to loosen the bars was the work of a few moments—they were fixed in a wooden frame, and, to her great joy, soon began to yield to her almost frantic efforts to remove them. Laboring with the energy of desperation, she opened a space wide enough to permit her body to pass through. She then threw out her hat and cloak, and long before the return of Dorcas she was speeding rapidly toward the city.

When Dr. Ledru reached the cottage, wearied and vexed from his fruitless errand, Linda Munroe was on a steamer plowing the Mississippi, bound toward the landing nearest to her recent home.

CHAPTER XXII.

FLORA'S bridal morning dawned clear and lovely. The season had been uncommonly mild, and already the forest was beginning to burst into leaf. The birds caroled their glad psalms, and all nature seemed to wear its brightest smile on that auspicious day.

As if to remove from the mind of the father and the bridegroom the only cloud that marred the perfect happiness of the hour, a letter arrived from Dr. Ledru, announcing the capture of Linda Munroe, and the certainty he felt that he should be able to wring from her the knowledge he desired to gain.

The family of Bellevue were momentarily expected to arrive at home, as orders had been sent from New Orleans several days before to have the carriage sent to Rodney to meet them. Invitations to the bridal awaited them, and Flora hoped soon to behold her friend, and judge for herself how she bore the wretched lot which had been forced upon her. Yet she trusted that Helen

would not arrive in time to be present at her own marriage: she felt the wide contrast her fate offered to that of the unfortunate wife of Mr. Hilton, and she dreaded the effects of the comparison. Even if death menaced her, the privilege of dying in the arms of him she loved—of being upheld by his tenderness, on the brink of that dread change, which all must undergo, would at least be hers; but Helen had no such consolation. To struggle for resignation—to wear forced smiles, while her heart was breaking; to tremble beneath the eye of her tyrant, yet feign contentment with her lot, was her most wretched destiny.

About mid-day a carriage crossed the ford, which was recognized as that belonging to Bellevue. A gentleman on horseback followed, who was at once known as Hilton, and to give additional certainty, in less than an hour a servant came over to Braeburn with an acceptance of the invitation.

Helen was once more in her own room: that spot in which a brief dream of happiness had visited her heart, but which she dared not think of now. Yet how impossible to drive it from her memory! The apartment had been newly fitted up since her departure, and the elegance of every thing around her accorded with the position she now occupied as the wife of a man of wealth, but she turned with a sick heart from the trappings, to gain which her dearest hopes had been torn from her. To her dismay she found that Hilton made no progress in overcoming her early aversion toward him. At first, he endeavored to purchase her affections by the most magnificent presents: the listless glance she cast on these, told him truly that the arrow had struck too deep to permit the vanities of life to conceal the wound. He then tried devotion to her slightest wish; for this, she made an effort to be grateful; but he was too keen-sighted to be deceived. He saw that she recoiled from him with the same unconquerable repugnance which had thrown her in convulsions on that terrible night when she comprehended the deception which had given her to him. Then all the natural bitterness and sarcasm of his mean nature triumphed, and he exulted in the thought that he could at least make her fear him, if it was not possible to win her love.

Already had her gentle spirit shrunk and quivered beneath the insulting taunts he had addressed to her; already had she learned to tremble and grow white at the sound of his approaching footsteps, and yet her aunt and mother exulted in the completion of their plans, and assured the unhappy Helen that the day would come in which she would thank them for the part they had taken in bestowing her on Hilton.

Dinner was over; her uncle and Hilton still lingered over their coffee, and glad to escape to the solitude of her own thoughts Helen wrapped a shawl over her and took the pathway leading to the Lover's Walk. In anticipation of her arrival, perhaps Flora had placed a letter in the nest, which contained some information respecting Clinton. She persuaded herself that all she now desired was to know that he had been restored to freedom—that he was not irremediably wretched; then she could bear the burden of her own unhappiness with more resignation.

No one, save herself, would now think of examining the nest, for the evil was completed which had been contrived against her, and henceforth the correspondence between herself and her friend would be of no importance to others. She trembled with anxiety as she approached the repository, and a burst of tears showered over a tiny note, folded in the smallest possible compass, and thrust so carefully beneath the nest that it would have escaped the observation of one less eager to discover it.

The missive was from Flora, and contained these words:

"Dearest Helen—You will naturally be anxious to hear from me at the earliest moment, and I think it best to give you such information as I can impart before we meet. Clinton is free: he

was seized and carried up the river, but not harmed. I saw him on his return, and he is by this time at home, as he was to set out for Philadelphia on the morning after we parted. I need not tell you of his anguish, for you have already tortured yourself sufficiently with imagining that. He will resign himself, as we must all do, to what is inevitable.

"I will speak on this subject once more when we meet; and after that, if you can endeavor to bury it in oblivion, then—then peace may once more be yours."

Helen read and re-read those words, feeling so wretched that it seemed to her all she had heretofore suffered was feeble in comparison with it. The paper lay spread open before her, and her head was bent slightly forward, while bitter sobs burst from her overcharged bosom.

Suddenly a thin hand was thrown over her shoulder, a finger pointed to the words, "He will resign himself," and a voice that sent every drop of blood in her frame in a burning torrent to her heart, said—

"I never can—it is beyond my power. Helen, you have wronged me—we have both been outraged in our dearest affections, and I come to break the iniquitous bond which weds you to misery."

The unhappy Helen started up, white and trembling, to confront the haggard and wasted form of her lover. She uttered no cry, for it seemed as if the powers of life were frozen by the terror that fell on her.

Clinton took her cold hand in his, and gazing in her face with tender earnestness, said—

"It is I, my love—come with me. We will evade their search; we will fly to a far distant land. Since I parted from Miss Forrester, I have learned the death of my mother. The news met me at Mobile, and so soon as illness permitted me, I turned back to seek you; for oh! Helen, I am unable to endure the anguish of my own heart. I will change my name—we will bury ourselves in the Far West, where they can never reach us. Come, my beloved, let us fly while we yet may."

In the bewilderment of the moment Helen permitted herself to be hurried forward a few paces. Suddenly she stopped, pressed her hand upon her throbbing brow, and said—

"I can not go—leave me—leave me, for I am the wife of another. Since I myself sanctioned the tie that binds me to him, I dare not break it."

A gleam of fire flashed from the eyes of Clinton.

"When I have forgiven this, why should you refer to it? Helen, I swear to you that this man shall not continue to stand as a barrier between us. If you refuse to go with me, I must remove him!"

"That would be indeed to sever us forever," she faintly replied. "No; all that now remains to us is to bear our destiny as we best may. Leave me, I conjure you; add not self-reproach to the wretchedness I already endure: and oh! if you would have reason retain its seat, seek not the life of him who claims me as his wife."

Clinton gnashed his teeth.

"That I should live to hear you assert yourself the wife of another! And you—you demand the life of him who has made me an outcast from hope—who has rendered you the wretched slave of his caprices. Helen, is it not just that I should shed his blood? He has inflicted on me such utter misery that no punishment short of death can repay him. Fly with me, and I leave him to console himself for your loss—refuse, and—"

He paused, and Helen trembled at the dark expression which lowered over his features. She appealingly said—

"Have I not enough to bear, Charles, that you thrust this additional sorrow upon me? Miserable I must be, I know, but fly with you I dare not. I have been weak enough to embrace the doom my family prepared for me, and true to that I must at least remain, or forfeit every feeling of respect from myself and others. Tempt not my weakness, for it is yet a bitter struggle to resign the dream we once cherished. I know you will not darken your own soul with crime, which can only widen the gulf between us. Should Hilton perish by your hand, it could never clasp mine while red with the stain of his blood who had once claimed me as his own."

As if fearful of her own strength, she waved him an adieu, and rapidly sped away, leaving him motionless, stupefied at her sudden departure; his mind still sane, but fearfully turned from its just balance by the suffering of the last few weeks. But one thought withheld him from the commission of the threatened crime, and that was what Helen had just expressed—the deed would place as effectual a barrier between them as the life of Hilton itself.

Helen returned to the house in a state of agitation it would be impossible to describe. It was now twilight, and on entering the room she found the lamps already lighted, and the splendid robes which were to decorate her laid out on the bed. Silken embroidery glittered upon the snowy folds, and gems gleamed upon the bosom, but she heeded them not: her wretched thoughts were wandering in the chill air of night, with the emaciated and miserable man who prowled around the house which contained her; ready, in some moment of overwrought feeling, to sever the bonds that bound her, even by violence.

Helen mechanically suffered her toilet to be made; how she endured this horrible mockery of what was passing within her, she knew not; but she was stupefied—despairing. It seemed to her that she had arrived at that point in her life in which Fate had done its worst: no after-sorrow could move her from the marble-like stillness into which her feelings seemed to have sunk.

A few hours later, and she felt that the deepest depths of suffering had not yet been sounded, for the horror which looms dimly and darkly before the startled imagination can never be so terrible as its awful realization.

Helen would have given much to be permitted to remain at home, but she knew it would be useless to make the request. Mr. Hilton had al-

ready informed her that he intended her to rival the bride in the splendor of her dress, and she knew it would be a mortal offense to betray any evidence of reluctance to appear with him in public. Besides, she felt a feverish desire to see Flora, to confide to her the dangerous proximity of her half-deranged lover, and, with her aid, devise some means of inducing him to return to his usual employments, which, in time, would divert his mind from dwelling on his recent disappointment.

She sat beside the window and looked out in the darkness, straining her vision to catch a glimpse of the form she fancied hovering around the house. Costly gems were wreathed amidst the silken braids of her hair, and glittered on her beautifully-sculptured arms; and the exquisitely fancied dress flowed in graceful folds around her stately form. Ah! what stern mockery of that which lay folded within her heart was this brilliant outer seeming. So desperately wretched was she, that, for the first time, the thought of self-destruction came to her. She repelled it with a shudder, but it would return as a mocking phantom to cast a deadlier chill over even the torpor of despair.

At length Hilton entered, and critically surveyed her costume.

"The dress is perfect," he said, "but you really look like a phantom-bride, Helen. You are paler than ever."

His tone indicated vexation. She arose and looked in the glass. Her eyes had often wandered over the mirror that night, but this was the first time she had distinctly beheld her own image, and now she saw that no sculptured marble could have worn a colder or fairer seeming.

"I am very pale," she quietly said, "but there is no help for it."

"No help!" he repeated, with sarcastic emphasis. "Ask your lady mother, and see if she can not find a remedy. Do you suppose I will take you among all the gossips of the neighborhood with that curdled cheek, to have them say the ill-natured things they would be capable of asserting?"

"Shall I stay at home, then?" asked Helen, with the air of a person whose perceptions are dulled by want of rest. Hilton uttered an oath that startled her into full consciousness of her position; her eyes turned toward him with a deprecating expression, but no shade of color gleamed for a moment on her pallid face. He turned to the servant, and bade her go to Mrs. Somers with a request for some rouge for her mistress.

The woman soon returned, and Helen passively permitted the rosy tint to be applied to her cheeks and lips by her skillful fingers. Then the fair face seemed suddenly lighted with glorious beauty. The soft eyes gained new lustre from the artificial bloom, and the expression of wild restlessness which flashed from them, imparted a new charm to her ever-lovely features. Those who beheld Helen that night, never forgot the almost startling character of her beauty. There was something in the expression which touched the

coldest, they knew not why: a statue suddenly warmed into life, and endowed with the power to suffer bitter human anguish, could not have been fairer or more mechanical in its movements than was this most wretched sacrifice to Mammon.

Hilton surveyed her with pride.

"You will be the handsomest woman there to-night, madam. If I can not boast of having the most devoted wife, I can at least show the world the most attractive in outer seeming."

Helen sighed so deeply that he turned more fully toward her and examined the expression of her features.

"One would think some new calamity had happened to you, Mrs. Hilton. Are you jealous of the happiness of your friend, and make yourself wretched by contrasting it with your own fate?"

"I might do so indeed," replied Helen sadly—"but I strive to be grateful for the happiness given to my beloved Flora without reference to myself."

"That is well. Perhaps, in time, your saintly resignation to a brilliant lot will be appreciated by the higher powers, and they may send you consolation in the shape of early widowhood."

This she knew was only intended as a taunt, but she shuddered at the images his words conjured up. He little dreamed of the danger that really menaced him. Should she warn him? Dared she tell him of the interview which had so recently taken place? Alas! the radical defect in the character of Helen again came in play; she had not courage to reveal to him the vicinity of Clinton, and bid him be on his guard against the stroke of the assassin. She could not brand the man she still loved with the imputation of meditated crime, which, for her sake, she believed he would never consummate.

She was spared any reply by the announcement of the carriage, and to her great relief, she found that Hilton intended occupying the fourth seat in it, while her uncle was driven in his cabriolet by his own servant.

As the carriage turned the bend in the creek, Braeburn lay before them, glittering with lights. The hillside was illuminated with colored lamps hung in festoons from tree to tree; the pillars which supported the gallery were wreathed with evergreens, and from their foliage gleamed lights on every side.

The party from Bellevue was rather late, and on entering the yard they found the slaves drawn up in three orderly rows, awaiting the appearance of their beloved young mistress as a bride. The company within the house consisted of about fifty persons from the immediate neighborhood, and Mr. Forrester had promised that they should so arrange themselves as to afford a view of the bridal ceremony to the blacks without.

Our party had only time to receive the greetings and congratulations of their acquaintances, when the folding-doors leading into the next apartment opened, and the bridal group advanced a few paces within the room. Flora's dress was

simple though costly. She wore a white crape robe, finely embroidered, and a wreath of orange flowers confined her gossamer-like vail. Bessie acted as bridesmaid, supported by Philip Maitland, who informed her that he confidently expected their own marriage would be the next one to come off. Bessie tossed her head incredulously, but Phil said—

"It will be, nevertheless—you will see, my pretty coz."

Bessie had no time to reply, for the doors unclosed, and they were in the presence of the assembled guests.

As the ceremony proceeded, a slight disturbance might have been seen in the yard. A youth made strenuous efforts to force himself into the front rank of the slaves, but he was unceremoniously thrust back by those among whom he intruded, and admonished to keep the place assigned him. With muttered words, which those around did not heed, he shrank away from the illuminated lawn, and sought the shelter of a clump of shrubbery not far from the end of the mansion.

The gallery, which extended around that side, had been inclosed with white drapery, ornamented with wreaths of evergreens, and the supper table set beneath its shelter.

The intruder looked around—no one was near to observe him: he took a knife from his pocket, and cut an aperture in the cloth just behind the railing; by lifting this slightly, he could view the scene within secure from observation.

"Now," he triumphantly muttered, "I hold his fate in my own hand!"

Crouching beneath the shrubbery, he awaited the supper hour with the calmness of one whose purpose could not be turned.

In the mean time, all went merrily within. Good music had been provided, and the younger portion of the company danced, while the elders amused themselves with conversation. Time passed lightly to all save Helen. She moved like one in a dream, with the presentiment strong within her soul that amidst this fair scene of enjoyment the thunderbolt was ready to burst, scattering desolation and dismay in their midst. At the mandate of Hilton she even danced, or rather walked through the figure of the cotillon, but the forms before her seemed brilliant phantoms, evoked by some weird fantasy, to mock her with their smiles and gay words; and the mingled sounds of mirth and music which filled the air around, thrilled through her excited brain as the awful summons of the last trump.

Helen found no opportunity to exchange more than a few words with her friend. Flora was so surrounded—so sought after by the guests, that no one could monopolize her attention for many moments together, and on this evening she looked so lovely—so happy, that the wretched Helen could not bear to thrust her own widely-contrasted fate before her. To-morrow would answer as well—to-morrow the bridal party had already engaged to dine at Bellevue: then she would reveal to Flora the vicinity of Clinton, and engage

the good offices of Lenox to seek him out, and induce him to leave her at least free from the terrible fears that now assailed her.

At length supper was announced. The musicians played a brilliant march, and headed by the bridal party, the company surrounded the tastefully-decorated table. As Helen was so lately a bride herself, it had been arranged that she and Hilton should stand at the head of the table beside Lenox and Flora; while Bessie occupied the place on the left hand of the latter.

Hilton was scarcely satisfied with Helen's demeanor, though she implicitly obeyed every impulse he chose to give her; yet he, with the rest, was struck with the almost unearthly beauty that surrounded her as a halo on that fatal night. He determined in his own mind to give her such a lesson on her return home as would shatter the dream-world in which she seemed to move, and place before her such startling realities as must convince her that the allegiance she owed him was hereafter to be her first thought—to show her that the only aim of her life should be to please him who had not vainly assumed the control of her destiny.

This man possessed few redeeming qualities, and they had become merged in the bitterness which overflowed his whole being at his failure to win more than mere endurance from one he had so violently made his own. To punish her for indifference—to make her feel how galling was the bondage she had weakly submitted to endure, was now his determination. One week he had consented to remain among her former friends; then he would take her to his own abode, where she would be entirely in his power.

Such were the thoughts that flitted through his brain as this gay scene passed before him. Wine flowed freely, and the two brides had many wishes for future happiness offered them. Flora received them with graceful thanks, but to her hapless friend they sounded as hollow mockeries.

At length the music was again heard—there was a movement around the table—Lenox and Hilton stood together a brief moment near the railing, while Bessie arranged a stray flower on the head of Flora. Suddenly there was a sharp report—a wild shriek, and horror and dismay seized upon the guests. They rushed back tumultuously, inquiring what had happened; and it was several moments before the catastrophe that had really occurred could be ascertained.

A passage was then made for a dark form carried in the arms of others, and followed by a white figure who moaned and wrung her hands, muttering unconsciously—"Oh, Clinton, could you not have spared me this crowning horror!" Her words were heard, and the name eagerly caught at as furnishing a clue to the perpetrator of the deed.

Hilton was quite dead before they reached the couch on which they placed him: and Helen stood beside him tearless, and nearly as cold as the lifeless body itself.

It seemed that a pistol had been fired within a

few feet of the gallery, and the load had entered his body with fatal effect.

The murderer could not be far off, and the gentlemen dispersed in pursuit. The group of pale women would have drawn Helen away, but she sat motionless, heedless of their entreaties. Every sensation left in her stunned and bewildered faculties seemed centred in that of hearing. She listened with bent head and concealed features to every noise without which heralded the return of the pursuers; she tried to form a prayer for his escape, but the words died on her trembling lips, as she remembered that it was her husband who had been violently hurled from life by his hand.

Flora vainly caressed her, and whispered words of love and encouragement; she heard them not—the cries and shouts of those without alone vibrated in her brain. Soon—too soon—came the cry, "We have found him—we have found him." Ten minutes had not elapsed since the commission of the deed, when a group came back, bearing with them a form which Flora recognized with a pang.

It was as she feared. Clinton stood before her, branded as the murderer of his rival. Helen did not raise her head as they entered; she knew that he was there, but she could not look on him who had so recklessly avenged their mutual wrongs.

Those around the couch fell back, and the dead and living confronted each other. Clinton was pale, but perfectly self-possessed. He advanced slowly, and stretching forth his emaciated hand over the body, solemnly said—

"This is the doing of Fate. You have arrested me as the murderer of this man, but as there is One in heaven who can read all our hearts, I swear by His holy name, that I had no part in it. He had basely wronged me and I sought him with deadly purpose; but, thanks be to God, I have been anticipated: by whom, I know not—I care not. My life may be the forfeit, but I am innocent of the deed of which I am accused."

A murmur of voices was heard, refusing to believe his statement. He calmly replied—

"I know that circumstances are strongly against me. I am known to be at deadly feud with him. I am armed—one of my pistols has been discharged: all this forms a chain of evidence that seems conclusive, but I repeat it, I am innocent, and Heaven, in its own good time, will manifest it. Helen," he continued, approaching her, and bending his knee before her. "Look up; fear not to meet my eye, for I swear to you that I am guiltless of the blood which has just been shed. I would not dare approach you if this were not the truth."

Helen, thus addressed, raised her pale face, and her lips syllabled the words, "I believe you," but no sound issued from them. Her eyes were fastened on his, and she read there what saved her heart from breaking in that dreadful hour.

Clinton arose, and taking her passive hand in his own, turned toward the breathlessly interested spectators of this scene.

"It may be unknown to the most of those here

present, that this hand has been pledged to me for years; that a strong mutual attachment existed between this lady and myself, which was most basely thwarted by the connivance of those who should have guarded her happiness. She was forced to become the wife of another, of whose conduct I will not now speak, for his crime is expiated. I sought his life; in the madness of my despair, I should have deemed myself justifiable in taking it; but, thanks to that overruling Power in whose hands we all are, I have been most mysteriously preserved from setting the seal upon my own wretchedness. I see you are incredulous, but there is one here who feels that I speak the truth; exonerated in her eyes, I can bear the fate which, in all probability, awaits me."

He raised Helen's hand to his lips, fervently pressed it, replaced it on her lap, and folding his

arms, he signified his readiness to accompany them wherever they wished.

The sympathies of Mr. Forrester's family were with him, for they knew all he had borne, and they believed his solemn assertion of his innocence of the crime; but it was not thus with the remainder of the company. They regarded the scene they had just witnessed as well got up for effect, but their conviction of Clinton's guilt remained unshaken. His captors congratulated each other that court was then sitting in the county seat, and the criminal could be summarily dealt with before the feeling of indignation at his audacious crime had time to subside.

Accompanied by two of the most zealous, Clinton was placed in a carriage, taken to F—, and before the dawn of day he was lodged in jail to await his trial for life or death as the murderer of Charles Hilton.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FLORA wished to retain Helen with her, but this Mrs. Wilnot positively refused. Angry and indignant at what had just passed, she would not permit her niece to remain at Braeburn. Exhausted by the variety of emotions she had contended with for so many hours, the unhappy being was herself quite passive. She submitted to be taken to the carriage, and conveyed to Bellevue, where she was placed in bed, and a physician summoned.

He administered a powerful narcotic, and, like an overtasked child, Helen at length fell into a deep and dreamless sleep. When she awoke she was feverish, and slightly delirious; Dr. — pronounced her in a nervous fever, and insisted that she should be kept perfectly quiet. Flora and Bessie shared with her aunt and mother the cares of her sick room, and many were the tears shed by her two friends over this young martyr to worldly aggrandizement.

Helen lay white and motionless for hours, with no sign of intelligence or suffering, save an occasional tear that welled from the half-closed eyes, betraying that, amidst the aberration of intellect caused by the fever which burned in her veins, she was still conscious of the mighty weight of misery that lay as a burden on her soul.

On the morning after the murder the body of Hilton was brought to Bellevue for interment. Attended by a large concourse of persons, his remains were conveyed to their last resting-place; and now all that remained to consummate the tragedy, was to bring speedy punishment to the perpetrator of the deed.

Though Hilton had not been a popular man, the circumstances of his death awoke a widespread feeling of indignation, and speedy retribution to the author of his fate was the universal

wish. Clinton was a stranger, and there was no one to raise a voice in his behalf, save Mr. Forrester and his new son; the latter, too little known in the neighborhood himself to have much influence. The minds of all men in the community were decided as to the question of the prisoner's guilt, and since he must die, why prolong the tortures of suspense? Let him be condemned at once, and the demands of justice satisfied.

Through the powerful influence of Hilton's connections the trial was hurried on, for there was no one to insist that, in the excited state of public feeling, it would be impossible to obtain an unprejudiced jury. Clinton's guilt appeared to be so clear and palpable that this was scarcely deemed of great importance. He was tried within a few days after the murder: he adhered to the statement he had already made; but in the face of the evidence against him, it was received with universal disbelief. Sentence was pronounced against him—death—and but one week given to prepare for the awful change.

The prisoner heard his doom with calmness, and returned to his cell to write to his friends, and inform them of the terrible fate which hung over him. This accomplished, he took up his pen to address Helen, but his courage failed him. What could he say to console the stricken one? She believed him innocent, for he knew that his solemn assurance in that last heart-rending interview had carried conviction to her at least. The time must arrive when his name would be vindicated from this imputation, but too late to save him from its penalty; and she would probably perish a victim to her sorrowful fate before that hour rolled around. He did not ask for prolonged life for her: could he have clasped her in his arms, and thus have gone to meet the award

of the deeds done on earth, he would have welcomed death. But to leave Helen to the loneliness of her anguish, was a terrible thought: he heard of her illness with joy, and really hoped that before the knowledge of his unhappy doom could reach her she would be forever at rest.

The news of Clinton's condemnation soon reached Bellevue. Helen still lay apparently in the same dreamy, half-unconscious state, though her physical powers did not seem to waste away beneath the sufferings of her mind. After the third day of her illness she did not refuse food when it was offered; for she wished to regain her usual strength. As the mind struggled back to consciousness, a restless feeling awoke within it, that on her depended the preservation of her lover; to her would be given the power to atone to him for all the anguish she had caused him.

Timid and sensitive natures, when acted on by some powerful motive, sometimes show a power of endurance—a tenacity of purpose, of which the strongest are scarcely capable; and in the stillness of her darkened room, Helen reviewed her position, and matured a determination from which she never wavered. Henceforth she was accountable to herself alone for her conduct: as a self-sustained and responsible human being she would act; she cared not if all the world condemned the course she resolved to pursue; it was as the last straw to the drowning wretch, and she would brave the world's censure to grasp it.

Such was the state of her mind, when at twilight her mother and Mrs. Wilnot sat in her room, and in suppressed tones spoke of the approaching fate of the condemned man. With senses preternaturally sharpened by the excited state of her nervous system, Helen heard the imperfect murmurs sufficiently to connect them together, and understand their import.

She gathered from them all they most wished to conceal from her; but she neither cried out nor wept. Such external evidences of emotion could now afford no relief to the burning restlessness that consumed her. She must act—must save him; but how? She lay late in the night, meditating on the most feasible course to accomplish the purpose that occupied her mind. Helen was now so much better that a servant was deputed to remain with her during the night: she waited impatiently until the woman slept; then rising, she walked several times across the floor, and a feeling almost of exultation came over her as she felt that her strength had not departed. Buoyed up by the impulse from within, she felt assured she would be able to accomplish what she was resolved to undertake.

On the following morning, Flora came as usual to inquire how she had passed the night. Helen still lay apparently weak and helpless before her, but when they were left alone, she was electrified by seeing her suddenly arise and open wide those large orbs which had lately seemed to shun the light of day. She grasped the hand of the astonished and half-frightened Flora, as she earnestly said—

"We have half an hour at least before my aunt

will return. In that time you must restore life to me, my trust—my best friend."

"Willingly will I do that, dearest Helen, if it is in my power."

"He is condemned! he is to die for that of which he is innocent! Oh, Flora, as you would have mercy shown to him you love in such dire extremity, aid me to save him. Refuse, and I have not courage to endure life—I will cast it off as a burden too grievous to be borne."

"My beloved Helen, who has revealed this to you? How can I aid you? You know that I would risk much to afford help or consolation to you."

"I know it; and therefore do I cast my last hope upon your mercy. Listen to me, Flora, and you will not refuse your aid."

In an earnest and excited whisper she then revealed to her friend the determination at which she had arrived. Flora heard her with deep interest: she understood the exact position of Helen, and she felt that this chance, desperate as it seemed, was the only one that offered her a gleam of hope for the future. She at once acquiesced in it, and pledged herself to obtain the co-operation of Lenox; with the assistance thus rendered, two human beings might be rescued from the brink of destruction, and their happiness finally secured.

As Flora arose to leave her, she said—

"I pledge you my word for what you ask, Helen; but are you strong enough to endure the fatigue that will be inevitable?"

"Oh, I can bear any thing but his present miserable condition. Doubt me not, Flora: kiss me now, dear friend, and to-morrow bring me a confirmation of your promises in behalf of Mr. Lenox."

"Of his assistance have not a doubt, for, like ourselves, he believes Clinton innocent."

On the following morning another brief colloquy was held between the friends; and when Flora left, after taking a tender leave of Helen, she lay for hours in a state of excitement which was happiness compared with the condition of mind that had preceded it. Toward evening she arose, and sat up a short time; then, fearful of exhausting her strength before the hour required for its exertion arrived, she lay down again.

It was a wild, gusty night, and promised rain before day again dawned; but this did not deter Helen from perseverance in her design. She thought the servant would never sleep, but at length the welcome sound of deep and regular breathing came to her ear. She softly arose, put on a traveling dress, then wrapping a shawl over her, she took a small bundle in her hand, carefully opened the door, and with light steps descended the staircase.

The hall door was easily unlocked, and with nervous haste she turned the heavy key, passed rapidly beneath the portal, and breathed the free air of heaven. Helen descended the wide flight of steps leading into the yard, and with one look back at the walls in which she had endured so much oppression, left them behind her forever.

There was no room for regret in her heart.

Not one sigh could she then afford to give to the severance of the ties which had so long held her; her onward course engrossed her to the exclusion of every other thought, for on the events of the next few hours depended life not only to herself, but to one far dearer than self.

A wild storm raged during the latter part of the night—majestic forest-trees were torn from their roots, and hurled by the resistless blast far from their recent beds. The creek, so lately a limpid stream, murmuring peacefully over its sandy bed, was heard moaning and rushing with the resistless sweep of waters momentarily increasing in volume and power. The awful reverberations of thunder filled the air with a continued roar, and the vivid lightning incessantly flashed over the scene of destruction.

A frightened group had risen from their beds, and the voice of Mrs. Wilmot was heard calling on the household to assemble in the hall, as that would probably be the safest place, in case any serious accident should befall the house.

As they rushed down the staircase a terrible crash was heard—the building shook to its foundations, and a vivid blue flame seemed to wrap it in its embrace. For an instant the glare overpowered the feeble light of the candle carried by one of the frightened servants, and the hall below was illuminated by the lurid gleam.

"Where is Helen?" asked her uncle. "We have not thought of her; the thunderbolt has fallen on that side of the house in which her room is situated."

A faint cry escaped Mrs. Somers. Her dull feelings seemed aroused from their usual apathy, and she hurried toward her daughter's apartment, followed by Mrs. Wilmot. They soon gained it, and on throwing open the door, they found the servant-girl lying across it, apparently lifeless: the electric fluid had entered the room just above the bedstead, and set fire to the drapery which hung around it.

To tear this down, and smother the flames with the bed-clothing, was the work of a moment; but to their horror and dismay their repeated calls on the name of Helen received no reply. The shaded lamp still burned in a distant corner, and there was sufficient light to reveal the fact that Helen was not in the room.

The last crash seemed to have exhausted the violence of the storm, and there was a sensible lull in the war of elements without. Those who had been left below ventured to ascend to ascertain the fate of Helen; the insensible negress was raised from the floor, and cold water poured over her until she revived, but she could give no account of her mistress. She had lain in the bed apparently asleep when the woman had last seen her; and with rolling eyes, she muttered something about "master coming back to take her with him."

It was now believed that in her fright Helen had risen and rushed from the room. Search

was vainly made throughout the house, and then those who had shown such callous disregard of the mental anguish they had inflicted, shuddered at the imagination of the physical ills she might endure, exposed to the inclemency of such a night.

The storm yet raged with too great violence to permit any one to leave the house, and two hours of mortal apprehension were endured by those alarmed watchers, before a gleam of cold gray light appeared to reveal the waste left by the wild tornado, which now wailed in fitful, dying gusts around the desolate mansion.

The instant it was practicable to do so, Mrs. Wilmot issued from the door, followed by Mrs. Somers, moaning and wringing her hands, and commenced the search herself. The conservatory lay a heap of ruins before her; but even this calamity was unheeded, amidst the greater one of Helen's disappearance.

The servants spread themselves over the grounds in every direction, but in vain: no trace of her could be found. With a sinking heart her aunt then led the way to the creek. It was full from bank to bank, and went roaring and eddying through its abrupt windings, like a spirit of evil suddenly freed, and given power to devastate all within its reach.

This cold, unrelenting woman, who had held a grasp of iron on the helpless girl thrown within her power, at last awoke to the enormity of the crime she had perpetrated against her. She fully believed that her niece had been driven to the last resource of hopeless wretchedness, and, as if in confirmation of her fears, a shout from one of the men was heard, and he came toward her, displaying a shawl and handkerchief known at once as the property of Helen.

Mrs. Somers, too lately aroused to feeling for her unhappy child, fainted, and was carried back to the house, followed by the others in mournful procession, bearing with them the tokens of the hapless girl's fate.

When the waters subsided, the creek was dragged for her body, but with scarcely a hope of success; for the wild stream bore every thing before it, and she must have been swept far beyond their reach.

So soon as the ford was practicable, a servant was dispatched to Braeburn with the account of Helen's disappearance and probable fate. He immediately returned with the information that the family had departed on the preceding evening for Oleanda, the residence of Mr. Lenox.

Late in the evening a rider from F—— came to Bellevue, bringing the news of the escape of Clinton from prison on the previous night. So soon as his flight was discovered, an active pursuit had commenced; but up to the time of his departure nothing had been heard from him. This scarcely produced a sensation among those who were weeping the tears of too lately awakened contrition and remorse for the loss of the gentle spirit which had passed forever from among them.

CHAPTER XXIV.

DR. LEDRU sat in his little room in the cottage, wrapped in a reverie of chagrin and disappointment. His anger at the disappearance of Linda Munroe was more terrible than even Dorecas had anticipated; and the recollection of previous faithful services of many years' duration alone obtained the pardon of that gossiping slave.

Believing that the quadroom would probably seek her late home, he had lost no time in sending a runner on her track to warn Lenox of her vicinity, even if he failed to arrest her before she reached Braeburn. An accident happened to the machinery of the steamer on which the officer embarked, and before he succeeded in reaching the place of his destination the murder of Hilton had been perpetrated, and no trace of the quadroom was to be found.

The man delivered the letter with which he was charged to Lenox, and to the dismay of the latter, he ascertained that the danger which menaced his lovely bride was not averted. He concealed this from Mr. Forrester, but urged their immediate departure for Oleanda, in the belief that on his own place he could more securely protect Flora from any desperate attempt on the part of her unscrupulous enemy.

The interview between the two friends hastened their movements, and preparations were made for immediate departure. The officer set out on his return on the same day, bearing an answer from Lenox, urging Dr. Ledru to renew his vigilance, and, if possible, recapture the woman.

Baffled and annoyed he retired to the solitude of his cottage to ruminate on his recent defeat, and devise schemes to obtain possession of his former captive. It was a stormy night; for it was the same on which the tornado passed over Bellevue; but there its violence was not felt. The wind occasionally swept past in mournful cadence, and the light dashes of rain upon the casements only gave an additional sense of comfort to the carpeted room with its gleaming fire-light and cushioned chairs.

Candles had not yet been brought in, and the physician sat absorbed in his own thoughts; several times he fancied he heard a noise in the room lately tenanted by the quadroom; but in the preoccupation of his mind he suffered it to pass unheeded. Presently the door which opened into it stealthily unclosed, and a figure appeared in the open space: it paused a moment, then slowly advanced, and noiselessly sank on a vacant seat near him. A motion of the hand threw back a large hood, and revealed the pale, worn face of

a woman, around which fell short curls of raven hair. Her eyes, large, fierce, and brilliant, were fixed exultingly upon the bowed form of the pre-occupied man, and the lips wore a smile of such fearful meaning as might send the blood with a shiver to the heart of the bravest who read its import.

Suddenly the fire blazed up; a burning brand fell upon the hearth, and Dr. Ledru stooped forward to replace it. As he raised himself his eye fell on the apparition beside him: a start, an exclamation, and a spring forward to clutch the form and test its reality, were the work of an instant.

"You need not grasp me so violently, for I have voluntarily returned," said the intruder, calmly. "The deed is done, which can not be recalled, and now I care not what becomes of myself. Give me over to the tender mercies of the law if you choose, for I have avenged my wrongs."

"What do you mean? Speak, woman—what crime have you committed?"

Linda laughed wildly as she busied her fingers with extricating something from the folds of her dress. She at length drew forth a small silver case, and held it toward him.

"This is what you tortured me to obtain—what I sent you on a fruitless errand to find, while I made my escape. Take it; I have regained it that you may be enabled to save *her* life to be a perpetual mourning. The beloved one lies stark and cold; and I bid you restore health to her, now the charm of existence has forever departed."

Dr. Ledru seized the precious boon thus offered, and secured it in a cabinet which stood near with a feeling of happiness that made him almost pity the wretched being before him, when she learned that Lenox yet lived. This done, he turned toward her, and said—

"Your hand, then, fired the fatal shot on the night of the wedding?"

"It did. Nerved by jealousy I felt strong to destroy his life sooner than see it prolonged to bless another. Lenox sleeps his last slumber, and I am ready to offer myself as an expiation for the crime."

"Will you give me this in writing, Linda, that I may save the unhappy young man who has been accused of the crime?"

"I will. I do not desire that *my* deed should lead to the destruction of another."

The doctor drew forth pen and paper, and wrote rapidly, while Linda approached closely to the

fire, and seemed to enjoy the warmth it diffused over her chilled and fatigued frame. The light was sufficient to permit him to accomplish his task; and then, without reading the record, the quadron at his bidding signed her name.

Then seizing her arm he held her firmly, while he looked sternly in her face, and said—

"Do you know what you have just confessed?"

"Yes," she replied, with singular apathy; "the murder of George Lenox—of the man I loved. Without him life is not endurable. I have sent him to the land of spirits, and I seek to follow him as soon as may be."

"Know, then, wretched woman, that by an unseen power your terrible intention was defeated: another received the contents of your weapon; Charles Hilton was killed, and Lenox yet lives."

A faint sound, as of one struggling for breath, came from the lips of the quadron, and she fell forward, as if suddenly bereft of life. Dr. Ledru called loudly for lights, and when Dorcas came in with them, he was kneeling on the floor supporting the head of Linda, while a dark stream welled from her lips.

The suddenness of the shock, combined with her previous state of excitement, was too much for her to sustain: a blood vessel in the lungs was ruptured, and the tide of life gushed forth so impetuously as to threaten suffocation. The physician used such remedies as soon recalled her to a sense of what was passing around her, though for some moments she seemed bewildered. She felt for the case she had so lately given him, and an expression of ferocious anger darkened over her death-pale face, as she muttered—

"Gone—gone! She will triumph, and I shall die and be forgotten."

Then starting up, she grasped the hand of the doctor with convulsive force, and said—

"Unsay those words. He is dead! You but mocked me. Tell me that my aim was true, and I shall die contented."

"You must die, Linda, whether you are contented to do so or not. Unless you subdue this agitation your life is not worth twenty-four hours' purchase."

"Be it so; only tell me if it is not true that I go to join him my hand has already sent to the shades of eternity."

"You may, indeed, go to join him you destroyed; for from all accounts he was little better than yourself. Hilton was killed—Lenox escaped unharmed. How it happened I know not. You are an inexperienced shot, I presume, and that accounts for his preservation."

Again there was a frightful hemorrhage, and she lay back on the couch to which they had conveyed her, panting, pallid, and terrible; for the wild eyes gleamed more fiercely than ever. After a long silence, she muttered—

"Oh, for life! one month of life to blight the golden promise of their lives! Weak fool! my hand trembled—I closed my eyes as I raised the pistol; fired, and fled. The weapon veered from its aim, and gave doom to another. Baffled—

baffled at every point! I could almost believe that a guardian angel watches over them."

Dr. Ledru listened to her words.

"A good angel indeed guards the life of these noble beings you would sacrifice to your insane hate. The mercy of Heaven is also shown to you, in permitting you to die before punishment for your crime overtakes you."

"I can not die, for he yet lives! I dare not die," she exclaimed with violence. "Of what avail is all your boasted skill, if it can not save me?"

"I would exert it, Linda, could it restore you, questionable as the mercy would be, either to yourself or others; but it can not be. You have ruptured a most important blood-vessel, and with a person of quiet temperament the end must come in a few days; with one like you, a few hours will suffice to close the scene."

"I will be calm. I do not now wish to die. Send for a priest—I am a Catholic—let me have absolution for my sins."

"Poor creature! such forgiveness as an erring man may give shall be yours, if it will afford consolation to your last moments."

The husband of Dorcas was forthwith dispatched with a note from his master to a Romish clergyman, with whom he was well acquainted, summoning him without loss of time to receive the confession of the dying woman.

Before midnight the priest arrived, and was left alone with the wretched being he came to pardon and console. Death, which she had recklessly inflicted herself, she now shrank from: the grim conqueror came to her armed with all his terrors, but the greatest anguish was the knowledge that those to whom she had been the spirit of evil should have escaped her vengeance. Could she have carried them with her to that dread realm her spirit was about to enter, she would joyfully have laid down life; but to die as a crushed viper, whose venom is rendered innocuous, while the desire to destroy is strong as ever, was to be the consummation of her miserable destiny.

The priest, who was a mild, good man, shrank from the awful words of defiance and reckless impiety which escaped her lips, when he confirmed the assurance of the physician, that but few hours more of existence remained to her. Exhausted by her violent emotion, another gush of blood destroyed the last hope that she could live to behold again the light of day. The doctor was summoned to her assistance, and exerted his skill to give such relief as would afford time to perform the last services of the church to which she belonged. With earnest emphasis the prayers for the dying were repeated, and by a faint motion of her hand she indicated her willingness to make confession of her sins.

As this was under the eternal seal of secrecy, the physician began to fear that the mystery which surrounded her would forever elude him. He was extremely anxious to fathom it, and as the night waned, he sat beside the nearly insensible woman, and watched for some gleam of re-

viving consciousness with the most absorbing interest.

At length her large eyes unclosed; the glazing orbs had lost their late expression of defying scorn, for the film of death was rapidly settling over them. Her lips moved, and Dr. Ledru bent his head to catch the meaning of the whispered words that fell from them.

"If I reveal it not, Lenox will seek from others the key to the strange drama in which I have acted. I would not have it so: let my unhappy fate rest in oblivion, and suffer those who once knew me in a different sphere to remain in ignorance of my fallen state. You will find the record of my life written by myself, concealed in a false bottom beneath the trunk I brought with me to this place."

She then gave directions for finding the trunk, and from that time spoke no more. Just as a faint streak of rosy light appeared in the east, she ceased to breathe.

Dr. Ledru lost no time in dispatching an account of all that had occurred to Lenox. He also took such steps as were necessary to forward Linda Munroe's confession to the murder of Hilton, that the proceedings against Clinton might be stayed.

This done, he proceeded to the lodging-house in which Linda had rested on the night before he discovered her, and readily secured the trunk which she had left there. After attending the burial of the unhappy woman, he set out for Oleanda in the first steamer bound up the river, to deliver the interesting document in person.

The good doctor was welcomed with deep and grateful joy, as the bearer of new life to one of the household, and a release to all from the only fear which had darkened the happiness they enjoyed. Lenox lost no time in perusing the brief manuscript left by Linda Munroe, which ran as follows:

"Until I attained the age of twenty-five, I believed myself the legitimate daughter of a man of wealth. I was reared amidst the most lavish indulgence, and my father, who was indifferent to every thing else, seemed to regard me with pride and affection.

"From my childhood I was betrothed to the son of a neighboring planter, and the attachment I formed for him was so interwoven with the very fibres of my being, that death alone may sever the links that bound me to him. I was fierce, wayward, and unfeminine; he, noble, generous, and considerate. I mistook his forbearance toward me for love, but I was terribly undeceived. When he understood that his union with me was looked on by our families as settled, he refused positively to fulfill the contract.

"His friends urged on the marriage, and strong in his resolution to give up every thing sooner than his freedom of choice in an affair of such importance to his happiness, he abandoned his home, emigrated to the Southwest, and assumed the control of his own future fate.

"Rage, astonishment, but above all, bitter an-

guish, seized on me. It was my first disappointment, and God knows it was terrible enough to punish me for the life of idle self-indulgence I had hitherto lived. Words can never paint my sufferings, for I loved George Lenox with that fierce passion with which the lioness regards her young. I could have borne death for his sake, but the idea of another occupying toward him that relation I had long looked on as indubitably my own, filled me with frantic anger.

"My mind was soon made up as to my future course. My father's health was failing very fast, and the dissipation he habitually practiced I knew must soon hurry him to the grave. As his only child, I should then become mistress of a large estate, and my first intention was to seek out my recreant lover, insist upon the fulfillment of the engagement he had permitted to deceive me so long, and in the event of his refusal, destroy both him and myself.

"Several years passed away, and still the old man lingered, while his unnatural child watched his wasting strength with fierce impatience. I did not make any efforts to overcome the passion I felt for the absent one. I was resolved that he who had refused me should yet reverse his decision, or become the victim of the woman whose pride he had so deeply outraged.

"At length the hour I regarded as that of my release arrived. My father died suddenly, and I believed myself free to act as I pleased. His body was scarcely consigned to the grave when I commenced my preparations for departure. I intended to set out at once for New Orleans, where I doubted not I should be able to trace him I desired to find. An agent was placed in charge of my plantation.

"Mine! oh, mockery!—yet, let me not anticipate. The last evening of my intended stay beneath my paternal roof arrived, and wearied with the varied employments of the day, I retired early to rest. I had slept but few moments, when the dashing of a carriage to the door, attended with the bustle of an unexpected arrival, aroused me. I sent a servant down to ascertain who honored me with so late a visit; the answer returned was, that Edward Munroe, the son of my father's only brother, was below, and would be glad to have an interview with me at as early an hour as possible on the following morning.

"This announcement filled me with amazement and indignation. The two families had been estranged for years, and I knew that my deceased father would have regarded the presence of his nephew beneath his roof as an insult to himself. I arose instantly, dressed myself, and descended to my usual sitting-room, where I found my cousin established as much at his ease as if he had spent his life on the spot. He arose with an air of familiarity, which at once revealed his want of refinement, and offered me his hand. I coldly repulsed it, and asked him to what cause I was indebted for the honor of his visit. He bluntly said—

"The old cove's dead, Miss Linda, and it is time for his heirs to look about them."

"His heirs!" I haughtily replied. "Who should be his heir but his daughter?"

"Ah—h! did the old fellow leave a will, my pretty cousin? for you are pretty, in spite of—"

He paused, and regarded me with such an expression as made me grow faint and cold. I rallied, however, and replied, that no will was necessary, as I was undoubtedly entitled to all my father died possessed of.

"We shall see to that. No will—then the case is a very plain one."

"I do not understand you," I said. "Your language is as incomprehensible as your presence is unwelcome beneath this roof. You well know that during the life of my father you would never have dared to enter his house."

"But times are changed, Miss Linda," he said, with insolent coolness. "The old one's gone, and a man always has the right to enter his own house."

"I was nearly speechless with rage at this assertion. Yet there was a confidence in my cousin's manner of proclaiming his right, that frightened me. I answered in such a manner as to arouse his anger, and then, without further preparation, came the appalling revelation he came prepared to prove.

"My father married a feeble and weak-spirited woman, whom he treated with that want of delicacy and tenderness a man of his habits would naturally be destitute of. She was one of the numerous offerings at the shrine of necessity; she was poor, and imagined that in obtaining a home and wealth contentment at least would be secured. Too late she found her mistake, and the few years she lived sufficed to prove to her that a life of labor would have been far preferable to the one she embraced. She died in the fourth year of their union, a victim, it was said, to a broken heart. On her death-bed she found means to make a well-attested revelation, which was conveyed at once to my uncle. By him it was sedulously kept from the knowledge of my father, lest a will in my favor should defeat his son's accession to the coveted wealth of his brother.

"Mrs. Munroe stated that her only child—a daughter—had perished when only a few hours old; the infant of a quadroon slave was then brought to her, and she was commanded by her husband to receive it in place of the one which had just died. She resisted, but was forced to comply; the dead infant was carried to the cabin of the slave and buried as her own. My father himself was the sole agent of this fraud, and thus was I established in all the rights of the daughter of his wife.

"So far from being, as I had supposed, the heiress to my father's wealth, the appalling conviction was forced on me that I was, in reality, a slave myself, and dependent on the mercy of this man, who so coldly revealed to me the actual position in which I stood.

"Stunned, overpowered by my sudden fall, I overwhelmed my cousin with bitter maledictions, and ended the scene by falling into violent hysterical spasms. When I recovered the power of

thought, I reviewed my position; my uncle was dead, his son was the only child, and to him was confined the knowledge of the stigma that rested on me. If I could rid myself of him, I was safe.

"In my desperate resolve to be revenged on the man I loved, I had made the subtle effects of different poisons my study. There was an old Spaniard living near my father's plantation, who had the reputation of a necromancer; and the country people for many miles around consulted him as to the events of the future. I sought out this old creature. I know not by what arts he did so, but he read my soul as if it had been laid bare before him. From him I obtained a subtle powder, which, if inhaled in small quantities, will produce a species of apoplexy; the dose could then be increased, so as to destroy the victim, apparently in the most natural manner.

"My resolution was soon taken to use it on my cousin without delay, and to give him such a potion as would produce instant death. I requested him to visit me in my sick room; apologized for my violent language on the preceding evening, and begged that he would not remember it to my disadvantage.

"He seated himself beside the bed, and bluntly replied—

"Oh! I only looked on it all as the overflowing of a woman's spite; and really it is a great change for you now. I have been thinking it over in my mind, and I have concluded that as you have always looked on yourself as the owner of every thing here, and I do not want to be mean, I will give you your free papers, and two hundred dollars a year. Won't that be liberal, now?"

"I could have strangled him where he sat, but I repressed my feelings, and thanked him for his kindness. It was the spring of the year, and by my orders a magnolia bud had been brought in to me. It lay upon the bed, looking so pure and fair that no one would have dreamed of the deadly agent which lay folded in its leaves. After some further conversation, I carelessly took it up and commented on its beauty.

"As I anticipated, my cousin took it from me, and raised it toward his face. In the act he recoiled, dashed it from him, and stood trembling and white, but unharmed, before me. My heart died within me, for I felt that I was detected. Edward Munroe remained motionless some moments, and then carefully lifting the flower, he said—

"From childhood I have been peculiarly sensitive toward particular odors; the magnolia, however, has never before so affected me. I believe that this is poisoned. I have read of such things, and should it prove so, I will forget that ties of blood really unite us. I will revoke my promises, and sell you into slavery, so far away that by no possible chance shall we ever meet again."

"He left the room immediately, and I saw him no more that day. In the evening a note was brought to me, containing the following words:

"It is as I suspected; from this hour, consider yourself my slave, for as such I shall treat you. I do not choose to offer you for sale in the

neighborhood in which you have been received as an equal, and I have already written to a trader in Charleston, who will purchase you for the New Orleans market. I would recommend you to learn to sew neatly and expeditiously, and you may then be purchased as a seamstress by some wealthy planter. Your destiny shall never be known to those among whom you have been reared."

"This last assurance was at least some consolation. I knew that I was extremely unpopular among the neighboring families, for my pride, undisciplined temper, and disdain of appearances shocked and offended the prejudices of many. I was convinced in my own mind, however, that if known, this terrible change in my worldly prospects would powerfully appeal to their humanity, and at any price I would be rescued from my cousin's power. Yet my pride recoiled from the thought of owing any thing to those I had often treated with contemptuous coldness: let my fall at least be concealed from those who had known me under such different circumstances.

"I begged for mercy from my kinsman. I humbled myself in vain before him. The attempt I had made on his life convinced him that he would never be safe from my vengeance, unless I were so far removed from him as to render it impossible that I could injure him. By my attempt to poison him, my liberty for years must be forfeited, if I were tried for the offense, and he gave me my choice to bear the odium of my crime, or voluntarily to accept slavery as the alternative. Service as a criminal within prison walls, or service in the free air of heaven, was all that was left to me.

"In a paroxysm of rage, anger, and despair, I accepted the latter. I had been an unprincipled woman before this event, but this change in my destiny made me a demon. Hatred of every human being reigned in my heart, and in the bitterness of my soul I declared war against the whole race of which I had so lately deemed myself a member; while scorn and loathing, never felt before, awoke within me toward that inferior caste to which I now knew myself to be allied by blood.

"Edward Munroe then informed me that I must hold myself in readiness to accompany him to Charleston. At that point, those who had once known me would lose all trace of me; and as it was known that I was on the eve of depart-

ure from my paternal home, no inquiries would be made.

"I pass over that dreadful journey. I would have made an effort to escape, but I found myself too closely watched to hope for success. When we reached Charleston, my cousin brought me yellow powder, with which I stained my face at his command. The trader then came, and, on the condition of being better treated than the remainder of the gang, I was transferred to him at a merely nominal price.

"Pleased with his bargain, he made no inquiries that might have been difficult to answer, and I was at once transferred to the ship which was then ready to sail. In compliance with his engagement, I was not degraded to a level with the other slaves; but however favored, the change was a terrible one to a daughter of luxury and self-indulgence such as I had been. My sufferings only added bitterness to my temper, and I had left to me but one consolation—I was going where he whom I loved might be found.

"I would seek him out, remove from my skin the yellow stain, resume the station to which I had been reared, and demand justice at his hands. I believed it would be possible to accomplish this, for I had been permitted to retain my wardrobe, and I also possessed a considerable sum of money, together with some valuable jewels. With my original fairness restored, and attired in costly robes, no one would dream of identifying me as a fugitive slave.

"All my inquiries for Lenox proved fruitless; and at length, in sullen despair, I suffered myself to be transferred to a wealthy planter in Mississippi. Mr. Forrester had but one child—a daughter—and from the first hour I beheld her I instinctively hated her. She endeavored to render me contented in my dependent position, but her kindness only served to aggravate my detestation, for it made me feel how far superior she was to what I had ever been in my hour of pride and prosperity.

"Another cause was soon added. A lover came to visit her, and in him I recognized the one I had so long sought. At Braeburn I beheld him her successful wooer, and yet I did not strike her dead at my feet. I only forbore, to deal the blow more securely. My powder I still preserved, and—"

Here the manuscript broke off abruptly, but the reader could well follow her through her subsequent career.

CONCLUSION.

AUTUMN has again rolled around. Lenox and his fair wife have just returned from a northern tour, in time to be present at the marriage of Philip Maitland and the Ruby of Rose-neath.

Flora's health was quite restored. Dr. Ledru, after analyzing the powder obtained from Linda Munroe, found a remedy for its effects, which to his great joy rapidly counteracted the evil influence of the poison on the system of his interesting patient. Radiant in health and spirits appeared the young wife on her return to her native home.

Mrs. Wilmot had already consoled herself for the loss of Helen by bringing forward a younger sister, less lovely than Helen, but fair enough to gratify her pride by the admiration she attracted. The benefits purchased by the sacrifice of her daughter were secured to Mrs. Somers by a deed executed by Hilton previous to the union, and to the great vexation of his family, she drew from his estate an annuity which sufficed to educate her two sons, while Mrs. Wilmot honorably performed her part of the contract. The worldly mother, elated with the change in her own circumstances, soon ceased to think of the price given in exchange, and Helen's name was no longer pronounced among them, while the remembrance of her sad fate was tacitly cast into oblivion.

On the bridal evening, Flora went over to Rose-neath at an early hour to superintend Bessie's toilet, for she had declined having any bridesmaid. As the two friends stood together in Bessie's room, the latter sighed, and said—

"It is a year to-day, Flora, since you dined here with Mr. Lenox. Then poor Helen was with us: the recollection of her fate saddens me now."

"Let it no longer do so, Bessie, for Helen is now happy."

"Yes, in Heaven."

"No—on earth. The necessity for further

concealment ended to-day. This morning I had a letter from Helen herself, announcing her marriage with Mr. Clinton."

Bessie regarded her in bewildered surprise. She said—

"Helen living! Oh, Flora, why have you not revealed this to me before?"

"Because I dared not, lest you should incautiously betray it to Mrs. Wilmot, and with poor Helen so much was at stake that I could not run the slightest risk. Know that Mr. Lenox and myself aided both Helen and her lover to escape. She remained at Oleanda with us until we went to the North. She then accompanied me to Philadelphia, where I placed her under the protection of Clinton's sister, who has been married more than a year herself. At the expiration of six months from Hilton's death, Helen promised to unite her fate with that of her lover. They have now been married two weeks, and to-morrow I shall send a letter to Mrs. Somers from her daughter, informing her of what has occurred, and Helen's motives for acting as she did.

"And after all her sufferings, my dear Helen is happy! That is charming!" exclaimed Bessie, with delight.

"Happy as I trust you will be, dear Bessie," replied Flora, with a bright smile. "Happy as I really am."

"I did not once think I should marry Phil," said the bride, "but he seemed to consider it so impossible that I should accept any one else. My parents looked on the matter as settled, so you see there was no resource but to consent to the arrangement; thus I am to become Mrs. Maitland, without any romantic *contre temps*, such as you and Helen encountered. My destiny seems a failure, it is so commonplace."

"Thank Heaven that it is so, my dear friend. Be grateful that happiness, undimmed by fear or anguish, has been yours. Would it were a more common lot!"

THE END.