

Mrs. J. H. Wilson

A NEW WAY
Pedigree
TO WIN A FORTUNE.

BY

MISS ELIZA A. DUPUY.

AUTHOR OF "THE DISCARDED WIFE," "WHY DID HE MARRY HER," "THE HIDDEN SIN,"
"THE CLANDESTINE MARRIAGE," "THE DETHRONED HEIRESS," "THE GIPSY'S WARNING,"
"WAS HE GUILTY; OR, HOW HE DID IT," "THE MYSTERIOUS GUEST,"
"ALL FOR LOVE," "WHO SHALL BE VICTOR," "MICHAEL RUDOLPH,"
"THE CANCELLED WILL," "THE PLANTER'S DAUGHTER," ETC., ETC.

*Let not one look of fortune cast you down;
She were not fortune, if she still did frown:
Such as do braveliest bear her scorns a while,
Are those on whom at last she most will smile.*

*Since you will buckle fortune on my back,
To bear her burden whether I will or no,
I must have patience to endure the load.*

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CONTENTS.

| Chapter | Page |
|---|------|
| I.—THE DESMONDS..... | 21 |
| II.—CLARE DESMOND'S LOVER..... | 32 |
| III.—A PAIR OF PLOTTING VILLAINS..... | 45 |
| IV.—FATHER AND DAUGHTER..... | 56 |
| V.—LACERATED HEARTS..... | 67 |
| VI.—MRS. ADAIR'S LETTER..... | 77 |
| VII.—CHRISTINE LEARNS CLARE'S SECRET..... | 89 |
| VIII.—THE LOVE-CHARM..... | 102 |
| IX.—MR. DESMOND FOILED..... | 114 |
| X.—CLARE'S NEW FRIEND..... | 124 |
| XI.—THE DEPARTURE FOR RIVERDALE..... | 139 |
| XII.—CLARE'S RECEPTION IN HER NEW HOME..... | 151 |
| XIII.—WHO CLAUDIA COYLE WAS..... | 164 |
| XIV.—CLARE'S NEW ADMIRER..... | 177 |
| XV.—THE CHEMIST'S ROOM..... | 189 |
| XVI.—MISS COYLE'S GAME BLOCKED..... | 201 |
| XVII.—MRS. ADAIR'S REVELATION..... | 216 |
| XVIII.—NEW FRIENDS..... | 229 |
| XIX.—THE BROOKE FAMILY..... | 243 |
| XX.—THE SYMPOSIUM..... | 255 |
| XXI.—GREEK MEETS GREEK..... | 267 |

| Chapter | Page |
|--|------|
| XXII.—CLAUDIA GETS THE UPPER HAND..... | 281 |
| XXIII.—CROSS PURPOSES..... | 294 |
| XXIV.—CLARE ENSNARED..... | 307 |
| XXV.—A CONSULTATION BETWEEN SPIERS AND CLAUDIA.. | 319 |
| XXVI.—MR. CLIFFORD'S DISCOVERY..... | 331 |
| XXVII.—THE CHEMISTS AT WORK..... | 343 |
| XXVIII.—MRS. HARTE'S GAME..... | 355 |
| XXIX.—CLAUDIA VICTORIOUS..... | 370 |
| XXX.—THE LOVERS..... | 380 |
| XXXI.—CLAUDIA STRIKES HER BLOW..... | 393 |
| XXXII.—DEATH ENTERS RIVERDALE..... | 406 |
| XXXIII.—CLARE'S SUFFERINGS..... | 418 |
| XXXIV.—MISS BROOKE CAUGHT NAPPING..... | 429 |
| XXXV.—THE OLD NURSE EXAMINED..... | 446 |
| XXXVI.—YOUNG BEAL'S STORY..... | 459 |
| XXXVII.—JASPER'S MISTAKE..... | 472 |
| XXXVIII.—THE ABDUCTION..... | 485 |
| XXXIX.—LUCK TURNS AGAINST JOHN SPIERS..... | 491 |
| XL.—THE PURSUIT..... | 496 |
| XLI.—CONCLUSION..... | 507 |

Ed. Wilson
Dupuy

A NEW WAY TO WIN A FORTUNE.

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CHAPTER I.

THE DESMONDS.

A COTTAGE stood on the outskirts of a southern town, with wide-spread desolate-looking grounds around it. Land was of little value in that region; and Desmonia, as the place was called, had a domain of fifty acres around it, a few of which were cultivated as a vegetable garden and corn-field, the rest allowed to grow up in scrub timber and long grass.

But the trees that drooped their patriarchal branches over the decaying roof were magnificent giant monarchs of the forest, with space enough left between them to spread out into a crown of verdure, which delighted the heart of at least one of the dwellers in that dilapidated-looking house.

That an indolent, careless man lived there was evident to the most casual observer; and on a bright afternoon in early summer a view of the owner which carried out

this impression might have been obtained, as he sat on the low-roofed veranda, idly smoking, in his comfortable but shabby-looking arm-chair.

Mr. Desmond was a man of forty-five years of age, but he looked much older. Life had gone hardly with him, chiefly through his own inaptitude to apply himself to business affairs; but that did not lessen his murmurs at the partiality of the blind goddess toward those more capable of winning her smiles, nor give him courage to bear the misfortunes that had befallen him in his career.

He was not like Micawber, for he did not look for anything to turn up in his favor, but sat down to mourn over lost opportunities and reconcile himself to the belief that nothing could now lift himself and his family from the slough of poverty into which they had fallen.

He had tried mercantile life, banking, speculations in various commodities, and always came out a loser, chiefly because he was careless, extravagant in his expenditures when money was coming in from any source, and utterly incompetent to manage the large undertakings which had brought him to ruin.

The son of an Irish gentleman of some fortune, Reginald Desmond had emigrated to Virginia in early life, bringing with him his portion of the paternal inheritance, amounting to six thousand pounds. He married a young girl of French descent, endowed with all the gayety and fondness for pleasure of the race from which she sprang.

Both husband and wife thought their means ample, for Mrs. Desmond owned the cottage home in which they now vegetated and several well-trained house servants.

A style of living was inaugurated which soon made heavy inroads on Desmond's fortune, and in an evil hour he undertook to reinstate himself by "going in business," as he expressed it.

The years passed on; no luxury was denied to his family, though loss after loss fell heavily upon its head, and two years before my story opened the final crash came. From the wreck was saved the home and slaves, with an income of four hundred dollars a year, derived from property left by a brother of Mrs. Desmond, for her sole use and benefit.

There were three children: two daughters of seventeen and fifteen years of age, and a son four years younger; and on this pittance a family of five persons, accustomed to every indulgence, was compelled to live.

Desmond was a kind-hearted man, and a liberal one, and it was little wonder that the change in his fortunes had silvered his raven locks and traced deep lines upon his brow. He had been a very handsome man, and still retained his fine figure and gentlemanly air, in spite of his shabby surroundings and neglected dress.

He had no heart to look after his small domain, and the one old negro man whose business it was to keep the place in such order as he could was left to manage in his own way, without interference from his master.

Desmond lounged away his days, reading, smoking and wondering for what purpose he had been created, since he had failed in everything he had undertaken. Like most men on whom disaster falls after middle-age, he seemed to have lost all energy and hope; so he accepted his fate as an accomplished fact, though he did not try to bear it with philosophy.

The sound of a young voice blithely singing came from the interior of the house, and Desmond frowned slightly as he muttered:

"I ought to feel glad that the child can sing, in spite of our changed prospects, but it grates on my ears when I feel as downcast as I do this evening. Heigh-ho! this is a poor world, and I and mine have come down to fill a very humble place in it. There is nothing to look forward to—*nothing*."

"What is that you are saying, Dessy, darling?" asked a cheerful voice at his elbow. "'Care killed a cat.' What is the use of moaning over what cannot be helped? We've got bread to eat, and a roof over us, and we ought to be thankful for that."

The speaker had issued from a window opening to the floor from the room to which his back was turned.

She was a small, plump woman, with bright black eyes, well-cut features, and an expression of gay good-humor which nothing could daunt.

"It is well enough for you to say that, Nettie, because the roof and the bread are both of your own providing. I am fit for nothing, for I have only made a mess of everything I have attempted, however fair the prospect was in the beginning. It is hard to sit down and feel that I am only a cumberer of the earth, unable to help myself or those that look to me for a suitable start in life."

"You dreadful old fellow! how do you dare to talk so to me? Isn't what is mine yours? And haven't I spent for you thousands and thousands that would have paid for this old place over and over again? You gave me everything I fancied I could want as long as you had

the means, and now you talk about *me* giving you house and home. It's—it's absurd, and I won't have it."

"It is true, any way, darling, and you can't deny it. We had a good time when the money was in hand; but now it's all gone, I can't help thinking what a fool I was not to invest my means in lands and negroes. We would have been rich if I had; but, you see, I thought I could find a shorter way to fortune than digging in the ground, and this is what I've come to;" and he waved his hand toward the neglected grounds lying around him.

"And it's a very good something to come to, too, if we will only make the best of it. I am going to have the undergrowth cleared away from the fields that have lain idle so long, and I am going to plant a crop; guess what it is now!" and a laugh, that was so contagious he could not help joining in it, burst from her rosy lips.

"Goodness knows! The land won't bring corn, for it is too poor, and it is too late now to get anything out of it this year."

"Oh, I am looking to the future. Next year we will make our fortune out of—you'll never guess, so I'll tell you—*Peanuts*! Now what do you think of that?"

Desmond laughed again.

"I think you are trying to raise my spirits, that is all, Nettie."

"Indeed I am not—I am in earnest, and if I can only find some money to start with, I know we can do as well as other people. Why, there is an old man living on a small place not more than ten miles from here, and he has made a little fortune in the last two years on his crop of peas. I am going to turn agriculturist; I mean to show you what I can do as a tiller of the soil."

Again her cheery laugh rang out, but Desmond did not join in it this time; he bitterly said:

"That old fellow might succeed, because he had something to start on; but you have nothing. The money that comes quarterly to you barely serves to meet our expenses. We have sold everything that could be spared; the jewels I decorated you with, with so much pride in our palmy days, have all been sacrificed to meet our necessities, and the mere attempt to prepare the ground for cultivation would involve an expenditure of several hundred dollars."

His wife looked anxious a few moments, but she presently smiled cheerfully and said:

"'Where there's a will, there's a way,' Dessy. We can begin on a small scale, you know, and once fairly started it will be easy enough to get on. I've been reading that queer life of Jung Stilling, and when he prayed earnestly for help in his darkest hours it always came to him in a most unexpected manner. Well, I've been praying, too, and the good Father will send us the aid we need. I feel as if He will surely help those who try to help themselves."

Her voice trembled slightly, and her bright eyes were humid with unshed tears; for this brave little woman had a tender heart, deep love for husband and children, and an earnest, helpful spirit, which impelled her to use every effort to sustain the drooping courage of the former, and to plan, from day to day, some new method of adding something to their means of living.

The eldest daughter was a good musician, and, much to the disgust and annoyance of her father, she had accepted an engagement in the neighboring town to give

instruction in that art in a small private school, for which service she was paid very poorly.

Mr. Desmond arose and took his wife in his arms as he said, in a choking voice:

"Your faith, your energy are a sad reproach to me, Nettie. I can only sit and dream over the disappointments of my life, while you are always trying to do something to alleviate the poverty into which my ill success has plunged all that are dear to me. I know that I have become a sad drone; but what can I do, dear? Everything I have tried has proved a failure, and I am really afraid to attempt anything else, lest I may risk the little that is left to us."

She shook her head energetically.

"*That* must not be touched—cannot, in fact, for the money was left to me. I could mortgage the place, it is true; but I dare not risk the loss of our home. Couldn't you get something to do in Portsmouth, dear? You are a good book-keeper, and you have friends there, you know. The town is only a mile from here, and the walk to and fro would do you good."

An expression of angry pain swept over Desmond's face, and he almost curtly said:

"I thought you understood how impossible that is. I have sought employment till I felt sick and degraded; but no one wanted about them an unlucky fellow like myself. Since I have made a mess of my own affairs, they very naturally think I would mismanage all of theirs that were intrusted to me. If I had strength to labor with my hands, I might perhaps get something to do in the navy yard; but I've lived the life of a gentleman, and if I tried daily labor I should only break

down, and give you the additional trouble of nursing me."

"My dear, you hurt me when you speak that way. I thought your friends would help you to some suitable employment; but if they will not, you must assist me here. There is a great deal to be done on the place, for it has run to weeds while we lived in Norfolk. The people we rented it to took no care of anything, and since we have lived here we have done little better. It is not good for you to live so idly, Dessie, darling; you sit and brood over your misfortunes till I sometimes fear they will produce melancholy madness. There, I've spoken out the fear that haunts me, and I hope you will forgive me, my dear husband."

Desmond looked down on her with a smile in his eyes, though his lips twitched nervously.

"I cannot be angry with you, Nettie, for expressing a dread that has, at times, come over myself. But half the people who know us would say that so indolent a man as I have become would not ever have *vim* enough to go mad. I believe I have sat down and taken things as they came quite long enough, leaving the burden and the heat of the day on you. I am going to turn over a new leaf, and to-morrow we'll start on another tack. I'll set about mending the broken fences, and see if I can't give old Cæsar a lift. That will be better than moping and reading till I am half blind, eh? How does that suit you, little wife?"

"That will be famous! Just make an effort, Dessy, and you'll see that God *will* help those that are willing to do something for themselves."

Desmond smiled faintly.

"You are like Mrs. Chick when she lamented over Mrs. Dombey. I hope *your* patient, though, will have more strength to rally than poor Fanny had. I have been reading that book to-day, trying to beguile the wearisome hours in the company of its genial author. But I'll not let even Dickens keep me from work to-morrow. You'll see I am roused out of my apathy, and I am going to see what virtue there is in mending fences and knocking around generally."

Mrs. Desmond accepted this assurance as the hopeful dawning of a better day. She was ten years younger than her husband, and her sanguine temperament buoyed her up and kept her youthful in heart and in appearance; for she might easily have passed for the sister of her eldest daughter.

Suddenly Mr. Desmond asked:

"Where is Clare? She should have been home an hour ago, and I do not like her lingering on the way from town in this way. Did Victor go to meet her, as I told him?"

"He always comes with her on school-days, but this is Saturday, and Clare said it was no use for her brother to come for her, as she meant to be back before dark; so I let Victor go off on some expedition of his own. The sun is only setting, and Clare will be here quite safe before night."

Mr. Desmond looked deeply annoyed, and he came nearer to his wife, and lowered his voice, as he asked:

"Have you not suspected the reason why I wished the boy to be her companion on her homeward walk? Has she never said anything to you of her acquaintance with that young apothecary in town, John Spiers? I have

been told more than once that he is madly in love with her, and that he avails himself of every opportunity of seeing her alone, though he dares not show himself here, the low-born cur! It makes my blood tingle to think of his father's son daring to suppose that loss of fortune has brought *my* daughter on a level with the son of the man who only escaped punishment for forgery through the clemency of the man whose name he had used."

Mrs. Desmond changed color slightly, but she quietly replied:

"You must be mistaken about young Spiers. Clare has never spoken of him to me; and if there is anything between them, I am sure she would have done so. I have always had her confidence, and she is too young to think of such things as love and marriage."

"She is a year older than you were when I married you. I am afraid Clare is not so open as you think, for she has certainly been seen walking homeward with Spiers, and I have noticed, of late, that Victor generally gets home from school some time before our daughter appears. If you question the lad, he will tell you, I fear, that he was sent forward to leave the field open for his sister's lover."

"If you have heard so much, and suspected so much, why have you not taken measures yourself to put an end to their acquaintance?" asked Mrs. Desmond, with some fire.

"I did speak to the young man the last time I was in town, and let him know very plainly that he should not pursue my daughter either openly or clandestinely. But you see the girl lingers, and I am almost sure they are together."

"If you had hinted anything of this to me, I would not have permitted Clare to go to Portsmouth to-day. She only went to call on a sick friend."

"Hum! an excuse—a mere excuse, I am afraid. I don't like to suspect the child of duplicity, but I fear she has taken a fancy to that bandit-looking young man. Girls have so much sentimental nonsense in their heads, that there is no knowing what one of them may do."

"I hope *our* daughter will better understand what is due to herself than to encourage John Spiers. Why, the family takes no position in the town, and his mother is a vulgar, uneducated woman, who says thar, and ha'r. I heard her talking in the shop once."

"But they have made some money—not much, but enough to encourage the youth in his pretensions. He doubtless thinks, because we are so poor, Clare may be induced to listen to him. She is not happy here, my dear, and she may foolishly think that any change will be for the better. Besides, she may fancy that she is lightening the burden on you."

"Poor child! she is already doing all she can to lighten it by teaching music. She does not get much, it is true, but every little helps. I do not think she is happy, for she writhes under our changed circumstances; but she is far too proud to accept young Spiers, and go as a penniless bride to a house in which money is regarded as the first good."

"You must talk seriously with her, Nettie, and I'll speak this time to old Spiers himself, and tell him what I think about his son's conduct. I agree with you that he will be as much opposed to such a match as we are;

but *we* have the best grounds for opposition, and he knows it, the smooth-tongued old villain!"

"Don't get excited, dear; and above all, don't get into a fuss with Mr. Spiers. It would only make a talk, and bring Clare's name unpleasantly before the public."

"That is true, and I promise to be careful. But I will go to meet my girl, and see for myself what is detaining her so late."

Without another word he threw on his Panama, and hastened toward the gate.

CHAPTER II.

CLARE DESMOND'S LOVER.

WHILE this conversation was going on, two young people were loitering slowly along the shaded road that led toward Desmonia, and both seemed very well pleased to linger, and talk over the future which the young man was trying to induce the girl to share with him.

The girl was petite, slender, and perfectly formed, with a piquant face, the nose slightly *retroussé*, deep violet blue eyes, with black hair and eyebrows, a wilful little mouth, and a complexion radiantly soft and fair, with the clearest rose tint on cheeks and lips. She was very lovely, and so thought the young man, who seldom removed his bold black eyes from her charming face.

John Spiers was the ideal of Conrad the Corsair, as more than one romantic young miss had declared. He

was six feet high, well developed, without any superfluous flesh, and was really rather a dashing, imposing-looking person. His face was dark, and rather fierce-looking; his features were well formed, but his mouth was coarse, and his chin heavy. These defects he managed to conceal by a silky mustache and pointed beard, both of which were tenderly cared for every day. His dress was fashionable, and on his long, nervous-looking fingers he wore several rings. In one hand he carried a slender cane, with which he struck down the mullein stalks and weeds that bordered the pathway they were walking on.

He was speaking earnestly to Clare Desmond, for she it was who walked beside him, and listened, half pleased, half alarmed, to his earnest protestations of undying affection.

"I love you, Clare, as the one hope of my life. I have been a wild fellow, and I have given my father some trouble; but I have settled down to hard work now, and I mean to redeem myself. When I came back from Rio two years ago, I gave up the sea, tired of the hard and uncertain life of a sailor. I have been in the shop with my father since then, and I have made such good use of my time that I am now as good an apothecary as he is. A man that understands putting up prescriptions is always sure of a good salary, and I can support you in as good style as you were used to before your father failed. See, my sweet love, how much you would gain by coming to me as my wife."

With a pouting lip, Miss Desmond replied:

"You are always urging on me the material advantages of marrying you, Mr. Spiers, as if you give more weight to them than to your own merits. Papa is poor,

no doubt, and it is a great change for me to have to come down to teaching music for a mere pittance; but I fancy, I had better do that than to marry you without the consent of either your parents or mine."

"How coldly you reason, Clare! You have my fate in your hands, and to you I appeal to save me from—from *myself*. With you, I could be good, true and happy. Without you, God knows to what temptations I may listen. I am not naturally a bad man, Clare, but my nature is a tempestuous one, and without you as my guardian angel, I do not know what demon may not gain an influence over me."

The girl changed color, and rather tremulously said:

"I—I am not used to such fiery people, and I am afraid, if I undertook such a charge as you, with the tempestuous nature you spoke of, that I might fail to be a spirit of peace to you. I am not an angel, but a mortal, with too many faults of my own to play such a part as you propose to the husband who ought to guide me."

"You are too prosaic, my love, and you purposely misunderstand me. I ask you, a young, pure girl, to save a human soul fluttering on the verge of—of the wild chaos of his own passions. You can make me noble and true as you are yourself; but if you refuse to hold out your dear hand to me, I must sink down—down—down into an abyss from which a lost spirit will ever cry out to you, 'You might have saved me, but, like the Pharisee, you walked on the other side, and would not.'"

This was nonsense, as no one knew better than the man who uttered it in his most dramatic manner. He watched its effect on the inexperienced creature who

lingered beside him, and saw that she grew pale and trembled.

"It is terrible to talk that way, Mr. Spiers, and—and you frighten me so much that I hardly know what to think of such strange love-making. If you have no strength to lift yourself out of that dreadful abyss you talked of, how could a poor, weak girl like me keep you from it?"

"*How!* By sustaining my courage for the battle of life; by breathing into my heart the spirit of peace that dwells like a dove in your own. Oh, Clare! the love I feel for you can mould me into a new man, if you will only be mine—forever mine! If you cast me off, I shall become reckless. This 'mortal coil' will become too heavy a burden to bear, and I will shuffle it off with the aid of some of my father's drugs, or a stab through the heart you disdained to accept."

He looked so tragic, played his part so well, that the poor girl was now thoroughly alarmed; but she was also indignant at the threat he had uttered. She gravely said:

"Your life is not your own to throw away at your pleasure. If I refuse you, I hardly think that you will commit suicide, wildly as you talk. You have managed to live very well without me all these years, and you would do it again, even if I were taken so far away from you that you could never see me again."

"*That* would be my only chance to recover from the insane passion that has mastered my whole being. Yet I would not submit to such a separation, Clare. I would seek you through the world, and *compel* you to return my love. I have a right to you, for you have encour-

aged me—you have smiled on me, and listened to my words of love; and now that I ask for a final decision, you shrink from giving me the promise that will bind you to me."

Clare became very pale now, for she felt that vanity, and the novelty of having a lover, had lured her from the straight path in which her feet should have walked. She faintly said:

"You can have no claim on me unsanctioned by my parents, and you have this evening told me that my father spoke to you, and strictly forbade any further acquaintance between us."

"So—you avail yourself of that excuse! Ha! ha! it shall not serve you, Miss Desmond. You either love me, or you are the most accomplished of coquettes. I will brave your father's wrath, and snatch you from him, or I will perish in the attempt. But I will not perish *alone!* mark that! One—perhaps two victims will go down with me to Hades, in that hour in which your perfidy becomes patent to me. I shall then be desperate enough to do anything—*anything!*"

He laughed wildly, grated his teeth, and seemed so furious that Clare shrank away from his side, and with effort said:

"I think it is unmanly, and—and cruel to speak to me in this way. What do you hope to gain by it? I regret that I ever permitted you to speak to me of love. I was flattered, I suppose, by the ardent professions you made; but if they had been sincere you could never have treated me in this way. You are only trying to frighten me now by going on more like a maniac than a sane man."

"Oh, pardon me, angel of light, if I have alarmed you. I *was* mad when I dared to threaten you. Only give me a gleam of hope; make me feel that you have not been trifling with me, and I will kneel at your feet to express my utter devotion to you. Oh, Clare, be merciful, or I shall die of despair."

He threw himself at her feet as he spoke, and turned his wild-looking eyes up to her face with an expression that chilled her to the heart. In spite of his humiliating attitude and his despairing words there was determination of purpose, and a mocking sense of power in the look he fastened on her palid face.

With supreme effort she said:

"Pray get up, Mr. Spiers. What am I, that you should kneel to me? Such an attitude as that should be assumed before Him only to whom worship is due. I will not speak to you while you grovel on the earth that way."

Spiers arose with a fierce gleam in his eyes, though he softly said:

"You are my divinity, Clare, and therefore it is fitting that I should kneel to you. I would humiliate myself to the very dust to win the assurance that you have been as much in earnest as I am in the love passages between us. Speak, my darling, and give me what I ask—the certainty that you love me—that you will give me this dear hand in spite of the opposition of a parcel of old fogies who have forgotten that they were once young themselves."

He took her hand in defiance of her efforts to withhold it, and held it in his firm clasp while awaiting her answer.

Clare Desmond was almost a child in many things yet; she knew very little of the world, for her father's ruin had fallen on him just as she left school, and she had seen nothing of society; but she felt now that vanity alone had led her to place herself in the false position she held toward this fierce wooer, and how to extricate herself from his power was her one thought.

There was a slight inflection of scorn in her voice, as she said:

"You are at liberty, I suppose, to speak of your own parents as you please; but I will not permit you to speak of mine as if they were worthy of no consideration in—in—the—the—question you wish me to decide so prematurely. I shall never marry you, nor any one else, Mr. Spiers, without the full and free consent of my father and mother."

"I did not mean to be disrespectful, Clare. You misinterpret my words. Your father is a very fine gentleman, in spite of his fallen fortunes; and your mother is almost as charming a woman as you are yourself. I have often wished that *my* parents resembled them. As to your last assertion, I can only accept it with modifications. You are bound to me in honor, for you have induced me to believe that my suit was not hopeless, and if Mr. and Mrs. Desmond refuse to listen to our prayers, I shall certainly not give you up. As to *my* father and mother, I can talk them over, and I have little doubt that they will eventually consent to a marriage between us."

"But—but," gasped the poor girl, "I have no wish to enter your family since I have learned that the slightest opposition has been offered to me. I have given you

no pledges, and I begin to think that—that I really have no preference for you."

Spiers suddenly turned, and faced her with a scowl on his dark face, a lurid anger in his eyes, that made Clare's heart almost die within her. He fiercely hissed in her shrinking ears:

"So—it has come to this! that I—I have been the sport of a girl's caprice! have been led on till my all of hope and happiness is bound up in you; and now you tell me that you doubt the genuineness of your love for me! I would have won you by gentle words and ardent protestations of affection, but *now* I throw such mawkish sweetness to the winds, and tell you that you shall be mine through *fear*, if not through love."

He approached his face to hers; his hot panting breath fell upon her cheek, and his black eyes gleamed almost ferociously upon her.

Clare recoiled from him in terror, and faintly said:

"I believe you are mad, to threaten me in this way. Let go my hand and leave me. It is getting late, and they will be expecting me at home."

"*Leave you!*—ha! ha!—not till I have made you fully understand that I am not a man to be trifled with, with impunity. I am not mad now, but I may become so if you persist in your present course. But *that* you shall not do—mark me, *shall not*; for I will stop at nothing to secure the fulfilment of your implied pledges, if they were not uttered. I will *kill* you, if you refuse your consent to a future union. I do not ask for an immediate one. I will yield that much to you. I only demand that you shall give me your sacred promise to marry me within the next two years."

Clare listened with quailing heart, for within the last few moments she felt as if she almost hated this man, and had rather die than accept him; yet he had acquired power over her through her own giddy love of admiration, and he had proved that he was ready to use it to its utmost limit. She desperately said:

"Kill me, if you choose, for I feel now as if death is preferable to a union with you on any terms."

Spiers grew livid with mortification and anger. He had not expected such a declaration from her lips, and his self-love was deeply wounded. He furiously cried:

"I *will* kill you, if you do not withdraw those words; but not you alone. You think that help is coming, and that is what gives you courage to defy me in this way. Yonder comes your father, panting and angry, to vent his rage on me; but take no hope from that; he is too far off to interfere with me before I have made sure of you, either in death or in life."

There was a long stretch of level road ahead of them, and with sudden hope Clare too saw the figure of her father turn a curve, which brought him into full view, though he was still nearly half a mile distant. The light shone against his tall form, throwing it out in full relief, and she knew him from his walk and general bearing, although he was so far away.

She would have started forward to meet him half-way, and claim the protection she so sorely needed, but Spiers seized her hand again, and forced her to stand still, as he triumphantly said:

"Now you have no alternative but to yield to any demand I may make. That man's life is as much at my mercy as yours is, and I will shoot him down in his

tracks, if you refuse to take a binding oath that you will be my wife when I choose to claim you as such; and that you will, furthermore, conceal what has passed between us this evening, and make your friends believe that it is your own wish to marry me."

"Oh, God help me!" gasped poor Clare, shuddering, and shrinking from the bad man who held her so completely at his mercy. "You—you could not be so cruel—so dastardly, as to fire on an unarmed man."

"Don't try me, that is all. I am desperate. Look—here is a pistol that has never failed to strike its mark from my hands. All the barrels are loaded. Refuse what I *demand* as my right, after what has passed between us, and I will use one on you, another on your father, and a third one on myself, for life will not be worth having without you, false as you have shown yourself."

At this threat, uttered with such apparent earnestness, all Clare's courage ebbed away. Almost in a dying voice, she said:

"I promise. Put up your weapon: my darling father must not meet such a fate, to save me even from you."

Still scowling, Spiers concealed the pistol in the breast-pocket of his coat, and slowly said:

"There is to be no paltering with your word; you are to keep it to the letter, or the danger is not passed. If I detect in you any symptoms of revolt from the allegiance you now owe to me, I will take vengeance in my own hand, and you know how terrible it will be. Get over this trembling; pinch your pale cheeks to bring back some color to them, and swear to be true to me before the old man comes to pour the vials of his wrath upon my head."

His brutal tone aroused the pride of the girl to whom he spoke. A burning torrent of shame and indignation overspread her face with blushes, and she impetuously said:

"If the lightning of His just wrath could destroy you as you stand there in your bold, unmanly villany, I should return thanks to God that he had removed from my path a reptile who is unfit to live. I will take no such oath as you demand. I have given my promise, and that is enough to bind me to the infamous compact you have compelled me to make. With the dread you have aroused in my heart, you know that you are safe enough—that I dare not claim the right accorded to other women, to refuse a man who has become odious in their eyes."

"You use strong language, pretty Clare," he replied, with a sneer. "I hardly think you *will* dare to rescind your promise, so I can dispense with the oath. Now resume your calmness, for the old man is bearing down closely upon us."

Aroused to a high pitch of indignation, Mr. Desmond was rapidly approaching the two who now slowly walked forward to meet him. Clare made strenuous efforts to control herself, but she felt with each step as if she must faint before another one was taken. But the strain upon her mind and heart was too great to permit her overwrought feelings to find a refuge in insensibility.

By the time her father came within speaking distance, she had regained comparative composure; despair had taken possession of her young heart, and a species of stony coldness settled down over the surging emotions that had so lately moved her. Her fate had been taken

out of her own hands by the reckless, hard man beside her, and henceforth she must be moved by his volition alone, recoil from him as she might.

"Well, sir," panted the excited father, when the three at last stood near enough to permit him to speak. "How is it that I find you in company with my daughter, after what I said to you but two days ago? Was I not explicit enough when I told you that your father's son was no fitting lover for a gentleman's daughter? that I would not have her name mixed up with yours on any account? And yet I find you waylaying her and making love to her, in spite of my prohibition."

A scarlet flush arose to the young man's face at the allusion to his father, but his manner and tone were almost cringing, in his effort to be respectful, as he said:

"What you know of my father's doings should not deprive me of all chance of winning your good opinion for myself, Mr. Desmond. Many a man who may have made a false step has had sons who were honorable and true. I cannot think it fair to visit the sins of the father on the child in this way. As to your daughter, I love her; she has promised to marry me, and for her sake I am willing to brave your displeasure. I sought her this evening, because I have the right to do so."

For an instant Desmond was dumb with rage and astonishment, at this bold declaration. When he could speak, he turned to Clare and hoarsely asked:

"Is this true? Have you made a clandestine engagement with this man, who is not worthy to wipe the dust off your shoes? What! you, a Desmond—a descendant of men of honor, good faith and high renown—have stooped to that man of base instincts and baser origin!

I know, and so does he, of what his father has been guilty, and he is the worthy son of such a sire."

Spiers writhed beneath the words, and the tone of bitter contempt in which they were uttered. Clare listened, believing every word, yet not daring, even beside her natural protector, to betray the loathing with which her lover's late conduct had filled her heart; for when she unclosed her pale lips to speak, Spiers made a significant gesture toward his breast, and she thrilled with fear at what might occur if she dared to utter the truth—that the engagement had not been a voluntary one on her part.

She faintly said:

"Forgive me, papa, but he has my promise."

The father looked at her a moment, and then furiously cried:

"But he has not my consent, nor that of your mother, and I shall take good care that this—this pretender to your favor shall have no opportunity to meet you clandestinely again. Come—our path lies this way, and yours, if I mistake not, lies in the opposite direction, Mr. Spiers."

Desmond strode to his daughter's side, drew her arm beneath his own, and without deigning a glance to the man who glowered after them, turned away.

Spiers stood still on the spot on which they had left him, till the turn in the road concealed them from sight, and then, with a bitter laugh, muttered:

"I have played my game well thus far, and I'll win the girl and the fortune she's bound to get, in spite of you, my fine fellow."

CHAPTER III.

A PAIR OF PLOTTING VILLAINS.

SPIERS resumed his natural manner, which was that of a bold swaggerer, whistled a merry tune, and retraced his steps toward Portsmouth, congratulating himself on the success with which he had played the part of Bombastes Furioso toward a helpless and frightened girl.

He bitterly resented Mr. Desmond's contemptuous treatment, but he intended to be even with him yet, and take from him the daughter who he knew was the darling of his heart, when it pleased him to claim her as his wife. He did not intend to be in a hurry about this, for there was much to be settled about Clare herself before it would be to his interest to force her to fulfil the pledge he had so cruelly extorted from her.

He moved jauntily through the streets of the town, returning the numerous greetings he received with a bow and smile; and more than one young girl turned to look after him, thinking what a romantic-looking creature he was, with his dark, half-tamed look and fine figure. He at length gained a side street and entered a drug store of pretentious appearance, with the usual display of plate-glass in the windows, behind which were arrayed jars of colored water, and various fancy articles in which his father dealt.

A tall, cadaverous-looking man, with hard black eyes, thin lips and watchful expression, stood at the furthest end of the shop, making an entry in his ledger before

going up-stairs to supper, for Mr. Spiers' family lived in the rooms above his place of business.

He looked up sharply as his son entered, and in curt tones said :

"So-o—you've come at last. I suppose you've been philandering after that Desmond girl again, though she's as poor as Job's turkey. You had better mind what you are about, young man, or you and I won't be friends much longer."

"I don't believe Job ever had a turkey, or that such birds were known to the inhabitants of the country he lived in, so your comparison doesn't hold good. Besides, I'll tell you a secret. Miss Desmond has a good chance to be rich. She don't know it yet, neither does her family, but it's true all the same. So, you see, she's not to be placed in the same category with that mythical turkey of the old Hebrew."

The elder Spiers opened his eyes widely at this statement. He eagerly said :

"If you can prove this, I'll not think you such a fool as I've lately believed you to be. What expectations has she, and how did *you* find them out?"

"That's my secret; but I'll enlighten you if you will come into the back room, where there are no eavesdroppers. Where's Beal? Call him to take charge of the shop while we talk together."

"He's packing some things, but he can leave them till to-night. Speak to him, and tell him he's wanted."

John Spiers went into a large, dreary-looking apartment in the rear, where a lad of sixteen was engaged in packing away bottles in a square box. He spoke to him gruffly :

"Go to my father; he wants to talk with me, and he says those things can wait. And mind, youngster, you're to look sharp after the shop, and not be trying to hear what we are saying."

The youth raised his face, red with the exertions he had been making to get his task done. It was a good, honest face, and he coldly said :

"I generally attend to my own business, John, and I am sure I do not care to meddle with yours, let it be what it may."

"So much the better for you. So go, now, and keep your distance from this end of the shop. What I am going to tell the governor will be known far and wide soon enough; but it's my secret now, and I don't want it blown on too soon."

Young Beal went into the shop without replying, and a moment later Mr. Spiers came into the room in which his son was waiting, and carefully closed the door between them.

"Now what is this wonderful windfall that has come to lift Reggy Desmond out of the mire into which he has bogged himself? I hate that man, and I am sorry that any good luck has fallen in his way."

"I don't love him myself, but it's not to *him* that the money is coming. He may get a slice out of it, but not even that if I can help it. It is the eldest daughter who will be invited to live with a rich old aunt of her mother's, and if Mrs. Adair likes her, she intends to give her all her fortune. It's a nice little pile, for the old lady is rich as cream. She owns a plantation, and at least a hundred negroes, besides bank stock that brings her in thousands a year."

"Bosh! Who told you all this, and where does Mrs. Adair live?"

"She has a place on James river, with a house on it that was built more than a hundred years ago. She has no relations but these Desmonds, or rather Mrs. Desmond and her children, for she has no opinion of *him*, and wouldn't care to claim him as a relation, since he's proved a failure. The old lady don't believe in unsuccessful people."

"Upon my word, you talk of this Mrs. Adair as if she had been your most intimate friend ever since you were born. I never heard of her before, which is strange, considering that you know so much about her and her circumstances."

"I never heard of her either till lately, but I know all about her from—from a friend, and what I tell you is true."

"What friend?" asked his father impatiently. "I must know all about this affair, to make sure that you are not humbugging me to get my consent to let you make love to that poverty-stricken girl you've taken such a shine to lately."

"I thought you knew me well enough to be certain that I would never look at a woman twice if she hadn't money, or the chance of getting it. I have too much of your nature in me to do that."

Spiers laughed grimly.

"I am glad to hear you say that, John, for I began to think that the girl has bewitched you, in spite of your better judgment. But I insist on knowing how you gained such accurate information of this Mrs. Adair and her affairs."

"Well, I suppose I'll have to tell you," replied the younger man, rather reluctantly. "I have a friend in the camp—that is, in the old lady's house. There is a young woman living there that—that I knew very well when I was knocking around the world. In fact, I was rather sweet on her once: but that's all at an end, of course. She has travelled a deal, and I met with her on shipboard coming from England, where she had been living as companion to some rich woman. She was after that recommended to Mrs. Adair in that capacity, and she's been living at Riverdale for the last few months."

"Hum—and I suppose you keep up a correspondence with this person, in spite of your alleged indifference to her now."

"I didn't say I am indifferent to her; I like her as well as I can like any one besides myself; but I can't marry her because she's poor. I do write to her, and it is from her that I learned what I've told you. Mrs. Desmond's grandmother was the sister of this old lady, but there was a family quarrel, and there has been no intercourse kept up between them. Mrs. Adair is nearly seventy years old, and her only descendant, a granddaughter, was drowned a few years ago. To shorten the story, she wants an heiress, and she's going to adopt the eldest daughter of Mrs. Desmond, and if she pleases her, she intends to give her all her fortune."

The keen face of the elder man brightened as he listened to this explanation. When it was finished he slapped his son on the back, and said:

"You are a sharp one, you are, John. I might have known that you were not going to compromise yourself with a penniless girl. But how do matters stand be-

tween you and Miss Desmond? Is it all fair sailing, and are you likely to enter the port of matrimony as soon as the fortune is hers?"

A cloud came over the face of Spiers, and he brusquely said:

"Of course I wasn't going to tell you all this, if I wasn't sure of the ground I stand on. I am engaged to Clare Desmond, and I hardly think she'll back out, after what passed between us this afternoon; even if the old man does rave worse than he did when he came on us in the road. He spoke of you as if you were beneath contempt, and treated me as if I was of no more account than the dirt under his feet."

The pallid face of Spiers flushed slightly, and a vindictive expression came into his eyes. His lips trembled as he said:

"But once in my life have I done anything that the law could touch me for. I used the name of a man who, I knew, was a good friend to me; I was in so tight a place that I must get money or be ruined. Mr. Cranston was away from home at the time, and I thought I could take up the note before it fell due. I couldn't do it, and it passed into the hands of Desmond and his partner. They saw that the signature was not genuine, but they kept it in their possession till Cranston returned. The old man would not prosecute me, though Desmond urged him to do so, as he thought business could not be safely carried on if such transgressors were not punished. I've hated him ever since, and I'd be glad to do him an evil turn if I could. I don't know, though, why I should speak of this now, for you've known all about it from the time it happened."

"Desmond taunted me with it this evening. It's a wonder to me that he hasn't proclaimed your crime to the world."

"I have no cause to thank *him* for forbearance. Old Cranston had been a good friend to him, and he knew that he liked me well enough to wish to screen me; besides, the note was for a trifling amount, which wasn't worth making a fuss about."

His son looked at him with a half-contemptuous expression.

"So—you risked everything for a contemptible sum of money that would only be of temporary use to you. Now if I had made up my mind to do such a thing as that, I would have made a bold sweep, and cleared out with my spoil. What's the use of doing things by halves? If a man acts the villain, let him do it to some purpose."

"I dare say you are right," replied his father calmly, "but in that case it wouldn't have answered. Moreover, I had a family, and I could not take them with me in my flight. I care for my own, John, even if I did bring that slur upon them."

"Oh! I dare say," sneered his son, "and you'd do something else to benefit them, which would be as questionable as that, if the temptation was offered."

He regarded his father with so strange an expression, that he asked, in some heat:

"What do you mean by that? Because I have tripped once, do you suppose I am capable of every species of villainy?"

"I don't take so wide a range as that; but I think if a nice little scheme was proposed to you which would bring you in a pretty sum, without any risk to yourself,

you'd hardly refuse to embark in it. Would you, now?"

The keen face of the elder grew sharper, the eyes assumed a hungry look, and he whispered:

"If it was safe, and all under the rose, I wouldn't mind. If you've got anything to say, speak out, for I hate beating around the bush."

John Spiers lowered his voice, and in a mysterious tone, said:

"Don't get excited, now, for what I am going to say is very important. That old lady we spoke of is very frail and can't last more than a year or two; but that's longer than I want to wait for her hoards. Can't we fix up something to hurry her on the way a little?—something that would be sure, but not too quick in its action? You know all about such things, and you could easily do what I want. I couldn't marry the girl, you know, till Mrs. Adair is safely disposed of, for she'd never look at me as the husband of her heiress."

The elder man became more cadaverous than ever as he listened to this proposal. He faltered:

"No, no, John; that will never answer. How could we hope to escape detection, even if that good friend of yours is willing to help us put her employer out of the way? I suppose you've sounded her before you spoke to me?"

"No, indeed. Claudia Coyle knows nothing of my plans, nor would I for the world make her the agent in this thing. I do not want power over *her*, but over another, who shall become our innocent accomplice, and find out when it is too late what she has done."

"I don't understand you, John. I wish you would explain yourself more clearly."

"If you'll have patience, I will. Clare has all the silly superstitions that negro nurses are so fond of instilling into children. Among others, she believes in magic philters and love-charms. As she will go to this old lady on trial, and if she does not take a fancy to her she may be sent back home, and the other sister taken in her place, Clare will very naturally wish to use every means to win her great aunt's approbation. We can give her a liquid preparation to mix with the old lady's wine, and make her believe that it will have no injurious effect upon her health. You must compound it very skilfully, that the gradual decay may seem to be that of old age."

"But—but—you are making your future wife the agent of a murder, John; and the fortune you may get a little sooner by this course will be too dearly purchased, I think. If Mrs. Adair is delicate, old as she is, she cannot last much longer."

"She may live ten years; such old cats never die when they are in other people's way. Besides I must have some hold on Clare. I shall not feel quite sure of her when the money is hers unless she is completely in my power. Women are uncertain always, and young girls are hard to manage under the best conditions."

"But if Miss Desmond has promised to marry you she must love you; and if her aunt opposes your suit, she, like every romantic girl, will cling only the stronger to you. Indeed, John, I think it will be a refinement on cruelty to make her the innocent agent in this affair. The other girl, for money—as you say she's poor—might be willing to aid you."

His son angrily asked:

"Can't you understand things without having them

explained to you in detail? If I have no hold on Clare Desmond she will seize the first opportunity to set me adrift. I found out this afternoon that she has only been flirting with me, but I took such measures with my lady as frightened her into giving me a promise to marry me. I played the furious, despairing lover to perfection, I think. I made her believe that I would kill her and myself, and perhaps some one else she loves, if she refused my prayers. Ha! ha! If she had been a few years older I wouldn't have dared to play that game, but she took it all for gospel, and when she saw her father coming she pledged herself to me to save him from danger. It was a rich scene; and the poor, trembling thing really believed I was in earnest about killing myself, after I had slaughtered her and her father. Catch me at that! I shall never hurt *myself*, whatever I may be tempted to do to others."

As John Spiers went on with this long explanation the expression of his father's face changed more than once. First, dismay at finding the fatal ruse his son had spoken of a necessity if Clare and her future fortune was to be secured; then amusement at the ease with which John had played his dramatic part; and at the last, approval of the energy with which the speaker repudiated the idea of self-destruction.

He burst into a laugh, and said:

"That was rich! The girl must be a soft-hearted little goose, to believe you could be in earnest. I begin to see that we must be up and doing, if you are to be benefited by that old woman's money. She has had her threescore and ten years any way, and that's as much as she can enjoy. Her life must be a mere drone by this

time, and it can't be such a bad thing to send her to tune her harp among the celestial choir. I can do what you wish with perfect safety to you and myself, for no one will be likely to inquire how a woman of seventy came to die of slow decay. I promise you that in three or six months at the furthest, you will be in a position to exact from Miss Desmond the fulfilment of her pledge to you."

"Then it's settled. You can get the stuff ready, and I can soon convince Clare that it will be to her own interest to use it. From all I can hear, the old woman is a tough customer to deal with. She's full of whims, and as hard to please as a spoiled child. Her niece will soon find it necessary to use this valuable love-charm—ha! ha!"

The two miscreants laughed in chorus as merrily as if they were planning some ingenious farce, in place of a murder which was to place a young and unsuspecting girl in their toils.

"When can you have the elixir of fortune ready?" asked John. "The invitation to Miss Desmond to go to Riverdale will not be long delayed, and I must give it to Clare, and explain its wonderful properties to her, before she goes away."

"It will take me several days to prepare it, but you shall have it in time. But are you quite sure that Miss Desmond's parents will let her go to her kinswoman at all? They are very fond of her, and may not be willing to give her up."

"They'd be greater fools than I take them to be, if they don't. They are as poor as church mice, and this is their only chance to get their heads up in the world again. I have no fears on *that* score."

"I believe you are right. There is the bell for supper, and your mother doesn't like to be kept waiting. Run up-stairs and say that I will come as soon as I've spoken a word to Beal."

A few moments later the two were seated at the well-spread supper table, and they ate as heartily as if no evil thought was assuming a tangible shape in their callous souls.

CHAPTER IV.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

CLARE DESMOND walked away with her father in so pitiable a state of agitation that for many moments he forbore to say anything further to her. Struck to the heart, as he was, by the confession of her clandestine engagement to a man for whom he had no respect, who had nothing to recommend him to his daughter's notice but a fine person and plausible manner, he thought it best to allow her time to overcome her overwhelming agitation before he attempted to utter the remonstrances that crowded to his lips.

Mr. Desmond recalled the past of this young man as far as it was known to himself, and he felt that it would be a less grief to him to lay his child in a premature grave than to give her, in her young purity, to the lover who had so daringly asserted his right to her.

As a boy, John Spiers had been notoriously depraved, and at seventeen he had run away from his home and gone to sea. Five years were spent in a wandering life,

and then he came back with a considerable sum of money, which he asserted was the fruit of his own industry. He joined his father in the business he followed, and for the last seven years had applied himself in a desultory manner to the pursuit he had undertaken. But the monotony of life on shore palled on him, and at intervals he had made three voyages to South America, and one to England as mate on a merchant ship, in which his father owned a share.

Mr. Desmond, with many others, had doubts as to how the money he had brought home with him from his first wanderings had been acquired. It was whispered that a passenger on the vessel on which he was then acting as mate had died in a sudden and mysterious manner; that John Spiers had nursed him in his last illness; and when his effects were examined, before sealing them up for transmission to his relatives, a small box, which the sick man had carefully guarded, was nowhere to be found.

As others had free admission to Mr. Jones' state-room, the theft could not certainly be fixed on the attentive mate; but when the facts became known to those who had known Spiers in his boyhood, few persons gave him even the benefit of a doubt. His father enlarged his business soon after, but he asserted that a kinsman in Massachusetts had left him a legacy, and to that his son had added fifteen hundred dollars saved by him from his wages.

With these recollections surging through his excited mind, Mr. Desmond remained silent till a turn in the road concealed them from the sight of the man who glowered after them with the resolution in his

mind to control the fate of his victim at any cost to herself.

Clare drew a long breath of relief, as the intervening trees hid them from the lover whom she believed half maddened by the fear of losing herself; for Spiers had acted his part so well, that she believed his simulated passion to be genuine, and she pitied him, while a shrinking feeling of abhorrence at the thought of marrying him took possession of her soul.

Her father's long silence terrified her even more than harsh words could have done, and she at last summoned courage to falter:

"Dear papa, I have not been so much to blame. I—I allowed Mr. Spiers to walk with me, because—because I was often alone, and he made himself very agreeable. He has seen so much, you know; and he gives very amusing descriptions of his travels, and of the people he has seen in different countries. Oh! papa, don't look at me that way, or I shall not have courage to—to—"

Her voice died away in an inarticulate murmur, and Desmond sternly said:

"A girl who has the courage to face life as the betrothed of the man we have just left, should not quail before anything. Clare, I could not have believed this thing of you. You, my cherished child, beloved beyond the others, unjust as that was to them, have struck a blow to my heart by this underhand conduct that you will never understand till you have children of your own to ignore your right to their confidence."

His voice broke, and Clare eagerly said:

"I did not mean anything serious, papa; I declare to

you I did not. I was only flattered by his attentions, because the girls at the school think him so handsome; and—and—he seemed to be so much pleased with me."

"*Flattered* by the notice of a creature who is unfit to touch your hand! whose glance is pollution to a pure child like you! Clare, the night you were born I knelt down and thanked God for the precious gift he had bestowed upon me; but dear as you have always been to me, I can ask him to take you back into his safe-keeping, sooner than give you to that man we have just left."

"Oh! papa—don't—don't say that!" gasped the agitated girl, "for I must—I *must* keep my word. I—I have pledged myself to marry him, and he will not allow me to retract."

"What power has Spiers over you to compel you to fulfil a contract unsanctioned by your parents?" asked her father, with sudden fire. "No promise is binding upon you without the consent of your mother and myself, and you may rest assured it will never be given to a union between you and John Spiers."

Clare could only repeat, in faint tones:

"I must keep my word, papa."

"What hold has that wretch over you, that you insist on ruining your life by giving him the control of it? Are you mad? Do you know what he is? He has been a wild, bad man all his life. He has been suspected of tampering with a man's life, that he might possess himself of property that was missing after his death. I and a few others know that his father has been guilty of forgery, and I have the assurance in my own mind that the son was privy to the transaction. After hearing this, you will not surely repeat that you are bound in honor

to him. *Honor!* I hardly think John Spiers understands the meaning of the word."

Clare became deathly pale, and with great effort said, in a choking voice:

"I must not believe these things, papa; many men are suspected of crimes they never thought of committing. Mr. Spiers is a man of fiery temper, and he may have done many wrong things, but I refuse to believe that he could have done what you accuse him of. I will tell you the truth: I have foolishly encouraged him. He—he almost wrung from me the promise to marry him; but I am afraid—yes, *afraid* to—to break my word. He would be so desperate then, for he seems so madly in love with me, that—that I do not know what he might do."

"Then he has dared to threaten you! He is a cowardly cur, I tell you, Clare, and he would never attempt anything that could bring on him the vengeance of the law. Leave *me* to deal with him, my child. Only assure me that you do not love him, and I will extricate you from him without trouble."

"Love him!" repeated Clare, and her frame thrilled with repulsion as the words passed her lips. But the denial that trembled on them was repressed, as the memory of Spiers' threats came back to her, and the horrible vision his words had conjured up arose before her fancy, nerving her to endure anything herself, sooner than endanger a life so precious to her as that of her father's. She slowly said:

"I am too young to understand my own feelings, perhaps, but I have recklessly engaged his to that extent that I believe it would be a great wrong to him to give

him up, even at your command. Dearest father, do not press me further now. Mr. Spiers does not ask me to marry him at once. He spoke of a probation of a year or two; hoping, I suppose, that in that time he would recommend himself to you, and win your consent to our union. I entreat that you will forbear toward him; that you will be courteous to him, and—and something may—"

Her voice died away suddenly, for she dared not utter the hope that some avenue of escape would be opened to her, and this man, who had now become so odious to her, be forever cast out of her life.

Her father waited a moment, expecting her to go on, but finding that she did not, he gravely said:

"You puzzle me, as well as distress me sorely, Clare. There is some mystery in this affair that I cannot comprehend; for I cannot believe that you are really attached to so inferior a person as John Spiers. It is great presumption in him to approach you in the character of a lover, for the position of his family is equivocal, his own reputation by no means good, and but for my loss of fortune, you could never have been thrown in contact with such as he. He has been a common sailor, then steward on a ship, and only arose to the position of mate on a vessel that is partly owned by his father. With such antecedents, do you think this man a fitting match for the descendant of the Desmonds and De Courcys?"

"We live in a democratic country," said Clare, in a low tone; "then why refer to my ancestors, papa? Every man here must stand or fall, according to his own strength and energy of purpose. As to the mystery of my entanglement with Mr. Spiers, I was reading only the

other day the assertion that no law can account for the caprices of the blind god. The writer also went on to say, that the most incongruous matches often turn out well and happily. Console yourself with that thought, for I again assure you that I feel bound to keep my pledge to my lover."

Her father angrily replied:

"You refuse to give me your confidence; but I, in my turn, assure you that I will use every effort that is possible, to save you from so wretched a fate as must be yours, as the wife of such a miscreant as I believe Spiers to be."

Clare breathed a brief prayer that he might succeed in rescuing her from the ignoble bondage into which she had fallen; but the next moment she was frightened at the possibilities that arose before her, and she grasped her father's hand, and pitifully entreated:

"You will be careful, papa; you will not be rude or harsh toward him? You—you will remember how wildly he loves me, and not provoke him to do anything desperate. No one can foretell what a man of his temperament may do if—if he feels himself badly treated."

"Have no fears on my account, Clare. I shall not forget that I am a gentleman, though I know that I have not one to deal with in this matter. If you have in your heart any feeling stronger than pity for Spiers, put it away from you resolutely, for you cannot, and shall not marry him."

A little cheered by this assurance, Clare said:

"Let us talk no more on this subject now, papa. We are getting near home, and I beg that you will spare me any further remonstrance to-night. Of course you will

tell mamma how thoughtless I have been, but if you love me, you will not do it till after I have retired for the night."

"Yes, I will keep from her as long as possible the stunning and mortifying fact that you have taken your fate in your own hands, and are ready to run to the devil with one of his own children," said Desmond, with intense bitterness. "Remember one thing, Clare; the day that gives your hand to that man will behold a final rupture between you and your own family. As his wife, you cease to be my daughter. You think, perhaps, that he has money, and he can give you back the luxury I can no longer surround you with. Sacrifice yourself for it, if your will proves stronger than mine, and then break your heart over the certainty you will soon obtain, that you have sold yourself into slavery to a brutal tyrant, to whom you are only attractive because you have youth and fair looks."

Clare felt as if she must cry out in her anguish and say:

"I loathe him as deeply as you do, but I fear him more. It is for *your* life, for my own, that I am contending, although you use such fearful words to me."

But she dared not speak the truth. She had no idea how lightly her father could have blown away that dreadful cloud which had so suddenly fallen on her life, if she had only possessed courage to repeat to him all that had passed between herself and Spiers that afternoon.

That her desperate lover would shoot Mr. Desmond down, in a sudden paroxysm of demoniac passion, was the dread that had taken possession of her heart; and to save him from that danger, she felt as if self-immolation

was possible to her. She also thought of her own warm, young life-blood shed by the hand of her infuriated adorer, if she proved false to him at last, and with the terror he had lately inspired in her, she feared to betray to those who might have extricated her from his power the conflict that raged in her soul.

Mrs. Desmond had walked down to the gate, and was leaning upon it, watching the two approach. With the quick intuition of love she saw that something had gone very much amiss, and she looked from one face to the other, her bright eyes trying to pierce to the truth but partially masked by the attempt to be calm as they drew near her.

"You are very pale, my darling," she said to Clare, "yet it is a warm evening, and I thought your walk would make new roses bloom on your cheeks."

"I am very tired," was the reply. "I think a cup of tea will do me good, and there is the bell now."

A faint silvery tinkle came from the veranda, on which stood Christine, the second daughter—a very young girl yet, who looked like a fairer edition of her handsome mother. She wore her hair in close curls, and still wore the short dress and high boots which had lately come in fashion for very young girls. They suited her especially now, for she was enchanted with the new world open to her in her country life, and entered with energy into all old Cæsar's efforts to improve the appearance of the long-neglected place which had fallen to his charge.

No words were exchanged between the three who came up the weedy carriage drive, and when they gained the steps, Christine exclaimed:

"I declare you look as solemn as three well-behaved owls. As that's the bird of wisdom, papa, you and ma cannot take exceptions to my comparison. Clare looks like a very white one, and you elders like respectable gray ones. What has sister been doing with herself that she seems ready to faint?"

"Nonsense," said Clare, in a vexed tone; "nothing is the matter with me. I am only overcome by the heat of the evening, and I have taken a long walk."

"Oh, if that's all, a cup of tea will set you up again, and it's quite ready. And, mamma, my late radishes are not so hot as you predicted they would be. I have a nice dish of the prettiest little pink things you ever ate. Victor brought home a mess of fish, but he fell in the pond at Mr. West's, and Tom pulled him out again. I made him drink some hot tea and go to bed, and he's fast asleep now."

Mrs. Desmond hurried in, to look after the condition of her son herself, and her husband said:

"What a busy bee you are, Christine. I declare, child, you will shame me out of my indolent habits yet."

"That's what I've been trying to do," said the saucy girl, with a brilliant smile. "If I can only get you away from your moping chair once, I think you'd find yourself so much better that you'd take to hard work, and help ma and me in our little plans for making things nicer. Come now—I've put a vase of June roses on the table, and you can't think how pretty it looks. Old Katy says I'm getting to be a real help to her."

"And to me too, dear, for I should not know what to do without two such bright spirits as you and your mother. I am going to work with you after this,

Christine, and you shall see what wonders I will accomplish."

"Don't promise too much at first," cried Christine, "for people that promise much don't often keep their word. You see, you've not been accustomed to work with your hands, papa, and you mustn't try too much in the beginning, or you'll get disgusted with the whole thing, and throw it up."

"What a little Solomon it is!" said her father, making an effort to smile down on her. "Here is mamma, and I think we had better go in to tea."

He passed his arm around Christine, and Clare felt as if she was somehow cast out from the high place she had hitherto held in his regard. Her tender heart ached and fluttered, and she was sorely tempted to throw herself upon his breast, and implore his protection from the lover he thought her so infatuated with that she was ready to marry him in spite of all the opposition that could be offered on the part of her friends.

They passed through a hall of moderate dimensions, and found the table set on a wide back gallery shaded by an immense walnut tree. Mr. Desmond praised Christine's taste and neatness, but he had no appetite for the food set before him. Clare pitifully thought:

"It is my fault that he cannot eat; I hoped to be a help and a comfort to him, and now I am only a worry and a burden. Oh! if I only dared to tell him all!"

Christine noticed that her father merely trifled with the food he took on his plate, and she said:

"If you don't eat one of my radishes, papa, I shall think it was not worth while to raise them. See what a beautiful color they are; and they are nice and crisp, too."

Mr. Desmond took one, with a smile, and said:

"I believe you are to be the pet and darling of our humble home after all, Christine. You are a good child, and I believe you will never willingly give your parents a headache."

Clare had made no effort to eat. She sat silently sipping her tea; but when her father spoke thus, she pushed the cup from her, and rising from the table, said:

"Please excuse me, mamma; I have a headache, and I think I will go to my room and lie down."

The mother nodded, and she went away.

The parents exchanged glances, and Christine said:

"I hope Clare is not going to be sick. She looks so out of sorts this evening, that I can't imagine what has happened to her."

"What I think can never happen to you, Christine, for you have less vanity and nonsense about you than your sister," said Mr. Desmond in a tone that caused the young girl to open her eyes widely, for Clare had hitherto been the pride and darling of his heart.

CHAPTER V.

LACERATED HEARTS.

AFTER uttering the bitter words he found it impossible to repress, Mr. Desmond abruptly left the table, and throwing on his hat, went far away from the house to think over in solitude all that had passed between himself and his daughter that evening, and try to com-

prehend why she so obstinately clung to the promise she had given Spiers. That she loved him he could not believe, for it seemed to him that a girl reared as Clare had been—one so gentle, so refined in all her ways—would instinctively recoil from the familiar approach of such a man; yet she declared herself bound to marry him, and insisted on fulfilling the contract, though he plainly saw that she was not happy in the bonds she had forged for herself.

He plunged into the tangled woodland, and walked for hours brooding in bitterness of heart over this new trouble; while those he had left behind him marvelled as to what could so have upset the head of the house, and his eldest daughter. In an aggrieved tone Christine said:

"Pa didn't more than taste his radish, after all. What is the matter, ma, that he and Clare seemed so much vexed with each other? He has always loved her best, I know; but this evening I begin to think my turn has come to be more to him than my sister is."

"My dear, I hope you would not rejoice in an estrangement between your father and sister, because there would be a chance for you to step in and take her place? That would not be like my blithe, generous-hearted Christine."

"No, mamma; I don't think I could be mean enough for that; but I love pa so much, that I should like him to think at least as much of me as he does of Clare. I think I can guess what has made him angry with her. Victor says that John Spiers has walked with her almost in sight of the house several times, and then turned back. I suppose pa found him with her when he went to meet

her this evening. He's very handsome, and full of fun, and I only wish he had come on to the house. If he had, maybe pa wouldn't have been so angry with sister."

"You are talking nonsense, Christine. What have we in common with those vulgar people? I am only astonished that Clare could have allowed such a man as John Spiers to make her acquaintance."

"Half the girls in town are in love with him, any way; and in winter, when he wears a Spanish cloak, he looks like a real cavalier. Old Mr. Spiers is getting rich, they say; and if they are vulgar, you know, ma, that people overlook that where there is plenty of money."

"You echo the opinions of others, Christine, for you know too little of life to understand such things yourself," said Mrs. Desmond, in a tone of annoyance. "Let me tell you this, though, for your future guidance. There can be no real sympathy of nature or feeling between those who have been reared among coarse people, and those who have lived in an atmosphere of refinement from childhood. This young man may be handsome as Apollo, but he has not risen above his surroundings, and no calamity could appear greater to me than for Clare to become entangled with him in any way. As to money, there are some things that are too infinitely precious to be bought by it, potent as its power is."

"Oh, mamma! what a sermon you have preached to me! Clare ought to have heard you, for she is the culprit after all. I suppose she has been flirting with Mr. Spiers, and pa has found her out. That must be the reason he is so angry with her, since you say you couldn't bear her to marry him."

"God forbid such a possibility as that!" said Mrs. Desmond, fervently. "Even to couple the name of such a man with that of my pure child seems profanation. You must not talk so freely, Christine. You are too young to have much judgment, and love and marriage are not fit themes for a school-girl to discuss."

Christine tossed her head slightly, and muttered, as she turned away:

"At our school, out of lesson-time, the girls don't talk of much else, anyway."

She went into the pretty room she occupied jointly with her sister, and found Clare lying across the foot of the bed, with her face buried in the pillow. Christine poured cool water in the basin, and coming to her sister's side, gently said:

"Let me bathe your forehead, Clare. That is the best remedy for the headache; or would you rather have me thread my fingers through your hair? Ma likes that when she is ill."

Clare moved impatiently, and spoke in a muffled voice from the bag of feathers in which she had concealed her face.

"Please let me alone, Christine. It isn't my head, but my heart that is aching, and I don't think you can find a remedy for that."

"Oh-h! then I suppose you've got a lover sure enough. Girls' hearts don't get to that pass without something of that sort, do they?"

Clare raised her flushed face, and with great energy exclaimed:

"I wish I had never been born! I wish I was dead! for there is nothing worth living for, now that papa is

estranged from me. And all the rest of you will soon look as coldly on me as he does. O dear! O dear! what is to become of me?"

"Now I *know* there's a lover in the case!" cried Christine, triumphantly. "And I know who it is, too. You needn't think that I am to be bamboozled, and kept in the dark, when I've got two eyes in my head; and very sharp ones they are, too."

Clare sunk down again, saying:

"I am too miserable to care what you have seen, or what you know. Nothing can ever make me happy again."

"Now that's coming it rather too strong," was the rather slangy reply of the younger sister. "There's no use in taking it so hard, if pa *won't* let you marry Mr. Spiers. He'll not do it; and neither will ma, for she thinks him—well, it's no use to tell you what, but you'll have to make up your mind to give him up, and not break your heart over it either."

"Break my heart over *him*!" said Clare, her head again emerging from the pillow. "I think not, Chris, unless I am forced to—"

She stopped abruptly, and plunging back again, lay silent, almost motionless; and Christine pondered on her last words, unable to comprehend their meaning. "Forced to—what?" she asked herself, and finally concluded the sentence to suit her own ideas. "Forced to give him up, I suppose she meant. I am sorry for it, for I think Mr. Spiers would make a nice, amusing brother-in-law. He can tell all about foreign people, and their funny ways. It's a pity pa and ma can't like *him*, even if his parents are coarse people. We've got to be so poor, and Clare

would have a nice home of her own, and may be she could help poor papa."

While Christine cogitated thus in her childish simplicity, ignorant of the most vital points in question, Mrs. Desmond threw a veil over her head and went in search of her husband.

After a long walk through the sombre woods, through which the bright moonlight dimly penetrated, she met him slowly returning toward the house. She put her arm through his, and said:

"What have you discovered, Dessy, darling? I knew, from Clare's face and yours, as soon as I saw them, that something very unpleasant had passed between you. You must not be too hard on her, dear, for she is very young, and, of course, thoughtless, and she has always been a good and gentle child to us."

"That is true, Nettie; but a spirit of opposition has been aroused in her, and in spite of all I could say, she insisted that she must keep the pledge she has given to that low fellow, to give him her hand when he is ready to marry her."

Mrs. Desmond uttered a little cry, and convulsively grasped the arm on which she leaned.

"You—you cannot mean that she is willing to throw herself away on—on young Spiers? I suppose it is he you referred to."

"Yes—I found them loitering along the road together, and in spite of what I had said to him, he actually braved me, and said he had the *right* to walk with her, as she had promised to become his wife."

"Oh, is it as bad as that? And not a word said to us before she gave that man the power to speak to you

in such a manner! Oh, my heart is half broken! I could not have believed that Clare would deceive us in this way. What did she say to you? How could she excuse her conduct?"

"What she said is the strangest part of the affair. She declared she had no idea of engaging herself to him, but he reproached her with trifling with him, and forced from her the promise she insists she must abide by. I suppose she has got the silly notion in her head, that Spiers will shoot himself if she refuses him now. If he never dies till he does that, I think he will be as immortal as the Wandering Jew."

"I will disabuse her mind of that idea. If she does not fancy herself in love with him, we shall save her yet. It would be too dreadful to give my child up to such a fate as hers would be, as the wife of a dissipated prodigal, even if John Spiers is not something worse."

"Yes, it would degrade and ruin her to step down to his level. I have said all that was possible to enlighten Clare as to his true character; but her only reply was, that she had given her word, and must keep it. I even threatened to cast her off, and she said the same, though I could not help feeling, all the time, that some unspoken dread filled her mind, which had more to do with her determination than any deep-seated feeling of affection for him."

"What should she dread more than losing the love and confidence of her parents? If she really does not love him, we shall soon extricate her from his toils. I suppose the man must be in love with her, or he would not wish to marry her. She has no dower but her own sweetness and beauty, no expectations of any kind; for

we have no rich relations except my old grandaunt, Mrs. Adair, and she has always ignored my existence because my mother offended her by marrying a man she did not approve of."

"I had forgotten that you have such a relative. Of course there is nothing to hope from her, and I suppose Spiers is what he calls in love with Clare; that is, he has taken a fancy to her sweet face and winning ways; but he would tire of her in a month, and end by treating her with brutal indifference. She must not go back to that school again, Nettie. They must find another music-teacher, though we can ill spare the pittance they pay her. We must dig and delve here, and get a living out of the old worn-out ground as we best can."

"Yes, dear, I can bear every privation cheerfully if we can only save our darling from the fate that threatens her. Let us go in now. The dew is falling heavily, and it grows late."

The next few days were passed by Clare in the house, in a state of fitful wretchedness; and when she knew that her father had gone into the town her heart died within her with dread of the result that might ensue from a meeting between Mr. Desmond and her lover.

But he came back safe, though very sad and stern-looking. He had held an interview with the elder Spiers and his son, and both had made every effort to conciliate him, and win his consent to a formal betrothal between the two young people.

When Mr. Desmond asked why Spiers had withdrawn his opposition to such a disinterested marriage for his son, a plausible reply was given to the effect that the father believed a union with the girl on whom John

had set his heart would be the best guarantee for his future steadiness, and that the warmest wish of his heart was to see him settled in a happy home of his own.

The old man declared his intention to act most liberally by the young pair, and boasted a little of the wealth he had accumulated; though he could not look Mr. Desmond clearly in the face while he talked of money, and knew that he was aware of what means had once been resorted to to lift him out of his difficulties in business.

When all had been said on both sides, Mr. Desmond ended the conference by emphatically saying:

"I have heard all that either of you can urge, and I have tried to listen with patience; but I wish you both to understand that, fallen as my fortunes are, I would sooner see my daughter wrestling with the direst poverty than know that she was living in luxury on such gains as yours. I know you both; there is no honor, no truth in your natures, and I say to you, Mr. Spiers, if this pursuit does not cease, the knowledge I hold in my possession, of one act of your life that can forever blight your good name, shall no longer be withheld from the public. I will spare you, if I can; but if your son persists in the suit I have forbidden you must take the consequences."

Spiers cowered a moment before this threat; but he recovered himself, and insolently said:

"If my son still chooses to persist, and marry your daughter in defiance of your opposition, I fancy you will be glad enough to shield the name she will bear from the gibes of the world."

"In that event, Clare will no longer be recognized as

a child of mine. If she elects to wed dishonor, let her bear the scornful finger pointed at her as she best can. I have said all that I came here to say, and now I bid you both good-morning."

The old man shook his fist at the retreating form of his visitor, and said, in low, concentrated tones of intense wrath:

"Wait—wait and see who will come off conqueror, Reggy Desmond. When your dainty darling is herself accused of a crime of far deeper dye than any *I* have been guilty of, then perhaps you'll lower your proud crest, and grovel in the dust at *my* feet. You shall believe her guilty—you shall drink to the dregs the cup of humiliation you have forced on me to-day."

He turned to his son, who was drumming on the window, his face sullen and flushed, but with the air of a man who felt himself far from vanquished. John curtly said:

"Why should we care for his threats? They can't mean much; and we'll turn on him so sharply presently, that he'll have no chance to harm us. I will see the girl in spite of him; but I must be cautious in my movements till she is as much in our power as you are in his."

"The scornful beggar! who has let all his chances slip through his fingers! I will bring home to him the opprobrium he threatens to cast on me. He shall believe that his daughter is guilty, and gladly give her to you as a bribe to shield her reputed crime from the knowledge of the world. Oh! I'll grind him to powder when I once have my heel upon him."

"There, that will do! Don't get into a tantrum, and

talk so loud as to give that infernal Beal a chance to overhear you. We'll pay Desmond back when the odds are in our favor, and that is all that is to be said about it."

The interview had taken place in the room back of the shop, and Mr. Spiers suddenly threw the door of communication open, but the young clerk was at the further end, bending down over a package he was making up.

"He's all right," said the old man, in a low tone. "Beal's a good fellow, and a great deal more useful to me than you are, John."

"It's his business to be," was the gruff reply. "As to myself, I have something better to do than pack up nauseous things that kill as often as they cure."

He strode out of the shop, and the old man muttered:

"It's always the way. He leaves the burden of everything on me and the boy."

CHAPTER VI.

MRS. ADAIR'S LETTER.

VAINLY did Mrs. Desmond make every effort to gain the entire confidence of her daughter. Clare was evidently very miserable, and she left those around her to infer that their opposition to her engagement to John Spiers was the cause of her depression. She wept bitterly when her mother talked with her, but the only reply to all her remonstrances was:

"I *must* be true to my plighted word, mamma. I

fancied that I liked Mr. Spiers. I was silly enough to let him talk of love to me till—till his feelings were so deeply enlisted that I have no right to draw back now.”

“But your own feelings, Clare? How do they stand affected toward this young man? Oh, my darling, pause on the brink of the precipice into which you are ready to plunge. How *can* you persist in giving yourself to a man who is so unworthy of you?”

“I *must*, mamma;” and that was all that could be gained from her.

In spite of the precautions taken by her parents to prevent a meeting, Spiers had watched around the house at night, and spoken to Clare through the open window of her room.

The rest of the family were in the parlor, but the unhappy girl, feeling herself in disgrace and out of place among them, had gone early to her chamber; she turned down the lamp and leaned her head upon the windowsill, feeling utterly deserted and forlorn.

Suddenly a low voice spoke softly in her ear, and she started up as if she had received an electric shock.

“You here! The dog will alarm the house, and—and papa declares that he will do something dreadful, if he knows that you have sought me again.”

“Have no fears about the dog. I have given him a dose that will stupefy him for a few hours, though it won’t harm him eventually. I have come to say to you that I cannot live without you; to ask you if you will be true to me, in spite of all the efforts that may be made to estrange you from me?”

“That is already done—your own words effected it when you threatened me. It is only through fear that I

submit to talk with you now. If I dared, I would call out and entreat my father to defend me from you. I do not love you, and yet I am forced to stand in a false position before my family—to sacrifice their confidence and affection, because I dread that your desperate threats may be put into execution.”

“You may well dread it,” he hissed through his clenched teeth. “I spared your father when he insulted mine a few days ago, and I did it for your sake. But he shall not escape me when you cease to stand as a barrier between him and myself. His only safety lies in my passionate love for you, and if you tell me again that you have ceased to love me, I will have no mercy on him, on you, or on myself. We shall all go down to Hades together, for I will be avenged before I give up the life that will be a burden to me without you.”

The frightened girl imploringly said:

“Will you have no pity on me? Will you tear me from my home, my loved ones, to make me the most miserable of human beings?”

“What am I to infer from those words? That it is only another way of telling me that you were only trifling with me when you led me on, till to win you became the one hope of my life? Beware! I am desperate; and some devil is whispering to me now to make you mine in death. See! I have the means at hand.”

He drew a small pistol from his breast, and held it in front of her head, and the unhappy object of his brutal violence sunk back shuddering, and half fainting. She gasped:

“Don’t—don’t kill me! I—I am afraid of death!”

In a sardonic tone, Spiers replied:

"I dare say; but you are not afraid to drive a man desperate, and make life a curse to him. If I shoot you the sound of the pistol will bring your father to the spot. I can put an end to him, and still have enough left to deprive the hangman of a victim by destroying myself. On the next words you speak depends the life of three people; so be careful what they are."

Clare was silent for a moment, for words would not come to her parched and trembling lips. Half dazed with terror she at last found voice to say:

"I am in your power; I have brought this on myself, and I must bear through life the chains you have put upon me. If you love me, as you would have me believe, I may, in time, learn to return your affection. I *must* try to do so, since death is the only alternative."

Spiers put up his pistol, and changing his manner suddenly, said, in tender tones:

"Pardon me, my darling, but I am half maddened by the opposition I have met with in consummating the dearest wish of my heart—to make you mine forever. I have succeeded in overcoming my father's objections, and all would go well with us, if your parents would be reasonable. Oh, Clare, your influence will make me a good and true man, for I love you to that degree that I will make every effort to come up to your standard when we are once united. Speak, my own love, and tell me that you will strive to give me something in return for the wild affection I bear you."

"I will try," was the faint response. "Go now, for I hear them leaving the parlor, and Christine will be here in another moment."

Spiers put his hand through the low window, and

grasped hers, though she would gladly have withheld it, if possible.

"Give me one kiss," he said. "We have never sealed our betrothal, and I have the right to ask it now."

She recoiled from him, and hurriedly said:

"It is too late; my sister is at the door. Go now, for God's sake, that no one may suspect this meeting."

He dropped her hand with a scowl, and turned away just in time to conceal himself behind a clump of tangled shrubbery as Mr. Desmond came around the house to take a survey of the premises before retiring for the night.

He missed the dog, called his name, and whistled for him in vain. He went back, muttering:

"I trusted Ponto, and even *he* is not faithful. I wonder if that wretched girl has poisoned him, that she may have the chance to meet her lover in the grounds. Yet I wrong her—for the dog would follow and guard her, and be silent enough if she spoke to him, let who would come to join her. The creature has forsaken his duty, I suppose, and gone off in pursuit of game."

He presently came around the house again from the opposite direction, but the intruder had effected his escape in the interval; and the next morning Ponto was found, as usual, lying on the veranda in the early sunshine, with no indication about him that he had been drugged on the previous night.

The interview between Spiers and Clare had only deepened her horror of the fate she had brought on herself; yet she could see no way of escaping from it. She believed in the reality of his simulated passion, and the chain that was tightening around her she felt herself powerless to break. If she had thought it possible that

an appeal to her father would at once release her from all fears on his account and her own, she would have made it without delay. But in her romance and inexperience, she firmly believed that there was no hope for any of them, save in the sacrifice of herself to the man from whom her whole soul recoiled with unspeakable repulsion. Clare did not sleep that night, and on the following morning she was feverish, and too ill to get up. Mrs. Desmond sat with her, and gave her every attention. She saw that the poor girl was more depressed than ever, but she could draw nothing from her save the weary plaint:

"I shall die, mamma, and then you will all forgive me for what I have made you suffer."

"You must not talk so, my child. You are young and strong, and there is not much the matter with you."

"More than you think; but I can bear it, I suppose, and illustrate the poet's words about the heart that brokenly lives on."

"I fear that you are a romantic little goose, my dear. If you do your duty by those who love you best, there is no danger that they will allow such a thing as heart-breaking misery to come near you."

"Oh, you don't know—you don't know. Papa is so hard to me. He has threatened to cast me off, and he treats me as if I am already thrust out of his heart."

"My child, your father is stern because he cannot understand you. You will give no satisfactory explanation of what has passed between you and Mr. Spiers, and we both think that you cannot long continue to love such a man, even if he has been able to cast an evil spell over you for a season."

"That is it—an evil spell. I know it; I feel it; but I cannot escape from it. Oh! mother—mother—"

What she might have been tempted to say, in that moment of anguish, was interrupted by the entrance of Christine, who said:

"Papa has a letter he wants to show you, ma, and he told me to stay with sister while you went to him."

Mrs. Desmond arose, and stood a moment by the sick girl's side, tenderly smoothing down her hair.

"I will come back, dear, and you can finish what you have to say to me. You know that you can trust me entirely, my love."

"Yes, mamma, I know that. But I believe that I have nothing more to say."

She turned her face to the wall, and with a sigh, her mother turned away and said to Christine, in a low tone:

"Be very gentle with your sister, for she is threatened with a low, nervous fever. Don't contradict or worry her in any way."

"I won't, ma; but I think you and pa are doing that every day of your life, and that's why she's sick. I can't see why she shouldn't be allowed to marry the man, if she wants him."

Mrs. Desmond gave the speaker a look that silenced even the pert tongue of Christine, and she almost sternly said:

"Be silent on what you do not understand. Sit quietly here till I come back; I shall not be long gone."

Mrs. Desmond found her husband on the veranda with an open letter in his hand, which seemed to have excited and agitated him much. His hand trembled as he held it toward her, and said:

"An avenue of escape is opened to that poor child for which I am very grateful, though a month ago the proposal to give her up to any one would have filled me with exquisite pain. Now, I think it is Providence that has interfered in her favor."

Mrs. Desmond glanced rapidly over the following lines, more surprised at their tenor than even her husband had been :

"RIVERDALE, June 22, 18—.

"MR. DESMOND—*Sir*: I address these lines to you because I recognize in you the head of your family, and in my day it was the fashion to pay respect to the one in authority, even if what was to be said most concerned those under his protection.

"At my age it is a burden to write long letters, so I shall try to be as brief as possible.

"I am the great-aunt of your wife, though I have never seen her, and for a very good reason. The mother displeased me by the marriage she made, and I told her that she and hers should forever remain strangers to me.

"I meant it when I said it, and I dare say I should have kept my word if my granddaughter had not died, and left me without kith or kin in the world, except Annette Desmond and her children.

"I have made inquiries about you, and I hear that you are a poor manager; that you have frittered away an independence in the hope of becoming rich; always failing in your efforts, but still spending as if there was no end to money.

"That only concerns me so far as this: if you are poor, you will be more willing to give up to me your eldest daughter for a few months, with the understand-

ing that, if she pleases me, I will adopt her, and make my will in her favor. I was an heiress in my own right, and I have the power to dispose of a large property. If Clare Desmond is as charming as I have been told, I think there is little doubt that I shall select her as my heiress.

"As I do not think it fair to do so much for the daughter and nothing for the mother, I shall pay to Mrs. Desmond an annuity of a thousand dollars a year, and that, with the little you have, will enable you to live at least in comfort.

"I enclose a check for eight hundred dollars, half of which is to be appropriated to Clare's wardrobe. I wish her to be elegantly dressed, and nothing of inferior quality purchased for her. Of course her mother will know what is necessary to a young girl's outfit, as I understand she has been a gay woman of the world herself.

"I assume the fact that you will gladly avail yourself of this offer, and three weeks from this time I shall send my manager, a thoroughly respectable, middle-aged man, to bring Clare to Riverdale. I do not ask you or her mother to come with her, because I wish to see and judge of the child myself before I invite you to come to me.

"You will not be long separated from your daughter, for my lease of life cannot endure much longer. My health is delicate, and that is why I looked about me for an heiress who is lovely and attractive enough to be known as one of the Graces of Riverdale. The women of my family have always been noted for their beauty and fascination, and if all that is told of your daughter is true, she will be worthy to wear the mantle of her predecessors. Your kinswoman,

"GEORGINA ADAIR."

When Mrs. Desmond finished reading, she drew a long breath, and said:

"This is the most extraordinary turn of fortune! I declare it almost takes my breath away to think that my magnificent old aunt has absolutely made overtures to us and wants to take Clare for her heiress. Of course she'll be pleased with our beauty, for she is as handsome as any of the Graces that have gone before her. But the best of it is, that we shall have enough to live on, without worrying about where the next supply is to come from."

"Then you are willing to give your daughter up? I feared that you might not regard this as I do, as a special interposition of Providence to remove Clare from the vicinity of the villain who has obtained so strange an influence over her."

"I thought of that from the first, and I am glad that I can send her away for a time. We shall not be very long separated from her; and even if the hope of seeing her soon had not been held out to us, I should have thought it our duty to accept the olive-branch the old lady offers. A short time since, it would have been very hard to part from Clare, but even then I should not have felt justified in refusing this chance to reinstate our fortunes. I don't make any pretence to being disinterested. We need money badly, and I am most thankful to aunt Adair that she has remembered us in our darkest hour. She has been sent like a good angel to rescue us from the worst perplexities into which we have ever fallen."

"You take a just view of the position, my dear, and as usual, we are united in our views. Clare has seen nothing of society, and with this proud old dame, she

will soon learn to be ashamed of her strange predilection for that underbred snob. *He* will never be allowed to approach her under the aristocratic roof of Riverdale. The old lady once lived almost in the state of a princess, though I suppose she has given much of that up since she grew old and infirm. This will be a wonderful thing for Clare, for I know beforehand that it is certain she must make a favorable impression on Mrs. Adair."

"I hope so, and I believe she will. I will rouse her up with this intelligence, and I hope it will cure her. Away from here, she'll soon forget all about that odious man, especially as I am going to get her a beautiful wardrobe; a thing a girl of her age is apt to think quite as much of as of a lover."

"That reminds me, dear, that we must keep to ourselves the news of her good luck. It will not do to let Spiers know that she is going away, nor where she will be sent. You had better take Clare with you on a visit to your old friends in Norfolk, purchase her outfit, and have it made there. She will have to take the steamer there, at any rate, and I shall feel comforted in thinking she is beyond the reach of that presumptuous villain."

"But how can you bear to have her away from you for the last few weeks she may ever be with us as our own especial darling?"

A cloud passed over Mr. Desmond's brow, and he curtly said:

"She can never be that to me again. Her silent obstinacy has disgusted me. I take a warm interest in her fate. I will do all that is possible to save her from the dark future she is so willing to embrace; but that is all. I could give her up to-day, if I knew her to be in safe

hands. I should not sigh over the separation, because all my grief would be for the ungrateful child who has so ill repaid our care and affection."

"Oh, my dear, you are very hard on the poor child. She suffers deeply—I can see that; and some day, perhaps, you will feel sorry that you were not more tender with her."

"I mete out to her less suffering than she has meted out to me.

"O! how sharper than a serpent's tooth it is,
To have a thankless child."

I am punished rightly, perhaps, for giving Clare a higher place in my regard than that occupied by my other children. But I will atone to them for the injustice I have been guilty of."

"Well, dear, let us talk of the dear girl's prospects, and not of her faults. Will you speak with her before you answer my aunt's letter; or shall I do it?"

"I have no wish to speak with her in private again," said Mr. Desmond, coldly. "I have already exhausted both words and patience, and you, at any rate, will be the most suitable person to tell her of the great piece of good fortune that has come to her. If I did not believe such a thing to be impossible, I could think that John Spiers has some knowledge of what was impending, or he would never have sought Clare, lovely as she certainly is."

"I don't suppose that he ever heard of Mrs. Adair in his life, or if he has, that he is aware of my relationship to her."

"I suppose not. Go now, Nettie; and come back to me as soon as possible, to let me know what she says. I must reply to Mrs. Adair as soon as possible."

CHAPTER VII.

CHRISTINE LEARNS CLARE'S SECRET.

WHEN Mrs. Desmond returned to the chamber of her daughter, she found that Christine had given up her post to an old negress who had been the nurse of her children. Dorothy, looking like an antique image carved in ebony, was sitting beside the bed, dressed in a striped cotton gown, with a turban of many colors wound around her head, and large gold hoops hanging from her ears.

"Yes—honey chile," she was saying, "dem air things is mighty strange, but it's true as I'm tellin' you. Take dat charm what I gin you, as were made by one as understand natur's secrets, an' w'ar it over yer heart, an' you'll git to be spry, and well as you ever was."

"Dear Mammy, if you can give me one that will make papa love me again, I shall be as happy as I can ever hope to be now."

"Shoo, chile; what you mean by talkin' dat air way? Anybody, to hear you, would think you'd never git out o' de dumps no mo'. I can't do what you axes, caze there's charms, an' charms, an' you'd have to give your pa suffin' wi' your own han's, an' git him to take it unbeknownst, or it wouldn't do no good."

Mrs. Desmond had paused in the open door-way, but at this juncture she sharply spoke:

"What nonsense is this you are putting in Clare's head, Dolly? Haven't I told you, again and again, that I would not have my children's minds filled with super-

stitious notions? *Love-charms*, indeed! I know of none that can be effectual, but truth, and sweetness of nature. If Clare will return to her duty, and regard the wishes of her father, he will not be likely to need any of your drugs to make him love her as well as ever."

The old woman shook her head, and said:

"I knows you don't b'lieve in 'em, Miss Nettie, but it's true, all de same. I knows a 'oman 'mong my own people what makes a 'coction o' yerbs dat'll make anybody love you, if you pours a leetle of it in de wine or de water dey drinks. You see, I knows, caze I tried it onct myself."

"You were an old dunce for trying it, and I have no doubt the wise man laughed at you for giving him money for so worthless a thing. Go away, now; I have something to say to Clare. And when you come back to sit with her, I forbid you to speak with her about such absurd trash as you were discussing when I came in."

The old woman arose, made a dignified salaam, and replied, in an offended tone:

"In course I'll go. You's de mistis, an' I'm boun' to 'bey yer orders; but I knows what I knows. I'm ever so much older'n you, Miss Nettie, an' sperience is wuth more'n book larnin'."

"I dare say you undervalue everything you don't know yourself," said Mrs. Desmond, laughing. "There—that will do; I have no time to enter into a discussion with you now. I have something particular to say to Clare."

Old Dolly swept out of the apartment with as grand an air as an offended duchess might have assumed; but

her curiosity was aroused by Mrs. Desmond's last words, and she did not scruple to steal around the house, and listen through the open window to what passed between the mother and daughter. She had no intention of making any evil use of the knowledge she gained in this surreptitious manner; but she had a vague idea that, as an old and trusted retainer of the family, she had the right to know all that concerned them.

Mrs. Desmond sat down beside the bed, and taking her daughter's hand in her own, asked:

"Would you like to go away from here for a while, my dear? Don't you think that change of scene would do you good?"

Clare aroused herself from the apathetic calm in which she seemed to be lying, and exclaimed:

"Oh, if that were possible, mamma! But we are too poor, and I have nothing suitable to wear away from home. I have outgrown all my nice dresses, and you can't afford to give me others."

"What would you say, my love, if I told you that a golden shower has suddenly fallen on us? that we can get for you all that you can possibly need in the way of dress?"

At this Clare sat up in the bed, and stared at her mother as if uncertain whether she was in her right mind. She slowly said:

"I should think it like a fairy tale; but it can't be true, you know, ma. Papa never buys lottery tickets, and we have no rich relatives that I ever heard of."

"Yes, I have one relative; a great aunt, and she is very rich. We have held no intercourse with her, and therefore you have been ignorant of her existence. Mrs.

Adair has lost her only descendant, a granddaughter, and she has written to your father to ask him if he will allow you to go to her for a season; and if you make a favorable impression on her, she will adopt you and make you her heiress."

The face of the sick girl flushed, her eyes sparkled, and she cried out in irrepressible excitement:

"Oh, mamma, this is a godsend! You cannot tell how gladly I will get away from here for a season. Besides, I will try to win the old lady's heart, and she will give me the means to help you. When I can do that, papa will not think me such a renegade to my own family."

"I am glad that you are so willing to go, my dear. When you are away from the evil influence that has lately enthralled you, you will begin to see how right your father is in his opposition to the marriage on which you seem so determined. I must exact one promise from you, Clare, and that is, that you will not communicate with Mr. Spiers, nor give him any clue to where you are to be found."

After a brief silence, Clare said:

"I will do that, mamma. I shall be glad to go away, and have time to think over my position; and—and perhaps—"

She paused abruptly, afraid to betray the secret of her incomprehensible conduct. She shivered slightly as she recalled the interview of the preceding night, and again became so pale that her mother was alarmed. She soothingly said:

"Don't excite yourself, dear. Return thanks to the Giver of all good for the unexpected help that has come

to us in our darkest hour, and ask Him to help you to come to a right decision on the momentous subject we have lately discussed so much."

"Yes, mamma; I will pray with all my heart and soul, and the burden of my prayer shall be: Oh God! deliver me from evil."

Her mother kissed her tenderly, and said, in tones that were tremulous in spite of her efforts to make them cheerful:

"I must tell you one thing more before I go, Clare. My aunt has offered me a thousand dollars a year, and I do not hesitate to accept it from her abundance."

"I shall love her dearly for that, and when she sees that I am attached to her, Mrs. Adair will return my affection, and I shall be sure to please her. Dearest mother, I promise to do my best to win the means of lifting you again to the sphere to which you were born."

"Only be natural, and true to yourself, my daughter, and the old lady will find comfort and delight in your presence beneath her roof. You must get well now as soon as possible, that you may go with me to Norfolk, on a visit to Mrs. Ford. My aunt has sent money to get you a handsome outfit, and your wardrobe must be prepared in the next three weeks. You will go away from us at that time."

"But to come back again, mamma. I am only going on a visit now, you know."

"I think we shall be invited to join you there, after Mrs. Adair has made up her mind as to her intentions toward you. I cannot doubt her ultimate decision, Clare, for you are sure to win upon her affections. Try to sleep now, my child, and if you are able to sit up to-

morrow, we may go to Mrs. Ford the next day. You shall have any quantity of the most beautiful things, now that I have the means of buying them."

"You are very good to me, and I don't think I will quite make up my mind to die yet," replied Clare, with a faint smile. "I may tell Christine, I suppose?"

"Yes; but she must not let any one know where you are going."

"I do not know that yet myself. I forgot to ask you where my good fairy lives."

"She has a beautiful place on James river. I have seen it from the deck of a steamer, but I never was there. My aunt quarrelled with my mother when she married, and they never met again. We have talked enough now, dear, and I must go back to your father. He will be delighted to hear that you are willing to leave the neighborhood of your obnoxious lover."

As she went out, Clare muttered:

"Obnoxious indeed, and to *me* more than to all. Yet I dare not speak out, and attempt to deliver myself from his thrall. Oh! if I could only go away where he could *never* find me again, how happy I should be! But he will track me out; I know he will, and—O Lord, help me, help me, or I perish!"

She prayed fervently, and gradually calmness came back to her, and with it sleep, that she had thought banished from her restless heart, fell upon her eyelids, and wrapt her senses in sweet oblivion. In the meantime Mrs. Desmond went back to her husband, and repeated to him what had passed between herself and Clare.

He listened with earnest interest, and then asked:

"Did she hesitate when you required of her a pledge not to reveal to Spiers the place of her retreat?"

"She did pause, as if thinking over what she had best say; and her face was a curious study to me, well as I have known and understood its varying expressions. As well as I could read it, there was dread of some inexplicable horror if she evaded him, mingled with joy at the prospect of being able to do so. I may have misinterpreted, but that was the impression I received."

"I believe you are right, and that wretch has threatened her with something she is afraid to speak of. If she could only be made to feel what a cowardly poltroon he is, she would soon know that his threats are mere sounding wind—that he would never dare to carry one of them into effect."

"Well, dear, we will get Clare away from his vicinity, and her natural good sense will soon show her that John Spiers is no match for her. Had you not better write your letter now to my aunt?"

"I will begin it at once." And he sat down before his desk and dashed off the following lines:

"DESMONIA, June 25th, 18—.

"MRS. ADAIR—*Dear Madam*: Your letter took both myself and my wife quite by surprise, for we had never thought of the long breach between the families being closed by yourself. Of course from us no overtures could come, lest they might be misinterpreted by you who had everything to give, and we nothing save kindly regard and gratitude for such aid as your heart has prompted you to extend to us in our misfortunes.

"I admit that I have managed badly, but I was not

educated for a business man, and it would have been better if I had invested my moderate fortune in a secure manner, and have contented myself with the income derived from it.

"It is equally true that we have spent a great deal of money, and have but little left; but I could not bear to deny my family the luxury to which I had been accustomed myself from my infancy, and I could not look forward to the ruin that at last overtook me.

"My wife and I jointly thank you for the generous assistance you have proffered, and we accept it in the same spirit in which it is tendered. We can now put our place under cultivation and improve the land, so that in a few years we hope to be independent of extraneous aid.

"You wish our eldest daughter to visit you, that you may decide as to whether she is a worthy descendant of the Beauforts—a race once so distinguished for its beautiful women and stately men.

"As her father, I am naturally partial to Clare, but I think the decision of others would also be that she is charming enough to take her place among the Riverdale Graces. She is yet very young—barely seventeen—and of course in a measure unformed; but I could intrust her to no better model of grace and refinement than the lady once known as the beautiful Georgina Beaufort, and later in life as the unrivalled leader in the world of fashion in which her triumphs were won."

"Blarney," said his wife, who was leaning over his shoulder, following with her eyes the lines as they were traced.

"Of course. I am an Irishman, and a smooth tongue is my birthright. Don't interrupt me, Nettie. I am only trying to make the way smooth for our daughter."

"Well, go on with your flatteries, then; for, with that object in view, I would perform the kou-tou to the dear old dame myself."

"In conclusion, I have only to say that we intrust to you, madam, a treasure so precious to us that, poor as we are, we would gladly keep her if it were not so much for Clare's benefit in every way that we give her up to you. I fully understand that she goes now only on a visit to you; but let your judgment of her be what it may, we earnestly hope that this opening may lead to a renewal of friendly intercourse between yourself and our family.

"With feelings of grateful respect, I am, dear madam,
Yours, to command,

"REGINALD DESMOND."

His wife again glanced over what he had written, and laughingly said:

"It has been said that the postscript is the cream of a woman's letter, and in this case I think you have left to me the main thing to do—to thank Mrs. Adair for her liberality to us."

"Not to us, but to you, dear; therefore it is your place to speak of that. See; I have left room at the bottom of the page."

Mrs. Desmond sat down and quickly added a few gracefully expressed lines, accepting the annuity and asking for her daughter the maternal care which a girl

of Clare's age needs more than at any other era of her life.

In the meantime Christine had returned to her sister's apartment, and, after a keen glance at her, discontentedly said:

"Something is going on, and nobody will tell me what. Pa and ma are shut up in their room together, talking mysteriously, and Mammy Dol looks as important as if she had found out something wonderful. What is it all about? Do you know, Clare? Now that I look at you your face is all changed since I went out. You've lost that dull, weary look you had an hour ago, and I declare you seem to have come to life again! What on earth has happened? Has pa given his consent to—to—you know what?"

"No, he has not; but that don't matter now. Can you keep a secret, Chris.? I've got something to tell you, but you are to promise not to tell."

"Of course I can keep a secret," replied the girl, drawing herself up with dignity. "I am no chatterbox, and, moreover, I don't know who I could tell it to, unless I made a confidant of Victor, for I see no one out of my own family. We live here like owls in a wood, but I don't complain; it's great fun to me to do pretty much as I please, and torment poor old Cæsar till I can almost see his wool getting grayer every day."

"Oh, dear; you talk so fast, that you don't even give me time to answer your questions. But you will not be allowed to run wild much longer. Oh, sister, something wonderful *has* happened, and I can hardly credit our good fortune yet."

Christine stared at her a moment, and then skipped

and danced about the room as if she had gone wild. Clare sat up in the bed and laughed, and the younger girl suddenly assumed an air of preternatural soberness, and said:

"I don't know why I am making a fool of myself before I know what I've got to rejoice over. Have we come into a great fortune? Is that what you meant, Clare?"

"No—not exactly that; but an old lady, a relation I never heard of till to-day, has written to papa and invited me to go on a visit to her. And oh! Christine, she has ever so much money, and if she likes me she will give me enough of it to make us all rich. You know what is mine would be for all of us to enjoy."

"That is nice—as far as it goes, Clare; but, you see, you can do as you please about marrying your lover when you are rich, and he may want all your fortune for himself. It would have been much better if this relation had given pa something to help him out of his difficulties."

"So she has given a thousand dollars a year to mamma, who is her great niece. She will have *that*, whether I please Mrs. Adair or not."

"That is good; mamma can carry out her plans about the place, and Cæsar says if it was properly cultivated, and ever so much done to the land, it would bring something worth having every year. I suppose you have brightened up so much because you think you can have your own way about marrying John Spiers, when you have got a fortune?"

Clare impetuously cried out:

"Do you think I want money for *that*? I am going

away where he can't find me, and that is better to me than the prospect of wealth. I wish I had never seen nor heard of him, for he has become the torment of my life."

Christine stared at her with open-mouthed astonishment, and then indignantly said:

"I could not have believed you so fickle and worldly-minded, Clare Desmond. Here you have made us all miserable for days, because you persisted in clinging to that man; and now, at the first glimpse of good fortune, you are ready to give him up. I don't want you to marry him, but if you hadn't been over head and ears in love with him you had no right to act as you have done."

"Oh! Chris., you don't understand; you wouldn't judge me so hard if you knew—if I dared to tell you, or any one else, how I came to engage myself to Mr. Spiers. I'll go to Mrs. Adair, and he must not find out where I have been sent. When I am out of his way he will get over his silly infatuation about me."

"Then you really don't care for him after all!"

"Come close to me, Chris. If I tell you something, will you declare to me that you will never reveal it to any creature? I am almost afraid to breathe it even to myself, but I've kept my secret till my heart is almost broke, and I think I can trust you with it."

"Ye-es," replied Christine, dubiously; "it will be safer, perhaps, to tell me than any one else."

Clare did not heed, in her excitement, that no pledge of secrecy was given, and she vehemently went on:

"I hate John Spiers—I would almost as soon die as marry him; but he threatened my life and that of papa;

he accused me of trifling with him, and went on so madly that I was frightened, and promised all he demanded. I have made you all miserable, and fretted myself sick, because I dared not tell the truth."

The younger sister listened in silent amazement, and after a pause, she said:

"I think you should have told papa. He is the one to protect you, and I hardly think *he* would be afraid of a coward who could be so mean as to threaten a young girl like you. If he's mad, he can be put in the lunatic asylum; if he isn't, papa can have him bound over to keep the peace."

"What a practical child you are! I never thought of either of those alternatives."

"Because you thought Mr. Spiers so much in love with you that *he* must be considered, and you were ready to sacrifice yourself before you would expose him to the punishment he deserves for treating you so badly. You are very romantic, sister, and you were going to do what you knew was wrong, because a blustering man scared your poor little life nearly out of you. He would never have dared to hurt you; and as for pa, I think he can take care of himself, and you too."

"You would not think that, Christine, if you had heard and seen him. Oh! he is a terrible man, and my only safety is in getting away from him, and hiding myself where he cannot find me."

"But, Clare, papa ought to know about this, that he may be on his guard against that man. If he is such a firebrand, he may attempt something dreadful when he finds out you are sent away. Let me tell pa what you have said to me; indeed, I think it the only safe way."

Clare was startled at this proposal; but after a long and earnest consultation, the clearer judgment of the younger sister prevailed, and Christine was permitted to inform their father of what she had learned.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE LOVE-CHARM.

CHRISTINE went in search of her father, full of the important revelation she had to make. She found him alone, for Mrs. Desmond had gone out to attend to some domestic affairs, and he was sitting in the veranda in much better spirits than on that first evening on which we found him there glooming over his losses, and giving up all hope of better days.

When his younger daughter nestled to his feet on a low foot-stool she had brought out with her, he smiled down on her, and said:

"I have something to tell you, my busy bee—something that I think will make you happy, though you will have to give up your sister for a while."

"I have heard about Mrs. Adair and the money she is going to give mamma, and I am very glad. But I have something more important than even that to tell you, papa. I have found out what has lately made Clare seem so naughty and self-willed; when you know about it, you will be sorry that you were angry with her, and you will love her more dearly than ever. But, dear father, don't love her so much *more* than me. I want

to make peace between you, but I want my place in your heart as high as hers."

Mr. Desmond was so much surprised both by the beginning and the end of this speech, that he listened without interruption. After a brief pause to overcome his emotion, he raised the speaker from her lowly seat, and placing her upon his knee, said:

"If I ever wronged you so far as to give you a lower place in my affections than that claimed by your sister, I promise to atone for it in the future, my child. Clare is going from us, and you are to be the light and joy of the house. Kiss me, my dear, and then tell me the mission on which you have been sent. I suppose our rebel has repented, and wishes to make peace at last on my own terms."

Christine kissed him more than once, and then said:

"Dear father, do not think or feel hardly toward my poor sister, for she has suffered even more than you, and she has consented at last that I shall tell you all about it."

She then went on to relate what had passed that evening between herself and Clare, and at the close of her narrative, Mr. Desmond said:

"I really thought that Clare had more strength of character than to be frightened into withholding from my knowledge the empty threats of such a creature as she has had to deal with. Her own sense should have told her that I was the proper person to consult, when she fell into difficulties of any kind. She would have saved both her and myself a great deal of suffering, if she had confided in me from the first. As to Spiers shooting himself or any one else, it is all bosh. I could

laugh at the whole thing, if it had not been the cause of such unhappiness to your mother and myself."

"It's all over now, papa, and you'll go to my sister and give her some comfort. She is still very much afraid of Mr. Spiers, and I only got her consent to tell you, because I thought you had better be on your guard, if he did make any attempt to attack you when Clare is sent out of his reach."

"That was a shrewd thought, Christine, and one that ought to have occurred to your sister. I will go to her and set her heart at rest about that blustering bully; but it is hard for me to forgive her for being so silly. For the last ten days she has kept me in a state of irritation and worry that has made me feel a dozen years older; and all might have been avoided, if she had not been a romantic little goose, who thought the man threatened her life because he adored her. Pretty adoration that, truly!"

"Dear papa, she has suffered more than you think. She has fretted herself into a fever, and you must be good to her, if you want her to get well again soon. I hope you will be gentle with her."

"Of course I will, my dear. She is sick and suffering; and when I look at her, I can forgive even more than she has done to annoy me. Wait here; and when your mother comes in, repeat to her what you have told me, that she may be prepared to talk it over with me. I will go to Clare now."

When he entered his daughter's room, he found her lying with closed eyes, her hands clasped over her heart, to still in some measure its tumultuous beating; for Clare feared nearly as much as she loved her father, and

she intuitively knew that he would be displeased at the reticence she had practised, when so much for herself was at stake.

Mr. Desmond looked down on her in the gathering twilight, and his heart softened toward her. He stooped and imprinted a light kiss upon her brow.

"My poor darling!" he softly said; "you have hurt my heart, but I forgive you."

The next moment Clare sprung up, and threw herself sobbing upon his breast.

"Dearest papa, can you—can you free me from the persecutions of that dreadful man? He was here last night; he spoke to me through that window, and held his pistol close to my head. I am not delirious—I am telling you the simple truth; and he made me promise again to marry him. But for my fear that he would do something dreadful if I betrayed him, I would never have kept all this from you."

Desmond trembled with sudden fury.

"What!" he exclaimed; "has that villain dared to penetrate to the very roof that shelters you? dared to repeat his dastardly threats, after what I said to him and his father but the other day? This passes all endurance, and I will no longer forbear with them."

Clare clung to him with all her feeble strength.

"Dearest father, do nothing rash, I entreat. I have so horrible a dread of anything happening to you, and on my account, I could never forgive myself—never!"

She was trembling and half fainting, and her father laid her back on her pillows, and controlling himself for her sake, gently said:

"Do not get excited, my love, for there is really no

cause for alarm. I have not the slightest fear of anything happening to me through the agency of Spiers. He is but a pitiful cur, whose barking might frighten a poor little dove like you, but to me it could have no meaning. He will not dare to attack me either openly or in secret; but I shall take such measures to-morrow as will point him out as my enemy, should he attempt to injure me in an underhand manner. Believe me, Clare, when I assure you that Spiers has too great a value for his own safety to risk it by doing any of the things with which he has threatened you."

Clare drew a long breath of relief.

"I wish I had told you at first. But I had not the courage. Are you quite sure that there will be no danger to you, papa?"

"As sure as I am that I am now speaking with you. No wonder that your nerves are shattered, when the wretch drew his pistol on you, and made you believe that he would immolate you on the altar of his pretended passion. If he really loved you, he could never have treated you so, and I should be safe in wagering that the pistol was not loaded. Such a coward as he is would be afraid to carry loaded weapons on his person, lest they might explode and do himself an injury."

Clara smiled faintly.

"Dear papa, it is such a comfort to me to hear you speak so. But he seemed terribly in earnest."

"He appeared so to you, but he was only acting. He has been a member of a Thespian corps, and in that school he has learned how to tear passion to tatters."

"But he must really love me, papa, for I have no fortune to tempt him to pursue me in this way."

"That is the puzzle to me; for I believe both him and his father to be thoroughly mercenary. Can it be that he has learned the intention of Mrs. Adair to make overtures of reconciliation to us, and place you in the position of her prospective heiress? Such a thing seems impossible; yet it is the only solution I can give to his conduct in forcing you, against your will, to pledge your word to give him your hand."

"If I thought that, I would make no effort to please my aunt. I would entreat her to take Christine in my place," said Clare, vehemently. "But it is impossible for him to know anything about her, papa, quite impossible, for we have never spoken of her to any one as a relation of ours."

"I hope you are right," replied her father, thoughtfully, "for he might follow you up and annoy you again, if he had any clue to whither you had been sent. If he should do so, Clare, speak to Mrs. Adair at once, and tell her the whole story. Write to me immediately and I will come to your assistance without delay."

"I will certainly confide in you from this time forward, father, for now I understand how strong and self-sustained you are. I have been in deadly terror since that evening you came to meet me on my return from town, and I now see how silly I was not to tell you all at once, and allow you to defend me from my persecutor."

"I cannot understand, Clare, how you came to encourage the attentions of such a man as John Spiers. To coarse, commonplace girls, his corsair-like beauty might be attractive, but not to a flower-like creature such as you. I should think that every instinct in your nature would recoil from him."

Her pale face flushed, tears came into her eyes, and in a low voice she said:

"You are right in that, papa; I did shrink from his bold advances at first; but he talks well and is amusing. Half the girls I gave lessons to were in love with him, or at least they thought so, and I heard him spoken of as a sort of demi-god. They told all sorts of romantic stories about his adventures when he was roving about the world, and somehow I got the idea in my head that it would be a distinction to captivate him. I knew that I could do it, because he had almost forced his acquaintance on me, and made pretty speeches to me from the first. It was foolish vanity that misled me, and now I am punished for it."

"Well, dear, I hope this will be a lesson to you never to attempt to flirt again. Have no fears with reference to your bold wooer, for I am as safe from him as if I had as many lives as a cat. I will promise to do him no physical harm either, for your name shall not be brought before the public in this affair. Quiet yourself now, and try to sleep, that you may be well enough tomorrow to help your mother prepare for your flitting. I wish, for several reasons, to get you away as soon as possible."

"Yes, it is best for me to go; if I stayed here, I should be in a state of nervous dread all the time, and I hardly think Mr. Spiers can know whither I am going, or be aware of the change in our prospects. Oh, papa, I must win my aunt's love, that I may hereafter have the power to assist you to regain the proud position you once held."

"Of course I expect you to make every reasonable

effort to please Mrs. Adair; but you must not be too eager to recommend yourself to her good graces. Old people are apt to be suspicious; and she might doubt your sincerity if you were too demonstrative. Only act out your own natural character, my daughter, and there is little to fear as to the result."

"It will be a difficult ordeal to pass through," said Clare, with a sigh; "but I promise to do my best. After all, if she does not take a fancy to me, my sister can take my place, I suppose; but I should like to be the one to bring prosperity to you again, my dearest father."

Mr. Desmond stooped forward and kissed her tenderly.

"I have no doubt you will be the favored one, Clare; and now good-night. Compose your spirits, and dismiss from your mind the phantoms that have lately haunted you. I will send Dolly to sit with you till your sister is ready to retire. You must not be left alone in this room again, lest that villain should repeat his intrusion."

"Thank you, papa, and good-night. I think I shall be able to sleep to-night."

In a few moments Dolly came in, and took her seat by the head of the bed. Clare lay silent a long time, but the fidgeting of the old nurse at length aroused her from her reverie, and she said:

"You must be as nervous as I am, Mammy. What makes you so uncommonly restless this evening?"

"'Pears to me I is shaky a bit, an' it's caze I've did a mighty mean thing. I knowed it were mean when I done it, but somehow I couldn't help myself. Ha'n't I got de right to know all 'bout de fam'ly 'fa'rs, missy?"

An' would you keer ef I tole you what I've found out for myse'f?"

"Tell me what you have learned," said Clare, unconscious of the sharp ring in her voice, for she knew at once that the woman had listened to something that had passed in her apartment.

"Thar! I knowed it! You's mad at me, caze I wanted to find out what yer mar had to say to you when she sent me out. I dunno why you would be, though, when it was sich good news to you; an' you know dat nobody'd be gladder'n I be to know dat de rich old aunt have come round, an' wants to give you all her money."

"Is *that* all you heard, Mammy Dol? If it was, I don't care about your eavesdropping."

"And a'nt dat nuff, honey chile? I didn't keer for no mor'n dat, no how. I knows 'bout Miss 'Dair, an' she's got heaps an' heaps o' money. Ef she on'y takes a shine to you, you'll be as rich as cream. Hi! de ole times is comin' back, an' you'll have as many lovyers ridin' arter you as dat ole Crishus had in her day."

"I suppose you mean Croesus, Mammy. How did you come to know anything of Mrs. Adair? Since you do, I wish you would tell me about her."

"How I come to know her is easily splained, Miss Clare. I b'longed to her father onct, and stayed on de ole plantation whar you're gwine till I were twelve year old. Miss Georgie Beaufort was a grand young lady in dem days. She were de greatest belle in de State of ole Varginny, an' she held her head high, I tell you. Yer gran'ma was lef' a orfin, an' ole Colonel Beaufort had her brought to de ole place; an' when he died, he lef' her on'y one-third of his fortin, though she were all de

chile his on'y son lef'. All de res' went to Miss Georgie, or rather Miss 'Dair, as she were den."

She paused, and Clare impatiently said:

"Go on. I will forgive you for listening if you will tell me all about this family history."

"Well, yer gran'ma growed up at Riverdale. She had a teacher in de house, a grumpy ole man enough *he* were, but she wanted to study some furrin lingo what Mr. Tracy couldn't learn her, an' a fine-lookin' young feller named De Courcy came to de neighborhood, an' Miss Georgie paid him to come thar an' give her niece lessons.

"The upshot o' de matter were, dat de lingo teacher an' Miss Clara ran away together an' got married. I b'longed to her, an' so did ole Cæsar an' ole Katy, though we was all chaps den. Miss Clara got her share of her grandfather's estate, or at least what he chose to leave her, but her aunt never would see her, or speak to her ag'in. Dat's why you never hearn tell o' dis rich ole 'oman what has a good deal dat ought to belong to yer mar. I s'pose her conscience begins to prick her, now dat she's comin' so near de everlastin' gates, an' she's got nobody else to give her money to eyther. She never had but one chile, an' he was a wild sort o' man, an' got killed in a quarrel. She took de chile he lef', and eddicated her, but she were never very fond o' her, bekase de proud ole lady didn't think her gran'darter fit to hole a candle to de beautiful Beaufort women whose picters hangs in de ole house. You'll see 'em all, an' I on'y hopes she'll think you looks like some on 'em."

"Thank you, Mammy; but how did you find out anything about Mrs. Adair and her grandchild? The

name even has never been alluded to in our house that I know of, till her letter came inviting me to visit her."

"When we lived in Norfolk, I saw some o' de people from de plantation at odd times. I had a aunt an' some cousins livin' thar, an' I knowed 'bout her all de time; but my ole marster, Mr. De Courcy, wouldn't 'low her name to be spoke whar he were. You see, Miss Georgie treated him as ef he were no better'n de dirt under her feet, an' in course he'd no love for her. Yer mar growed up 'thout even hearin' her name, an' she'd hardly ha' knowed dat sich a pusson were in de worl' ef I hadn't p'inted out de place to her when we was on a steam-boat onct, an' tole her dat her great aunt lived thar, an' she had a right to good pickin's out o' de fortin' Miss 'Dair held on to."

"Of course, mamma knew better than that, for her grandfather had the right to leave his property as he pleased. I am going to Mrs. Adair, but I shall not do so with the idea that we have been wronged in any way by her. I think she wishes to do what is right by us, and that is why she has sent for me. I shall do my very best to make a good impression on her, Mammy."

The old woman lowered her voice, and mysteriously said:

"Thar an't but one way to make dat *sure*, Missy. I knows how it kin be done, but yer mar is so obstinated she thinks she knows more'n I do, though I'm old nuff to be her mother. You jes' take my 'vice, my lamb, an' you'll be able to twis' dat hard ole 'oman roun' your finger in no time."

"Explain how that is to be done," said Clare, laughing, though she had far more faith in the superstitions

of old Dolly than she would have been willing to admit. "The days of miracles are past, you know, Mammy."

"De mir'cles de Saviour did an't gwine to be did ag'in, I know, caze, you see, he were God's Son, an' he gin him more spiritool power den folks has in our days. But 'mong my people, dere's men, an' women too, what makes charms what never fails. I know, caze I've tried 'em. I fell in love wi' my second husbin', an' he were thinkin' 'bout another gal. I went to a wise 'oman, an' she gin me a bottle o' truck what had been made out o' suttin yerbs gathered when de moon was in de fust quarter, an' de bilin' was did when de moon was full; den de wise 'oman 'peated what she called a spell over it, and 'twas finished."

With some eagerness, Clare asked:

"Did you give that stuff to him? You might have poisoned him, you know."

"Dere wa'n't a mite o' danger o' dat," replied Dolly, in a dignified manner. "De yerbs was on'y good for him, an' I *did* gin 'em to him. You'd believe in dem tings ef you'd seed how quick Tim turned off dat oder flirtin' thing, and come arter me. We was married, an' a more lovin'er husbin never was as long as he lived."

"I hope you didn't keep on dosing him with it, Mammy Dol," said the young girl, mischievously.

"I didn't have no call to do dat, Miss Clare; onct de insides o' dat bottle was 'x'austed, dere wa'n't no need o' nothin' mo'. Now what I axes you to lemme do for you is, to go to ole Nancy Blodge what lives down 'bout Porchmouth, an' git you a bottle o' de same stuff. She's de 'oman what made mine, an' she's mo' pow'ful now

dan she were twenty year ago. Ef you'll on'y take it long o' you, an' gin it in leetle doses to Miss 'Dair, she'll soon tink dat de sun rises and sets in you."

"Nonsense! I could not do such a thing, Mammy. I must take my chances fairly, and not attempt to drug the old lady with something that might be injurious to her."

"But it couldn't hurt her. Ef you love me, my pretty lamb, you won't 'ny me dis chance o' sarvin' you."

Clare still objected, and tried to laugh the old woman out of her belief in the efficacy of the magic liquid; but Dolly was not to be convinced. After a playful war of words, she finally consented to take with her the love-charm the nurse wished to provide, though she declared that she would never be tempted to use it.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. DESMOND FOILED.

THE invalid slept well that night, and in the morning arose looking more like her former cheerful, happy self than she had for many days. It was a very busy day, for Mrs. Desmond had to make arrangements for leaving home for several weeks, and also to superintend the packing that was necessary.

Christine and Victor were to be left with their father, and Dolly was to take charge of the house in the absence of her mistress. Christine joyfully consented to remain

behind, for she adored her father, and was glad of the opportunity to make herself useful to him.

With many misgivings as to what might happen in his absence, Clare saw Mr. Desmond set out for Portsmouth soon after breakfast was over. She could not resist the impulse to run down the road after him, and ask:

"Are you sure, quite sure that all will be well with you, papa?"

"Quite sure. I am not going to make a row, Clare, so you need not grow hysterical. I am only going to lay down a law to that villain which he will break at his peril. I know him thoroughly, child, and I have no more to fear from him than I have from that crowing rooster yonder. I don't know, indeed, but the chicken has the most courage of the two."

Clare laughed, and ran in again, quite reassured.

Mr. Desmond went on his way trying to keep the rein over his temper, for he almost shook with rage when he thought of the base attempts of John Spiers to intimidate his daughter. As he had told Clare, he had no fear of the young man, but he felt a tingling desire to teach him such a lesson as would make Spiers very much afraid of him in the future.

He sighed as he thought of the impossibility of doing this without bringing Clare's name before the public in connection with that of Spiers, and he reluctantly made up his mind that "discretion was the better part of valor" in this annoying case.

He found old Mr. Spiers in the shop alone, and he looked grim and hard enough when he looked up and saw who his visitor was.

"Excuse me, Mr. Desmond," he said, "but after your parting words when you were here last, I hardly expected a call from you again. It must be something very imperative that brings you here, I think."

"Where is that precious scamp, your son?" asked Mr. Desmond. "Of course I have business here, and with him, or you would not have found me darkening your doors again. I wish to see him at once."

"I am sorry you can't be gratified. John has left town, and won't be back for several days. What has he been doing now, I should like to know?"

"I hardly think you are ignorant of his doings, anxious as you pretend to be to be told about them. What object has your son, in trying to frighten my daughter into accepting him as her husband?" asked Mr. Desmond, with as much calmness as he could command.

With a great assumption of astonishment, Spiers exclaimed:

"Frightening Miss Desmond! I do not understand you, sir. Pray explain."

"I know the explanation is unnecessary, but I will give it, since you choose to show ignorance of the shameful part your son has been playing. He has carried a pistol in his pocket, and he has twice threatened to commit wholesale murder if the girl he pretended to adore refused to accept him. Under the influence of fear, she acceded to his demand; but at last she has found courage to tell me the truth. Now I ask you what punishment could be too severe for a miscreant like that?"

The black eyes of the listener snapped viciously at this question, but he coolly said:

"I think you exaggerate, Mr. Desmond. John may

have been fiery in his wooing, for he is deeply in love with your daughter, but I decline to believe that he would be guilty of such violence as you describe. At any rate, he is not here to answer for himself, and I decline to be any further troubled about this affair. I was willing for him to marry a beggar, as his heart seemed to be set on it; but I am not willing to be badgered by you at every turn. I think the best thing he can do will be to give up the girl; and as to myself, I shall withdraw my consent to the marriage he is so unworldly as to wish to make."

There was much in this speech to annoy a proud man like Desmond, but he had so thorough a contempt for the man who uttered it, that he only curled his lip, and said:

"It is a pity that such disinterestedness should not meet its reward, Mr. Spiers. But I wish both you and your son to understand that there is not the ghost of a chance that *my* daughter will ever step down from her own level to wed one so much beneath her as your son. There are some things that money cannot buy, and among them are honor and nobility of feeling. I called here this morning to say that, as the condition I imposed when I was last here has not been kept, there is no reason why I should keep from the world that little escapade of yours which has hung over you so long. I told both you and your son what you had to expect, yet he dared to drug my dog, and come into my very yard to threaten my daughter."

Spiers gave him a venomous look, but he grew even whiter than he naturally was, and cringingly said:

"I hardly think it fair that I shall be punished for the misdeeds of my son. So far as I am concerned, I

would put an end to the whole affair if John would listen to reason. But he's madly in love, and it's of no use to talk to him about consequences. He's just in that state of mind that he's reckless about everything till he's won the girl he has set his heart on. You must admit one thing at least, Mr. Desmond, that he is perfectly disinterested in his wooing."

With a searching glance, Desmond slowly replied:

"It may be so; yet I hardly know how to credit your son with such a virtue, or indeed with any virtue, for you know yourself that he has always been a hard case to deal with. I am not anxious to be hard on *you*, Mr. Spiers, though I cannot resist the belief that there is some conspiracy between yourself and John, and that you both look forward to some advantage to yourselves in his so persistently pursuing my daughter. Come now; tell me under what delusion you are acting, and I will promise to be as reticent about that affair as you could wish."

Spiers coldly replied:

"You speak in riddles, sir. Why should I conspire with my son to give him a wife who, as far as I know, has nothing to bring him in the way of dower, and no prospect of ever having anything? If you are one of the heirs to a great fortune over the water, I have never heard of it; and if I had, I shouldn't think much of your chances ever to get a penny from such a source as *that*. You see, sir, how absurd your suspicions are."

Mr. Desmond watched him keenly while he spoke, and he could detect nothing in his guarded manner to strengthen the vague belief which floated in his mind, that in some way the intended liberality of Mrs. Adair

had become known to Spiers and his son. He quietly said:

"I have no claims on anything in my native land. I brought with me, when I came to this country, all that I was entitled to from my father, and there are two brothers, with families, who are older than I; so you see I can have no hope of ever succeeding to the family estate. My wife has few relatives: the only one who has money she has never known; and if that lady should take the fancy to notice her now, no one can count on the caprices of an old woman who has everything in her own power."

Spiers testily said:

"I am sure I know nothing of Mrs. Desmond's family, nor do I care to know. Waiting for dead people's shoes isn't to my taste anyhow, and I here tell you flatly, that if John pursues this affair, it will be against my consent. I've been insulted enough by you, without letting a girl come into my family with whom impertinence is probably hereditary. I am in a fair way to make money enough for me and mine, without cringing to rich people to give me the means of living."

"I am glad to hear that you are so prosperous," replied Mr. Desmond, coldly. "As to my child, there is no possible chance that she will ever become a member of your family circle; but should so great a misfortune have happened to her, I think she would never have forgotten that she has had the training of a lady. I wish you to say to your son that I know everything that has passed between him and my daughter, and I warn him against interfering with her again in any way. I too can carry fire-arms, and I will use them to his detri-

ment if he again attempts to annoy her. Before I leave town it is my purpose to call at a magistrate's office, and leave a deposition to the effect that my life has been threatened by John Spiers, and if he should attack me unfairly, suspicion will at once be pointed at him. I shall also leave with a friend a written statement of the crime of which you were guilty, and a motive for his act will be furnished by that. I think I have placed things on a proper footing now, Mr. Spiers, and I will bid you good-morning."

As he passed out of the shop, John Spiers, who had been in the back room listening through a crevice left by the imperfectly closed door, burst in upon his father, and after uttering a volley of oaths went on to say, in an excited manner:

"I'll be more than even with him yet, the old prevaricator—the beggarly old humbug! How dare he come here to browbeat us in our own house? I was tempted more than once to rush in on him and give him a few scientific taps on that old noddle of his, but I thought better of it. We can bring him down to his marrow-bones in a better fashion than that, and by — I'll do it too!"

"Have you really ventured to enter his yard, John? I hardly thought you'd try that after what he said here the other day."

"Of course I've been there, and more than once too. I spoke to Clare night before last through the window of her room; and I was there again yesterday evening while the family were at supper. I found out that the girl was sick, and I thought I might get a chance to speak to her. I did not do that, but something better

for my plans happened while I was crouched down near the window."

His father looked interested, and asked:

"What was it, John? Of course you'll keep nothing back from me."

"Not this, at any rate, for you must help me to profit by it, by getting that elixir made in time, and giving me money to bribe an old woman."

"The preparation is nearly completed, and as to the money, I think you always help yourself freely enough. Now explain what you overheard."

"The old nurse was sent to sit with Clare, and after giving her a history of Mrs. Adair she proposed the very thing that plays into our hands. The old woman has faith in love-charms, and she begged her young lady to allow her to get one for her from old Nance Blodge, the mulatto fortune-teller, who lives in a hut just out of town. I remember going to her once, when I was a boy, to find out from her who had stolen a lot of marbles from me."

"Of course she did not tell you right; but what about the two women? What did they say?"

"Oh, there was a lot of talk, and at first Clare would not consent to use such a thing, but the old darkie had such faith, and the girl herself more than half believes in such nonsense, and she finally agreed that old Blodge should be applied to. Clare thinks she only accepted the old woman's offer to please her, but when she once has the bottle in her possession, I shall know how to urge her on to its use, though I shall neither see nor write to her."

His father gave him a significant look.

"I understand. You will bribe Nancy to substitute our preparation for one of her own; and that young lady you spoke of as Mrs. Adair's companion is to use such arts as will be necessary to bring Miss Desmond in our power?"

The younger man nodded.

"Claudia will risk anything for me, and when the thing is neatly done, and I am in possession of the hoards I long to grasp, she shall never again have to submit to any old woman's caprices to get a living. She isn't suited to that kind of life, and I am glad she'll not have to bear it much longer."

"Hum—Miss Coyle seems to be more to you than the girl you have been playing such a part to bind to you."

"She is more to me than any other woman in the world, but I can't marry her, because we are both too poor. The time may come, though, for the young simpleton I shall force into my arms will soon break her heart under such treatment as I shall give her, to pay her for all the trouble she'll cost me. Of course I shall make her leave me all the property. *Then*, ho, for love and Claudia Coyle!"

Spiers did not appear to recoil from this iniquitous programme. He dryly remarked:

"I would not care to insure the life of Mrs. Spiers junior, when she falls in your hands and those of that charming Claudia."

The younger man smiled grimly, and again referred to the fortune-teller.

"I have already seen Nancy, and she has promised that if I will pay her twenty dollars she will give old

Dolly the bottle you will prepare, in place of making one of her own infernal decoctions. At first she was suspicious, but I made her believe at last that we only wished to send a strengthening medicine to a strange old lady, who would not take anything that was good for her. Nancy is a miserable old crone, and when I spoke of money I hardly think she cared what the elixir was, provided she got a good price for making the exchange."

"Ha! ha! so much the better; you can afford to pay her when the money will bring such splendid interest. Desmond is evidently afraid that we know something about his daughter's prospects. Of course he has heard from Mrs. Adair, and they will only be too anxious to get the girl away from your vicinity as soon as possible. Now that she has plucked up courage to tell on you, you had better keep out of her way till the elixir has done its work, and the will been made in Miss Desmond's favor. Then you can carry all before you, and leave her no alternative but death by the laws of her country, or a marriage with you. There can be little doubt as to her choice, for she has shown that she can be easily frightened."

His listener shrugged his shoulders contemptuously.

"If she refused to yield to necessity, she should to force, for I shall carry her off as soon as I know for certain that the fortune is hers, and compel her to marry me. I have settled everything, and I don't wish to go near her to keep up that farce of adoring her any longer. I will allow her to lull herself into fancied security, and then come down on her with such proofs of her guilt that she will almost believe herself that she meant to

kill her benefactress, that she might possess herself of her money."

"You are very clever, John; but have you ascertained if the old lady is really worth money enough to make it worth while to take all this trouble and risk?"

"She is worth a quarter of a million at least, and *that*, I reckon, you'll think worth getting hold of."

"Oh, indeed! But here comes Beal, so we must wait for another opportunity to speak together."

The young clerk came in looking very much flushed.

"You are late this morning," said his employer severely.

"Yes, sir, but it was unavoidable. My mother was very ill last night, and I could not leave her sooner than this. It is not often that I am behind time, Mr. Spiers, and I hope you will excuse me."

"'Least said, soonest mended.' Now that you are here, pray go to work and make up for lost time," was the ungracious response, and Beal meekly obeyed the mandate without uttering another word.

CHAPTER X.

CLARE'S NEW FRIEND.

ON the appointed morning a hired carriage drove to the door, and Clare, with many tears, parted from those she was to leave behind her, and old Dolly threw after the carriage a shoe for good luck.

The nurse had bestirred herself in the matter of the

love-charm, which she believed would insure to her young lady the favor of Mrs. Adair, and she had made two visits to Nancy Blodge since the evening on which she spoke about it with Miss Desmond. Late on the previous night she had secured the precious elixir, and that morning she brought it with much mystery to Clare's apartment. Dolly chose an opportunity when no one else was in the room, and she triumphantly displayed a small flat bottle filled with a transparent liquid of a pale amber color.

"Thar, honey! you'll be all right now. Dis is de strongest charm Nancy's ever done made, an' ef you'd hearn her mutterin' big words over it, you wouldn't laugh as you're doin' now, caze you'd know dat she unstans hocus-pocus. Now, Miss Clar', you mus' promise me dat you'll be sho to use dis here charm, ef de ole madam don't show to onct dat she thinks you sweeter'n de roses o' May. You see, chile, dat I've done tuck a heap o' trouble to git it in time, an' I think you orter tell me dat you'll use it, ef Miss 'Dair takes too much time to 'sider 'bout leavin' you de prop'ty."

Clare subsided into gravity as the nurse talked on. She shrank from touching the bottle; yet it possessed a vivid interest for her as a possible means of winning her aunt's regard, should she be so unfortunate as not to please that lady's capricious fancy.

With a slight tremor in her voice, she said:

"It is all nonsense, Mammy Dolly. I know that the liquor in that bottle is only some mess made up by old Nancy, and can be of no use anyway; but as you have taken the trouble to get it for me, and you have assured me that it is harmless, I will not refuse to accept it. I

have no idea, though, that I shall be tempted to give Mrs. Adair any of it."

"Mebbe not, mebbe not; but it's safest to have it at hand, in case it's wantin'. I'll put it in this here box 'long of yer hangshers, and anybody what sees it'll think it's some kind of 'fumery what you uses on 'em. You see dem six marks on de paper what's pasted on it? Dey means six drops for a dose, an' it won't change de taste of water nor wine nuther."

"Oh, well, put it out of sight before some one comes in. I suppose I must take it, or you'd be perfectly miserable."

"I should be very sorry, Missy, ef you didn't, caze I'm sho you'll have need o' it. White folks is mighty onsartin, an' Miss 'Dair is de mos' onsartiness o' all, ef what I've hearn tell o' her be true."

"I declare, you make me quite dread a meeting with my aunt. Such an old lady can't be very formidable, I think."

"There an't nothin' the matter wi' her form dat I knows on. She used to be thought a gran' lookin' 'oman, though she wasn't so tall arter all. It was just her prideful way o' carryin' herself dat made people say she looked like a borned queen. She's los' all dat now, I reckon, fur she's ole, an' she's had 'fictions, what's made her know dat de Lord don't 'prove o' de ways o' de scorners."

"There; please don't talk about Mrs. Adair any more or I shall lose all courage to face the ordeal before me. There is the breakfast bell, and we are going as soon as that is over. Hide the bottle, and lock my trunk, while I am gone, Mammy, and don't forget to give me the key."

Clare hurried away, and the fatal elixir that was so craftily imposed on her—that was destined to bring her so much woe—was safely bestowed in her trunk by the poor old nurse, who thought she was doing the greatest service in her power to the being she loved best in the world.

When the morning meal was over, Mr. Desmond sat a few moments on the piazza with his daughter, giving her such last words of advice as he thought would be useful to her in her new sphere. He had always been especially fond of her, and he felt very tender toward her in this parting hour.

At length he drew her to him, and softly repeated some lines that had once touched him:

"Come lean once more upon my breast,
As when a simple child caressing,
For another day, and far away
Wilt thou be from thy father's blessing."

"The young girl to whom those lines were addressed was about to leave the home of her childhood as a bride; but the fragment I have quoted from the poem applies to you, my darling. You cannot know how hard it is to me to give you up, and I would never have done so, had I not felt how incompetent I am to win a bright future for those I love. Mrs. Adair has purchased the right to you for a season at least, by her kindness to your mother; and you will be able to bear the exile from your own home, when you remember that the old lady's liberality has brought hope and light in a house that so sorely needed them."

Clare wept silently upon his breast a few moments, and then softly said:

"Dear papa, I will try to be contented. I promise to make every effort to win the good opinion of my aunt, and every day I will recall the advice you have given me, that I may guide myself by it."

"I can ask no more than that of you, my daughter. But remember one thing—there must be no more flirting. You have had one severe experience which should be a warning to you. I wish you to marry when you find a noble and true man who is worthy to win you; but to such a one you must not take a heart soiled and hardened by a coquette's experience."

"Dearest father, do not, I entreat, refer to that humiliating affair again. Never again will I be tempted, by fondness for admiration, to give the slightest encouragement to any man but the one I intend to marry. When you remember how young I am, you surely can find some excuse for the folly of which I have been guilty."

"It needs only my love for you, Clare, to condone an offence even greater than that. But here comes the carriage, my dear, and you must make ready to leave. I shall see you again before the day of your departure for Riverdale arrives, and I shall come over to Norfolk to take you to the steamer myself."

Half an hour later Mrs. Desmond and her daughter were on their way to the ferry-boat which plies between the two rival towns; they did not alight from the carriage, because they did not wish to have it known that Clare was leaving the neighborhood for an indefinite time. But John Spiers was on the watch, and he laughed in his sleeve at the useless precaution taken to conceal from him what was quite as well known to him as to the family at Desmonia.

Mrs. Ford was an elderly widow with no family, and in possession of a comfortable independence. She owned a pretty home in the suburb extending toward Fort Norfolk. A row of Lombardy poplars was planted along the whole length of the iron fence, and trees, grass and flowers were found in the small but well-kept enclosure. The house was large and well ventilated, and in its hospitable rooms every appliance for comfort was found.

The old lady herself was a plump, rosy-faced woman, who wore her own gray hair under a small lace cap trimmed with lilac ribbons. Her dress was always black, relieved at the throat and wrists by bands of white linen.

Mrs. Desmond had warned her of their intended arrival, and everything was in order for their reception. The guests were made to feel that they were welcome, and in a short time they felt themselves perfectly at home.

The next few days were passed in a most agreeable manner to Clare. Every morning Mrs. Ford took herself and her mother in her carriage to the places they wished to visit, and they came back with such beautiful things as made the young girl's heart dance for joy. A complete outfit was purchased for her, and a woman employed in the house to assist in the plain sewing, while the handsome dresses were taken to a fashionable mantua-maker to be made up in the latest style.

Clare sewed very neatly herself, and she took great delight in preparing her new garments; but she also found time to receive and return the visits made to her by her old schoolmates. When it became known that

Mrs. Adair had made advances to her impoverished kinswoman—that her daughter would, in all probability, become the heiress of her large fortune—much interest was excited, and even lukewarm friends flocked to see those who for the last year had been almost forgotten. Clare attended several small summer parties, and received so much admiration from the naval officers attached to a frigate lying in the stream in front of the town, that her head might have been turned but for the warning given by her father. She thoroughly enjoyed the homage—what young and pretty girl would not?—but she was careful to make no distinction among her admirers.

With much effort the wardrobe was made ready by the day appointed by Mrs. Adair, and on the evening before, a gentlemanly-looking man, plainly dressed, made his appearance at Mrs. Ford's, and announced himself as Mr. Clifford, the manager of Mrs. Adair's business affairs.

That lady had spoken of him only as her manager; but it was evident that he held himself superior to a man who merely looked after the negroes and the making of crops. He talked intelligently on most subjects, and it incidentally came out, in the course of the conversation, that Mr. Clifford had married a half-sister of Captain Adair, who was many years her brother's junior; that he had been unfortunate in trade, and had gladly accepted a home at Riverdale for himself and his son.

His wife had been dead many years, but Mrs. Adair's kindness to the bereaved child had, in some measure, compensated for the loss the boy had sustained.

Mr. Clifford spoke with the simple straightforwardness

of a man who had nothing to conceal himself, with no thought of double-dealing in his mind, and Clare felt her heart open to him at once. She impulsively exclaimed:

"I am so glad to hear that Mrs. Adair likes one young person. My dearest hope is, that she will be as good to me as she has been to your son."

With a smile that was very genial, Mr. Clifford said:

"Mrs. Adair is particularly partial to all young people who are gay, and bright, and handsome. She places especial stress on those three things; but the first two are of little value in her eyes without the last. I have never known a woman who appreciated mere physical beauty so highly. To her there is something absolutely repulsive in an ugly woman."

Clare involuntarily glanced at a large mirror which reflected her graceful form, clad in a becoming evening dress, and she smiled at the reflection of the charming face that smiled back at her. Mr. Clifford observed this by-play, and understood it. He quietly said:

"You will stand that test easily enough, Miss Desmond, for you are very lovely. I think, too, you will be able to hold your own in other respects, if you are allowed fair play."

"Who is to prevent that?" asked Clare, in surprise. "Of course my aunt, who has summoned me to her presence, will be anxious to judge me as leniently as possible."

"Yes—such is Mrs. Adair's wish, no doubt; but she is not the woman she once was, and she can be influenced far more easily than in her earlier days."

"But who would desire to influence her against me,

Mr. Clifford? You quite frighten me at the thought of an enemy under the strange roof I am going to be sheltered by."

"My dear young lady, do not jump to such rapid conclusions. You may chance to find a good friend in the lady I refer to, and in herself she is a very attractive person."

"But who is this person? And what position does she hold in Mrs. Adair's family?"

"Miss Coyle is your aunt's companion. She is a young, beautiful and highly accomplished woman: she has lived with Mrs. Adair for the last year, gaining a degree of influence that I never expected any human creature to wield over her."

"In that case, I can only wonder that Miss Coyle allowed me to be summoned to Riverdale at all," said Clare, in a low voice. "If I understand you aright, my interests will be antagonistic to hers."

"Not necessarily so, unless—" He checked himself suddenly, and with a faint smile, said: "I have allowed myself to be beguiled into talking to you as if I had known you from your childhood. I do not think that you could make an evil use of anything I may tell you, to put you on your guard, Miss Desmond. Your face is so true and good that I think I might trust you that far."

"Indeed—indeed you may," was the eager reply. "I am so anxious to know something of this unknown land into which I am about to venture, that I shall be most grateful for some knowledge of its inhabitants. I can be prudent, and reticent too, Mr. Clifford, even if I am a young girl; and I know that I am incapable of making a treacherous use of anything you may say to me."

He regarded her gravely a moment, and then said:

"You are a very impulsive person, Miss Desmond; but in spite of that, I am not afraid to speak more plainly to you than I would to many an older woman."

"I have carefully observed Miss Coyle since she has been at Riverdale, and you will some time know why I took pains to understand the manoeuvres of this young lady. At first she evidently intended to induce Mrs. Adair to make a will in her own favor, and this she might have accomplished but for one bar to success. The old lady has a crotchet in her head about the fair disposal of her property, which I cannot now explain. It would not be fair to you to do so; but you will learn it in good time. Miss Coyle could not fulfil the required conditions, so she gave up, and advocated the whim of Mrs. Adair to send for you. In fact, I am not sure that she did not suggest it herself. At first I thought her extremely self-interested, but of late I am compelled to see that she is not so mercenary as I once believed her. Miss Coyle is a person I cannot understand, and therefore I regard her as one not entirely to be trusted. I think she will be very cordial and affectionate with you, and I merely wish to put you on your guard against trusting to her sincerity too implicitly. Pardon me, Miss Desmond, but you are evidently so young and inexperienced, that I cannot allow you to go into—I was going to say the lions' den, but that would be gross exaggeration on my part—into—the atmosphere of finesse you are about to enter, without giving you some idea of what you will have to encounter."

Clare grew pale, and anxiously said:

"I fear that I shall be unequal to what lies before me,

Mr. Clifford. I have lived in a happy and united family, and I have been taught to feel the truth of Wordsworth's beautiful lines:

"There is a comfort in the strength of love;
'Twill make a thing endurable, which else
Would upset the brain or break the heart."

I have had no experience in duplicity or coldness; how then am I to cope with them among strangers, and with no one to sustain me in the conflict? If my parents had not accepted of Mrs. Adair's bounty, I think I should beg to be taken back to my own home, and allowed to remain there."

"My dear young lady, that would simply be throwing away your chances of a brilliant, and, I hope, a happy future. Mrs. Adair has quick perceptions, and a desire to be just in her dealings; both those facts are in your favor, for a guileless nature, such as I am sure yours is, will make a favorable impression on her from the first; and if you find it possible to fall into her plans for you, Miss Coyle will have no power to injure you in any way."

"But what are her plans?"

"Ah! that is what I cannot tell you. If I betrayed them she would never forgive me, and besides, I have reasons of my own for withholding them. In due time Mrs. Adair will enlighten you herself, and I can only hope that you will then find no difficulty in complying with her wishes."

"Oh, dear! what a complicated existence you must all lead in that new home to which I am going. Mrs. Adair is a sort of sphinx, I suppose, and we must all bow before her till her oracular lips unclothe and reveal

the fate she assigns us. *You* seem to be interested in her decisions, as well as this Miss Coyle, and I am sure I myself am."

Mr. Clifford changed color slightly, but he gravely said:

"You show more acuteness in your judgment than I expected, but you are right: I *am* interested. If you understood all, you would see that I have the right to be so, Miss Desmond. You will have a friend in me, remember, let things turn out as they may; and I have much influence with the old lady. If I could only master the subtle plans of Claudia Coyle, I am almost sure I could make myself master of the situation. If I could, I assure you that *you* should not be a loser."

"Thank you. I shall be glad to have one friend to turn to, on whom I can rely; but what you have said to me only frightens and bewilders me. I am such a sad coward, that I would turn back now, if such a thing were possible."

"It is too late for that. You will win, my child—you must win, if you will only be true to the fine instincts of your nature. I am a good judge of character; and I see that you are one to be trusted to do what is right and proper, even under the most difficult circumstances. Accept Miss Coyle's advances, but confide nothing to her, for your interests and hers are antagonistic; do not forget that. She will fascinate you in spite of this warning; she will probably tell you that to *her* you owe it that Mrs. Adair remembered that your mother and her family are all the relatives she has in the world. But do not be won over to look on her as a true friend. I mistrust her, and not without cause."

After a pause, Clare replied :

"I will try to remember all you have said, but I shall hate to suspect and mistrust one with whom I must be thrown every day. I am very grateful for your interest in me, Mr. Clifford, but I am afraid that you have only made my position more difficult in Mrs. Adair's house, by what you have told me."

"That may be so, Miss Desmond, but I could not, in fairness to you, allow you to walk blindly into any snare that scheming woman may prepare for you. I hope you will at least give me the credit for kindly feeling toward yourself, as one of the motives that impelled me to this confidence."

Clare could not help saying :

"Then you had more than one motive."

Clifford smiled slightly as he replied :

"I see that one must be careful in the choice of words when speaking with you. Yes, I had other motives—but they are not detrimental to you. Time will enable you to judge of them, and also to understand why I cannot now speak more plainly."

Clare frankly offered him her hand, and said :

"I can take your motives on trust, Mr. Clifford, for I feel sure that you mean only good to me."

"Thank you ; that is well. You will have more confidence in yourself if you feel that you have a friend near you in whom you can trust. I think we had better go in now, or your mother will wonder what we have been speaking of so long. She is sorry to lose you, and it may be as well not to increase her uneasiness by speaking of what has passed between us out here."

He had drawn her from the house, under the pretext

of getting a better view of the frigate lying at anchor in the harbor, and they had been walking on the beach, which was only a few hundred yards distant from the dwelling.

In reply to his last words, Clare nodded intelligently, and they walked forward in silence, while she furtively glanced at the grave face of her companion, and felt that it was one she could trust.

Mr. Clifford was a man of fifty, with regular, well-cut features, deep, clear gray eyes, and dark hair slightly sprinkled with gray. His face was smoothly shaved, and the expression of his mouth was gentle, though the square chin indicated firmness. His tall form drooped slightly forward, and he had more the air of a student than a man of active business habits.

When they reached the house they found that Mr. Desmond had arrived, and, on meeting, the two gentlemen recognized each other as acquaintances who had met more than once in a banking establishment with which they had both transacted business.

"Upon my word, Clifford, are *you* the manager of whom Mrs. Adair spoke in her letter to me? I know that you are a connection of hers, and I really think the proud old dame might have referred to you more respectfully."

"I do oversee her affairs, and in that sense I am her man of all work," replied Mr. Clifford, smiling. "I see that the negroes are well treated and properly cared for too, though I do not follow them in the field. Mrs. Adair has but one name to bestow on the person who renders her such service, and I am not too proud to bear it, I assure you."

"That is well; and you really like this old lady? I am going to send my daughter to her, but I do it with many misgivings. I shall feel easier about her since you are the person sent to escort her to her new home."

"Thank you. After supper is over, I wish to speak with you in private; we can stroll out with our cigars and have as long a talk as we please."

Mr. Desmond assented, and that evening they were absent more than an hour. Every moment of the time was passed in earnest conversation, and, when they at last thought of returning, Mr. Desmond earnestly said:

"I feel grateful to you for the interest you take in Clare, and I shall feel better satisfied now that I know she has a good friend where she is going. As to the other matter, we must leave affairs to take their course. Interference would probably mar our plans. As to Miss Coyle, she is dangerous, and to be guarded against."

"Yes, she is secretive, and therefore to be mistrusted. I shall foil her yet, if I can only ascertain her motives for wishing your daughter to come to Riverdale."

"If I thought it was with any evil intent, I would take my child back with me, and give up all hopes from Mrs. Adair."

"You may trust Clare to me. She is charming, and Mrs. Adair will yet make her the heiress."

CHAPTER XI.

THE DEPARTURE FOR RIVERDALE.

ON the following morning, Clare Desmond set out on her momentous journey. She had sat up till a late hour of the previous night, talking with her mother, and listening to her maternal counsels as to how she should walk in the new and difficult path on which she was about to enter.

Clare gave her mother no hint of what had passed that evening between Mr. Clifford and herself, but she was greatly cheered by a reference Mrs. Desmond herself made to her new friend. She said:

"Your father has long known Mr. Clifford, and he has a high esteem for him. If you should need advice, you will be quite safe in going to him."

"I am glad to hear you say that, mamma, for I like him, and I think he is friendly to me."

"Of course he is. Why should not every one be friendly to a young and innocent child like you; and one, too, who is sent away from her natural protectors, as we are forced to send you? Oh, my darling, you must write to me every week, and tell me all that happens to you."

"I shall certainly do that, mamma, and you or Christine must also send me a weekly bulletin."

Thus they talked, and tried to beguile the pain of a separation which both acutely felt, though they believed it would be but temporary.

The morning came; it was brilliantly clear, and the

soft air which blew from the river tempered the heat of the summer sun.

The whole party went down to the steamer, and Mrs. Ford declared her intention to keep Mrs. Desmond with her till she was reconciled to the departure of her daughter. She had been very kind to Clare; had made her a handsome present, and exacted from her a promise to visit her whenever an opportunity offered.

The last words were said, the final embrace taken, and the cherished object of so much love and care was left to go upon her way, to tread a path apparently strewn with flowers, but on which she was to find a trial so fiery that, to her gentle nature, even death would have been preferable to such an ordeal.

Clare, in a light summer travelling-dress, sat beneath the awning spread over the deck, and her tears were soon wiped away; smiles came back to her rosy lips, as she listened to Mr. Clifford's attempts to cheer her, and looked out at the various objects of interest he pointed out to her.

The steamer glided on her course with noiseless speed; the vessels in the harbor were left behind, Craney Island was passed, and her well-read companion had so many things to tell her, of what had happened at various points in the war of the Revolution, that Clare soon forgot her own personal griefs, and laughed and talked with all her natural vivacity.

In the course of the day she ventured once to refer to Miss Coyle, but he glanced around at the other groups of passengers scattered about the deck, and said, in a low voice:

"We will speak no more of her till you have seen and

formed some opinion of her yourself. I do not wish to render your intercourse with her unpleasant; on the contrary, if you could win *her* confidence without danger to yourself, I should be glad. I will tell you this much, Miss Desmond: I have spoken freely to your father, and told him more than I was willing to tell you, and he is quite satisfied; yes, quite satisfied, I may safely say."

Clare looked at him as if expecting some further explanation; but as he gave none, she was compelled to rest contented with this assurance. It was some comfort to know that her father had confidence in her new friend, but she could not help wondering what it was they concealed from her, and why it should be necessary to keep her in the dark as to what she intuitively felt deeply concerned herself.

Later in the day, Mr. Clifford said:

"Your father told me of the young man who has so much annoyed and alarmed you lately. If Mr. Spiers should find out whither you have been sent, and venture to follow you to renew his persecutions, all you have to do is to warn me of the fact, and he will be very summarily disposed of."

Clare flushed painfully, and for a moment made no reply. She at length said:

"It was safer, perhaps, for papa to tell you of him, but still it is a mortification to me that any one outside of my own family should be aware of that folly. I had no feeling of regard for him, Mr. Clifford; I beg that you will believe that, though I was forced by him to—to—"

"I understand; so do not pain yourself by attempting to explain. He is a contemptible villain, who should be severely dealt with by the law; and but for Mr. Des-

mond's anxiety to screen your name from association with his in any way, he would have had him punished."

"It is better as it is," she murmured. "I am going where, I hope, he cannot find me; and if he does, he will not venture to approach me while I am under the protection of Mrs. Adair."

"Perhaps not. He will be a bold man if he does."

There was silence for some time, and then Mr. Clifford, pursuing the train of thought in his own mind, abruptly asked:

"Have you any idea that this young man is acquainted with Mrs. Adair's companion? She has knocked about the world a good deal, and such a thing may be."

Clare had become absorbed in watching the scenery on the banks of the river, and she was startled from her reverie by his words.

"I—I do not know. Mr. Spiers has wandered about the world, and been to many strange places too. My acquaintance with him has not been of long duration, and I know nothing about his friends. This young lady may be one of them, but I scarcely think it probable."

"I would give a great deal to know; but if it is so, I will find it out. I think I should make a first-class detective, Miss Desmond, for I can piece things together in a marvellous manner sometimes."

"I am afraid that you are rather a dangerous person, Mr. Clifford," said Clare, with a slight laugh. "Pray do not use your powers on me, for the idea of having my actions observed, and my motives scanned, might drive me to do something questionable, even if no other temptation was offered."

He recalled her words afterward, but now he replied, with a kindly smile:

"You are as transparent as the day, Miss Desmond; therefore my acuteness would be thrown away on you. Women often do puzzle me, for they are not consistent even in wickedness. I would give much to be able to read Miss Coyle's nature as clearly as I do yours. She is an enigma I have not yet been able to solve."

"Perhaps I may be able to assist you when I get to know her well. Women understand each other, you know, it is said."

He shook his head:

"She will throw her spell over you, as she does over all who come near her—for a time at least. Why, when she first came to Riverdale I was half in love with her myself; but something—a mere trifle—led me to dissect her morally, and I have made up my mind that she is the most consummate actress living. She came very near 'fooling me to the top of my bent,' but I found her out in time. She is very deep, but she cannot always have on her armor of proof."

"I declare you make me quite dread a meeting with this young lady."

"You may have more cause to dread her than you know. But you must not be afraid of her; that would give you over to her at once. After all, she will cozen you so nicely that you will look on me as a suspicious ogre, and the charming Claudia as a defamed angel. If it should be so, you need not be afraid to tell me, for I would not give you up even for that. I have promised your father, you know, and I begin to look upon you as, in some sort, my own property."

Clare regarded him with a half-startled glance, and Mr. Clifford replied to it with a slight laugh.

"I do not put forward any legitimate claim to you, my dear, but you interest me; your father has given you into my charge, and I feel responsible to him for you. If you will try to give me a daughter's confidence, we shall get on admirably together, I have no doubt."

"I promise to do that," was the earnest reply. What further she might have added was interrupted by the sound of a sneering laugh close behind them. Both turned, and saw an old man standing within a few feet of them, apparently intent on a newspaper he held in such a position as to screen his face from accurate observation. That his hair and beard were nearly white they plainly saw, and Clare remembered that this old man had managed to keep near herself and her protector throughout the greater part of the day.

Mr. Clifford spoke to him a little sharply, but no notice was taken of him; and a gentleman, sitting not far off, politely explained:

"I believe that man is deaf; he has been spoken to several times to-day, but took no notice unless he was touched. He sneers and mutters over the contents of his newspaper, but he does not care to talk."

There was a sudden chuckle from the person of whom the stranger spoke, and in a hoarse tone he cried out, as he rattled his paper:

"The fools, the fools! They think to have everything their own way! Was there ever such a gullible people as we who pretend to be the masters of our own destiny?"

Having spoken thus, he abruptly walked away, and Mr. Clifford came to the conclusion that he was some half-demented politician; but Clare felt a vague sense of

uneasiness, for some electric repulsion told her dimly that an enemy had been near her in that strange-looking old man.

Twilight was beginning to fall around them, and the first star gleamed out from the empyrean, when the steamer landed at a small cluster of houses two miles below Riverdale. A handsome open carriage and a baggage wagon were in waiting, and a middle-aged negro man came on board, spoke respectfully to Mr. Clifford, and took charge of Clare's trunks.

A few moments later she found herself rolling smoothly onward under the shadow of lofty trees, on her way to the formidable meeting she began to dread so much.

Mr. Clifford had taken the reins himself, and ordered the servants in charge of the carriage to return home in the wagon. When they had gone far enough away from the landing to be sure that no one was in sight or hearing, he checked the speed of the horses, and turning to her, said:

"You must not allow what I have told you to make you nervous when you meet Mrs. Adair. She sets a peculiar value on ease and grace of deportment, and you must practise self-control if you wish to make a favorable impression upon her at first sight."

"I will do my best, but my heart is beating so fast that I feel sometimes as if I shall suffocate."

"Driving through this soft air will enable you to recover from that before the trial comes. You are quite sure to please her after she becomes acquainted with you, for you have all the gifts she most highly estimates. She is a hard woman in some respects, but she is both just and generous, and you need not be afraid to act

out your natural character in the home to which you are going."

Clare sighed.

"If there was not so much at stake for those I love, I would not be so nervous. Oh! Mr. Clifford, you don't know what it is to feel that on you depends, perhaps, the whole future prosperity of all who are dearest to you on earth."

"My dear, that is a responsibility which all good men are bound to feel; but I admit that it is a heavy burden to be laid on the shoulders of a young girl like yourself. Let this console you, however; whether Mrs. Adair likes you or not, she will make a fair provision for your mother. Mrs. Desmond is her nearest relative, you know, and the old lady has too much pride of race to allow her niece to live in poverty. Try to compose yourself; and above all, do not suffer yourself to be anxious about the future."

Clare sunk back upon her seat, and made a successful effort to control the dread with which the approaching interview inspired her. She could soon look calmly out on the winding road which afforded occasional glimpses of the river. The full moon arose, and threw long, tremulous lines of light upon the rippling water; fire-flies flitted to and fro, and the whole woodland was vocal with the insect life which makes itself heard at night in a southern forest.

The influence of the hour and scene gradually calmed the young girl, and when a turn in the road brought Riverdale in sight, she felt herself equal to the meeting that awaited her.

The place stood in a curve in the river; the shore

sloped gradually upward from the water's edge to a wide sweep of level ground; from that there was a second rise, and on the plateau above stood the ancient mansion of the Beauforts, with large trees massed together at either wing; these curved in a half circle, leaving a wide open space in front of the stately-looking pile.

The house had been built in imitation of a French chateau by the great-grandfather of the present occupant, who had emigrated to Virginia on the revocation of the edict of Nantes. Colonel Beaufort had accompanied the small band of Huguenots who escaped from France, and settled on James river. He had managed to bring with him a considerable portion of his wealth in the shape of jewels which he sold in England, and invested in lands in his new country.

His affairs prospered greatly. He married a rich woman; built him a home so substantial that here, after the lapse of more than a century, it stood in massive pride, as comfortable to live in as when it was first erected. At each corner of the building stood a large circular tower, clothed to the roof with ivy, mingled with the Virginia creeper, now in full bloom, and the long wreaths of scarlet flowers massed together in picturesque confusion around the long narrow windows which gave light to the spacious rooms within. The central portion of the house contained many rooms, opening from a wide hall which arose to the roof; from this wound upward a grand staircase, with balusters of black walnut grotesquely carved.

A modern iron fence enclosed the extensive lawn, which in places was dotted with clumps of shrubbery judiciously placed, and a hedge of English hawthorn,

mingled with monthly roses, grew within a few feet of the fence.

A wide gravelled sweep led up to the stone steps of the portico, and on either side of these was a massive pillar, on the top of which a large vase was placed, in which grew oleanders in full bloom. A boy had been stationed at the gate to watch for the carriage; it flew open before them, and before Clare had time to get into another nervous flutter, the spirited horses dashed up to the entrance, and she saw a lady standing just beyond the shadow of the oleanders, with the moonlight falling over her proudly poised head and stately figure. A cloud of white drapery fell around her, and Clare was almost startled by the regal loveliness of this woman.

Claudia Coyle was indeed superbly beautiful. No goddess in marble could have surpassed her in regularity of feature or gracefulness of form; but those cold, impassive creations lacked the subtle vital charm which pervaded her whole person—speaking in her large, liquid black eyes, smiling in her red, sensuous, though exquisitely formed lips. Her hair, of a deep bronze hue, was gathered into a knot at the back of her head, from which long tendril-like curls fell upon her fair neck. Her arms were bare nearly to the shoulder, and a single bracelet, representing the coils of a serpent, was wound several times around her left wrist, the head of the reptile set with glittering gems, which gave it a venomous and almost lifelike appearance.

With a slow, undulating movement, which seemed to Clare the perfection of grace, Miss Coyle came forward to welcome the stranger.

In a clear voice, which had a slight metallic sound, she said:

"Good-evening, Mr. Clifford. You have done your devoir well, and brought us the fair spirit my dear old friend will be so happy to receive into her home. I need no introduction to you, Miss Desmond, for Mrs. Adair and I have talked so much of you that I feel as if we are already acquainted. I welcome you to Riverdale as the adopted daughter of the house, and its future mistress."

She took Clare's hand in her firm white fingers, pressed it kindly, and stooping forward lightly kissed her brow.

At the first view of this imperial woman Clare felt her heart contract, and then a strange calmness came over her, the origin of which she could never have explained. She felt as a man might who has been forced into a duel against his will, but, when the supreme moment came, found courage to defend his life coolly, even if it must be at the cost of that of his adversary.

Clare felt as if she was face to face with her destiny now, and in her soul arose the courage to hold her own against this fair incarnation of power, pride and guileful sweetness.

She submitted to the caress, and gently said:

"Thank you. I hope, indeed, that in you I shall find a true friend."

Miss Coyle frowned slightly at the emphasis the speaker unconsciously placed on the word *true*, but with a gay laugh she replied:

"Of course I shall be true, though that does not matter much to *you*, who are to become the lady paramount here."

Then turning toward Mr. Clifford, she said, with her most fascinating smile:

"I remembered your fondness for tea, and I have a cup of it to offer you. You will come in and join us of course. Mrs. Adair is lying down, and she will not be ready to receive Miss Desmond for half an hour yet."

He accepted the invitation, and Miss Coyle took Clare by the hand and led her up the steps, as she said:

"Let me enter the portal of your future home with you, that some chance ray from your good fortune may fall on me. 'It is better to be born lucky than rich,' says the old proverb, and you and I illustrate its truth. I was the daughter of a millionaire; *now*—I am Mrs. Adair's companion."

Clare did not complete the comparison; she was too much occupied with the appearance of the beautiful home she was assured by this girl would some day be her own, to pay much heed to what the fair Claudia was saying.

The hall floor was paved with tiles made in imitation of marble, and the walls were covered with family portraits. Among them was Pierre Beaufort, the old Huguenot, who had shed his blood for an ungrateful sovereign, and then fled from his kingdom to the wilds of America, that he might gain freedom to worship God after the convictions of his own conscience.

Miss Coyle removed Clare's bonnet, and, placing it on a table, led the way into a spacious room, lighted by a chandelier with ground glass shades.

In a bay-window, which had been thrown out toward one end of the apartment, was placed a round table, set for three persons.

A neat-looking servant was in attendance, and in a few moments they were seated at the table, and by some magical power exercised by Miss Coyle the three were talking together as freely and pleasantly as if no feeling of mistrust was in existence between them.

CHAPTER XII.

CLARE'S RECEPTION IN HER NEW HOME.

WHEN the repast was ended Miss Coyle apologized for leaving Mr. Clifford and his young charge together a few moments, while she went to Mrs. Adair and announced the arrival of her niece.

They strolled into the hall, and, when out of hearing of the servant, he asked:

"What do you think of her?"

"I never imagined any creature so superbly beautiful—and—and winning, Mr. Clifford. It seems to me impossible that she can be what—you think her."

"I told you you would be charmed; but wait and see. Don't let her beguile you into anything that can compromise you with the old lady. She wears her emblem on her arm, for she is cunning as the serpent, though she affects the mildness of the dove. There—she is coming. You are quite calm now, my child. Don't let yourself be fluttered, and do not mind anything the old dame may say to you. She is eccentric, but she is kind at heart, and she feels that you have on her the claim of blood."

A moment later Claudia Coyle came from a lateral hall which led to the eastern wing of the mansion. She passed her arm caressingly around the slender form of Clare, and drew her away, as she said to Mr. Clifford:

"Good-night. You will see us no more this evening. Jasper has returned from his ride. I saw him pass the windows a moment ago, and he has been anxious for your return."

Mr. Clifford bowed, and turned toward the opposite wing, in which his own apartment was situated.

As the two girls moved down this narrower hall, Claudia said, in her most honeyed tone:

"I arranged to receive you first myself, that you might have time to get over the nervousness of a first arrival among strangers, before seeing Mrs. Adair. She is most favorably inclined toward you, and I think she will be particularly charmed by the ingenuous sweetness that beams from every feature in your face. Everybody tells me that I am handsome as Cleopatra; but as I sat looking at you at supper, just now, I could only compare myself to a garish tropical flower, and you to a sweet moss rose just peeping from its shelter into the outside world—that hard, hard world with which I have had so bitter a struggle, but which to you presents only its fairest face."

"Pray do not institute a comparison between you and myself, Miss Coyle, for I should lose too much in being brought into contrast with so beautiful a woman as you are. I, too, have known hardships, and it is to aid those I love that I am here. I trust that Mrs. Adair will at least like me well enough to enable me to assist them.

I speak of this freely to you, because you understand my position as well as I do myself."

"Better, if you have any doubts as to Mrs. Adair's intention to make you the heiress of the bulk of her estate. That is why she sent for you, my dear. She made a condition, it is true, about liking you; but she will be sure to do that, for she adores beauty, and you are lovely enough to please the most fastidious taste."

"Thank you; but I could wish my aunt to love me for something better than my beauty. I hope you will allow me to be of some use to her, as well as yourself. I could not bear to live beneath her roof, and accept her bounty, without making some return for it."

"Oh, that will all arrange itself. We lead a very pleasant life here. This is a sort of liberty hall, where everybody does what seems to them best. *My* office of companion is almost a sinecure, for Mrs. Adair has her favorite servant to wait on her, and my duty is only to read to her occasionally, or to play on the organ while she says her prayers. Strange fancy, isn't it, to want music while she prays? but she says that in that way alone can she elevate her thoughts to the great white throne from which the destiny of poor mortals is fulminated."

"Ah! I can understand that, and I am sure I shall like my aunt," said Clare, with enthusiasm. "The profound tones of the organ move my own soul more deeply than any other music to which I have ever listened. When I have heard it finely played, I have felt as if the angels were descending on the waves of sound, inspiring each listening spirit with a deeper desire to become as pure in heart as the white-robed messengers of grace themselves."

Claudia's lip curled slightly as she listened to this outburst, but she sweetly said:

"There is one chord of sympathy at least between you and your new-found relative, and I trust, as time progresses, many more will be found. But here we are at Mrs. Adair's door."

She tapped lightly on the panel, then opened it and went in, followed by Clare.

The apartment was large and elegantly fitted up. Everything that could gratify the eye, or contribute to the comfort of its occupant, had been collected and placed within the narrow boundary of the suit of rooms appropriated exclusively to the use of the mistress of the house; yet good taste presided over the arrangement, and an artistic eye had evidently selected and combined the whole.

A lamp, with a ground glass shade, stood on an inlaid table placed against the wall, and through the open windows the moonlight streamed in, as if in rivalry with its feeble imitation.

A chair, covered with crimson velvet, stood in front of one of the windows, and in it was seated a slender, delicate-looking woman, dressed in a flowing purple robe, open to the waist in front, with folds of soft lace closed at the throat with a small pin, in which was set a solitaire diamond of great beauty and marvellous value. A similar stone gleamed on one of the fair, withered-looking hands that lay carelessly folded upon her lap.

Mrs. Adair looked thin and frail as a shadow, but her face still retained much of its proud beauty, old and infirm as she was. Her features were of the aquiline type; her eyes were still bright and expressive, and the brows

above them were dark and well defined. Her hair was perfectly white, and what struck Clare most was the youthful-looking head-dress she had adopted, and the way it harmonized with her appearance.

She wore a square of very fine lace upon her head, with one of the points upon her forehead, and where it was fastened there was a rosette of the clearest rose-pink ribbon; a few folds of ribbon of the same color were mixed with her silver tresses, forming a unique but most becoming coiffure.

Mrs. Adair reminded her niece of a picture of a French marquise she had seen in an annual of her mother's, which represented one of the grand dames of the court of Louis the Great.

Mrs. Adair put up a gold eye-glass, and critically surveyed her young kinswoman as she crossed the room. She was apparently satisfied with the result of her examination, for she dropped her glass, and putting out her hand, said:

"I am glad to see you in the home of your forefathers, Miss Desmond. That you and yours have been banished from it so long was no fault of mine, though I dare say your parents do not think so."

"I have never heard them speak on the subject, Mrs. Adair, and therefore I cannot tell you what their sentiments are. Allow me to thank you for your late kindness to my mother, and for the invitation extended to myself to visit you."

Clare was surprised at her own self-possession, and the old lady seemed both pleased and annoyed. She rather curtly said:

"I am your mother's aunt—your own kinswoman; then why do you speak to me as Mrs. Adair?"

"I took my cue from you, madam. You addressed me as Miss Desmond, and, of course, I could not presume to be more familiar with you than you were with me."

Mrs. Adair uttered a shrill little laugh.

"Well answered, by my faith! I think I shall like you, Clare Desmond, and I give you leave to call me aunt. You are the third of your race who has given me that title, and you bear the name of the first ungrateful one who wounded my heart as well as my pride by the marriage she made. You have heard of that elopement, I dare say?"

"Yes, madam; and I have also heard that my grandfather was a gentleman, and a man of high culture. That being the case, he could scarcely be considered a low match for even a Beaufort."

"Oh, indeed; so you are a democrat in your tendencies! That is a matter of course, though, since you are the descendant of the language master, and the daughter of an Irishman who came to this country to better his fortunes. He has not done it, though; so much the worse for him."

Clare's heart swelled at this attack upon her father, and with some effort she repressed the words that arose to her lips. This old lady was to be conciliated at any cost to herself, she thought; so she stood silent before the keen eyes that were bent upon her flushed face.

In a more conciliating tone, Mrs. Adair said:

"Draw up that chair in front of me, and sit down where I can see you in the moonlight. Nothing makes a fair woman look so lovely as the soft shimmer of the Queen of Night, as the poets call that frozen mass up yonder, if astronomers are to be relied on."

Clare silently obeyed her, and after another searching gaze at the bright, ingenuous face, she went on:

"It is pleasant to see anything so young and fresh as you are, Clare. I see that you know when to speak, and when to be silent. I *was* rather hard on your father just now, but I must tell you that I do not esteem him the less because he has failed to secure the fortune he hoped to win in trade. I know that his family is good, and that his early training did not fit Mr. Desmond for a commercial man. If he had turned his attention to planting, things would have been very different with him now."

"Thank you, dear aunt, for doing that much justice to my darling father," said Clare, impulsively. "If you only knew him, you would appreciate him highly, I am sure."

"Perhaps so. I hope to make his acquaintance some day; that is, if I like you as well as I think I shall. Claudia," turning to Miss Coyle, "you can go now; I wish to speak with my niece in private. If I should desire music to-night, I will send Mona to let you know."

Claudia stood in a careless attitude, leaning with her elbow on the low marble mantel, looking as serene as if no gnawing care was at her heart, for she was most anxious to effect her escape, that she might meet one who, she knew, was awaiting her in the grounds. She bowed in reply to this dismissal, and glided from the room without speaking.

Mrs. Adair's eyes followed her retreating form, and as the door closed she said:

"What a graceful creature that is! It is a pleasure to me to look at her, for I love beautiful things."

"Yes; Miss Coyle is very lovely," said Clare.

"No, my dear, not lovely. *You* are that; but Claudia is regal, magnificent, unsurpassed in her peculiar style. She has been with me a year now, and she is the only companion I have ever had who exactly suited me. You must learn to like her, Clare, for it was she who reminded me that I owed a duty to your mother, and suggested to me the invitation I have given you to come to me on a visit."

"I hope I shall be able to like her, aunt, since you wish it. She is certainly very attractive, and I ought to be grateful to her for inducing you to remember such claims as my mother has on you."

"How coldly you speak, child! I hope Mr. Clifford has not attempted to prejudice you against her. It is not fair in him if he has, for he was half in love with her at one time, and when she showed him that there was no chance of success he took a most unreasonable dislike to her."

Clare was at a loss what reply to make, but she finally said:

"He told me that he had admired her very much, and that I would be charmed by her."

"I am glad he was generous enough to say that. He is my agent and man of business, you know. He is one of the unsuccessful smart men, who are 'Jacks at all trades, and good at none;' yet I ought not to say that, for he is an excellent manager, and as honorable in his dealings as any man can be. He has tried law, trade and heaven knows what besides, to settle down at last at Riverdale as the overseer of all my affairs."

"He was very kind to me, and I like him," was the reply.

"I am glad of that, for I wish you to"—Mrs. Adair paused abruptly, and then, smiling faintly, said, "Here I am talking about home affairs, when I detained you here to learn all about your own family. I have been so utterly separated from your mother that I really know nothing certain about her affairs. I heard of your father's failure about the time that a great calamity happened to me here, and until very lately I made no effort to inform myself of his actual position. You can tell me all I desire to know, I suppose, and it is no idle curiosity that prompts me to ask you to let me know exactly how he is situated."

With much emotion Clare replied:

"You are very good, aunt, to interest yourself in my father. We have been very poor of late, and but for my mother's hopefulness things would have gone very badly with us. She is one of those women who take for their motto 'Never give up the ship!'"

"Hum! that is her Beaufort blood. We are a strong race; in some things wilful; but the women of the family, at least, have the true ring of the metal. My brother was not much to boast of, but he was spoiled by over-indulgence, and my own poor boy was an Adair. He inherited none of the characteristics of the Beauforts."

"Except their propensity to make unequal marriages," thought the young girl, with a slight feeling of triumph that her grandmother had not been the only delinquent in the family.

With skilful questions Mrs. Adair gradually drew

from Clare the history of her father's difficulties; and when she had finished the old lady said:

"I had no idea that your parents were so much reduced in circumstances. I heard that Mr. Desmond had saved a fragment of his fortune, and supposed that you were at least lifted above actual poverty. I see that I must do something more for your mother; the annuity I offered her seems pitiful to me now. You see I am very rich, Clare; I spend thousands every year merely to gratify my æsthetic tastes; and while I have been doing that one of my own blood has been wanting the comforts of life. I am not a mean woman, but I have sometimes been a very hard-hearted one, I fear."

"Do not misunderstand me, aunt. We have not been in want. My mother has some money coming to her every year, and old Cæsar makes a good gardener. Mammy Dol is as successful in raising poultry as she used to be in nursing children, and we have three cows to make butter from. I gave music lessons in a school in Portsmouth, and we managed not to get in debt."

Mrs. Adair's lip curled slightly, and she said:

"What a practical little woman you are, to understand all these details. I know that the whole thing must have been a wretched travestie on life, to people accustomed to the refinements and ease that wealth affords. Your father, I have been told, was a man lavish in expenditure, and I do not know how he could bring himself down to such a vegetative state as that you have described."

"Necessity was his master, I suppose. Papa has not been the same man since his misfortunes; but he has submitted to them with as good a grace as he could.

Your letter was a great joy to my mother, and she bade me say everything to you that—that would prove to you how grateful she is for the assistance you have rendered her."

"Well, well, you need not trouble yourself about that; I will take it all for granted; small favors thankfully received, and so forth; but I am not satisfied with what I have done for her. It seems to me pitiful that I gave so little from my abundance to my brother's grandchild. Why did not your mother write to me, and tell me how she was situated?"

Clare flushed slightly.

"My parents are poor, but they could not beg, and, above all, not from you, who had ignored their existence even in the days of their prosperity."

"There spoke the pride of the Beauforts, child. I do not dislike either you or your mother for cherishing that feeling of independence. It proves the kinship that is between us. But after all, Annette Desmond is my natural heir, and she has claims on me. But I have others to consider as well, and I am going to make my will after I have become better acquainted with you. I have a plan to—"

She paused, and presently said, in a tone of sudden exhaustion:

"I have talked too long. I cannot bear much, and I have been more excited by our meeting than is good for me. Ring that bell, please, and my servant will answer it."

She pointed to a silver bell on the stand near her, and the tinkling peal Clare sounded upon it was answered by the appearance of a middle-aged mulatto, with an intelli-

gent face, and almost as much grace and quietness of movement as Claudia Coyle herself.

"Give me my drops, Mona," said her mistress; "but first summon Lyra to show Miss Desmond to her room."

The woman bowed, and went out; in a few moments she came back, accompanied by a young girl a few shades darker than herself, who made an obeisance to Mrs. Adair, and said:

"Thank you, mistis, for lettin' me be Miss Desmond's waitin' maid."

"See that you perform your duties deftly," was the reply. "You are to sleep in Miss Desmond's dressing-room, and be ready to attend to her whenever she needs you."

The girl made another salaam, and glanced furtively at the young lady thus given into her charge.

"Good-night, Clare. You have not kissed me yet; come, my dear, and give me the kiss of reconciliation. The feud is healed at last, and I wish to be friendly with you and yours."

Clare tenderly pressed the hand held out to her, and then kissed her on brow and lips.

"I am glad I came," she whispered; "for I hope that I can be a comfort to you. I will write to mamma, and tell her how good you have been to me."

"And tell her that before long I shall send for her too, and with her must come husband and children. Go now, dear; I am suffering, and must have immediate attention."

Her face was suddenly drawn with pain, she waved Clare imperiously away, and Mona, at a gesture from

her, placed herself in front of her mistress while she said to Lyra, in carefully modulated tones:

"Show the young lady to her room immediately."

A lamp was burning on a table near the door, and taking it up, the servant walked on to the central hall, and mounting the winding stairs, led the way to a handsome apartment in the main building, which overlooked the lawn and river.

Like the rest of the house, it was lavishly and richly furnished. Clare's trunks had been placed in the adjoining dressing-room, and with the assistance of her new maid, she unpacked and arranged her clothing in the different receptacles provided for it.

Then she dismissed the girl, and threw herself into a luxurious chair beside the open window, to think over the interview which had proved so much more satisfactory than she had dared to hope. Clare believed that she had made a favorable impression on her aunt; and as to herself, she felt that she could love her very dearly, if she was as uniformly kind as she had been that evening.

Her reverie was broken by the sound of steps on the lawn below, and looking cautiously out, she saw two figures in the shadow thrown by the house. One was certainly Claudia Coyle, and the other was as certainly the deaf old man who had acted so strangely on the boat. Clare uttered a slight exclamation; both looked up, and the next moment the man plunged into the shrubbery, and Miss Coyle entered the house.

The sound of the organ presently floated out upon the summer air, and Clare knew that her aunt was praying. She knelt, too, and returned thanks.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHO CLAUDIA COYLE WAS.

WHEN Claudia Coyle left Mrs. Adair's apartment, she flitted around the house, gained the shelter of a mass of tall shrubs which grew near the windows of the room from which she had been dismissed, and stood listening to what passed within, till the shrill imitation of a whip-poor-will's cry became so imperative that she was forced to pay attention to it, much as she desired to hear all that was said between the old lady and her new protégé.

While she stands there, with head bent forward, lips half apart, eagerly listening to what she thought might nearly concern herself, we will give a brief sketch of her past life.

The daughter of an English father and an Italian mother, she had inherited the calculating hardness of one race and the subtle, intriguing spirit of the other. Her father was the only son of a wealthy banker, who had been sent by him to make the tour of Europe. In his travels he met with a beautiful ballet-dancer, and became so deeply enamored of her that he privately married her, although he knew that in so doing he risked losing his father's favor, and with it the wealth which he had been educated to spend.

The elder Coyle was a hard-working money maker, who cared for the elevation of his family to the ranks of the gentry more even than he did for his beloved guineas.

He would have been delighted if his son had chosen some impoverished Earl's daughter, and have lavished his hoards on his titled daughter-in-law without stint; but Leonard Coyle knew that the marriage he had made would never be forgiven, and every precaution was taken to conceal it from his father.

He remained in Italy, and there Claudia was born. His wife, who had believed that in marrying the rich Englishman she was securing a brilliant position, soon grew weary of the secluded life she was compelled to lead, and pined for the triumphs and admiration she had won as the queen of the ballet.

Leonard Coyle realized that he had "married in haste to repent at leisure," and he was about to take steps to free himself from the shackles that soon bore heavily upon him, when he was thrown from his horse and killed.

The young widow was advised to go to London, and claim from the banker a suitable settlement for herself and child. She did so, to find her claims repudiated, and admittance denied her to the house of Mr. Coyle.

The shock of his son's death proved the death-blow of the old man; but when he heard of the arrival of a woman who claimed to be the widow of his son, and of the child she proclaimed as his legitimate heiress, he rallied sufficiently to make a will, bequeathing the whole of his large fortune to a nephew who had been with him for many years as cashier in his banking house.

Mr. Leonard was a hard, grasping man, with a large family of his own, and he thought himself very liberal when he gave his cousin's widow a few hundred pounds as a provision for herself and her child.

Mrs. Coyle made such efforts as were possible to a friendless foreigner to secure something more for her daughter; but losing all hope of success, she finally went back to her native land, and, not unwillingly, returned to the old life which had so many charms for her.

Until her eighth year, Claudia lived in the tinsel glare of the footlights. She was taught to dance exquisitely, and she played her part as a fairy in many a brilliant spectacle, winning applause by her beauty and her graceful movements, though she had no dramatic talent.

The cholera swept through Italy, and her mother fell a victim to it. A son of Mr. Leonard happened to be in Naples at the time. He had seen Claudia on the stage, and hearing her mother's story, he recognized her as the repudiated heiress of the fortune which was now enjoyed by his father's family. The young man possessed a keener sense of justice than his father, and when he heard of Mrs. Coyle's death, he sought out the child, and took her with him to England.

His father rated him for what he called his romantic folly, but he finally consented to pay the expenses of the little Claudia at a first-class boarding-school.

As the girl grew older, she rebelled against the fetters with which she was bound, and in every possible way showed that the Bohemian spirit she had inherited was strong within her.

She hated her kindred, and accused them of having defrauded her of the wealth and position that rightfully belonged to her.

At eighteen years of age she was beautiful, highly accomplished, and eager to enter the arena on which she hoped to win success, yet she had no certainty as to what

position she was to hold. Education might only have been given her to enable her to gain her own living by becoming a governess. How vehemently she recoiled from the mere thought of such a life no words can express. The gall of bitterness arose in her soul as she remembered that she was a dependent on those who possessed the fortune that should have been her own, and she cherished no feeling of gratitude even to him who had rescued her from the forlorn position in which she had been left by her mother's death.

Charles Leonard had now been married many years, and his wife, an amiable, commonplace woman, consented to receive Miss Coyle beneath her roof, and introduce her into society. Leonard believed that her rare beauty, and the promise of a few thousand pounds as dower, would insure her a suitable alliance, and thus his duty to her would be amply fulfilled.

Claudia was taken to his splendid mansion, and treated with kindness and consideration. She had a liberal allowance, and her beauty was set off by elegant and tasteful dress.

But she felt no gratitude for this. "They give me a moiety of what should be my own; they deck me in expensive clothing, hoping that I may attract a lover who can take the burden off their hands," was her bitter thought, and with the strong perversity of her nature she resolved to disappoint her relatives by the choice she would make.

The society she met with in her cousin's house was composed of two classes: the solid city men who had been the architects of their own fortunes, and the more aristocratic associates of Charles Leonard's high-born wife.

One of the former, a man of mature years and great wealth, asked for Miss Coyle's hand in marriage; and to one of the latter, a handsome, profligate spendthrift, Claudia gave her heart.

Her cousin placed before her all the advantages of a marriage with Mr. Boynton, and she seemingly acquiesced in his views; but three days later she eloped with Captain Gordon, and for three years lived a gay life with him at the different gambling places in Europe.

At the end of that time, Claudia discovered that there was another wife in existence at the time of their marriage, and she left Gordon and embarked for the United States.

It was on that voyage she encountered John Spiers, and for the first time learned what it was to love with all the passionate fervor of her southern temperament.

She had renounced the safe position offered her by her elderly lover, for the sake of Captain Gordon, but it was not done purely for love. Many ambitious views entered into her calculations. Gordon was the heir to a baronetcy and an ample rent-roll, and Claudia thought she could afford to wait a few years to reach such a goal at last. When it became known to her that, in a drunken spree, he had made a Scotch marriage before he met with her, and had pensioned off the woman with a pledge of silence till his uncle died, Claudia quietly possessed herself of some valuable jewels and a considerable sum of money, and went away, leaving a letter behind her explaining what she had done, and why she had left him.

As by this time the pair had become mutually indifferent, Gordon laughed at the escapade and its attendant

circumstances as a good joke. In her letter Claudia explained to him that she should make no attempt to prosecute him for bigamy at that time, but when he came into his inheritance, she was to be liberally paid to be quiescent, or heavy consequences would result to himself.

She resumed her maiden name, made friends wherever she appeared, for few could resist the seductive beauty and gay good-humor of this woman; and as long as her money lasted, the life she led was a very pleasant one to her.

Spiers was too poor to marry her, and to the attainment of that object both bent all their thoughts.

To be near him, Claudia answered the advertisement for a companion to an elderly lady living on James river, in Virginia. She brought with her unimpeachable recommendations, furnished by those who only knew her as an elegant and attractive woman.

Mrs. Adair was so much charmed with her new acquisition, that if Claudia could have fallen into her views with regard to a marriage with the son of Mr. Clifford, who she thought had claims on her property, in justice, if not in law, the old lady would have given the whole of her fortune to the two at her death.

But Jasper Clifford was but twenty—a dreamer and a scholar; and a mutual repulsion arose between the two, founded on the radical antagonism of their natures. But even if Jasper had shown any preference for her, Claudia would never have dared to accept fortune on such terms; for the fierce jealousy of her lover was such, that the slightest intimation of Mrs. Adair's wishes produced a violent scene, and Spiers declared that he would take her life, and that of her bridegroom, if she attempted to play

him false. He was quite in earnest when he made that threat, for the mere thought of losing Claudia rendered him as desperate as he had pretended to be when he used the same strategy with Clare Desmond.

When Claudia heard of the relationship of Mrs. Desmond to Mrs. Adair, she wrote to Spiers to find out all that was possible concerning the family. The result of what she learned was the concoction of the treacherous plot they had now taken the first steps toward carrying out.

Disguised as an old man, Spiers had followed Clare, and lingered near her on the steamer, overhearing the greater portion of what passed between her and Mr. Clifford, though he affected to be stone deaf to all who addressed him. He was now waiting under the shelter of the trees for the appearance of his confederate, and his shrill signal became so imperative that Claudia felt compelled to leave her station near the window before the conversation between Mrs. Adair and her niece came to an end.

"They have dropped the discussion of myself," she muttered, "and the rest will be but sentimental twaddle, so I might as well go."

Keeping in the shadow of the shrubbery, she moved rapidly toward the belt of trees which curved around the northern side of the house. When she gained their shelter, a figure sprang forward to meet her, and clasped her in his arms.

"My angel! my darling! my adored! it seems an age since I met you. I thought you never were coming. Old money-bags ought to be asleep by this time, for it seems to me that I have been here an age."

He had taken off his wig and false whiskers, and Claudia kissed him on cheek and lips before she attempted to release herself from his embrace.

"There," she said, with a laugh, "I have paid you well for keeping you waiting. Besides, it is not late; your impatience makes the time seem long. I ought really to have stayed till our new inmate was safe in her own apartment before I came here. I don't know what Miss Desmond will think of my unceremonious desertion."

"It doesn't matter much what she thinks; your brains are fertile enough, at any rate, to find some excuse that will satisfy such a verdant specimen as Clare Desmond. Do you know that she has packed away in her trunk what she believes to be the elixir of love, to charm the old lady into making her her heiress? But you and I know that it is the elixir of fortune for us."

"I am afraid she will see no necessity for using it. Mrs. Adair was charmed by her at first sight, and was far more gracious to her than I had any idea she would prove."

"Ah-h! well, you may allow that state of feeling to continue for a little while, but not long. Croesus likes a new plaything; but after the novelty wears off, your turn comes. You must find means to alienate the old woman so far as to make her treat Clare with less kindness, though you must be careful not to endanger the inheritance; the will must be made in her favor, you know, or we are all at sea again. The girl must be made to believe that her interests are in jeopardy, and she is so anxious to be able to assist her family, that she will try any nonsense to reinstate herself in the old woman's good graces."

"I understand what is necessary to be done," said Claudia, with a sigh. "If it were not for that absurd fancy of Mrs. Adair's, to make a match between the two to whom she wishes to give her fortune, I think I could have won on her till she would have made me her heiress. But in her mind that idea is fixed as fate itself. She has a romantic notion in her head, that the two she designs for each other shall meet and fall in love without any intimation that they are expected to do so."

"With what prospect of success, do you think?"

"It seems probable enough that these two young people will take a fancy to each other. I hate Jasper, but I cannot help seeing that he is as handsome as a young Apollo; and he has just that dreamy, poetic temperament which will incline him to admire a girl of Miss Desmond's style and talk sentimental nonsense to her. They will be thrown together without restraint, for Mr. Clifford understands Mrs. Adair's wishes, and of course he favors them. It would be a miracle if these young people, who I know will prove congenial to each other, do not fall as desperately in love as can be desired by those who wish to make a match between them."

Spiers' brow clouded, and he viciously said:

"I wish that young fellow was at the antipodes. But for *him* and his fancied claims on Mrs. Adair, you would have been sure of the money. I almost think it would be expedient to put him out of the way."

"That would be of no use unless his father was removed at the same time. Mr. Clifford has resigned his claims in favor of his son; but if anything happened to Jasper the old lady would insist that he should take the young man's place. The money her husband left her

she regards as of right belonging to the Cliffords; she might leave it to them, but she has an insane desire to keep the bulk of the property together and bestow it on her two protégés, if they will agree to marry each other."

"What would be the result if they refused?"

"I cannot foresee; but I think that Miss Desmond would be sent back to her parents, and the second sister be brought hither for trial."

"*That* must not be, for I have no hold over Christine, and she would never be safe to meddle with. I was going to suggest to you to give Clare a hint of what is expected of her, that she might do what almost any perverse girl would—take an aversion to this boy. But I see plainly that it would not do."

"Even if it would, I should not dare to attempt it. She and Mr. Clifford are such good friends that she would be sure to betray me; and Mrs. Adair would never forgive me if she suspected that I am trying to undermine her plans. In fact, I think it will be rather amusing to further them, knowing as I do that the whole of the actors are but puppets, the wires by which they are moved being held in my hands."

"Ha, ha!—yes. I should like to change places with you, for the play will be amusing. Let them fall in love over head and ears. It is true I must marry that girl, but if she dies of a broken heart the better for you and me; the sooner we can ratify the promises we have made to each other."

At this Claudia's brow grew dark, and she curtly said:

"There will be no necessity for such a sacrifice on

your part. When Miss Desmond has used that fatal mixture she will be so much in your power that you can exact from her nearly the whole of her inheritance, as the price of silence. You seem to think only of yourself in this matter; but can you not imagine what my feelings would be, to see you actually pledged to any one besides myself? I can see no necessity for marrying her at all."

"My dear Claudia, it is unlike you to let jealous feeling mar our plans. You know that you alone possess my heart; that I would do anything, *anything* to secure fortune, and with it the power to make you forever my own. Clare would not long be in your way; if she did not die of horror and heart-break, I could, aye, and *would*, very soon put her out of your path. But I can see no way to success, except by a marriage with her. Mrs. Adair has expressed to you her positive intention to bequeath the whole of her large fortune to this young girl, if she is pleased with her, and you have assured me that she is."

Claudia threw herself upon his breast in a sudden impulse of passion, and cried out:

"All that is true, but I shall die if another woman comes between us. I cannot bear it—I cannot!"

"Calm yourself, my angel, and listen to me. If I do not secure power over Miss Desmond as my wife, her friends would come to her assistance. Investigations would be made that might be very damaging to me; but if I stood in the position of her husband, don't you see that their hands would be tied? They will then gladly hush up the whole affair, and leave the girl to my tender mercies. You can imagine what they will be when she is once completely in my power."

Claudia shuddered. She presently looked up, and her face was white and drawn.

"This poor girl is sadly in my way, but—but I wish some less dreadful means could be found to dispose of her. She is so young, so innocent, that I shrink from the thought of utterly destroying her."

"The more innocent, the better fitted she is to join the angelic choir," said Spiers, lightly. "You will lay aside your scruples when you see her actually my wife."

A glance of flame flashed from the black eyes of his companion, and she moved several paces from him, as she spoke with intense bitterness:

"I do not know why I love you to that degree that I am ready to risk everything for your sake. But so it is, and I cannot help myself. You are right; when I see Clare Desmond holding that position toward you, the tiger in me will be aroused, and I shall be ready to compass any means to insure her destruction. After all, you will only avenge on her the fate she will have given her aunt."

"Now you are reasonable, my darling. You know that it is for your sake I do all this, so you must bear with a little suffering, to make our brilliant and happy future a certainty."

"*Little!*" repeated Claudia, pressing her hand upon her heart. "Every day, every hour I know her to be with you will be bitter anguish to me. Oh, John, you cannot understand how I love you!"

"I think I can, Claudia; and if you will reflect, you will see that I am giving you the strongest proof of my devotion, by entering into the plot you chiefly arranged yourself. I shall incur great danger for your sake; for

if discovery were made, *I* should be the one to suffer punishment, not you."

"That is true; and we must risk nothing. I give you up to *the heiress* for a brief space; but you must not falter—you must not be turned from your purpose by her beauty and sweetness. Oh, in that event I could devote her to the infernal gods myself!"

She stood before him pale, panting, almost terrible in her passionate emotion. Spiers drew near her, took her cold hand in his own, and almost as passionately said:

"I swear to keep faith with you to the letter, Claudia. Give me six weeks after the old lady is safe in her grave; I will claim my bride, take her away, force her to make a will in my favor, and then deal with her in such a way that no suspicion of foul play shall fall on me. You can await me in some foreign city. I will turn the estate into money, and with you for my companion, seek and find happiness under another name. In our new home we shall be rich and happy."

He passed his arm around her, and as they walked to and fro they arranged every minutiae of their plans. Then he put on his wig again, and said:

"I must get back to the landing in time for the night boat. Write to me under a new name, for I think Clifford will watch you sharply. Abner Jonson will do as well as any, and be sure to keep me posted as to what happens here."

"I shall certainly do that. Come with me to the door. The house is quiet, and no one will see you at this hour. I told Reuben to leave the front entrance unlocked, as I often do when I walk at night."

With some reluctance Spiers complied, for he feared

being seen; but Claudia believed that all was safe till she heard Clare's exclamation, and looked up to see her white face at the open window.

She hastily whispered:

"Never mind; I shall know how to account for your presence here. Go now." And she hurriedly entered the house, and sought her own room.

CHAPTER XIV.

CLARE'S NEW ADMIRER.

CLARE could not sleep for many hours. The excitement of the interview with her aunt made her nervous, and the last incident that had happened afforded too much food for conjecture to permit slumber to seal her eyelids till after she heard the great clock in the hall ring out the midnight hour.

She slept much later than usual the next morning, and when she awoke she found her new maid moving noiselessly to and fro, arranging everything for her morning toilet. Clare found it very pleasant to be so deftly waited on, and she spoke gently to the girl when she had occasion to address her.

Lyra was evidently taking the measure of her new mistress, but the decision she came to was evidently favorable. When Clare stood before her in her pretty morning dress of rose-colored muslin, with crimped ruffles at the throat and wrist, her hair braided in shining bands around her daintily set head, Lyra said:

"I 'clar', Miss Desmin, you's pretty as a picter. You an't nothin' like Miss Claudy, but I thinks you's a heap nicer'n she is."

Clare's rosy lips dimpled into smiles, but she said:

"You are only trying to flatter me, Lyra; for you know that I cannot for a moment be compared to so magnificent a woman as Miss Coyle."

"She's mighty grand, for sure, Miss Clare, an' she tries to be mighty sweet, but we's all glad that ole Miss couldn't made things go atween she an' Mr. Jasper. Ef she had, *you'd* never ha' been sent for; an' we darkies was mighty glad to find out that one o' the ole blood were 'membered, an' was comin'."

"Thank you," said Clare, much mystified by the allusion to a person she had never heard of before.

"Who is Mr. Jasper?"

"Goodness! You don't say as Mr. Clifford never tole you 'bout his son? He's a mighty nice young gemplin, an' he's kin to ole Miss through her husbin. He lives here long of his father, an' they has the wes' wing, as it's called. Mr. Jasper is a *chimie*, an' the tower room's full of all sorts of glass things twisted and turned, de Lord knows how many strange ways. He's high larnt, he is, an' he's been to collidge an' found out what all them things is good for."

"I shall see him at breakfast, I suppose."

"I dunno. Sometimes he has his'n took to his room. Him an' Miss Claudy don't allers hit it off together. Thar an't no love lost atween them two, sure as you live."

The silvery tinkle of a bell was heard from the hall below, and Lyra interrupted her flow of gossip to say:

"Thar's the breakfis bell, an' ef you stops a minute longer'n you ought, Miss Coyle'll take me to task for not havin' you ready in time. She can't b'ar to wait for anybody, caze she says the coffee an't fit for nothin' ef 'tan't drunk afore the *romy* gets los'. De Lord knows what that is, for I don't."

"I had better go at once, then," said her young lady, laughing. "I should not like to try Miss Coyle's patience the first morning I am here."

When Clare descended the winding stairs, she found Claudia awaiting her in the hall below, looking fresh and charming, in spite of her late vigils on the previous night. She cheerfully said:

"I summoned you a little earlier than was necessary, for breakfast will not be on the table quite yet. The morning is so lovely, that I wished you to enjoy it with me a few moments. Come out on the portico, and see how charming the view is. I am going to do the honors of your future home to you, and show you all its beauties."

Her voice was so frank, her manner so winning, that Clare found it impossible to resist their charm, though she had been harboring painful suspicions of the fair speaker.

"Thank you," she said, "I am an early riser, but I lay awake so long last night, that I overslept myself this morning."

"You sat up so long, you mean, for I saw you at your window when I came back, at eleven o'clock, from a late stroll I am often in the habit of taking. You must have been surprised to see me coming in at that hour, and you fancied, perhaps, that I had gone out to meet the old man who was with me."

Clare flushed slightly under the steady gaze that was bent on her, but she quietly replied:

"I have no right to sit up in judgment upon you, Miss Coyle, and you may be sure that I had no intention of spying upon you."

"Of course not; how could I imagine such a thing? You sat at your window dreaming of the fair future that is opening before you, and you naturally looked out when you heard some one moving below. I understand that; but as you saw that importunate old man, I think it but right to explain to you how he came to be with me."

"If you choose; but I have no wish to pry into your affairs. You must use your own judgment about that."

"Certainly; and it tells me that I must not risk losing your good opinion by allowing any mystery to hang around my actions. I am open as the day myself, and I cannot bear to be thought otherwise than perfectly straightforward in all my dealings. That old man is a pensioner of mine, who comes hither occasionally to ask such assistance as I can render him. He served me once when I needed a friend, and now, in his need, I cannot refuse him such trifling aid as I can afford him. He told me that he came on the same boat with you yesterday, and he prowled about in the grounds till I went out to walk. He came on me just as I was returning, and I could not get rid of him till I came on to the house. The truth is, he is becoming rather a nuisance, and I have forbidden him to seek me again. I begin to think that he is a disreputable old creature, who only seeks to prey upon me, in place of working for his own living."

The explanation seemed simple enough, and Clare, in

her innocence, was glad to accept it. She hated to think evil of any one, and this specious actress won on her, in spite of all that Mr. Clifford had said of her. With a smile, she replied:

"I am quite satisfied with your explanation, Miss Coyle, and shall think no more of your venerable friend."

While speaking, they had walked forward to the front entrance, and Clare uttered an exclamation of delight as she emerged upon the portico. The wide, undulating park stretched before her, with its massive trees, its verdant sward and clumps of shrubbery, with the river rippling on its course in the distance. The opposite shore was dotted with villas, which gleamed like fairy palaces from the screen of verdure that encompassed them; forming altogether a scene of rare loveliness. The morning was bright enough to suggest a dream of Elysium, and the birds were singing their matin songs from every tree. There was no mist upon the water, and the soft summer air fluttered the leaves in unison with the carols of the morning songsters.

"Oh, how beautiful must life be in such a paradise as this!" said Clare. "It seems like a dream that I am here, and with the prospect that all this will some day be my own."

"I think there is little doubt about that, Miss Desmond—or rather, Clare. Let me call you by your sweet name, and do you call me Claudia. It sounds so formal to address each other as Miss."

"Yes, it does," said Clare, frankly, "and I am quite willing to make the change you propose; though it seems to me that you are much too grand a person to be spoken to merely as Claudia."

Her companion laughed gayly.

"Yet my name sounds very sweetly from your lips, *ma chère*. I am older than you by ever so many years, it is true, but I hope we shall be friends and companions nevertheless. I hate formality, and I wish to get on a pleasant footing with you as soon as possible. Mrs. Adair will love you all the better, if she sees that you have some kindly feeling for me; so, you see, the sooner we are friends the better for us all."

"I hope, indeed, that we shall get on well together, Claudia; there is no reason why we should not; and if, to like you, an effort were even necessary, I would make it to please my aunt."

Miss Coyle laughed strangely, and the metallic ring in her voice was very perceptible as she said:

"Oh, of course; everything must be done to please Mrs. Adair, as that is your cue just now. But I hope that I may also win some regard from you on my own account. I have won many friends, and do not despair of yet enrolling you among them."

"It would be strange indeed if you did not gain friends, so beautiful as you are, so fascinating as Mr. Clifford told me you can be. So far as we two are concerned, I think it more important to *me* to make you *my* friend, than for me to become yours; though, if you are good to me, I shall be sure to love you very much."

"Good to you! Why should I not be? for you are lovely and ingenuous. Besides, it is to my *interest* to treat you as well as possible. The days of my dear old friend are numbered, and you are the coming woman in whose hands all power here will be left. You see I am quite frank in showing you that I have some interest

in the relations we shall bear toward each other. This place is very dear to me, and I hope that when you are its mistress you will not turn me from it at once."

"Oh! I hope that you are mistaken about my aunt; but if anything should happen to her, you may be sure that I could not banish from her roof one to whom she is so much attached."

"Thank you. That assurance satisfies me. There is the second bell. Mrs. Adair rarely appears at the table—never in the morning—and she is unusually indisposed to-day. I think your coming excited her too much."

"Is my aunt suffering from disease, that you speak of her life as so precarious?"

"She has a nervous affection that is rapidly undermining her strength; but she may rally, and live for years yet. I only spoke of possibilities; so old a woman as Mrs. Adair cannot expect to have a long lease of life before her."

As they entered the hall two gentlemen approached from the opposite direction, and Clare gazed with a species of fascination at the younger one, attracted by his remarkable physical beauty.

A tall, lithe, graceful figure, perfectly proportioned; a finely shaped head, well set on the round neck, which was partially exposed by the open collar then so much worn by young men, in imitation of the idol of the day, Lord Byron; short silky curls of blonde hair, thrown back from a noble brow on which time nor care had yet imprinted a line; deep blue gray eyes, and a complexion of marble fairness, with perfectly moulded nose, mouth and chin: it would have been difficult to find a better

representative of a young Antinous than Jasper Clifford would have made.

In spite of his great beauty, there was nothing effeminate in his appearance; his well-knit frame showed strength, and the expression of his eyes and mouth denoted both firmness and power. It was easy to see that, in full maturity, he would be a grand and self-poised man, capable of erecting a high standard for himself, and coming up to it in spite of every drawback. He came forward with a smile which Clare thought very winning, and was presented to her by his father.

"This is my son Jasper, Miss Desmond. I did not mention him to you, because I always wish him to make his own way without praise from me; and I am such a doting old father that I could not have named him without trying to prejudice you in his favor before seeing him. I hope you will like each other, and I think you will."

Clare bowed, and involuntarily extended her hand, over which Jasper bent his head, though he only took the tips of the delicate fingers in his own.

Miss Coyle's lip curled slightly, and before either could speak she said:

"Of course they will like each other. Two so formed by nature to agree must soon discover how congenial they are. Fate sometimes works in the dark; but in this instance its purpose is plain as daylight."

Clare flushed crimson; Jasper frowned, and cast a look of aversion toward Miss Coyle; and Mr. Clifford's dark eyes flashed indignantly at her as he icily said:

"I was not aware that you aspire to the part of an oracle, Miss Claudia; but if you *are* inspired, I think it

would have been in better taste to withhold your vaticinations till they were asked for."

"Why, how seriously you take my nonsense, Mr. Clifford! One would think that I have committed some grave breach of propriety, when I was only thoughtless enough to express my conviction that your son and my young friend here are affinities. If they have not studied Swedenborg, they will not know what that means, so no harm will be done."

"If no harm was *meant*, it does not matter," said Mr. Clifford, significantly. He lowered his voice, as he walked beside her toward the breakfast-room, and earnestly went on:

"You know Mrs. Adair's wishes with reference to these two, and yet you are taking the very plan to defeat them. It was you who suggested that Clare should be brought hither, that the old lady may have a chance to gratify the mania of keeping the estate together, by promoting a marriage between the two to whom she wishes to give it. I trust that you are not playing a double part, Miss Coyle?"

Claudia inwardly raged, but she retained perfect outward composure, and deprecatingly said:

"I spoke impulsively, for I was struck with the fitness of the union Mrs. Adair has set her heart on! Mrs. Adair thinks she has not long to live, and she is naturally anxious to have this affair settled before her death."

Mr. Clifford cast on her a piercing glance:

"Do *you* think her in greater danger than she has been for years past?"

"She is older and weaker, and she is subject to

strange attacks; she had one last night after Miss Desmond left her. She thinks herself that she will die in one of them."

"Mrs. Adair has a nervous temperament, and she has never practised self-control; that is the secret of her spasmodic attacks. I have made a particular study of her case, and I think, with proper care, she may live several years yet."

"I hope so, indeed," said the fair hypocrite, as they entered the breakfast room.

The table was placed near the large window, and the fresh morning air was wafted in, accompanied by the blithe chatter of the birds which built their nests in the trees that shaded it. The table was exquisitely set, and a large bouquet of freshly gathered flowers stood in a vase in the centre. Claudia took her place behind the coffee urn, Mr. Clifford sat opposite to her, and Jasper and Clare at the sides. This arrangement suited the latter, as the pyramid of flowers formed a welcome screen between them, and helped them to recover from the embarrassment Miss Coyle's words had produced.

Jasper regarded them as a malicious effort on the part of that young lady to annoy him, for he had not the slightest suspicion that the future heiress had been brought to Riverdale with a view of making a match between her and himself.

At intervals he glanced furtively at Clare through the flowery ambush, and silently compared her ingenuous face with that of the scheming woman he had learned to mistrust, more through intuition than through any positive evidence of lack of principle on her part.

Jasper, with his lofty idealism, his high sense of honor,

had little in common with that beautiful syren, who once, at the command of her patroness, had made an effort to charm him into a union that, to him, would soon have proved as fatal as that which Spiers now contemplated with Clare, when his machinations placed her utterly in his power.

Though Claudia had no preference for him, she hated him for his indifference to her charms, and she now revelled in the hope that his fate had come to him in the shape of this lovely young girl, and when he had learned to adore her as the incarnation of all that is pure and true in woman, the proof of deadly crime should be brought home to her, and she, to save herself, become the prize of another man.

Under the influence of these thoughts, Claudia brightened into playfulness. Her efforts were seconded by Mr. Clifford, and gradually Jasper and Clare joined in the conversation.

When the meal was nearly over, a humming-bird fluttered in through the open window, and regardless of the presence of those around the table, floated airily about the lily bells that crowned the bouquet, plunging his long beak first in one, then into another, evidently enjoying his dainty repast.

"What a lovely fairy it is!" exclaimed Clare. "I wonder if it would frighten the poor little thing to death, if it were made a prisoner for a few moments?"

Claudia laughed unpleasantly.

"You must not take liberties with this bird, my dear, for it is an especial pet of Jasper's. He provides the flowers for its repast, and he has accustomed it to fly in, in this fearless manner."

Clare glanced shyly at the handsome head which was now lifted above the screen of flowers. Jasper smiled, and said, in reply to her look:

"I should be sorry to have Fairywings, as I have named this pretty creature, frightened away, for it has cost me much pains to make him so familiar; but if you will come to my sanctum at any time to-day, Miss Desmond, I will show you several specimens prepared by myself, which are almost as beautiful as this living one."

"I shall be delighted," said Clare, impulsively. "I am by nature a bird-fancier, though I could never bear to keep one confined in a cage, except a canary. *They* cannot live in this climate, you know, unless they are well taken care of. I have one at home, that I left in Christine's care. She is my sister, as you perhaps know."

"If it will afford you any pleasure, I will show you my collection at once. It is not very extensive, but there are some pretty specimens in it."

"I shall be glad to go with you, if—if Miss Coyle will accompany me," said Clare, with sudden diffidence.

"Oh, of course, and with great pleasure, for I wish to do the honors of the house to you in the way that will best satisfy you. Jasper's den is the most curious part of it, as you will think when you have seen it."

Jasper's lip faintly curled, but he silently offered his arm to Clare, and Claudia followed, attended by Mr. Clifford.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CHEMIST'S ROOM.

THE west wing of the house corresponded with the one in which Mrs. Adair's apartments were situated, and after turning into a lateral hall young Clifford and his companions gained the door of a large room simply fitted up.

Fencing-foils and a stand of curious arms stood between the two large front windows; a few proof engravings of rare merit hung in plain frames against the walls, and over the mantel there was a collection of pipes of every possible shape and form.

A large circular table covered with papers and magazines stood in the centre of the floor, and in a recess by the fireplace was the secretary in which Mr. Clifford kept his most important documents. A few comfortable-looking chairs, and a large bookcase filled with a choice collection of works on medicine, law, and general science, completed the furnishing.

Jasper led the way across this room, and opened the door of what Miss Coyle called his den. It was a tower room, and circular in shape. In the centre arose a pyramid of geological specimens artistically arranged, and crowned by shells of every variety accessible to him, mixed with sprays of seaweed. Plain cases stood between the long, narrow windows, filled with smaller specimens, but one of them held bottles filled with alcohol, in which floated reptiles of different kinds. On one side of this room was a complete chemical apparatus.

In front of this a glass case was placed, with a miniature tree imbedded in the bottom, and on its branches were perched a score of birds, so well preserved as to look almost lifelike.

A winding staircase built in the thick wall led to the upper story, which was used as a bedroom by Mr. Clifford and his son.

Clare was so much interested in the shells and seaweed that she forgot the object in coming there; and she received her first lesson in geology and the wonders of the deep from the lips of Jasper, before she turned her attention to the birds.

At length she naively said:

"How much you know, and what an ignoramus you must think me, Mr. Clifford! I must try to remember what you have told me about these things, and to learn something of them myself."

"I shall be most happy to aid you, Miss Desmond," was the reply, "but I hardly think you will care to pursue such dry details as have interest for me. Your accomplishments, as is fitting to your sex, are of a lighter and more graceful order, and you know much of which I am ignorant, no doubt."

Clare shook her head.

"I know superficially such things as are usually taught girls. I am a passable musician, and I am fond of reading, but I really *should* like to know something of the wonderful world we live in; and I would like to learn something that would make me useful in my day and generation."

The fine eyes of Jasper beamed approvingly upon her, and Miss Coyle satirically said:

"Now is your opportunity if you wish to become a female physician, Miss Desmond; for medicine is the specialty of both Mr. Clifford and his son. They doctor the whole plantation, and successfully too; so you can put yourself in training as soon as you please."

Clare flushed slightly, but she quietly said:

"I think every woman should understand how to administer simple remedies at least. Life has often been lost for the lack of such knowledge; but I have already received from my mother as much training in such matters as is necessary to me. If I trouble Mr. Clifford to teach me anything, I will first try conchology. With this fine collection of shells, I could soon learn a great deal on that subject."

"I hardly think Jasper will be so ungallant as to think it a trouble to teach so pretty a girl as you *any* lesson she may take a fancy to learn."

Jasper was amazed at the emphasis; he turned his large luminous eyes upon the speaker and said:

"There is one lesson I should like to teach you, Miss Coyle, and that is—"

He paused, and she impatiently asked:

"What? I did not imagine I had anything to learn from *you*."

Before he could reply, Mr. Clifford broke in:

"Why is it that you two cannot meet without sparring at each other? Come, Clare, I will show you the humming-birds, since Jasper seems to have forgotten all about them."

Jasper turned abruptly from Claudia, and with a light laugh said, in reply to his father:

"I think Miss Coyle and I will defer our battle to

another time. It will be our best policy to pass over slight grievances till we can meet on a field worthy of our prowess, and fight to the death."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Claudia, with pale lips. "We may disagree, but no such cause of quarrel as that can arise between us."

"Certainly not, if *I* could have the ordering of fate," was the light reply, "but *you* seem determined to drive me to extremities. If you will promise to cease wielding your petty weapons against me, I will pledge myself to keep the peace."

"Here is my hand, then. I ask a truce at least."

Jasper bowed over the hand she extended to him, but he did not touch it, and Claudia was strongly tempted to slap him on the face with the slighted gage of amity. But she restrained herself, and permitted him to turn his attention to Clare, feeling in her own mind the triumphant assurance that he was already interested in their new inmate, and through her she would yet avenge the slights he had put upon herself.

Clare was charmed with the birds, and Jasper was as evidently charmed with her, and when she went away with Miss Coyle, she took with her a volume of Humboldt's *Cosmos*, declaring she intended to study it carefully.

"What do you think of her?" asked Mr. Clifford, as the door closed on the two visitors.

"I think she is as natural and charming a young girl as can be found," was the reply. "I can only regret that she is thrown into companionship with so heartless and unprincipled a woman as I believe Claudia Coyle to be. It seems strange to me that you cannot open Mrs.

Adair's eyes to the fact of her duplicity. You have no more faith in her than I have, yet you spare her."

"I spare her because the time to strike has not arrived. All that I could say now would have no weight with one so infatuated with her as the old lady is. We must wait till something can be *proved* against her, and as yet there is nothing tangible."

"Is it not enough that she has clandestine meetings in the park with a lover who comes here in disguise? I saw them together last night, though I could not get near enough to overhear what they were plotting; for plotting they are, I am sure, and against the poor old woman she pretends to be so fond of. Ever since Claudia has been here, these nocturnal meetings have taken place every month or two. I have seen her in his arms, yet she made advances to me in the mad hope that Mrs. Adair would give the whole of her fortune jointly to us. Faugh! it makes me sick to think of her baseness."

"My dear Jasper, it would do no good to tell Mrs. Adair of those meetings. Claudia would declare that the man is her brother, or her cousin—some one that has a claim of relationship upon her, and we know too little of her antecedents to disprove her assertions. The end might be that the old lady would take the man into favor, and we should have two adversaries to deal with in place of one."

"Better that, and deal with them openly, than have them plotting in the dark. Claudia desired this young girl to be brought here, but for what purpose I cannot fathom. That she really wishes Clare Desmond to become the heiress of the wealth she covets for herself, I cannot believe."

"Her conduct in that respect is a puzzle to me too, but it shall not remain so long. I am interested in Miss Desmond, and her family are entitled to the greater portion of Mrs. Adair's fortune. Her father made an unjust will, and it is her place to right the wrong he did. So far as you and I are concerned, we have very little interest in the disposal of her fortune. You are her godson, and she will give you something, no doubt, but she has entire control over the money left her by my uncle, and she has a fancy to keep the estate intact."

"I am thankful that I have no need of anything from her," said Jasper. "The small income left me by my mother, with what you have saved, will suffice for our wants till I can establish myself in some business when the time comes for us to leave this place. I do not deny that I shall regret giving up so pleasant a home, but a man with health and energy can always provide what is necessary for himself and those that are dependent upon him. I linger here now because Mrs. Adair insists so much upon it, not with a view to any benefit from her future liberality. I should hate myself if I thought I could be influenced by designs upon her fortune."

"I know that you have no mercenary taint in your nature, Jasper, and I love you all the better for it. The old lady has an object in view in detaining you here. I approve of it, though I am pledged to her and to myself not to betray it to you, for a time at least. All we have to do at present is to watch over Clare Desmond's interests, and protect her from Miss Coyle's machinations."

His son regarded him earnestly a few moments, and then said:

"It is something new for you to be mysterious, sir;

but I suppose you are only indulging one of Mrs. Adair's eccentric whims. I do not deny that it is pleasant to linger here for a season, before I go forth into the busy world to fight my battle with it. I am with you too, and I can aid you in the management of this large estate."

"Oh, there are plenty of excuses for keeping you with me," replied his father, laughing. "I must ride around the place now, and you can look over and arrange those accounts we spoke of last night."

When Mr. Clifford went away, Jasper placed himself in front of the secretary, and made an effort to absorb his mind in the business confided to him; but, for the first time in his experience, he could not fix his attention upon the dry details necessary to the accomplishment of his task.

The sweet face, the soft eyes of Clare Desmond would keep flitting before his mental vision, and her fresh, joyous voice seemed to ring perpetually in his ears. He finally sunk into a reverie, but he presently abruptly roused himself from it, muttering:

"What care I how fair she be,
If she be not fair for me?"

"I cannot lift my thoughts to the prospective heiress of Mrs. Adair's fortune. The old lady, doubtless, has high views for her, for in her day she was the very incarnation of pride and ambition. I wonder she cannot see how imprudent she is to bring together two young persons like Clare and myself, lest, as that fair serpent said, we should prove affinities. Oh, Claudia Coyle, I hope that I shall be able to unmask you yet! I dedicate myself

to the task, for I cannot help believing that this young girl has been brought hither to serve some purpose of your own."

Too restless to remain within, Jasper threw on his hat, and went out by a side door to stroll beneath the grateful shade of the trees.

In the mean time Miss Coyle had ascertained that Mrs. Adair was awake, had taken her breakfast, and now wished her niece to come to her.

The two went in together to find the old lady sitting up in bed, her gray hair dressed, and the cap, with its rose-colored ribbons, in its proper place. A scarlet cashmere shawl was thrown over the embroidered wrapper she wore, and by the dim light which was permitted to filter through the bowed shutters she looked handsome and almost young.

"Good-morning, my dear," she said to Clare. "I had a dreadful time of it after you left me last night; but luckily Mr. Clifford always understands what is best to be done for me in my attacks, and so you see I am alive yet."

"And likely to live long, I hope, dear aunt," replied Clare, taking the hand extended to her; but when she would have pressed it to her lips the old lady drew her face down and kissed her on her forehead.

"There, my child! An old woman's kiss may not be as acceptable as a young lover's, but sometimes it is worth more to the recipient. Do you know, Clare, that I find in you something that is eminently attractive to me? You must wear the girdle of Venus, child, for Mr. Clifford is as much pleased with you as I am."

Clare flushed with delight, and she smilingly said:

"I am sure I am very glad to receive such appreciation, aunt; but I am only a simple, inexperienced girl, who has been taught to measure her actions by the Christian standard. My parents have tried to make me good and true."

The expression of the old lady changed, and she made a grimace as she replied:

"I hope you are not a prig, child. I hate cant, and all that sounds mightily like it. How can a baby like you come up to what you call the Christian standard? I never could, and I am over seventy years old, and I do not think I am a very bad woman either."

Clare was slightly abashed by this, but she replied with childlike simplicity:

"The only rule given me was, 'Do as you would be done by.' I try to practise it, aunt, but I hardly know what a prig means."

"You delightful little ignoramus, sit down here by my bed, and talk to me while Claudia plays on the organ. I generally say my prayers to her music, but this morning I think I will have a chat with you."

Claudia took the hint, though she went into the tower room with a very discontented face.

"Close the door," said Mrs. Adair to the woman in attendance on her; "we shall have enough of it then: and you may go to your breakfast, Mona. Miss Desmond will remain with me."

When the woman was gone, Mrs. Adair sat silent a few moments, intently regarding the face of her young relation. At length she said:

"I hoped that you would look like my family, Clare, but I can see nothing of them in you. I am satisfied

with your appearance though, for you are very fair, and you will mature into a magnificent woman. You are worthy to sustain the dignity of the Beauforts."

"I am happy that I please you, aunt," was the murmured reply, for Clare felt disconcerted by the steady observation of those keen, dark eyes.

"Well—yes—you please me, as everything young and pretty does. Youth—youth, what a charm it has! There is another incarnation of its power beneath this roof, but Jasper has many good gifts aside from that. You have seen Mr. Clifford's son; tell me frankly what you think of him."

"He is the handsomest person I have ever seen, except Miss Coyle," said Clare, perfectly unembarrassed, "and I found him very agreeable. He took us to his room to show his birds, and he explained many other things to me that I found interesting."

"Really! Well, that was getting on pretty well for him; but you must be a strange girl if you found anything in that collection of rubbish to please you. It is well arranged, I know, but it tells me nothing that I care to know. I am content to enjoy the beauty of the world we live on, without delving through unknown ages to find out how it was produced. I wish you and Jasper to become good friends; but I do not want you to addle your brains trying to follow him in all the idle wanderings of his fancy."

"But if what the rocks tell us is true, aunt, should we not wish to understand what they reveal?"

"Stuff! It is only a theory, and it is against the Mosaic account of the creation; so it will be safer for you to let it alone. Jasper is a man, and he may meddle

with things that would not be safe for you. I don't believe in women going beyond their sphere; to them should suffice the commands 'to love God and keep his commandments, and to love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"But those commands were given equally to men and women," said Clare, timidly.

Mrs. Adair laughed.

"This is strange talk for you and me to fall into. I know one thing—that if Eve tasted of the tree of knowledge first, when Adam followed her example he gobbled up all the rest of the fruit, and left for her share only the certainty that she must robe herself gracefully or she would never find favor in the sight of the lordly sex. Yet men abuse women for their love of dress. By the way, my dear, that wrapper you have on is exquisitely becoming. I hope your mother got for you a blue silk, with black lace trimmings. That will suit your style better even than pink. I know, for I used to be a connoisseur in dress."

Clare was glad to be able to reply that she owned a dress which answered the description, and Mrs. Adair, with much vivacity, said:

"I am glad to find that Mrs. Desmond has such good taste. I shall come out to dinner to-day, and you must be in full toilet to do honor to me. Wear your blue silk, and with it something else I am going to give you. Open that cabinet yonder, and bring me the two jewel boxes you will find there."

Clare obeyed, and the old lady opened one containing a set of rose coral, exquisitely designed.

"This," she said, "will harmonize with your blue dress, and you will wear it with it. The other is a

parure of opals, set with brilliants. Of course they are for full toilet, and they are very handsome. Don't look at them now; you can examine them at your leisure, when you go to your own room."

The old lady nervously thrust the casket away from her, and silenced Clare's thanks by saying:

"There—that will do. The sight of those things has made me nervous. Take them away, and send Mona to me—no, I mean ring the bell for her to come."

Clare obeyed, and leaving the room, went into the hall, and sat down to examine the beautiful presents her aunt had made her, before she took them up to her own room.

She uttered an exclamation of childish delight as the opals, with their diamond setting, gleamed out of the purple velvet lining on which they were laid. The necklace was clasped with a large stone, from the heart of which a flame seemed at intervals to flash up, and then fade away, leaving the surface white as pearl, till another scintillation came.

Clare sat absorbed in reverie, watching the glancing light as it lit up each gem, and trying to remember what she had read of misfortune and the opal being linked together, when the voice of Claudia Coyle spoke close beside her.

CHAPTER XVI.

MISS COYLE'S GAME BLOCKED.

CLAUDIA'S face was smiling, but it changed slightly as she glanced at the open caskets. She exclaimed, in genuine surprise:

"Is it possible that Mrs. Adair has given you the jewels that were purchased as a bridal gift for her granddaughter? I had no idea she would ever bear to see them worn by any other person."

Clare involuntarily pushed them away from her.

"If they belonged to that unfortunate girl, I am sure they will bring evil fortune to me, beautiful as they are," she impetuously said.

"I should risk it, at any rate," replied Claudia, lightly. "But what do you know of her for whom they were designed? Have you heard her tragic story?"

"Only that she was drowned on the eve of her marriage. Poor girl! what a fate! and how sad it was to leave this beautiful home—to give up all the joy and hope of life when it was at its brightest!"

Claudia's lip curled, and there was something hard in her voice as she said:

"You would spare your sentimental pity if you knew the truth. That young girl had no joy in life, and many have doubted if she did not voluntarily give it up, in preference to marrying the man her grandmother had selected as her husband."

"Oh, this is terrible!" exclaimed Clare. "Was my aunt so immovable? Was the man she had chosen for

Laura so repulsive to her that—that she did so wicked a thing rather than marry him?”

“Mind, I did not say she *did* destroy herself; I only repeated the surmises of others. You will not think her lover repulsive, for you know and like him, and so do I. But Laura Adair was desperately in love with another man, and one version of the story is, that she was escaping with him on a stormy night, when the boat was upset, and both she and her lover perished. She certainly did, for her body was found and buried in the graveyard belonging to this place.”

“And you say I know the man who—who stood between that poor girl and happiness. You must be mistaken, Miss Coyle. I know no gentleman here except Mr. Clifford and his son.”

“Precisely—and it was the elder man who wished to marry Mrs. Adair’s heiress; he drove her to destruction by his persistence, although he must have known that Laura Adair had no love for him.”

Clare regarded the speaker with dilating eyes.

“Are you *sure* of this, Miss Coyle? You were not living here at that time, and you may have been misinformed. I scarcely think that Mr. Clifford could act as you declare he did.”

“No, I was not living here, it is true, but Mona told me the story, and I have no reason to doubt its truth. Mr. Clifford is a fair average man, I suppose, but he wanted the money and this beautiful home. Laura Adair was not handsome; she was nearly thirty, and for three years she had insisted on marrying a man so far beneath her in social position that, to save her, her grandmother patched up an engagement between her

manager, who is her husband’s nephew, and the rebellious girl. You know what the end was; she was drowned in trying to effect her escape.”

Clare closed the jewel case, and with a shudder, said:

“These are very beautiful, but if they were purchased for that poor girl, I am sure they will bring evil to me. It is hard for me to believe that my aunt or Mr. Clifford would either of them have driven her to such extremity. He seems as kind and thoughtful for me as if I were his daughter.”

Claudia smiled.

“He understands his own interests, I fancy. You are the probable heiress now, and to use a vulgar proverb, Mr. Clifford knows ‘on which side his bread is buttered.’ Of course he will try to please you in every possible way. As to Mrs. Adair, her one thought was the salvation of her last descendant from a union with a dissipated and worthless man whom she met at a Northern watering-place. From all I could learn of her, Miss Adair was dull and wilful; her grandmother had little comfort or pride in her, and she would have been glad to see her safely married to her cousin.”

“But if the poor girl recoiled from the match, it was cruel in both of them to urge it upon her,” cried Clare, indignantly. “I should think that remorse would haunt them forever.”

Claudia shrugged her shoulders.

“I have seen no indications of any such feeling. Mrs. Adair had recovered from the shock before I came here; and as to Mr. Clifford, he is ready to play the same game again, if he can secure himself against expulsion from this place when the old lady dies.”

Clare grew pale as death.

"You—you cannot mean that—"

Her voice died away in a husky murmur.

"That is exactly what I do mean. You have been brought hither to take the place of that drowned girl, on the condition that you prove pliable in Mr. Clifford's hands. If you eventually refuse to bear his name, you will be sent back to your parents with a trifling provision for them, and left to the obscurity from which he chiefly influenced the old lady to draw you for a season."

Clare lifted her head, and a faint flush came into her face, as she said:

"You spoke vaguely about bearing his name, Claudia. I—I am too young to think of Mr. Clifford as a *possible* lover; and he may be manœuvring in the interests of his son."

"And you think, for the sake of this noble inheritance, that the handsome, ill-tempered Jasper might be accepted as your husband without too great reluctance on your part. My dear, he has no more feeling than the stones he is so fond of; and if he were to step down from his pedestal, and show any desire to make himself agreeable to you, you would see how quickly his father would interfere. Mr. Clifford makes a great parade of affection for his son, but he intends to be master of Riverdale himself, and if *you* will not give him the right to it as your husband, he will find other means to gain his ends."

"But—but does Mrs. Adair understand and abet his plans? Can it be true that she has brought me hither to sacrifice me to a man old enough to be my father? And if I refuse, will she consign my whole family to

poverty again, after awakening in us such hopes from her liberality?"

"I am fond of Mrs. Adair, but she is a hard woman, and a very capricious one. She has taken a great fancy to you, but no one can tell how long it will last. If you thwart her, she will be quite capable of disappointing all the hopes she has awakened. Mr. Clifford has claims on her property which descended to him from his uncle, though Mr. Adair left all he had to the entire control of his wife. She cannot bear the idea of dividing the estate, though she wishes to do justice to the Cliffords. In her wisdom, or the lack of it, she has devised a plan to bring you here, and make your favor depend on your acceptance of the name of Clifford."

Clare remembered the warning she had received against the speaker, but Claudia spoke in so assured a tone that she could not doubt the truth of her statements. Still she mistrusted her sincerity toward herself, and thought it best to act on the defensive.

With a faint smile she tried to speak lightly:

"The name is a very pretty one, and if it were offered by the son, I might be induced to accept it. I wonder it did not occur to my aunt that such a plan might be more easy of accomplishment than the one you have just disclosed. I think Jasper has more sensibility than you give him credit for, and if I set my cap for *him* his father would for very shame forbear to interfere between us."

"You are charmed by his handsome person, as most people are; but when you know him as well as I do, you will think his father a safer match for you than he would be. Moreover, by encouraging Jasper, you will risk the

favor of Mrs. Adair. When she has set her heart on a thing, she is very tenacious. If you set yourself in opposition to her wishes, there is no telling what she may do."

Clare sat silent a few moments, thinking over what had passed between herself and Mr. Clifford. She could not give up all belief in him at once, at the bidding of the very woman of whose arts he had warned her to beware. She finally said:

"It is very painful to find myself in such a position as I occupy in this house. I have too little experience to guide myself aright, so I think the best plan for me will be to drift with the tide, and trust to Providence to bring me to a safe haven. If I can win on my aunt's affections, I can induce her to think more of my happiness than of the disposition of money."

"That shows how little you know of Mrs. Adair. I do not think she could rest quietly in her grave if she could know that her estate was dismembered after her death. She is a monomaniac on that subject. *You* will be the heiress of all or of none. From her personal property she may give your mother a few thousands to place her above actual want, but you will be disgraced, and get nothing, if you attempt to prove to her that your happiness is to be considered before her will."

Clare suddenly said:

"I wish, Miss Coyle, that you would not speak to me again of my aunt and her peculiarities. If I am to get on well with her at all, I must be left to act out my natural character before her, without fear of offending against her prejudices. If I have constantly before my eyes the dread that I am running counter to her wishes, things cannot go smoothly between us."

Claudia felt that she was baffled, but she earnestly said

"Pardon me, if my interest in you led me further than perhaps I should have gone. I am not partial to the Cliffords, because I clearly see the game they are playing. They would do anything to secure the possession of this estate at Mrs. Adair's death. When I first came hither, the old lady, as is usual with her, took a desperate fancy to me, and she thought for a while that if a match could be brought about between Mr. Clifford and myself, she would set aside the claims of her own relations, and settle her property on us. He entered into her plans, and tried to carry them into effect, but I could not bring myself to encourage his advances."

Clare remembered that Mr. Clifford had told her that at one time he had been fascinated by Miss Coyle, and she naively said:

"I wonder you could not fancy him, with such inducements too. He is still a very handsome man, and his manners are excellent."

"Yes—many would have been tempted; but I had a safeguard in my love for another. I am betrothed, and when my lover has secured a fortune he has reason to believe will fall to him in the next year or two, I shall go back to my native land with him as his wife."

Clare was interested, as most young girls are in a love story, and she said:

"Of course you could not be false to your lover, even to please my aunt. Is his fortune involved in a lawsuit? If it is, I hope he will succeed in winning it."

"No. There are two lives that are in the way at present, but one of them is a very old person, and the

other is that of a feeble girl, whose life is not worth a year's purchase."

Claudia found a strange pleasure in speaking thus to the innocent victim who was to be offered up on the shrine of her avaricious lover.

Clare asked many questions, which she answered till weary of them, and she then said:

"You have forgotten all about your jewels. That set of opals cost many thousand dollars, and it is well worth taking care of. Come with me, and I will show you the picture of the girl for whom they were purchased as a bridal gift."

"I did not know there was a portrait of her here, though I really know very little about anything here yet. I shall be glad to see the shadow of poor Laura."

Miss Coyle led the way across the hall and entered a suit of apartments, two of which were elegantly fitted up as parlor and sitting-room; a third one opened from them, smaller in size, and more plainly furnished. Between the two windows hung a large frame covered with a black curtain.

Claudia threw open the shutters, swept aside the curtain, and Clare looked on the insignificant, almost repulsive face of the unfortunate Laura.

The artist had done his best to make a fine picture. In the background Riverdale was seen, and the heiress was represented standing on the lawn, with a large Newfoundland dog crouched at her feet. The figure was well posed, but it had none of the graceful dignity for which the daughters of the Beaufort race had been so celebrated. It was short, heavy, and ill made, and the head and face were in keeping with it. The features were coarsely

moulded; the eyes of a pale, watery blue, and the hair light flaxen. The expression was that of a froward, intractable child, though the original could not have been less than twenty-five years old when the portrait was painted.

When Clare had looked at it a few moments, Miss Coyle asked:

"What do you think of the man who wanted such a woman as that for his wife? Look at that low forehead, that silly mouth. What a life one would lead with such a creature as that!"

"She is not handsome, certainly. She does not resemble any of the portraits in the hall."

"No, indeed. She is like her mother, Mona says, and *she* was a girl Andrew Adair picked up somewhere and married in one of his disreputable sprees. He was very wild, as you have heard, perhaps, and he died young. He left the child to his mother, and she accepted the charge."

"With the intense love of beauty my aunt has, it must have been almost painful to her to have that face constantly near her. I have rarely seen one that impressed me so disagreeably."

"Oh, her ugliness was the least disagreeable thing about her, if I have been truly informed. She was dull almost to idiocy, with a violent and ungovernable temper, and she would even make her grandmother tremble before her at times. One reason why Mrs. Adair wished Mr. Clifford to marry her was, that he might help to keep her in order."

Claudia had turned her back to the window, and the face of Jasper, wearing a surprised expression, passed

across the open space, and vanished almost as quickly as it was seen.

Clare saw him, and she astutely thought:

"He overheard that assertion, and if it is not true, he will seek an opportunity to vindicate his father. I am very glad that Miss Coyle did not see him."

As can be seen, Claudia had changed her tactics. Not daring to interfere directly with Mrs. Adair's plans, she thought it safer to inspire the mind of Clare with distrust toward Mr. Clifford, and to alarm her by representing him as an aspirant to her future favor.

If she, with the natural timidity of a young girl, recoiled from the paternal efforts of her elderly admirer to win on her regard, Claudia's purpose would be served by keeping them apart; thus weakening the interest Mr. Clifford felt for the young creature whose only safety lay in the protection he could afford her.

Subtle as Catherine de Medici, Claudia's motto was, "Divide and conquer," and if she could produce discord between those three whose interest lay in union, she believed she could easily attain the end for which she labored.

Her further comments on the person and history of Laura Adair were cut short by a summons to read to her patroness, and she reluctantly left Clare to her own devices.

The walls of the house were immensely thick, and all the windows had wide, low seats in them, many of which were cushioned. Clare had taken a fancy to this simply furnished room because it reminded her of the humble home from which she had so lately come, and she sat down in one of the recesses, and again opened the case

containing the opals, and sat watching the flickering shades of light and color that swept over them, thinking far less of them than of the story of the unfortunate girl who had been their first possessor.

Jasper, who had been wandering through the grounds for the last hour, again drew near the window, and stood several moments watching the bowed head and thoughtful face of the young girl before he ventured to speak to her.

When he did, she started, flushed deeply, and then a strange questioning expression came into her eyes, which he had quickness enough to understand and reply to.

"You are pondering over the extraordinary statement I accidentally overheard Miss Coyle make to you not long ago. I hope you will believe that I had no intention of eavesdropping. I was surprised to see these windows open, and came toward them just in time to catch a few words from the fair Claudia which intimately concern the good name of my father."

"Then it is not true that Mr. Clifford would have forced that poor girl to marry him, that he might get her fortune?" Clare eagerly asked. "Oh, I hope it is not true that the unhappy creature drowned herself to escape from him."

"Oh, what a *Coyle* is here!" exclaimed Jasper, in serio-comic indignation. "I think my good angel, or more probably yours, directed my steps here this morning, Miss Desmond. I hope you believe my father incapable of such baseness as he seems to have been accused of to you. I should only need to look in his face, to clear him from every imputation of possible meanness."

Clare flushed, and timidly said:

"Do not blame me for listening to such details of family history as must possess great interest for me. I—I—did not willingly give credence to many things Miss Coyle said of your father. Indeed—indeed I should be very sorry to believe half of them."

"Or the other half either," said Jasper, dryly. "If it will be no breach of confidence, I should like to hear what new phase Miss Coyle's romance concerning my father has assumed. She has a vivid imagination, but I think a few prosaic facts will be better worth your consideration than all the fiction the fair narrator has supplied you with."

The young girl lifted her frank eyes to his face, and said, in reply:

"I am sure you will set me right, Mr. Clifford, so far as your father is concerned, without asking me to betray to you what has passed between Miss Coyle and myself. I dare say you can divine it without any assistance from me, and I had rather not repeat what was intended for myself alone."

Jasper looked at her a moment in silence. He was thinking what a charming face and head hers was, with the sunlight flickering through the waving tree boughs without, as if glad and happy to throw its brightness upon her.

Clare colored vividly, and dropped her eyes, as she read something of the meaning of his glance. With a faint smile, he replied:

"I was wrong, Miss Desmond, to ask you to do anything which can violate your own sense of honor. I can easily divine what Claudia has been saying to you, since she brought you to this room to look at that disagreeable

picture. I overheard her assertion that Mrs. Adair wished my father to marry my cousin Laura, that he might help to keep her in order. From that clue I can imagine the rest. She has asserted that he was *anxious* to make a dull, half-witted woman his wife for the sake of the wealth he covets. Is it not so?"

Clare bent her head in assent, but she would not speak.

"Now let me tell you the plain truth concerning Laura Adair. She was not too young for my father, and the old lady was most anxious to induce him to marry her, that she might be saved from throwing herself away on a worthless adventurer named Clifton, whom she met while travelling at the North. You see, the similarity in the names *may* have misled Miss Coyle."

"Yes—and your father had nothing to do with her sad fate," was the eager response.

"Laura certainly did not drown herself to escape from him, because no temptation offered by Mrs. Adair could induce him, for a moment, to think of accepting her granddaughter as his wife. It was discovered that the young lady carried on a clandestine correspondence with Clifton, and measures were taken to buy him off. He was needy; he really cared nothing for the poor girl, and a few thousand dollars induced him to go away.

"Finding herself deserted, Laura, after her first rage and grief were over, concluded to take a husband of her grandmother's selection. As my father would not listen to her arguments in favor of a union between himself and her heiress, Mrs. Adair finally chose the son of an old friend of her own, with whom she thought her granddaughter would be safe.

"Edgar Western was a plodding, easy-tempered man, fond of money, though not miserly. He had known Miss Adair from childhood, and in his estimation, all her defects were atoned for by the fortune of which she would one day be the mistress. The match was arranged by the elders, and both parties consented. Preparations for the wedding were commenced, and the bride elect seemed perfectly satisfied with the fate in store for her.

"More than a year had elapsed since Clifton disappeared, and no interference from him was apprehended. But he heard of what was going on, came to the neighborhood, and found means to send a letter to Miss Adair asking her to meet him once more before she became the wife of another.

"On a stormy night she went out for that purpose. It is supposed that he persuaded her to elope with him, for they set out to cross the river in an open boat. Since that night Clifton has never been heard of; and two days later, the body of the unfortunate girl was found washed up on the shore many miles below here."

"And the man?—may he not have murdered her?" asked Clare, excitedly.

"No one believes that he did. Every possible inquiry was made; the boat was found floating on the river, turned bottom upward. It was ascertained that Clifton could not swim, and the inference was that both had perished, though his body was never found."

After a pause, Clare said:

"What a sad story! It completely refutes Miss Coyle's assertions, and I am glad you have told me."

"It is fortunate for you that I found the opportunity. Since you know how Claudia can pervert the truth, you

will not again be likely to give credence to any assertion concerning my father or myself that she may make."

"I promise you that; I will be on my guard."

"Thank you. Have confidence in my father, for he is your best friend here. He has no designs on Mrs. Adair's fortune; none on her heiress, believe me."

Clare blushed deeply, and drew the open jewel case toward her, nervously attempting to fasten it.

Jasper said:

"That is a rare set of ornaments. You must be a great favorite of the old lady, since she has given you the gems she designed for her granddaughter. They were never given to her though, for they did not arrive till after she disappeared."

"Oh, I am so glad of that! I thought they had been in Miss Adair's possession."

"I dare say Claudia tried to disgust you with them by telling you that. Did she not also say that opals are considered unlucky for the wearer?"

"I was thinking of that myself when Miss Coyle joined me in the hall. I have read about the superstition. Do you think there is anything in it?"

"It can be only a poetic fancy. In what month were you born, Miss Desmond?"

"In October. Why do you ask? Has that anything to do with my opals?"

"Yes; more than you think. Each month has its own peculiar gem. October has two—aqua marine, which signifies misfortune, so you must not wear them; opal also belongs to that month, and its signification is hope. Therefore I think you may safely deck yourself with your beautiful gift."

"I am so glad to know that. And diamonds—what month do they belong to, and what do they mean?"

"Innocence; and their sparkling beauty aptly typifies the month of April."

"Oh, thank you. And what is *your* gem?"

Jasper pointed to the studs in the bosom of his shirt, in which were small turquoise stones, and replied:

"These are emblematic of December, and mean success."

"I am glad to hear that. You are so good to me, that I heartily wish you success in all you may undertake."

"Thank you," said Jasper, with a beaming smile. "But here comes Claudia again, so I will take myself away. Remember your pledge."

She nodded her head, and the next moment he was gone.

CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. ADAIR'S REVELATION.

CLAUDIA came into the room secretly raging, but she smiled, and said:

"You have found pleasant employment in my absence. I saw Jasper flirting with you through the window. Why did he run away at my approach?"

"Perhaps he has found out that you have no particular liking for him," said Clare, maliciously, "and thought to please you best by retreating."

"I scarcely gave him credit for so much penetration,"

said Claudia, dryly. "I have little cause to be fond of him; and when you have found him out, you will have no more faith in him than I have. What brought him from his den I wonder, at this hour of the morning? Did he explain to you how he came to be prowling near this room?"

"He said he saw the windows open, and he came to see who was in here."

"And he stayed to talk nonsense with you. Ha! ha! it is something new for Jasper to show interest in a young lady. I wonder if he is meditating the treachery of trying to supplant his father."

"I hardly think he will attempt anything of the kind," was the quiet reply. "He has been explaining to me the significance of gems, and I found it very interesting."

"And what may opals and diamonds mean?"

"Hope and innocence," said Clare, taking the ring belonging to the set from the casket, and slipping it on her finger. "With such a talisman as that I ought to be able to defy all malice and uncharitableness. Don't you think so, Claudia?"

"You are not likely to encounter either here, unless it is through the evil influence of Mr. Clifford and his son. But I am forgetting my errand hither. Mrs. Adair wishes you to take my place as reader this morning. I am suffering from a slight cold, and my voice is not clear. She got angry with me, and asked me what I had been doing with myself—that I was as hoarse as a raven. She has no sympathy with any ailments but her own."

"If you had told her that you were out late last night,

on an errand of benevolence, perhaps she would have excused you. Of course I will go to her, as soon as I have put my presents away."

A sudden flash came into Claudia's eyes, and she scanned the face of the speaker keenly, half amused at her unconscious satire, half fearful that she suspected the nature of her meeting with her lover on the previous night. She quickly said:

"Of course Mrs. Adair knows nothing of that person. She would have a thousand absurd fancies about burglars if she knew of his coming here to ask aid from me. I hope you will give her no hint of his presence here last night. If you do she will have a guard of armed men around the house for a month to come."

"You may rely on my discretion," said Clare, laughing; and she escaped from the room, ran up-stairs, locked up her jewels, and went to her aunt's room.

Claudia stood a moment looking after her, and then threw herself upon the window seat, muttering:

"I thought I should have an unformed, thoughtless child to deal with; but this girl is sharp, and she knows how to defend herself. Mr. Clifford has evidently put her on her guard, but I will prove more than a match for them all yet. Jasper could not have been near enough to overhear *my* version of Laura Adair's story, for I looked around carefully when I opened the windows, and no one was in sight."

Thus reassuring herself Claudia sunk into a reverie, trying vainly to arrange some plan by which the future enjoyment of Mrs. Adair's fortune could be secured to herself and her lover, without the necessity of a marriage between Clare and Spiers, with the tragic result he had foreshadowed.

She cared very little as to what fate might befall the victim she was ready to ensnare, but she shrank from possible consequences, for she had a superstitious belief in the old adage that "murder will out." Her jealous heart also raged at the thought that another woman, younger than herself, and charming in men's eyes, should, even for an hour, come between herself and the man she so passionately loved.

But no other scheme could she devise; so she finally restored the room to its usual appearance, and went up-stairs to lie down; for her head was aching, and she felt herself at present unable to cope with the difficulties that surrounded her.

In the meantime Clare had a very pleasant time with her aunt. She was a good reader, and she had a passionate fondness for the style of literature which Mrs. Adair preferred.

Every month a package of books was sent to Riverdale from Richmond, and the latest works were always found among them.

At twelve luncheon for the old lady was brought in, and Clare was invited to remain and share it with her. She kindly said, as they sat over the tray:

"You read charmingly, my dear. Claudia's voice gets husky very soon, and I hate to hear fine speeches croaked out as if the hero was at his last gasp. I like all Claudia's performances better than her reading."

"Then perhaps you will permit me to assume that duty, aunt. I shall be so happy to be of some use to you."

The old lady fixedly regarded her, and with a faint sigh, said:

"If I could only believe that you will really care for me for myself, Clare, and not for what I can give you. At first I thought Claudia sincerely attached to me, but she was so willing to fall into my views with regard to herself and Jasper, that I could not help thinking the fortune to be won by doing as I wished was the most she cared for."

"*Jasper!*" repeated Clare, with a strange feeling of annoyance at hearing his name coupled in this way with that of Miss Coyle. But she recalled the first words of her aunt, and more calmly went on:

"Pardon me, aunt, if I was surprised into exclaiming as I did. I will only speak of myself, in reply to what you first said. I will make no protestations to you, for you would have no right to believe them till you know me better. I have no one here to love but you, and your goodness to my parents has given you a warm place in my heart. I desire to be useful to you, because I cannot bear to eat the bread of idleness. If you will let me do what I can for you, I shall feel as if I earn a right to be here."

"You have the right without earning it, child. This is the home of your mother's family, and she and her children are all that are left of the old stock. You are too independent in your ideas, Clare; but if you *can* serve me for love, I will be glad to have you near me."

"It is a compact then, aunt. Give to my mother, if you choose; but let me think only of pleasing you for your own sake."

"I declare, child, you almost make me believe that there is such a thing in the world as disinterestedness. Now about Claudia. You seemed astonished just now,

when I spoke of her and Jasper in connection with each other. It was a fancy of my own to make a match between them, and give them all I had to bestow, which, I admit, would have been very unjust to your family. *She* consented at once; but my young gentleman flared up and declared that he would be no party to any such iniquitous transaction, and I am sure he said things of Claudia that she did not deserve."

"Do you think that Miss Coyle really wished to marry Jasper?" asked Clare. "I already have the impression that she does not like him."

"Of course she doesn't now, when he has put such a slight upon her. But she was very sweet and winning to him till she found out that he would not be tempted to enter into my views."

"Then I think you should give *him* credit for disinterestedness, aunt; few men would refuse so beautiful a woman as Miss Coyle, even without the additional temptation of a large fortune. At least I think so."

"You are perfectly right in that, my dear, and that is why Jasper's conduct is so inexplicable to me. Claudia is a few years older than he, but she will retain her beauty even longer than a husband cares for or notices how a wife looks."

"But perhaps something was wanting in Miss Coyle which Jasper values above mere beauty."

"My dear, men, as a rule, think more of a woman's charms, than they do of other and nobler gifts. I don't know why Jasper should set up a higher standard than others, especially when he set himself in opposition to *me* in doing so. However, it is just as well as it is, for I am not so much infatuated with Claudia as, I admit, I was at first."

"Then you no longer wish such a marriage to take place?"

Clare spoke thus because the old lady paused, and looked at her as if she expected some reply. With a smile that was inexplicable to her young companion, Mrs. Adair said:

"No, indeed; I am almost glad that Jasper was so obstinate, though I was angry enough with him at the time, and he has been in my black book ever since. You see, my dear, I have always had my own way all my life, and I don't like to be thwarted when I have set my heart on a thing."

Clare thought her very unreasonable to be glad that Jasper would not fall into her views, and yet show coldness toward him because he had firmness to resist them, but she did not dare to say so; and she began to fear that the task of pleasing this autocratic old dame would not be so easy after all.

Finding that Clare did not speak, Mrs. Adair went on:

"Jasper is my godson, and I could not get on without Richard Clifford to manage for me. *He* is another stiff-necked creature who chooses to have a will of his own. I think he ought to feel remorse when he remembers how much trouble he could have saved me, and how obstinate he was in opposing my views. Has any one told you about that unfortunate girl, my granddaughter?"

The question was so abrupt that, for an instant, Clare did not know what reply to make. She flushed under the sharp eyes fixed on her, and Mrs. Adair went on:

"I see that your woman's curiosity has led you to find out all you could about her. I suppose you have

heard that she was drowned in that river flowing so tranquilly out yonder, and that I—I took her death as calmly as if she had not been the last of my descendants."

"Oh no, aunt; no one referred to you at all, or spoke of your grief; that was taken for granted," cried Clare, anxious to vindicate Jasper, though Mrs. Adair did not know that it was from him she had heard the true history of her granddaughter.

In a defiant tone, the old lady went on:

"It is true all the same, whether it was spoken of or not. I shut myself up in my room, but it was not to grieve over the removal of her who had always been a thorn in my side, so much as to conceal from others that I was *not* overwhelmed with affliction at my loss. You see I am frank with you, Clare, because I wish you to understand me."

"I—I am afraid you are getting too much excited, aunt," faltered her unwilling confidant. "You know you were ill last night after talking so long with me."

"If I was, it does not follow that I am going to be ill again to-day," snapped the old lady. "I have got on this theme now, and I am going to tell you the truth about it, that you may take warning, and not try to have your own way, whether it pleases me or not. I like *you*, child, and, as short a time as I have known you, I believe I should feel ingratitude from you more keenly than I did from Laura, though she was my son's child."

"I will do my best to please you, aunt," faltered the poor child, who, in her anxiety to propitiate the arbiter of her parents' fortune, would have promised anything.

"Oh! I dare say you think so now; but wait and see.

Let me tell you about Laura. Her mother was ugly, coarse, commonplace, and what attraction my son, even with his depraved tastes, could have seen in her, I could never comprehend. I always had my doubts as to the legality of the marriage, for the woman came to me after my boy's death, with her child in her arms, and a certificate of marriage which might have been forged; which, from her subsequent career, I believe *was* forged.

"I took the child, for she was all that was left to me of the son my indulgence had ruined. I pensioned the woman, on the condition that she should go away, never seek her daughter again, and resume her maiden name. Of course she consented, for she cared only for the money, which enabled her to live an idle and vicious life.

"Oh! my pride—my pride was dragged in the dust by that woman's conduct! But that was nothing to the humiliations inflicted on me by her child. Laura was the counterpart of her mother. There was not one trait in her that recalled the nobler race from which she sprung. She grew into womanhood a dull, ungainly, cross-grained creature, who mortified and annoyed me at every turn. How was it possible for me to love such a being—to grieve over her death, tragic as it was?"

There was a pause which Clare made no effort to break, painful as it was to her.

"Laura had a mania for travelling—constant change and fine dressing amused her, and I was forced to parade that dullard at every fashionable place of resort, as the heiress of the Beauports. You can never understand what I suffered.

"To cap the climax, she fell in love with a pretty, dandified man, who only cared for the fortune that would

one day be hers. For a long time it went on, in spite of all I could do, and I lived in constant dread of an elopement. As money was Clifton's object, he was finally bought off, and then Laura let me choose a husband for her. The first one I selected refused her flatly, and no wonder, for no man of any taste could have accepted her on any terms. I forgave him, though I was bitterly angry for a time.

"Well, I at last found a man who was a fair match for my heiress, and his mental calibre was not so much above hers as to make him sensitive to Laura's defects. I groaned in spirit, as I felt that I was about to have two wooden heads to deal with in place of one, but I made up my mind to endure it. The end of it all was, that an elopement with the banished lover was at last attempted, and in the storm of that night both were lost—the unprincipled runaway and her worthless lover.

"Do you think I had cause to grieve for her? No—a thousand times *no*. After the first shock was over, I felt as if a horrible incubus had been lifted from my life. Laura had tormented me, mortified me, and defied me in every possible way. It was better to stand alone in the world than to have a greedy, insolent cormorant taking measure of my days, and wondering why God allowed me to linger so long on earth, when she wanted her inheritance to give to a wretched spendthrift, who, in a few years, would have brought to the hammer the fair lands that I love almost as a portion of myself."

Exhausted by the rapidity with which she had spoken, Mrs. Adair sunk back, white and tremulous. She motioned for water, which Clare held to her lips.

"Shall I ring for Mona?" she asked

"No—not till I have finished all I have to say to you. To-day I have the power to control myself, and I shall do it. I have brought you hither, Clare, to take the place of that unhappy girl of whom I have spoken so freely. You suit my taste, for you are charming in person and manner. But I am easily alienated; at times, I am fearfully suspicious. You must be submissive to me; you must resign your fate into my hands, or the great object of my life will be thwarted. Do you consent to this, child?"

"But, aunt, do you think it will be right for me to do that, unless I understand what your wishes with reference to myself may be? My own heart may run counter to them."

"I shall not enlighten you," was the decisive reply. "If I did so, with the perversity of human nature, you would be sure to refuse the fate I have decreed to you. Unless you accept it, you will never be my heiress. I shall, ere long, be able to judge of the probabilities of success to the wish that is now nearest my heart. If you fail me, I will provide for your parents, but the bulk of my estate will go to another heir; to one who, I know, is not calculating on its reversion, and will not, therefore, grudge me every added year of my life."

"Dear aunt, you have just expressed a terrible suspicion, and one to which, for all you own, I would not have myself subjected," said Clare, in a low voice. "I will not again ask you what you wish me to do to secure your favor, though I am more puzzled than I can express by the strange position in which I find myself placed."

Mrs. Adair laughed.

"I think your good angel will guide you aright, my dear. If it does, you will have a magnificent fortune to bestow on the man of your choice. If it does not, you and yours will be poor; for then I shall give your mother but a few thousands, and to you—*nothing*. So you see everything depends on your pleasing me. I would like to make plain to you my wishes, but my experience tells me that it is best not to do so. I leave you freedom of action; use it, and may some good genius guide you in the path I wish you to take."

After a pause, Clare gently said:

"I will pray to God for guidance in the difficult path that lies before me; and I hope—I do earnestly hope, aunt, that I too shall not prove a source of disappointment to you."

"If you do, I shall give you up—send you away, and never ask your parents to come hither, only to behold the paradise their daughter failed to win as her dower. Ring for Mona now; I think we understand each other sufficiently, and I feel tired."

Clare left the room like one in a dream. She went to her own apartment, ensconced herself in the wide window seat, and reflected on all that had been said to her that morning.

Claudia had told her that the dearest wish of Mrs. Adair was, to hold intact the property she valued so highly; that the Cliffords had claims on it, which could not, in justice, be passed over. She was shrewd enough to comprehend that one or the other of them was the man her aunt wished her to marry; for that on her choice of a husband she felt sure depended her future prosperity, and that of those she held dearer than herself.

Jasper had offended the old lady by his conduct toward Miss Coyle, and was evidently out of favor; therefore it could only be his father to whom Mrs. Adair's wishes pointed.

The poor child indignantly repudiated the idea of attempting to win a man of Mr. Clifford's age to think of her as his wife, and she thought the eccentricity of her new-found relative must border on insanity, if she really had planned so unsuitable a marriage.

The price to be paid for this inheritance would be too great, she thought, if she was required to give her youth, her brightness, her freshness of heart and freedom of choice, in exchange for it.

Yet this glimpse of prosperity had made her more anxious than ever to secure to her family the enjoyment of the wealth on which they certainly possessed the strongest claim when its present possessor was removed by death.

"If it was only Jasper now," she thought, with a blush, "it would not be so difficult to fall into the old lady's plans. He admires me—I could see that—and he is the handsomest man I have ever seen. I wonder who it is my aunt will give her money to, if I refuse to do as she wishes? Heigh-ho! it is all a wretched puzzle, so I believe I'll be reckless, and please myself."

CHAPTER XVIII.

NEW FRIENDS.

CLARE'S wilful decision was scarcely arrived at, when Lyra came in to assist her in making her toilet for dinner.

"Mistis sent her love, Miss Clare, an' tole me to tell you that some gemplin from the other side o' the river will be here to dinner, an' she wants you to make yerse'f look as han'some as you kin. You know, Miss, she sots a heap o' store on good looks, an' I'm gwine to try an' make you shine down Miss Claudy. Miss Clawy would be a better name for her, I'm thinkin', for the way she's bin goin' on in her room is nuff to make yer har riz on yer head. Look at mine, whar she's ketched at it, an' pulled it from under my hanksher. She's steriky, and I's been waitin' on her, an' tryin' to git her roun' in time for dinner."

"Is Miss Coyle really ill? She complained of headache, but I did not think much was the matter with her. I think I had better go in and see how she is before I begin to dress."

"Oh, 'tan't nothin' much. She's only in one o' her ways, an' I know she'd ruther you wouldn't trouble yerse'f about her. 'Deed, Miss Clare, her sickness an't o' no 'count; suffin's gone wrong wi' her, that's all."

Clare paused half-way across the floor, and asked, with some displeasure:

"What do you mean, Lyra, by speaking in this way of a friend of my aunt's?"

"*She* an't a friend to nobody but herse'f; now mind I tell you so, Missy. Don't you be lettin' her bamboozle you as she does the mistis. She's sweet as honey to *her*, but half the time she stings the rest on us like the bees what makes it. She's orfle to-day, I tell you, an' you'd better let her be."

"She will hardly be rude to me, I think, and if she is suffering, I ought to go to her."

"She's only had a fit o' the highstrikes, but she's got over 'em now, an' Hebe is helpin' her to dress. You's only got time to do yer own prinkin', Miss Clare, an' mistis 'll be proper vexed if you don't look yer very best to-day."

Clare came back at this, saying:

"I should only be in the way if she is well enough to make a toilet. Is Miss Coyle subject to such attacks as the one you have described?"

"Wall, I s'pose I may say she is. She holds in sometimes for a week or two, when things go smooth-like; but when she's worrited about anything, she allers goes off in a steriky spasm. She kin allers git out'n it though, whenever she chooses. 'Tan't nothin' but temper, Mona says, an' *she* ought to un'stan' cranky people, caze, you see, she's had a mighty onsartin' one to manage ever sense she were a young gal."

"Meaning my aunt, I suppose?"

"In course, Miss. I don't mean nothin' dis'pectful to the mistis, but she's crotchety, an' there an't no use denyin' of it. Ef she wa'n't she'd never ha' took it in her poor ole head to make Marse Jasper marry Miss Claudy. When he wouldn't 'gree nohow, the way she flared up at him was orfle; yet she wouldn't let him go 'way when he wanted to."

"She is fond of him then," Clare said, though she could have bitten her lip afterward for uttering the words.

"'Deed, I think she likes him better 'n anybody in the worl', though she don't sen' for him to her room no longer, like she uset. She'll come roun' agin, arter a while, though. Ef you'll let me, Miss Clare, I'd like to tell you suffin we darkies has been hopin' might come to pass in futur'."

Clare's face dimpled into smiles, and she said:

"Perhaps I can guess it; but that is all nonsense, you know, Lyra."

"'Deed, I think it's mighty good sense, Missy; an' it'll be a heap better 'rangement than that other one 'bout Miss Claudy, that *he* wouldn't hear to. You an't grand-like, like she is, but you's 'nuff sweeter an' wholesomer to live with than she be. Oh, she's a clinker, I tell you."

Clare laughed in spite of herself.

"I don't know what that means, Lyra."

"Don't you? Let me 'splain then. A clinker means a smasher, a clawer, a she-tiger; an' all them Miss Claudy'd be, ef she only got the chance. I 'clar' to Moses, when I's seen her a goin' on sometimes, I wished the lunity people could ha' hearn her, caze they'd been sure to put a strait-jacket on her."

"I declare, Lyra, you almost make me afraid of Miss Coyle. You must exaggerate."

"I dunno what that air big word means, but I an't tellin' you nothin' but what's true as gospil, Miss Clare. As to bein' feared on her, 'twon't hurt you if you is. *She* an't no call to be frien'ly to you, for ever sense she's

bin here, she's bin tryin' to git on the right side o' the mistis, an' we all knows what *that's* for."

"But it was Miss Coyle who induced Mrs. Adair to send for me; therefore, you see, you must be mistaken if you think she has any hostile feeling toward me."

The girl's eyes widened; and after a pause, she said, in an emphatic whisper:

"Then you stan' from under, Missy, for she means mischief to you; sho's you live, she do."

Clare laughed nervously, but she began to think this strange confidence had gone far enough, and she coldly said:

"You must not retail to me the gossip of the servants, Lyra. I wish to live on friendly terms with this young lady, but if I permit you to fill my mind with idle suspicions concerning her, it will be impossible for me to do that. At what hour is dinner served here?"

"At four o'clock, Miss; you has plenty o' time to make yerse'f look as killin' as you kin. I axes yer pardon for sayin' one word more, Miss Clare; but mind, I tell you, the more you 'spicions Miss Claudy, the better for you."

"There, that will do; now help me to make my toilet, and do not refer to Miss Coyle again."

"I'll 'gree to be mum-chance nuff, Missy, if you'll only 'member what I *has* said. 'Tan't no use talkin' when you's sot agin believin'; but you'll fine out some day that she an't no frien' o' your'n, when it'll be too late, mebbe. I'm mighty glad, anyhow, that the mistis sent me to wait on you, an' Hebe on her."

By way of changing the topic that so deeply interested her loquacious maid, Clare said:

"What singular names you all have! Lyra, Mona and Hebe, and the dining-room servant is called Castor. I could almost fancy that I have been suddenly translated to Mount Olympus."

The girl showed all her shining teeth as she replied:

"Mistis named us all out'n her po'try books. *She* don't like nothin' that an't grand-like."

Accustomed from childhood to the familiarity of family servants, the freedom with which Lyra spoke to her did not seem out of place to Clare. While dressing, she ruminated on the warning the words of the girl were intended to convey, but she could not believe that any evil could reach her, protected as she was by her aunt, and with both Mr. Clifford and Jasper to watch over her.

That both father and son mistrusted Miss Coyle, and kept over her a strict surveillance, she had reason to believe; then why should she trouble her young head as to her schemes? She hated to think evil of any one; her sunny and unsuspecting temper recoiled from harboring dark and secret thoughts concerning those with whom she was daily thrown into companionship, and with the characteristic heedlessness of youth Clare put far from her the disagreeable thoughts Lyra's words had evoked. When her toilet was completed, she smiled herself at the fair, fresh image reflected back to her from the large mirror, and Lyra was in raptures. The blue silk was exquisitely becoming. Around the low boddice fell fine black lace, and the short sleeves were trimmed with the same; on the latter and upon her breast were knots of rose-colored ribbon, which harmonized with the pink coral her aunt had given her.

"Thar! I think ye can hold yer own agin all de worl', Miss Clare, let alone that steriky gal as wants to git ahead on you."

Severe in youthful dignity, her young lady turned to her, and said:

"This must be the last time that you speak to me so disrespectfully of Miss Coyle. Remember, Lyra, or I shall ask my aunt to transfer Hebe to my service, and let you take her place near that young lady."

Lyra seemed quite taken aback by this address, and she looked much crestfallen as she said, in a doleful tone:

"I 'clar' to Moses, I an't said nuffin but was for yer good, Miss Clare. I'll bite my tongue off sooner 'n I'll 'fend that way agin, if I'm to be sont to wait on that ere—my gracious! thar, I am doin' of it agin!"

Clare shook her finger at her, laughing in spite of her efforts to be grave, and flitted from the room, as sweet a vision of youth and loveliness as ever gladdened the heart of man.

Claudia was in the hall below, looking as calm and inscrutable as a marble sphinx; she was dressed with perfect taste, and was beautiful as Cleopatra herself in the days when her lover thought a world well lost for her sake.

As she looked at her Clare almost doubted the statement so lately made to her by Lyra. It seemed impossible that this stately, self-poised woman could so lately have given the rein to her naturally violent temper, and yet show no visible trace of the agitation through which she had passed.

If Lyra's person had not borne proof of the truth of

her statements Clare would have doubted it; but the girl's hair was torn from beneath her handkerchief, and her neck bore several scratches inflicted by the polished filbert nails of the hand which now held a bouquet of rare flowers, while she commented on their beauty to a small young man who stood beside her.

His figure was extremely slender, but straight as an arrow, and his carriage, naturally stiff, had acquired little grace or ease by intercourse with society. His complexion was sallow, his features sharply cut, and his pale, greenish gray eyes were set beneath dust-colored eyebrows. An immense quantity of hair of the same hue stood out from his head, as if he had recently been tearing it, and his long neck was bare *à la* Byron.

He was dressed in the extreme of fashion, and carried in his hand a scented handkerchief, fine and white enough for a lady's use.

As Clare tripped down the winding stairs he threw himself into an attitude, and exclaimed in blank verse of his own composition:

"A goddess from the heights descends,
Fair as Aurora in the early dawn,
And scatters living light from eyes
That scintillate sweet meaning.

Dear Miss Coyle, I am charmed, enraptured with this new divinity. I feel that my heart is already gone."

Claudia laughed musically.

"You are too susceptible, Mr. Brooke. Every new face that has any claims to prettiness produces a tumultuous sensation in the vital organ you call your heart. If you were only capable of a genuine passion the field is open to you here. Mrs. Adair wishes her heiress to

make a suitable choice, and of course *you*, with your position and fortune, may enter the lists."

He bowed, with his hand upon his heart, and said:

"I never before valued the gifts of fortune at their true worth. You open paradise to me, Miss Coyle, and I think I shall profit by your suggestion. There is something divine in love at first sight, and I am sure I feel it for the fair vision that approaches."

By this time Clare had gained the floor, and she came forward, and was duly presented to Mr. Brooke, the son of a retired physician who had made a large fortune. He resided on the opposite side of the river, and was an old and esteemed friend of Mrs. Adair.

Clare repressed the inclination to smile at the fantastic obeisance the young man made, and said to Claudia:

"I hope I have not kept you waiting on me. I did not know you had come down."

"I have been watching for you for ten minutes," was the reply. "But there is yet time for you to make your appearance in the drawing-room before dinner is announced. Mrs. Adair is expecting you there."

The three entered the large apartment, and Clare blushed to see her figure reflected from every side by the numerous mirrors upon its walls as she moved forward to the farther end, where her aunt was seated in a large velvet-covered chair, talking gayly with a tall, gray-haired man who stood beside her. He had a melancholy, cadaverous face and deep sunken gray eyes, from which all light and joy seemed long since to have departed.

A more lugubrious-looking man could hardly have been found, and when Mrs. Adair named him to her niece as Dr. Brooke, he put out a long, claw-like hand, and, in a deep voice that had little vibration, said:

"I am most happy to make your acquaintance, Miss Desmond. I have met with your father, and I liked him."

Mrs. Adair here broke in:

"Doctor, please give me your arm to the dining-room; there is Castor bowing at the door, and that is the signal for dinner. Here come Mr. Clifford and Jasper just in time."

The two gentlemen entered, shook hands with the doctor and his son, and then Mr. Clifford drew Clare's hand beneath his arm, leaving the two young men to escort Miss Coyle.

She hardly liked being appropriated in this way, and wondered a little resentfully if Mr. Clifford was thus early asserting the claim upon her which Mrs. Adair's favor gave him. But she was a little consoled when they took their places at the table. Mr. Clifford sat opposite to the mistress of the house, and was too much engaged in carving to give her much attention for a time, though he placed her on his right hand. Jasper deserted the fair Claudia, and took his seat beside her; Miss Coyle sat between the two guests, well pleased to monopolize the attention of the younger man, while the doctor played the agreeable, as far as he could, to the old lady.

The dinner was elegantly served, but it consisted of but three courses, as the fashion of stupefying the senses and ruining the digestion, by partaking of food which the appetite does not crave, had not yet come in. Claret was served with the meats, and old Madeira with the dessert, and the gentlemen left the table with the ladies when the repast was ended.

Around the board the conversation became general

when the fruits and ices were put upon the table, and Clare found herself talking with a degree of ease and fluency that surprised herself, when she remembered how little any of the company was known to her.

Both Jasper and Mr. Clifford took pains to draw her out, and she felt grateful to them for the attentions they lavished upon her. Just before they arose from the table, Jasper said to her, in a low tone:

"You have been under inspection, Miss Desmond, and I think the verdict is favorable. That grim old man opposite is my aunt's oracle, and he was asked here to-day to pass judgment upon you. That is why I took my place beside you. I wished to give you such poor assistance as I could render, to enable you to pass the ordeal with flying colors. I think you have proved a success."

She flashed a lightning glance into his eyes, and saucily said:

"Then I will claim you for my ally on all occasions when I need help. You shall be my *preux chevalier*, and wear my colors."

She took from one of the flower vases with which the table was decorated a lovely blush rose, and held it toward him. Jasper accepted it, and dreamily regarding her, asked:

"Don't you think such a compact will be rather dangerous to me, and to—to—somebody else?"

Clare looked very innocent, as she replied:

"Not unless we choose to run into danger with our eyes open. I want a friend beneath this roof, and I—yes, I think I can trust you, after what you said to me this morning."

"You may trust me indeed; only, you see, it might be dangerous to trust myself; and I am no longer in the good graces of the person it is most important to you to please."

Clare made a wilful little grimace, and said, as they walked together toward the drawing-room:

"I will try to make that person love me, for I feel grateful to her; but the way to do that is not to submit to unreasonable caprices. I am going to be true to myself, and if she likes me it will be well; if not—"

She paused, and changed color slightly.

After a brief silence, Jasper said:

"That will probably be your best course. I cannot help thinking that your intuitions are so true and good, that they will guide you aright. Remember always, that you have two staunch friends near you, in my father and myself."

At the reference to Mr. Clifford her brow contracted slightly, and she almost impatiently replied:

"I cannot speak as freely to an elderly man like your father, as I can to one nearer my own age. I cannot help standing a little in awe of him."

Jasper regarded her with a penetrating glance; he impressively said:

"You must not be afraid of the best friend you can claim here, Miss Desmond. Above all, have perfect faith in his honor and integrity of purpose."

Before Clare could reply they entered the drawing-room, and Brooke came to her side, while Claudia, at the solicitation of the doctor, seated herself at the piano, and played wild German music for him, for which he had a passion.

Clare had in her that spice of coquetry which is inherent in pretty, bright women, and she thought it no harm to amuse herself with the absurdities of her new acquaintance. Besides, she was flattered by Walter Brooke's evident admiration, when a royal queen of beauty like Claudia Coyle was near. She had a keen memory, had read any quantity of poetry since her school-days ended, and she could return quotation for quotation with an aptness that surprised and enchanted her new admirer. Jasper withdrew himself into a recess of one of the windows, but he furtively watched this young girl, who seemed to him a new revelation of feminine grace and loveliness. With a half sigh, he thought:

"If she had only come hither first, before that coiling serpent had time to wind herself about my aunt, how easy it would have been for me to fall into her plans. It is too late now; I have lost favor with her, and any demonstration of interest on my part would ruin this poor child."

The sharp voice of the old lady aroused him from his reverie.

"Come here, Jasper, and sit beside me. I wish to ask you a question."

Jasper took the seat she indicated, which had just been vacated by his father, who, with a nod and smile to him, went out of the room.

"Well, aunt, I am ready to answer your question," he said, as the old lady leaned back, apparently forgetful of what she had said.

"Oh—ah—yes; I was thinking of something else. What do you think of my new heiress?"

"If you mean Miss Desmond, I think her a very attractive person."

"Hum!—brief enough; 'damning with faint praise,' as somebody strongly said. Don't you think that she and Walter Brooke would make a suitable match?"

Jasper coldly replied:

"I scarcely think you will be more fortunate in match-making in this instance, than you were in another you wot of, aunt, if you think that shallow fop yonder will be successful with Miss Desmond."

This reply irritated Mrs. Adair, and she snapped:

"Why not, pray? *My* wishes will have more weight with her than they had with an ungrateful boy I could name. She has more at stake than he had, and therefore will be more pliable in my hands."

"Yes, she is a woman, and therefore more dependent, and she has others to think of besides herself. But, my dear aunt, for that very reason you should allow her perfect freedom of choice."

"That is what I intend to do; but if she does not choose one to please me, back she goes, and she will get nothing from me. When she and you have both ruined yourselves, perhaps you will take it in your wise heads to fall in love with and console each other. Who knows? As old Gummidge says, 'Everything goes by contraries.'"

Jasper was at a loss to understand this inconsistent speech. He only said:

"Since I have been so unfortunate as to offend you irrevocably, I can only hope that this young lady will be more tractable than myself. If she consults her interests, she certainly will."

"Hum! What a precise young man you are, Jasper. I have no patience with people who are blind to—to the wishes of those who are interested in them."

"I do not understand you, aunt."

Mrs. Adair laughed harshly:

"A month or two hence, perhaps, I shall be more easily comprehended. Here comes the doctor to say that they are going."

Dr. Brooke, after thanking Claudia formally for the pleasure she had given him, came toward the lady of the house, and solemnly said:

"I dare not expose myself to the night air on the water, and therefore I must take my leave, dear madam, though inclination would detain me here many hours yet, if I could consult it alone."

"*Must* you go, dear friend? Since it is so, pray tell me what impression my niece has made on you. Your opinion has great weight with me, you know."

"I think her charming. Young, impressible and easily molded, you will have no trouble in guiding her as you wish. I have watched her, and I think she will be a comfort to you, and a blessing."

"Oh, I hope so—I hope so; for I have suffered much through the wilfulness of the young people I have had to deal with."

The doctor and his son took their leave, promising to repeat the visit very soon, and the old lady retired to her room as soon as they were gone.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE BROOKE FAMILY.

A BOAT with an awning and cushioned seats awaited Dr. Brooke and his son in a little cove at the lower end of the lawn. A stalwart negro man was in charge of it, and the two gentlemen seated themselves, and conversed in low tones.

"You seemed much pleased with the new favorite, Walter."

"Pleased! I am ages gone in love with her already. Such taste, such fondness for my favorite authors, I scarcely expected to find in so young a girl. She and I perfectly agree in our estimate of Byron, Scott and the Lake poets."

"And of course you found her adorable," replied the elder man, with a slight tinge of cynicism in his tone. "The question is, how long will the impression last? for you were quite as enthusiastic about Claudia Coyle, when you first made her acquaintance."

"That is true; for who could help bowing down before so magnificent a woman? For a whole month I was bewitched by that fascinating being, and it seems to me that was a long time to devote to one woman, when there are so many charming creatures to claim one's attention."

The doctor made a gesture of impatience:

"You are incorrigible, Walter; but this is not a question of mere admiration. With me it means marriage, and settling down to be constant to one woman. I wish you to marry, as you have long known, and Miss Des-

mond is suited to you in every respect. I hardly think Mrs. Adair will throw *her* over, and she could not find a better match for her heiress than you would be."

"I don't know about that. Mrs. Adair is a strange old woman, and if she thought any one was speculating on the chances of getting her money, she'd be very apt to throw them over, as you express it. It is my belief, that if Miss Coyle had not shown too great a willingness to be influenced by her, she would have had no rival brought to Riverdale. It is very difficult to deal with a jealous old woman almost in her dotage, and I hardly think Mrs. Adair treated Claudia fairly."

"What claims had that handsome adventuress upon her?" asked his father, sternly. "Mrs. Adair is by no means in her dotage; she is a clear-headed woman, and very rightly decided that among her own kindred she could find one better deserving of her favors than Claudia Coyle. The young girl she has brought here is more likely to retain her place in her aunt's good graces than a more artful and experienced person."

"You may be right, sir; but I think the Cliffords will get the better of all who come to Riverdale with the hope of rivalling *them* with the old dame."

"So you think *that*, do you?" was the sarcastic reply. "Now *I* happen to know that Dick Clifford could have got the whole by marrying Laura Adair, and he refused her. Jasper, in like manner, could have been the winner, if he had listened to the old lady's proposal to take Claudia, and, with her, the reversion of the estate."

"How did you find that out? It sounds incredible."

"Yet it is perfectly true; and I heard it from Mrs. Adair herself. She has always confided her troubles to me; but of course I tell you this in confidence."

"If that is true, then Clare Desmond is designed for either the father or the son. I may flirt with her as much as I please, and it will not alter her destiny."

"Do not jump to conclusions so rapidly. Mr. Clifford is too old to make a fool of himself with a wife of seventeen; and Jasper has offended the old lady so deeply by his contumacy with regard to Claudia, that even if the young people fell in love with each other, I believe she would put her veto on such a marriage."

"And yet you declare she is not in her dotage. If she took a fancy to make a match between Jasper and Claudia when she was infatuated with the latter, would it not be far better to make one between him and Clare?"

"I thought you were in love with the young lady yourself?" said the doctor, dryly.

Walter shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, in my way, but it's only skin deep. I am not going to make a fool of myself by asking any girl to marry me, unless I am perfectly sure of the ground I stand on. Mrs. Adair may pretend to be confidential with you, but she has not told you what she has most at heart—a union between her godson and her heiress. I saw her smile complacently more than once at dinner when the two seemed interested in what they were saying to each other. Depend upon it, *pater*, the old woman has found out that the best way to make young people fall in love with each other is to make a show of opposition."

"I cannot agree with you, and if you would only be in earnest I think your chance of success would be very good. For a long time I have not seen a girl I approve of as entirely as I do of Miss Desmond."

"Very well, then; I am content to take my chances. I can 'take opportunity by the forelock,' and have a nice time flirting with that pretty creature, till I find out what Mrs. Adair's views for her young relation really are. I am not a marrying man, *pater*, but if the old lady would come down handsomely, and the young one was dreadfully in love with me, I can't say but I might be tempted to the folly you wish me to perpetrate."

"You will never be serious, Walter. I don't know where you get your lightness of nature from; you are not like your sainted mother, and still less do you resemble me. To me life has been almost a tragedy; to you it is simply a farce."

"Better the last than the first, father. 'Man struts his little hour upon the stage;' of course the immortal bard meant the comic stage, for we cannot rant through life as the tragic hero does. 'Variety's the spice of life,' and I've found it true so far as women are concerned. Don't ask me to devote myself exclusively to one as long as the 'Cynthia of the minute' has such charms for me."

"You are an absurd coxcomb!" said his father, irritably; "and it is but time wasted in trying to induce you to act like a sensible man. Here we are at the landing, and I am glad of it, for I am sick of you and your folly."

The boat grounded, and the two got out, and the oarsman chained the light craft up under a shelter erected for the purpose.

On the rising ground, a few hundred yards from the landing, stood one of those irregular houses, built at different times, and forming an incongruous whole, but

often more agreeable to live in than more pretentious abodes. A piazza extended the whole length of the front, and there was a wealth of shade around it most welcome at that season of the year.

Dr. Brooke was a widower, with this only son and a daughter three years older than Walter. Judith kept house for him, and cared for little beyond her own home.

Dr. Brooke had accumulated a handsome fortune in his profession, and at sixty he retired to this country place, which was bequeathed to him by a brother, to whose large estate he also fell heir.

At the age of thirty-five he had married a lady to whom he had been many years engaged. She had no fortune, and until success in his profession was secured, her family would not permit her to give him her hand.

A man of deep, concentrated nature, with him to love once was to love forever, and when, at the end of the fifth year of their union, his wife died, he was inconsolable; he had never thought of giving her a successor, and it was whispered that he always slept with a small marble bust of the deceased Mrs. Brooke near his pillow. He invoked her image on all occasions, and seemed ever to be conscious of her presence near him.

As Mrs. Brooke had not been beautiful, and the doctor was a hard, dry-looking man, who had not the slightest sense of the ridiculous, the comments of the outside world upon the scenes sometimes witnessed in his drawing-room were often more amusing than complimentary to the actors in them.

He had a literary mania too, and held soirees at his house, whenever a person of any pretensions to distinc-

tion in that line chanced to come into the neighborhood.

As the two gentlemen approached the house, a tall, slender woman of twenty-eight, with an angular figure, and a quantity of unmanageable-looking hair, arose from the low rocking-chair on which she had been seated, and came forward with something like animation in her light blue eyes.

"Oh! papa, I have something to tell you that I know will delight you. Who do you think has come to visit Mrs. Simpson? Some one you will be charmed to meet again."

"But, my dear, from that vague description how can I guess? There are so many old friends I should be glad to meet once more before this earthly pilgrimage ends, and Mrs. Simpson has so many visitors in the summer."

"But one—one above all was our delight, when she shone upon us as the incarnation of genius."

"Ye gods! not—not Aspasia!" cried Walter, before his father could speak, but there was very little elation in the tone of his voice.

The saturnine face of the doctor lighted up.

"Is it—is it really Mrs. Harte? It will indeed be a great pleasure to me to meet a lady who combines in herself so many attractions."

"Yes, papa, it is Aspasia Harte, and she has been here to-day. I invited her to a soiree next week, and she accepted, on the condition that you and Walter should call to see her before that time."

Dr. Brooke's face became less radiant.

"I seldom call on ladies, as you know, but Walter will of course pay his respects to her without delay."

Walter shrugged his shoulders, and made a light grimace; but before he could reply, Judith said:

"Indeed, papa, Aspasia will expect that courtesy from you too. She knows you were at Mrs. Adair's to-day."

"That is very different. Mrs. Adair is one of the oldest friends I have in the world, and your fascinating friend must be satisfied with the homage of my son. I am no longer 'a squire of dames.'"

"I will take on myself all the courtesy business," said Walter, rather brusquely; "so you may hold yourself absolved from *that* bore."

"Walter!"

Both voices simultaneously pronounced his name in accents of astonishment and rebuke, and after an expressive pause Judith said, in mocking tones:

"I thought you were devoted to Aspasia Harte—that you looked on her as something almost superhuman."

"Well, I admit that I was humbugged by her, for she is an awful humbug. That poetry she declaimed as her own I found afterward in an old magazine at Mrs. Adair's that was published thirty years ago. Claudia Coyle brought it to my notice, for you know she and the fair Aspasia did not affiliate."

"Of course not: one is a schemer, and the other is 'open as day to melting charity.' I am not an admirer of Miss Coyle, you know."

"Nor am I particularly, since I have seen her rival; *there* is a girl after your own heart, Judith, full of life, poetry and feeling. - Miss Desmond is indeed a *rara avis*."

"Yes, I know; every new goose is a swan with you. Not that I mean to say that Miss Desmond is a goose,

though somebody else I could name might merit that name."

"Thank you. I don't think the simile holds good; for those feathered bipeds are not like me, 'to one thing constant never.' I had Aspasia on the brain last year; this one, I am destined to be in as bad a way about our charming young neighbor."

Judith tossed her head, and her hair fell down in a shower around her plain but not unattractive face. She knew she was not handsome, and cared very little about it; for she had good sense enough to know that cleverness and money could make amends for that deficiency. One peculiarity about her hair was, that it was always falling down, and she whisked it up in so rapid a manner that the ends were always sticking out, as if resentful of and determined to evade the confinement of the comb.

While this sparring went on between herself and her brother, Dr. Brooke stalked on to the house, thinking of the pretty widow whose advent had been announced.

When he was out of hearing, Walter asked:

"Do you know what has brought Aspasia back to this neighborhood? Like a hawk, she flies straight to her quarry, and the *pater* is the prey she is after now. How could you be so absurd as to rejoice in her advent?"

"Nonsense! it is *you* she admires, and *pater* is old enough to be her father."

"That does not signify; she is after him, I tell you, and she'll take him if she can get him."

"She may if she can drag his heart out of the marble mausoleum in which our mother lies. *He* is quite safe from her flatteries and cajoleries. I see through Aspasia as plainly as you do, but she is great fun to me; and be-

sides, I think she has some good in her, with all her pretension."

"Do you know, Judith, that I have doubts about those pretty stories she read to us with so much pathos, and declared to be her own composition?"

"I cannot agree with you there, for she is certainly a woman of genius, though she may not write poetry. If the idol is dethroned, pray don't try to trample it in the dust, Walter. That is hardly fair."

"I won't unless she comes it to strong over the *pater*. I sha'n't submit to have him bamboozled by a pretty woman after he has passed the age of discretion. You know, or you have heard, that there is no fool like an old fool."

"Respectful! You forget what the Bible says about calling a brother such a name, or you would be more careful about applying it to our father."

The head of the speaker was tossed again, with very much the action of a spirited Arabian, and down came the hair, to be flirled up in the same summary manner as before.

"Oh, he is wise enough, as far as that goes, and you put rather a strong interpretation on my words. The old man bores me about marrying, but I think he is sound in mind for all that. If he thinks a matrimonial yoke good for me, why sha'n't a bewitching widow put it in his head that it will be equally good for him?"

"Walter, how can you even hint such a thing, when you know that mamma's bust is always kept on his writing-table; that he sleeps with it near his pillow, and holds constant communion with her spirit. You know with what solemnity he often repeats to us the counsels he believes he receives from her."

"He reads Swedenborgian books, and addles his brains, that is all. He is sensible enough on every other subject except that, and marrying *me* off. I'll give him *carte blanche* for the first, though, if he will let me alone about the last."

"You are always falling in love; then why not marry?"

"*Why?* Did you never go through a garden of beautiful roses, culling each one you thought perfection, and then casting it away as something more attractive caught your fancy? That is just my case about women. Each, in her turn, is the most charming of her sex till another comes on the carpet. It is my failing; but I am going to try to fix my heart on this new charmer, and be constant to her. I have promised to make love to her in earnest, and I am going to try it."

"It is Miss Desmond, of course, who is to fix your wandering fancies. I think old Goody might have asked me to be of your party to-day."

"Think of speaking of that aristocratic old dame as Goody! You would be banished forever from the paradise of Riverdale, if Mrs. Adair even suspected such lack of respect. Claudia don't particularly like you, you know, and *she* holds her own there yet."

Judith made an expressive grimace.

"For the present we will let Miss Coyle pass. Was my father really so much taken with the new favorite that he urged you to pay your court to her?"

"He insists that I can marry her, and if I can, I *must*. A fine old autocrat, isn't he, to dispose of me in so summary a manner?"

"What's the value of an autocrat who doesn't enforce

his decrees? To the end, you will be fickle as a butterfly, and Miss Desmond will enchain you no longer than another fair one comes along to claim your allegiance. There is the bell for supper, and *pater* doesn't like to be kept waiting."

The two walked the length of the piazza, and at the farthest end passed through a door opening into a large square room panelled with oak, but well lighted by four large windows, opening on one side toward the river, and on the other upon a large, well-kept flower garden.

The furniture was plain and old-fashioned, and the Brussels carpet on the floor was so worn and faded that nearly all the bright coloring had disappeared. But the sideboard was covered with silver ware, kept with that extreme care on which a Virginia housewife of other days prided herself.

The room, with all its belongings, had an antique look, and the old doctor, with his thin, strongly-marked face and silvery hair, harmonized with his surroundings. He was one of those men who care very little for outward show, though his establishment was conducted on the most liberal scale, and all dependent upon him had every necessary comfort.

Dr. Brooke hated change. The things he had become accustomed to he preferred to newer and more fashionable articles, and his children loved and respected him so much that they sacrificed their own wishes sooner than cause him the slightest annoyance.

The supper-table was very neatly spread, the food deliciously prepared, and after asking a blessing, the three seated themselves and partook of it, talking cheer-

fully, and waited on by a neat-handed negress with an immense turban upon her head.

Toward the close of the meal, Judith asked :

"Who shall we invite to the soiree, papa? Aspasia is in high feather, and I think she would like to make a display. She tells me she has some new pieces to read that have not appeared in print."

"Ah-h ! I only hope that is true," muttered Walter.

Judith gave him an indignant glance, and Dr. Brooke slowly said :

"Then we must have an appreciative audience. Ask such people as care for displays of that kind, and, if possible, exclude those giggling girls who made themselves so absurd at the last one."

"But that is impossible, papa, for two of them are the Miss Simpsons ; and as Mrs. Harte is visiting there, we cannot exclude the young ladies."

"True enough ; but girls of fifteen and sixteen are, as a rule, great nuisances, unless they have been extremely well brought up. Mrs. Simpson allows her young people too much latitude. It was not so in my day."

"I suppose not, *pater*, but things have changed since then. Shall I ask the family from Riverdale?"

"Of course, I wish you to pay particular attention to Miss Desmond. *She* is a young girl too, but a quiet, lady-like person, with much cultivation. She will appreciate our fair authoress."

"Very well, sir ; I will go over to-morrow, and ask them for next Thursday week. I hope I shall like this young lady better than Miss Coyle."

"Of course you will, for she is a person easily understood. I have ulterior views concerning Miss Desmond,

which will take shape after I have consulted my sainted oracle."

Judith slightly elevated her eyebrows, and exchanged a significant glance with her brother, as they arose from the table.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SYMPOSIUM.

MISS BROOKE duly made her call and the invitation was accepted by the three younger people, though Mrs. Adair and Mr. Clifford declined. The old lady rarely left home, and such entertainments were not to Mr. Clifford's taste.

Judith decided in her own mind that she should like Clare Desmond on a further acquaintance, and she told her brother he would be very difficult to please if this attractive girl did not win him to love her at once, and forever.

During this call, Clare had flirted with Walter, quite unconscious that a person of his stamp could have any serious intentions with regard to herself. With the giddiness of her age, she thought it very good fun to have so sentimental an adorer, who, amid his finest speeches, was evidently thinking more of the effect he produced, than of the lady to whom they were addressed.

The evil use to which her thoughtlessness was to be put, could never have suggested itself to a candid, confiding nature like hers, and Clare made herself merry over the compliments of Walter Brooke, when she and

Claudia were left together after the departure of their visitors; the latter all the time speculating in her own mind as to the possibility of entangling Clare with her new admirer, till she would be justified in asserting to Mrs. Adair that her darling project of bringing about a union between Jasper and her new protégé had little prospect of success.

Then Mrs. Adair would show how cold, how hard she could be, and in her despair, the poor girl would turn to her love potion as the only means of bringing back the old feeling of regard her aunt had evidently conceived for her.

That she would succeed, Claudia had no doubt, for Clare Desmond, sweet and lovable as she was, was by no means a pattern young lady. She had great fondness for admiration, love of amusement, and a degree of thoughtless confidence in others, which peculiarly fitted her to be ensnared by a more crafty person.

To all outward appearance, Claudia was the kindest and most considerate of friends, and in spite of all Clare had been told, she found it difficult to believe her false and scheming.

In the course of the next ten days Mrs. Adair gave two large dinner parties, at which her niece was presented to her guests, and great was the satisfaction of the old lady at the almost unanimous verdict that her future heiress was charming, and well fitted to fill the position to which she had elevated her.

Invitations were accepted in return, and a bevy of gay young people made the neighborhood delightful to the new debutant. As the recognized heiress to one of the best estates in the county, and the representative of an

old and highly respected family, Clare found herself an object of attention and interest wherever she appeared.

This life, apparently so free from care, so brilliant on the surface, possessed great charms for her, and she was just at the age to take "all the goods the gods provide," without thinking of or caring for the serpent whose trail, according to the poet, is over them all.

Always charmingly dressed, for her aunt required especial attention to her toilet, admired, sought after, flattered even more than she cared to be, Clare had as utterly cast the episode of John Spiers from her thoughts as if such a person had never existed. That he would not dare to seek her here she was well aware, and she cast all thought of him away, as something too disagreeable to be remembered. How would she have shrunk and trembled if she had known that his influence was constantly around her—that every action of her life only tended to place her more completely in his power!

She had written long letters to her parents describing her new-found relative, and the lovely home in which she was made so much of; and the answers came, bringing cheerful accounts of affairs at Desmonia. But the intelligence which gave Clare the most satisfaction was, that John Spiers had left Portsmouth, and his father stated that he had gone away on another long voyage.

"It was true enough that he had left the town, but not for South America, as was supposed. He was concealed not many miles from Riverdale, and at night Claudia often met him in the grounds, though she was careful to avoid the side of the house from which the windows of Clare's apartment opened.

He was very impatient at the delay in carrying out

their plans, though he knew that time must be allowed to bring Clare into the snare prepared for her. Claudia assured him that all was going on as well as possible for their interests. That their young victim had a serious flirtation on her hands with Walter Brooke, while at the same time she and Jasper seemed unable to withstand the mutual attraction that drew them together. That, too, should be made to play into their hands when the right time came; and the two revelled in the thought that by the time autumn began to put on its livery, the fate of the unfortunate girl would be at their mercy.

Thrown together every day, it was quite true that Jasper and Clare had both found out that they cared more for each other's society than for that of any one else.

As Mr. Clifford's paternal manner to her had not changed, she had decided that it was not the elder man her aunt wished her to marry, and all her confidence in Mr. Clifford returned when she saw how unconscious he was of the dread that had crept into her own mind.

Clare's heart leaped at the thought that, if not the father, it must be the son who was destined by Mrs. Adair for her future husband, and impressed with this belief, she used such innocent coquetry as her intuition told her would be most irresistible to the man she wished to captivate.

She succeeded better than she believed, for Jasper, much in love with her as he speedily became, would not betray his passion, lest it might injure her interests with her aunt. He knew himself to be out of favor, yet he could not help thinking Mrs. Adair's course very singular, for she placed Clare under his protection whenever

she went from home, and always gave him the injunction to trust her with no one else.

If she had not hitherto proved herself capricious and difficult to understand, Jasper would have admitted the delicious thought that his aunt meant to give himself and Clare opportunities for falling in love with each other; but he feared to act on this supposition, lest it might prove the ruin of the girl he loved. He thought he kept his secret well, but the keen eyes of Claudia Coyle were upon him, and she understood the symptoms too well to be deceived.

Affairs were in this condition when the evening of the soiree at Dr. Brooke's arrived.

Walter had been constant in his devotions to the new object of attraction, and to pique Jasper, Clare had unconsciously given him a degree of encouragement which led lookers-on to believe that young Brooke was to prove the successful candidate for the favor of the fair heiress.

The evening was bright and balmy; the flaming hues of sunset were reflected in the placid stream, as the boat containing Jasper and the two girls was rowed by two young negroes in fanciful linen costumes trimmed with blue, toward the landing at Brookover.

Several other barges with gay-colored awnings were already under the shelter of the boat-house, and Clare gleefully said:

"There is going to be quite a party. I am glad of that. Perhaps the doctor will let us dance, after the literary part of the entertainment is over."

"My dear," said Claudia, "Dr. Brooke would think the world about to come to an end, if any one attempted to dance in his house. Everything is staid, solemn and

proper, and I warn you to be on your good behavior. He would expect that spiritual wife of his to come down in the midst of the revellers, if they attempted to skip about his floors to the sound of music."

"Indeed I believe the doctor would enjoy it, for I think he is one of the nicest old gentlemen I ever saw, and he likes to see young people happy. Is it really true that he talks with his dead wife?"

"He *says* he does, and of course no one is rude enough to contradict him. There is a chair in his room in which no one is allowed to sit; it is sacred to his wife, and he declares that he can see her in it when she comes to confer with him, as she always does at his summons."

"I wonder if such a thing can be possible," said Clare meditatively. "Dr. Brooke seems a sensible man, and it is difficult to believe that he has imagination enough to become the victim of an illusion. What do you think, Mr. Clifford?"

Jasper started at the sound of his name, and in some embarrassment, said:

"Pardon me; but I was not attending to the conversation. Will you tell me again what it is that you require my opinion about?"

"Oh, I never repeat," she answered, with a saucy smile. "The pearls that drop from my lips are too precious to be wasted in so prodigal a manner."

Claudia laughed, and said:

"As my utterances are not so valuable, I will enlighten you, Jasper. Do you believe in the reality of Dr. Brooke's hallucination regarding his deceased wife?"

"I find it difficult to answer that question, but I am certain that the doctor states nothing that *he* does not

believe strictly true. Like many men of his profession, he inclined to materialism; as that belief was terrible to him after the loss of his wife, he sought for some tangible assurance that with death all does not end for us. He sought this everywhere, and finally made up his mind that he had discovered it in the writings of Swedenborg. He is consoled by the imaginary presence of his wife, but what reality the phantom shape may have, I am not prepared to say."

"He makes himself very absurd about the wife who has been dead and gone more than twenty years," said Claudia, hardly. "I fancy that Mrs. Harte would not object to become Mrs. Brooke number two, from something I saw last summer when she was here; if she chooses, I think she will put to rout the bust, the shade, and the curtained picture. But I must not tell Clare about that; it would forestall half the amusement of the evening."

Before Clare could speak, the boat came up to the landing, and the voice of Walter Brooke hailed them, as he ran down the slope to meet them.

"Well come at last," he cried out, "for I have been watching for you for the last hour. The evening is so beautiful, that I suppose one must excuse you for dawdling over the water as you have done."

"Has the queen of the revels arrived?" asked Clare, as she gave him her hand and sprang on shore.

"Not the one crowned with bays, but the queen of love and beauty stands before me now," was the reply.

Clare laughed and blushed at this open flattery, but she was not displeased that Jasper should hear it. She permitted Brooke to draw her hand under his arm, and

they walked toward the house chatting gayly together, while Claudia and Jasper followed them; she radiant, and triumphant over the success she anticipated in her nefarious plans; he jealous, and angry at the air of possession with which Walter drew Clare to his side.

"She cannot be in earnest," he thought, "for she gives me such sweet looks and smiles as tempt me every day to say something to her that would be the ruin of both her and myself. Oh, if she were alone in the world; if others were not interested in her success with the old lady, I would speak all that is in my heart, and, if she consented, brave the world with her, winning competence for her sake. It is two weeks to-day since she came to Riverdale; and it seemed to me, from the first hour of meeting, that a portion of my very self had come to me, to remain beside me forever. My aunt is cruel, or she would take me into favor again, and give Clare to me as my wife, in place of this serpent woman gliding along beside me, that she was lately so anxious for me to marry. Oh, life! oh, fate! thou art terrible enigmas to solve."

When he had wrought himself up to this pitch, Claudia scornfully said:

"I am sorry that I am compelled to play the part of *Mademoiselle De Trop*, Jasper. I did not assume it willingly, yet you look as black as a thunder-cloud because I am left to you."

"Pardon me, Claudia," he hastily replied. "My thoughts had wandered far from you; and if my face expressed annoyance, I assure you that it was not because you are my companion. It was—but excuse me, I will not bore you with the cause of my vexation."

"It would be a waste of words if you did, for I comprehend that jealousy is at the foundation of it. You have let the pretty face of Clare Desmond enthrall you, though you must know that for you there can be no hope in that quarter. Mrs. Adair has not, and will not forgive you for making it necessary to look for an heiress among the kindred whose very existence she has hitherto ignored."

"My aunt should rather thank me, I think, for being the means of bringing to her side so true and warm-hearted a being as Miss Desmond, and for reminding her that natural ties are stronger than those formed with a stranger. Excuse me, Miss Coyle, but this is a subject that you and I cannot very well discuss."

"Why not?" asked Claudia, tranquilly. "We are on even ground. You angered Mrs. Adair by refusing me, and if I consented to accept you, it was not because I cared for you in the least. You must know that other motives swayed me at that time."

"I think I understood your motives perfectly, Miss Coyle. I never gave you credit for anything beyond self-interest."

Claudia laughed bitterly.

"What other motive should sway a young and attractive woman who has luxurious tastes and great ambition to become a leader in society? You disappointed my aspirations, Jasper Clifford, and at the same time ruined your own future. That is some consolation to me, at least."

Jasper smiled.

"I am young, strong, well educated, and hopeful; therefore my future is pretty safe in my own hands. I

think the consolation of seeing me a failure will be denied to you, Miss Coyle."

"In one thing at least you will fail. Clare Desmond will never be your wife," was the taunting reply; and with this Parthian shaft she ascended the steps, and received and returned the greeting of Miss Brooke with that grace and sweetness which she could assume at pleasure.

Judith was very simply dressed in a light purple muslin, with a pink bow at her throat, and another in her rebellious hair, which, on this occasion, had been dressed by her maid, and looked much more tidy than usual.

She greeted the new arrivals cordially, and led the way to the drawing-room. This was in a portion of the house which had been built half a century later than the oak-panelled dining-room; the furniture was also of a more modern era than that of the remainder of the house, though it was of much more antique fashion than anything to be found in the luxurious mansion of Riverdale.

There were some good pictures on the walls, and but one mirror, an old-fashioned mantel-glass, divided into three portions by gilt mouldings, and the different reflections given by each portion was a source of great amusement to two young, ruddy-faced girls, the daughters of Mrs. Simpson, who had been sent on in advance of their mother and her guest.

The central mirror gave a tolerable image of one standing before it; the one on the right hand broadened the face and figure to an absurd degree; while the left one lengthened the visages of Miss Phoebe Simpson and her sister till Walter Brooke, with his usual felicity at

quotation, compared them to "linked sweetness long drawn out," as they stood before it with their arms wound around each other.

"Oh, dear! Mr. Brooke, you always find something nice to say," giggled Phoebe, and then she turned with much effusion to welcome Clare.

In a recess on one side of the chimney hung a veiled picture, and as they passed it, Clare asked her young companion:

"Why is that concealed from view? Is it a portrait?"

"Wait and see," replied Phoebe, with a burst of stifled laughter. "Oh, my! it is such fun to come to these literary symposia, as that dear, solemn old doctor calls them, and to see him unveil his goddess."

About twenty persons were present, all known to Clare, and they now crowded around her and offered greetings, and made inquiries about Mrs. Adair, while Claudia, with curling lip, stood to one side, bitterly thinking:

"The last time I was in this house, all that homage was offered to me, because it was then whispered and believed that *I* would inherit Riverdale. Never mind—I can bide my time; and that pretty doll, who is now the lady paramount, has little cause to exult in her prospects. I begin to hate her, and I will compass her destruction as ruthlessly as Cæsar Borgia crushed those who stood in his way."

At this juncture the tall form of Dr. Brooke entered, and like a covey of bright plumaged birds, the ladies gathered around him and chattered gayly, thanking him for the treat in store for them in hearing the fair Aspasia read her own productions.

"The feast of reason, and the flow of soul," quoted

Walter. "That is as original, I think, as anything we shall hear to-night; hey, Miss Coyle?"

"Very likely," replied Claudia, indifferently. "Literary pretenders are apt to poach on others' preserves."

Phœbe Simpson overheard her, and with a giggle, said to her sister:

"I'll tell Mrs. Harte that. She takes me to task for laughing so much, and I shall like to put her down."

"Tiresome old thing!" replied the younger one; "all the fun we get out of her is in seeing her show off with that solemn old owl, who makes her believe she's a goddess."

"Don't speak so loud, Kitty," said Walter Brooke, "lest the *pater* should retort by saying that to be an owl is better than to be a parrot."

"Oh, dear! I didn't mean that you should hear that."

"I dare say not. But we are quits, I think."

A slight bustle took place at the door, and two servants came in bearing a small table covered with a crimson cloth richly embroidered. They placed this in front of the fireplace, and presently returned with a wreath of laurel leaves ingeniously woven together, and a massive wax candle such as are used on the altars of Catholic churches, and placed them upon it.

"The fane is ready, but the priestess tarries," said the old doctor in his solemn tones, and another burst of suppressed giggling from the two Simpsons caused him to look severely at them, and say:

"If I were prepared, I would give a brief lecture to fill up the time till the fair Aspasia arrives, and my theme would be, the manners of the rising generation."

With crimson faces, the two offenders shrank behind

the other guests, but Phœbe consoled herself by whispering to her sister:

"He's a horrid old dunce, anyway, and Aspasia will end by twisting him around her fingers, see if she don't."

A diversion was made in their favor by the arrival of a carriage, and Dr. Brooke went to the door to receive the honored guest of the evening.

CHAPTER XXI.

GREEK MEETS GREEK.

A FAT, good-humored-looking woman came in fanning herself violently, and nodded patronizingly to the assembled guests.

"Couldn't get here before—something happened to the harness, and Bob had to mend it the best way he could; but we are all right now, Doctor, and Mrs. Harte will soon get over her fright. She has gone with Miss Judith to take some sal volatile; so you must excuse her for a little while."

The doctor bowed, and the next moment a bustle at the door announced the arrival of the star of the evening.

A figure floated in which offered a remarkable contrast to the plainly attired Judith, who entered with her.

Mrs. Harte was a tall, well-developed woman of thirty-five, though she confessed to only twenty-five, and the arts of the toilet enabled her to maintain the

appearance of youth. She was a brunette, with large, languishing black eyes, and a heavy suit of hair of the same color, which was wreathed in classic braids around her head.

She was dressed in flowing white robes of some thin, glistening material, gathered in at the waist by a girdle fastened in front with a fine cameo. The wide, open sleeves were looped up to the shoulder with gems of the same kind, and on her bare neck and arms were necklace and bracelets to match.

Mrs. Harte was a handsome, dashing, fashionable-looking woman, but there was not a ray of genius in her face. The soft lustre of her eyes, the full red lips, the rather heavy chin, cleft with a deep indentation, were all sensual—of “the earth, earthy”—and breathed little of the divinity of that heaven-born inspiration given to but few of earth’s children.

She fluttered into the room with the air of a woman who expects homage as her right. Bowing in a superior way to the company assembled there in her honor, she made her way with extended hands to the master of the house.

In perfectly modulated tones, she said :

“Dear Doctor—dearest friend, how happy I am to meet you once more! Naughty man! Why did you not come over with Mr. Brooke when he called at the Oaks? I have been vexing my heart with the thought that my friends at Brookover have become estranged from me; for your son, who was my shadow when I was here last, has been to see me but twice. I must resign myself to that, I suppose, as I hear he has found ‘metal more attractive.’”

The old gentleman listened to this overflow of words with a curious blending of reverence and annoyance, for he thought this woman the most charming and gifted of her sex, and the allusion to Walter as a former worshipper at her shrine pained him, he could scarcely have explained why.

With some embarrassment, he replied :

“I never call on ladies, as you know, Mrs. Harte. As to Walter, young people will be fickle, but we elders know how to excuse their inconstancy. I have had grievous sorrows to bear in my earthly pilgrimage: one at least that has saddened me deeply, and would have overwhelmed me but for the grace vouchsafed to me in the spiritual communion mercifully permitted between the original of yonder shadow on the wall and myself,” pointing to the portrait of his deceased wife.

Aspasia cast a reverential glance toward the plain-looking rival she fully intended to dethrone, and with a soft sigh, replied :

“Alas! yes—I know the story of your devotion to your lost one. It is beautiful, it is touching; and I, at least, have no doubt as to the reality of the spirit influence she exerts over you.”

“Because you possess the intuitions of genius, and your gifted soul can understand what those of coarser mould can only scoff at. But pardon me, dearest lady; I am monopolizing you, while our friends are expectantly awaiting the exhibition of your surpassing talents as an improvisatrice and declaimer.”

Mrs. Harte was always ready to exhibit, and she had declared to Walter Brooke that a new talent had been added to her marvellous gifts since she was last at

Brookover. She found herself able to improvise fluently on any given subject, and on this evening she would exhibit her newly-developed power.

For days past she had been arduously committing to memory an old poem on resignation, which she had found in an obscure collection published in England many years before. She flattered herself that no one present had ever seen or heard of the volume, though for her it unfortunately happened that Claudia Coyle had a copy of that very work, which was almost the only thing she possessed that had belonged to her father.

Aspasia had privately informed Mrs. Simpson that *some* preparation was necessary, as she was but a tyro as yet in such exhibitions; and as she wished the display at Dr. Brooke's to be a success, she asked of her friend the favor to enable her to distinguish the paper on which the subject proposed by her was written, that she might be sure to select that from the others that were offered.

It unfortunately happened that Phoebe Simpson overheard this little arrangement, and prepared her plans accordingly, for she had no love for Mrs. Harte, as has already been told.

Aspasia turned with a smile to the little altar which had been decorated in her honor, and making a slight obeisance to the guests, who had ranged themselves on the opposite side of the room, said:

"I will first read a sketch of my own, embodying the history of a beautiful woman I have met, and then, my friends, you will, as many of you as choose, write a suitable subject for improvisation. One of them I will select, and proceed to poetize it, as is the custom in Italy,

that classic land in which the last few months of my life have been passed."

There was a murmur of applause and assent, and throwing herself into an attitude, Aspasia unrolled a small scroll of paper which Mrs. Simpson held ready in her fat hand, and began to read in the declamatory style of a trained actor. She had in fact taken lessons from a distinguished tragedian, and her voice and elocution were both good.

As the fair reader went on, Claudia Coyle became almost as white as the dress she wore; she set her teeth hardly together, and a wild glitter of rage and fear came into her eyes, for her own unhappy story was the subject Mrs. Harte had chosen for the amusement of the company, knowing, too, that in all probability she would be present at the reading.

For the last eight months the widow had been travelling in Europe, and there had doubtless taken pains to ferret out the painful details she made so unscrupulous a use of. Even the name of Reginald Gordon was given, trusting to the chances that no one present, but the one she intended to victimize, had ever heard of such a person.

The motive of this attack was spite, because Walter Brooke had told Mrs. Simpson of the plagiarism Miss Coyle had detected and exposed to him.

With great effort Claudia regained outward composure, and when the piece ended, she approached with others, and offered her homage to the reader; but no steel could have been harder or colder than the glance which passed between the two.

Claudia managed to breathe into the ear of her enemy, without being overheard by the others:

"'When Greek meets Greek,' you understand the rest. I must speak with you before we leave."

Mrs. Harte nodded haughtily, with defiance in her eyes, and Miss Coyle went back to her seat, clenching her white hands till the nails almost penetrated the flesh.

Dr. Brooke now spoke:

"You have, as usual, excelled, divine Aspasia, and in your honor, permit me to crown you with this wreath of bays, and light the incense on the shrine dedicated to our new goddess. In you we find the dignity of Juno, blended with the intellect of Minerva and the beauty of Venus. As a fair representative of the immortal trio, accept the homage of those you have so highly honored, so much delighted."

The old doctor uttered this gallant speech with grave and sonorous emphasis, and the graceful head was bowed to receive the offered decoration, and the large candle lighted.

Then the whole company following the example of the doctor, defiled before her, bowing profoundly, as in homage to a royal queen.

As the old gentleman lighted the incense, Phoebe satirically murmured to Clare:

"What an absurd exhibition! The poor old doctor will be saying next to her:

"Remember I was once the youth
Who, in days past of joy and truth,
First offered incense at your shrine,
And fondly hoped to call you mine."

He is dazed enough to fancy all that, poor old gentleman. I expect to see him dyeing his hair, and putting on tight boots next. Oh! won't it be fun!"

Clare could not help laughing, though she shook her finger at her. To her the whole scene had been infinitely amusing, though she would not permit herself to comment on it as freely as Phoebe did.

Aspasia's voice arose, and with the patronizing condescension of a queen, said:

"Thanks, my friends, for these undeserved tokens of your approval of my poor efforts to amuse you. I should not have permitted myself to be crowned, however, till my supreme effort has been made; but my kind admirer, Dr. Brooke, wished it, and of course I submitted."

"Her admirer! Good!" muttered Phoebe. "I wonder what the old gull will say when she breaks down as Walter did, hissing out that tiresome poem that he always *will* repeat."

A small enamelled card-basket was handed round to receive the little rolls of paper prepared by such of the guests as wished to suggest a subject. There was not more than a dozen offered, and among them was one with a peculiar twist, which Phoebe accurately copied, and the two little coils lay side by side, so much alike, that it was impossible to distinguish between them.

Walter Brooke approached the goddess with the basket in his hand, knelt before her, and touching his lips to the hem of her flowing garment, theatrically said:

"Adorable Aspasia, choose the theme of thy inspiration. Behold, a dozen lie here to choose from, and I pray that your good angel may guide you in the selection of the subject on which you are best prepared to poetize."

A lightning glance shot from the lady's eyes, but she coldly replied,

"I am prepared to speak on each or all alike, Mr. Brooke. I do not understand your last words."

"They meant nothing derogatory to your goddessship, I assure you. Pray select your theme, while I kneel at your feet your most devout worshipper."

Thus adjured, Aspasia put out her hand, and after a moment's hesitation, in which a singular expression came over her face, she took up one of the rolled papers, opened, glanced at it, and almost mechanically read aloud:

"Serpent-Charming, or the Wiles of Widows."

For an instant Mrs. Harte was nonplussed; but a moment later she proved herself quite equal to the occasion; she coolly said, as she dropped the paper and took up the one prepared for her use:

"Serpent-charming has been so fully discussed in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, that it would be great presumption in me to enter into rivalry with the great master. As to the wiles of widows, as I am one myself, I shall hardly undertake to attack the sisterhood to which I belong."

Opening the second paper, she smilingly went on:

"Ah, here is something more congenial. Resignation is a theme I can descant on, and it is one that comes home to us all. Now listen, my friends, for the glow of inspiration is upon me."

She struck an attitude, raised her eyes to heaven, and commenced repeating the ode, which at once struck on the ear of Claudia as something familiar. A triumphant glitter came into her eyes, and she followed each movement of the graceful declaimer, muttering to herself:

"I have *her* at my mercy now. She meant to strike

at me, and perhaps to crush me; but I have *my* advantage now. Her vanity will condone greater faults than I have committed, if I threaten to expose her to Dr. Brooke as a mere literary impostor. She evidently intends to captivate him, and a hint of what I know would ruin her with him."

The ode to resignation was a greater success than the reading, and the fair improvisatrice was pronounced equal to Corinne herself, when she received an ovation in the Roman capital.

When the buzz of flattery subsided, and a sudden calm fell on the company, the old doctor said to his daughter:

"My love, since we have enjoyed to the utmost the feast of poesy afforded to us by our distinguished friend, I think it is now time that the creature comforts should have their turn. Will you order in refreshments?"

Judith went out, and presently returned, followed by servants bearing waiters with fruit, wine and cake. Dr. Brooke strictly abstained from the use of spirituous liquor in any form, and thinking some apology necessary for refusing to join his guests in partaking of the refreshments provided, he said:

"My friends, I never take late suppers, and the use of the grape I abstain from, as I consider drinking wine a most pernicious and depraved habit; one very deleterious to the human system, and therefore—ahem!"

This sudden break-down was caused by a pinch on his arm, given with vim, by Judith, who at the same time whispered in his ear:

"Stop, for mercy's sake, father, and think what you are saying."

The old gentleman looked bewildered a few moments, and made an effort to apologize for what he had said, but Mrs. Harte came to the rescue; she held up her glass of ruby wine, and laughed musically:

"I shall drink this, at any rate, doctor, for it is worthy to have been quaffed on Mount Olympus, in the drinking cups served by Hebe herself."

"If a fairer one than the handmaiden of the gods will offer me the magic cup, I will atone for my involuntary rudeness by tasting it at least," was the reply, as the gray head bent deferentially before her.

Aspasia took from the waiter a small glass, and touching her lips to the brim, offered it to him with her most bewitching smile.

"Here is the nectar, and you are Jove receiving it from my hand."

With a grave bow, Dr. Brooke accepted the offering, sipped a few drops of the generous liquid, and then pouring the rest out at her feet, solemnly said:

"This is my libation to the goddess of the hour, offered in the same spirit in which it was poured out by the men of Greece to their deities."

Judith uttered a faint exclamation as she saw the ruby liquid saturating the carpet, and Phoebe Simpson said to Clare:

"It's lucky that the groundwork of the carpet is red. After this, that dear old stupid will never consent to get a new one. He will insist that this is consecrated. Oh, my! I wouldn't have missed coming here to-night for anything, not even for a diamond ring! Isn't it great fun, Miss Desmond?"

"I have been very well entertained," said Clare, with

a faint smile. "But I cannot find anything to ridicule in an earnest and truly good man like Dr. Brooke."

"Can't you? Well, I like him well enough too; but he is as good as a comedy, you must confess, if you'll speak the truth. Do you know he sleeps with a bust of that ugly woman up yonder on his pillow? Ma told Walter one day that if he didn't smash it up his father would go crazy with his nonsense about spirit communion, and all that."

"Of course Mr. Brooke did not take her advice."

"No; he thought it would be risky, because the old man says she told him whenever she wanted him to take another wife she'd smash herself up. Did you ever hear of anything so absurd?"

Clare laughed at this merrily enough, and the two young girls got to be very good friends before the evening was over.

Claudia watched her opportunity and passed out of the room, making a significant gesture to Mrs. Harte, which was understood by that lady and acted on a few moments later. She declared herself so weary with her efforts to entertain others that she must retire a few moments, and she begged that she might be permitted to go alone.

With her old cavalier, to hear was to obey, and he conducted her to the door, leaving her there with a ceremonious bow, and returned to his other guests.

Claudia was standing on the piazza, and she said in a low tone, as Mrs. Harte passed by her:

"Come to the summer-house in five minutes; I will be there."

Aspasia nodded, and went on to the dressing-room.

The summer-house was a small latticed building, covered with roses and jasmine, with rustic seats in the interior. It was open on two sides, one toward the river, the other toward the house. And Claudia, after glancing cautiously around, flitted toward it unseen by any one.

She presently saw the flutter of Mrs. Harte's diaphanous robes, and prepared herself for the combat. That lady entered the bower with a haughty and defiant crest, and coldly said:

"When the gauntlet is thrown down to me I always accept it, Miss Coyle. Will you be so good as to explain the threat couched in your quotation? though, in this case, it will not be Greek meeting Greek, but Greek battling with a Helot, I think."

This superb insolence caused the surging blood to leap through Claudia's veins, but she conquered the impulse to fly at this woman, and choke her till she had no voice left with which to cry for mercy. She steadied her voice and said:

"It is my right to demand of *you* an explanation of the unprovoked attack made on me to-night. Where did you hear that story you read with so much emphasis, and why have you dared to make so base a use of my unhappy history?"

"If the cap fits, you may wear it, Miss Coyle. My motive you can easily divine: it was to hint to you that you had better quietly leave the neighborhood before you are exposed in your true character."

Claudia laughed scornfully.

"Do you really believe that you have the power to make me do so mad a thing as that?"

"Of course I do; and what is more, if you do not go

away at once, I will send that story to Mrs. Adair, with such proofs as will convince her of its veracity."

"You think you have me utterly in your power, no doubt, but I am not afraid of you, Mrs. Harte. It so happens that you are equally in mine; and if I leave in disgrace, I think I can tell that which will also cause you to 'hide your diminished head,' and never show your face in this neighborhood again."

"Ah, indeed! that is something new, upon my honor! Idle threats will not save you, Miss Coyle, and I have the most supreme contempt for yours. Will you be so good as to give me an idea of what you fancy you can do to injure a woman in my position?"

"I can do this: I can baffle the bold game you are playing to win that old man up yonder because he is rich; I can cover you with such ridicule, after the absurd exhibition of this evening, that you will never dare to show your face here again."

Mrs. Harte changed color, and her tone was less arrogant as she asked:

"In what way, pray, can you accomplish that?"

"By simply bringing forward an old book belonging to me, and showing, word for word, the poem you declared to be an improvisation to-night. I can prove you a mere literary pretender—a thief of other people's ideas. That is what I can and will do, if you offer to hint to any one that the story you read to-night is but a transcript of mine."

Hitherto Aspasia had remained standing, but she now sank on a seat with a gasp, and seemed on the point of fainting. Claudia waited for her to speak, but several moments elapsed before she was capable of doing so. She at length said:

"You have beaten me, and I will come to terms. You and I need not come in conflict, and if you will leave me to play my own cards, I will grant you the same freedom. It is a bargain, Miss Coyle?"

"Yes, on one condition: tell me how you learned my unhappy story, and why you wished to ruin me by making it known to others?"

"I met with Mr. Gordon in Rome. He became one of my adorers, and a friend put me on my guard by enlightening me as to his character. The story of the girl he had eloped with while his wife was living was told me, and your name was given. Of course I identified you as the heroine of the tale, as you had not changed your very peculiar name."

"No; I did not do that, because I fancied I should be quite safe in this country. I see I was mistaken now. But did not your informant also tell you that I was deceived myself—that I had never heard of a Mrs. Gordon, and believed the ceremony that was performed a legal one?"

"I was not told that; if I had heard it, I should not have acted as I did to-night. Why did you not prosecute the man for bigamy?"

"Because I despised him too heartily to have my name brought before the courts in connection with his. After a few months, he treated me with brutal indifference, and my one wish was to escape from him. I did so, and I have found a good home for myself. I warn you, madam, not to interfere with me in any way; if you do, it will be the worse for your own interests. In spite of your efforts to injure me, some would be found to sympathize with my misfortunes; but for *you*, nothing

but the jeering laugh of contempt would be in store. Of all impostors, a literary one is the most contemptible."

Claudia swept away as she uttered these words, leaving her insolent adversary humbled and alarmed. She went back to the house, and complained that the fright of the early part of the evening had made her ill, and nothing was left for Judith but to ask her to remain as her guest, when the rest of the party broke up.

CHAPTER XXII.

CLAUDIA GETS THE UPPER HAND.

MRS. ADAIR was charmed with Clare's description of the literary soiree. She had as keen an eye for the ridiculous as Phoebe Simson possessed, and away from Dr. Brooke's house, she had no scruple about giving the scene in all its details, and even mimicking with accuracy the style and manner of the chief actress.

Her aunt laughed, and said:

"I am glad that you do not attempt to caricature that good, simple-hearted old friend of mine, my dear; all the rest, even to Walter, I leave to your mercy. I hope the doctor is not going to make himself a dunce about that absurd woman. From what you say, though, it looks very much like it."

"He certainly was very much taken up with her, aunt; but if what Phoebe Simpson says is true, he will hardly ask her to marry him unless his spirit wife breaks up her own bust."

"What nonsense is that you are talking, child? How can a spirit meddle with tangible matter?"

"I am sure I can't tell, aunt; but Phoebe said that his wife had told him when she wanted him to marry again, her marble bust should be broken. That is all I know about it."

"If this Mrs. Harte hears that, she will get that image destroyed, by hook or by crook. What sort of a woman is she, Clare?"

Claudia had entered the room, and before Clare could reply, she brusquely said:

"I know her to be a most dangerous and scheming woman. She has come here to win Dr. Brooke to marry her, and she will stop at nothing to achieve her purpose. You should assume the privilege of an old friend, and warn him, Mrs. Adair."

"No, indeed. If he chooses to make an old fool of himself, he may do it for me. If his sainted angel does not interfere to save him, I am sure I shall not. How do you come to know so much about Mrs. Harte, Claudia?"

Miss Coyle changed color slightly, and then said:

"I had heard something of her before she ever came into this neighborhood. She is ambitious of being considered a literary lion, with only the most flimsy pretensions to genius; and her great aim is to win a rich husband. The weakness of the old doctor for literary celebrities, and the fascinating wiles of this woman, will end by ensnaring him in the trap she has cleverly set for him. You will see that I speak the truth, Mrs. Adair."

"I declare, Claudia, you are so vehement and bitter

against this charming widow that I begin to think you have been casting a sly glance that way yourself. Have you not tried to make an impression? Tell me the truth, now, and maybe I can help you to rout Aspasia, and bring all her plans to confusion."

To this quizzing speech Claudia gravely replied:

"I have no designs on Dr. Brooke. If she wants him, Mrs. Harte may take him, and welcome. If I had wished to be an 'old man's darling,' I might have accepted one four times richer than your friend, and reigned a queen in banking circles in London itself. I had no taste that way, and here I am."

"That is a new episode in your history, Claudia. You never told me that before; in fact you have told me nothing worth speaking of, of your life before you came to me. I think you love money; then why did you refuse it when it was offered?"

"Why? because I was a fool," replied Claudia, bitterly. "I fancied myself in love with a man who played the traitor to me. That is the whole story, Mrs. Adair."

Mrs. Adair looked at her meditatively, and then said:

"You are very beautiful, Claudia; yet men mostly admire, without loving you. I cannot understand it. Dick Clifford was fascinated with you at first, but he cooled off, and—and you know how it all ended. Now, here is my little girl here, who seems to carry hearts by storm. If Jasper dared, he would be making furious love to her; and Walter Brooke, knowing that I am a stickler for old customs, has asked my leave to win her if he can. What makes the difference now, I wonder? for you are more superbly beautiful than Clare is."

"Dear aunt—pray—pray don't bring me up in this

way," said Clare, deprecatingly. "As to Mr. Brooke, I hope you gave him no encouragement."

"Comparisons *are* odious," said her aunt, laughing, and ignoring her last words. "Claudia seems to feel that they are, for she looks as dark as a thunder-cloud."

The cloud rolled away from Claudia's face, and she gayly said:

"You quite misunderstand the source of my annoyance, dear madam. It is impossible for me to feel jealous of a young girl like Clare, for we belong to a different day and generation. I am a mature woman, and she is but a budding angel. I was thinking of that good old man at Brookover, who is doomed to be victimized, unless his children come to the rescue."

"Judith will be very apt to do that. The name suits her, for, if the occasion arose, she could cut off a man's head as courageously as that old Hebrew woman did."

"But this time it is a woman's head, and a very shrewd one, too. If Miss Brooke could decapitate her metaphorically, I have no doubt she would try it; but Aspasia will prove more than a match for them all, or I am much mistaken."

"Well, well, we cannot meddle in our neighbors' affairs, and Dr. Brooke is the last man to tolerate interference. I have known him all my life, yet I would not dare to offer a remonstrance, even if I thought the syren would lead him to destruction."

"She will be sure enough to do that," muttered Claudia; "yet I dare not unmask her, lest she ruin me in my turn. After all, I have enough on my hands, so why should I care?"

As Claudia had now come in to sit with her aunt,

Clare thought she might be spared, and she asked permission to go to her room and write to her mother.

Mrs. Adair graciously replied:

"I am sorry to lose your bright talk even for a few hours, Clare, but I understand the claims of your parents upon you, and of course you must not neglect writing to them regularly. Go, my dear, and tell Annette that I thank her for sparing to me so much of her sunshine."

"Oh, aunty, I must kiss you for that," said Clare, impulsively, and she threw her arms around Mrs. Adair, and pressed her lips to her cheek. "I am so glad, so glad that you find some pleasure in having me here."

"I do find a great deal, and even more than that; for you are a comfort to me. There, dear; go now, for I see that Claudia has something to say to me."

"Pray don't cut short your endearments on my account," said Claudia, with slightly curling lip. "It is a real delight to see relations so fond of each other."

There was something in her tone that jarred on both of them; and when Clare left the room, Mrs. Adair turned sharply to her, and asked:

"Are you jealous of my new pet, that you look and speak as you do, Claudia? You induced me to bring the child here, and now you seem to have taken a dislike to her. What has she done to merit this?"

In her softest tones Claudia replied:

"I have no feeling of hostility to Miss Desmond, I do assure you, my dear friend. But I came hither to speak to you about her. As you are vexed, and may not be inclined to do justice to my motives, I had best, perhaps, say nothing to her prejudice; though I think you ought to know that, in spite of her sweetness, and

apparent desire to please you, she is deliberately doing all that is possible to defeat the plan so near to your heart."

A red spot came into the old lady's cheeks, and she impatiently replied:

"I believe the child sincere, Claudia, and all you can say will not convince me to the contrary. Speak. I must hear what you have to tell me, and then I can take my own time to decide as to your motives."

Claudia could weep when she pleased, and tears now dimmed her magnificent eyes. In faltering accents, she said:

"I knew you would be vexed at hearing that things are not going on as you wish; but it is my duty to tell you what I have seen myself. Dear Mrs. Adair, you are the only friend I have in the world, and I shall be in despair if I am so unfortunate as to displease you."

"Enough of that, Claudia," was the brusque reply. "If you really have anything to say, out with it. I detest beating around the bush; and by this time I think you ought to know that I am as impatient as old Job himself was."

Claudia understood that her patroness would submit to no further acting on her part, and she therefore went on in a less lugubrious tone:

"I am sorry to tell you that Clare is a terrible flirt. She understands without being told, that the wish nearest your heart is to make a match between her and Jasper; yet she openly gives such encouragement to Walter Brooke that there can be no doubt she is making up her mind to marry him, and make sure of a rich husband while she has the reputation of being your heiress."

"But, if Clare is a flirt, how have you arrived at that conclusion? She may only be amusing herself with him, as she does with others."

"Until last evening I believed that myself; but I overheard a conversation between her and Walter which leaves no doubt on my mind. I did not intend to listen, but I was placed in such a position that I could not avoid it."

"Oh! of course—I understand that," was the sarcastic rejoinder. "It was a lucky chance, and one you were bound to make use of in my behalf. Pray go on. I am trying to keep myself calm, though you try my patience wonderfully. What did they say?"

"Oh, a great deal of nonsense that it is not necessary to trouble you with. The gist of it was, that your niece has discovered that she was brought here to marry Jasper, and with the wilful perversity of her years, she is determined not to do so. She told Mr. Brooke that in two weeks she would give him a decisive answer, and in that time she thought she could win on you so much by making a great show of affection, that you would give up your wishes to hers, and allow her to make her own choice of a husband."

The old lady sunk back with a gasp, and pressed her hand over her left side, as if smitten with sudden pain there.

Claudia silently offered her a glass of water, and gently said:

"It is bitterly painful to me to agitate you so deeply, but I dared not withhold this from you. This young girl, who seems so free from guile, is determined to maintain her place in your regard, and at the same time gain

her own way. Walter Brooke is not to be compared with Jasper, but she has taken a fancy to him, and she will marry him, as much to disappoint you as from any other motive."

"Yet she does not seem wilful; and it is hard for me to think her deceitful. Claudia, I could almost wish that you had not told me this," said the deceived woman, with a pang at her heart which told her how dearly she had already learned to regard her niece.

"I thought it right to warn you, Mrs. Adair," replied Claudia, with great appearance of humility. "There is something else I ought to say to you, but you seem so much excited, I think I had better keep it to myself."

With a gesture of angry impatience, the old lady impetuously said:

"You know well enough that when a thing is hinted to me I never rest till I have heard the whole of it. Now speak out all that you have to say, and leave me to deal with myself, and with her afterward."

"Since you insist, I suppose I must obey. Clare stated that, in any event, her mother was your legal heiress—that she had a claim on your estate which you dared not ignore. Her grandmother, she said, had received but a moiety of what should have been hers, and if you passed over your own family in your will, her father would contest it, and prove that you were not in a fit state of mind to dispose of your property."

Mrs. Adair started up in sudden fury; she shook her clenched hand above her head, and in a voice tremulous with rage and wounded feeling, cried out:

"Oh, this is too much! The viper! the smooth, smiling serpent, who hopes to coil around my heart that

she may stifle me, crush me! Good God! such a creature would be capable of murdering me to attain her own ends; and she so young too!"

Claudia began to fear that she had gone too far, and she hastened to soothe the anger her false communications had aroused.

"I believe you go too far in judging Miss Desmond so harshly as that, Mrs. Adair. She is not so much to blame herself, as those who have carefully tutored her to the part she is to play, before they sent her hither. Her parents have everything at stake, for of course the lawsuit she spoke of could never be brought to a successful issue. They know that well enough, and this young girl was to win you over, and make all sure, if possible, by inducing you to bequeath your fortune to her. It is difficult to believe her less transparent than she seems, and she has many charming traits of character; but she has had bad counsels, and she thinks any deception right which will serve the cause of her parents."

"And I—I am to be victimized in this heartless manner for the benefit of a parcel of grasping cormorants! Don't speak a word to me in Clare's favor. If she cannot be all to me, she shall be nothing; I will send her back to her parents, and withdraw from them the assistance I have offered to enable them even to live in comfort. A fine reward I have for my liberality, truly!"

"But, my dear friend, such precipitate action as that would cause the world to misjudge you, and bring down on me its heaviest censure. After all, these people are your nearest relations, and you must wish them to rise out of the poverty into which they have fallen. Do not

be too hard on Clare, for she is very young yet, and if she marries the man of her choice, she may mature into a good woman, as the world goes. Give her a chance to secure a good husband, I entreat. Let her remain here, but treat her with extreme coldness, and show her that her chance of fortune through your liberality is lost."

"That might goad her on to a marriage with Walter, and if she would only choose Jasper in preference, I could forgive even this baseness, and take her into favor again. Rich people need not expect gratitude from those dependent on them. I did not, till this girl so sweetly befooled me. Even after what you have told me, if I suffered her to wheedle around me again, I believe I should get as fond of her as ever."

"I think, perhaps, your coldness might have an opposite effect. If Clare finds she has risked so much by offending you in the choice she has made, she will probably change her tactics, and try to like Jasper well enough to accept him. It is easy to see that he is deeply in love with her, and she gives him a little gleam of hope at times. For the sake of all concerned, Mrs. Adair, it will be best to temporize. Give Clare a chance to fall into your plans, or, if she prefers it, to marry Walter Brooke. In that case she will be amply provided for, and able to assist her parents. No one could then blame you for casting them off, and I should escape the odious charge of mischief-making. As it has turned out, I am sorry that I induced you to bring Miss Desmond here."

Mrs. Adair regarded her with a penetrating glance.

"If you had not urged it on me as persistently as you did, Claudia, I should be tempted to believe that you are

acting a double part. What motive you can have for bringing my niece here, only to secure her expulsion after a few weeks' sojourn beneath my roof, it is impossible to divine; therefore I must acquit you of double dealing."

"I hope you do acquit me of such baseness as that," said Claudia, with apparent indignation. "It is hard to have even a passing suspicion of me darken the mind of my best—almost my only friend. It is the dearest wish of my heart that after a temporary estrangement you and Clare shall become as good friends as ever, and that her ultimate acceptance of Jasper will insure to her the succession to your estate. If you knew how ardently I wish for that, Mrs. Adair, you would at least give me credit for disinterestedness."

"Then why can you not help it on?" asked Mrs. Adair, abruptly. "The strongest desire of my heart is to prevent the division of this estate. It has been, in my family almost from the first settlement of the country, and I could hardly sleep quietly in my grave if I knew it was dismembered. My husband paid off some debts which had accumulated; he did this to prevent any portion of the land from being sold, and there was an understanding between us that what he paid should be made up to his heirs, the Cliffords—or rather to Dick, for Jasper was not then born. I have a mania for buying land, and in place of laying up my income to liquidate that debt I enlarged my possessions, and I am just as unwilling to see the new acquisitions separated from the estate as I ever was to part with what my father left me. You understand now why I am so bent on a match between my heiress and one of the Cliffords. Dick

waives all claims in favor of his son, provided Clare can be brought to reason. Now, why can you not undertake to do that, Claudia?"

"Grant me a month, and I think I may engage to accomplish it," was the calm reply. "But if I am to succeed, you must do your part, Mrs. Adair. You must treat Clare with extreme coldness, though I beg that you will not be harsh, or betray to her anything of what has passed between us to-day. If you do, I cannot undertake to influence this wilful girl. In fact, I should lose all power to do so, if she suspected that there is an understanding between you and myself."

Mrs. Adair was an irritable, high-tempered woman, but she was easily influenced by one in whom she had confidence, and Claudia, by her apparent disinterestedness, had completely blinded her. She gave her credit for the kindest feelings toward Clare, and after hesitating a few moments, she gave the pledge required of her.

"I promise not to be harsh; only cold, as you advise. I have your success so much at heart, Claudia, that I promise to give you an order on my merchant for two thousand dollars the day that Jasper and Clare ask my blessing on their union. That may stimulate your efforts, my dear, and I shall feel so grateful to you if you succeed, that I shall not think the price too high for the service rendered."

"I do not know how to thank you, dear madam," said Claudia, with effusion. "I am yours to command in all things, you well know; but at the same time I will not deny that the offer of so munificent a reward will stimulate me to attain success. I think I understand all Clare's weaknesses, for I have made her a study since she

has been here, and I will so work upon them as to make her comprehend what her true interests are."

"Only save me from the necessity of dividing my estate, and I am your fast friend for life. I could give it to Jasper alone, but it is my wish that one of the old Beaufort blood shall inherit it. Whether worthy or not, Clare shall be my heiress if she will take him for her husband. I dare say you think me a monomaniac on this subject, and perhaps I am."

"Do not say that before any one else," said Claudia, in suppressed tones. "If you did, there is no knowing what advantage might be taken of it."

Mrs. Adair clenched her hands, and again a crimson flush mounted to her face. She faintly said:

"I feel ill; this has been too much for me. I—I was beginning to love that child so dearly, and now to know that she is so untrue is bitter, bitter."

"Shall I ring for Mona?" asked the false voice.

"Yes—and begin your mission at once. I can have no peace till this thing is decided, one way or the other."

When the servant came in, Claudia retired triumphant. She stood outside the closed door with her hand raised toward it, exultingly muttering:

"You have resigned your fate into my hands; henceforth *I* am the mistress, and *you* are the puppet, to be moved at my will till the end comes. Ha! ha! Now for the fair heiress. I understand her wishes well enough to mould her to my own purposes, and bring her to the point I desire."

CHAPTER XXIII.

CROSS PURPOSES.

CLARE wrote her letter, giving to her mother a most glowing account of the high favor she enjoyed with her aunt, and assured her that she believed all her family would be speedily summoned to make a visit to Riverdale, for the purpose of becoming acquainted with its mistress.

She then threw on her hat, and went out into the grounds to take a morning walk before going back to Mrs. Adair. She sang softly to herself as she moved under the shadow of the trees, thinking how fortunate and happy a girl she was. With Clare, any deep feeling instinctively assumed a devotional form, and raising her beautiful eyes to the cloudless azure vault above, she burst into Addison's beautiful paraphrase of the nineteenth psalm, beginning:

"When all Thy mercies, O my God!"

Her voice was clear and well trained, and she sang with the fervor of one whose heart echoed every line of the hymn, unconscious that any one was within hearing.

"Bravo," said Mr. Clifford; "that was well done, Miss Clare. You sing better in the open air than in the drawing-room."

Clare turned swiftly, and saw both Jasper and his father standing a few yards from her, apparently arrested by the sounds of her voice. The elder man carried in his hand a small valise, and was evidently setting out on a journey.

Scarcely heeding his compliment, she eagerly asked:

"Are you going away, Mr. Clifford? I have heard nothing of it, and—and I am really sorry to know that I shall not see you every day, as usual."

"Yes—I am going away for a short time, on business of Mrs. Adair's. But I leave my son to take my place and try to make himself agreeable to you. Jasper is more a squire of dames at any rate, you know."

Clare glanced shyly at Jasper, and saw in his eyes an expression which thrilled her heart, and made her almost tremble with the delicious certainty that he loved her. But the next moment a cold chill came over her soul, when she thought that to accept love from him would probably be ruin to them both. She flushed, and then grew pale, but she calmly said:

"You are my paternal friend, Mr. Clifford, and no one, not even your son, can fill your place. You have kindly shown me what I must do, and what avoid, since I have been at Riverdale, and now that you are going, I have a presentiment that my giddiness will bring me into some scrape."

"I have no fear of that, my dear; for all your instincts are good, and if you only follow them, they will lead you right."

"Thank you; but you don't know how silly I can act sometimes. I am afraid my good spirit often folds his wings over his face and leaves me to the guidance of the evil one. You know it is said that every human soul has two such attendants."

"Yes, there is some such superstition, and the mixed good and evil in the same character would lead one to have some faith in it. As to yourself, however,

"I hardly think the evil genius can ever gain the ascendancy."

"Oh, you do not know me, or you would not say that. I have had no temptation to wrong-doing since I have been here, because you are all so good to me. I cannot tell you how happy I am to find that my aunt is really fond of me."

These words Mr. Clifford afterward recalled, and shuddered at the interpretation that could be put upon them; but he now smilingly said:

"Your bark of life has found a safe harbor, Clare; so you may take 'the goods the gods provide,' and eschew temptation. Mrs. Adair is indeed much attached to you, and I think there is little danger *now* that any storm will arise to mar your brilliant prospects. I shall be absent ten days, perhaps, and if you need advice or assistance you may confidently rely on Jasper for either. He is one of those exceptional men who have old heads on young shoulders, and you may safely trust to his judgment."

Jasper here spoke

"I cannot vouch for my wisdom, Clare, but you may rely on my desire to serve you in every possible way. I hardly think, though, that the necessity will arise for assistance of any kind. How could it, indeed, when you are here sheltered by your aunt's protection, and shielded by her love?"

His tone was measured and his manner a little stiff, for he remembered how friendly she had been with Walter Brooke the day before, and his jealous heart was a little sore.

Clare felt this, and with a pettish toss of her head, replied:

"In spite of the precocious wisdom your father attributes to you, Jasper, I shall not trouble you to listen to such petty cares as may assail me. As you say, no serious complication can arise, situated as I am."

"I quite agree with you as to the last," was the stiff reply, and Clare bit her lip with vexation: yet she declared to herself it was best that they should not be too friendly with each other.

"I am going to Baltimore," explained Mr. Clifford, "and the cab is awaiting me at the lower gate. I may see your father as I return, as I shall be a day in Norfolk then, and I will run over to his place for a few hours."

"Oh, do; and tell them how kind my aunt is, how happy I am here, and how hopeful that they will soon be summoned hither too."

Mr. Clifford laughed, and said:

"I will tell you a secret, Clare. Your parents will only be asked to Riverdale when you have chosen a husband, and your wedding is about to come off; and not then, unless your choice pleases Mrs. Adair."

"In that case, I think the summons will not long be delayed," said Jasper, with irrepressible bitterness.

Clare flashed a lightning glance at him, and angrily replied:

"I don't know by what right you say that, Jasper. I have betrayed no preference for any one as yet."

"Oh, indeed! Then you were only amusing yourself with your new adorer last evening."

"I do not know that it is any business of yours what I am doing," was the retort. "I shall not certainly permit myself to be called to account by *you* for any of my actions."

"Nothing is further from my intentions, I assure you, Miss Desmond," was the stiff reply, and Mr. Clifford hastened to say:

"Tut, tut—this will never do, young people. It is my wish, and that of Mrs. Adair, that you shall be good friends to each other. Remember that, and don't be falling out and quarrelling while I am away. The old lady will not like it. Come, shake hands, and make friends before I go."

The two looked at each other, and by a resistless impulse their hands were extended. Jasper held that of Clare in so warm and tender a clasp, that the roses flushed to her cheeks as she withdrew it, and said:

"I could not refuse any request you made to me, Mr. Clifford, just as you are going away. But shaking hands with Jasper will not make me forget how rudely he sat up in judgment on me just now."

"Oh, he will find means to make peace with you some day, I hope," was the laughing response, and Mr. Clifford took leave of the two, telling his son to return with Miss Desmond to the house. Then he went on his way, thinking:

"The old lady was half right in her tactics. If those two had been bidden to fall in love with each other, they would never have obeyed; and here they are half-seas-over already, because they believe nobody wishes them to get married. It will all come right, and I shall have the sweetest little daughter-in-law in the world."

Jasper and his companion scarcely spoke as they walked side by side toward the house. Both were thinking of what Mr. Clifford had said, and wondering why Mrs. Adair was so inconsistent as to wish them to

be friends, when they were prohibited from becoming lovers. Had they spoken together with their usual friendliness, the chances were that the true state of their feelings might have been betrayed, and the fatal snare into which Clare was blindly walking have been avoided. But one was jealous, and the other offended, and the opportunity was lost.

As they drew near the house, Claudia came sauntering from the opposite direction, and neither suspected that she had been watching them ever since they parted from Mr. Clifford.

Her keen eyes glanced at the two faces, and she saw that something had happened to discompose both. For an instant her heart bounded wildly, as the fear arose that an explanation had taken place, and the lovers might be on their way to Mrs. Adair to tell her that they had concluded to adopt the motto of the old play as their rule of action: "All for love, and the world well lost."

But as they drew nearer, she banished all such fears. With clouded faces and averted eyes they walked side by side, and Claudia understood at a glance that there had been a quarrel of some kind.

Remembering the old adage, that "the quarrels of lovers are the renewal of love," she thought it best to interfere between them before many more words could be spoken. She came up with a smile, and said:

"Is it not a delicious morning? Mr. Clifford will have a pleasant day for his journey."

Jasper started, and regarded her with a displeased expression, as he almost sharply asked:

"How did you know that my father had gone on a

journey, Claudia? I do not think he spoke of his intention to any one here, except myself and my aunt."

"Is there any secret about it?" she asked, with an innocent expression. "Mr. Clifford does not usually make a mystery of his goings and comings. I only overheard him this morning giving orders for the cab to be in readiness for him, and I learned from Mrs. Adair that he is going to Baltimore."

Jasper frowned slightly, as he replied:

"My father is not apt to deal in mysteries, Miss Coyle. He leaves that for—"

The young man broke off abruptly, and making a slight bow to those he was leaving, turned off in another direction, and strode away.

"Upon my word," said Claudia, "the young man is taking airs on himself! One would think that he is lord of all he surveys, to see him and hear him speak."

Clare bit her lips angrily, and her eyes flashed, but she made no rejoinder, and after a pause, Claudia went on:

"I am afraid that Mrs. Adair saw you walking alone with him, for you must have passed the windows of her room. She will probably be angry with you for giving him the slightest encouragement *at present*."

"Why at present, pray?" flashed Clare. "What do you mean by your sly innuendoes, Claudia? My aunt wishes me to be friendly with Jasper. Mr. Clifford told me that only a little while ago, and now *you* say she will be offended if I walk with him. The two stories do not hang very well together."

"I dare say not," was the calm reply; "but *I* tell you that you will lose favor with Mrs. Adair, if she suspects

that anything is going on between you and Jasper. Mr. Clifford is anxious to secure his son's interests by a union with you; for then, if the old lady made a will cutting you both off, as she certainly would, he would bring forward your mother's claims as next of kin, and those he has on the estate for moneys of his uncle that have been expended upon it."

"If my aunt were so unjust to her natural heirs as to do what you say she would, I think Mr. Clifford would be perfectly justifiable in taking such a course," said Clare, coldly.

"But the litigation would be long and expensive, and by using a little craft you can easily gain the whole for yourself. *Then* you could make magnificent amends to Jasper, and I think you like him."

Clare flushed deeply.

"I shall use no craft, Miss Coyle. I hate the word; and it is utterly foreign to my nature to feign anything I really do not feel."

"I know that you are a dear, open-hearted, ingenuous creature, and that is why I like you. I used the wrong word; I only meant that you should use all your efforts to keep on the right side of Mrs. Adair, and act as she may in the interim—and she *does* act very strangely at times toward those dependent on her caprices—she will eventually come round, and give up her present fancy to make a match between you and Walter Brooke."

Clare faced her suddenly, and, with some vehemence, said:

"If my favor depends on that, my aunt had better understand at once that I will never accept Mr. Brooke."

"Really I thought he stood a fair chance to win you, Clare. You allow him to devote himself to you, and you heard what Mrs. Adair said this morning."

"I remember; but she did not seem at all angry when I told her he has no chance of success."

"Mrs. Adair knows too much of life to take so young a girl as you at her word. Rely on it, she will make you feel her displeasure after she has time to think over what you said. I should not be surprised if she withdrew from you all manifestations of affection till you are penitent, and show a willingness to fall into her views."

Clare grew pale, but she firmly said:

"I scarcely think my aunt will be so unjust. You give me a strange idea of her, Claudia, yet she has been very kind to you."

"My dear, you have only seen one phase of her character yet, and I am only trying to prepare you for what may come. She spoke with me after you left the room, and she wrought herself into such a state of excitement that I was forced to summon Mona to her assistance. She has spells of ill temper, and while she is in them there is no managing her at all. She will not listen to reason, and at such times she does the strangest and hardest things."

"And I have really offended her?" asked Clare, with pale lips. "Is there no way of reinstating myself except by consenting to marry Mr. Brooke?"

"None at present; but she may take another caprice when her fit of anger is over. All you can do is to let Walter come as usual, and let her think that time may win you over to her wishes."

"But that will be treating Mr. Brooke badly. He might hope for what I can never bestow on him."

"It is a miserable complication," said Claudia, with a vexed air. "What a pity it is that the old stories about love philters is not true! If it were, now, you could make her love you in spite of any opposition you may make to her strange whim to marry you to Walter Brooke."

"I have heard of such things," said Clare, flushing deeply; wondering how Claudia came to speak in this way, yet mistrusting nothing; "but of course it is all nonsense to believe in them."

After musing a few moments, Claudia said:

"It seems an absurd superstition, but *I* am silly enough to believe in it. I have some reason, however; for I have known one case in which a magic liquid given to an obstinate old man produced the most marvellous effects. He gave up his intention to bequeath his property to charities, and left his sister and children rich. Till the love-charm Mrs. Anson had prepared was administered to him by her own hand, but without his knowledge, he had become so much estranged from her that there was little hope she would inherit anything."

"You really knew this yourself, Claudia?" was the eager inquiry of her companion. "Oh, if I only could believe as you do!"

"I cannot see how it would benefit you if you did believe. You are so timid, you would never dare to try it yourself."

"I—I do not know about that. I might be tempted to try it, if I thought no injurious effects would follow the potion," said Clare, more as if she were speaking to herself than to her companion.

"What a little goose you are, child! How would it be possible for you to obtain such a thing here? I can reassure you on one point, though. Such things are compounded of ingredients that are perfectly harmless in themselves. As a proof of it, the old gentleman I referred to lived many weeks longer than his physicians thought it possible, and his sister believed that the stimulating properties of the philter sustained his strength."

Clare listened with the desire to believe, and she did not suspect for one moment that Claudia knew of the bottle she jealously concealed in her trunk—that she was tempting her to destroy the life of her aunt, by secretly using its contents.

There is a wonderful fascination to most minds in the occult mystery of such preparations; and Clare, in the ignorance and simplicity of her youth, had full faith in them. Her superstitious old nurse had told her innumerable stories bearing on this subject; and here was an educated woman of the world bearing witness to the truth of old Dolly's revelations.

In the sunshine of her aunt's favor, she had almost forgotten the Elixir of Love, as it was labelled; but now, with a beating heart, she thought, if Claudia's warning proved true, and her aunt was really offended with her, there would be no harm in testing its efficacy.

After a long pause, during which Claudia watched her furtively, Clare said, with a sigh:

"I can only hope that my aunt will get over her vexation about Mr. Brooke, for I cannot accept him. I cannot help thinking it will be best to bear the brunt of her anger at once, and not attempt to play a double part."

"I assure you that would ruin all. In her anger Mrs. Adair would be quite capable of sending you away at once. Indeed she threatened as much, and said she would withdraw the allowance she agreed to give your mother, if you refuse to accept the husband she has selected for you."

Poor Clare felt as if she should faint. She sat down on a rustic seat beneath one of the trees, and for several moments was too much overcome to speak.

With affected compassion, Claudia said:

"It is very hard, dear, and very cruel in your aunt; but if you, at present, seem determined to thwart her wishes, she will be capable of carrying out her threat. I take a warm interest in you, Clare, and if you will be counselled by me, you will yet be the mistress of this place, and can choose the husband you will prefer yourself."

Clare suddenly recalled Mr. Clifford's cautions, and she asked:

"Why should *you* wish me to be the heiress, Claudia? If my aunt passes me by, she will probably give her fortune to you."

"I could not keep it in peace if she did; and the world would censure me for creeping into Mrs. Adair's confidence, and abusing it to serve my own interests. I beg that you will believe me incapable of that, Clare. I am too sensitive, perhaps, but I cannot bear to have my conduct impugned, and motives attributed to me which would dishonor me in the estimation of good people. Only be patient, use a little finesse, and your aunt, when she gets over this absurd tantrum, will be fonder of you than ever. Indeed, she may atone for her temporary

injustice by allowing you to have your own way in everything. Like most people who are guided by impulse, Mrs. Adair is always in extremes."

Claudia spoke with such apparent frankness that Clare's suspicions were disarmed. It is difficult for a generous and confiding nature to believe in the duplicity of another, and this hapless young creature, left to the tender mercies of so heartless a plotter as Claudia Coyle, had no means of testing her truth except by such small experience as she had acquired in the few years of her short life.

She gave her hand to Claudia, and said:

"I fear that I have been unjust to you, Claudia. I hate double-dealing, but I feel that in this instance nothing is left to me but to play a part that is odious to me. No doubt you advise me for the best, and I will do the best I can to bring back my aunt's good-humor with me. I will go in now, and see how she will receive me."

Claudia pulled her veil over her face to conceal its triumphant expression from her poor deceived victim, and they moved together toward the house.

CHAPTER XXIV.

CLARE ENSNARED.

CLARE ascended to her own apartment, and made an effort to compose herself before she went to her aunt. She had fallen into the habit of going to her before luncheon was served, and reading to her the letters that came by the morning mail, and such fragments of news from the daily papers as she thought would interest Mrs. Adair.

For the first time since the day of her advent at Riverdale, she trembled at the thought of entering that room; but when the alabaster time-piece on the mantel rang out the hour of twelve, she knew that no more time for hesitation was allowed her. She must go, or risk offending her aunt still more deeply, by appearing to neglect her.

She smoothed her hair, gave a glance at her perturbed face, and ran down-stairs rapidly, that her courage might not fail her before she gained the door of her aunt's apartment.

She found it half open, and the scent of sal volatile floated out on the air. As she would have entered, Mona came forward and said, in very low tones:

"Scuse me, Miss Clare, but mistis an't well, an' she tole me special that you wa'n't to be 'lowed to come nigh of her agin to-day. She's bin in a orfle tantrum sense Miss Claudy was with her, but I dunno what it's all about. Ef Marse Dick, I mean Mr. Clifford, was here now, he might bring her roun', but he's gone away to stay more'n a week."

"Yes, I know. I saw him before he left," said Clare, though she was scarcely aware of what she was saying, so stunning was this confirmation of Claudia's words. "Oh, Mona! what shall I do to allay my aunt's displeasure? Only this morning she seemed so happy to have me with her, and now I am refused admittance to her room."

"You can't do nothin', Miss Clare, but wait till the mistis comes back to her right self. When she's in one o' these spells 'tan't no use to try to do nothin' with her. She won't listen to reason, nohow. *I'm* yer friend, Miss Clare, and I'll try to git her in a pleasant humor with you agin."

"Thank you, Mona, but I am afraid that my aunt—"

She broke off abruptly, conscious that Mona was not a suitable confidant of her troubles; but if her pride would have allowed her to speak to the faithful servitor, she might have learned that which would have saved her from the desperate resource she was ready to adopt to win back the favor of her aunt.

Suddenly a sharp, quavering voice issued from the chamber of Mrs. Adair:

"Who is there, and why are you staying away from me so long, Mona? Come back here; I need you. Who are you talking with?"

Clare summoned courage to step beyond the threshold, and say:

"It is I, aunt. I come as usual to read to you, and I am sorry to find you so ill. Will you not allow me to do something for you?"

The room was darkened, but there was light enough to see the drawn face and wild eyes of the old lady, who

was supported by pillows on a couch which had been drawn to the centre of the floor. She made an effort to raise herself, and her shrill tones rang in Clare's ears long afterward.

"You—you have dared to intrude into my room, after I had given my orders that you were not to do so? I am still mistress in my own house, Clare Desmond, and I bid you go now, and not come to me again till you understand that my will shall be law to all who are dependent upon me."

"Oh, aunt, make your will clear to me, and—and I will try to do it, however difficult it may be. I will *try*—I will indeed," and the voice of the unhappy speaker broke almost into a wail.

Mrs. Adair was unmoved by her emotion. She angrily said:

"You understand my wishes well enough, though you have chosen to run counter to them. You have forced yourself in here to agitate me still further, I suppose, that you may destroy me before my will is made. *Then*, you think, my property must go to your family and the Cliffords, as the legal heirs. Oh, I understand your tactics, deceitful girl that you are!"

Clare had been very pale before, but a crimson flush now leaped to her cheeks. She threw up her head proudly at this accusation, and in low, concentrated tones, said:

"I am sorry, aunt, that you think so meanly of me, but I assure you—"

Mrs. Adair shook her hand violently, and almost screamed:

"Do you dare to stand there and attempt to defend

yourself when I bid you go? Do you wish to *kill* me, that you throw me into such a state of excitement as may have that effect? I will not hear another word. Go! go! go!"

Clare unclosed her lips to say she would not only leave her room, but her house, that very hour, unless she recalled her unjust accusations, but Mona almost forcibly drew her from the apartment, and eagerly whispered:

"You mus'n't—you mus'n't say nothin' to her when she's on her high horse. You just wait an' see, Miss Clare, and when Marse Dick comes back, he'll set it all right. You mus'n't come anigh her ag'in till she sends for you. She'll be sho to do it, honey, ef you'll only be patient."

The woman went back to her mistress, and Clare, moving like one in a dream, went slowly back to her own apartment. She had no appetite for luncheon, and when Lyra was sent to summon her, she excused herself under the plea of a severe headache.

It was true enough that both head and heart were aching, and she had wept herself almost sick over this sudden change in the prospects that had seemed so bright only a few hours before.

An hour later Claudia came up to her, bringing a cup of strong tea, which she declared a sovereign remedy for headache and disordered nerves. After much persuasion, Clare was induced to swallow a portion of it, though she felt as if each drop choked her.

Her false adviser softly said:

"I am so sorry that you *would* go in Mrs. Adair's room after she had ordered that you should not do so. You begin to understand now the kind of person she is.

I have been almost inclined to believe that she has periodical attacks of lunacy, for in no other way can I account for the strange vagaries she takes in her head."

"She seems to be under a strange hallucination concerning myself," said Clare, in a broken voice. "I feel so insulted that I almost think it would be right for me to pack up my things and leave this house at once. If it were not for the disappointment of my parents I would not hesitate a moment. Oh, Claudia, I find my position here a cruel one, and only this morning I was so happy!"

"My dear girl, you must not take this little flare-up so much to heart. I have borne as hard things from Mrs. Adair; but when she got over her anger, she used every effort to make atonement for her injustice. You would ruin yourself and your parents, by acting so precipitately."

"I know that, and I *must* stay—that is the hardest part of it. If Mr. Clifford were only here, he would tell me what I ought to do. I think I will write to papa, and ask him to come here to set things straight, and if that can't be done, to take me away with him."

Claudia seemed to reflect a moment, and then she said:

"I am convinced that if Mr. Desmond came at your bidding, your aunt would be irrevocably offended. By the time he could get here she will probably be in a good-humor with you, and ready to load you with favors, to make up for her harshness to-day. Besides, it would make your family very miserable to know that your bright prospects are so soon clouded over."

"I believe you are right, and I must bear on, I sup-

pose, till—till my aunt finds out that I am not so mercenary as to calculate on her death, as she said this morning."

"Did she really hint such a thing as that? Poor old lady, that is her weak point; she fancies that all who approach her are trying to gain her favor, that they may be remembered in her will. That is why I entreated her to bring you here. It was the only thing I could do, to show her that I had no mercenary motives in bearing with her singular temper as I have done."

"But it is different with me, Claudia. I am her niece, and my mother is her legal heiress. She sent for me herself; my parents have never, in their darkest days, appealed to her for assistance, and her own judgment should tell her that she wrongs me deeply by such degrading suspicions."

"So it will in a short time. When Mrs. Adair is in one of her tempers she has no judgment; but when the reaction comes, she sees how absurdly she has acted, and she tries to atone for it. Only do all you can to make her love you, Clare, and things will soon mend."

"I will bear it a few weeks as you advise," said Clare, thinking of her elixir, and fast making up her mind to use it. "I shall not marry Mr. Brooke; if her heart is set on that, she must be disappointed, for I like somebody else better. In fact, I gave him to understand last night that there is no hope for him; but if he chooses to flutter around me still, I will permit him to do so, till—"

She paused abruptly, and Claudia asked:

"Till when—till what? I am curious to know."

A faint smile flitted over the sad face of the poor girl, and she more cheerfully said:

"Till I have time to charm my aunt back to the state of feeling she was in toward me till this unlucky morning. I believe I have the power to do it, Claudia, and no effort shall be wanting on my part."

"That is right, dear. I thought your courage would rise to the occasion. Only do that, and all will be safe. This beautiful home, with an income more than adequate to support it, will be well worth a more difficult struggle than yours will prove."

"Beautiful as it is, I would rather never call it mine than purchase it at the price my aunt demands. I told her I would *try* to please her, if she would tell me what she wished; but she only replied that I understood her wishes well enough. You say that her whim is to marry me to Walter Brooke, but I can't—I *can't* do that, come what will."

"I understand that, and I do not blame you, for Walter is not very attractive, and some day he will become as great an oddity as his father. Only keep up a semblance of bearing with him, for a week or two, and by that time another fancy may seize on your aunt, and one more agreeable to you than this has proved."

Clare blushed and smiled, and the astute schemer hugged to her heart the conviction that her victim had entered the net so remorselessly spread for her—that its meshes would soon entangle her beyond escape.

She stooped over Clare, and kissing her with her treacherous lips, said:

"I will leave you now, my dear, to compose yourself; for I can see that you have been very much agitated by

this unhappy freak of Mrs. Adair's. Console yourself with the thought that you are not the only sufferer from her singular temper, for I have a great deal to bear from her myself."

When the door closed on Claudia, Clare arose from the sofa on which she had been reclining, and turned the key in the lock. She then took from her trunk a small Chinese box of octagon shape, which was so constructed that, to the uninitiated, no method of opening it was to be found. Inserting her finger nail in a crevice below the feet of the Eastern beauty who smiled on its lid, Clare unclosed a revolving drawer, in which, imbedded in pink cotton, and the stopple carefully covered with kid, lay the tiny bottle given to her by old Dolly.

She trembled and changed color as she looked at it, but it was not from dread. That the elixir should affect her aunt physically, had never once occurred to the thoughtless girl. Assured that it would act marvelously on her mental condition, Clare gave no thought to anything beyond that, and utterly ignorant of the trick that had been played on the old nurse, she speedily made up her mind to commence the use of the charm that very evening, if she could gain admittance to Mrs. Adair's chamber without being seen.

Clare for the first time removed the folds of kid, and found beneath it a silver shield which screwed down over the glass stopple, and the latter fitted so tight that some effort was required to open it.

She felt some surprise that the old negro fortune-teller should have put the liquid up so neatly, but no suspicion entered her mind that another hand than hers had prepared the potion within.

She tried to test its harmlessness on herself before attempting to use it on her aunt. She poured a few drops in water, and drank it off, but the liquid was both tasteless and scentless, and she felt no effects from the portion she had taken.

"It cannot harm her any way," she murmured to herself; "and desperate cases require desperate remedies. This may have no effect, but I will try it at all events."

Having thus definitely made up her mind, Clare became more composed, and she made her toilet for the late dinner with as much care as usual. The tiny vial, wrapped in tissue paper, was placed in the pocket of her dress, ready for use, if the opportunity was afforded to enter Mrs. Adair's room unobserved, and mingle a portion of its contents with the carafe of lemonade which was always placed beside the old lady's bed. She had heard her aunt say that she drank its contents before dawn, and sometimes aroused her attendant to prepare more; so Clare felt quite sure that the drops she mingled with the draught would all be taken.

Claudia intended to afford her the opportunity she desired, to get into Mrs. Adair's room without detection; for one glance at Clare's face when she came down gave her the conviction that all doubts were at an end, and the power of the fatal elixir would be tried.

She had been with Mrs. Adair, and persuaded her that, later in the day, she would feel better if she would suffer herself to be dressed, and take a drive in the cool evening hours. In her present state of irritation toward her niece, Claudia felt certain that she would not be asked to accompany them. In their absence, the room of the old lady would be arranged for the night, and the

opportunity Clare desired, to enter it unobserved, could easily be found after Mona retired.

Did not one pang of doubt assail this ruthless plotter, as she consigned the woman who had been a good friend to her to the pangs of slow, yet certain death? Did not her heart shrink from the consummation of this evil deed, through the innocent agency of the helpless young girl she had determined to victimize?

If such feelings assailed her there was no outward sign, for Claudia was as serenely beautiful as ever; and at dinner she exerted herself to enliven the two who sat almost silent at the board, scarcely tasting the viands set before them.

Jasper looked as if he had passed through a fierce mental struggle; he was pale and preoccupied, and made no effort to do more than attend to the courtesies of the table. As soon as politeness permitted he withdrew, and left the two girls together.

With a mocking laugh, Claudia said:

"Young Grandairs seems to be in bad spirits to-day. What did you say to him this morning that induced him to wrap the drapery of his pride around him, and play the part of a sulky Timon after this disagreeable fashion?"

Clare flushed painfully.

"I—I—have nothing to do with Mr. Clifford's want of spirits. We had some words this morning, but his father interfered, and induced us to make friends again."

"Ah-h—he was jealous of Walter Brooke, I suppose. I saw him scowling after you as you went with him last evening. Tell me the truth now, Clare; would you be so rebellious against Mrs. Adair's wishes, if they pointed to Jasper in place of the other?"

"I cannot answer such a question as that, Claudia. But I must say it seems strange to me that my aunt does not prefer Jasper before Mr. Brooke—and—and wish me to like *him* best, in place of the other."

"Jasper was unfortunate enough to offend her, and Mrs. Adair is very vindictive. She is the most difficult person to propitiate, and to tell the truth, Jasper takes very little pains to set himself right with her. My question is sufficiently answered, Clare, and I shall take such measures as will bring about a better understanding between Jasper and the old lady. Walter Brooke will not give you up with the first repulse, for he is a most tenacious person. If you will be civil to him for a few weeks, I will work on the old lady's mind till she becomes disgusted with the union she has herself planned, and become anxious to substitute Jasper in Walter's place. If this will be agreeable to you, say so; for I know that Jasper is in love with you—that he would ask you to marry him, if he did not believe it would ruin you in the estimation of Mrs. Adair if you accepted him."

During this long speech Clare's face was a study, and the astute eyes that rested on her read each flitting emotion as clearly as if it had been put into words. She now tremulously exclaimed:

"Oh, Claudia! if I dared to trust you!"

"Why should you not trust me, you dear, innocent child! Mr. Clifford has probably warned you to beware of me, and made you look on me as a serpent that is ready to coil around you and stifle you, that you may be safely out of my way. But, Clare, he grievously misjudges me, as I will prove to you. Only follow my advice while my

enemy is away, and when he returns, and finds you the betrothed of his son, he will make the *amende honorable* by confessing that he has too harshly spoken of me."

The magnetic power possessed by the speaker, aided by her soft, caressing manner, brought the true, simple-hearted creature against whom her wiles were practised, entirely under her influence. Like the timid bird charmed by its feline enemy, all power of resistance seemed to leave Clare, and she faintly said:

"I leave my cause in your hands, Claudia. If you are not true, you are the most false and specious of women. I promise to follow your advice implicitly, and may God deal with you as you are true to your pledges."

"What a solemn little goose you are, Clare! I *will* be true to my promises, and if you will only make Jasper as jealous as possible, I will answer for it that in two weeks' time he will be at your feet, and with the consent of your aunt too. Some people have a talent for management, and I may boast that I have never yet undertaken to accomplish a thing without succeeding. When you are mistress of Riverdale, I shall expect you to be very generous to me, my dear. Perhaps, if I tell you that I am not perfectly disinterested, you will have more faith in me, eh?"

"Of course I will do what I can for you, Claudia, if—if all goes right; but I have no power at present to pledge myself to anything."

The two were walking on the lawn while this conversation took place, and it was interrupted by the appearance of the carriage coming around the drive.

Claudia hastily said:

"We understand each other, Clare, and I ask no promise from you. I can rely on your generosity when you possess the power to make me independent of the caprices of such women as your aunt. I must go to her now, as she intends to take an airing, and I would advise you not to approach her just now. She has said that I alone am to accompany her."

Clare felt wounded, for she had never before been passed over in this way, but she silently bowed, and turned off in another direction.

CHAPTER XXV.

A CONSULTATION BETWEEN SPIERS AND CLAUDIA.

IN the gathering twilight the carriage rolled away, and Clare Desmond stood looking after it with a feeling of desertion and desolation that was very difficult to bear.

She walked through the grounds till lights gleamed from the house, and then suddenly recalling the purpose she had so fully matured in her own mind, she walked rapidly toward the wing in which her aunt's apartments were situated.

The windows opened to the floor of the balcony, which was entered by a flight of steps ascending from the flower-garden below. The curtains were only partially lowered, and the blinds had been thrown back to admit the evening air. A shaded lamp stood on a circular table drawn near the bed, and beside it was a Bohemian glass carafe, with a drinking cup turned down over its mouth. The

lace mosquito curtains were drawn and carefully tucked in, and everything had evidently been arranged by Mona for the night.

Clare stood pale and almost breathless outside of the window, hesitating at this last moment to enter her aunt's room like a midnight assassin, and meddle with the draught prepared for her. Once she turned back irresolutely, but the thought of how much was at stake for herself and her parents impelled her on again, and muttering:

"I will do it at all hazards," she turned rapidly, passed into the dimly-lighted room, and, after listening a moment to assure herself that all was still, approached the table, and with trembling fingers mingled a few drops from her magic potion with the lemonade.

Clare fled rapidly from the room, but paused on the balcony to utter a fervent prayer for the success of her efforts to win back the love and confidence of her aunt. She then returned to the other portion of the house, and encountered Jasper as she entered the hall.

He was struck by her extreme pallor and the perturbed expression of her face. Apparently forgetful of his late pique, he approached her, and asked:

"Are you ill, Clare? And how is it that my aunt went out without taking you with her?"

"I—I am not ill, but I am distressed, Jasper. I have lost favor because—because I cannot bend myself utterly to my aunt's will. Until to-day she was all kindness, but something—I cannot explain what—has made her angry with me. Oh, Jasper, I wish your father had not gone away. Somehow I feel as if I shall get into trouble without him to advise me."

"Can you not have the same confidence in me, Clare? My father told you you might rely on me, you know."

"Yes; but I cannot speak freely to you as I could to him. Any appearance of intimacy between us would only anger my aunt more deeply with both of us."

He sighed deeply, and averted his eyes from the face that he found all too charming for his peace.

"I am afraid that is true, but it seems hard that you should have no counsellor in the difficulties you seem to take so much to heart. I cannot help thinking sometimes that we are all acting at cross purposes in this house. If I dared, I would end the complications that I cannot understand, by speaking out what my wishes are, and take the consequences, let them be what they may."

Scarcely knowing what she was saying, Clare exclaimed:

"You must not do that, Jasper! You must not ruin yourself, and make my aunt more angry with me, by—by—doing or saying anything imprudent. I will try to restore myself to favor, and I think I shall succeed, if I have a little time granted to me."

"Perhaps so; but Mrs. Adair never forgives any one who thwarts her will. Unless you can submit to that, I fear there is little hope of mollifying her anger. I hoped that you, at least, would escape the usual fate of her protégés, but your reign has been even more brief than that of others she has taken into favor."

"Oh! don't say that my reign is ended, Jasper. I—I—somehow feel the assurance that my aunt will soon take me into greater favor than ever. I do indeed. If

I did not cherish that belief, I would write to papa to come and take me away at once."

He changed color, and with some emotion, said:

"I hope that Mr. Desmond will never be summoned hither on such an errand as that. I hear the carriage approaching, and I will leave you before my aunt can see us talking together. She is so strange and suspicious at times, that she may fancy we have been conspiring against her. It is most unfortunate that she has fallen into one of her fractious moods while my father is away, for he is the only person who can manage her at such times."

"Can he not be recalled? Was the business that took him away so very important?"

Jasper shook his head:

"I know nothing of the nature of the business, but I know him too well to believe that he will return until he has properly attended to it. I must go now, but remember what both he and I have said to you concerning Claudia Coyle. Allow her to gain no hold over you in any way, or it may be worse for you than you think."

"How can she do that, unless I do something wrong myself?" asked Clare, a little annoyed at this warning. "I cannot help thinking that Claudia means kindly by me, in spite of your distrust."

Jasper bowed almost disdainfully.

"Enough has been said to you to put you on your guard, so I will hold my peace on that subject. Good-evening, Miss Desmond."

The next moment he was gone, and Clare stood alone in the lighted hall when her aunt came in, supported on Claudia's arm. She looked sharply around, and said:

"I saw two persons as the carriage stopped. Why have you so suddenly spirited your companion away, Clare?"

"He took himself away," replied Clare, trying to smile, but it was a most abortive effort.

"If it was Jasper, I think he might have come out to assist me from the carriage. He had better mind what he is about, or my disgust at him may take a turn he will not like. Such stupidity, such wrong-headedness, no mortal woman ever had to encounter before! I shall leave both you and him to your own devices, and then we'll see what comes of them."

As Clare was unable to understand this speech, she made no reply to it, and Mona came to take the bonnet and shawl of her mistress, thus making a diversion in her favor.

Tea was served, and the old lady took her place at one side of the table, leaving Claudia to preside at the urn. She glanced at her niece several times, but she spoke to her no more; and Clare, with a choking sensation in her throat, compelled herself to make a show of eating something.

When tea was over the old lady complained of feeling tired, and commanded Claudia to accompany her to her apartment. Clare arose from her seat, and stood flushing and paling alternately, wondering if her aunt intended to treat her so rudely as to ignore the common courtesies of life by refusing to bid her good-night.

When Mrs. Adair gained the door, she turned suddenly, and peevishly said:

"Why do you stand there, looking so woebegone? You only need an empty urn in your hands to personate

Niobe, and I don't like solemn faces. You were brought here to brighten my life, not to give me the hypochondria every time I look at you."

Clare summoned courage to say:

"Dear aunt, how can I look otherwise than sad, when I have been so unfortunate as to offend you?"

"Fiddlesticks! as if you couldn't bring back my good-humor, if you chose. I sha'n't let you kiss me to-night, nor any other night, till you have submitted your will to mine. Good-night, child; though, if you have a *good* one, it is more than I shall."

Awaiting no reply from the unhappy object of her displeasure, Mrs. Adair abruptly left the room, and Clare went up to her own apartment to have a good cry, while her whole soul arose in rebellion against the injustice with which she was treated.

Lyra came up at her usual hour, and uttered many exclamations of sympathy and astonishment at the condition in which she found her young lady, though she was not quite unprepared for what she saw. Mona had already reported the scene of the morning, and the servants were murmuring among themselves that *nobody* could please the mistress, if this dainty young creature, with her winning ways and fresh loveliness, failed to do so.

The girl had become much attached to her new mistress, and she volubly said:

"I 'clar' I wouldn't mind mistiss's tantrums, Miss Clare. They don't 'mount to much arter all, caze you know you's of the old Beaufort blood, and you's got a *right* here. That's what all the people says; an' cut up as she will, *you'll* be the lucky one, arter all's said and done."

"I do not wish to discuss this subject with you, Lyra. My head aches, and I wish you would be quiet while you brush and arrange my hair. I do not feel as if I can bear the sound of a human voice to-night."

Lyra made an effort to be obedient, but after a few moments silence, she maundered on to herself in a way she had when her young lady would not listen to her chatter.

"It's a shame, that's what it is, for her to be a takin' of that Claudy out in the carriage with her, an' leaving her own flesh an' blood behind. I only wish I dared to talk out, an' give her a piece o' my mind."

Clare caught the sense of her words, and she could not help laughing aloud at the idea of one of Mrs. Adair's slaves attempting such a thing as that.

"The laws! Missy, don't you be goin' to git steriky now. That's the way *that* Claudy goes on when she gits riled. But things has gone to suit her lately, and she ain't had a spell for a long time *for her*."

"You must not speak of Miss Coyle in that way, Lyra. I believe she is a friend of mine, and you must be more respectful."

"A friend o' *yourn*! Oh, lordy, what a unsuspectin' angel you is, Miss Clare! Don't you know she'd go down in the dirt, an' eat humble pie off'n the mistiss's very feet, ef she could git her to leave her fortin to her? It's all she's arter, as you'll find out some o' these days."

"You are quite mistaken about that, Lyra. It was Miss Coyle who induced my aunt to send for me, and that does not look as if she is mercenary. I forbid you to speak of her at all to me, if you cannot be more discreet in your remarks."

"Oh, well, Miss Clare, in course I mus' bay you; but I mus' say that mebbe when it's too late, you'll wish you had listened to me."

"I have been taught that domestic treachery is a most base and unpardonable thing, and I will never be guilty of it myself. If Claudia Coyle is what you say, God will send one of His good angels to watch over and protect me from her machinations. You may go now, and hereafter I wish you to understand that you are not to insinuate to me anything against those who dwell under the same roof with me."

Much crestfallen, Lyra withdrew, and consoled herself by saying to Mona, when they were talking over the family affairs:

"Miss Clare's too hifalutin in her notions 'bout folks. She thinks other people's as good as she is, poor thing."

"I dunno why you call her poor thing, gal. She'll be rich as cream yit, an' no thanks to Miss Claudy nyther. Ef you thinks my mistis is gwine to give her fortin to a strange woman, and leave her own kin poor, you dunno much o' the pride o' the Beauforts. She ain't made her will yit; but when 'tis made, you'll see what's what."

"I hope I shill, but I don't b'lieve it."

That night Claudia met Spiers in the grounds, and triumphantly announced to him that the first step toward the consummation they so ardently desired had certainly been taken.

"And we are on the high road to fortune," was the gleeful response. "What a treasure you are, Claudia. You planned this affair; you skilfully manipulate those around you, and induce them to do exactly as you wish.

By what power do you accomplish so much, my beautiful queen?"

"Much of it is done through the magnetism of a strong will. I believe that some natures can dominate others, and from my youth I have tried my powers on those I wished to influence. They failed me in but one instance, and then the nature I had to deal with was a hard and brutal one."

"Yes—I understand that Gordon was beyond the pale, and I am glad of it. If *he* had been other than he was, *we* should never have been thrown together, Claudia, and that would have been for me to lose the divinest incarnation of wickedness that Satan ever conceived. We are soul-mates, my darling, for we act and react on each other, and life holds nothing that, together, we cannot win."

Claudia smiled strangely at this equivocal compliment, and her brow clouded as she said:

"I hope the potion is as sure and deadly in its effects as you told me, and that no antidote can be found to neutralize its power."

"I compounded it myself from a deadly drug I purchased from an old Indian doctor in South America. He taught me the whole mystery of his craft, and if I had desired it, I could have stultified the old dame, in place of killing her by slow degrees."

"Are you sure that no trace of it will be found? Mr. Clifford is a good physician, though he has only used his skill on the plantation; and Dr. Brooke is, or was, a fine surgeon. If they are puzzled by Mrs. Adair's symptoms, they may have a *post-mortem* examination."

"No trace of the poison will be found, I assure you;

and if there were, the proof that it was administered secretly by Clare Desmond would prevent suspicion from falling on us."

"She would tell where she got it, and the woman to whom you gave it would be forced to speak the truth. If you are implicated, and my relations toward you are discovered, I am lost, as well as yourself."

"Are you showing the white feather in the moment of triumph, Claudia?" asked Spiers, with a half sneer. "It is not like you to despond in the prospect of brilliant success. Trust me that my measures have been so securely taken that there is no *possibility* of detection. The old witch who was my agent in this affair has been bought up by me, and she has already left her hut and gone, nobody knows where. I went home in disguise last week, and learned this from my father. Kiss me, my goddess, as an atonement for doubting my foresight."

Claudia kissed him, not once, but many times, and was kissed in return, but she presently drew herself from his ardent clasp, and said:

"Mrs. Adair's wealth shall go to Clare, but I rage with jealousy when I think that she must become your wife, or we cannot secure it. After she is yours, how long must I wait before you can come to me in the retreat I shall find, and say to me that you are free?"

"Just so long as it will take to turn the property into ready money. I know a millionaire in New York who is anxious to invest some of his gold in real estate in the South. I have served him more than once in my life, and it is his turn to serve me now. I know of some slippery dealings of his, and he will only be too glad to secure some papers I have that would embroil him with the govern-

ment, by agreeing to purchase Riverdale at my own valuation. I have thought of everything, Claudia, and made arrangements to get rid of my incumbrance as speedily as possible after I have forced her to marry me."

"But how soon will that be, and how will you put her away?"

Spiers laughed aloud.

"That is a neat phrase, by George! *Put her away!* Well, I sha'n't tarry long about it; you may take your oath on that, if goddesses ever swear. As soon as I have touched the price for which I sold myself to that little piece of nonentity, she will be attacked in the night by violent spasms, and before morning she will be out of your way and mine."

"But can that be done without danger to yourself?"

"Certainly. As soon as I get my funds safely transferred to Europe, I shall embark with my wife in a sailing vessel for Liverpool on which no prying doctor is kept. Sailors are not suspicious; and after the girl has been thrown to the fishes, there can be no resurrection of her body to find evidence that she was foully dealt with."

Hard as Claudia was, she shivered at this picture. She said:

"It is a safe plan; only Clare may refuse to go with you in a sailing vessel. It will seem very odd to her that you should prefer one of them to a steamer."

"I should like to see her rebel against any command I choose to enforce, after she is once my wife," replied Spiers, arrogantly. "By the time we are ready to leave, she will be glad enough to purchase decent treatment by submitting, without a murmur, to anything I may propose."

"Then you won't let her win on you the least little bit, John? Those clinging, dependent women are so apt to twine their wiles around a man's heart."

"Have no jealous fears, Claudia. That style of woman is not to my taste, as you ought to know. I shall compare her with you, and hate her. I have a grudge against her, too, for the cavalier way she treated me, and it will go hard with me but I'll take it out of her before I am done with her. Through her, old Desmond shall get his pay too, for his insolence to me, the wretched old beggar! In three months, at farthest, I will join you at any point in Europe you may fix on, and we will be married at once."

"Oh, John, how happy we will be! It thrills me with ecstasy to anticipate that meeting. All dread, all obstacles to our union removed, all we shall then have to do will be to enjoy the luxury we both so highly prize."

"Yes, my princess, and to exult in the cleverness by which it was won," said Spiers, complacently.

Much more in the same strain passed between them before they separated, and it was nearly midnight when Claudia came back to the house, and gained admittance through a side door she had opened after the rest of the household were asleep.

A shaded lamp was burning in her room, and she sat down beside the window to think over the interview which had lately passed. For the first time, all the horror of her treachery arose before her, and for a moment she faltered in its consummation. It was but for a moment; all the hard elements of her nature arose to combat the unwonted feeling, and she at length rose up with gleaming eyes and white face, muttering:

"It is a high stake, and something must be sacrificed to win. For gold—for *gold*, and what it can buy, everything is possible to *me*!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

MR. CLIFFORD'S DISCOVERY.

THE next two weeks of Clare's life were passed in a state of excitement which, at times, arose almost to delirium. Mrs. Adair's treatment of her fluctuated in a most perplexing manner. At times she was almost as kind to her as in her first days at Riverdale; at others, so harsh and cold that the poor girl's endurance was tasked to its uttermost limit.

In her simplicity, she attributed the kindness to the effects of the love-charm, which she had found means to mingle nightly with her aunt's lemonade; and the harshness, to the old lady's displeasure at any appearance of friendly feeling between herself and Jasper.

Walter Brooke would have been satisfied with the dismissal Clare had given him, and have held himself aloof from Riverdale, but that would not have suited Claudia's views, and she wrote him a friendly note marked private, in which she told him that she possessed Miss Desmond's confidence, and that she already repented of the abrupt rejection she had given him. If Mr. Brooke would renew his attentions, and try his fate a second time, Claudia assured him that a happier result might be anticipated.

Walter had really become very much fascinated by this gay, light-hearted young girl, and with the belief that "faint heart never won fair lady," he brushed up his rebellious locks, took a long look at himself in the mirror, and resolved to try again.

He came every other day, and if Clare had been shrewd or suspicious, she would have attributed her aunt's bad treatment to those visits; for after they occurred, Mrs. Adair was always more cold and bitter in her manner than before. But under Claudia's skilful manipulations Mrs. Adair would relax in a few hours, and poor Clare would fancy that the change was due to the potent powers of her magic elixir.

Mrs. Adair did not seem as well as usual; she complained to Claudia of increased action of the heart, and said her physicians had always warned her that there was danger in excitement of any kind. She lay back in her large chair for hours listening to Claudia play on the organ which stood in her dressing-room.

Clare was never summoned now to her presence, to read to her or to prattle with her: as the old lady had said, she and Jasper were left to their own devices, and on those days that were free from the intrusion of Walter Brooke, they passed many hours together, talking freely on any subject but that of love. Jasper was at a loss to understand Clare, for he saw clearly from her treatment of Brooke that there was no chance that he would be accepted; yet she did not dismiss him, as he thought she should do, and he mentally accused her of carrying on a heartless flirtation with two men, both of whom she must be aware were deeply in love with her.

In vain had he tried to put a guard on himself, and

permit no evidence of his passion to be given. Every glance of his eyes, every inflection of his voice, when they were together, gave Clare the assurance which made her inexpressibly happy in his presence, yet filled her soul with doubts and fears when she was alone.

"To accept him will be ruin to both of us," she thought; "but if he would only speak—would only tell me that, for my sake, he is willing to risk the loss of all my aunt can give, I would not hesitate a moment. I think she is less hard to me of late, and the love-charm may do its work after all."

At this crisis Mr. Clifford returned. He was much surprised and chagrined when he heard from his son that Clare had fallen into disfavor with her aunt. He curtly said:

"This is Claudia Coyle's doings. She has availed herself of my absence to work in the dark; but I will baffle her yet. A more dangerous, scheming woman cannot be found; yet Mrs. Adair is so infatuated with her, that words of accusation will be useless, as long as they are not supported by convincing proofs of her unworthiness. I went on this journey to Baltimore chiefly to obtain them, for one of the letters she brought hither was written by a lady of that city."

"Did you succeed?" asked Jasper, eagerly.

An expression of gloom settled over Mr. Clifford's face.

"I did not. I hoped to bring back with me something that would suffice to show Mrs. Adair that her confidence is misplaced; but Mrs. Lyon, the lady I referred to, is absent on a northern tour, and I could not even obtain her address. But the exposure is only de-

ferred. From what I learned of Mrs. Lyon herself, I think she is a person who, for a consideration, would not hesitate to give a character to any plausible woman who had pleased her fancy. She is a butterfly of fashion, with little fortune to sustain her pretensions—a person of no fixed principles, and altogether unreliable. She has been in Europe, and if she chooses, I believe she can throw valuable light on Miss Coyle's antecedents."

"But would she do it?"

"That is to be tested, for I shall seek her again when the season for watering-places is over. I can outbid Claudia, and from what I could gather concerning her friend, money can accomplish a great deal toward unsealing her lips. The two met in Paris, and being congenial spirits, they soon formed an intimacy, and travelled to this country on the same ship."

Jasper sighed, and said:

"I wish you had seen this woman. Something tells me that Clare is in danger from Claudia's machinations, yet she refuses to believe in her utter falseness."

"I warned her before she came hither, and my words should have had some weight. She is impulsive and generous, and to such natures it is painful to believe in evil. If Mrs. Adair was not the most obstinate and wrong-headed of women all this could be set right at once. I think the time has passed for the concealment of her true wishes, but I dare not speak till I have her permission. I will seek her now, and try to convince her that—"

He broke off abruptly, and after a pause, went on in a more cheerful tone:

"I know whither your wishes tend, Jasper, and there

is reason to hope that before long the skies will brighten above you, and the old lady get over her pique toward you because you would not marry Claudia. Hope for the best, my boy, for I shall work bravely for you."

With these words he left the room, and despatched a message to Mrs. Adair stating his wish to see her at once, if she was well enough to receive him.

Claudia was reading aloud, and she changed color slightly when she heard of Mr. Clifford's arrival. His influence in a measure neutralized her own, and she glanced uneasily at Mrs. Adair, as that lady exclaimed, almost joyfully:

"Dick back again! That is good news, indeed, for I have missed him every day since he left. Go to him, Claudia, and tell him to come to me at once. You need not return, as I wish to speak with him alone."

Claudia reluctantly laid down her book, saying:

"I hope you will not suffer yourself to become excited in any way, dear madam. You are not so strong of late, and you should keep yourself as quiet as possible."

"Dear me, do you suppose that I am going to put myself in a quiver because Dick Clifford is coming to tell me how he invested a sum of money I have set apart for the Desmonds? Even if Clare is ungrateful, I am not going to let my own kindred grovel in poverty. I wanted him to do the business in Norfolk, but he persisted in going to Baltimore to buy some kind of stocks that pay better interest, he said."

"I wonder if that was all that took him to Baltimore?" thought Claudia, a vague feeling of alarm rising in her mind when she remembered that in that city resided the friend who had obtained for her the letters of

recommendation which enabled her to secure the place of companion to Mrs. Adair.

She walked slowly through the long corridor which communicated with the main hall, and by the time she reached it she was calm and smiling as usual.

Mr. Clifford was pacing impatiently to and fro, awaiting the return of his messenger, but he paused abruptly as Claudia said, in her sweetest tones:

"I am glad to welcome you back, Mr. Clifford; we have missed you sadly, and I fear that my dear old friend's health has suffered from your absence."

Mr. Clifford bowed, and merely touched the hand she extended to him.

"I am surprised to hear that, for Mrs. Adair was unusually well when I went away. I thought the presence of her niece had given her a new lease of life."

Claudia sighed.

"I am sorry to tell you that Miss Desmond has shared the usual fate of her favorites. She has become as much embittered against her as she is against Jasper, because they will not rush into each other's arms without being told that it is her wish for them to do so. Unreasonable— isn't she?"

He glanced keenly at her, and coldly said:

"I can set all that right, if she will allow me to speak with her. I hope you bring me the permission to go to her room, Miss Coyle?"

"Yes—I came for that purpose; but you must be careful not to agitate her. She seems strangely affected of late, and if I did not know her aversion to medicine, I should think she has been tampering with her health in some way."

There was a sudden gleam of suspicion in Mr. Clifford's eyes, and he became perceptibly paler, as he abruptly asked:

"Has Mrs. Adair made her will in my absence?"

"No, indeed—she is not so bad as that, Mr. Clifford. She is superstitious, and will never make her will till she is in extremity."

His face cleared, and hastily saying:

"Excuse me; I must not keep the old lady waiting on me," he passed her, and went on to Mrs. Adair's door.

Mona opened it at his knock, and with a bow and a welcoming smile, passed out herself.

When Mrs. Adair spoke, his quick ear detected a change in her voice, and he looked anxiously in her face, as he said:

"I hope you are not worse than you were when I left you, dear madam. I have been detained longer than I expected, but I have accomplished the business you sent me on in a satisfactory manner."

"I don't know about being worse, Dick, but I feel listless and weary, and my heart troubles me more than ever. I have been worried lately, and that may be the cause of its increased action. I would not send for Dr. Brooke, though Claudia urged me to do so."

Mr. Clifford held her hand in his own, and counted the quickened pulse. He then bent down his ear and listened to the rapid beating of her heart, and his face grew very grave.

"You have been worrying yourself about something since I have been away, and your health has suffered. Will you tell me the cause of your uneasiness? Perhaps I shall be able to calm it."

In an irritated tone, she replied:

"You can never do that, unless you can control the vagrant fancies of a silly young girl. Claudia assures me that Jasper has fallen as much in love with Clare as I can wish; but here *she* is carrying on a flirtation with Walter Brooke, thinking, I suppose, that she will secure a good nest for herself, if I should cut her off in my will. I am so much offended with her that I can scarcely tolerate her presence near me, and I only keep her here in the hope that she will come to her right senses, and give Jasper the encouragement he only needs to induce him to speak."

Mr. Clifford sat down in front of her, and quietly said:

"I think you are unnecessarily annoying yourself, aunt. I am quite sure that Clare likes my son better than Walter Brooke, and if she dared she would openly show her preference. You have ordained that they are both to be kept in the dark as to your wishes; but the time has come to enlighten them, and I fear that you will defeat yourself if you withhold the truth from them any longer."

Mrs. Adair obstinately said:

"Clare shall not be bribed to fall into my views. If she is so mercenary as you hint, she may go back to her parents, or take Walter for all I care. If she does not care more for my money than for true love, she would not play this double game. It is disgusting to think of so young a girl angling between two chances, ready to take the best at a moment's warning. If she understood my wishes, she would turn to Jasper at once; but if she takes him at all, she shall do it blindfold. I'll not have

him put in the scales with such a man as Walter, and weighed down by my gold. It would not be fair to him."

"I think, madam, that you are mistaken in your estimate of this young girl. Some influence must have been at work against her, or you could not have become so much embittered. I am quite willing to accept her as my daughter, for I have seen nothing in her to warrant the harsh judgment you have pronounced against her."

"You are striking at Claudia now," said Mrs. Adair, harshly, "and you always do it when you get a chance. She is a good friend to Jasper, and seeing how much in love he is with this pretty coquette, she is using all her influence with Clare to detach her from Walter, and induce her to encourage your son. *Now*, what do you say, sir?"

"Only this: that Miss Coyle has some end of her own to serve, in playing the part of go-between where her services are not asked for nor appreciated. I mistrust her; I believe her to be false to the core of her heart, and her object in bringing Clare Desmond hither was to alienate you from her, and through her from all your own family. I acceded to your wish to let these young people drift into love for each other without using any undue influence; but the thing has gone far enough, and I entreat you to permit me to enlighten Jasper at least. Clare can then choose her own destiny, and I do not for a moment doubt what that choice will be."

Mrs. Adair flushed angrily at his accusations against Claudia, but she grew calmer as he went on, and after a moment's reflection, said:

"I agree to the last, provided Clare is kept in pro-

found ignorance of how much is involved in the choice she may make. If she proves her disinterestedness by accepting Jasper, I will not only receive her into favor again, but make my will at once, bequeathing to her my whole fortune."

"I accept the conditions, and I have no doubt as to the result," was the grave reply; and then Mr. Clifford turned the conversation, gave a lively account of what he had seen in his absence, and described a brief visit he had made to Mr. Desmond's house.

Mrs. Adair listened with vivid interest, and asked many questions concerning her unknown relatives. She at length said:

"You told them nothing of the handsome addition I have made to their income, I hope. I design that as a pleasant surprise for Clare, when she shows a willingness to comply with my wishes."

"I obeyed your instructions literally, madam. I have the bonds with me, made out in Mrs. Desmond's name, and you can choose your own time for transferring them to her."

"That is well," said the old lady, graciously, and the interview was ended by the entrance of Mona to say that the carriage was at the door, and Miss Coyle wished to know if Mrs. Adair intended to take her evening drive.

"Of course I shall; it is the only thing that keeps me alive. You may go now, Dick, and I know that I can trust you to conduct this affair as I desire."

Mr. Clifford bowed, and went out, intending to seek his son and tell him all that had passed between his aunt and himself with reference to his marriage; but Clare met him in the hall, and had innumerable questions to ask him concerning her home, and its beloved inmates.

While he talked with her, the two elder ladies set out on their evening drive, and Mr. Clifford significantly said to her:

"You give Claudia every chance to monopolize the ear of the old lady. Why have you ceased to ride out with them, my dear?"

"Only because I am not invited. I told you I should get into trouble as soon as you were gone, Mr. Clifford, and that very day my aunt flared up at me, and said so many insulting things, that if it had not been for Claudia, I believe I would have written to papa to come and take me away."

"Oh! ah! the divine Claudia then played the part of friend to you? I wish I could fathom her motives, for deep and subtle ones she had, I doubt not. I can see a little way through them, though; as soon as I was out of the way, she produced a breach between you and your aunt, that she might pretend to heal it in time, and thus win your gratitude and confidence."

Clare flushed, and deprecatingly said:

"Don't say anything more against Claudia, please. She has been very good to me, and—and—I cannot help thinking that you do not understand her."

"I only wish I did," said Mr. Clifford, with perfect sincerity. "After all, it does not matter. You must take counsel of me now, remember, and not of the fair Claudia."

"I can safely promise to do that."

And Mr. Clifford went in quest of his son.

He did not find him in their rooms, and a servant he encountered told him that Jasper had gone out on the river, as was his frequent custom in the cool twilight of

evening. He walked toward the landing, and lounged about, awaiting Jasper's return. But as he failed to come, and he saw nothing of his boat, Mr. Clifford went slowly back to the house, thinking of Clare and her troubles, and smiling as he pictured to himself her innocent joy when she found herself restored to her aunt's favor, and the betrothed bride of the man he felt sure she loved.

He came up on the side of the house on which Mrs. Adair's rooms opened, and he was much surprised to see a figure in white, which he at once recognized as Miss Desmond, standing on the balcony in front of the window, her form clearly outlined by the shaded light which burned within the room.

Before entering, she turned and cast a searching gaze around, as if anxious to be certain that no one was observing her, and Mr. Clifford stood perfectly still in the shadow of the thick shrubbery, wondering what took her to Mrs. Adair's apartment, and why she so stealthily entered it.

Determined to penetrate the mystery, he moved cautiously forward, and stood in front of the balcony, his head reaching just above the floor. The low window enabled him to see what passed in the room; and unfortunately for Clare, the table on which the lemonade was placed was just within the range of his vision.

He saw her drop the elixir in the open mouth of the carafe and cover it up again with swift fingers, and then she flitted toward the window, muttering to herself inaudible words.

Mr. Clifford had barely time to conceal himself before

she flitted past him, and almost ran toward the front of the house.

"My God! can a creature apparently so innocent be worse even than Claudia!" he muttered, faint with the shock he had received.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE CHEMISTS AT WORK.

MR. CLIFFORD stood a few moments like one paralyzed, and almost doubting the evidence of his own senses.

Mrs. Adair's health had evidently grown worse of late, and he recalled Claudia's suggestion that she had been tampering with herself. The suspicion that darted into his mind when she spoke thus, he felt was unjust to her, for the will had not been made, and in case the old lady died intestate, Mrs. Desmond, as heir-at-law, would become the legal possessor of the greater part of her large estate.

Could that consideration have led her daughter to perpetrate such iniquity as this? he asked himself. Could she, with such fair prospects before her, have ruined all by attempting to poison her aunt? He recoiled in horror from the thought; but in what other way could he interpret what he had himself seen that night?

When he recovered from the stupor into which he had been thrown, he ascended the steps, entered the room,

and looking around, took from a carved bracket fastened against the wall a small Chinese cup covered with grotesque paintings.

"This will scarcely be missed before I can get an opportunity to replace it," he muttered, as he uncovered the carafe, and poured a portion of its contents into the cup. "Now we will see what devil's work has been done here. Oh, my poor boy, what a blow for you this will be!"

He left the room as he entered it, and going around the house gained his own apartments without approaching the front.

Jasper had just returned, and he regarded with some surprise his father's pale face, which looked more troubled than he had ever before seen it.

"What has happened?" he asked. "Has my aunt quarrelled with you too, as she seems inclined to do with every one about her except Claudia Coyle?"

"No; we are very good friends. The old lady was very affable, and quite satisfied with the result of my journey. When I left her I thought I had some good news for you, but something has happened since which has quite upset me, and I do not think I shall repeat to you now what she authorized me to say."

"You are very mysterious, father. And what is that you are carrying in your hand so carefully covered up? The old begum's Chinese cup, I declare! Did she give it to you? If she did, she must be going to the 'land of the leal,' for she values that bit of porcelain as highly as if it were set in diamonds of the purest water."

"She did not give it to me. I only borrowed it a little while, and I hope there will be time to replace it before

she gets back. I have something in it which I wish you to analyze carefully. Find me a jar to pour this lemonade in, Jasper, and be quick."

Jasper became very pale, and his hand trembled as he held out a glass vessel, into which his father poured the liquid, saying:

"Make a very careful analysis of this, Jasper. Thank God that you understand chemistry, and no stranger's aid need be asked to enable us to arrive at the truth."

"But—but what does this mean, father? My aunt's night draught is lemonade at this season of the year, and your face frightens me. Has any one been trying to tamper with her life?"

"I cannot tell till I know what has been mixed with that liquid. Tell me that, and I will then enlighten you further. I must go now and replace this cup. Go to work at once, Jasper, and let me know the worst."

Mr. Clifford carefully wiped out the cup, and hastened from the room, leaving his son bewildered and much alarmed. He hastened to Mrs. Adair's apartment, and had barely time to replace it and effect his escape before the old lady returned, and, complaining of fatigue, went directly to her room.

Mr. Clifford returned to his son, and aided him to make the analysis in which they were so deeply interested, and the result was carefully noted down.

When it was finished, Jasper said:

"I have done your bidding, sir, and now I hope you will explain to me how you came to suspect that any injury was designed to my aunt, and also who is the person implicated."

Mr. Clifford gravely replied:

"I have reflected on what is best to be done in this strange tangle of affairs, Jasper, and I think I shall keep my own counsel for the present. You must wait my own time to speak, and be satisfied that I am acting for the best."

"I know that your judgment is always sound, father, and, as usual, I yield to it. If there is a criminal, I know it is Claudia Coyle; though what she is to gain by my aunt's death, unless her will is made in her favor, I cannot see."

"I believe that Claudia is at the bottom of this; but to ensnare her in her own trap, I must be wary and silent. Do not change your manner to her, Jasper; give her no cause to believe that you suspect her of any new wickedness. I must unravel this mystery, and if possible, save that unfortunate girl who has evidently been brought here only to be made use of in a most shameful and terrible manner by Miss Coyle."

Jasper reeled, and sunk on a seat, as he gasped:

"Clare—Clare! has *she* anything to do with this? No! no! it is impossible! She could never have allied herself with that infamous woman, though she refuses to believe her as bad as we know her to be."

Mr. Clifford had intended to tell his son what he had seen himself, but the anguish in Jasper's face at the mere thought of Clare's complicity in any of Claudia's designs, induced him to change his mind. It would be time enough, when her guilt was proved, to stab him to the heart with the knowledge of the events of that evening. He sadly asked:

"Do you then love this poor girl so dearly, Jasper?"

"Love her! You know I do. It is madness to do

so, I know; though I have at times hoped that I should not blight her prospects by asking her to cast her lot with mine. Some things that have fallen from you have induced me to believe that my aunt is not so much opposed to our union as she has pretended to be; but I feared to act on them lest I should ruin Clare, and thus entail poverty on her family. But for *them*, I should not have hesitated, for I can win my own way when I am permitted to enter the world, and make a home for myself and the wife of my heart."

Mr. Clifford paced the floor in silence for many moments, apparently absorbed in troubled thought. Then, as if speaking to himself more than to Jasper, he said:

"All this complication has arisen from a crotchet in one old woman's brain. If she had permitted me to tell you before I went away, that a union between you and Clare is the dearest wish of her heart, all might have been well. As it is, God alone can foresee the end."

A deep flush arose to Jasper's face, and in great excitement, he exclaimed:

"I am free then to ask Clare the question that has trembled on my lips for days past. But why this cruel deception has been carried on so long, or indeed at all, I cannot understand."

"I will explain that. Mrs. Adair thought she had been too precipitate in pressing on you a marriage with Claudia; she believed that was why you recoiled from so beautiful a woman as she undoubtedly is. She did not wish to make the same blunder again, and woman-like, she went to the opposite extreme. She has overdone her part, and made both you and Clare afraid to betray the

preference you have for each other, lest her favor should be forfeited."

"She has treated us both shamefully," said the lover, with much heat. "But I will set matters right at once. I will no longer be silent; I will tell Clare that I love her beyond my life, and let her accept or reject me as she chooses."

His father gravely said:

"Under present circumstances, I cannot permit that, Jasper. Wait—wait till this cloud has passed away. I have myself witnessed that which gives me unpleasant suspicions regarding Clare, and until they are cleared up you must do or say nothing to commit yourself in any way. This is my ultimatum, my son, and I think you will abide by it."

There was indignation, terror and rebellion in Jasper's eyes as he flashed them on his father, and angrily repeated:

"*Suspicious!* What could be suspicious in the actions of a girl who is still half a child in her simplicity and truthfulness of character? If an angel could appear before me, and tell me that Clare Desmond had been guilty of a mean or dishonorable action, I could scarcely believe him. Excuse me, father, but in this matter I cannot be dictated to. My happiness and hers has already been too shamefully trifled with, and I must now follow only the dictates of my own heart."

Overwhelmed by this passionate burst, Mr. Clifford silently regarded the working face of his son several moments before he replied. He was strongly tempted to tell him what he had seen, but in Jasper's state of excitement, he feared the effect of such a blow upon him, and he only said:

"If you defy my wishes, of course you must act as you please; but I fear that when you know as much as I unfortunately do, you will regret your precipitate action."

"Speak out then, and tell what you hint at."

"No; that might be unjust to Clare. As long as there is a doubt in my own mind, I will not betray what I— There, Jasper, I will speak no more on this subject. I leave you to think over what I have said, and when you are cooler you will see that I am right. A delay of a few days, or even weeks, cannot signify, if the end is happy."

"If I am ever to win happiness," said Jasper defiantly, "I must trample on scruples, and snatch the crown of love in spite of the efforts of fate to tear it from me. Something tells me that I shall baffle Claudia Coyle by doing this; for that *she* is the real author of all these complications, I have no doubt."

"Nor have I; but we do not know her secret schemes, and by acting as you propose, you may only be playing into her hands. Give me a few days, and I think I can make myself master of the situation, and deal such retribution to Claudia as she deserves."

"If I thought that, I would promise not to speak for three days; but I will not avoid Clare. I will devote myself to her openly now. That may mollify my aunt, and induce her to treat my poor darling with less coldness."

"It will certainly have that effect, and I will watch Claudia, and see what effect the change in Mrs. Adair will have on her. Seal up the remainder of that lemonade, Jasper, that it may be submitted to other chemists,

should the necessity arise. I shall take care to have another draught prepared every night for the old lady, and substitute it for the one Mona places beside her bed."

"Mona and Claudia must be in league with each other. It is dreadful to think that one's own servants can be corrupted in this way."

"How much more dreadful would he think it, if I told him all!" thought Mr. Clifford; but he only said, "It is growing late, and you look quite worn out with excitement. Try to sleep, my son, and hope for the best."

Neither slept much that night; and in the morning an invitation came from Brookover, for the family to dine there. On this occasion Mrs. Adair decided to go, and take with her Claudia and Clare, escorted by Jasper.

She wished to observe for herself what encouragement her niece gave to Walter Brooke, and to draw her own conclusions as to Jasper's chances of success with one she had been taught to believe a mercenary and heartless flirt.

Influenced by Mr. Clifford's words on the previous evening, the old lady was kinder in her manner to Clare, and even summoned her to sit beside her in the boat, when they crossed the river to Brookover. Easily elated, the poor girl's spirits rose, and she made herself so agreeable to her aunt that she suddenly said:

"My dear, I can't conceive how I have done without your lively chatter all these days. I have missed you, child; how much I do not care to tell you; but now I can't help hoping that all will be fair weather between us in future."

"If it depends on me, aunt, there can be no doubt about that," was the smiling reply. "My heart has been half broken by my banishment from your apartments; but now that you are good to me again, I shall be as happy as a bird."

The old lady wistfully regarded her, and she said:

"What a pity it is that you are so charming, Clare! If you were less so, you would not be tempted to trifle with men's hearts as you do."

"A trifle, aunt? Oh, how much you are mistaken! How could you have obtained such an impression of me?"

"How, child? by your own actions, to be sure," in an irritated tone. "If you are a flirt, you ought at least to have grace enough to admit it. In the world's code, it is not an unpardonable sin; in *my* code, it is far more pardonable than falsehood, or—or treachery to the hand that fosters you."

Clare shrank back as if a blow had been struck her, and she tremulously said:

"I am not conscious of deserving such a reproof from you, aunt. If you think so badly of me, send for papa, and let him take me away."

The old lady glared angrily at her.

"I cannot imagine how you dare to speak to me in that way. Send for your father, indeed! A pretty return that, for all the kindness I have lavished on you! I *will* send for him, as you suggest, and banish you forever from my presence, if the last chance I am willing to give you to regain my favor is not used."

"Aunt, you speak in riddles which I am unable to solve. If I could clearly understand your wishes, I—I

— No, I cannot promise anything; for I am afraid that all my efforts will not enable me to accept the—the lot you have awarded me.”

“So it seems you do understand, and are determined to ruin yourself sooner than yield to my earnest desire to see you suitably and happily married. That is enough, Miss Desmond. I *shall* send for your father to-morrow; and when we get back to Riverdale, you may pack up your things and get ready to go away with him.”

Struck to the heart by this sudden ending to all her hopes, Clare at that moment understood how worthless had been the love-charm in which she had placed such reliance. Had it possessed any power, her aunt could not cast her off in this harsh and heartless manner, and she bitterly regretted having used it. The change in Mrs. Adair's appearance had not escaped her, and she began to fear that, innocent as she had been assured it was, there might be something in it peculiarly hurtful to one of her aunt's temperament.

She drew her veil closely over her face, to prevent the others from seeing its pallor and the tears that filled her eyes.

Mrs. Adair raised her voice, and sharply said:

“Change seats with Miss Desmond, Claudia. I prefer to have you near me, for you at least do not thwart me in everything on which my heart is set.”

The rowers rested on their oars, and Claudia left her seat beside Jasper, and sunk into the one poor Clare hastened to relinquish.

As they passed each other, Claudia managed to whisper:

“She has changed her mind about Walter Brooke. Be on you guard with him to-day.”

More bewildered than ever by these words, Clare indignantly felt that in the hands of these two women she had become a mere puppet, and she determined that before twenty-four hours were over she would have a clear understanding of her position, and not permit herself to be sent away in disgrace without a full and clear explanation with her aunt.

Claudia had managed to overhear all that passed between Mrs. Adair and her niece, and she comprehended that the time for changing her tactics had arrived. The betrothal of the lovers must now be brought about without delay, the will be made, and all would be prepared for the final blow.

She watched every symptom of the old lady, and saw plainly that she failed from day to day, though she complained little, and seemed annoyed if any one spoke of the change in her appearance. She had grown thinner, and her complexion had assumed that livid tinge often seen in persons who suffer from an affection of the heart.

Claudia was aware that the tragedy of her granddaughter's death had so deeply shocked her, that from that time Mrs. Adair had been subject to attacks of faintness, which Mr. Clifford attributed to heart disease. She had informed Spiers of this, and the elixir prepared by him was designed to increase the action of the heart, and thus gradually produce death in a natural manner.

“The end must soon come now,” thought the remorseless plotter, “and an understanding between those two young fools must be brought about. The old lady knows how frail her hold on life is, and there will be no delay in settling her worldly affairs when she is sure that her dearly beloved lands will not be divided after her

death. Oh, ho! if she only knew who will have the selling of them, and the enjoyment of the luxury their price will purchase, I wonder what she would say or do?"

She now whispered to her old friend:

"You must not be too hard on Clare. She has been hesitating between her two lovers, and I am sure she has finally made up her mind to refuse Walter, and think more favorably of your candidate for her favor."

"But she has just told me herself that she cannot, or rather *will* not, let me choose for her," snapped the old lady.

"Then there must be some misunderstanding between you, dear madam; for I am convinced that Clare has lately found out that she likes Jasper the best of the two. If you would let them know that their union is what you wished to accomplish in bringing her hither, I think all difficulty would be at an end."

"Your advice tallies with that of Dick Clifford, but I'll not take it just yet. I will make my own observations to-day, and decide what is best. A day or two can make little difference in the denouement."

The speaker little knew how much would happen in the time she named—how slender was the thread on which the sword of fate was suspended; how soon it might fall, and crush more than one in its fatal descent.

The boat was by this time drawing near the landing, and Dr. Brooke and his son were there to welcome them.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MRS. HARTE'S GAME.

DR. BROOKE, in a new and fashionably-made suit of clothes, with crimped ruffles on his shirt bosom, in which glittered diamond studs, and his gray hair carefully brushed, presented so unusual a sight to Mrs. Adair, that she exclaimed in astonishment:

"What an Adonis you have become, Doctor! Who would believe that you are the man who lately thought comfort is the great desideratum at your age? What on earth has induced you to dress yourself up in a tight-fitting suit of broadcloth in such weather as this? I declare, miracles will never cease!"

The doctor cleared his throat, and seemed much embarrassed at this unceremonious address. He rather stiffly said:

"I am very glad to welcome you to my home once more, Mrs. Adair, and I cannot see why you should think it strange that I make a better toilet than usual, to do you and these young ladies honor. Excuse me, madam, but I am surprised at such brusqueness on the part of a lady I have hitherto considered a model of good taste and polished breeding."

"I feel myself snubbed," said Mrs. Adair, laughing, "but I put up with it like an angel, Doctor, because I have just heard something that has put me in too good a humor to allow me to retort, as I might under other circumstances. I declare you are a fine-looking man

still, and few persons would believe that you are but four years younger than I am."

"Oh, I am not quite a Methusalah yet," replied the old gentleman, looking black as a thunder-cloud, though he made a grim effort to smile. "Young ladies, you are charming as ever, I perceive. Jasper, I am glad to see you, though I should have been better pleased still, if your father had accompanied you hither."

"He had business to attend to, sir, and you know he rarely visits any one."

By this time they had all landed, and a large arm-chair with two bearers was awaiting Mrs. Adair, as the old doctor knew that the exertion of mounting the slight elevation on which his house stood would not be good for her. She took her seat in it without comment, for she had often been carried that way before, and he walked beside her, holding a large umbrella over her head.

Walter Brooke had given them all cordial greetings, and he at once made an effort to appropriate Clare; but this Claudia coolly defeated. She took his arm, saying, in a guarded tone:

"I have something important to say to you; so you must leave Clare to Jasper for a while, if not altogether in fact."

His greenish gray eyes flashed a spark of angry defiance at her, and as they walked on together, he said:

"I do not understand you, Miss Coyle; nor am I likely to accept your present advice, after having from your own hand the assurance that Clare would eventually consent to become my wife."

"I believed that when I wrote to you; but she is a

coquette at heart, and I am sorry I sent that note. All the encouragement she has given you of late was only designed to bring Jasper out. I know now that she is in love with him, and nothing can please Mrs. Adair so much as a union between them."

"And do you expect me to give her up to him without a struggle?" was the fierce question he put to her. "When I was ready to withdraw my pretensions, believing that perseverance would be useless, *you* stepped in, and made me believe that Clare had repented her rejection. Her manner since then has often puzzled me, and I have wondered whether it was she or you who was playing with me, using me for some purpose of your own."

"I think it very hard that, in your anxiety to screen Clare from blame, you should judge me so unjustly, Mr. Brooke. I believe she *did* intend to make sure of a good match by accepting you, until she discovered that her aunt's heart is set on a union between herself and Jasper, and that it would be more to her interest to take him. She deceived me, or I should never have taken the part I did. In what way could *I* hope to be benefited by taking you in in this way, I ask you?"

He bluntly replied:

"You are a managing, scheming woman, Miss Coyle, and I cannot help thinking that it was a dark day for Clare Desmond—aye, and for her aunt too—when you took up your abode beneath the roof of Riverdale. I cannot see how you are to be benefited by the treachery you have been guilty of toward me; but that you had some plan of your own to serve, I feel quite sure. Clare has not allowed me again to speak of love to her, and

her manner to me has been so shy, that before to-day I have doubted if she ever gave you any such confidence as you reported to me."

"Think what you please," said Claudia, haughtily, as she withdrew her arm from his. "I am quite indifferent to your opinion, though I know I was acting in good faith. I have heard much of the courtesy of Virginia gentlemen, but you give me a fine specimen of it here on your father's grounds, where I am received as his guest."

Walter flushed at this taunt.

"I beg your pardon, if I have seemed discourteous, Miss Coyle. No one respects the laws of hospitality more than I; but the suspicions that have been seething in my mind for days past, would not be refused utterance when you coolly told me that I must surrender the girl of my heart, and think of her no more."

"You are welcome to think of her, dream of her, madden for her, if you choose, but I say to you that you will never win her; and moreover, if you persist in devoting yourself to her to-day, in the presence of her aunt, you will ruin her hopes of succeeding to that magnificent inheritance. Only as the betrothed wife of Jasper, will anything be given her. I have this from Mrs. Adair's own lips."

"The deuce!" thought Walter, who was not so much in love with Clare as to be indifferent to fortune. "I wonder if she is speaking the truth now, or if she is only trying to disgust me with the pursuit of a penniless bride."

He coldly said:

"My father's son can afford to marry without asking

what dower his wife is to have; but I should be sorry to injure Miss Desmond's chances with her aunt, nor will I thrust on her attentions that, you say, will now be unwelcome to her."

Claudia laughed bitterly.

"I understand. Stripped of her golden prestige, Clare is no more to you than any other pretty girl; though you express yourself so well, Mr. Brooke, that is really the true meaning of your words."

Walter was about to make an angry retort, when Mrs. Adair, hearing the laugh of Claudia, turned her head, and called out:

"What is amusing you so much there? Come up, and tell me; for the doctor is not half as agreeable as usual. He is affronted with me yet, I am afraid, because I commented on his fine dress."

The doctor straightened himself, and grew stiffer than ever, and Claudia stepped to the side of the chair, smiling brightly on its occupant.

"It was only some nonsense hardly worth repeating, dear madam. You know that Walter always has the power to make me laugh."

"But I insist on hearing it, for I feel bored already," said the old lady, regardless of the effect her words might have on the two gentlemen.

Thus pressed, Claudia called on her invention, and said:

"He was telling me a funny story of a low-bred man who had money left him after he attained what should have been years of discretion. He wished to study the language and habits of refined people, and he read all the hifalutin novels he could find, adopting their big

words without understanding their meaning. He was describing a romantic cottage to Mr. Brooke, which was built on a stream of water, and he said the house was *absconded* in the shade, and the river ran *previous* to it. Ha, ha! Did you ever hear anything so absurd?"

They all laughed, and Walter was marvelling at the fertility of Claudia's invention, when the old lady checked her mirth, and dryly said:

"I know the hero of that story, and he is a kind-hearted though uncultivated man. I do not like such a person to be made the butt of ridicule, Miss Coyle."

"Pardon me, madam. I was not aware that any friend of yours could commit such blunders. At any rate, it is Mr. Brooke who is the culprit, not I."

Walter flashed a contemptuous glance at her, and with an air of exaggerated courtesy, said:

"I never contradict a *lady*; but I would respectfully ask Miss Coyle if she has ever descended to the depths of the well in which it is fabled that truth dwells?"

"I never answer impertinent questions," replied Claudia, with a rippling laugh, but a look of defiance was in her brilliant eyes as she turned them full on the young man.

He ground his teeth, and muttered through them:

"If you were one of my own sex, I would wring answers from you that would at least have some semblance of truth in them."

As they drew near the house, three ladies were seen grouped together on the piazza. Judith, very plainly attired, and looking both weary and annoyed, stood between Mrs. Harte and Phoebe Simpson.

The widow was handsomely and becomingly dressed

with natural flowers in her hair; and when Mrs. Adair caught sight of her, she glanced significantly at her old friend, and said:

"Ah-h! that's it, is it?"

"I—I don't understand you, madam," said Dr. Brooke, in his most stately manner. "I never was good at guessing enigmas."

"I only thought I had discovered the mystery of your spruce appearance, that is all. Have you had a new revelation from the spirit world, doctor?"

A cloud came over his face, and he curtly said:

"That phase of my being is over. The angel of my life has entered the highest heaven, and her sublimated essence is no longer permitted to commune with earthly natures."

"And her bust, doctor? What has been its fate?"

"There is irony in your tones, Mrs. Adair, but I will answer you. The consecrated image of my departed angel is broken into fragments—let that suffice. It is a subject too sacred to be discussed by me."

By this time they had gained the foot of the steps, and Judith descended them to welcome her old friend, and assist her to the room that had been prepared for her to rest in, before joining the company in the parlor.

Clare and Jasper had walked behind the others, almost in silence. He remembered his promise to his father, but he could not resist saying, in guarded tones:

"Do not be cast down, Clare. My aunt's anger will soon be dispelled, and the full sunshine of her favor be restored to you. At least, I have good reason to believe so."

"Oh! Jasper, if it could be so! but I will know the

worst to-morrow. I will no longer be played with in this manner. She has threatened to send me away unless—unless I—”

Her voice broke down, and she seemed on the point of bursting in tears. Jasper hurriedly said:

“Compose yourself, my dear girl, and do not let these people see how unhappy you are. Be your own bright, sweet self to-day, for I assure you that the clouds are beginning to show their silver lining to us.”

Clare brightened at this, for she was hopeful, and easily consoled, especially by Jasper, and by the time she found herself among the little crowd on the piazza, the paleness had left her cheeks, and her lips had a soft smile upon them.

“What a naive child she is!” thought her lover; “yet my father even fancies that she has had something to do with that nefarious attempt on the old lady’s life. I wish he had spoken the whole truth to me; I feel sure it would have been better.”

Phoebe Simpson flew toward Clare, and at once took possession of her, saying:

“Oh! you dear, delightful creature! I am so glad to meet you again. I have been here for the last two days, and if the dear old Don Quixote hadn’t been such fun, I should have died of the blues. Miss Judith isn’t my style; Walter has been in the dumps, and all I’ve had to keep me alive, was the billing and cooing of those two elderly turtle-doves.”

“You don’t mean that Dr. Brooke is seriously thinking of—of—”

“Well, he’s doing nothing else, as you’ll soon see for yourself. The idol is smashed, and another reigns in her

place,” and Phoebe laughed so violently that Claudia, who was, as usual, listening to all that was said around her, though she was apparently engaged in passing compliments with Mrs. Harte, thought:

“That girl has had some agency in the destruction of the bust, and it will go hard with me but I’ll get it out of her before I leave. I will defeat this woman’s plans, even at some risk to myself.”

When Judith found herself alone with Mrs. Adair, the old lady, after taking off her wrappings, and resting in a large chair, commenced on the subject that was, at that moment, uppermost in her mind. After conversing for some time with Judith on the subject of her father’s marriage with Mrs. Harte, and the breaking of the marble bust of Mrs. Brooke, she said:

“Let us go to them, Judith; and be sure that we shall find some means of breaking up this ridiculous affair.”

“I should be very glad to think so, but I am afraid it is too late to do anything. My father wished you to be invited here to-day, as his oldest friend, that he might communicate his engagement to you himself.”

“Good Heavens! you don’t say that things have gone so far! he may be sued for breach of promise if he draws back!”

“Yes; he says his honor is pledged, and I do not think that anything could induce him to retract. That woman has bewitched him, Mrs. Adair. He used to be fond of Walter and myself, but now all that we can say has no weight with him. He has told Walter to marry your niece, and—and if I choose, he says I may recall Arthur Bowden, who, you know, he has not allowed to visit me for years. Papa was never willing for me to marry till now.”

Mrs. Adair drew herself up at the allusion to Clare, and a little stiffly said :

"My niece is out of the question as a wife for your brother. I like Walter well enough, but I have other views for Clare, and unless she falls into them she will have no fortune from me. If I were you, I would take the doctor at his word, and renew the engagement with your old lover. I always thought your father's conduct in that affair arbitrary and supremely selfish."

"Pray don't speak so harshly of him as that, Mrs. Adair. I have sacrificed my youth to him, as you know, and I could continue to devote myself to him, if he would permit it. Papa has already seen Arthur himself, and he will dine here to-day. I could be very happy now, if it were not for the fears I have for my poor old father."

"Oh ho! So you have settled your affairs before letting any of your neighbors know what was going on. I congratulate *you*, my dear, for Arthur Bowden is a good and true man, and I know that you have long loved each other. 'It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good,' says the proverb; you have got yours, and now we must raise it to a hurricane, to blow all Mrs. Harte's plans to shreds. Keep up your courage, dear, for we'll save the old man yet."

When they entered the parlor Mr. Bowden was already there: a grave, quiet man of thirty-five who for ten years had been trying to gain Dr. Brooke's consent to marry his daughter. This had been withheld because the old man desired Judith to remain unmarried, that she might be mistress of his house, and look after his welfare. He had no especial objection to the object of

her choice, but he thought Bowden, who was a practical man, would not suit him as a daily companion, and the thought of allowing him to remove his only daughter to his own home had never entered his mind.

There was much gay talk in the parlor, and the young people played games till dinner was announced. Mrs. Adair looked sharply after her niece, and she was surprised to see that Walter held himself studiously aloof from her, while Jasper was always hovering near her; that he was her partner at chess, which he was teaching her; and the old lady intercepted more than one look which passed between them, that seemed to tell the old story.

Dr. Brooke devoted himself openly to Mrs. Harte, and she received his attentions with an air of satisfied triumph which exasperated more than one looker-on.

The dinner was sumptuous, and handsomely served; and when the dessert was put on the table the master of the feast arose, and holding high a glass of ruby wine, said :

"My friends, you are all aware that I am a strict temperance man, but on an occasion like the present I must drink with you to the health of the two brides, and also to my own happiness."

Judith faintly exclaimed :

"Oh, father!" and Mr. Bowden looked annoyed.

The old man went on, in a tone of exultation :

"Yes, dear friends, of *two* brides. The lady who sits on my right hand has promised to make me the happiest of men, and I have to-day given my consent to the union of my beloved daughter with the faithful lover who has waited for her as Jacob did for Rachel. He has

found his reward at last. Pledge me in bumpers, for this is a joyful occasion, and must be fitly celebrated."

The wine was drank, though Phoebe Simpson almost choked in trying to swallow hers, for she was shaking with inward laughter.

Then congratulations followed, and soon after they arose from the table.

Mrs. Adair found a brief moment in which to whisper to Claudia:

"You do not like that woman; get at the truth about the breaking of Mrs. Brooke's bust. You can find it out from Phoebe: from the way she giggles I know she had some hand in it."

Claudia nodded intelligently, and said in reply:

"I think so, too. I will try my best to keep Mrs. Harte from reigning here, as you may well believe."

In pursuance of this resolve, Claudia used all her fascinations on Miss Simpson, and finally lured her to the summer-house, in which an interview between herself and the widow had once taken place.

She pretended she had something important to communicate to her, and when they were under the shelter of the verdant walls, Phoebe said:

"Come now, Miss Coyle, don't lose any time; for I am dying to get back to the house to watch that old Adonis making love, in his pompous, antiquated fashion, to the divine Aspasia."

"What I have to say is about them," was the ready reply. "I wish to ask you if you think it right to aid such a woman as you must know Mrs. Harte to be, to establish herself here, and end by breaking up so happy a family as this has been?"

"I aid her! What can you mean, Miss Coyle?" but the speaker flushed guiltily.

"I mean exactly what I say: that you were privy to the destruction of Mrs. Brooke's bust, and were probably the agent in accomplishing it. Come now, Phoebe, tell me the truth, and help Dr. Brooke's friends to save him from the toil so cleverly prepared for him."

Phoebe hung her head for an instant, and then burst into a ringing laugh.

"It was all my doing," she said, "and I don't mind telling you, especially as this thing must not go any further. I cannot allow the poor old man to be victimized; but I don't know how to extricate him without telling the whole story, and it will be hard to do that, reckless as I am."

"Tell me, and I promise to break the engagement just announced, without detriment to you."

"Can you do that?"

"If I could not, I would not promise it. Now tell me, please; and also what was your motive for playing so severe a practical joke."

"My real motive was to serve good old Judith, by bringing about just what has happened; but I never meant that Mrs. Harte should take her place here. I thought it would be such fun to raise her hopes, and then disappoint them. Oh dear! I almost wish I had not done it now."

"I can get you creditably out of the scrape, if you will confide in me."

"I cannot see anything else to do, so here goes. I was spending a night here, and I brought with me a bottle of phosphorus, with which I daubed a miniature

likeness of Mrs. Brooke, which I had copied from the picture on the parlor wall. I hung that up opposite the old doctor's bed, and pinned a white handkerchief so smoothly over it that, with his imperfect vision, I thought it would escape his notice. It did, and I waited till he was asleep before I carried out the rest of the programme.

"Such weather as this he always leaves his door open, so I could easily get into the room. I wrapped a large white shawl over me, went in, took away the screen from my picture, and it looked frightful, to be sure. I then lifted the bust, which sure enough was on his pillow, and dashed it down with all my strength.

"It broke into shivers, and the doctor started up with a great peaked night-cap on his head, which came near making me shriek with laughter. That would have spoiled all, you know; so I controlled myself, and in a sepulchral voice, said:

"'I leave you forever. My home is henceforth with the highest, and you may console yourself with your Aspasia.'

"He put out his long arm to grasp me, crying out that he could not let me go; but I evaded him, and stepping backward, got out of the room, and ran to my own chamber. Mrs. Harte was awake, and had missed me, and I told her what I had done. She gave me a beautiful bracelet to be silent and let things take their course. That is the whole story, Miss Coyle, and if it wasn't for Judith's happiness being secured, I would feel sorry for what I have done. If you can only help me to get out of this scrape, I shall be very grateful."

Claudia laughed merrily over the story; but she checked her mirth suddenly, and said:

"You have been very reckless, Phoebe; but I promise to do my best for you. I have Mrs. Harte in my power; and when I get back to Riverdale, I will send Dr. Brooke something I have, which will show him that she is only a charlatan in petticoats. What did you do with the picture you smeared with phosphorus?"

"Oh, I jerked it down as I ran away, and held it up as a mask before my own face. I know, from the exclamations of the old gentleman, that he thought it was the glorified image of his lost wife."

Claudia laughed again, and said:

"I have seen a bust that you modelled, Phoebe, and you must try your hand on Mrs. Brooke. Make a new statuette, and place it in his room. You can get up another scene, and make him believe that his wife has found it impossible to remain even in heaven without communion with him. He is so crack-brained on that subject that he will readily believe it."

"I can easily do that, for my first attempt at sculpture was a copy of Mrs. Brooke's bust. I took it though without the doctor's knowledge."

"So much the better for our purpose. And now keep your own counsel, and we will make Mrs. Harte so ridiculous she will never dare to show her face in this neighborhood again."

CHAPTER XXIX.

CLAUDIA VICTORIOUS.

GIDDY and thoughtless as she was, Phoebe Simpson possessed that genius to which Mrs. Harte was only a pretender. Already she had modelled busts of her parents which were considered good likenesses; and she had made an exact copy of that of the deceased Mrs. Brooke, which, luckily for Claudia's plans, her father had had copied in marble by a young sculptor in Baltimore.

Dr. Brooke had never seen it, as it had been sent home only a few days before this visit, and was designed by Phoebe as a present to Judith when she married, if her father would ever permit her to fulfil the long engagement which had existed between her and William Bowden.

Mrs. Simpson was not particular as to the antecedents of such acquaintances as pleased her, and the handsome widow had been picked up at a northern watering-place two summers before, and invited to visit her in her pleasant Virginia home.

She came, half conquered the old doctor by her airs and graces, and other schemes failing, she returned this summer to complete the victory she had left half won. Triumphant now, Mrs. Harte bore herself proudly and defiantly before those who she intuitively felt were hostile to her.

She had seen Claudia decoy Phoebe into the arbor, and fearing some such *denouement* as had actually taken

place, she escaped from the doctor by reminding him that Mrs. Adair might feel neglected if he devoted himself so exclusively to her, and came fluttering down the path just as the compact between Miss Coyle and the young culprit was completed. She glanced keenly from one face to the other; that of Claudia was inscrutable, but Phoebe colored slightly, and seemed discomposed by her appearance.

"What treason are you two plotting?" asked the fair betrothed, smiling sweetly. "You come off to yourselves like a pair of real conspirators."

Claudia's lip curled slightly:

"If we are conspiring, Mrs. Harte, it is only for the benefit of an old friend. We were arranging a programme for an amusing performance; that is all. As it is completed, we will return to the house now, if you please."

Still smiling, Mrs. Harte asked:

"Who are to play the chief characters in the comedy, may I inquire? A forsaken mistress, or a—"

She paused, frightened at the fiery flash emitted by Claudia's eyes. Her face had grown so white that it looked like a marble mask, and she waved her hand to Phoebe, saying, with lips that seemed scarcely to move:

"Leave us. I have something to say to Mrs. Harte."

Glad to escape, the young girl left the summer-house, and hastened to join the rest of the party on the piazza.

Mrs. Harte tossed her head defiantly as Phoebe disappeared, and said:

"The truce is broken, Miss Coyle, and I throw down the gauntlet. The battle may be *à l'outrance*, if you

choose. You have been tampering with my young ally, but I defy you to defeat my plans *now*."

Claudia's face relaxed, and she scornfully said:

"You think you are secure because the poor old man you have to deal with has a chivalrous sense of honor; but I advise you not to be too much elated with the success which, I swear to you, shall be as short-lived as your insult to me just now was uncalled for. I accept the gage of battle, madam, and I will soon show Dr. Brooke what a sham you are, in more respects than one."

"What do you mean by that insinuation? I may have passed off other people's productions as my own, but in other respects I am unassailable," was the angry response.

"Ah-h! can you prove that, Mrs. Harte? I have taken pains to learn something of your former history since our last encounter in this place. A lady who has made herself so familiar with mine cannot object to that, I suppose; and I know enough to make any man hesitate before surrendering himself to the tender mercies of yourself and your brood."

It was the widow's turn to grow pale now, and with effort, she gasped:

"What do you mean? I do not understand you."

"I am quite willing to explain, though you are not so obtuse as you pretend to be. You have passed here as a childless widow, with sufficient fortune to enable you to flit from place to place, sustaining a handsome style of living. You have four children at different boarding-schools, at which their bills are rarely paid. Your income is not over a thousand dollars a year, and the one

aim of your life is to entrap some wealthy man into a marriage with you, that you and your young cormorants may devour his estate, and appropriate the fragments to your own use."

"I do not know who your informant may have been, Miss Coyle, but you are quite mistaken. I have but two children, and they live in Canada under the protection of their father's brother."

"You acknowledge two, then," said Claudia dryly. "I think that without much effort two more can be found: one a daughter, eager to escape from the restraints of the school-room; the other a youth of sixteen, who has been placed at a manual labor institution in Pennsylvania. *He* works for his living, and that is more respectable far, than for the others to be clothed and schooled at the expense of the old shoemaker, your late husband's brother."

Mrs. Harte uttered a little shriek, and sunk down on one of the seats, trembling with fear and rage.

"How did you find this out, and what use do you design to make of it?"

"I found it out through one you knew very well once. The use I shall put it to is, to show a deluded old man the precipice on which he stands."

"But who—*who* has repeated this—this false and shameful tale to you?"

"If it is false you can easily prove it so, but John Spiers, who was my informant, is not often mistaken in his statements. You remember him, doubtless."

The rouge on Mrs. Harte's cheeks contrasted frightfully with the pallor that overspread them as Claudia uttered that name. She shivered, and faintly said:

"Yes, I remember him. We met in Rio Janeiro, and he was with my husband in his last illness. He robbed him, I am certain, and mixed drugs with his medicine that were fatal to him; yet I had no proof, and he was kind to me: he helped me to get back home with my children. Why should he try to injure me now?"

"Because he loves the woman you lately dared to threaten, and because you have been imprudent enough to repeat to others the slander you have just uttered to me. Leave this neighborhood at once, Mrs. Harte, and give up your pursuit of Dr. Brooke. Means will be found to convince him that his spirit wife has not forsaken him, and he will easily console himself for your desertion."

"If I do leave, it shall not be before I have placed *you* in your true colors before the old lady whose wealth you are manœuvring to secure. If John Spiers is your ally, you will succeed, unless I unmask you at once."

Claudia laughed satirically.

"Let us tell all we mutually know of each other. It would be a fine scene of recrimination, and cover us both with ridicule. Don't you think it will be better to retire from the stage with dignity, leaving our reputation to be picked to pieces after we are gone? *I* am on the wing, for a week hence I shall have left Riverdale. *You* will, of course, pack up as soon as you get back to Mrs. Simpson's, and write a sentimental adieu to your ancient lover, telling him that the fates forbid your union. Ha! ha! What a farce it has all been!"

Mrs. Harte was no match for Claudia either in self-possession or craft, and she wilted completely beneath the discovery of her actual position. She almost humbly said:

"I will spare you, Miss Coyle, if you will do the same by me. I thought I had secured a good home for myself and my children, but I see that all my wiles have been thrown away. Give me time to get away, and I will go as soon as possible; but I exact that you shall also keep your word. If you do not leave Riverdale, I shall write to Mrs. Adair and tell her all I know about you."

"I am going, as I told you before. It is my purpose to leave Riverdale in a few days. Mrs. Adair will have no further use for me, as her niece will soon be married, and Mrs. Desmond's family will be summoned to assume the place near the old lady that they should have occupied long since. Adieu, madam."

She swept out of the bower, leaving Mrs. Harte palpitating with dread of her adversary and fury at her own defeat. After a few moments she arose, and tried to recall the artificial smile to her lips, as she muttered:

"The battle is not always to the strongest. That woman has cowed me and beaten me down now, but I will watch and wait. If she leaves Riverdale, it will be to carry out some sinister purpose of her own; and now that I know John Spiers to be her lover, there is everything to fear from her machinations and his. I must give up the snug nest I thought I had secured, but *she* shall win her game no more than I shall win mine, if I can prevent it."

In the meantime Dr. Brooke, in the midst of his conversation with Mrs. Adair, kept casting such wistful glances toward the summer-house, that Phoebe Simpson impertinently sang:

"My heart's in the *bower*, my heart is not here,
My heart's in the *bower*, where is my sweet dear;"

improvising a parody, as she went on, on the old Scotch song, which she knew was a great favorite with her host.

He turned suddenly to her and said:

"I believe you are a genius, Phoebe, though in your present undeveloped state you are a great torment. When the flower comes to perfection, if Walter has not found a mate, I think you would suit him, and I should have a wife and a daughter that any man might be proud of."

Phoebe blushed vividly, glanced toward Walter to see if he overheard his father's words, and finding him at a safe distance, saucily said:

"It takes two to make a bargain, Doctor. Your swans sometimes turn out geese, you know; so I am not flattered by your words, especially as they link me with one who, if not a goose, will be proved a—jackdaw."

She fluttered away before he could ask what she meant, and a moment later Mrs. Harte came up the walk, looking as calm and smiling as usual. After exchanging a few words with the doctor, she took a seat beside Mrs. Adair, and began to speak guardedly of Miss Coyle.

But if she intended to put the old lady on her guard against her unprincipled companion, Claudia defeated her, for she came at once to Mrs. Adair and said:

"It grows late, dear madam, and there is an ominous cloud rising. Orders have been sent to get the boat ready, and we shall, if we start at once, have ample time to get back to Riverdale before the storm bursts."

Mrs. Adair arose precipitately, for she was very much afraid of lightning; she called to Clare, and went at once to prepare for departure.

Judith insisted that they should remain till the storm

was over, or even all night, if that was necessary; but to that Mrs. Adair would not listen. She had not passed a night from beneath her own roof for years, and she knew she could not sleep out of her accustomed bed.

So a hasty and rather informal parting took place, and the procession, headed by Mrs. Adair's chair, set out for the boat, while a dark cloud began to gloom heavily overhead.

As they descended the steps, Walter, for the first time that day, endeavored to gain a few words in private with Clare. He rather stiffly said:

"I have something to say to you, Miss Desmond, that may be of importance to you. I beg that you will linger a little behind the others."

Clare slackened her pace.

As soon as they were sufficiently distant from the others to avoid being overheard, he bluntly asked:

"Did you ever confess to Claudia Coyle that you repented of what you said to me when you were here several weeks ago?"

"Never! Do you suppose I would do such a thing as that, Mr. Brooke? If Claudia has insinuated that she had any authority from me to mislead you as to the state of my feelings, she has been false to both of us."

"I could show you *written* proof that she has done so, Miss Desmond, but I know you would be too honorable to read what was never intended to meet your eye. I should not have annoyed you with my attentions after what you said to me the night of the soiree, had I not believed that Miss Coyle's assurances were true. What her object was in so deluding me I cannot fathom, but I am sure she is playing some deep game of her own, in

which you and I have been used as counters. Be on your guard, for I cannot think she is a friend to either of us, and I am certain she is still less friendly to Jasper. I thought this morning that I would not give you up without a struggle; but what I have seen to-day has convinced me that perseverance in a hopeless cause would be useless."

Clare blushed, and then became pale.

"I cannot understand Claudia's tactics, but I hope you will believe that I am incapable of trifling with you. If I have accepted your attentions lately, it was—it was because I thought to please my aunt by allowing them."

"Your aunt! Claudia herself told me this morning that it has always been her wish that you and—"

What he would have said further was cut short by the imperious voice of Mrs. Adair, who was by this time in the boat, and she called out:

"Hurry, Clare, and sit here beside me. The clouds darken every moment, and we have barely time to get home before the storm bursts."

Jasper came toward them, and Walter did not choose to finish what he was saying in his hearing. He saw Clare placed beside her aunt, and bowing to the group in the boat, said:

"I think there is ample time, Mrs. Adair. It may lighten a little, but rain will hardly fall before you are safe at Riverdale. Good-evening."

Clare was thinking of Walter's last words, and wishing they had not been so abruptly broken off, when she was startled by a shrill cry from her aunt. At the same instant a dull, rumbling sound was heard, and a vivid flash of lightning quivered over the bosom of the dark

cloud that sailed above them. A few large drops of rain fell upon the awning, and the rising wind began to lash the water into foam.

Jasper spoke firmly:

"There is no danger, aunt. Do not suffer yourself to become excited. We shall reach the landing before another flash comes."

"I have a horror of lightning," wailed the old lady, now in a state of agitation that alarmed Clare, and she used all her power to calm her.

The landing was safely gained. Mrs. Adair was hurried out of the boat. Mr. Clifford met her with shawls and umbrellas, and Miss Coyle sprang out to accompany her to the house.

Jasper remained behind to assist Clare, and just as the two were about to step on shore, a loud crash came, the awning was rent in twain, and a blinding flash of lightning struck the boat, stunning the lovers, and they both fell into the stream.

For an instant Jasper was bewildered, but the shock of the sudden plunge restored him to consciousness, and he wildly grasped at the sinking form of Clare.

The next moment she was in his arms and he was striking out for the life that was dearer to him than his own. She lay limp and half senseless on his breast, and he cried into her ear:

"Arouse yourself, my darling; live for me, for I love you beyond all things. I am a strong swimmer. I will save you, my own—my own now and forever."

Her voice came faintly to his ear:

"And I love you too, Jasper. It is sweet to die with you, if I cannot live for you."

The next moment they were swept away by an eddy in the current, and the two excited negroes, who were recovering from their fright, hurried in pursuit of the lovers, hoping to be in time to save them.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE LOVERS.

MRS. ADAIR, alarmed by the lightning which played now incessantly overhead, hurried on, unconscious of the catastrophe that had happened to the boat and its occupants. Mr. Clifford and Claudia, anxious for her safety, scarce cast back a glance to those they had left, and were not aware of the deadly peril of Clare and Jasper.

When they reached the door, Mr. Clifford hurriedly said in a low voice to Claudia:

"I will leave my aunt to your care, Miss Coyle, and return to see what has become of the others. They are not in sight, and I fear that something may have happened."

He was gone the next moment, and Claudia grew pale to the lips with the dread that all her plans might be defeated, almost in the moment of fruition, if anything fatal happened to Clare. But, so long as Mrs. Adair's will was unmade, her safety was quite as important as that of her heiress, so she hastened to get the old lady in bed, and to give her a composing draught which would quiet her nerves. In the meantime Mr. Clifford ran

back to the landing just in time to see his son lifted into the boat, still clinging, in his exhausted condition, to the senseless form of Clare.

"My son! my son! speak to me!" cried the agonized father. "Tell me that all is well with you."

Jasper lifted his head and made an effort to stagger to his feet, as he faintly replied:

"Do not be alarmed on my account, father. I—I shall soon be all right. But Clare is half drowned, and if she does not have immediate assistance she will die."

In half an hour the two were in bed, and stimulants were freely used to restore the chilled circulation.

Clare lay faint and pale, but with a smile of ineffable happiness upon her lips; for she knew now that her fate was linked with that of Jasper for good or ill, and all other worldly considerations seemed of trifling importance in comparison with the great happiness which had come to her in that moment of mortal peril.

Mrs. Adair was kept in ignorance of what had happened, but Claudia came to Clare's room as soon as she could leave the old lady, and warmly congratulated her on her escape.

She smilingly said:

"None but the brave deserve the fair.' After this romantic episode, of course Jasper must claim the lifelong devotion of the fair one he has saved so gallantly."

Clare turned her face away, for she remembered what Walter Brooke had so lately told her, and she could no longer keep up a semblance of liking for the false woman who had, she now believed, produced the estrangement between herself and her aunt. She faintly said:

"I cannot talk with you now, Claudia. Please leave

Lyra to watch beside me while I sleep, for I am very much exhausted."

Claudia gave her a vindictive glance, and clenching her long, lithe fingers, as if clutching something in their relentless grasp, left the room, muttering:

"I have my hand upon your fate now, and I care not what you either know or suspect. I defy you to escape me. Jasper has betrayed his love in words. The old lady must be told, the will be made, and *then* the way is clear before me to the enjoyment of all I have planned, schemed and suffered to attain. Eureka! the prize is as good as won."

She went to her own apartment, dismissed Hebe, and packed a satchel with such articles as she would require during a few days' absence. When an explanation took place between Mrs. Adair and the lovers, she knew that her double treachery must be discovered, and she intended to evade the storm that would inevitably fall on her, by disappearing till Mrs. Adair's death took place. Then she would return in triumph, to reap the fruits of her baseness. That the old lady's life was now limited to a mere span she fully believed; for she had failed rapidly lately, and Spiers himself had warned her that the quantity of the elixir she had taken must speedily bring about the catastrophe for which they had so zealously labored.

She also packed a small trunk, to be sent for in case Mrs. Adair lingered longer than she believed possible; and when all was accomplished, Claudia retired to her couch, and slept as sweetly as if no thought of wrongdoing had ever entered her mind.

The next morning arose bright and serene, as if no

storm had ever marred the clear azure vault, and both Jasper and Clare appeared at breakfast, perfectly recovered from the effects of their involuntary bath. Mrs. Adair was still invisible, but she sent a message to say that she was better than usual, and wished to see her niece as soon as the morning meal was over. Mona said she was already up and dressed, and seemed in unusual good-humor.

The lovers glanced at each other, and when they arose from the table, Jasper followed Clare into the hall, and drawing her with him to the piazza, earnestly said:

"You must not go alone, Clare. I will accompany you to my aunt, and tell her that we have found out, in a moment of peril, that we cannot live without each other."

"Have you told your father, Jasper? What will he say, if he knows that you are risking my aunt's favor, by choosing me as your future wife?"

Mr. Clifford had followed them closely, and he now stepped forward, and almost with solemnity said:

"If you can pledge me your word of honor, Clare, that never in your life have you been guilty of anything that renders you unworthy of my son, I say that you have my full consent to make your appeal to Mrs. Adair."

Clare lifted her innocent eyes to his face, and with the irresistible power of truth, calmly said:

"It is a strange pledge to require of me, Mr. Clifford, but I can give it. My conscience acquits me of any intentional wrong-doing, and I believe I would shrink from any thought of evil with the loathing felt for it by every pure heart."

"Thank God!" he fervently breathed. "I believe

you, Clare. In spite of all, I have faith in you, and I will—save you if man can do it.”

“Save me from what?” she asked, with a frightened look. “I—I have done nothing to compromise myself in any way, Mr. Clifford.”

“What are you doing in your aunt’s room every evening when she has gone to take her drive? I have seen you there myself, Clare.”

For an instant the poor girl seemed on the verge of fainting, and Jasper passed his arm around her to prevent her from falling.

Mr. Clifford patiently waited till she could speak.

“I have been very silly, but I have done nothing hurtful to my aunt. My nurse is superstitious; she believes in love-charms, and insisted that she could get me one that would make my aunt fond of me. I allowed her to do so; and when Mrs. Adair grew angry with me, and treated me coldly, I made use of the elixir. But I prayed to God fervently every time I mixed it with her lemonade, Mr. Clifford, and I would not have dared to do that if I had intended any harm to her.”

“I fully believe you, Clare; but can you tell me from whom your nurse obtained the elixir?”

“From an old fortune-teller who lives near Portsmouth. She deals in such things; but I feel now that I was wrong to place any faith in them.”

“It would have been better if you had not meddled with such doubtful jugglery; but I exonerate you from any evil motive, my dear, and it will go hard with me but I will—”

He broke off abruptly, and addressed his son.

“Go in with Miss Desmond, and tell your story to the

old lady. I will await your return here, if I am not summoned to the interview before it ends.”

Clare, nervous and bewildered by what had taken place, unable to understand the nature of the suspicions which Mr. Clifford had, for a season, entertained against her, moved slowly by Jasper’s side, holding to his arm, as if safety was only to be found in his protection.

He made every effort to reassure her, and bring back her composure; but when they entered Mrs. Adair’s room she was as pale as a ghost, and trembling with excitement.

The old lady was seated in her usual chair, and although she was smiling graciously, they both saw that the alarm of the previous evening had told on her, for she looked almost ghastly in the light that fell into her room through the waving branches of the trees without. Her toilet was made with unusual care, and she almost gayly said:

“Welcome, my two young water sprites. Mona has told me of your narrow escape last evening. I am glad I did not know it before, or I should not have slept a wink last night. What ails you, Clare, that you look ready to faint? I hope you are not afraid of me, child?”

“Yes, aunt, I am afraid, for I have come to tell you that in spite of your opposition I have elected to take Jasper, and give up the hopes I had when I came hither. Take Christine to your heart, Aunt Adair, and let me live for the one I prefer to all others.”

Jasper had permitted her to take the initiative; because he wished Mrs. Adair to know that Clare had accepted him in the full belief that in so doing she relinquished all hope of fortune from her.

He now said with a smile:

"Yes, aunt, we have come to ask your blessing on our union; and the sooner it can take place, the better we shall both be pleased."

Clare, unable to sustain herself, had sunk on her knees before her aunt. Mrs. Adair raised her kindly, though she sharply asked:

"Who has put it in your head that I should be angry with you, if you consented to marry Jasper? It's what I've wanted all along. It's what I had in view when I brought you here, child."

"Oh, aunt! Claudia made me believe that your wishes pointed in another direction—that Walter Brooke was the one you had chosen for me."

"What could the deceitful minx mean by such falsehood as that? She has had my confidence all along, and this is the way she abuses it. Walter Brooke, indeed! He is well enough in his way, but he is no match for my heiress. Yes, you are that, Clare, from this hour, and I am going to make my will at once. Send for your father, Jasper; he is lawyer enough for my purpose, and I shall not wait another hour to accomplish a duty I should have attended to before, if I could have made up my mind as to who should reign here after myself. I am a fantastic old woman, but I have tried to be a just one."

"Dear aunt, you are more than just—you are kindness itself. If I had only known—if I could have dreamed of your purpose in bringing me hither, that cruel estrangement would never have taken place between us."

"If you had known it, you'd have been as per-

verse as the others were, and you'd never have taken a fancy to Jasper. It's the senseless way of young people to insist on choosing for themselves. I thought the best way to success was to make you both believe that I was opposed to such a match; but I did not intend to have your mind filled with the idea that I wanted you to marry somebody else. I cannot imagine what Claudia meant by such gratuitous falsehood; but I'll pay her out for it. I'll speak my mind to her, and then she may go her way, for I'll have no such traitor about me. Kiss me, child, for you have made me very happy."

Clare tenderly pressed her lips on the worn brow bent toward her; and the next moment Jasper, who had gone himself for his father, entered the room with him. With his grave smile, Mr. Clifford pressed the old lady's hand, and said:

"The wish you have had most at heart is at last accomplished, dear madam. These young people have proved their disinterestedness by agreeing to take each other for better, for worse; Clare, at least, believing, when she accepted my son, that she elected to give up all her hopes of fortune for his sake."

"Then you betrayed me to Jasper. It does not matter now though; and Clare's freedom from mercenary feeling was what I wanted to test."

"The test has been equally strong for Jasper, for he expressed his unalterable intention to ask Clare to become his wife before I told him that to do so would be to please you well."

"Then all is right; and to make things sure, I will set you to work to draw up my will at once. I have passed a good night, in spite of the exertion I made

yesterday, and I feel as well as usual; but you know, when a duty is to be performed, it is well to have it done quickly. No one can tell what a day may bring forth, and I am quite an old woman now. I am not strong, and I could not lie at rest in my grave, if I had not settled my affairs to suit myself. Bring your bride to me, Jasper."

The two approached, and, at a sign from her, knelt before her. She placed her hands upon theirs, and held them in a firm clasp, as she solemnly said:

"May the blessing of heaven follow and rest on you, for the joy you have given an old woman's heart. May prosperity dwell with you, and the love that now unites your hearts never grow cold. Be upright, charitable, and true in all your dealings with others, that the great Father of all mankind may send to you no such retribution in this world as has fallen to my share. I have been a hard, haughty woman, and I have erred many times, but I have asked forgiveness in the name of Him who was sent to redeem sinners, and I trust that my sins are forgiven. Go now, my children, and be happy."

Both reverently kissed the withered hand that held theirs; they then arose and went out together. As they were leaving the room, Mrs. Adair called out to Jasper:

"Send a messenger to Brookover for the doctor and his son, as I wish them to witness my will; and say to Miss Coyle that I will see her here, two hours from this time."

Claudia, in the meantime, had not been inactive. She had overheard a portion of what passed on the piazza between the three who stood there after breakfast was over; and when Clare and her lover went to Mrs.

Adair's room to announce their betrothal, she flitted around the house and entered the tower in which she had passed so many hours at the organ. On one side was a private door communicating with the flower-garden, of which she usually kept the key, and she now ensconced herself behind the curtain which, in summer, fell over the open space between the two rooms. From this point of observation she could not only hear, but see all that passed in Mrs. Adair's apartment.

Her lip curled defiantly as she heard the old lady's threat against herself, and she muttered:

"You have seen *me* for the last time, my dearly beloved old dragon. I may look on *you* once more, but it will be when you are lying stiff and cold, unable to hurl your anathemas at me because I have so cleverly schemed to secure my own interests."

Her thoughts were interrupted by the voice of Mrs. Adair.

"There are writing materials on the table yonder, Dick; draw it a little nearer to me, and I will dictate to you what I wish you to write down as to the disposition of my property."

Mr. Clifford was soon ready with the pen in his hand, and Claudia listened greedily to the words that fell from Mrs. Adair's lips. To Mr. Clifford himself a legacy of five thousand dollars in bank stock was left. Mona was to have her freedom and the sum of five hundred dollars; and there were several other trifling bequests: one of fifty dollars to Dr. Brooke to purchase a seal ring, and one of a thousand dollars each to the two younger children of Mrs. Antoinette Desmond.

The testatrix paused here, and said:

"Their parents are already sufficiently provided for by the gift of the stock you bought in Mrs. Desmond's name when you were away last week. I shall give them nothing more. I intended to have given Claudia Coyle something handsome, but she has forfeited all claims on me by the treachery she has been guilty of in trying to defeat a marriage between Jasper and Clare. I shall pay the wages due her, and no more. I feel now that I have trusted her too far, but I could not believe so plausible a person so base as she has proved herself to be."

Claudia snapped her fingers, and viciously muttered:

"*That* for your good or evil opinion of me! Go on, old imbecile, and make such a disposition of your property as I wish, and I shall win all I shall want, without the necessity of shedding crocodile tears over you when you are laid in your grave."

Mr. Clifford here spoke:

"I have warned you against Miss Coyle, madam, but you would not listen to me. I have long fathomed her character. I am glad that her name will not appear in your will. Shall I go on now?"

"Not until you have looked behind that curtain. I thought I heard a sound come from there just now."

Before Mr. Clifford could push back his chair and gain the curtained space, Claudia had flitted noiselessly across the floor, softly unclosed the outer door, and retreated behind a clump of shrubbery, lest he should pursue his investigations by looking into the flower-garden.

He did not do so, and in a few moments Claudia returned to her post, determined to hear the portion of the

will in which she was most vitally interested. The first words she heard were:

"I give and bequeath to my beloved niece, Clare Desmond, all my real and personal estate, except the legacies named above, to be held and enjoyed by her, and to be transmitted by her at her decease at her own pleasure, on the condition that the land shall not be divided, at least during her lifetime.

"To my beloved nephew, Jasper Clifford, I bequeath my consent to his union with my heiress, thus rendering it unnecessary to provide further for him."

"Had you not better insert a clause, making Clare's inheritance dependent on her marriage with my son," asked Mr. Clifford. "It will be safer for both of them, perhaps."

Claudia's heart seemed to leap to her lips at this suggestion, and she scarcely breathed as she listened for the reply.

It came in sharp tones:

"What is the need of doing that? Have you not assured me that both were ready to sacrifice all for each other? There is no need to hamper Clare in that way."

Mr. Clifford unclosed his lips to give his reasons for the request, but the ghastly face of Mrs. Adair alarmed him, and he sprang to her assistance, forgetting all about the will and its contents.

After a few moments of painful suspense on his part, she lifted her head and feebly said:

"The exertion and excitement of the last twenty-four hours have been too much for me. My heart is truly beating its funeral march to the grave. I feel and know it; the only work now left for me to do is to sign that

document in the presence of competent witnesses, and I shall be ready to go."

Mr. Clifford counted the fluttering pulse, administered composing drops, and said:

"I will put my work away till Dr. Brooke and his son can arrive. You must be very quiet till then, and I strongly advise the postponement of your interview with Miss Coyle till you are quite yourself again. Now that you have had your eyes opened to her treachery, there is nothing to be feared by permitting her to remain beneath your roof a few days longer."

"I cannot see her to-day. I feel exhausted, quite; and when we *do* meet, I must have electric force enough to open a pretty sharp battery upon her. Send Mona to me, Dick; she is the only one who knows what to do for me when I am prostrated in this way."

Mr. Clifford hesitated a moment, and then asked:

"Are you perfectly sure that Mona's fidelity is incorruptible? Till lately I have always believed so, but something has occurred which I own has shaken my faith in her."

Mrs. Adair sunk back with a hollow moan.

"Oh, Heavens! are you trying to make me suspect my own people? Do you know what you are saying, Dick Clifford? Are you mad, that you impugn the fidelity of Mona? She is above suspicion, I tell you. I trust in her as I would in myself."

Her first agitation had returned, and Mr. Clifford regretted that he had been so imprudent. He ministered to her gently and kindly, and then rang the bell for Mona; when she came in, he sharply studied her as he said:

"I will leave my aunt in your care, Mona, and you must not leave her a moment till she sleeps. Above all, Miss Coyle is not to be permitted to enter this room. She has offended Mrs. Adair, and the sight of her might agitate her too much. You understand?"

"Yes, sir; an' I thanks the Lord that my mistiss's eyes is opened at las'. I has 'spected a long time that Miss Claudy was a snake in the grass. She sha'n't come in here, sir, you may be *sho o'* that, as long as *I'm* here to look arter things."

"She is honest," thought the inquisitor, "and I think I may trust her." So he went away, leaving Mona in charge of her suffering mistress.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CLAUDIA STRIKES HER BLOW.

BEFORE the storm burst Jasper and Clare had at least a few hours of supreme happiness. They wandered through the grounds, talking such nonsense as lovers delight in. They did not appear at lunch, for neither of them cared for such mundane things as bread and butter; and they were only recalled to the remembrance of the claims of others by seeing Dr. Brooke and his son walking up the avenue toward the house.

"Oh, dear, I must go in and dress for dinner," said Clare. "Who would have thought it could be so late?"

Jasper clasped her hand tenderly.

"Time has indeed flown on wings of light to-day. I

have put far away from me every intruding thought of care, though I have at this moment a sad presentiment that the sunshine of this hour will soon be overclouded. Such happiness as ours is too bright to last, my darling."

"Why do you say that, Jasper? If ever two beings should be thankful and happy, it is you and I. All things have indeed worked together for our good, and I think the good God watches over us, insignificant as we are."

"I believe it indeed, Clare, and to Him I will trust to bring us safely through such tribulations as may come to us before our future is beyond a doubt."

She raised her eyes, with sudden terror in them.

"What is it, Jasper? what do you apprehend? My aunt may be capricious, but she will hardly change her mind about us now."

"It is not that I dread, my love. I will tell you this much. I believe a great trial approaches us, of what nature I cannot now explain; but if you will only have courage and confidence in my father and myself, I think we can extricate our bark from the tempest that threatens to burst on it."

"Oh, Jasper, from what quarter will it come? You speak in enigmas, and my poor, cowardly heart begins to dread—I scarcely know what."

"I am sorry I spoke at all, Clare, since I see how you are affected by my words. I only wished to prepare you for—for my aunt's death, for my father thinks it impossible for her to last many days longer. What may follow that event God only knows."

Clare trembled, and excitedly asked:

"Can the drops I have given her have hurt her in any

way? Oh, Jasper, I cannot tell you how bitterly I regret my foolishness. I had every assurance that they were perfectly harmless."

Anxious to spare her as long as he could the knowledge of the critical position in which she stood, Jasper said:

"I am certain you believed that, my darling, or you would never have used them. After all, I may be only alarming myself unnecessarily, and my aunt may live to see us happily united. It is only her death I dread—only her death," he repeated, as if mechanically.

"And can nothing be done for her? Is she so far gone as to be past all hope?"

"Everything that skill could accomplish has already been done. Both Dr. Brooke and my father, who is a well-read physician, though he does not assume the title of one, have regularly attended her for years. But for them, she would have been in her grave long since."

"She must live till after we are married, Jasper. Tell your father at all risks to keep her alive that long," said Clare, scarcely conscious of what she was saying. A dim fear began to penetrate to her mind that the elixir she had so innocently used had injured her aunt; and with it came such unspeakable horror that by the time she gained the side entrance, which communicated with both of their apartments, she was pale as death.

Jasper held her face up to his, kissed it on lip and brow, and more cheerfully said:

"You must do as I have done to-day, Clare: have strength enough to put from you all apprehension of what to-morrow may bring forth. We have been supremely happy for the last few hours, and I have faith to believe that we will be so again."

"Oh, Jasper, if I thought those drops have really hurt my aunt, I would not care much what became of me! I should be too wretched to care for anything."

Jasper had pledged his word to his father not to betray to any one the result of the analysis they had made till the proper time came to do so, and at this moment, when he might have been tempted to speak, Mr. Clifford himself came down the lateral hall in which they were standing. He said, with a faint smile:

"I hope you have made love enough to each other for one day, my children. You have barely time to make your toilet, Clare, before dinner is served, and both Dr. Brooke and his son are here. Have you seen Miss Coyle in your wanderings through the grounds?"

"We have had eyes only for each other," replied Jasper. "She may have been walking too, but we have not seen her."

"It is very strange. I have been trying to find her for the last two hours, as I had something important to say to her, but she is not to be found."

"Oh, she'll be all right, and dressed as beautifully as ever, when dinner is served," was Jasper's careless reply, and Clare effected her escape to her own apartment.

As she passed Claudia's door she knocked, and receiving no reply, looked in. The room was vacant, but a sheet of paper, which seemed to have been wafted to the floor by the breeze that came freshly through the open windows, fluttered to the feet of the intruder.

Clare picked it up, saw that it had not been folded, and mechanically read the lines, which were addressed to herself:

"CLARE DESMOND: I am going away, to stay till my efforts to serve you and your lover are rightly appreciated. I am aware that Mrs. Adair is bitterly angry with me, and I do not choose to face her displeasure. A scene between us might be fatal to her, and much as *you* may desire her death, *I* have no interest in being instrumental in the furtherance of your plans.

"Your *Love-Charm* will soon accomplish its work; the wealth you have coveted will be yours; but beware, for a Nemesis is upon your path, and the fair future that looms before you is already overshadowed by the clouds of fate.

"When death enters this house, as it will ere long, I will return to its shelter; and then you will learn the only terms on which immunity for your crime will be accorded you. The drops you have administered to your aunt were *poisoned*, though that can be no news to you. I have visited your room and taken possession of the bottle containing them. I shall take it away with me, to be used as evidence against you, should you attempt to turn on me, and refuse the only compromise by which your safety can be insured."

Half dazed with horror, Clare read the lines twice over before she could quite take in all their dreadful meaning. Then, with a moan of anguish, she fell fainting to the floor with the paper clutched in her hand, and was found there by Hebe, who came up to see if Claudia had gone back to her room.

Her outcries brought Jasper to her assistance, who fortunately secured the paper before a group, collected by the negro girl's wild cries, approached the room. He

thrust it in his pocket, lifted the insensible girl in his arms, and strode with her to her own apartment, saying, by way of explanation:

"Miss Desmond has not recovered from her fright of last evening. She has stayed too long in the hot sun walking with me this morning, and this is the result. Come with me, Lyra, and assist me to bring her back to consciousness."

His father and the servant girl went into Clare's room with him, and by the united exertions of the three she presently revived, and looking wildly around her, cried out:

"Where is it? Where is that dreadful paper? Oh, I shall die! I shall die if what she says is true!"

"What paper?" asked Mr. Clifford. "I have seen none, my child."

"I had it—I found it on the floor in Claudia's room. I—I read the dreadful words, and—and I—"

Again she sunk into insensibility, and fell from one fainting fit into another till the violent shock she had received terminated in fever and delirium. Jasper was almost beside himself with terror, but his father reassured him, by declaring that youth and an unbroken constitution would bring her through the attack in a few days.

The dinner that day was scarcely touched by those for whom it had been set out. Jasper came down, and tried to do the honors, in the absence of the ladies of the family, but his father remained beside Clare the greater portion of the time till the party of gentlemen were summoned to Mrs. Adair's apartment.

Before going to it, Jasper found means to show his

father Claudia's letter, and neither of them scrupled to read it. Mr. Clifford gloomily said:

"It is as I supposed. There is some deep-laid scheme of villany to be developed by that wretched woman and her accomplice. I have been working to defeat them, and I will do it yet, or perish in the attempt. I wish now that I had prepared that poor child for the blow, and told her all that we know. She is in no condition now to understand what is said to her, but if any proof of her innocence were wanting, it has been supplied by the vivid horror expressed in her face when she referred to that letter. It was a cruel, cruel blow to strike, but it was worthy of Claudia Coyle. The wretched viper! She shall yet perish through her own venom, if I can only follow her up through all her sinuous windings."

"Where can Miss Coyle have gone? I hardly think she has left the neighborhood," said Jasper.

"No; she has doubtless taken refuge with the man I have seen her walking with at night more than once lately. I have been near enough to them to hear their voices distinctly, but they spoke in French, and I could only understand a word here and there. I should, perhaps, have told Mrs. Adair at once, but I am so much afraid of exciting her, that I forbore, thinking that I could defeat Claudia in the end."

"We will—we *must* do that, father. But we must go now, or my aunt will become impatient."

"Yes, we will go to her, for it is not safe to excite her in the least degree. Her condition is very critical, and her death just at this crisis would be a terrible thing for Clare."

The father and son joined the other gentlemen and

went with them to Mrs. Adair's room. She had slept several hours since her attack in the morning, and looked cheerful and well pleased to see her old friend and his son.

With a smile, she said:

"The last act in the tragi-comedy of life is about to be consummated, doctor. My will is made, and I wish you to witness it. After it is duly signed and sealed, all that remains to me is to make my peace with Heaven, and lay down the 'mortal coil,' which of late years has been more of an incumbrance than anything else to me."

The old man pressed her hand tenderly, and gently said:

"It is appointed unto all of us to die, but making a will is no evidence that your time is near, my dear madam. I came at your bidding; but now that I am here, you must not bring up such lugubrious fancies for my entertainment. I am not thinking of dying, I assure you, and you are not so much older than myself."

"The warning is *here*," replied Mrs. Adair, placing her hand significantly upon her left side. "But we will let that pass, as I have found that talking of one's ailments only seems to intensify them. Bring up the table, Dick. I have added a codicil to my will, which is not to be read till after my death. You see I have not lost my taste for dramatic effect, and I have prepared a surprise for you when the instrument is read."

Mr. Clifford earnestly regarded her, but she replied to his questioning glance by saying, with a laugh:

"You will be as much surprised as any one, Dick; but I am not going to give you a hint of what the codicil

contains. I have folded the paper in such a way that no glimpse is to be obtained of my writing, and all you have to do is to sign your names. Be patient, friends; it will not be long before the little mystery I have chosen to throw around my last will and testament will be made clear to you."

She held out her hand for the paper, placed it carefully on her open portfolio, wrote her own signature, and watched the signers as they traced their names on the few inches of space left for that purpose.

Mrs. Adair then folded and sealed it herself, impressing on the wax a seal she ordinarily used, on which was a ship tossing on a stormy sea, with the motto, "Such is life."

She smiled faintly as she read it, and said:

"My storms have chiefly been mental ones, but I sometimes think they are harder to bear than the evils of adversity. I could more easily have struggled with the world, than have borne, in the silence of my own heart, the griefs and disappointments which have assailed me. Ah! life is a sad, sad puzzle, and now that I have reached its utmost verge, I can but look back and think of the words of Job, that 'man'—and in a greater degree woman—'is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward.'"

"True," said Dr. Brooke, sighing heavily, "and the older men get, the greater fools they are sometimes. *They* often deserve the troubles they bring upon themselves through their own folly."

Mrs. Adair glanced shrewdly at him.

"What has happened to you, doctor? Yesterday I thought you in the seventh heaven of bliss, and if you will excuse my frankness, of senile imbecility."

The old gentleman colored and looked abashed.

He gravely replied:

"I know now that I have been acting under a delusion, madam. You do not believe in such things, I am aware, but I had a revelation last night from one who has been the guard and guide of my life since she left me to dwell among the angels. For the first time she has been inconsistent, and I have been misled by what I supposed to be her wishes."

"Oh! then you have been stopped in your headlong career toward strife and wretchedness during the remnant of your life. 'All is well that ends well,' " said the old lady, graciously. "I congratulate you far more heartily on your return to your old allegiance, than I did yesterday on your new engagement; yet the disappointment to the fair widow must have been a severe one."

"You mean as regards the material advantages of an alliance with a man of ample fortune. I have regained my sober senses, Mrs. Adair, and I can now see that in myself there can be but little to attract so brilliant and charming a woman as Mrs. Harte. I intend to do by her what I think is right and honorable, and I shall settle on her a certain annual sum, which will be sufficient to compensate her for such disappointment as she may feel."

"And prevent a suit for breach of marriage promise," whispered Walter Brooke to Jasper. "The widow's a humbug, but the old man believes in her, and my sister and I are more than willing to give up a few hundreds a year to be quit of her."

Mrs. Adair here said:

"I hope this change in your plans will make no dif-

ference to Judith. You will not withdraw your consent to her marriage with Mr. Bowden?"

The doctor rather ruefully replied:

"I have given my word, and an honorable man never withdraws that; but it will be a dreadful inconvenience to me to have no lady to manage my house. Walter must be looking out for a wife, I suppose, and if he had been fortunate enough to find one in that sweet little niece of yours, I could have contented myself without Judith. But that is quite out of the question now, I suppose."

"Quite," replied Mrs. Adair, rather stiffly. "Clare is betrothed, with my full consent, to my nephew, Jasper Clifford, and their marriage will take place without any unnecessary delay."

"Then I am to congratulate you, my boy," said Walter to his successful rival, as graciously as he could. "I thought it would be so, from what I saw yesterday."

Jasper only bowed in reply, and Mrs. Adair suddenly asked:

"What has become of Clare? I have not seen her since that important interview this morning."

"She is lying down, aunt," Mr. Clifford hastened to say. "The fright of last evening, and the excitement of this morning, have been too much for her. I have been up to see her, and I think she will soon be better, though she is not well enough to visit you this evening."

"I am sorry to hear that: I wanted her to talk to me, and to read me to sleep, as Claudia often does; for *she* will not be allowed to approach me again till I summon her to dismiss her from this house."

The gentlemen looked at each other, for they all were

aware of Miss Coyle's sudden disappearance, though it had been thought advisable to keep Mrs. Adair in ignorance of her evasion.

Mr. Clifford dryly said:

"Miss Coyle will make no effort to intrude on you, aunt. She knows how deeply you are displeased with her, and she accepts her exile with resignation. I think we had better leave you now, for you are beginning to look weary."

"Yes—you may go. I am not good for much any longer, and little effort tires me. Good-by, doctor. Come and shake hands with me, for of late I always feel, in parting from a friend, that it may be for the last time."

"You must not have such melancholy fancies," was the reply; but Dr. Brooke took both of her hands in his, and the two looked each other in the eyes with that sad and pathetic expression which seemed to say, "Adieu till we meet in a better land."

He pressed his lips to her hands, and tears were in his eyes as he turned away, for his professional eye saw that in her face which led him to believe that her premonitions of a speedy end were all too true. The grotesque and the sad always lie side by side in life; and we turn from the shaded chamber of the doomed lady to the doings of Phoebe Simpson.

She had taken Walter into her confidence, and confessed to him that a practical joke of hers had led to the engagement between Mrs. Harte and his father. He was only too eager to aid her in repairing the mischief she had done, if that was possible now. Relying on Claudia Coyle's assurances that the widow would quietly

withdraw, Phoebe induced Walter to ride over to her father's, and bring back with him the bust of his mother, which was an exact copy of the one she had so recklessly destroyed.

As before, she entered Dr. Brooke's room after he had fallen asleep, wrapped in a white shawl, with an ingeniously contrived mask upon her face, and around her head a circle of paper covered with phosphorus, designed to represent a halo.

She placed the bust in its usual place upon the pillow, and Walter, beneath the open window, swept all the chords of a guitar with so strong a hand that the old gentleman was startled from his light slumbers, and started up in his peaked night-cap, exclaiming:

"Ha! are those strains from the mystic realms of spirit-land? What do I see? An angel ministrant from realms of blessedness. Hast thou come back to me, angel of my desolated life, or am I dreaming?"

In a faint, carefully modulated whisper, Phoebe breathed, rather than spoke, a few words, to which the deluded old man listened as to an oracle.

"It is no dream. I am permitted to return to you, to resume our communion, and Aspasia must be banished from your heart and life."

He made an effort to touch her, but Phoebe recoiled from the side of his couch, and in doing so, gave a sudden impulse to the bust, which rolled down and struck him on the breast. As she gained the door she paused, and still in that unearthly whisper, said:

"My image has been miraculously renewed. Clasp that to your heart, and never more think of giving me a rival."

Incredible as it may seem, Dr. Brooke implicitly believed in the reality of this scene; and in the morning he acted on it. He spoke frankly to Mrs. Harte, and offered her such compensation for her disappointment as she was very glad to accept, in lieu of the hand she had known from the previous evening would never be hers.

CHAPTER XXXII.

DEATH ENTERS RIVERDALE.

MRS. ADAIR retired in her usual health, but Mona was told by Mr. Clifford to make her bed in the dressing-room, lest her mistress might need her in the night. Why he was so uneasy he could himself scarcely have explained, but that premonition of impending evil which comes with subtle power to persons of sensitive organization, warned him that the very hours of the invalid were numbered.

With a sad heart he went up to Clare's apartment, to find her still delirious, and incapable of comprehending the sense of the words he whispered in her ear, in the hope that they might afford her comfort and courage for the trial that he felt assured awaited her.

Lyra watched beside her, and for a marvel, for one of her race, kept her eyes open, and administered the medicine at regular intervals. Mr. Clifford came up more than once during the night, that he might see how Clare was getting on, and report her condition to Jasper. He, poor fellow, threw himself on a sofa dressed as he was,

and throughout the long hours of that seemingly endless night, he scarcely slept at all.

More than once Mr. Clifford went to Mrs. Adair's door and listened, but all seemed still within, and he retired reassured, unconscious that the angel of death had already entered the portal and done his work.

At dawn Clare lay sleeping heavily, stupefied by the narcotic she had taken, and the weary hours passed on till ten o'clock, Mrs. Adair's usual time for rising. Mona had flitted about her room arranging things as usual, and more than once had been struck with the immobility of the old lady's attitude, but she did not dare risk arousing her by approaching too nearly; for one of Mrs. Adair's fancies had been, that if any one looked steadily into a sleeper's face, the electric power of that glance would arouse the dormant soul from the deepest slumber. She lay turned slightly on one side, with her face partially hidden from view, and her hands clasped over her heart, as if to still its too rapid pulsations.

Mona thought she slept unusually late, but no suspicion of the truth was aroused till she accidentally dropped upon the floor a book she was dusting; she turned in affright to the bed, expecting to receive a reproof for her awkwardness.

When there was no movement, not even a quiver of the folded hands, she became alarmed, and reckless of consequences, rushed to the bedside, and placed her hand upon those of her mistress.

The icy chill of those slender fingers told her that all their earthly work was done, and with a wild cry, Mona rushed from the chamber of death, and met Mr. Clifford

coming again to ascertain how Mrs. Adair had passed the night.

In the dim light of the corridor he had but an imperfect view of the woman's face, but he intuitively knew what had happened. With effort, he asked:

"What is it, Mona? Why are you so much alarmed?"

"Oh, sir!—oh, Mr. Clifford, she's gone—gone away in the darkness, with nobody anigh of her. Oh! my poor ole mistis! my poor ole mistis!"

"Hush! you must not raise an alarm, for Clare is very ill, and she must know nothing of this. Come back with me to Mrs. Adair's room. You may have been mistaken."

"Oh! I wish I was—I wish I was; but she's cold an' stiff, a lyin' there like a stone woman. I teched her, an' then I knowed 'twas all over with her; my poor ole mistis! She was quick-like, Marse Dick; but she was good to me, for all that."

While Mona talked thus in the fulness of her heart, Mr. Clifford made rapid strides toward the open door of Mrs. Adair's apartment, and in a few moments stood beside the still form on whose life for a few weeks, or even days, so much depended.

A rapid glance showed him that all was over—that she had passed away in a tranquil sleep, and that several hours had probably elapsed since the spirit left its tenement of clay. He reverently closed the eyes, and then kneeling beside the bed, prayed a few moments for the repose of the departed soul, and also for guidance in the difficult path this sudden death had opened before himself.

Then giving Mona such orders as were needed, Mr.

Clifford went in search of Jasper, to tell him what had occurred, and to send him for Dr. Bröoke, that the two might make a post-mortem examination and ascertain the cause of Mrs. Adair's sudden death. He had no doubts himself, for she had suffered from aneurism of the heart, and he had long known that death might strike her at any moment. But it was necessary, for Clare's sake, to have the cause of her death ascertained beyond dispute; and as Dr. Brooke was a skilful surgeon, and he himself quite able to act as an assistant, the examination could be made without any unnecessary publicity, and its results used in defence of the hapless girl on whom it was evident Claudia Coyle and her accomplice meant to fix the charge of murder. The full turpitude of their designs Mr. Clifford could not fathom, but he supposed they intended to extort a heavy ransom from Clare, to save her from the accusation they would otherwise bring against her.

He found Jasper, looking pale and heavy-eyed, walking to and fro beneath the windows of Clare's apartment. When he saw his father's face he knew that something dreadful had happened, and he, who could think only of Clare and her danger, hoarsely exclaimed:

"She is dead! And you have come to tell me."

His father understood him, and drawing him from the vicinity of Clare's room, hastened to say:

"Clare is sleeping, and I hope the best for her, now that the delirium is quieted. Death has entered the house, but his dart was not levelled at her, Jasper."

For a moment the young man gazed silently in his face, and then said, with repressed excitement:

"My aunt was his victim, and she—my darling, my

darling—is in danger from this sudden event. Those wretches will act promptly now, and we shall not have time to save her from the toils they have spread for her. Oh, father! my heart will break, as will that of Clare, if this villany is not cleared up, and its authors punished."

"My son, I will use every effort to bring the truth to light. A nefarious plot has been concocted, but we hold some of the threads of it in our hands, and they will serve as a clue to the rest. Go now without delay for Dr. Brooke, and be sure that he brings with him his case of surgical instruments. We must ascertain the immediate cause of Mrs. Adair's death; though I have no doubts myself, we must be in a position to satisfy those of others. When that is accomplished, the old lady must be placed in the family vault without unnecessary delay, and I will hasten to Portsmouth to see Mr. Desmond, and obtain his assistance in clearing up the villany that has been so cleverly concocted. That John Spiers is at the bottom of it I cannot help believing, though Mr. Desmond wrote to me that his daughter had nothing to fear from him, as he had gone to South America, and would probably not return. Do you think it possible that he and Claudia Coyle can be in league with each other?"

A sudden conviction that it was so flashed on Jasper's mind.

"I believe he is. His pretended departure was only a ruse to put us all off guard. He is the man you have seen in the grounds at night with Claudia, I feel sure, and if you can unearth *him*, you will find the true criminal."

"But where can they have met? Besides, he pretended to be desperately in love with Clare; and the person I have seen is evidently Miss Coyle's lover."

"His passion for Clare was feigned, and for some purpose that we have yet to fathom. As to where he and Claudia have met, in her wandering life she may have encountered him many times. 'Like seeks like,' and they are congenial spirits."

After a brief pause, Mr. Clifford said:

"You may be right, Jasper. At any rate, I shall get away at the first opportunity, and seek for such traces of John Spiers as can be found. The nurse who obtained that liquid, and imposed it on her young lady as a love-charm, must be rigidly examined, and also the old witch who concocted it. Never fear, Jasper; I will find out the truth yet, and extricate your betrothed from the dangerous position she is in, by fixing the guilt on the true criminal."

"I trust so," replied Jasper, gloomily, "for I feel to-day as if the blackness of darkness is settling around her fate and my own."

"Hope for the best, my son; and now set out at once for Brookover. By the time you get back with the doctor, everything will be in readiness for the examination, which will set at rest all conjectures as to the cause of the old lady's death. That is the first thing to be attended to."

Jasper went to summon the boatman, and his father ascended to Clare's apartment, to find her lying like one in a trance, with half-closed eyes and parted lips. Her pulse was irregular, though the fever had subsided as rapidly as it had arisen, and Mr. Clifford saw no reason

to apprehend danger to her physical health, unless the mind was allowed to act again, and take in all the horror of her position while this dark cloud hung over her fate.

"She is too sensitive to bear it," he thought, "and the only salvation for her reason is, to keep her under the influence of narcotics till the danger is past. Her nervous system has received so great a shock that she will die under the fluctuations of dread and suspense, before the truth can be found out and the true criminal found. I will take the responsibility, Clare, and keep you from knowing what is going on around you till it will be safe to arouse you from your lethargy."

Thus thinking, he prepared a draught to be given at stated intervals, which was designed to act upon the brain alone; and giving the whimpering Lyra strict injunctions as to its administration, he went down again to see if his orders to Mona had been fulfilled.

An hour had passed since he left Mrs. Adair's room; and Mona, with the assistance of two old crones she had summoned from the quarters for that purpose, had already made the toilet of the dead.

On a wide sofa, covered with a linen sheet, lay the small, shrunken form, clad in loose, flowing robes, daintily embroidered, which Mrs. Adair had had prepared for this use when her health first began to fail her.

She was a philosopher in her small way, and a believer in the truths of the Christian revelation, though by no means inclined to yield assent to the dogmatic teachings of many of its expounders. Death she regarded not as the enemy, but the friend of man—not as a conqueror, but as a deliverer. He had come while she slept, and

had borne away the spirit to meet its award, apparently without a struggle.

Her face was ineffably serene, and much of its youthful beauty had returned to it in those hours of pulseless repose. Angel fingers seemed to have smoothed out the lines left by care and suffering, and a calm smile rested on her lips.

She had been a worldly woman, and in some respects a hard one; but as Mr. Clifford looked down on her, he felt that her faults had grown out of her surroundings, and the great Judge would know how to sift out the good from the evil, and mercy would preponderate when her small sins were weighed against her long life of probity, and her desire to do right in the sphere that had been awarded her.

He sat beside the couch, and read over the prayers for the dead, trying to fix his mind entirely upon them, and to shut out for a brief space all thoughts of the living, for whom this sudden death might have such fearful consequences.

Dr. Brooke came as speedily as possible; and at first he was so tremulous over the shock he had received, that the stronger man feared he would not have the requisite composure for the examination he was so desirous of having made.

When he became more composed, the old man said:

"Jasper insisted that I should bring with me my surgical instruments, and said that you would explain why it was necessary to use them. Surely, Clifford, there can be no doubt as to the cause of Mrs. Adair's death. We both know that she has suffered from aneurism of the heart, and was liable to drop off at any moment."

Mona still lingered in the room, and glancing toward her, Mr. Clifford replied in a low tone:

"That is very true, doctor; but if you will come with me into the dressing-room, I will explain my reasons for wishing to ascertain precisely what was the cause of Mrs. Adair's death. It is of vital importance to one person, at least, that it shall be established beyond doubt that her decease was brought about by natural causes."

Dr. Brooke looked surprised, but he followed him into the tower room, and they talked together there for half an hour, leaving Mona to watch beside the corpse of her mistress.

While they were gone, Jasper came in, bringing with him the case of instruments. He put them on the table, and then took a seat beside the sofa, looking down with moistened eyes on the calm face which had sometimes frowned heavily upon him, but which had also often smiled, and in his heart he blessed her for the happiness he believed she had assured to him on the previous day.

Mona drew near him, and tearfully said:

"She was a good mistis to me, Marse Jasper, if she was fractious, an' hard to manage sometimes. I shill miss her, an' ef 'twa'n't that Miss Clare will come after her, I'd be a grievin' even wuss than I is."

Jasper started at Clare's name, and a cloud came over his face. His heart was aching heavily, and he could only say in reply:

"I think your new mistress will be as kind to you, Mona, as your old one was. That is, if she lives to enjoy the fortune that will now fall to her."

"Don't you be down-hearted, Marse Jasper. It's

only a little spell o' fever Miss Clare has got, but she'll be all right afore long. I has seed how things was goin', an' we'll have a good master in you, as well as a good mistis in her. The blessed Lord knows what is right an' good for them what trusts in him, an' he'll bring it about yit."

Jasper was deeply touched, and a little comforted by the faith of this humble slave woman, that all would come out for the best, and he grasped her hand as he hoarsely said:

"I trust in God that you may prove a true prophet, Mona; but to-day I can see little that is bright before me."

"That is nat'ral, Marse Jasper. When death is in the house, we can't feel as ef we've got anything to do but git ready to die ourselves; but we gits over that, an' the sun shines as bright arter a while as it did afore. The clouds always passes away, you know, let 'em be ever so black."

Before Jasper could reply to this homely comforter, the curtain before the door of the dressing-room was lifted, and the two gentlemen came in—Dr. Brooke looking very pale, but evidently bracing himself with stern resolve to the repulsive task that lay before him.

Mona was ordered to bring wine, as Mr. Clifford saw that the old surgeon would need stimulating before he attempted to perform the duty required of him.

In her absence their preparations were made, and she stared in open-eyed horror when she saw her beloved mistress lying on a table, with an array of shining steel instruments placed upon another. When she uttered a little cry Mr. Clifford sternly, but kindly, said:

"We can have none of that, Mona. You must be brave and silent, for what we are going to do is absolutely necessary. Shut the door, and lock it. Bring towels and water, and then retreat to the dressing-room till we have completed the examination we design making."

Accustomed to obey, Mona went, shaking in every limb, to perform the service required of her, and then cowered down in the dressing-room, stopping her ears with her fingers, as if she expected to hear her old mistress cry out under the torture of the knife.

The result of the post-mortem examination was given to Jasper as it proceeded, and carefully noted down by him; this was afterward read over and certified by the two chief actors in the scene.

Great care had been taken not to soil the garments of the deceased, and when Mona was summoned to the room again she was surprised to find the body of her mistress lying calmly and decorously on the sofa, with no visible trace of what had been done.

Mr. Clifford said to her:

"You see, Mona, it was not so dreadful, after all, though I admit it was a great trial to have to do it. It was necessary though, and none of us must shrink from an imperative duty. I know that you are to be trusted, and not a word of what has taken place here must be spoken of to any one—mind you, to *any one*—till I give you leave to speak. You must prove, for once, that a woman can keep a secret."

"'Deed, Marse Dick, I don't want to talk 'bout nothin' so dreffle. It makes me creep all over jest to think on it, and I knows better'n to tell what white folks wants kep' dark."

"Very well; see that you are discreet, and it will be none the worse for you. I have some good news for you, which I'll not tell you till I have tested your fidelity. Remove these things now, and make the room tidy. Take the soiled linen to your own house, and wash it yourself. I will see that you are well paid for silence and discretion."

"'Deed, sir, you may trust me; but I hope some day I'll find out what it all means."

"It only means this; that we were anxious to find out if your mistress died of disease of the heart; but we have reasons of our own for wishing no one to know that we have taken measures to satisfy ourselves as to the cause of her death. For the present nothing must be said about it, but before long we will proclaim it ourselves."

The room was soon restored to its usual appearance, and the three gentlemen left, carrying with them the case of instruments.

Dr. Brooke, at his own request, went up to see Clare before he left; he shook his head over the half-lifeless condition in which she lay, though he admitted to Mr. Clifford that the course he was pursuing was the wisest one under the circumstances. If she were permitted to regain the control of her faculties till she could be assured that she was safe from arrest as the destroyer of her aunt, fatal results might ensue; therefore it was better to keep her senses stupefied, than to risk madness as the result, if perfect consciousness were restored.

Arrangements for a speedy and private funeral were made before Dr. Brooke left, as Mrs. Adair had always expressed the desire that no unnecessary parade should be made when she died.

The most of the neighboring families were absent at that warm season—even the clergyman of the chapel the family attended was at some bathing-place, and Mr. Clifford took on himself the duty of reading the burial service over the dead.

The vault of the Beauforts was in the rustic graveyard that lay around the little gothic church, two miles away from Riverdale, and on the second day after her decease Mrs. Adair's remains were placed in it, followed by the family of Dr. Brooke, and a few other friends belonging to her own sphere in life.

The negroes followed in procession, and when the ceremonies were over they went back singing, in solemn chorus: "Hark from the tombs a doleful sound;" but as they drew near their own homes, they changed the strain, and the air was filled with the beautiful and inspiring hymn, "I know that my Redeemer liveth."

Judith Brooke remained at Riverdale to watch over the sick girl, as she could not think of leaving her to the care of servants alone.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CLARE'S SUFFERINGS.

CLARE DESMOND lay in a passive state, dimly conscious of what was passing around her, but unable to grasp the meaning of anything that had occurred, or to arouse herself from the apathy into which her faculties were plunged. She made many efforts to do so,

but without result, and she at last resigned herself without further struggle to the dreamy listlessness induced by the potions administered to her.

With the docility of a child she obeyed the wishes of those around her, with the consciousness that she was tenderly cared for, and all was done for her good. She had no appetite, but she took the food that was brought her, because they told her it was necessary to sustain her strength.

When Jasper entered her room, her eyes brightened for a moment, but the brief gladness died out, and when he drew near and attempted to take her hand, she withheld it, vaguely muttering:

"Too late! too late!"

"What is too late, my darling? Why do you shrink from me in this way?"

"Because—because something dreadful has happened. I can't think what it is, Jasper, for my head is in a strange state; but my hand is stained. You must not touch it, lest it defile you."

"But, Clare, I believe you to be as pure as the angels in heaven. Let me hold your dear hand in mine, if only for a single moment."

"No, no; it would leave a black spot wherever it touched you. I can't think what I have done to bring this curse upon me; but I feel as if I had committed the unpardonable sin of which the preachers tell us. Isn't it a dreadful doom, Jasper? The more dreadful that it fell on me just as I thought we were going to be so happy."

"We shall be happy yet, Clare, if you will only try to get well, and regain your usual spirits."

"That is nonsense, you know, Jasper. I can't laugh and jest as I used to, with that fearful weight always upon me. Please go away now; I am tired, and talking makes my head ache."

This interview took place after the return from the funeral of the old lady. Mr. Clifford was preparing to leave on the steamer that passed Riverdale, that evening, and Jasper went to him with an earnest entreaty that he would visit Clare before he left, and tell him exactly what he thought of her mental condition.

Jasper repeated as accurately as he could the conversation that had passed between them, and Mr. Clifford gravely said:

"I have been forced to choose between two evils, Jasper. If Clare is allowed to regain perfect control of her mind, she must learn the death of her aunt, and, in spite of every assurance we could make, she would believe herself instrumental in hastening it. That horrible thought, combined with the dread of arrest, would probably destroy reason, if not life. I have thought it best to stultify her for a season; but I assure you the medicine I have given her will not injuriously affect either her mental or physical health. From the way she talks in her half-dazed condition, you may imagine what her remorse and self-accusation would be, if her mind was in a state to grasp all the facts of her unhappy position."

Jasper sighed heavily.

"I know that you have acted for the best, sir; but the work seems to have been imperfectly done. The mind is not at ease, and she is groping in the dark for the clue to what she thinks she has done."

"With a person of less sensitive temperament, the

preparation of morphine she has taken would have produced perfect quiescence; but she is high-strung and nervous, and to deaden all thought I should be compelled to use more than is safe. You must bear with her fancies, Jasper, and soothe them to the best of your ability. I hope in a few days to be able to release her from the spell under which she is held now. I shall send her mother to watch over her, as soon as I get to Portsmouth. I would have written to Mr. Desmond of Mrs. Adair's death, and invited him to her funeral, but I shrank from having them here in such a condition of affairs; and his presence will be needed where I am going, to assist me in establishing the innocence of his daughter. It will be a dreadful blow to them, to hear of what has taken place here, and I thought it best to soften it as much as possible, by going in person to relate all I know about the mystery of iniquity that has been carried on under this roof."

"Have you been able to find out anything about Claudia Coyle's place of refuge?"

"I have had little time to make inquiries, so much has happened in the last three days; but we shall soon hear from her, now that Mrs. Adair is dead. She will spring her mine at the earliest opportunity, and I must hasten away to prepare a countermine. The old lady's will cannot be read till Clare is in a condition to understand its contents, and I shall have time to foil Claudia's plan, to extort from the heiress a large slice of her fortune to suppress the accusation she dared to bring against her. Watch over the poor child's safety while I am away, Jasper, and do not suffer that woman to gain access to her room, if she should venture to return."

"I think she will hardly attempt that; but I shall be on my guard. Miss Judith and I will prove more than a match even for Claudia Coyle."

"Judith has been very kind, and she has been told enough to enable her to understand Miss Coyle's machinations. I hope to be back in a week, and Mrs. Desmond will probably be here by to-morrow night. Of course she will come as soon as she hears of her daughter's condition. In twenty minutes I must be on the wing, but I will go in with you and see Clare before I leave."

They found her sleeping quietly, and Judith was sitting beside her bed reading.

She looked up as they entered, and said, in a low tone:

"So you are really going to leave us, Mr. Clifford? I almost fear that as soon as you are away, a raid may be made upon us. Suppose Miss Coyle returns, what are we to do with her, or to say to her?"

"Treat her with extreme politeness, but by no means permit her to have access to my patient. I hope to relieve you from your post of duty, Miss Judith, by sending Mrs. Desmond here to take your place in a few days. We are very grateful for your attentions to our invalid; for, as you know, she is a very important person to both Jasper and myself."

Mr. Clifford bent over Clare, felt her pulse, and then said:

"There is no trace of fever left. If you can get her to sit up to-morrow and walk about her room, it will be better for her. She must not lose her strength, though I dare not allow her mind to act fully until I can assure her that no guilt attaches to her for the death of her

aunt; that no punishment can reach her, surrounded as she is by friends who will defend her to the utmost of their ability."

"She has spoken of Mrs. Adair more than once, and expressed some anxiety to see her. I quieted her by telling her that she was too much indisposed to come up-stairs."

"That was right. She must not, on any account, hear of the old lady's fate till I can prove to her that she will not be held accountable for it."

At this moment Clare started from her fitful slumber, and cried out, in piercing tones:

"Oh, mamma! mamma! take me away! save me from that dreadful man! he is after me again! He will get me this time, and I shall die; I know I shall die."

Mr. Clifford spoke soothingly to her, and tried to calm the agitation which shook her slender frame as if with an ague fit.

"I am here to protect you, Clare; no one shall come near you but those who are devoted to you. You have been dreaming, that is all; but your mother shall soon come to take you away with her, if you wish it."

"Will she? I can't ask her to come, because she would look at me with her clear eyes, and say, 'Guilty, guilty;' and I should know that she is lost to me forever."

"Get rid of that hallucination, my child, for you are as innocent as a baby of wrong against any one. You must not accuse yourself in this way. Who were you dreaming of just now, Clare?"

She shuddered again.

"Of one who is more repulsive to me than the old

man of the sea was to Sinbad. I saw John Spiers and Claudia laughing together and jeering at me, telling me that I had done something dreadful; and he put out his hand to clutch me, when I screamed out and awoke. What have I done, Mr. Clifford? I—I know they told the truth, but when I try to think what was in that letter I found on the floor, it flits away from me, and I can't understand what enormity I have been guilty of."

"You have done nothing that you need fret about, Clare. You surely can take my word for that; you ought to know that I would not tell you an untruth. You have been threatened with brain-fever, and this delusion still remains. Get rid of it, my dear, and let me find you in better spirits when I come back."

"You are going away then," she said, with a frightened look. "They will come after me; they will take me away in spite of myself. That bad man told me in my dream that he meant to have me, and he defied any one to keep me from him *now*."

The father and son exchanged glances. Mr. Clifford said:

"I believe your dream was sent for a purpose just at this time, Clare. It has given me a new idea, and one that I shall act on. Have no fears as to your safety while I am gone. Jasper will be here to watch over you, and Miss Judith will not leave you till your mother comes. I am going for her, and you will soon see her."

She looked at him wistfully.

"Don't—don't tell her about—about—you know, though I can't think what it was Claudia accused me of. Mamma wouldn't look at me if she knew. She is a good and true woman, and I am a doomed sinner. Jas-

per need not trouble himself to take care of me, for I am not worth it."

"You are worth a great deal to me, Clare," said Jasper, trying to smile on her. "You are more precious in my estimation than diamonds and rubies."

"The Bible says a good wife is more precious than a crown of rubies, Jasper; but I shall not be that to you. We have had our dream, but it is over now. Our happiness came like a flash, and was gone before we had time to realize it. Good-by, Mr. Clifford. Tell me if mamma can forgive me. I hope she will see me once more, at least; and I would like to have papa kiss me once more, and tell me that I am not quite an outcast. If they could only understand that I did not *mean* to do anything wrong, they might be kind to me, though I know I don't deserve it."

She burst into a passion of weeping. It was the first time she had shed tears since the shock of that cruel letter prostrated her, and Mr. Clifford's face lost some of its troubled expression, as he said to his son in a low tone:

"She will be better now, Jasper. It was that stony suffering in one so young that alarmed me for her reason. It will be safe now to discontinue the soporific I thought it necessary to give her. When her mind is perfectly under her own control again, tell her what we know. She will have a hard trial to go through with, but sustained by her best friends, she will be able to bear it."

Jasper nodded, and the two left the room, accompanied to the door by Judith. As they parted, Mr. Clifford said to her in a low tone:

"Make no attempt to soothe your patient just now,

Miss Judith. Those tears are her salvation; you may let her weep on till they cease to flow of themselves; then you may use your powers of consolation by repeating to her what I have told you. Jasper will prepare a new potion for her, which will act on her nervous system, and brace it to such endurance as will be necessary to her."

He bowed, hurried away, and after a few impressive words to Jasper, set out on the journey which was to have such momentous results.

Clare wept till she fell asleep from exhaustion, and leaving Lyra to watch over her, Miss Brooke went down to tea. She found Mr. Bowden in the hall awaiting her appearance. He had come over, he said, to see if he could be of any use in the absence of Mr. Clifford. Judith's face brightened when she saw him, and she earnestly said:

"It was very thoughtful of you, and I am grateful that you came. It may be silly, but I cannot get over the fear that advantage may be taken of Mr. Clifford's absence to do—I hardly know what. I shall feel safer, if you and Jasper will take turns to watch through the night. I do hope that Mrs. Desmond will come to-morrow evening, that I may resign my charge safely into her keeping."

"You are nervous, Judith, and conjure up strange fancies. What danger can menace Miss Desmond under this roof?" asked her lover, in some surprise.

"Nothing worse than has already befallen her, I hope; but it is as well to guard against surprises. You will stay all night, now that you are here, William? you will, I know, for my sake."

"I had no intention of doing so when I came; but of course I shall be most happy to stay, if you wish it, Judith."

"I do wish it with all my heart; so it is settled that you remain and take me home to-morrow evening, after Mrs. Desmond arrives. I know she will be sure to come by the steamer to-morrow."

Bowden was only too happy to be near his betrothed, and Judith unconsciously lingered over the tea-table, exchanging with him that communion of thought and feeling which had so long been denied to them through the capricious opposition of her father to a union between them.

Jasper soon left them, and after looking into Clare's room to find her sleeping, with Lyra nodding beside her bed, he went to his own den to prepare the composing draught his father had left with him directions for making.

He had scarcely left the room when Claudia Coyle emerged from the adjoining one, and approached the side of the sleeping girl. She looked down on her with an expression of mingled triumph and hatred in her shining eyes, and to the exclamations of alarm and astonishment that burst from the lips of Lyra, she imperiously replied:

"Hush that noise! How dare you risk awakening the patient from this saving sleep by making such an outcry as that?"

"O lordy! O lordy! what *shill* I do? Whar you come from? Whar's you been all these days, Miss Claudy?" whimpered the frightened girl.

"That is no concern of yours. I have been visiting a friend in Richmond, and I came back on the steamer

that took Mr. Clifford away. What has happened here since I have been gone? How is Mrs. Adair?"

"Oh, the laws! an' you don't know! I can't tell you *here*, nohow:" and she pointed to Clare, who lay upon her pillows white and still, as if dead.

"Then come where you *can* tell me. I merely had a glimpse of Mr. Clifford as he was stepping on the boat, and I know nothing of what has happened here in my absence. Come into the dressing-room and speak with me."

Lyra arose at her bidding, and reluctantly followed her. Claudia dexterously drew from the girl all that she knew, and then went to her own apartment, to determine on the most feasible means of carrying out the plans she and Spiers had determined on in her absence.

She had really been to Richmond; for when she took refuge in the cottage of the old woman with whom Spiers had boarded since Clare had been at Riverdale, she found that he had wearied of the monotony of his life, and had gone away for a few days.

A note left for her told Claudia where he was to be found, and she followed him, to inform him that Mrs. Adair's will was made in favor of Clare, and from indications of failure in the old lady she believed it impossible for her to live many days longer.

Spiers wore his cleverly contrived disguise, and he came back with her, fearless of detection, to learn, on their arrival, that Mrs. Adair was no longer an obstacle to the success of their base plot.

Clare was now at their mercy. She would not dare to refuse to marry the man who could cover her with infamy, by accusing her of the premeditated murder of the kinswoman whose wealth she was anxious to enjoy.

After earnest consultation between the two conspirators, it was decided that Claudia should venture back to Riverdale, and assume her old position there, as if nothing had occurred to render her presence unwelcome. She could thus have opportunities of communicating with Clare, and of placing before her the only alternative that would save her from a criminal accusation sustained by such evidence as she must be made to believe would lead to her condemnation.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MISS BROOKE CAUGHT NAPPING.

WHEN Miss Brooke at length remembered her charge she hurried to her apartment to find Lyra in a state of extreme excitement, after the cross-examination she had gone through. She sat crying, wringing her hands, and rocking to and fro as dismally as if some awful calamity was threatening herself.

Judith sharply asked:

"What is the matter with you? Has anything happened while I was away, to put you in such a state as this?"

"Oh, the laws! Miss Judy, *she's* done come back, an' she's bin in here a talkin' to me; an' she says as how she's bin to Richmond, an' she never knowed the ole mistis was done gone till I tole her."

"Who has been here? Not Claudia Coyle, I hope?"

"Yes'm; Miss Claudy it is as talked long o' me, an'

she's gone to her room now, an' says she means to stay."

Judith wheeled shortly around, went straight to Miss Coyle's room, and knocked at the door. After a slight delay it was opened by Claudia herself, who, with tears in her eyes, said:

"Come in, Miss Brooke, for I wish to speak with you. I have sustained a dreadful shock since I came here, in learning that my dear old friend is no more; but I have been trying to calm myself for the duty that lies before me. This is no time to give way to the natural emotions of my heart, and suffer as I may in suppressing them, I must do so."

Judith went in, closed the door carefully, and dryly said:

"It will be best for you to keep all your wits about you, Miss Coyle, for I assure you you will have use for them. Will you be so good as to explain the reason of your return to Riverdale, after leaving it clandestinely, that you might avoid the just anger of its late mistress?"

Claudia haughtily replied:

"It is my purpose to do that. I went away to evade telling my dear old friend what I knew would prove fatal to her in her precarious condition, but not to avoid her anger, Miss Brooke. Are you aware that her niece has mixed poison with the lemonade she drank at night? that *she* is responsible for the premature decease of the old lady? The night before I left I saw her myself, when she poured the deadly drug into the carafe that stood beside the bed."

Judith changed color slightly, but she quietly asked:

"Did you take any measures to protect the old lady by removing the lemonade that had been tampered with, and replacing it with another draught? Unless you did that, how can you know that Clare used anything that could hurt her aunt?"

"Action on my part was rendered unnecessary," replied Claudia, with a sneer. "Clare had scarcely left the room when Mr. Clifford came in, threw the lemonade out of a window, and filled the carafe from a small pitcher he brought with him. I was naturally surprised at this; but I soon understood that he had discovered Miss Desmond's purpose, and anxious to keep the old lady alive a little longer to lull suspicion, he had taken this method of circumventing her niece. He must have been fully aware of her revolting intentions, yet he promoted an engagement of marriage between his son and the perpetrator of this crime, because Mrs. Adair had made her her heiress."

"If I understand you, Miss Coyle, you accuse both Mr. Clifford and his son of collusion with Miss Desmond in her unnatural attempt upon her aunt's life."

"I only tell you what I saw myself; you can put your own construction upon it. I believe one party as guilty as the other. If not, when Mr. Clifford discovered what Clare was doing, he would have denounced her at once."

Judith was silent a few moments. She was bound by a promise to Mr. Clifford not to betray the confidence he had reposed in her; so she only said:

"Perhaps he was actuated by the same motive that you assert took you away from Riverdale—the dread that the knowledge of Clare's guilt would prove fatal to Mrs. Adair."

"If he had not participated in that guilt, he would not have allowed his son to betroth himself to Miss Desmond. That fact of itself is sufficient to criminate him, knowing, as he must, that the old lady's life was tampered with."

"Is your object in coming back to Riverdale to bring an accusation of murder against the three to whom Mrs. Adair was most tenderly attached? I am surprised that you returned at all, Miss Coyle, to place yourself in the power of such unscrupulous persons. How could you know you would be safe here for a single hour after your intentions became known?"

"I came to have an interview with Miss Desmond, and lay before her the only terms on which I will allow her to escape a criminal prosecution. I have in my possession the vial containing the rest of the liquid used. After seeing what I did, I abstracted it from her room and took it away with me. That alone will condemn her when it is produced before a jury, and an analysis of its contents submitted to them."

"But if it was believed by her to be harmless? If the poor child only thought she was using a love-charm, as she asserts, I hardly think she would be condemned, even if a trial did take place."

"A trial *shall* take place, unless she accepts my terms. I give her one chance to escape; if she does not avail herself of that, she is lost and disgraced."

"I presume your purpose is to extort money, Miss Coyle?"

Claudia flushed deeply. She resentfully said:

"It matters not what my purpose is, Miss Brooke, and I decline unveiling it to you, since you will not

give me credit for wishing to serve the ends of justice by bringing retribution on this young girl."

"I understood you to say that on certain terms you would allow Clare to escape. I supposed, of course, that your desire to punish her would yield before the consideration of your own interests."

"You are at liberty to suppose what you please. I must see Miss Desmond in private, and have an understanding with her. To her alone will I name my conditions, and it rests with her to accept or reject them. She will do the last at her peril, I most solemnly assure you."

Judith arose from the seat she had taken, and coldly said:

"I have pledged my word to Mr. Clifford that in case of your return, you should not be permitted to see Clare. She is too ill to be annoyed, and I do not think that she will consent to any terms proposed by you. If you have anything important to say, you had better speak to Jasper. As her betrothed husband, he can answer better for her than she probably could for herself."

"Thanks for uncalled-for advice, though I shall not accept it. I have nothing to say to Jasper at present. What I have to propose to Clare would come in conflict with his claims, and she alone must hear it and judge for herself. I shall keep my room and have my meals brought up to me, as I have no wish to see any one in this house except Clare, and half an hour with her will suffice."

Judith firmly repeated:

"No communication can be allowed between you and

Miss Desmond. I will protect her, while I remain here, from any intrusion on your part; and her mother, who will soon be with her, will not be likely to prove less vigilant than myself."

Claudia slightly started, but she recovered her self-command, and calmly said:

"I am glad to hear that Mrs. Desmond is coming hither. *She* will see the necessity for allowing her daughter to make such terms as will save her from ruin and disgrace. I have no doubts as to the result. There is now but one course for Clare to pursue, and her mother will see its necessity as clearly as I do."

"I think you will find yourself mistaken, Miss Coyle. That is all I shall say at present; but the developments of the next few days may prove to you that Clare has friends, who will bring home to the authors of this vile conspiracy the guilt they are trying to fix on her. I think it *will* be best for you to keep your own apartment while here, as neither Jasper nor I will care to sit at the same table with you."

Judith left the room as abruptly as she had entered it, and Claudia stood looking after her with both fear and indignation expressed in her face.

"What—what can she mean?" she muttered. "It is impossible that any clue can have been found. John is not apt to make mistakes, and he assured me that every precaution had been taken to prevent detection. My letters suggesting this clever road to wealth were destroyed as soon as read; the old fortune-teller has been induced to go away, leaving no trace behind her; so what can Clare's friends do to criminate us, and save her? *Nothing*; so I cast fear to the winds, and go upon my course certain of victory."

"Not speak with her! Shall I not? We will see, Miss Judith Brooke, which shall prevail in this struggle. My craft will prove more than a match for your vigilance, you will find out. I will speak with her this night, and force from her her consent to go away with John Spiers, much as she loathes him, in spite of all the precautions that may be taken to prevent me."

With this determination she sat down beside an open window, to wait till all was quiet in the house. Jasper sent up a request that she would see him, but she curtly refused, sending word back that she had nothing to say to him.

Presently the servant came back, bringing a few pencilled lines.

"It will be to your own interest to hear what I have to say, Miss Coyle, and I insist that you will allow me to speak with you a few moments. "J. C."

To this she rapidly replied:

"In coming hither I was not actuated by any motive of interest. I am here to bear witness to the crime that has been perpetrated beneath this roof, and I shall not leave it till the ends of justice are accomplished. I do not wish to hear anything you have to say in extenuation of the evil deed done here; therefore I decline to see you. "C. C."

Judith and Jasper were standing together in the hall when this reply was brought to him. He bit his lip as he handed the slip of paper to her, and said:

"Since she will sow the wind, she may reap the whirl-

wind. I shall make no further attempt to communicate with her."

"You have done all that you can, Jasper; and moreover, your father would be seriously offended if anything were betrayed to her. Let her rest in imagined security till the storm bursts. I will remain with Clare to-night, and guard her so effectually that no access shall be gained to her."

"But what can she have to propose to Clare? It is that which worries me. It may be something aside from money, and in her present weak, half dazed condition, my poor darling may be frightened into consenting to anything, to save herself from this frightful charge."

"It can be nothing but a heavy bribe that she is playing for, Jasper; but do not make yourself uneasy about Clare. She shall have no chance to be annoyed by Claudia Coyle."

Jasper sighed heavily.

"I shall not sleep to-night, for the sudden return of this woman has filled me with a vague dread that I find it impossible to overcome. I fear that she is capable of anything to carry out her base purposes, and we cannot be too watchful."

"I shall do my part, and I have no doubt as to your vigilance," said Judith, in reply. "I am going now to Clare, and I shall not permit myself to sleep through the night. With you and William to watch over us, I shall have no fears of anything happening in the night."

She went up to Clare's room, and dismissing Lyra, established herself in a large chair beside the bed.

The night was very warm, and all the windows and doors were open to admit the faint breeze that began to arise from the river.

The sick girl lay sleeping quietly, and by the light of the shaded lamp Judith thought she looked less ghastly than a few hours before. Judith had herself given her the new potion prepared by Jasper, and she thought it had already produced a sedative effect on the nerves of the patient.

Judith found the hours hang very heavy, for the book she had brought up with her proved tedious as a "twice-told tale," and finding herself on the verge of falling asleep, she arose, and went to the open window. The lawn lay bathed in bright moonlight, with heavy shadows massed together beneath the overhanging trees on either side of the house, and the river flowed placidly by, dotted here and there with such small craft as plied upon it.

Night had for her always a peculiar charm, and she leaned her head against the sash, drinking in the soft air that floated up to her, and gazing with loving eyes upon the wide azure vault above, with its flood of mellow light and faintly twinkling stars. She saw a figure moving slowly among the trees, and in her anxiety to discover who it was, she was, for a few moments, oblivious of what might be passing in the room to which her back was turned.

The night-prowler came nearer, emerged into the open moonlight, as if fearless of being seen, and Judith recognized her lover. He looked up, and she waved her hand to him, and stood several moments watching him as he moved leisurely toward the house, thinking how happy she was after so many years of probation.

Judith had scarcely approached the window when a figure, shrouded in a black mantle that covered her from

head to feet, came swiftly and noiselessly to the side of Clare's bed. On the table, which had been drawn up near it, was a small pitcher filled with ice-water, which had been placed there for the use of Miss Brooke. A Bohemian glass goblet, of a deep ruby tinge, stood beside it, and into this the intruder dropped a few grains of white powder, which were instantly dissolved by a few drops of water remaining in the bottom. She then glided away as noiselessly as she had entered, and when Miss Brooke returned to her post she had no suspicion of what had been done.

She poured out some of the water, which was so cold as to disguise the taste of what had been mingled with it till after the draught was swallowed. She then made a grimace, and muttered:

"It is strange how bitter ice will sometimes make water taste. Heigh-ho! it is very tiresome here, with nothing interesting to read, and I dare not leave my post to get another book. Neither must I let myself go to sleep. I suppose that wretched creature is on the watch, and is ready to take advantage of a moment of forgetfulness on my part."

She sat down, again took up her book, and tried to extract some interest from its pages. For half an hour she resisted the drowsiness that was creeping over her; but then, in spite of all her efforts to keep awake, the drug she had taken overpowered her. She arose with the intention of calling Lyra, who slept in the dressing-room, in case she should be wanted in the night; but before she had moved a dozen steps from the bed, Judith forgot her purpose, and coming back, threw herself beside Clare, and was instantly in a slumber so deep and

motionless that an earthquake would scarcely have aroused her.

Jasper, who had implicit faith in the watchfulness of Miss Brooke, did not attempt to approach Clare's room, but contented himself with watching below, with the unquiet fear that Claudia had some outside confederate, who might attempt to communicate with her in the night.

Thus Claudia had the field clear to herself.

She waited a few moments, till she was quite certain that Judith was blind and deaf to all that might happen near her, and she then came softly in, closing the door behind her, and also that which opened into the dressing-room, though she had little fear that Lyra would be aroused by the sound of their voices, in the conversation she had secured with Clare.

Claudia then approached the bed, and looked with piercing eyes upon the pale sleeper. There was no compassion in her heart for the change she saw in that young face, and her lithe fingers worked nervously, as if she was tempted to grasp the slender throat and choke from it the breath of life.

She fiercely muttered:

"If I dared! if I *dared!* but her life is too important to be trifled with *yet a while*. Patience! It shall become a horror and a weariness to her under *his* tortures. Oh, if I thought he would ever have one relenting feeling in his heart toward her when she falls utterly in his power, I believe I would kill her now as she lies helpless before me."

Some electric consciousness of the baleful glance that rested on her must have been felt by Clare, for she stirred uneasily in her sleep, and presently opened her eyes, to

see a form clad in white drapery which flowed loosely to her feet, standing over her.

For an instant the superstitious horror of supernatural appearances fostered in her by her old nurse was dominant, and the effort she made to cry out was stifled in her throat by the belief that she saw a ghost. The next moment she recognized Claudia, and with a faint gasp, said:

"You here! What have you come for? and where is Miss Judith?"

"I came to have an earnest talk with you—one that is vital to yourself, and as they refused me admittance to you I drugged Miss Brooke, and here I am to help you to evade the fate you have so recklessly brought on yourself."

Clare passed her hand over her brow, and for a moment seemed perplexed; then a sudden spasm of pain passed over her face, and she slowly said:

"I remember all now; the letter, and—and the cruel falsehood it contained. Claudia, how could you write anything so infamous? I would sooner have died than give anything to my aunt that would injure her. You know that very well, Claudia, though you did say that I had poisoned her. I have been wandering in a maze for the last few days, but my brain is clearing now, and I remember what you said. What does it all mean? and why do you hate me so?"

"It is very well for you to put on that innocent look, Clare Desmond, and ask such pitiful questions; but what has happened here is sufficient to condemn you in the eyes of the most unsuspicious people," was the hard reply.

"Why, what has happened here? Nothing more than usual, though I have been ill, and they may have kept things from me. What do you mean, Claudia?"

"I will tell you, if you will promise me to remain perfectly still, however shocked you may be at the too sudden consummation of your wishes with regard to your aunt. If you utter one cry to bring others here to interrupt our conversation, you are lost. I came hither to save you, and only I and one other can do it. Do you understand, Clare?"

She might well ask that question, for the stony face that was now lifted from the pillow was so wild with horror that all comprehension seemed to have died out of it. Clare's white lips faintly syllabled:

"My aunt—what of her? I shall make no outcry. I have no voice left to do it with."

Unmoved by her anguish, Claudia icily said:

"That is well. I came hither to tell you what has been kept from you, but which you ought to know. Mrs. Adair is dead and buried; and unless you listen favorably to what I came here to say to you, you will be arraigned as her murderer."

She might have talked on indefinitely, for Clare had sunk back half insensible upon her pillows.

Claudia coolly sprinkled a few drops of water on her pallid face, and waited till consciousness returned.

"Dead—dead! my aunt dead!" the white lips at length murmured. "And I—I her destroyer! Ah, God! can it be, can it be that this awful crime can be brought home to me? No, no; I will not believe it. I will not!"

"Of what avail is such an assertion as that," asked

Claudia, "when in your inmost soul you know that you are guilty? I can help you to evade the punishment you justly deserve, and I will do it on my own conditions. I hold in my hands the proofs of your guilt, and I will produce them, if you refuse to be guided implicitly by me. We have not much time to waste in words, so you must choose your course, and do it quickly."

Clare gazed at her in silent horror, as she thus spoke. For many moments she could not speak, and Claudia sarcastically went on:

"It is a strange thing that you could have the nerve to plan and carry into effect the fatal deed you have accomplished, yet have not the pluck to meet the consequences. If you prove a coward now, Clare, what is to become of you when you are arraigned in the felon's dock, and hundreds of curious eyes are turned up to get a glimpse of the young creature who could commit so unnatural a crime?"

With sudden passion Clare lifted her head, and cried out:

"Hush! hush! how dare you bring such an image as that before one you know to be as innocent as the baby in its mother's arms! You say you have proof of my guilt. What is it?—where is it, Claudia Coyle? I used a philter given to me by my nurse, foolishly believing that it would make my aunt love me; but there was nothing in it that could possibly hurt her."

Claudia coldly asked:

"Is it well for you to keep up this farce, to the only person who can and will help you in the dire strait into which you have fallen? The evidence is all against you,

Clare, and it is strong enough to hang you. Do you hear?—to hang you by that dainty neck of yours, white and rounded as it is."

Her cruel lips dwelt on the last words, as if she found pleasure in uttering them. Clare looked at her with dilating eyes, her heart fainting within her, and with effort, she said:

"You take pleasure in torturing me, Claudia, or you could not speak in that way. What evidence have you against me, except that poor little bottle that you took from my room? If *that* has not been tampered with, nothing will be found in it to condemn me."

"I pass over your insinuation of foul play," said Claudia, tranquilly, "because you are not now in a condition to be responsible for what you say. The bottle contains a slow but subtle poison, which insidiously undermines the very springs of life. You have, for weeks before Mrs. Adair's death, mingled its contents with her nightly beverage. This can be clearly proved against you, even by those who are most anxious to screen you. But I do not wish to destroy you; I wish you to live, because I have pledged my word to one to whom I am under obligations, to aid you to escape from the doom impending over you, that you may reward him for his devotion."

"What can you mean? Of whom do you speak?" asked Clare wildly, as she lifted her head again, and sat erect, with her questioning eyes fixed on the face of her ruthless tormentor.

"Can you not recall the image of one who loved you before you had any prospect of becoming an heiress? One who will do all that is possible to save you now if

you will listen to his suit, but who will crush and destroy you, if you refuse his prayer for a secret and speedy union."

Clare could not become paler than she was before, but an expression of horror and despair swept over her face as she faintly said:

"John Spiers! he it is who has set you on, and enabled you to throw your toils around me. I have vaguely known that some terrible wickedness was carried on against me, and now I understand the object of this accusation. Did *he* supply that elixir? Was my poor old nurse induced to become his assistant in this infamy?"

"It is John Spiers to whom I refer; but do not jump at conclusions too rapidly. He had nothing to do with the compounding of the death-draught you brought hither with you. Your nurse wished you to come speedily into your fortune, and she asked of the old crone she applied to, not a love-charm, but something far more fatal. A large price was promised when you came into your inheritance. The drugs were purchased at the shop of the elder Spiers, and suspicion was aroused in the mind of the old man, though too late to be of any benefit to Mrs. Adair. He and his son have traced out the whole conspiracy, and they stand ready to give their evidence against you, if you refuse to fulfil your engagement to John. His adoring love for you induces him to wish to save you, if possible."

By this time Clare was in no condition to reason, or to defend herself against her adversary. Her senses were whirling; her mind was bewildered; her heart suffering pangs of remorse in the belief that however

innocent in intention, she had certainly been the cause of her aunt's death. She said, in low, reluctant tones:

"It does not matter much now what becomes of me. I must save my parents from the disgrace of seeing me arraigned for a crime I never intended to commit. I know that you cannot be moved from your purpose, Claudia, though I cannot fathom your motives for thrusting me into the arms of John Spiers. I will purchase present immunity by accepting his offer, though I shall die of a broken heart before many weeks are over. That does not matter now, for the sooner I die the better for me. What must I do? How can I go to him, watched over as I am?"

"I thought you would come to your senses after I showed you the precipice you stand on. You must be dressed, and walk about the house to-morrow. In the evening Jasper will be compelled to go to the boat to meet your mother. I will go away when luncheon is over, telling them that I shall not be back before dark. Judith will be thrown off her guard, and nothing will be easier than for you to walk out of the house and join Mr. Spiers in the arbor at the lower end of the lawn, where he will be waiting for you."

"And when my darling mother is coming, I must do this! must evade her and go away with a man I despise and detest!" said Clare, in a tone of anguish. "Oh, Claudia, this is too terrible a trial!"

"It is less terrible than the one you are threatened with if you dare to stay here. Fail to meet him, as I have pledged my word you shall, and in twenty-four hours you will be in the hands of the officers of justice, on your way to prison. I may seem hard, Clare, but I

am the best friend you have in your present strait, except the generous man who is willing to take you, with all this load of guilt upon your head."

Clare was exhausted both mentally and physically, and she dropped back on her pillow, saying faintly:

"I will save those who love me from the anguish of seeing me openly disgraced. I will go—I will force myself to rise to-morrow, and I will drag myself to the feet of that dreadful man, to die there perhaps, for I feel as if I cannot live through much more."

"Oh, yes, you will live to reward the true heart that is willing to condone your crime—for a *consideration*," added Claudia, sardonically; and she left her victim, after saying:

"Of course you must be secret as death itself concerning this interview."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE OLD NURSE EXAMINED.

THE aspect of affairs had improved at Desmonia, in the two months Clare had been with her aunt. The house had been repaired, the lawn cleared of weeds, and everything without and within wore a renovated appearance.

Clare's letters had been frequent and full of details, the early ones breathing only of hope and enjoyment, and the fond parents reconciled themselves to her absence, by thinking how happy and fortunate she was. But the

tone of her letters suddenly changed, and in spite of her efforts to write cheerfully, it was evident to her parents that some cloud had come over her which she was unwilling to explain, and they waited in painful anxiety from week to week, hoping that an explanation would be voluntarily given, or an invitation be sent to them to visit Riverdale, when they could make their own observations, and decide as to their daughter's willingness to accept the husband Mrs. Adair had chosen for her.

In the talk the two gentlemen had with each other when they met at Mrs. Ford's, Mr. Clifford had frankly stated to Mr. Desmond the wish of Mrs. Adair, that his son and Miss Desmond should fall in love with, and marry each other; and that on such a union depended Clare's favoritism with her aunt. It was the old lady's whim, that neither of the parties most vitally concerned should have a hint of what was expected of them, and both Mr. Desmond and his wife were cautioned not to betray anything to their daughter.

The promise was kept, though it was often difficult, in their tender correspondence with the absent one, to refrain from expressing some solicitude on the subject. Clare must be left to choose for herself, ignorant of how much depended on the choice she might make.

One brief note came from Mr. Clifford, in which he said, at the close:

"I think affairs are progressing according to our wishes, but nothing is certain as yet."

Mrs. Desmond was an active housewife, and breakfast was served by five o'clock in the morning in summer. At that early hour the family had gathered around the neatly set out table, when a visitor was seen coming up the walk in front of the house.

"Who can it possibly be at this hour?" said Mrs. Desmond. "He looks like a gentleman, and—and I really do believe it is Mr. Clifford."

"Yes, it is he," said her husband, rising. "I hope he comes to bring us cheering news of Clare. Her late letters have filled me with vague uneasiness on her account. I will go and meet him."

A single glance at Clifford's face, as the two met, showed the father that his errand there was by no means of a joyful nature: he looked weary and anxious. And ready to take alarm for his absent child, Mr. Desmond said:

"You are most welcome here, Clifford; but I hope that you are the bearer of no evil news. Your face looks ominous. Is anything wrong with Clare? She is well, I trust?"

"She has been ill, but is better. I have come to send her mother to her, as I think she needs her presence. I have much news for you—some of a pleasant, some of a painful nature. Mrs. Adair's will is made in favor of your daughter, but the old lady died suddenly on the night afterward."

"And you have come for us to go to her funeral. Is it not so?"

"She is already buried. Later I will explain the apparent disrespect to you, and you will see that I acted for the best. I will not spoil your breakfast, nor that of your wife, by telling my news beforehand. To tell you the truth, I am half famished myself, for I have been up since daylight, and I have walked from Portsmouth here."

"Our matin meal has just been served, and after you

have taken salt and broken bread with us you can speak of what brought you hither. If Clare is in no danger I can wait patiently."

"I can safely say to you that she is in no immediate danger. Do not alarm Mrs. Desmond; all Clare needs at present is the guardianship of her mother. Once safe with her, all will go well. I should tell you, perhaps, that she is betrothed to my son, and they seem tenderly attached to each other."

"I am glad to hear that. Now I know that all is indeed safe for her. The old lady carried her point, and then made her will, I suppose?"

Mr. Clifford nodded, and they went in together. Mrs. Desmond welcomed her guest with the graceful ease that distinguished her, and he replied to her inquiries concerning Clare in such a manner as to avoid betraying anything unpleasant. Christine and Victor were presented to him, and he quite won their hearts by describing life at Riverdale to them, and promising that before long they should both visit their sister at that enchanting place.

When the meal was over, Mrs. Desmond walked beside her guest to the front piazza, and earnestly said:

"I am not half satisfied with your replies to my questions, Mr. Clifford. There is a strange reticence about you when you speak of my aunt. Did she send me no message? no invitation to visit her? I cannot tell you how anxious I am to make her acquaintance."

"You will never make it in this world now, Mrs. Desmond," was the grave reply. "Mrs. Adair died two nights since, and I came hither to tell you and your husband that news, as well as other things that are of the

deepest interest to you. Can I speak in private with you and him?"

The bright rose tint on her cheeks faded, slightly, but she hastened to say:

"Of course we are ready to listen to anything you have to say, though I fear from your manner that it is something more painful even than the news of Mrs. Adair's sudden death. Is—*is* Clare concerned in what you have to tell us? Has anything gone wrong with her?"

"Clare is deeply concerned, Mrs. Desmond; but let me say to you that I believe all will come right for her, and for my son, who loves and is betrothed to her. But at present she is in great trouble, and we must use both craft and skill in extricating her from it."

"Trouble! Has that wretched John Spiers come back again to threaten her, now that her aunt is dead? Explain, I entreat, Mr. Clifford, for it makes me half wild only to think of that wretch being on her path again."

"I believe that the man you speak of is in league with the young woman who has lived with Mrs. Adair as companion. I came hither to consult with Mr. Desmond and yourself as to the measures we had best take to unmask the villany of which they hope to make Clare the victim."

Mrs. Desmond became so pale, and trembled so excessively, that Mr. Clifford was alarmed.

"Dear madam, I have been too abrupt—I should have used more finesse; but my mind is so full of this villany that I forgot how new it is to you—how deeply a mere hint of it must shock you."

Desmond passed his arm around the trembling form of his wife, and the three sat down on a wide bench which ran along that end of the piazza. He said:

"Tell us the worst at once, Clifford, and then we can devise means to circumvent that base man, who, I now believe, knew from the first of the prospect Clare had of becoming an heiress. That is why he sought her; and now that Mrs. Adair is dead, and her wealth comes to my child, he is on her track again."

"I strongly suspect that he has never been off it. The voyage to South America was a ruse to lull suspicion. I have no *proof* that Claudia Coyle is in league with him, but I have in my own mind almost a conviction that a man she has been in the habit of meeting clandestinely in the grounds about Riverdale is John Spiers; and I have come hither to obtain such evidence as will save your daughter from falling a victim to one of the deepest-laid and most infernal plots that ever was concocted. You must both summon all your firmness to listen calmly to what I have to reveal; it will shock and pain you deeply, but you must be told."

By this time Mrs. Desmond had regained that self-control which women of strong nature can practise in moments of deepest torture. She no longer trembled, and her voice was steady as she said:

"Give us the facts, Mr. Clifford. This is no time to shiver and grow pale; the danger is too imminent; it touches us too nearly, through our child, to allow us to think of our own suffering. When we have done all that is possible for her rescue, and *failed*, it will be time enough to sit down and bewail our lot."

"You are right, madam, and in you I recognize the

spirit of a hero. I will tell you all I know, and all I suspect; then Desmond and I must come down like a thunderbolt on old Spiers, and wring from him such information as he can give of his unprincipled son."

Mr. Clifford went on to give, as concisely as possible, the history of the love-charm, and the use made of it by Clare—of the letter left by Claudia Coyle, stating that it was poison, and that it had been used by the heiress of Mrs. Adair's wealth, to enable her to gain possession of the old lady's hoards without too great delay.

We pass over the exclamations uttered by the pale mother while this explanation proceeded. But for one statement made by Mr. Clifford, she would have given up all hope of saving her child from the snare that had been laid for her; but that gave her courage, and she said, when he had finished:

"We can, and will save her. But will she be quite safe in your absence from Riverdale, Mr. Clifford? Spiers may force himself into her presence, and Heaven knows what he may not attempt."

"She is quite safe from intrusion, I assure you. My son is on guard, and he loves her devotedly. Miss Brooke, a sensible woman, and a true friend, is with her, and will remain at Riverdale till you arrive there, Mrs. Desmond, and take your daughter in charge yourself. I think, however, it will be best for you to leave on the twelve o'clock boat, if it is possible to do so."

"Of course it is; anything is possible in such a crisis as this. I will get ready in time, and leave you and my husband to follow me as soon as you have unearthed John Spiers."

"Before we set out on that errand, I should like to see

the old woman through whose silly superstition all this wretched complication has arisen. If her nurse had not imbued Clare's mind with such nonsense, this hold could never have been obtained over her."

"I always set my face against it, and reprimanded Dolly when I found her telling her wild stories to my children," said Mrs. Desmond; "but what could I do with a negro nurse who was many years older than I, and thought herself twice as wise? Dolly will be sorry enough when she knows to what danger she has exposed Clare, for she is fondly attached to her; but even this will not shake her faith in her favorite superstition."

Mr. Desmond arose, looking stern, and said:

"I will summon the woman, and we will learn from her every particular connected with her visit to old Nancy Blodge. It is my belief that Spiers tampered with the fortune-teller, and that a slow poison was designed to be given to the old woman. How he has been foiled I cannot understand, but I hope we shall be able to find out."

In a few moments he came back, followed by Dolly, with that peculiar ashen color seen on a black face when in mortal terror. She shook like an aspen leaf, and rolled her eyes wildly from side to side.

Her master had only said to her:

"Come with me to be examined about that bottle of trash you gave your young mistress. She is accused of having poisoned her aunt, because she used it. If you do not speak the whole truth, I will have you hanged."

Dolly would have replied, but her tongue seemed frozen with terror, and with difficulty she managed to

totter after her master, feeling very much as if the day of judgment had come for her.

Seeing that she was unable to stand, Desmond pushed forward a chair, and said:

"Sit there. You are a criminal arraigned for your life now, remember, and speaking the whole truth is all that can save you. Answer such questions as this gentleman will put to you, and be careful that you tell neither more nor less than has actually happened."

Dolly sunk on the chair in a limp heap, too deeply horrified to understand anything clearly, but that she was on trial for life or death.

Mr. Clifford waited a few moments, to allow her time to compose herself, and then quietly said:

"I wish you to collect your faculties, old woman, and tell me when and where you obtained a vial of liquid called a love-charm, which you gave to Miss Desmond before she left her home. Do not be frightened. I believe that you intended no evil to her."

Dolly began to rock herself to and fro, muttering:

"O lor! O lor! to think I should ha' got my darlin' in sich a mess as dis, an' I on'y meant to help her. Oh! what shill I do? What *shill* I do?"

"There is nothing for you to do but to speak out, and that pretty quickly too, for we have no time to waste on you," said her master sternly. "Stop that maundering, and tell Mr. Clifford what he wishes to know."

Thus admonished, Dolly made an effort to straighten herself up, and whimpered:

"I an't got nuffin to tell him but what he knows a'ready. I gin the thing to her, an' I an't 'sponsible for what was in it. Old Nance gin it to me, and she said as

how it were a pow'ful love-charm. Dat's all I know 'bout it, an' you couldn't git no mo' outin me, ef you was to tear me to pieces wi' wild hosses."

"Tell me all the particulars of your visit to this Nancy Blodge, and where she is to be found," said Mr. Clifford, still trying to reassure her.

"She an't to be found nowhars. She's done gone, an' nobody knows what's come o' her."

The two gentlemen exchanged glances.

"Come now, Dolly, I have forborne toward you long enough. You've had time to gather your senses and answer rationally. Give me a minute account of what happened on the night you went to get from Nancy this pretended love-charm. Call to mind the most trifling thing, for on that perhaps the safety of your young mistress may depend. She is in danger, and if you do not speak, something dreadful may happen to her."

After a brief pause, Dolly straightened herself, and said:

"I'd do anything for my pretty lamb. I nussed her in dese arms, an' her own ma can't love her much better'n I do. I meant to sarve her when I got dat ere bottle o' truck from Nance, an' I can't believe there was nothin' in it dat was wrong."

"You mean anything in it, I suppose?"

"I dunno what I means, for I's all discomboberated—dat's what I is; flustrated don't come nigh what I is jes' now. I'll try to tell you 'bout dat ere visit I made to Nance's cabin. I saw her de fust time in de woods a gatherin' yerbs, when I were on de way to have a talk wi' her. Well, in course we colloqued together while, an' I axed her 'bout what I wanted. She said she were

up to all *sich*, an' ef I'd come to her house de nex' night she'd have it all right for me."

"Of course you went. What happened then? and who did you see there besides old Nancy?"

"How did you know there was anybody thar? I'm sho I didn't 'spect to find nobody at dat ole shanty, but there *was* a man thar a talkin' long o' her."

"What sort of a looking man was he? Young or old? tall or fair?"

"He weren't nyther one nor t'other, but I couldn't git a good look at him, caze he kep' his hat jammed over his face; but he had a heap o' white hair. An' when he went out, which he did almost 'mejiate, I saw dat he were a tall man, wi' mighty shapely legs, an' shiny boots on his feet."

"Ah-h!" said Clifford, with a long breath. "There is some light here. That is the very man I have seen walking with Claudia Coyle at night. Go on, Dolly. You are putting us on the right track now, and you will yet help us to expose the villany of which you and your young lady have been made the unconscious agents. Tell us what occurred after the visitor went away."

"Tan't much to tell, sir, but I'll do my best. Ole Nance seemed flustered at me findin' de man thar, an' she turned sharp to me, an' tole me she wasn't lookin' for me for a hour yit, an' axed me what I meant by comin' afore my time. I pacified her de bes' way I could, an' when she got in a good humor, she luffed an' joked wi' me, an' tole me dat delixir I'd come arter was wuth its weight in gold—dat I were gettin' it dog cheap at fifty cents, which was all she'd axed me for it, an' a mighty scrabble I had to git dat much money.

But I was tarmined to do all I could for Miss Clare, an' I knowed nuff 'bout Miss 'Dair to be sartin sure she'd need suffin to keep her in de good graces o' de ole lady. So I sold my speckled pullet, wi' her fust chickens, bein' thar was only six on 'em, an' de money I got for 'em went to pay for dat ere charm. Dat's all I know 'bout it, ef I was goin' to die dis blessed minute."

Mr. Clifford looked disappointed; he presently said:

"You saw nothing more of the white-haired man I suppose; that is, on your way home, I mean?"

"No, sir; I didn't see nuffin more o' *him*, but I met another feller, an' a curis thing happened. I never knowed what he meant by stoppin' me, but he stood jest in front o' me, an' said:

"Halt, thar; whar do you come from?"

"I was mad at him for his imperence, an' I said back:

"You an't no millingtery, nor no p'leeceman, an' I an't agwine to stop for no sich white trash."

"De moon was shinin', an' I could see plain nuff dat he were white, an' when de win' blew his hat off I knowed him. 'Twas ole Miss Beal's son, an' ole Nance's cabin were on one corner o' his mother's farm."

"Young Beal!" exclaimed Mr. Desmond, breathlessly. "He is a clerk in Spiers' drug store. What did he say to you, Dolly? Be careful now, for a great deal depends on your answer."

"He only chaffed me, as boys will, you know, an' he an't seventeen yit. He 'cused me o' goin' to Nance to git some o' her trash, an' said *he* could make me suffin ever so much better. I 'nied dat, an' at las' he somehow

got me to 'fess dat I had a bottle o' her truck, an' to let him look at it.

"He tuk de bottle in his han's, an' twisted and turned it 'bout, an' then when I got mad caze I thought he didn't mean to gin it back to me, he laughed like one all possessed, and said:

"How much did you pay for dis, now, you ole goose? It's wuth 'bout five cents, an' I s'pose you gin ten times dat much for it. 'Tan't nothin' but soda an' water, wi' a little yaller colorin' mixed up wi' it."

"You'd better believe I were proper mad at dat, caze I knowed he weren't up to ole Nancy's doin's. I tole him 'twan't no business o' his'n what I paid for it; an' I spoke my mine out to him 'bout his rudeness in stoppin' me, when I were 'tendin' to my own business.

"At dat he were p'lite as a dancin'-master. He made me a low bow, and handed back my bottle, an' I went away as fas' as I could, while he laffed agin, an' called out arter me, 'I hope yer mess o' stuff'll do no harm, aunty;' an' den he went on a whis'lin' wi' all his might."

Mr. Clifford drew a long breath, as if a heavy weight had been lifted from his breast. He calmly said:

"You have given us a valuable clue, Dolly, and you may go now. Quiet your nerves, and keep a still tongue in your mouth. You are not to breathe a word of what has passed here this morning. I think we can undo all the wrong that has been perpetrated, and, with the help of young Beal, bring the real criminals to justice."

Dolly, in spite of this assurance, went away looking crestfallen and forlorn.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

YOUNG BEAL'S STORY.

MR. CLIFFORD turned to Mr. Desmond, and asked:

"Who is this young Beal? and what is his character?"

"He is the only son of a widow who owns a small farm in the edge of Portsmouth. The place is worn out, and I think there must be very good management to make both ends meet at the close of the year; for Mrs. Beal has three daughters, all younger than George. The boy, so far as I know him, is a straightforward, clever lad, and not likely to abet any rascality, though he has been with such a man as Spiers for the last three years, learning how to make pills and mix potions."

"I am glad to hear that he has good principles; he knows more of this elixir than any one else except Spiers and his son, and his evidence will be valuable. I think we had better lose no time in seeing him, Desmond. I almost grasp the truth now, and if it is as I believe, we can take Beal back with us, and go on the same steamer with Mrs. Desmond, to confront him with those conspirators who flatter themselves that they have the game in their own hands."

"If you can only do that, Mr. Clifford, I shall be almost happy," cried Mrs. Desmond, grasping his hands. "Oh, my poor child! Let us only be in time to save her, and I shall thank and bless you all my life."

"I keep a cab and horse now," said Mr. Desmond,

"and at this hour they are always ready to take me in town. We can be there in a few moments, and as we have six good hours before us in which to work, we may possibly be ready in time for the steamer."

In a few moments the vehicle stood at the door, with a stout roan horse throwing up his head, and showing his impatience to start.

As they were leaving, Mrs. Desmond said:

"I shall prepare for you to accompany me to Riverdale, Dezzy. I feel almost certain that you will be able to do it."

"God grant it!" was the brief reply, and a moment later they were sweeping down the road at a brisk trot.

Mrs. Desmond went in to make her arrangements for a week's absence, and Christine, to her great delight, was told that the house would be left in her charge, and Victor left under her management. The old servants would be protection enough in a quiet neighborhood, it was decided, especially as there was little in the house to tempt a burglar, if one should be prowling in that vicinity.

Christine supposed her parents were going to Mrs. Adair's funeral, and she was so much elated with the information that the old lady had bequeathed her fortune to her sister, that she could neither speak nor think of anything else.

With swift fingers she aided her mother in her preparations for her journey, and by ten o'clock all was in readiness for her departure.

In the meantime, the two gentlemen had driven straight to Mr. Spiers' place of business. The old man

was the only person in the shop when they entered, and a half-scared expression came into his face, succeeded by a vindictive scowl, as he recognized Mr. Desmond.

He offered him no greeting, but stood glaring at the unwelcome intruder, waiting for him to speak.

"I suppose you hardly expected to see me here again, Spiers; but you see I am not done with you yet. I have brought my friend, Mr. Clifford, to witness our interview this time, and I think it will have more important results than any that has hitherto passed between us."

At the name of his companion, Spiers visibly winced, but he recovered himself, and insolently replied:

"I wish neither yourself nor your friends to come into my house, Mr. Desmond. You've insulted me often enough, I think; but the longest lane has a turn, and we've got to it now. I am not going to put up with anything more from you, I can tell you."

"Oh, ho! I suppose you think you've got the whip-hand of me, but by the Lord you were never more mistaken in your life. I'll pay you out now, you vile blot on humanity, for all the villany you have been guilty of in your loathsome life. I have spared you long enough, but this last crime shall be atoned for, if I am forced to take your life myself in expiation of it."

The cadaverous face of Spiers became almost livid, and he could not control the tremor that seized him.

"Have—have you gone mad, Mr. Desmond, that you assail me in this way? I shall be glad if your friend here will explain your meaning, as you seem to be in no condition to do so yourself. I deride your threats, and defy them."

Before Clifford could speak, the enraged father strode up to the counter behind which Spiers had taken refuge, and shaking his fist in his face, cried out:

"You think that you have my child in your power, and that will cow me into silence; but you were never more mistaken in your life, you miserable dog! She is safe from you—safe, do you hear? though Mrs. Adair is dead. Your base son meant to fasten on her the charge of murder, that he might force her to marry him to induce him to conceal it, but we know enough to foil him at that game."

With a gasp, Spiers fell back on a chair as if he had been shot. At that moment George Beal, who had been out on an errand, entered the shop, looking excited and a little scared.

A curious change came over his face as he saw Mr. Desmond, and he rushed up to him, saying:

"Is it true, Mr. Desmond, that Mrs. Adair is dead? I saw it in the paper just now, and I thought it must be the same old lady Miss Clare went to live with. If it is, sir, it's lucky you are here, for I have something important to tell you."

"I came here to find you, George, and if you can do what I hope, your future is safe for life, my boy. Don't fear to speak out; my daughter is rich, and she can more than make up to you what you will lose by leaving the employment of yonder trembling wretch."

"It's not that I am thinking of, sir. I've only been waiting for things to come to a focus, that my strange story might stand a chance to be believed. There can't no harm come to Miss Clare. I took good care of that."

"Shut that door and lock it, George, and then we'll have the truth out of that vindictive old scoundrel who sits glowering and trembling yonder."

"You sha'n't shut my door," screamed Spiers. "Do it, if you dare, you young viper, that I've warmed in my bosom only to be stung by you. I'll shoot you, if you lay a hand on that lock."

He drew a pistol from his pocket, and with a hand that was almost palsied by fright, attempted to level it at the lad, but Mr. Clifford wrenched it from his grasp, and coolly said:

"There are two policemen who have been watching this house since five o'clock this morning, by my orders, and any hostile demonstration on your part will be speedily followed by arrest. We have come here to have a settlement with you, Mr. Spiers, and we intend to learn the truth about this infamous conspiracy, at all hazards."

Spiers sank down as if collapsed, and for a moment he seemed on the verge of fainting. He had heard from his son of the death of Mrs. Adair, and received from him the assurance that before many days her heiress would be in his power, either by fraud or violence; and just as he was preparing to triumph over his old enemy, by throwing in his face the accusation of murder against his daughter, he came to proclaim his knowledge of the whole plot, and consign those engaged in it to the punishment they merited. A coward at heart, in the moment of danger he had no resources with which to defend himself. He sat there abject, despicable, shrinking before the stern men who held him at their mercy.

The door was shut and locked. Spiers was collared

and brought from behind the counter, with no effort at resistance from him. Both moral and physical strength seemed to have deserted him, for he submitted without even a remonstrance; he possibly saw that words would be useless while in the hands of the outraged and enraged father.

Beal threw open the door of the inner room, and Mr. Desmond thrust his captive into an arm-chair which stood near the centre of the floor, and sternly said:

"I shall first hear what Beal has to tell me, and then I shall deal with you. Now, George, speak out, and tell me how you managed to baffle the devilish plot of that man and his son."

There was in the partition wall a space which had once been filled by a door. It was in an inconvenient position, and Spiers had caused another to be made, boarding up the first, and papering it on the side next to the shop. A few days before the interview between himself and his son, in which the latter unveiled his intentions with regard to Clare, Beal, in packing some heavy articles in that corner, had started one of the planks, leaving a crevice nearly half an inch in width. As he was often severely scolded, and his small salary kept back, if accidents happened, he said nothing of this, intending to restore the plank to its place when an opportunity offered.

After explaining this, he went on to say:

"John Spiers never treated me well, but one morning he was ruder to me than usual when he came in here and found me packing some things. He ordered me out, and told me not to go eaves-dropping to hear what he and the old man had to say to each other. I

shouldn't have thought of such a thing, if he hadn't put it in my head. I remembered the crack in the wall, and I put my ear to it as soon as they shut the door on me. I was scared at what I heard 'em say. John had letters from a girl that was living with a rich old lady, who meant to send for Miss Clare Desmond to go and live with her, and if she liked her, she'd give her all her money when she died."

Beal then went on, and gave as clear an account of the conspiracy as he could, interrupted at every new statement by a sharp hissing sentence from the limp villain on the chair:

"You lie, you young viper; you lie, and you know it."

Little notice was taken of this feeble attempt to defend himself, and the lad at length came to that portion of his statement for which Mr. Clifford impatiently waited.

"When I found out what they meant to do to get Mrs. Adair out of the way, and fix on Miss Desmond the charge of killing her, I made up my mind that I'd take a hand with 'em, and hold the trumps. I owed a grudge to John Spiers for always running roughshod over me, and I meant to let him go the length of his tether, and then bring him up with a sharp jerk.

"I watched 'em after that, and I found out where the old man kept the elixir he was getting ready for John to give Nancy Blodge. As he didn't suspect me, it was easy enough for me to get at it and see what it looked like. He put the bottle in a private drawer of his desk, but I knew how to open that as well as he did, and I took a vial exactly like the one he used, and made a

mixture of soda, with a little arnotto to color it, and a few drops of violet perfumery.

"Mr. Spiers sealed up his bottle with red wax, and put a strip of paper on the outside, with six marks upon it, to show that six drops must be given at one dose. I made up mine exactly like it, and put his back in the drawer, keeping possession of the other. I got possession of his afterward, and I have it now with the seal unbroken, and I will give it to you to be analyzed, Mr. Desmond."

Spiers at this uttered a groan, and cried out:

"He is making the whole story up; there's not a word of truth in it. If there is poison in that bottle he has put it in himself, that he may ruin me and my son, good as I have been to him."

"Silence!" said Desmond, sternly. "Your denials signify nothing, and only interrupt the business in hand."

Then turning to Beal, he said:

"I hope you have that bottle at hand. Time is precious. It is my wish to get to my daughter as soon as possible, that I may protect her from the machinations of that wretched hound."

With sudden fire, Spiers cried out:

"He's no more a dog than you are, Reginald Desmond, and he'll yet save himself and torture you, by marrying the girl before you can reach her. You had better mind how you disgrace us, for your daughter will be John's wife before you get to Riverdale, as sure as you are standing there."

Desmond glared on him, and with pale lips, said:

"In that case, I will pursue him and *kill* him with my

own hand. Do you think I would trust my child with him for an hour, when I know that it is his purpose to possess himself of her fortune, and then put her out of the way, that he may marry that fiend in woman's shape, Claudia Coyle?"

"It will be an even chance which will get killed if you do follow him, and John isn't the man to be taken by surprise. He'll have the girl, and her money too. I've got over my scare now, and you'll see that we'll fight you to the bitter end, and win in the long run too."

Mr. Clifford here spoke:

"This is wasting time. Be silent, prisoner, for I hold you as such, and do not dare to interrupt again. Beal, tell us as briefly as possible what remains to be told."

"Yes, sir; I'll come to the end quickly now. I carried that bottle about me, and followed up John Spiers sharp enough. Nancy's shanty was on my mother's land, and I kept an eye on her every night, because I knew that whoever went to see her, generally went after dark. I saw John go to her cabin, and I listened outside. It was easy enough to hear all that went on, and to see too, for that matter, for there was plenty of cracks in the walls. I heard the bargain he made with her to give the bottle he brought with him to Dolly, Miss Desmond's nurse, in place of the one the old crone had prepared for her.

"The woman came before Spiers went away, but as he was disguised with a gray wig she did not know him. When he left the women talked together, and I saw the bottle old Spiers had prepared given to Dolly, and she, poor old fool, thought it was a real love-charm, that

would bring good luck to her young mistress. I watched for her on the road, and stopped her with some nonsense. I bantered her till she let me look at the bottle she carried so carefully, and while pretending to examine it, I made the exchange I desired, and sent her off with a preparation that was harmless as water. The poison I locked up in a box at home, and I've carried the key about me ever since. I can run home, get it, and be back in half an hour."

"You have done bravely and well, Beal," said Mr. Clifford, warmly; "but why have you kept silent so long? You should have gone to Mr. Desmond at once, and stated all you knew."

"I see that I ought now, but I wanted to trap John and pay him back; and I waited to see what he would do when the old lady *didn't* die. When I saw the paper this morning, and found her death in it, I was scared, I tell you, and I ran back here to get leave to go home an hour or two, intending to go to Mr. Desmond's house and tell him all I knew. I found him here, and that is all I have to tell."

"And that is enough, George; you have saved my child, and made a friend for life in me. Leave this accursed house and come with me. I will care for you and yours in future myself, and thanks to Mrs. Adair's liberality, I am able to do it."

"I'll be very glad to get away, Mr. Desmond; for I am sick and tired of the way I've been treated. If the little I earned hadn't been so important to my mother, I would never have stayed this long. When I changed the bottles, I didn't think of anything but getting Miss Clare out of a bad scrape; but I'll be very glad if you

can help me to get away from old Spiers. He and I don't suit each other."

"I should think not, indeed. Honesty and baseness rarely do. You are quit of him now, my lad, forever."

"So you may all think," said Spiers, with vicious emphasis, "but you'll find yourselves mistaken. I'll yet prove all that boy has stated a vile fabrication, and I'll make Clare Desmond plead for mercy on her bended knees. *She* destroyed her aunt, and all this is got up to screen her from the punishment she richly deserves. You'll find out, Reggy Desmond, that you'll not have things all your own way. You have attacked me in my own house, which is my castle, and I'll have the law of you for that. I'll indict *you* for conspiracy against an honest man, and unless that girl of yours marries my son, I'll bring her to the halter—that's what I'll do."

Spiers looked frightful, as he raved thus. The pallor of his face had changed to a blotched purple hue, and his eyes were injected with blood. In his impotent rage, he had bitten his lower lip through, and a small stream of blood trickled down on his white shirt bosom.

Mr. Clifford attentively regarded him, and then said:

"This is simply raving, Mr. Spiers. Miss Desmond is safe, and the villany of yourself and your son must recoil upon your own heads. I am something of a medical man, and I see in your face indications that are not to be mistaken. If you do not calm yourself, you will be in no condition to do anything in half an hour from this time."

"I don't believe you. I am strong, and well as any one, and you are only trying to frighten me, that I may

turn into a puling idiot, and confess all that you would like to have said, that Clare Desmond may be saved from the fate she has earned for herself. Go to the deuce with your predictions. I want none of them."

Clifford shrugged his shoulders.

"I have warned you, and I know what I say. I will tell you something before you fall into a fit, which will show you that another avenger has been on your track besides young Beal. I accidentally saw Miss Desmond mixing something with the night draught of her aunt, and without letting her know what I had seen, I removed the lemonade, and prepared more myself for Mrs. Adair's use. My son is a good chemist and he analyzed the liquid I carried to him. We found nothing deleterious in it, but we took the precaution to renew the draught every night, after the poor child had tampered with it, in the innocent belief that she was only winning the old lady over to love her. We have a portion of that lemonade sealed up, that others may judge of it as we did. To make assurance doubly sure, there was a post-mortem examination of Mrs. Adair's stomach, and not a trace of poison was found. She died of aneurism of the heart, from which she had suffered for several years."

As Mr. Clifford went on, speaking with deliberate impressiveness, a glassy expression came into the hard eyes that were lifted to his, and there was a faint twitching of the lower part of the discolored face. When he had finished speaking, Spiers muttered:

"Baffled—baffled at every point!" and fell forward on the floor, writhing and moaning as if in pain.

When they lifted him, blood was flowing from his mouth, and Mr. Desmond said:

"A higher power has saved us from the trouble of dealing with him; there will soon be one reptile less on the face of this fair earth, which he, and such as he, endeavor to make a pandemonium. He may not die, though he is very ill. We had better call his wife to look after him; but to make sure of him, I shall leave a policeman in charge of the house, with injunctions to keep a strict watch over him."

At that moment the rear door of the room was suddenly burst open, and a tall Amazon, with dark hair and flashing eyes, bounded in.

"What's all this here todo, and why is the front door shut up in business hours? A nice way to make money that is, to be sure. What's to pay, I say?"

Desmond knew her by sight, and he stepped forward, and said:

"Your husband has been taken suddenly ill, Mrs. Spiers, and we were just about to send you word."

"You here, Mr. Desmond? I don't know how you dared to show your face in this house, after what's passed between you and my husband. What have you been doin' to him to make him like this?"

"We—my friend and I—have been telling him some plain truths; that is all, madam. Mr. Spiers had better be taken to his room, and a physician sent for. He is in a dangerous condition."

"If he is, you've put him in it, and I'll have you arrested for it," was the fierce reply. "What do you mean by coming into our house, and using its master this here way?"

"I mean to have justice, madam; but that is out of the question just at present. If your husband had not

fallen into a fit he would have slept in jail to-night. For the present he will only be watched over by a policeman, to see that he does not escape."

"Escape what?" and she burst into a volley of violent abuse, which the gentlemen were glad to escape by going away, and taking Beal with them.

A crowd had begun to collect in front of the door, curious to ascertain why it was closed during business hours, and in a few moments Mrs. Spiers had more assistance than she needed to convey her husband to the upper apartments.

It was several hours before he became conscious, but when he could speak, he whispered to his wife:

"The only chance left is, that John will nab her before they get to Riverdale. He's safe to do it; so have the parson ready as soon as they get in the house. When they're once married, all will be right enough."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

JASPER'S MISTAKE.

THE two gentlemen first went to a magistrate's office, taking Beal with them, and there a formal deposition was made, and three warrants issued for the arrest of Spiers and his son, and for Claudia Coyle.

A policeman took up his watch in the apartment of the sick man, and two others, it was arranged, should accompany the party to Riverdale, and, if possible,

secure their quarry before they were warned of the danger that menaced them.

Mr. Desmond went with Beal himself to the house of his mother, and took possession of the elixir prepared by Spiers. This was sealed in a box, and delivered to the magistrate, to be produced when necessary. By eleven o'clock all was in readiness for their departure, and with a jubilant heart, Mr. Clifford saw the last glimpse of the town as the steamer ploughed her way toward the bourne they were now so anxious to gain.

But the hearts of the parents were heavy with dread, which they would not express, lest one might sadden the other. There was a dark presentiment that all would not be found well with Clare, though neither could have explained why they mistrusted the assurances of Mr. Clifford that no danger could reach her, guarded as she was by the watchful love of Jasper, and the constant presence of Judith Brooke.

Clare was ill—half distraught with fear and remorse; they had discovered from Mr. Clifford, that it was doubtful if she understood him when he tried to explain to her that the drops she had given her aunt had been analyzed, and nothing injurious found in them; and if Spiers or his accomplice could find means to approach her, they would work on her fears till she might consent to any course that would save her from the disgrace and horror of a public trial. Both Mr. Desmond and his wife knew Clare to be impulsive, easily wrought on, and from childhood, there had been a dash of recklessness in her temper, when driven to bay, which had sometimes happened even under her mother's loving rule, and they could not rid themselves of the dreary weight of apprehension that oppressed them.

The day was charming, the scenery lovely, and the associations connected with different points on the river thrilling, or romantic; but all had lost its charm for hearts only occupied with their own fears for the safety of one who was indeed in deep peril; who, unconscious that deliverance was on its way to her, was despairingly giving herself up to the fate she dreaded far more than death, yet which she believed she could not evade.

Clare passed the day which followed her interview with Claudia in a state of mind bordering so nearly on delirium, that she could scarcely be considered responsible for any madness she might commit.

The blackness of darkness seemed to have settled over her life, and more than once she was tempted to take it. But she had been too religiously reared not to shrink from the thought of self-destruction, and she despairingly thought:

"The end will come soon enough without using violence toward myself. Since I must give myself to that dreadful man, or suffer even a worse fate than to become his wife, I will go on the path appointed me, hoping that my trial will be brief. God will have mercy, and let my poor heart speedily break under the load it will have to bear."

When Judith awoke in the morning, she felt self-condemned that she had been untrue to the trust she had undertaken. She could not understand how she had fallen asleep, nor why she was so overcome with drowsiness as to be oblivious of her charge for so many hours. She suspected that there had been foul play, and she questioned Clare closely as to what had happened during the night.

Her replies were so strange and irrelevant that Judith could glean nothing satisfactory from them, and she reluctantly came to the conclusion that the mind of her patient was less clear than on the previous day. She was also more feverish, and when Jasper came up to see her after the morning meal was over, he was so much alarmed by her condition that he prohibited much talking, and himself administered a sedative, which he hoped would allay the nervous irritation from which she was evidently suffering.

He sat with her the greater part of the morning, reading aloud to her, in the hope that the monotonous flow of sound would lull her into slumber. She lay so still that he was deceived into thinking that she slept, when she only lay perfectly quiet, with her arm thrown up in such a position that she could look from beneath it upon the dear face she believed she was looking on for the last time; for see him after she became the property of John Spiers, she had made up her mind she never would.

When he at last arose softly, and was about to summon Lyra to sit with her till Miss Brooke returned, she lifted her arm and faintly said:

"Kiss me before you go, Jasper. You are so good to me, that I wish to make the only return I can for all your kindness."

"The *only* return, my darling? A kiss from you is a great delight, but the love of which it is the sign and symbol is a far more precious possession."

"It is yours, Jasper. Let what will happen, remember that I love you, and you alone; that I will never cease to love you while my brief span of life lasts. I

shall not live long, dearest. When I am gone, you will forgive all—all—"

Her voice sunk suddenly, as if courage and hope had both deserted her, though she was in the arms of her lover, and her head lay upon his breast.

"You must not speak in this way, Clare. You are in no real danger. Only be calm and hopeful, and you will soon be strong and bright as ever."

She burst into a violent passion of weeping, and at intervals sobbed:

"Oh, Jasper! I am doomed! *doomed!* Nothing can help me now; but when all is over, you will pity me; you will come to my grave and shed a few tears over it."

She was trembling violently, and fearful of exciting her still more, dreading the effect of such extreme agitation on the mind that had never been perfectly clear since the night that cruel letter reached her, Jasper replaced her on her pillows, and tenderly said:

"You must not talk in this gloomy way, Clare. I came to you this morning in the hope that you would be composed enough to understand something I have to explain to you. But I find you more nervous, and less able to control yourself than heretofore. Believe me, darling, when I assure you that our future is bright—that you have nothing to fear."

Clare seemed scarcely to heed his words. With a faint, weary sigh, she said:

"Good-by, Jasper. Leave me now, for I must rest. I—I have a great deal before me, and I must gather my strength for—for it don't matter what, but something that I have to do."

She spoke so strangely that he thought her mind

wandered; but for that he would have explained to her the precautions his father and himself had taken to prove to the world that the elixir she had given her aunt was simply colored water, with a few grains of soda dissolved in it.

Mr. Clifford had already told her this, but she was delirious at the time, and there was no memory of it in her half-dazed mind now. The one awful horror that was crushing her down, and bringing her surely within the grasp of John Spiers, was the belief that she was really guilty of the crime of which Claudia had accused her. If Jasper had spoken then, she would have been turned from the fearful step she was about to take, to save herself, she believed, from the punishment of the deed she had so innocently committed.

The picture Claudia had sketched of herself, arraigned as a murderess before a crowd of curious or jeering spectators, was ever before her mental vision, and in her childish desperation she was ready to do anything, however repugnant, to save herself from such a fate as that.

Jasper made the mistake so often committed by those in charge of invalids more sick at heart than from physical causes. Fearful of exciting her too much, if he spoke of the charge that could be so easily refuted, he thought it best to soothe her by the assurance so often given her in vain, that she was quite safe and their future unclouded.

That was told her only to keep her quiet, she thought; they hoped to save her, but after what Claudia had said, there was no chance for that. John Spiers held her fate in his hands, and he would be ruthless if she did not

win his forbearance by the sacrifice of herself to the wild passion she believed he felt for her.

Before Jasper came to her, Clare had insisted on being dressed and placed on the wide sofa between the two front windows. Her malady was mental, and her physical strength had not materially declined, so she knew that when the time for action arrived, she would have the power to fulfil her promise to Claudia, to drag herself to the arbor and accept the doom which was more dreadful to her than death itself.

When Jasper left her, Judith came up; but to all her efforts to cheer her or draw her into conversation, Clare only replied by an impatient movement, and at last almost fretfully said:

"Please excuse me, Miss Judith; my head is in a whirl, and my heart is half broken. Just let me alone, if you really care for me. I must try to quiet myself for what lies before me."

Miss Brooke imagined she referred to the arrival of her mother, and like Jasper, she thought it best to humor the sick girl and keep her quiet at all hazards. She found a book that was suitable to read aloud, and her voice exerted a more soothing effect than that of Jasper, for Clare fell asleep, and did not wake till after luncheon was over.

Lyra brought her up tea and toast, and a broiled bird; and remembering that she must not faint from lack of food before the purpose now fully matured in her mind was accomplished, Clare forced herself to eat, though every morsel seemed to choke her.

Claudia had not yet appeared below stairs, but when luncheon was over, she came down with her hat on, and

a parasol in her hand, and said to Miss Brooke, as she passed her in the hall:

"I have an engagement for this afternoon which will detain me till after Mrs. Desmond arrives. When I return, I will speak with her, and I think she will be more just to me than you have been, Miss Brooke."

"I have nothing further to say to you on any subject, Miss Coyle," said Judith, drawing herself haughtily aside. "Since you are going, I think it will be best for you, and for those you leave behind you, that you should never return here at all."

Claudia flashed a single glance of hatred and defiance upon her, but the next moment she was tranquil as usual, and with a cruel smile replied:

"I do not quite agree with you. Before I go, I owe a duty to myself, which can only be performed here. I shall come back to see Mrs. Desmond, and make such explanations as are necessary. *Au revoir*, Miss Judith. You can enjoy your lover's society without fear now, as I shall not be here to intrude on your precious charge."

Mr. Bowden was not far distant, and as Claudia swept down the steps, and moved away with the lithe, elastic tread which showed the perfect physical development to which she owed half her charms, he laughed, and said:

"What a clipper she is, Judith! and how condescending of her to tell you that you may freely devote yourself to me this afternoon. I hope you'll do it, dear, for I have not yet found the opportunity to say to you half that I wish. We have so many years of estrangement to make up for, you know."

"Not estrangement, William, for we were always faithful to each other; and we both had faith to believe that my father would relent at last. I would gladly stay with you if I were certain that this pretended absence of Claudia Coyle is not a ruse. She may slip back and get into Clare's room, if I am not on guard, and I feel responsible to Mr. Clifford. I am not quite easy in my mind about what happened last night. I have not felt quite right all day, and I begin to think that I may have been drugged. But if that girl got into Clare's room, she would surely have raised an alarm, or have told me to-day what passed between them."

"I think you alarm yourself unnecessarily about Miss Desmond. I hardly think Claudia Coyle would attempt to meddle with you in any way; you were only worn out with watching, and slept more soundly than usual; that was all."

Judith shook her head dubiously, but she made no other reply. She watched Claudia till she was lost sight of beyond the trees, and then said:

"I believe the serpent has fairly trailed herself away this time, and for a few hours all will be safe. I must go to Clare now, but I promise to come back as soon as I can, and remain with you as long as I can."

Clare was lying with a handkerchief thrown over her face to conceal from observation the dire struggle that was going on in her soul, and Judith sat down quietly, thinking her asleep.

She had brought up a book with her, in which she soon became absorbed, and the time passed on almost unnoted. At four o'clock Jasper was to go to the land-

ing to meet Mrs. Desmond, and he looked in a moment before starting.

Judith pressed her finger on her lip, and pointed to the motionless figure of the poor girl, who lay like one in a horrible trance, weighed down to the dust by the thought of her evasion, yet resolved to accomplish it, if life and strength were granted her to do so. She made no sign, though every echo of her lover's footfall, as he moved away, fell on her heart as a knell to hope and happiness.

Finding her so quiet, and certain that Claudia was really gone, Judith remembered her promise to her betrothed, and she softly left the room, and sent Lyra to take her place.

The girl came, but in half an hour the heat of the afternoon, and the loss of rest for several nights past, told on her, and she leaned her head down on a table near her, and fell into a deep sleep.

Then the handkerchief was withdrawn from the wild, white face it had shaded, and wrought up to the utmost pitch of endurance, Clare noiselessly arose, threw a dark shawl over her white wrapper, and glided from the room. There was a back staircase at the end of the hall, and she swiftly descended this, and passed unseen through a side entrance which opened on the lawn.

Then her courage almost failed her; something whispered that she had better await the arrival of her mother, and take counsel with her before she took this desperate step. But the flitting gleam of correct reasoning was soon obscured, and spurred on by the goading fears Claudia had aroused, she moved swiftly down the

pathway leading to the arbor, scarcely conscious of what she was doing.

In the meantime Claudia had taken refuge in the same retreat, and waited there as patiently as she could till her fellow-conspirator made his appearance.

The arbor was a rustic bower covered with wild vines, which stood in a grove of trees on the lower end of the grounds, more than half a mile distant from the house. It was rarely resorted to, and at that hour of the day was as safe and sequestered a place of meeting as could have been selected.

The time passed very slowly to Claudia, and the two hours that elapsed before Spiers joined her seemed as if they would never come to an end. He had laid aside his disguise, and was carefully and handsomely dressed.

Claudia frowned slightly as she remarked the care with which his toilet was made, and almost sharply said:

"You wish to make a good impression on the namby-pamby baby you are going to meet, I suppose, and that is why you have kept me waiting so long while you were making such an Adonis of yourself?"

He snatched her to his breast, and after kissing her again and again, said, with a laugh:

"You know better than that, my adorable. It is true that *she* must see me at my best, but I thought only of you while I was removing that odious disguise and making myself presentable once more. Since you are here, all is right, I suppose?"

"Yes; I outgeneralled them all, and in spite of their precautions I saw and spoke with her last night. I made her see that her only chance to save herself from

the ruin and degradation of a criminal prosecution is to accept you as her protector. Ha! ha! I think she is half mad now, John, and she will be wholly so before she has been in your power long."

"So much the better," he coolly replied; "then I could manage her to suit myself, and get rid of her at my own option. Don't be jealous, Claudia, for I swear to you you will have no cause. I must wear the matrimonial yoke a few months to make sure of the money, but when that is safe we will know how to enjoy it together; eh! my beautiful?"

"I think we shall; but are you sure that your arrangements are such as cannot be interfered with?"

"I think they are safe. My horse is fastened securely not far from here. Like a paladin of old, I will take my prize in my arms and gallop away to the cottage in which I have so long vegetated with old Mrs. Brown and her cub of a son. The young man will do anything for money, and I have promised him a hundred dollars to help me off with the heiress. I have made arrangements with the clerk of the steamer that comes down stream to-night, to lie off in front of old mother Brown's house till I can come out in a boat with my bride and get aboard. Once safe in my father's house, all will be in readiness for the bridal, and you may be sure no time will be lost. I shall take Clare with me to the north, and keep out of the way of Desmond till his wrath has time to cool. It will depend on himself whether he ever sees his daughter again."

Claudia vindictively said:

"Never allow her to hope for a reunion with her family till her will is made in your favor. After that is

done, you will be a greater fool than I take you to be, if you permit her to live long enough to tell any one interested in her, by what means she was coerced into giving you the whole of her aunt's large property."

Spiers laughed.

"You may trust me to take care of my own interests, Claudia; and you may be sure that the sooner I can rid myself of such an incubus, with safety to myself, the more agreeable it will be to me. You will go to Naples, as we have settled, and I will set out to take my wife there, to spend the winter for the benefit of her health. Ha! ha! She'll never see the tropic verdure of the Italian paradise; she'll die suddenly on her way there, and I don't think there will be much time given to mourning before I find a successor for her."

Both laughed in concert at this hideous pleasantry, and Claudia presently said:

"I would gladly go away at once; but to avoid a suspicion of collusion between us, I think I had better remain till after Mrs. Adair's will is read. I know that she has left me nothing, but that does not signify, since our cleverness will secure to us the enjoyment of all her wealth."

"But if Clare shouldn't come after all," said Spiers, with sudden uneasiness. "It is getting late, and the steamer will soon be at the landing. Confound it! what does she mean by keeping me waiting on her in this way? I'll pay her out for all she's made me suffer, when I once have her in my power."

Claudia paled slightly at the possibility that Clare might fail to come, and she hurriedly said:

"I will go toward the house and see if she is on the

way. Jasper is gone to meet Mrs. Desmond, and the ancient turtle-doves left on guard will be so much occupied with each other, that I fear no interruption from them. Clare is weak and half distraught, and she may need some one to guide her on her way. Ah! there is the flutter of a white dress now; she is coming, and all goes well for us."

A girlish figure was indeed approaching with swift steps, as if afraid of discovery or pursuit, and Spiers hurried forward to meet her, while Claudia thought it best to disappear.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE ABDUCTION.

CLARE, with her face flushed with fever, her eyes shining with the excitement that alone sustained her, came on with rapid, though unsteady steps; but she faltered and drew back, when she saw John Spiers advancing to meet her.

Her first impulse was to fly from him, for the only feeling he inspired was that of repulsion; and if her strength had not suddenly failed her, she would have turned and fled from him, crying aloud for help to evade the miserable destiny she came to embrace.

The ground seemed to rise up beneath her feet, the trees to whirl around her; and all became dark, as she made an impotent effort to turn on her steps and retrace the path toward the house. She would have fallen

to the ground, had not Spiers bounded forward and reached her in time to receive her swaying form in his arms.

He bore her to the shelter of the arbor, and drew from his pocket a pungent essence he had brought with him, in anticipation of some such catastrophe.

When consciousness returned, she found herself lying on the breast of the man who was a terror and a horror to her, although she had so madly given herself up to him; and with sudden strength she wrenched herself away from him, and said, with passionate vehemence:

"Don't touch me! I cannot bear it. I came here to make terms with you, not to accept your loathsome love. You threaten me, and I came to buy you off. Name your price, for I believe it is only money that you care for."

Spiers deprecatingly said:

"You are very unjust, Clare. Did I know that you would be Mrs. Adair's heiress when I first sought you? I adore you! I cannot, I will not make any compromise that involves losing you. I may seem cruel, but I am driven to the wall—I must use the weapon you have yourself put into my hands, to force you to fulfil the promise you once made me."

"The promise was wrung from me by such violence as you are again ready to use to procure its fulfilment. Have mercy on me, Mr. Spiers, and do not persist in making me your wife. I love another—I shrink from you as from something fatal to me. Take half my fortune and let me go."

He uttered a sneering laugh.

"You are complimentary to me, fair lady, but I do

not believe in this rival's power to make you ignore the pledges you gave to me. I shall not give you up to him—rest satisfied of that; nor will I accept money of you in lieu of the hand I so ardently covet. Why did you come to me at all this evening, if it was not with the intention of going with me wherever fate may lead me? You have voluntarily placed yourself in my power, beautiful Clare, and I am never going to be such an idiot as to let you escape me now."

"It will be worse for you if you do not," she said, with a sudden glare in her eyes, which told him that, if driven to desperation, even this slender creature might be dangerous. He drew a step nearer to her, and said, in the softest tone he could command, while he was inwardly raging against her:

"It would be despair to me if I did. What can I say—what can I do, Clare, to bring back to you the tender feeling you once confessed for me? You could not have been trifling with me; I should be loath to believe that of so young and artless a girl as you seemed to be."

"I was a silly child. I was flattered by your seeming preference because others thought you handsome; but that I ever loved you, or led you to believe that I did, is false. The promise I gave you was forced from me in so base and unmanly a way, that I have hated and despised you ever since it was given."

"You use strong language, pretty Clare; but I can forgive it, since you came hither voluntarily this evening to place your fate so utterly in my power that there is now no escape from a union with me."

"Have you no mercy? Will you dare to take to your heart a creature who has but one feeling toward

you, and that is repulsion? If you refuse my prayer, I shall believe that you and Claudia Coyle have spread this snare for me, and that *she* has put poison in the elixir I gave my aunt; that she did it, and at your command, that you might have me at your mercy. Let me go, and take the half of my fortune. I will gladly give it as a ransom for myself."

"After what you have said, I would do so if you had the power to keep your word with regard to the inheritance left you by Mrs. Adair; but you have not. You are a minor; your fortune will be in the hands of trustees, and you will have no legal right to transfer any portion of it till you are of age. Before that time you would marry Jasper Clifford, if I were fool enough to give you up, and *he* would never permit you to pay the debt you are so willing to incur. No, my pretty one; you came to me of your own sweet will, and you will stay with me from this time forth till death us do part as the prayer-book has it."

Clare sunk down on the bench, unable longer to sustain herself; but when he would have approached her, she repulsed him, and faintly said:

"I came in the hope that I should be able to make terms with you. You threatened to have me arrested for—for a crime I never wilfully committed. Is it not dreadful enough for me to know that I caused my aunt's death, without being dragged forward before the world, and accused of it? Why should not *you* also be implicated, since you seem to know so much more of it than I do myself? Oh! I was mad to come here! I was mad—*mad!*"

She pressed her hands over her eyes to shut out the

hateful glance that glared down on her; for Spiers, at this glimpse of the truth which had come to her, lost all self-control. He spoke in tones that made her shiver through every fibre of her frame.

"You may have been mad, but you will be a worse lunatic before I have done with you. Come—we have talked too long. You are mine now and forever, and I thus take possession of my own."

He seized her in his strong arms, threw over her face a handkerchief saturated with chloroform, which had at that time just become known to the medical profession, and holding it over her face until she became limp and helpless, he bore her to the spot where he had his horse fastened.

Away like the wind he rode through woodland paths till he came upon a small unpainted house, half hidden by trees and undergrowth, invisible from the river, though it stood but a few hundred yards from its banks.

An old woman with bleared eyes, and a wrinkled face which was the color of leather, came out at the sound of his horse's feet, and with a smirk said, as he dismounted, carrying his burden in his arms:

"So the pretty dearie has run away with you after all, Mr. Johnson," that being the name he had assumed since he had lodged in Mrs. Brown's house. "But what has happened to put her in sich a fix as this?"

"She was frightened for fear of pursuit, and has fainted. She has been ill, and has been so closely watched that she could not get to me before. All is safe now though, for in another hour the steamer will be down, and we will get away before the people from Riverdale can stop us."

While speaking, he strode into the house, and laid the insensible girl on a bed which stood in the front room.

A hat, with a long thick veil attached to it, and a black shawl, had been given to Spiers by Claudia Coyle for Clare's use, and he brought them from the inner room, and placed them beside her, briefly saying:

"You are to put these on her when the signal is given, that no time may be lost. I must go now, and help Jared to get the boat in readiness. If she recovers enough to speak, she may say strange things, but she is half delirious, and you must not pay any attention to them. She came to me voluntarily, or I could never have got possession of her. I think her sufferings have made her half crazy, Mrs. Brown; but now that she has effected her escape, she will soon be better. Her mind will be at rest, poor darling."

"Yes, I know," said the old woman, sympathetically. "I run away with my ole man when we was both young and foolish, and I knows what I went through afore I got off. She's a pretty creeter, Mr. Johnson, and she'll be rich as cream if it's true that old Madam Adair left her all her fortin."

"She'll be rich enough to pay you handsomely for helping her off with her true love, Mrs. Brown, and I shall take care that you get your reward before many days are over. Just let her lie quiet now; she is breathing again, and there is no danger."

Mrs. Brown, in spite of her ungainly appearance, was not a bad woman, nor one to whom it would have been safe to tell the whole truth. Her lodger had induced her to believe that the heiress of Riverdale was desperately in love with him. He had told her that his sojourn beneath her humble roof was made that he might find an opportunity to elope with Miss Desmond, as her relatives were bitterly opposed to their marriage.

Clare was breathing heavily, but quite unconscious of all that was passing around her, and the old woman sat down to watch over her, her memory going back to the time when she had herself eloped from her father's house, where plenty and peace reigned, to cast her lot in with that of a man who had ill-treated her and brought her to poverty.

"I hope this poor thing will have better luck than I had," was the mental prayer she breathed over the hapless girl, unconscious how much darker was the fate that threatened Clare than the one which had been awarded to herself.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

LUCK TURNS AGAINST JOHN SPIERS.

SPIERS went down to the water's edge and found a boat idly rocking in a little cove sheltered from observation by a curve in the bank. In it lay, at full length, a young man of uncouth appearance, clad in homespun. A hat with a torn brim was pulled down over his eyes, and he seemed to be sleeping.

Spiers called out in an angry tone:

"Hillo, Jared; is this the way you watch, when you are well paid for it?"

The head was slowly lifted, and a loutish-looking face emerged from the shelter of the hat, as its owner growled in reply:

"When thar's nothin' to watch fur, why sha'n't I take a nap? Is the gal nabbed?"

"Yes; she's safe at the house. Has the boat passed up stream yet?"

"Yes, half hour ago; but I an't heerd the tother comin' yit; she'll be along, though, I reckon, in time."

"Oh, yes; she's always on time," was the light reply. "You understand what you have to do, Jared?"

Young Brown nodded, and lazily stepped from the boat.

"You are to give me a hundred dollars to git you off safe wi' the gal. I kin do it, and I will do it, so *thar*."

"I don't think there will be anybody to interfere before we are off; but if there should be, you must stand by me to the last, and do whatever I tell you."

"Sartin. I couldn't expect to git that pile o' money ef I shirked 'cause there was a fuss around. I an't afeard. Ef the gal wants to go wi' you she shill, anyhow."

"Of course she wants to go with me, or she would not have come to meet me this afternoon. In half an hour the Richmond boat should be in sight, and once safe on board of her with my prize, I can snap my fingers at all her friends."

Jared only grunted in reply, and Spiers walked to and fro upon the shore, pausing every few moments to take a long view at the river. The sun sank to rest in a heavy bank of clouds, and the bright twilight ended, but there was no sign of the expected steamer, no sound that indicated her approach; she was an hour behind time, and Spiers came to the unwilling conclusion that some accident had happened to detain her.

He raged to and fro like a baffled hyena, and swore so terribly that his companion remonstrated.

The infuriated man retorted:

"How dare you speak to me in that way? If you had as much at stake as I have, you would blaspheme even worse than I do. The people from Riverdale will be down on me, and there's but one way to make all sure. I will bring the girl down, and you can row me to some point where we can get shelter and be safe from pursuit."

Jared pointed to the river, which was beginning to lash itself into foam under the influence of one of those sudden storms which are often as violent as they are brief. He laconically said:

"If the boat was to come now, it would be hardly safe for you to try to git on her in sich a stiff blow as this is goin' to be. We'd better git back to the house, I kin tell you. See *thar* now."

This exclamation was caused by a burst of thunder above their heads, accompanied by a vivid flash of lightning, and Spiers began to think himself that discretion was the better part of valor. He sullenly said:

"Everything is against me. Come on then, and I'll tell you as you go how you may earn not one hundred, but five hundred dollars."

"Golly! that'd be a grand haul. I an't particler ef the money'll be all right."

"I'll give you one hundred now, and the balance shall be paid you in a week from this time. You told me that you had been a Methodist preacher once; and if you will go over the marriage ceremony between this girl and myself, the money is yours."

"But I wa'n't licensed to preach. I jist took it up a spell, 'cause I thought it'd be a easy way to make a livin'. 'Twas all-fired hard, I tell you, an' the people laughed at my want o' eddication, though I sent 'em all

to blazes, as the most o' them are fellers do. I never married nobody; an' ef I had, 'twouldn't ha' held in law."

"I don't care for that. Desperate cases require desperate remedies. The Desmonds won't know that you were not regularly ordained. Marry me to the girl, and I will manage all the rest."

"Well, 'tan't none o' my business. Hand over the rhino, an' I'll do my best."

The hundred dollars was paid, and a few moments later the two entered the house. Clare was alone in the outer room, lying with half-closed eyes and parted lips, evidently still under the influence of the chloroform she had inhaled.

At the approach of the storm, Mrs. Brown had rushed out to put up a brood of young chickens that had been hatched out only a few days before, and Spiers hurriedly said:

"It is lucky the coast is clear. Hurry up now, and get through before the old woman comes back."

"But the gal don't seem to know nothin'. What would be the use, if she can't make her 'sponses?"

"I can lift up her hands for her, which will do quite as well as speech; you know she's willing to marry me, or she wouldn't be here with me."

"That's true; so here goes."

Jared rattled off a brief form of words, and at its close said, with a hoarse laugh:

"I pronounce you, John Johnson and Clare Desmond, man and wife. Short work that to win sich a pile o' money, I reckon."

Clare had shown no consciousness of what was passing. She breathed, and that was all; she did not even shrink from the hated touch of Spiers, when he raised

her hand in mocking response to the question, Will you take this man for your wedded husband?

The storm burst, and for half an hour raged with such fury that the small house rocked to its foundations. Half of Mrs. Brown's chickens were drowned, and in her lamentations over them she was almost oblivious of Clare's presence beneath her roof.

The storm soon exhausted its violence, and in a sudden pause in the roaring of the wind, the tones of a bell were heard rising from the river. A glance through the window showed the outline of a steamer gleaming with light, looking, in the lurid atmosphere, like a fire-ship ready for action.

The deep booming of the bell came at intervals, and aroused by the sound, Clare lifted her colorless face, and excitedly asked:

"What is that? Is it the funeral knell of every hope I had in life? What—what are you going to do with me?"

The last question was prompted by the rapid action of Mrs. Brown. She snatched up the hat and shawl, and commenced muffling her guest in them, while her son threw open the door, and rushed down the declivity on which the house stood, to make a signal to the boat, that the expected passengers would soon be alongside.

To Clare's terrified inquiry, Mrs. Brown replied:

"I'm gittin' you ready to git off wi' your sweetheart, honey. It's all right; the boat's come, an' you'll soon be safe aboard on her."

Spiers bent over her before she gained breath to reply, and hissed in her ear:

"One word in contradiction of what I have told here, and I will denounce you before these people as the mur-

derer of your aunt, and you know what must follow then. I could not save you."

"Let me be lost then," she desperately replied. "Anything, *anything* will be better than going with you."

In spite of her struggles, he wrapped the veil over her face in such a manner as to stifle her cries, and taking her in his arms, strode out of the house.

CHAPTER XL.

THE PURSUIT.

IN the meantime the Norfolk steamer had reached the landing, and, much to Jasper's surprise and delight, not only Mrs. Desmond was on board, but her husband and his own father. To the hurried inquiries made after Clare, Jasper replied that she was quite safe, though still much indisposed.

Beal, with two policemen in plain clothes, came on shore with them, and after a slight delay, a conveyance was found for them to Riverdale, and the three gentlemen got into the carriage with Mrs. Desmond. As they drove rapidly forward, Jasper was told how completely successful his father's mission had been; and that he was in possession of warrants for the arrest of Spiers and Claudia Coyle.

In conclusion, Mr. Clifford said:

"I hope Clare's mind is clear enough to understand that she is exonerated from all blame; that Mrs. Adair took from her hand nothing that could in any degree affect her health."

"I have told her again and again that she has nothing to fear; but I did not venture to explain everything to her. She seemed too much excited, and I thought it safest to soothe her as I best could."

"I fear you have made a great mistake, Mr. Clifford," said Mrs. Desmond, in some excitement; but she checked herself, and more quietly added, "but you doubtless thought you were acting for the best, and all can be soon set right now."

The impatient mother thought the drive would never end, though the horses were put to their utmost speed, and she had no thought for the grandeur of the home that now belonged to her daughter, when they drove in at the iron gates, and swept up to the entrance.

Judith Brooke was on the steps ready to receive them, and she smilingly said to Mrs. Desmond:

"Clare is resting quietly, though I scarcely think she is asleep. Shall we go up to her at once, Mrs. Desmond?"

"Show me the way, please, that I may clasp her in my arms as soon as possible, and bring peace to her poor heart."

The two hurried up-stairs, followed by Mr. Desmond, who was not less impatient than his wife to embrace his daughter again and breathe peace into her fainting soul.

Claudia witnessed the arrival of the first carriage from the windows of her own apartment; the one containing Beal and the policemen was not yet in sight; and with a satisfied smile she turned away and went down to greet Mr. Clifford; she appeared as perfectly at her ease as if unconscious of the evasion of the unfortunate girl he had hurried back to save.

She was charmingly dressed, and looked as grand and beautiful as he thought he had ever seen her, as she came toward him with outstretched hand and beaming smiles.

"You see I am back again, Mr. Clifford. I went away in a pet, but I thought it best to return and keep my position here till my dear old friend's will is read. She always promised to remember me handsomely, and I stand in need of all she may have given me."

Acute as she was, Claudia could not understand the expression of his face as he replied:

"I expected to find you here, Miss Coyle, and I assure you that I am very glad you have returned. There is some unfinished business to settle in which you are deeply interested."

Claudia changed color, and at that moment her discomfort was completed by the sudden appearance of Beal and his two companions. She hurriedly asked:

"Who—who are these men, and why have you brought strangers here at such a time as this?"

"You will soon know, Miss Coyle. They came on *your* account, and I advise you to make no resistance. I arrest you in the name of the law for a crime I need not now stop to explain to you. Do your duty, gentlemen."

The arrest was so sudden and unexpected that for an instant Claudia was paralyzed; but the next moment she darted away and ran into Jasper's arms, who was entering from the lateral hall.

She struggled violently to escape, but he held her with a strong grasp till the policemen came up, and one of them coolly took off the serpent bracelet that

glittered on her arm, and replaced it with a slender pair of hand-cuffs he had brought for the purpose.

Claudia was pale as marble, and panting with rage and fright; but what she might have said was cut short by a thrilling cry above stairs, and Mr. Desmond rushed down, looking white and desperate.

"My daughter is gone! She has been spirited away in some unaccountable manner. What has become of her? Woman, answer me truly, for *you* have aided this abduction. The truth—the truth from your vile lips, or your life is not worth a moment's purchase."

In his frenzy he drew a pistol and levelled it at Claudia's head as she stood there, her identity betrayed by the manacles she wore.

One of the policemen quietly struck the weapon up, and said:

"No violence must be used, Mr. Desmond. Let some one give orders for horses to be made ready for a pursuit, and it will go hard with me if I cannot get from this young woman such information as will guide us to the right place to find your daughter."

"You will learn nothing from me," said Claudia, sullenly, "and I will make you pay roundly for insulting me in this unheard-of manner. What have I done to deserve such treatment? Of what am I accused?"

"Of complicity with John Spiers to poison Mrs. Adair, making her niece the innocent agent of her murder; of using the power thus obtained over Clare to induce her to marry Spiers, and make a will in his favor. When that was done, *she* was to be dealt with as mercilessly as the old lady was," said Mr. Clifford, in reply.

This brief statement made her cower a moment, but she defiantly replied:

"There can be no proof of such a crime on my part. I know nothing of John Spiers, or his plans. How should I, living as secluded as I have since I came to Mrs. Adair's?"

"We have the proofs—let that suffice. I have witnessed your nocturnal meetings with Spiers more than once, and if you had spoken English I should have fathomed your plans long ago. I have been working in the dark to foil you for weeks past, Miss Coyle, and you have fallen into the trap you so cunningly set for another."

Claudia glared at him, and viciously said:

"My guilt cannot be proved without that of Clare Desmond being made known. *She* used the elixir, and she is guilty of the murder."

"But there was no murder, and Clare is innocent, as you will soon understand. Come forward, Beal, and tell your story. When Miss Coyle has heard it, perhaps she will be willing to tell by what agency Miss Desmond was removed from this house, and give us a clue as to where she is to be found."

Beal came forward, and gave a concise account of what is already known to the reader.

Claudia clearly saw that the game was up, and her most eager desire now was to prevent Spiers from getting off with his victim, and forcing her to marry him, since no pecuniary advantage could be derived from such a union.

After a few moments' reflection, she said:

"Neither Jasper nor Mr. Desmond can be willing to have what has happened here brought before the world, since Clare's name must inevitably be mixed up in it. Pledge me your word, Mr. Clifford, that I shall go free,

and also my accomplice, and I will tell you where he may be found, and Clare rescued."

"I cannot set aside your arrest, now that it has been made," said Mr. Clifford, in a low voice, "but I can so arrange it that you may both be allowed to escape while on your way to prison."

Claudia shuddered at the last word.

"Promise me that—I know I can rely on your word—and I will tell you enough to enable you to follow up John Spiers, and release Miss Desmond before he has time to make her marry him."

"I pledge you my word of honor that you both shall escape if Clare is brought back unharmed. *If not*, I hardly know what vengeance you may not expect to fall on you. You would have three merciless men to deal with, Claudia Coyle—her father, her betrothed husband, and myself. Now speak, if you will."

By this time the clatter of horses' hoofs was heard on the gravel in front of the house, and both Jasper and Mr. Desmond, who had aided in getting them ready, came in to learn what terms had been made with the prisoner.

Claudia briefly said:

"Clare went out this afternoon to meet Mr. Spiers in the woodland arbor. I scarcely think she knew what she was doing when she came. She hoped to make a compromise with him, and induce him, for money, to spare her the accusation he declared he would bring against her if she refused to marry him. He declined her offers, and took her away with him. If the Richmond steamer has not passed down the river, she will be found at Mrs. Brown's cottage, four miles below this place. That is all I have to say."

Mr. Clifford's face brightened.

"The steamer has *not* passed down yet, for we heard, on the one we came up on, that she would not leave Richmond till several hours after her usual time. A military company was coming on her, and there was to be a parade first. Fate works in our favor, and you will be in time to save Clare yet, Mr. Desmond. I shall stay here to watch over our prisoner, as she must be confronted with her accomplice before she is allowed to depart. Take the policeman with you, Desmond, for the man may be desperate; and it may be as well to send a boat out to drop down slowly, and intercept him if the steamer should arrive."

"Be sure that we shall do all that is possible," said Jasper, with pale lips, but an expression of determination on his youthful face which told Claudia that if any evil had happened to Clare, the life of the man she loved as the tigress loves her young would be the forfeit.

Their arrangements were soon completed. By this time the sun had set, and the storm was brewing; but regardless of that, the boat was manned by two stout negro men accustomed to the river, and one of the policemen, with Mr. Bowden, who insisted on joining the party, took their places in it. The other one accompanied Jasper and Mr. Desmond. They set out amid the first breathing of the storm, in the hope that they would reach Mrs. Brown's house before it burst on them in all its fury. Mr. Clifford thought it best to detain Beal with him, as his evidence was too important to risk his safety in any way.

The lightning flashed, the thunder rolled, rain fell in blinding torrents, and the wind snapped branches from the trees like pipe-stems, and sent them flying in every

direction; but little did the three determined men heed the dangers on their way. The father and lover thought only of Clare in the power of so base a wretch as John Spiers, and they thundered on unscathed amid the din of the elements, scarcely conscious of the dangers that surrounded them.

When the raging wind ceased to roar as suddenly as it had arisen, they found themselves within a quarter of a mile of the place they were seeking. Jasper knew the road well, and he checked his horse, and said:

"The storm will still further delay the steamer, and we shall have time to rescue Clare before she comes. I hope the boat has fared as well as we have. The way is shorter by the river, and the men are skilful boatmen. I think they will be in time to aid us, if their assistance should be necessary."

At that moment the deep booming of a bell was heard, and Jasper cried out:

"We have not a moment to lose. I know the sound of that bell too well to mistake it. They are ringing for their passengers. On to the rescue!"

Again they dashed away, and in a few moments more were riding pellmell toward the bank, on which a dark group was gathered. A boat was rowing in toward the land, which Spiers mistook for one belonging to the steamer, but which Jasper recognized as the one that had been sent from Riverdale.

It landed just as the three excited horsemen came within speaking distance. Spiers sprang into it, placed Clare on the seat, and lifting his hat, waved it triumphantly toward those he believed had come too late, and cried out:

"Baffled! She is mine now, and I defy you!"

Then turning to the men, he said :

"Row for your lives! Fifty dollars to you, boys, if you get us to the steamer before those fellows can pursue and stop us."

Bowden and the policeman had crouched down in the boat as she drew near the shore, and when they now sprang up, and pinioned the exulting abductor, he was so taken by surprise that he was handcuffed and bound before he could make any effectual resistance.

His blasphemies were terrible; but we pass over his impotent ravings to chronicle something more agreeable.

In a moment Mr. Desmond was in the boat, and had his daughter in his arms, crying out :

"You are saved! you are saved, my darling!—doubly saved, for you are proved innocent of any injury to your aunt. The draught that wretch had prepared was changed by a friend, and the elixir you used was only soda and water. Look up, my precious child, and let me see that you fully comprehend the import of my words."

"Yes, papa, I understand. I have escaped an awful danger, but I know that I am safe now. Can you forgive me for my mad flight? But I was so wretched, papa, that I did not know which way to turn for safety."

"All is forgiven, love, and your sufferings will soon be forgotten in the happiness that awaits you."

Spiers paused in his cursing to listen to what was said by the father and daughter. He cynically said :

"I think I shall have a word to say about that, Mr. Desmond. Your daughter is my wife, and I ask you if this is fitting treatment for your son-in-law?"

"Your wife!" exclaimed Jasper, on whose set face the full moon suddenly shone from a rift in the clouds.

"Dare to repeat that assertion, and I will kill you."

Clare shivered, and shrank, and laying her hand on her lover's arm, said :

"It is false, Jasper. There is no tie between him and myself, as can be proved by these people here."

"Ask the young man," said Spiers, in a loud tone. "Jared Brown is a Methodist clergyman, and he married us not half an hour ago. You pretended to be insensible, but you knew all that was going on, and you know that you left Riverdale this afternoon with the intention of eloping with me."

"Silence!" thundered Mr. Desmond. "How dare you claim my daughter as your wife, and with her own consent? If I believed your assertion, I would pitch you into the river, bound as you are, and let you drown like a dog. Jasper, we cannot linger here. Bring forward that woman and her son, and let them answer for themselves. If any such villany has been perpetrated, they shall answer dearly for it."

Mrs. Brown, alarmed by the noise on the beach, had come down to see what was going on, and she now held on to her son, and defeated his attempt to escape. She angrily said :

"There wa'n't nobody married at my house to-night, as I knows on, an' this here boy an't no more a preacher than I am. He tried it onct, but the Conference wouldn't have nothin' to do wi' him, an' said he weren't in his right mind to think o' sich a thing, an' he hardly knowin' how to read. Please, gents, let the half-witted fool alone, for he's all I've got, an' he's the last o' nine children; all the others is dead an' gone."

"That is enough, Mrs. Brown," said Mr. Desmond. "Keep your son at home, that he may be found, if wanted; but I think I shall be able to deal with this

man without calling on him. He stole my daughter from her home, and would have forced her to marry him to secure her fortune. That is the explanation of all that has happened here to-night."

"The la's! An' he said she was runnin' off wi' him, caze she wanted to, an' you wouldn't let her."

"He tole me the same thing, or I wouldn't ha' done it; but 'tan't bindin' nohow," said Jared.

"It is well for you that it is not," replied Jasper, and Brown retreated from that angry face, drawing his mother away with him.

It was then arranged that Mr. Desmond should return in the boat with his daughter and the prisoner, while Mr. Bowden rode back to Riverdale on his horse.

In the meantime the steamer, tired of waiting, had resumed her course.

The boat had weathered the storm by hugging the shore and taking refuge in a little cove during its greatest violence, as the men now explained to Mr. Desmond, and he promised them a handsome reward for the skill and fidelity they had shown in hastening to the rescue of his daughter.

Spiers made several efforts to talk with him, but he refused to hear anything he had to say, telling him that in the morning Mrs. Adair's will would be read in his presence, and the final settlement of his fate, and tha of his accomplice, be determined on.

"You think you'll have it all your own way," he insolently replied; "but I'll be a thorn in your side yet. Clare is my wife, and I will prove it. I'm not going to give her up without a struggle."

"Gag that fellow," cried Mr. Desmond, in irrepres-

sible wrath, and the policeman at once obeyed the command.

We pass over the meeting between Clare and her mother, because words would fail to do justice to its pathos.

The poor harassed girl slept that night in the arms that had held her in infancy, and in the morning she awoke stronger and clearer in mind than she had been for many days.

A guard was kept over the prisoners, and on that day their fate was to be settled after the will was read.

CHAPTER XLI.

CONCLUSION.

AT ten o'clock the whole party assembled in Mrs. Adair's room, with the addition of Dr. Brooke and his son, who had been sent for at an early hour to be present at the reading of the will.

In spite of the strictness with which the prisoners had been guarded, they found means to communicate with each other through the medium of writing. Claudia had pledged her word that they would make no attempt to escape for the present, and the handcuffs were removed from her wrists, and from those of her accomplice; though as a safeguard, Spiers was kept securely tied, and one of the policemen was stationed in the room with him.

A glittering piece of jewelry tempted Hebe to become

the agent of Claudia, and a scroll of paper wrapped around a pencil was placed by her on the waiter on which the breakfast sent up to Spiers was arranged. He furtively read the few lines she had traced on the paper, which ran thus:

"Confess all, and they will allow us to escape. We have been foiled, and all our labor thrown away; but we are too keen-witted to fail always. Fresh fields and pastures new are open to us, in which we will be more successful. After all, I cannot help feeling happy that Clare Desmond will not be your wife. "C. C."

To this Spiers replied by scratching a few lines on the same paper when the sentry was looking through the window.

"Clare Desmond is my wife, and I shall maintain my right to her. In Scotland such a marriage would hold good, and why not in this country? If they get rid of me it shall be by paying me a heavy price. As to bringing either of us to trial, that is all bosh. The stigma would attach to Clare as much as to us, and old Desmond's infernal pride won't allow him to risk that. Never fear; I will make good terms for both of us. "J. S."

In this belief he obeyed the summons to join the others, looking as jaunty and unconcerned as if no serious danger menaced him. Claudia, on the contrary, was pale, stern, and haughtily defiant even to him, and as she passed him she managed to hiss into his ear:

"I will not accept safety at the price of your union with that girl, nor will *they* allow you to make good your claims. Do as I bade you, or we are both lost."

Spiers only shrugged his shoulders in reply, and dropped into the chair that was pointed out to him. He insolently surveyed the assembled company, and tried to obtain a good view of Clare's pale face; but Jasper and her mother had placed themselves in such a position that, from his seat, she could not be seen. A table was drawn into the centre of the floor, on which the will was laid. Dr. Brooke and Mr. Clifford placed themselves near it, and the former, taking up the folded parchment, said:

"I bear witness that this is the last will and testament of my deceased friend, Mrs. Georgina Adair. It was drawn up by Mr. Clifford from her dictation, and his son and myself affixed our signatures to it. Mr. Clifford will now proceed to read it, that those who are interested in its provisions may know its contents."

In a clear, resonant voice Clifford then read aloud the instrument, the contents of which are already known to the reader. He had scarcely finished the first page, when Spiers cried out:

"Clare Desmond, the heiress of this estate, is my lawful wife, and I claim the control of her person and her property. She eloped with me of her own free will, and was united to me by one who has been enrolled among the clergy, if he is not now a licensed preacher. Without my consent this marriage cannot be set aside, and I am master in this house, in right of my wife."

At this insolent assertion Mr. Desmond started up, but Clifford lifted his hand, and quietly said:

"A moment, Mr. Desmond, will suffice to show this braggart the ground on which he stands. There is a codicil written by Mrs. Adair's own hand *after* the eavesdropper who made herself familiar with the contents

of the will had left her station in the dressing-room. I will proceed to read it, that the prisoners may know how little hope is left to either of them of wringing money from the heiress."

The codicil simply revoked the entire bequest to Clare unless she gave her hand to Jasper Clifford within six months after Mrs. Adair's decease. If she failed to do so, the income derived from the property was to be paid over to Mr. Clifford for five years, in liquidation of his claim against the estate; then it was to pass into the hands of trustees, the house to be converted into an industrial school for boys, who were to be taught agriculture practically by laboring in the fields the testator would not permit to be divided. The negroes were to be sold to raise an endowment fund to pay the professors employed.

As Spiers listened, for the first time he looked crest-fallen. Mr. Clifford turned to him, and triumphantly asked:

"What do you say now, sir, to your shadowy claim on Miss Desmond's hand? As *your* wife, she will have nothing. Knowing that, have you such love for her as will lead you to brave poverty for her sake?"

Spiers sullenly replied:

"I say this, sir: that the girl, without the money, would only be an incumbrance to me. If I give up all claim on her, she will be able to pay me well; and if she wishes me to let her alone, she had best make it worth my while."

Mr. Desmond spoke for his daughter.

"Not a cent shall you have, now or ever, miserable caitiff that you are! If you remain in this country, I

will prosecute both you and your accomplice to the utmost extent of the law, and send you to the penitentiary to expiate the crime you have committed against the peace of a whole family."

"The old girl wasn't killed by us, nor by any one else, if that precious Beal is to be believed," said Spiers, lightly. "Then what can you do to us? Your own daughter's name wouldn't be spared in the trial, so I am not afraid of a prosecution."

"But I am," said Claudia, suddenly rising, and looking around. She could ruthlessly plan and carry out her schemes as long as danger did not menace herself; but at its first glimpse her courage failed her, and she was ready to make any concessions that would save herself and the man she loved desperately, in spite of his baseness. "We will go away from this country, if we are permitted to do so, never to return. Keep your pledges to me, Mr. Clifford, and mine shall be kept to you. John Spiers will be guided by me in what I know is for our mutual good."

Spiers made a faint show of resistance, but he knew as well as Claudia that no hope of a compromise was left. He must accept the terms offered, or be delivered over to the tender mercies of the law. He chose the former, after some further display of insolence, and was removed from the room, together with Claudia, after pledging himself to leave the country forever.

A few hundred dollars, still due to Miss Coyle for her services to Mrs. Adair, were paid, and so careless a watch was kept upon the prisoners that before the steamer came down that evening they were far away. The trunks of Claudia were sent to New York to an address she left

in her room, and neither she nor Spiers were ever heard of afterward.

Clare recovered her health, and before the six months expired gave her hand to Jasper. They lived at Riverdale, and Mr. Clifford remained with them.

Four thousand a year had been secured to Mrs. Desmond, and she repurchased their old home in Norfolk, and lived there in peace and plenty. In due time Christine married George Beal, whose fortunes prospered under her parents' care, and they lived near them.

Judith Brooke and her faithful lover were united, and Mr. Bowden consented that she should remain with her father till Walter married. This happened a year later, and Phoebe Simpson was the bride he brought home to brighten the old man's life, and atone to him for breaking off his match with Mrs. Harte.

The charming widow never ventured in that neighborhood again, but she eventually found a rich husband to take on himself the burden of herself and family.

THE END.

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